

His job stuff of hoop dreams

Raycom's Steedman helps set college TV schedule

By DAVID POOLE
Staff Writer

Chuck Steedman's command of the calendar is more a tool of the trade than a trick, but it's still something to see.

Steedman, vice president of events and programming for Charlotte-based Raycom, keeps much of the 1995-96 college basketball season's television schedule in his head. Ask him, for example, what day of the week Feb. 15 falls on in 1996.

"A Thursday, I am thinking," Steedman says, picking up his computerized pocket organizer. He knows he's right about the date, but he's willing to prove it.

"I can tell you that on that weekend, Maryland has its off weekend on the ACC schedule so we'll

try to make a game for them on the ABC schedule," Steedman says as he taps away at the dozens of buttons on what amounts to a high-tech Rolodex.

"I know the weekend before that is the 7Up Shoot-out in Phoenix. Arizona and Arizona State are playing in that, and we need to fill two more slots."

Steedman grins and keeps talking as he turns the display around. A 15 flashes under Thursday on the February 1996 header.

"The weekend after that is Duke vs. UCLA," he says. "The weekend after that is Duke-Carolina."

In college basketball's game of "Let's Make a Deal," Steedman is among a handful of Monty Halls.

His current project is convincing the regional finalists in this season's NCAA tournament to participate in next season's "Great Eight," a

Unassuming Raycom official is a college hoops power broker

series of four games over two nights arranged and managed for ESPN by Steedman and Raycom.

This season, Raycom owned or shared television rights for the ACC, Big Ten, Pac-10, Southwest and Metro conferences. That means anytime any team from those leagues appeared on television, Raycom — and Steedman — was involved.

Power? Steedman has it, unquestionably. College basketball coaches want their teams on television, and Steedman can make that happen. But he uses his leverage judiciously.

"I could never imagine myself making a call to somebody and saying, 'Get him on phone now, doesn't he have any idea who's on the line?'" Steedman says. "That's entirely foreign to me."

Instead, Steedman prefers a style that he says is part science, part art and part perseverance.

"It's a science in a true TV marketing sense of the word, where you look at how you can position your product to beat the competition," he says. "You look at all the traditional things — ages, demographics, competition — and figure out where your product is going to do best against the competition."

"You have to know what is on NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox and now UPN (Paramount Network) and Warner Brothers. You have to start out with an awful lot of information."

Art of the deal

Next comes the creativity and determination to find a way to make a deal happen.

"When you're out there trying to make games, you try to essentially talk people into things they hadn't thought about doing or things they don't want to do," Steedman says, picking up a soft drink.

"Then it's no different from selling any product to you, no different from me trying to sell you this can of Sprite. You may want it, you may not want it. I'm not sure how much you want it, and I have got to try to figure it out and find a way for everybody to come out of it alive."

Steedman, 32, is a native of East Brookfield, Mass., who majored in sports management at Massachusetts and began his career in the sports information office at Connecticut. In a six-year stay, Steedman moved up to marketing director and then to assistant athletic director at the Big East school.

Eager for a challenge with a more national focus, Steedman interviewed in late 1989 with the NCAA for the job as director of Division I men's basketball. He didn't get the job, but found out about his current post at Raycom during the process.

"I came to work here in Febru-

ary of 1990," Steedman recalls. "My first day here, it was 72 degrees, and I said I have done something right, I have done something very, very right."

He came to Charlotte with his wife, Lisa, whom he met on a ski trip in Vermont and who asked him out to a Hartford Whalers hockey game for their first date. They have a 4-year-old son, Andrew, who his dad says "eats sleeps and drinks sports," especially the Charlotte Checkers.

Steedman will be in Seattle this weekend, continuing his work on next year's schedule and lining up the Great Eight field.

"There are some coaches, some athletic programs who will play anybody, anywhere on any date," he said. "And there are some that really don't want to play anybody other than their conference schedule and a few other people."

"You have to know who those people are, and work around the parameters. . . . But I haven't found a coach in America yet who isn't willing to listen. . . . I haven't had anybody slam the door in my face and say I am not interested in talking about games for television."

A scheduling juggling act

Raycom produces, distributes or

does both with the regional packages for all the leagues it does business with, such as the partnership it has with Jefferson-Pilot Sports for games shown on the ACC's regional network.

It also produces and does all the advertising sales for games that air on Sunday afternoon on ABC, and deals on various levels with ESPN, CBS, NBC and regional cable networks such as SportSouth.

Steedman's job includes making sure all of that works in concert — that a game made to be shown on ABC, for example, isn't also counted on to be part of the ACC regional package.

This part of the job, he says, is like playing chess on a three-dimensional board, where a move might make perfect sense on one level but totally wreck an equally important strategy on another.

