

'Season Ticket' hauled to court by angry fans

ASSOCIATED PRESS

RALEIGH — Officials of Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) now know just how far Atlantic Coast Conference basketball fans will go to see their favorite teams — all the way to a court of law.

Armed with lawsuits at each end of the state and beyond, attorneys convinced judges to lift the Season Ticket pay-television blackout, allowing many viewers to see Thursday night's ACC battle between Maryland and top-ranked North Carolina.

North Carolina took a 74-62 victory to raise its unbeaten string to 11 games.

By the 8 p.m. tipoff in College Park, Md., cable viewers in many cities were watching the game, originally scheduled to be blacked out as part of the Season Ticket arrangement as judges issued temporary restraining orders.

"Now the courts are trying to preempt our rights to the contract," said ESPN executive vice president for marketing Roger Werner. "In effect, that causes the product to be stolen. We are damn well gonna defend our rights."

Temporary restraining orders were issued in Union, Catawba, Stanly, and for parts of Mitchell and Madison counties. Orders were also issued in the cities of Monroe, Durham, Fayetteville, Greensboro, Albemarle, Burnsville and Spruce Pine.

Earlier orders were issued in Wilmington and Orange County, while Asheville's cable system showed the Tar Heel-Terrapin game without court action.

Three attorneys in Monroe filed suit in a last-ditch effort to prevent Monroe Cable TV, Inc., from

blackout the North Carolina-Maryland game. Union County District Court Judge Kenneth Honeycutt issued an order forbidding the firm from interfering with, blacking out or otherwise disrupting the programming on any of the 19 channels for which subscribers pay a basic charge.

Honeycutt ordered officials from Monroe Cable to appear in Union County District Court next Thursday to show cause why the order should not be continued until the merits of the case can be reviewed.

One hour before the game, Clearview Cable, which serves Burnsville and Spruce Pine, was ordered to open the Season Ticket package to all cable subscribers. Judge Philip Ginn issued the order.

Werner said ESPN and Raycom own the rights to Season Ticket, adding that all the ACC has done is sell the pay-television rights.

"We do not have the right to show those games on cable or on local television," he said.

In addition to his dilemma with the courts, Werner said adverse publicity and reaction have hampered Season Ticket.

"The negative press and court action contributed to an attitude on the consumer's part that this programming was gonna be free," Werner said. "I don't blame consumers for not signing up if they think a week later it's gonna be given away to the neighbors who don't sign up."

Subscriber interest has been spotty throughout the ACC region, but Werner said he expected the package to return next season.

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'Season Ticket'

continued from page 1B

think, will prevail," he said. "If we have to fight it all the way to the Supreme Court to prove this, we will do that."

Under the Season Ticket plan, ESPN provides the extra ACC games at a special price to ESPN customers. Those who do not subscribe to the games do not receive the signal as long as the game is in progress.

The same games are provided free to ESPN customers outside the ACC region.

In Roanoke Rapids, officials for TeleCable there said Thursday they have been struck by an act of vandalism and threats on the lives of two employees. One spokesman speculated that the threat was directly related to the Season Ticket package, which is not offered there.

TeleCable vice president Gordon Herring said threats were telephoned to an answering device prior to Wednesday night's North Carolina State-Virginia game, also part of the Season Ticket package. Local manager Gilbert Portela said a cable was cut just before a Dec. 21 doubleheader.

"We feel it is just a crank call, but you have to take things like that seriously," Herring said, of the threat, adding that his firm is offering a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible.

An order which forced Alert Cable of North Carolina, Inc., to show the scheduled Season Ticket games as part of standard programming was construed to include the entire Alert system. Alert subscribers in Selma, Garner, Reidsville, Cherry Point, Cary, Wake Forest, Guilford County, Farmville and Weno

The Charlotte Observer

Thursday, January 12, 1984

Thoughts On 'Ticket' Could Win You One

One of the biggest controversies about ACC basketball this season has been about "Season Ticket," a pay-TV package that will deliver 23 ACC games to cable subscribers who pay an additional fee (\$64.95 in Charlotte, for example) to receive it. It's a supplement to the free-TV schedule of 38 games, but for people who have been accustomed to getting all their ACC basketball without any extra charges, "Season Ticket" has come as a real change.

Tell us what you think about "Season Ticket." Write a letter of 100 words or less — humorous, thoughtful, outraged — with your opinion. We'll publish selected letters. And if you write the one we judge as best, we'll pay that basic fee for you to get "Season Ticket" this year. Any additional cable-hookup charges and costs or deposits are your responsibility.

