

Ray's Alaskan adventure led to Raycom Sports TV boom

By DAN LOHWASSER

CHARLOTTE (UPI) — Rick Ray packed his bags and headed to Alaska almost a century after the gold rush but still found something of value in those hills.

In 1978, Ray, then operations manager for a Charlotte television station, bought the rights to a little-known Alaskan college basketball tournament and put together a package of sponsors and stations to show the games. That was the birth of Raycom Sports, Inc., now one of the largest independent sports networks in the country.

Ray, 33, and his wife Dee, also in her 30s, began Raycom with \$5,000 in the bank, a lot of initiative and the idea that viewers couldn't get enough of college sports. This year the Charlotte-based firm of nine employees will have billings of \$10 million.

"One reason I think it worked is that we had no idea it couldn't be done," said Dee Ray, the vice president of the company. "People would tell us it was impossible — that we couldn't do it."

Dee Ray, who built her own successful outdoor advertising business before her involvement with sports broadcasting and her marriage in 1978, handles advertising sales. Her husband negotiates the programming. They travel extensively and often end up in the same big city but headed in different directions.

What Raycom does is buy the rights to an event, sell the advertising, buy air time from stations to carry the telecast, and then hire a producer to put together the actual telecast. Last year, their first with the ACC rights, a profit was made, although no one is saying how much.

Initially the Rays were on the fringes of the college sports world, televising games the larger production companies did not want. Then in 1981 the ACC broke its 24-year business relationship with the late C.D. Chestey, a pioneer in televising college sports who in that year lost the contract to MetroSports of Rockville, Md.

The ACC's deal with MetroSports ended a year later when the conference chose Raycom over 16 candidates in competitive bidding for the television rights.

"It was competitive bidding, but the conference was also interested in the quality of production and the kind of business operation that was going to be run," said Rick Ray.

Raycom is a joint venture with Capitol Broadcasting Co., Inc., of Raleigh which paid the ACC \$18 million for a three-year television deal. Capitol handles the production end of ACC telecasts and the profits are split 50-50.

In addition to the basketball rights, Raycom and the ACC last week announced it had reached an agreement to televise a similar package of ACC football games. The football plan goes into effect if a recent court ruling that colleges can negotiate their own live television contracts is upheld on appeal. The NCAA currently has exclusive rights to its members' live football television rights, something the universities of Oklahoma and Georgia claim in a lawsuit is a violation of anti-trust rights.

Raycom also has deals with Virginia Tech and other schools for broadcast rights both in radio and television. Last year the company handled about 140 broadcasts, compared to 13 in its first year.

Rick Ray worked for 10 years in programming at television stations before he made the move to capitalize on the belief that

television viewers had an insatiable appetite for college sports.

"It took more know-how and contacts than capital," Ray said. "Now things have really changed. The dollars involved have multiplied 10 to 20 times."

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