

ACC EXCELLENCE



CHESLEY FILLED NATION'S AIRWAVES WITH ACC BASKETBALL

CASTLEMAN DETOLLEY CHESLEY
JUNE 13, 1913-APRIL 21, 1983

An impressive 154 Atlantic Coast Conference men's basketball games would be televised during the 2002-03 season, with 135 of those appearances scheduled for various national networks.

Castleman DeTolley Chesley is no doubt smiling from above.

He never scored a point or defended a shooter, and his name may not be recognizable to many fans today, but Chesley did as much for the game and the ACC as any single individual. He lifted basketball from small, hot gymnasiums along the Eastern Seaboard and placed it in living rooms across the nation.

"He put ACC basketball on the map, about 10 years ahead of everyone else," said Hugh

Morton, a longtime photographer of ACC sports, owner of Grandfather Mountain in North Carolina and close friend of Chesley. "And they are still trying to catch up."

Chesley, once a producer of regional college football telecasts for national networks NBC and CBS, had a simple idea — put the passion of the ACC on the airwaves.

He started with a few football games in 1956, until the NCAA took over the broadcast rights for all college games. In 1957, he became enthralled with Frank McGuire's undefeated North Carolina men's basketball team. Chesley knew he could convince a handful of television stations in North

Carolina and Kansas to broadcast the games from the Final Four.

There was no March Madness back then, no Dick Vitale. Fans who could not be at the games listened to Ray Reeve describe the action on the Tobacco Sports Network on radio, or read the stories in the next morning's newspaper.

Chesley's broadcast of the 1957 championship from Municipal Auditorium in Kansas City went to five stations in North Carolina. The broadcast captivated the state as it watched the Tar Heels beat Michigan State in the semifinals in triple overtime. The next night, against the most famous player in the country, Kansas center Wilt Chamberlain, McGuire's Tar Heels outlasted the Jayhawks in three more overtimes to win the ACC's first basketball national championship.

The players didn't realize the game had been broadcast back home, but they discovered it when they arrived at Raleigh-Durham Airport. Ten thousand people greeted them on the runway. Looking back, that broadcast was a seminal moment for the four-year-old conference.

"They were renting TV sets for hospitals," Chesley told the *Greensboro Daily News*. "It was the damndest thing you ever

heard of. I knew right then and there that ACC basketball could be as popular as any TV show that was shown in North Carolina."

Chesley, a former assistant athletics director at the University of Pennsylvania, may have known he had a product that could make money and entertain viewers, but when he first began his weekly broadcasts in 1958, the basketball coaches were opposed.

"You can't convince me that TV will not hurt the attendance," Bones McKinney, head men's basketball coach at Wake Forest, said of Chesley's weekly package of games. McKinney never lived this prediction down, even after he joined Chesley's collection of all-star announcers that included Jim Thacker, Billy Packer, Jim Simpson, Charlie Harville and Dan Daniels.

"If they had kept ratings back then, the ratings for [the ACC] area would have been through the roof," former ACC Commissioner Gene Corrigan said. "Everybody in the winter at one o'clock on Saturday afternoon watched ACC basketball. There was no alternative."

Recruits watched those games as well. "There's no doubt that the reason the ACC kept getting the best talent was because of all those games on



television," Corrigan said. "If you think kids like being on television now, you can imagine what it was like back then, when there was only one or two games on a week."

Chesley had a background in football and the theater, and he knew how to put on a good show. A native of Washington, D.C., he played football at North Carolina before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania. He became captain of the football team at Penn and was the lead actor for the Wig and Mask Society. During an opening night performance in 1935, Chesley's booming baritone answered 17 curtain calls.

"He really was an amazing man," said his stepson, James Porter, who lives in Westchester, Pa. "He decided he could produce sports on his own better than the networks."

He did, too. Chesley produced a variety of sports, from ACC basketball to Sunday afternoon rebroadcasts of Notre Dame football. He also produced the first television broadcast of the Greater Greensboro Open and helped organize and televise the first Liberty Bowl. He even produced the Miss North Carolina beauty pageant for several years in Greensboro.

He was a fairly simple businessman, despite owning a degree from Penn's Wharton School of Business. He operated without an advertising rate card and on a limited budget.

"It was very simple," said Billy Packer, who began his broadcast career with Chesley's company. "He figured out how much he wanted to make. He figured out how much he had to pay in rights fees and production costs, and that determined the advertising price."

"Every check I ever got from him was handwritten," said Woody Durham, who got his start with Chesley before moving on to become the "Voice of the Tar Heels" for



LEFT: C.D. Chesley, flanked by Marvin "Skeeter" Francis (left) and Commissioner Bob James, pioneered television coverage of collegiate sports in the Atlantic Coast Conference. His efforts helped to make ACC men's basketball tops in the country by putting the league's teams on television regularly, well ahead of other conferences around the nation.

FACING PAGE: Television announcers for Chesley's college-basketball broadcasts — Bones McKinney (left), Billy Packer and Jim Thacker — listen to Chesley.

the radio broadcasts of UNC sports.

Chesley knew how to take care of his advertisers, whether it was his longstanding partnership with Pilot Life Insurance Company or the string of other sponsors who supported the infant stages of college basketball, from Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer to Piedmont Airlines to Holly Farms and Food Lion. Now the string of the league's "corporate partners" could fill a page.

He also took care of the station managers who aired the weekly games, even if it was just a few rounds of golf and several hands of poker during an annual spring retreat at Grandfather Mountain.

Soon after Chesley began televising ACC games on a regular basis, he developed throat cancer. He survived, but doctors had to perform a laryngectomy that silenced his showman's voice. He was forced to speak through a hole in his throat for the remainder of his life.

The effects didn't keep Chesley from screaming at the top of his tube when production went wrong or from moaning when the

league wanted to add more games on television.

"Every time we ever mentioned showing more games on TV, he would say 'You're killing me; it can't be done,'" Corrigan said. "But he always did it. He was very protective of the product, and he didn't want it to be overexposed. Ches deserves a lot of credit for the caliber of ACC basketball because he set the standard."

That standard included regionally televised regular-season and tournament games. He went national in 1973 and '74, when he strung together a network of stations to broadcast a pair of Super Bowl Sunday games between N.C. State and Maryland, two of the best teams in the nation and the league during that era.

"It wasn't just his initial broadcast, but his idea of taking the league and exposing it, and in the quality way that he did it," Packer said. "It really put the ACC in a special category ... because of his exposure, the ability of the league to recruit beyond its natural territories, way beyond any other conference. That separated [the ACC] from other leagues when you

started talking about the rise of its quality."

Through the 1970s, Chesley made the ACC and its players famous, well before the advent of cable television sports network ESPN. Even McKinney finally became convinced. "He presented the ACC with a goldmine," McKinney said in 1983. "They ought to put a statue in front of the ACC office."

Chesley was never immortalized in marble or granite. He is buried in a public cemetery at the base of Grandfather Mountain. "He was so wonderful, so happy, so funny," said his widow, Ruthie, who still lives only a few miles from where her husband is buried.

Chesley died from the advanced effects of Alzheimer's disease on April 21, 1983, just weeks after N.C. State coach Jim Valvano and his Wolfpack captured the league's fourth national championship in basketball.

Fans across the country watched every moment on television, just as the folks around the ACC had been doing for years — thanks to C.D. Chesley. ★



GOLDEN GLORY: The First 50 Years of the ACC

by Barry Jacobs