We need to receive your letters by noon Monday. Send them to "Season Ticket," The Observer, P.O. Box 32188, Charlotte, N.C. 28232.

Employees of Knight Publishing Co. and Observer Transportation Co., and their families, are not eligible.

SPORTS

The Charlotte Observer
Thursday, January 19, 1984

Wake Alum Had Wry View

Fritts Biesecker, a Charlotte accountant, is the winner of a contest in which The Observer asked for letters with readers' opinions of "Season Ticket."

Until it was canceled Tuesday, "Season Ticket" was a pay-television package of 23 ACC basketball games, produced by Raycom/Jefferson-Pilot Teleproductions and distributed by ESPN.

Here's the letter by Biesecker, 45, a Wake Forest alumnus:

Q.: How many "Season Ticket" executives does it take to change a light bulb?

A.: None. "Season Ticket" executives enjoy a blackout.

Did Biesecker think about

signing up for "Season Ticket?" "I'm just gung ho enough an ACC fan to consider subscribing," he said.

But he didn't, primarily because he has a season ticket for Wake Forest's home games. That, he said, allows him to see most of the ACC basketball in which he is really interested.

When The Observer launched the contest, it offered a subscription to "Season Ticket" as the prize for the author of the letter judged best. Because the package was canceled, Biesecker will receive two tickets to the NCAA tournament first- and second-round games in Charlotte in March.

Greensboro Daily News

Robert D. Benson, President and Publisher

Ben Bowers, Executive Editor

Ned Cline, Managing Editor

John R. Alexander, Editorial Page Editor

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SATURDAY, JANUARY 21, 1984

SECTION A

Season Ticket thicket

No, Atlantic Coast Conference fans did not invent the game of basketball. Nor is there a constitutional mandate that ACC games must be televised for free. It just *seems* that way sometimes.

Perhaps the promoters of the late and lamentable Season Ticket package of basketball games would have been wiser to take that into consideration before offering the feature this year. If nothing else, they would have saved themselves a chunk of money and a lot of embarrassment.

It started off as a bonus for ACC basketball fans. Raycom/Jefferson Pilot Teleproductions would continue to offer 38 ACC games broadcast over commercial television stations and the Eastern Sports Network (ESPN) cable channel — the same number of games aired last year.

But for those fans who wanted more, an additional 21 games would be available through ESPN for an extra fee of about \$70. Those who didn't want the games would either see alternative programming on ESPN or a blank screen in the five states having ACC schools.

That's where the trouble began. For in the 45 other states, the 21 extra Season Ticket games would continue to be televised — for no extra charge other than what subscribers already were paying for the ESPN cable service. When ACC sports fans heard about that, they charged ESPN and Raycom/Jefferson Pilot with a technical foul.

Sure as shooting, the action moved from the hardwood court to the court of law. Lawyers hustled into court and

obtained injunctions that required Raycom/Jefferson Pilot to broadcast Season Ticket games for free. Faced with continuing injunctions in various parts of this and other ACC states, Raycom/Jefferson Pilot finally threw in the towel. The remainder of the Season Ticket schedule for the year was canceled.

For this year, at least, Season Ticket was a flop. For one thing, it never attracted a strong following and had less than 5,000 subscribers out of a potential market of 600,000. For another, fans became irate because they thought they were being had. They were paying extra for something the rest of the country got for free.

But those two circumstances do not necessarily spell doom for Season Ticket. When cable television systems in the five ACC states finally catch up with the available technology, Season Ticket games can be shown on a separate sports channel that won't require blackouts or alternative programming. Subscribers could either buy it or not.

And ACC fans may one day accept the conference's contention that the 38 games already available amounts to a saturation of the market. Thus, in the ACC's view at least, any more games could be broadcast only on a pay-per-view basis. That is not an unreasonable position given the fact that there are so many ACC games on television already.

The Season Ticket concept may never be warmly embraced by diehard ACC fans. But if basketball fans in this area do want more ACC games broadcast, they ought to be prepared to pay the piper.

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TV/RADIO



By winning in court, Chadwick, Mason and Hart can watch what's happening on court.

Because January is exam time in many colleges, it's only fitting to report the first flunking grade. It goes to the Atlantic Coast Conference's new pay-TV basketball package, *Season Ticket*, which has proved to be a ducat to disaster. Nobody's buying it, the area's populace is stomping mad, and now *here come de judges*, ordering that pay-TV games in their locales be shown for free. There is so much controversy, in fact, that at week's end the producers were thinking seriously of taking the entire package off the air.

