

Michigan-Duke biggest sports syndication test in years

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New York — The rematch Saturday of last season's Michigan-Duke NCAA championship game could be the biggest syndicated TV game since Lew Alcindor and Elvin Hayes met in the Astrodome in 1968. It also could signal a change in the industry.

"There will be a lot of eyes on this — not just from the viewers, but also from the broadcast networks," Raycom executive vice president Ken Haines said. "They want to see how we do because this could pave the way for a lot of other major events in national syndication."

Raycom, an independent producer and syndicator headquartered in Charlotte, turned down a big offer for the game from CBS, which wanted to open its college basketball season with a doubleheader of No. 3 Kansas at No. 2 Indiana in the afternoon and No. 1 Michigan at No. 4 Duke in prime time.

Raycom pays the ACC an estimated \$14 million a year to control the network, cable and syndication rights to all its home games. Although neither Raycom nor CBS will confirm the figures, industry sources say

CBS offered \$200,000 and may have been willing to go as high as \$250,000 for Michigan vs. Duke.

"We offered a premium price," said Len DeLuca, CBS vice president of program planning, "but there's no way we could go beyond what we considered a premium fee for a December college basketball game.

"The advantage to Raycom is obvious. They get to keep the ad revenue and try to syndicate the game among a lot of stations Saturday night in prime time. But it's still a December game, and it's not going to get the ratings it would later in the season."

With the big networks losing money on many of their sports properties and unwilling to pay the kinds of rights fees they did in the past, Raycom was leaning toward its national syndication experiment even before CBS made its offer.

"This is an opportunity, pitting two of the top teams in the nation, to test the syndication market for a national sporting event again," Haines said. "It's not often that you have a situation where two teams that played for the national championship play again at the opening of the next season."

The Hayes-Alcindor matchup, in which Houston snapped UCLA's 47-game winning streak with a 71-69 victory, was syndicated by TVS. Although figures are hard to come by from those years, fans remember it was hard to find that game on TV.

A more recent college game that eluded the networks was the Georgetown-Virginia meeting of Patrick Ewing and Ralph Sampson in December 1982. That was a Ted Turner extravaganza, combining syndication to about 112 stations and cable coverage over WTBS.

Ten years ago, cable reached only about 30 percent of American TV households, less than half of what it reaches now. According to TBS, its combination of cable and syndication reached 92 percent of all homes with sets.

On CBS, the game would be seen on about 200 affiliate stations. In syndication, Raycom says it expects the game to be carried by 125-130 stations, reaching 90 percent of the TV homes in America.

"It'll be in all the top 40 markets, and about half the stations carrying it will be network affiliates," Haines said.