

ACC strikes deal with Fox Sports

By DAVID SCOTT
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The ACC's efforts to aggressively market itself took another step Thursday when the league announced plans of a national Sunday-night men's basketball television deal.

The package, which begins in the 2001-02 season, includes 19 games on Fox Sports Net, and is the result of a recent 10-year deal struck by the ACC with Raycom/Jefferson Pilot. It also means every ACC league basketball game will be televised, after Raycom finishes negotiating deals with other networks.

"This is part of what we wanted from our new agreement," said ACC commissioner John Swofford. "It's part of what we're doing in looking at our marketplace, and how it's changed. We wanted more national cable TV games and not as many over-the-air weeknight games."

Charlotte-based Raycom, which has the rights to distribute ACC basketball, has secured national television packages for the league with ESPN, ESPN2,

Please see ACC / page 4C

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ACC from 1C

ABC and Fox, as well as its regionally syndicated deal with Jefferson Pilot. Raycom CEO Ken Haines said Wednesday he is negotiating with CBS.

The Sunday games are expected to start early, perhaps at 7 p.m., which shouldn't conflict with early classes on Monday for students.

"Most of our teams charter planes now," said Maryland coach Gary Williams. "So we'll be back that night. And the students who go to the games will be out by 9:30 or so. I don't know of any college student who goes to bed at 9:30."

The Sunday-night deal with Fox has its roots in a request the league's basketball coaches made of Swofford a few years ago. The coaches, feeling ACC basketball's image had grown stagnant, asked the league to formulate a marketing plan.

"We felt at the time that we really needed a boost," said Wake Forest coach Dave Odom. "Sometimes when you have a business with a number of departments, you have one department that's doing extremely well. Sometimes the CEO has a tendency to leave well enough alone. It's a 'if it's not broken, don't fix it' mentality, and you spend most of your time building those areas that are weak."

"The ACC (basketball) has been so strong for so many years, we really hadn't made a conscientious effort to maybe explore some different approaches, and maybe things had gotten a little stale. We asked the league office to help spruce it up a little."

The league has since instituted "ACC Live," a news and features television program that emphasizes basketball during its season. It hired former Georgia Tech and N.C. State sports information director Mike Finn as the league's assistant commissioner for external relations. Swofford, however, said the ACC's best marketing will come on the court.

"The ACC's ability to play the best people and beat the best people, that will continue to be our ultimate selling point," he said.