"This has been a marketing failure and a public-relations fiasco," says Virginia athletic director Dick Schultz. Adds David Hudson, a cable operator in Reidsville, N.C., where 37 of a potential 4,500 subscribers have signed up: "I'd like to see us all boycott this thing if it's ever offered again."

Part of the problem is the inequitable manner in which the 21-game *Season Ticket* package is shown on cable systems. In 1982 the ACC sold its pay-TV rights through 1984-85 for \$2 million to Charlotte-based Raycom Sports, Inc. Before this season began, Raycom cut a deal with ESPN in which 38 games were to be carried nationwide on ESPN's basic cable signal except in the ACC area. In the ACC, 17 of those games were already scheduled for over-the-air stations and the other 21 would be available to ESPN subscribers if they paid not only their ba-

sic cable fee but also from \$50 to \$75 extra. The subscribers would need a decoding device to unscramble the signal, sometimes at a further additional charge. The rest of the ESPN audience would see either snow or reruns of previous games.

Another problem is that *Season Ticket* games are a supplement to the many ACC games already being shown on "free" TV in the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, Georgia and Washington, D.C. Raycom and Jefferson-Pilot Teleproductions, partners in the pay-TV venture, also are paying the ACC \$18 million over three years for a 38-game package on the over-the-air stations. Then there are the eight ACC games that NBC televises and the four CBS puts on. With so many freebies, who's going to pay dearly for 21 more games? As it turns out, almost no one.

Season Ticket's stats are so bad it's astonishing. Raycom and ESPN offered the deal to 120 cable systems in the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland and Atlanta; 70 operators, representing a potential of 600,000 homes, signed up. ESPN expected a modest "five to seven percent" of these homes to subscribe, says Raycom's president, Rick Ray. By last week Raycom had "between 2,000 and 3,000," according to a spokesman, or less than 0.5%. The record for futility goes to Giles CATV of Narrows, Va. Among 1,323 homes, it has *one* subscriber to *Season Ticket*. "I hope ESPN loses its shirt on

by William Taaffe

It's a ducat to disaster

ACC basketball fans aren't sold on ESPN's *Season Ticket* package

this," says Bill Day of Warner Cable in Hampton, Va. "From a business point of view, it's wrong. They're putting a pay service on a basic service. What's next? Football?"

Two weeks ago the "Wilmington Three"—fans named Alley Hart, George Chadwick and Billy Mason—won a preliminary injunction in federal district court in Wilmington, N.C., prohibiting the local cable system from blacking out *Season Ticket* games. Says Hart, who was a backcourt mate of CBS analyst Billy Packer on Wake Forest's '61 ACC championship team: "It's a moral issue as well as a legal issue. We have to pay extra to get ESPN's regular programming that's going to the other 90 percent of the country for free. It isn't fair." By last week, other district courts had ordered the blackouts lifted elsewhere in North Carolina as well as in Lynchburg, Va. "The courts have basically stolen our property," protests ESPN executive vice-president Roger Werner.

Ray and Werner profess optimism over the long-term future of pay-TV in the ACC, but know they must be patient. Meanwhile, some obvious lessons:

If pay-TV for college sports doesn't work in the gloriously successful ACC, where will it work? My feeling is that many more schools are going to reach for that pot of gold at the end of the pay-TV rainbow in the next few years and find it contains goldfish.

And, as for the public at large, if ACC fans work up a lather over 21 additional games being shown on pay-TV while the great majority of games remain on "free" TV, imagine the outcry when the World Series or Super Bowl heads over the hill. Richard Nixon could make a political comeback on that issue alone.

END

Readers Vent Rage At 'Ticket'

Here are some of the other entries in the contest in which The Observer asked readers for their opinions about "Season Ticket." Approximately 100 people wrote to explain what they thought about "Season Ticket."

No Entry

I refuse to dignify "Season Ticket" by entering this contest.

H.C. WALL JR.
Charlotte

One Step Further

Season Ticket, the ACC basketball pay-television package, is a stroke of marketing genius. But why stop short? ESPN and Raycom should charge by the quarter. Twenty bucks for the first quarter, \$25 for the second and so on. In the final quarter, charge by the free throw. Man, oh, man.

Where do I sign up?

