

On air, ACC still strong

When Ken Haines looked at the preseason Associated Press men's college basketball poll, what he didn't see made him wince. He didn't see any ACC teams among the top five or six.

As executive vice president of Raycom, which owns and brokers the rights to ACC telecasts, Haines knows national rankings frequently parallel TV ratings.



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"To be honest," Haines said, "we

were expecting a long winter. It's been our experience that the more powerful the teams, the more likely we are to get good ratings numbers."

The operative word is "were." With only about a month remaining in the regular season and probably the best numbers yet to come, ACC basketball appears to have survived a rare case of mediocrity.

"Pleasantly surprised — that's my reaction so far," Haines said this week from his office in Charlotte. "It looks like we're running at about the same pace, or maybe a little better, than normal. I'd never have guessed it."

A big boost was ESPN's Duke-at-North Carolina game, which rang up a 2.3 national rating, extremely high for cable-only telecasts. That means 2.3 percent of all cable-receiving televisions in the country were tuned to the game. UNC's game Jan. 6 at Maryland, also on ESPN, drew a 1.7, good by cable standards.

Raycom benefits because it sold the rights to ESPN.

Why the unexpected windfall? Snowfall perhaps. Haines and ACC commissioner Gene Corrigan said the winter weather probably has increased audiences.

"There's no question in my mind it's helped," Corrigan said. "The weather's had much of the East Coast house-locked. A lot of those people have spent time watching TV, and a lot of them have watched our games."

Said Haines: "Bad weather helps TV ratings. That's been a given in this business since day one. The women's games on Sunday [ABC] did a 5.5 in the Atlanta market. That's exceptional for women's games. There was a lot of snow and ice Sunday, and it kept an unusually high number of people indoors."

But the historic regional and national fondness for ACC basketball also has helped.

"ACC basketball still rather easily outdraws any other conference in the country in terms of national and/or relative regional viewing," Haines said. "I think we'll see that's still the case this season, even when the prestige is down some compared to past years. But one other thing that I think is factoring in most of the games this season have been fairly close, and there's not as much certainty before the game starts about which team will probably win."

The best ACC ratings by region won't be known until mid-March. All ratings to date reflect only games aired nationally by ESPN, ESPN2, HTS, ABC and CBS or those televised regionally by Raycom-Jefferson Pilot in five monitored markets — Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, Tampa and Washington.

The results in several ACC hotbeds — the Triangle, Triad, Greenville-Spartanburg, Richmond, Tidewater and Roanoke — aren't in yet.

"A rating of 20 for a show will beat 98 percent of all shows on at any given time," Haines said. "The highest rating we've ever drawn was a 36 for the entire state of North Carolina for the Virginia-at-UNC game on Feb. 10, 1983."

That game, featuring Ralph Sampson and Michael Jordan, was won 64-63 by Jordan's Tar Heels.

The Duke-UNC game on Feb. 4, 1986, drew a 35, and two games in February 1987 — Duke-UNC and State-UNC — each did better than 28 percent in North Carolina.

Haines called them "incredible numbers for any show, but they're extraordinary for a sports event."

He said he doesn't expect the mid-March reports to reveal any regional 30s but that he does anticipate some in the 20s. "If we find out a few games hit in that range, we'll be very very happy about the year overall."

But this unusual season has revealed something interesting about regional viewing habits: Even a sour ACC season is producing better ratings than the NBA's Hornets in Charlotte.

"ACC games in the Charlotte market are pulling 11s or 12s consistently," Haines said. "The Hornets are running around 9. That's encouraging, especially when you project that the ACC games probably will do better in the Triangle and Triad by comparison ..."

To put it in another context, the NFL considers a home-market rating of less than 15 to be an unhealthy sign for its teams.

What does all of this mean to individual schools? Technically, nothing. Boom or bust, Raycom has purchased the rights to all ACC games through the 2000-2001 season. The league is paid a flat fee — about \$14 million per season — which doesn't change whether the games get a zero share or a 20. That money is divided evenly among member schools.

The ratings are far more important to Raycom. The '95-'96 numbers will dictate what the company can charge sponsors for air time in '96-'97.

But in the larger sense, they are important to ACC schools as well. They influence recruiting, according to most coaches, and also will affect future TV contracts.

"The prosperity we're enjoying as a result of basketball now is really rooted in the accomplishments of years and years past," Corrigan said. "I guess you actually could trace it all the way back to the '50s and '60s."

The ACC has had at least one representative in each of the past eight Final Fours. That streak may end this year, but maybe the league will weather it.