"I could sit down and lay out the best ABC schedule in the world, the best possible one where we took all best games from the ACC, the Big Ten and so on," he says. "But we've also got ESPN, we've also got the syndicated packages, the cable packages — the Pac-10 has two different cable deals. And each one of those feels that, for what they are paying for the packages, they need to get a return out of them."

Kansas vs. Indiana: The art of the deal

CBS wants Kansas to play Indiana in college basketball, so Raycom's Chuck Steedman goes to work. Here's what it took for that series to be arranged:

Act One: The opening pitch

The original idea is for Kansas and Indiana to meet in a one-time deal at the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, a supposedly "neutral" site. Since the idea of 30,000 fans wearing Indiana's crimson and cream doesn't sound neutral to Kansas, Steedman steers talks toward a four-year deal with the games at the Hoosier Dome, on the Kansas campus, then on the Indiana campus and then in Kansas City, Mo.

Act Two: Dealing with the Demons

If Kansas is to agree to the four-year deal, it needs to clear a schedule spot in the first year and won't give up a home game. All of its away games are "return games" from other deals except for a game at DePaul on ESPN.

Steedman explains the problem to DePaul, which would like to help provided it can get something back for doing so. Specifically, DePaul wants a game to replace Kansas on its schedule, plus a commitment from ESPN to show that game instead of the one with Kansas.

Plus, since this all is being done for CBS, DePaul thinks it'd be nice to get a network game for its trouble. CBS wants Kansas and Indiana, but not DePaul, so Steedman tells the Blue Demons he'll include them in the package that Raycom puts together for ABC.

Act Three: Houston, hello!

Steedman still has to fill the Kansas hole in the DePaul schedule, so he calls Houston to see if the Cougars would like visit DePaul. He also works on getting ESPN to agree to show the game.

"So, in the end, you have Raycom, ABC and ESPN all working together so the Kansas-Indiana game can happen on CBS," says Steedman, who estimates the whole process took about three months.

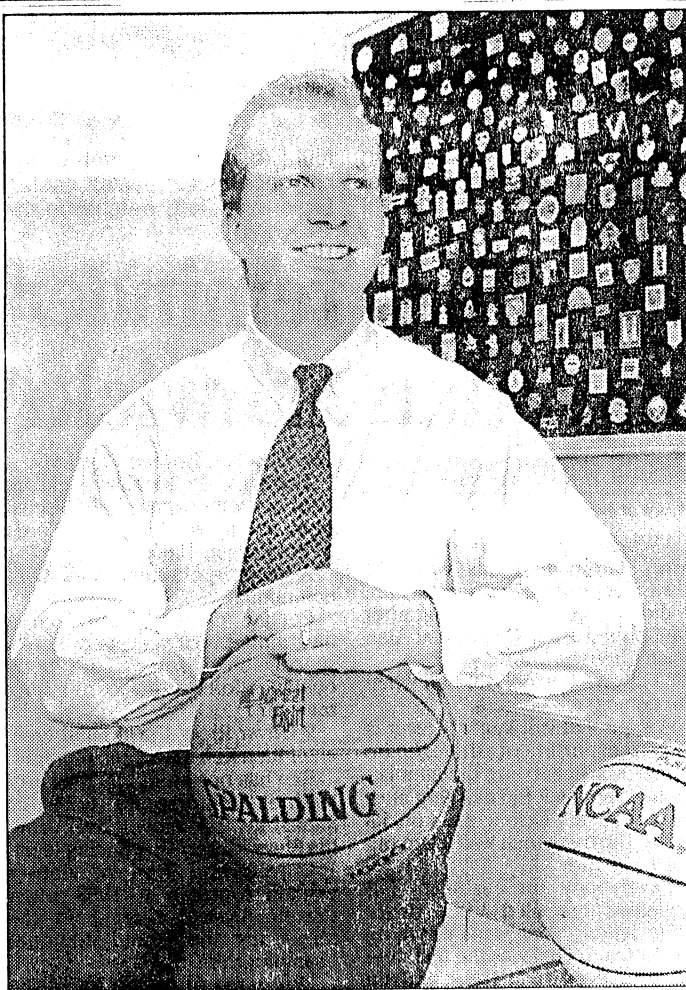
Epilogue: Some you win . . .

For each deal that works out, there are many times more others who go more like a potential Arizona-Louisville game this season that he spent five months of almost daily efforts trying to bring about.

"That one was like an accident victim," Steedman said. "It was alive, then it was dead, then it was alive, then it was dead. And then it was alive and well, and then it died."

What happened? The two schools wanted to work out a football series, as well. Raycom didn't have any rights involved there, so it had no influence on those discussions. When the football deal fell through, it took the basketball series down with it.

— David Poole



TOM FRANKLIN/Staff

Man of many moves: Chuck Steedman, vice president of events and programming for Charlotte-based Raycom, plays a big part in determining which college basketball games are televised.