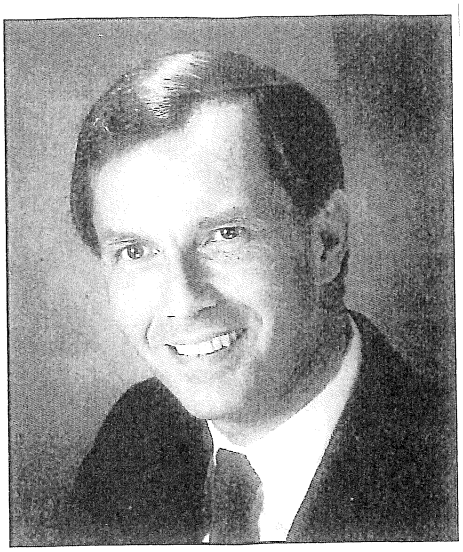
Behind The Scenes

David Poole

ACC Basketball Handbook 1993-94



Raycom's chief officer, Rick Ray, focused on games of high local interest in beginning his own business.

Peter Rolfe remembers the wish, and he's been neck-deep in work ever since it came true.

Rolfe was working for NBC, producing college basketball games that turned the announcing team of Dick Enberg, Billy Packer and Al McGuire into the hottest act in sports television.

"I thought we did a lot of games then," Rolfe said, "and we were only doing about 20 to 25 a year."

Rolfe remembers coming home after the final telecast one season and telling his wife he wished there were more games to do.

"She reminds me of that now from time to time," Rolfe says.

Today, Rolfe is executive producer for basketball at Raycom, a sports syndication company that televises more than 25 games a week during basketball season. In 1992-93, Raycom took part in the broadcasts of more than 400 games.

Raycom is headquartered in Charlotte — North Carolina's largest city and the host of the 1993-94 NCAA Final Four. Charlotte is also home for Jefferson-Pilot Teleproductions and Creative Sports Marketing — two other syndicators that, combined with Raycom, account for the television rights, production, programming and marketing for just about every college basketball conference in America.

Raycom has made the most of its opportunities since 1979 when Rick Ray left his job at a small UHF station in Charlotte and formed his own company to produce and market college basketball games. Ray was joined in the venture by Dee Birke, who owned an advertising agency and became Ray's wife after six months as business partners. Dee Ray now is Raycom' s president; Rick is its chief officer.

Ray's path to becoming college basketball's biggest syndicator began with a look at the ACC's regional package, a ratings-winner in the basketball-crazed region that included, at the time, the Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland.

"We saw that you could deliver good ratings regionally by showing games with a high local interest," says Ken Haines, executive vice president of Raycom. "Back then, the only real hope you had of getting on television was to be nationally ranked and have one of the networks pick up your game. That didn't really happen that often unless you were UCLA or Indiana or Kansas or Notre Dame.

"We worked very hard to get the rights for as many conferences as we could. The five-year plan was to be able to offer most parts of the country a strong regional package. The 10-year plan was to be able to do it nationally."

In the typical television deal between syndicator and conference, the syndicator pays the conference a lump sum for rights to broadcast games, then makes back that money, along with the money spent to produce and market the games, by selling most of the commercial time available during the broadcast. Stations that show the games make their money by selling ads in the remaining commercial slots.

Raycom's deal with ABC is based on the concept of regional interest. It pays ABC a lump sum for the air time. Raycom also pays the schools and conferences for rights, then sells commercials to both national and regional sponsors.

On a given Sunday afternoon, the Raycom/ABC package might be a double-header involving six different games, with each part of the country getting the two games with the most local interest.

National sponsors run commercials on all six games. Regional sponsors can buy into particular games, targeting their advertising dollars to a particular audience.

What those audiences see, and the way what they are seeing gets to their homes, has changed dramatically over the years.

Today, games are shot up into space and bounced off satellites to reception points all over the country. Except for a couple of weeks a year when sun spots are a nuisance, the technology is a lot cleaner and more dependable than the "olden days" of a decade ago.

