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Double the coverage

New ACC-TV deal doesn't insist ESPN block games here.

WATL owners can show in other cities.

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The ACC basketball tournament features dual — or is that dueling? — telecasts.

The games are being televised nationally by ESPN and regionally by Raycom Sports, giving fans across the ACC footprint, including Atlanta, a choice of two telecasts.

Different announcers. Different productions. Different channels. Same games.

“This is the only conference tournament I’m aware of that has dual coverage of all games,” said Ken Haines, Raycom Sports’ president and chief executive.

In Atlanta, all 11 tournament games are being televised on WATL, which is part of Raycom’s ACC syndication package, and on one of the ESPN networks (ESPN, ESPN2 or ESPN3). Sunday’s championship game begins at 1 p.m. on ESPN and WATL.

The choice is new this season for ACC tournament viewers.

In the past, ESPN’s telecasts of the tournament were blacked out in ACC markets, where the tournament was shown only on Raycom’s syndicate of over-the-air affiliates. But under the ACC’s new TV deal, which took effect this school year, the ESPN telecasts are not blacked out in ACC markets, even though Raycom continues to broadcast the tournament on the syndication package it brands as “ACC Network.”

Which broadcast to watch is “the fans’ choice,” said Nick Dawson, ESPN’s director of college basketball programming and acquisitions. “Let them pick and choose which one they want to watch. It’s great for them to have that option.”

The ESPN and Raycom announcers call the



Atlanta viewers have the unique option of watching all 11 games of the ACC basketball tournament, including NC State's loss to North Carolina on Saturday, on both the ESPN networks and Raycom's "ACC Network" on WATL. JOHNNY CRAWFORD / JCRAWFORD@AJC.COM

games from seats not far apart on the front row near center court at Philips Arena.

“We definitely don’t look at it as competing,” Dawson said. “We look at it as, ‘Hey ... this was the model that made sense for all three parties [ESPN, Raycom and the ACC].’”

Charlotte-based Raycom has syndicated ACC telecasts since the early 1980s.

Until this season, the company was the league’s basketball rights-holder, airing games on stations across the ACC footprint and sub-licensing the national rights to ESPN. The ACC’s new TV contract essentially reversed the roles by selling the full broadcast rights to ESPN, which sub-licensed syndication privileges to Raycom.

Generally, ESPN and Raycom don’t televise the same games under the new deal, but the arrangement provided for two exceptions: the first Duke-North Carolina game of the regular season and the ACC tourna-

ment.

The arrangement “has really come about by the fact promises were made to the conference to have as much exposure on as many different media platforms as possible,” Haines said.

“ESPN recognized that it was extremely important for [Raycom] to be able to maintain the tournament over the air,” Haines said. “One of the reasons stations carry our regular-season [package] is so they’ll be able to carry the tournament.”

“A lot of people may think that it’s cats and dogs [between networks], but it’s not anymore. You have partnerships, and we were very fortunate to be able to maintain a partnership with ESPN. We’d had one for 30-some years; it just flip-flopped a little bit as to who was in the driver’s seat.”

A benefit of the new arrangement to Raycom is that, for the first time, it is permitted to syndicate its telecasts outside the ACC footprint. In addition to coverage that blankets the region, Raycom

this season syndicated regular-season and tournament games in widely scattered markets such as San Francisco, Denver, Houston and Cleveland. More than 75 stations are airing Raycom’s tournament telecasts.

While ESPN televises many other conference tournaments, the ACC’s is the only one in which all games are simultaneously shown by another broadcaster — “the co-exist model,” Dawson called it.

Sharing the audience obviously will reduce the Nielsen ratings that either ESPN or Raycom’s “ACC Network” would draw if airing the games exclusively.

“I don’t look at it that way for us, because we’re coming from a deal where we were blacked out in the past [in ACC territory],” Dawson said, “so for us anything we gain in the territory is going to be a plus for us, versus past history.”

Said Haines: “We believe the total audience will be greater because of both platforms airing the games.”