"The country was wired through a lot of different centers with a lot of different switching points," says Haines, remembering the days when television signals were transmitted via telephone lines. "You might have to go through 20 switching points to get one telecast on."

Executive vice president Ken Haines works closely with the conferences to offer viewers a wide variety of high-interest games.

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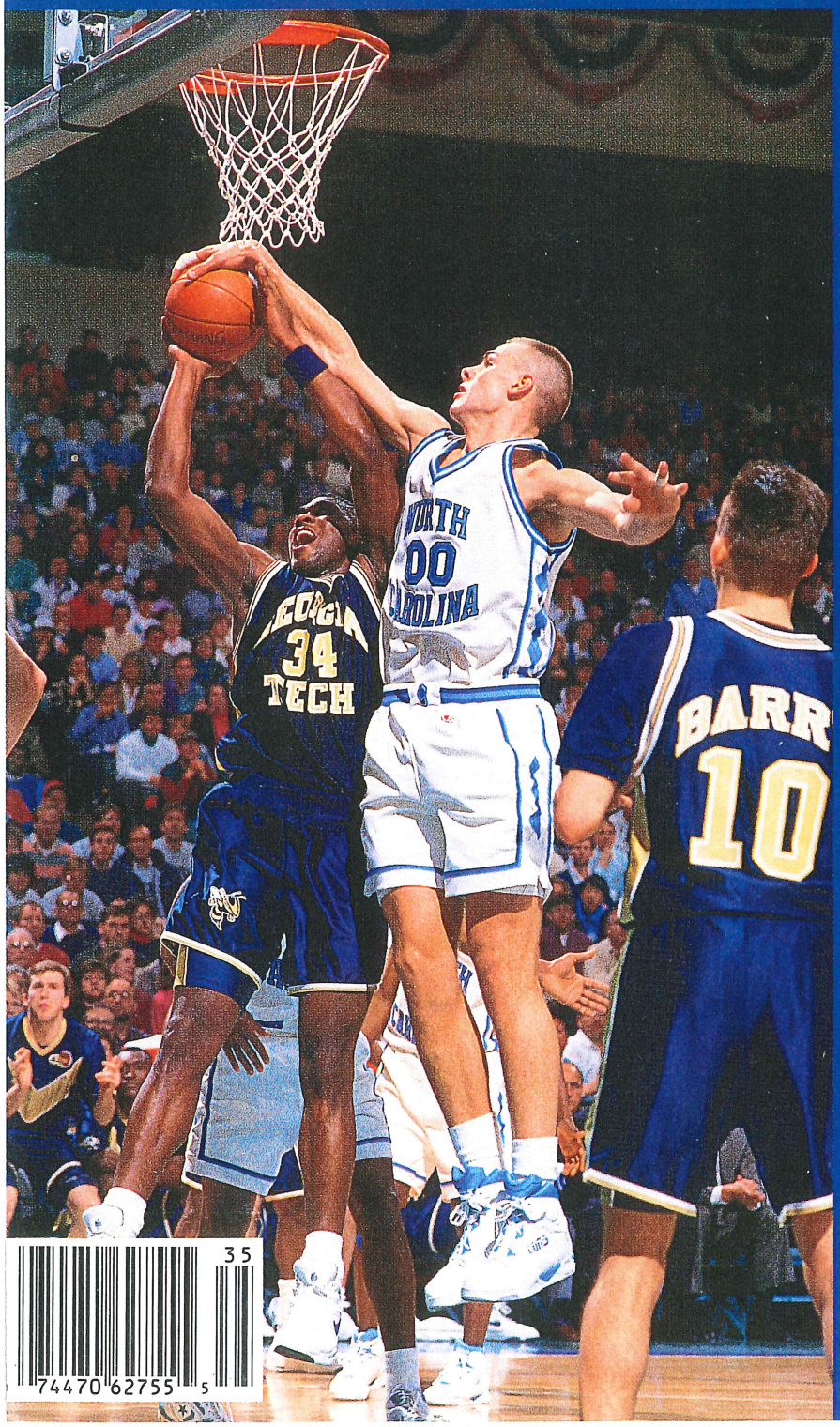

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