JACK DILLARD
Charlotte

A 'Yes' Vote

On the day "Season Ticket" went on sale, I went down and purchased a subscription. Frankly, I am most appreciative to Raycom and ESPN for the opportunity.

I am amazed to hear the outraged comments of many fans who seem to think they have a right to view any sports contest for free. If this were the case, why is admission charged at the gate?

GORDON BLACKWELL
Raleigh

More Crowd Shots?

Please send me "Season Ticket." I miss Raycom's shots of the crowd during fast breaks.

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'Ticket' Gets Both Barrels

Continued From Page 1C

Also, send me Rick Ray's handbook on successful marketing: "Making Folks Understand What They Really Want."

HARVEY FARDESPARKLE
Hickory

Passing The Bucks

We all know the issue at hand with "Season Ticket" is bucks. But ESPN and Raycom did not have the business sense to foresee the correct source of these bucks.

If you have a quality product, you charge your advertisers a premium because their message will reach a larger audience. And, vice versa, when you have a pathetically small audience, you lose money.

Fortunately for the ACC fan, ESPN is learning this lesson the hard way.

WILLIAM WYNN JR.
Charlotte

A Call For Help

Ralph Nader, where are you?

JANE WILSON
Lincolnton

Wants Another Chance

Please enter me in your contest and pick me as the winner so I may have a second opportunity to vote "no" on "Season Ticket" by refusing to accept the prize.

J.M. BRYAN TAYLOR
Charlotte

Dollars And 'Scents'

I was raised on the farm. I worked in hog lots and stables. But "Season Ticket" outstinks them all.

CLARENCE HINSON
Albemarle

ESPN Means What?

Is it true ESPN stands for "Enjoy Sports but Pay Now?"

I'm a basketball junkie and would gladly send ESPN a buck for a Dick Vitale hair-transplant fund. But no way do I want to pay for what everyone else receives free.

BARRY BYERS
Rock Hill

'Season Ticket' Unfair

I'm an avid sports fan. I'm also a senior citizen who has rheumatoid arthritis, which restricts my activities greatly. I look forward to all televised sports events.

I feel "Season Ticket" is very unfair and the \$64.95 fee is out of the question. I don't know who to hold responsible — television or the ACC. But the almighty dollar is at the root of it.

EILEEN HELMS
Charlotte

Blackouts Elsewhere

Blackouts are a part of television throughout the country. For example, people in Chicago or Los Angeles are not allowed to see certain sports events unless specific requirements are met. "Season Ticket" is not a biased act against basketball fanatics in our area.

If you like ACC basketball enough to pay for "Season Ticket," fine. If you don't, watch the cable-health channel.

WILLIAM CRENSHAW
Hamlet

Why The Uproar?

Can anyone recall an uproar of

the magnitude caused by "Season Ticket?" Certainly, the newness is gone from the idea of pay television. So why the feelings of unjust treatment?

The answer is clear. After years of enjoying free ACC games, it seems almost criminal to be charged for them.

ACC basketball is so much a part of our lives. Its coming each year heralds the presence of friends by a warm fireside on a night or weekend afternoon, with the undeniable excitement of basketball to look forward to.

Some things just can't be bought. Their value is not measured in dollars and cents. To place ACC basketball in a package and dole it out is to reduce to mercenary terms a Southern institution. What is the value of a sunrise? Or a baby's smile?

Give us ACC basketball free of charge or not at all.

MICHAEL CRAIG
Charlotte

Another Plea For Help

Joe McCarthy, where are you? They're painting Tobacco Road red and lining it with Havana cigars. Any minute now, we'll probably see Cuban guys in army fatigues riding around in jeeps.

Joe, this "Season Ticket" thing is taking away our constitutional rights. It's another step in the takeover but we're trying to fight it. The problem is ESPN (Eastern Soviet Pay Network) is fighting back.

Are we a nation of sheep? Say it ain't so, Joe.

EZELL WILLARD
Charlotte

Public Wins A Round As 'Season Ticket' Dies

Outside the building in which Will Espin works, a cold rain fell, and the sky was filled with gray. But even a bleak Wednesday morning couldn't mess up Espin's smile. A day earlier, "Season Ticket" had died, and Espin figured he played a part in the messy demise of the pay-cable service.

"Season Ticket" was a package of 23 ACC basketball games offered by Raycom and Jefferson-Pilot Telecommunications on ESPN. For a fee — \$64.95 in Charlotte — cable subscribers in the five-state ACC area got access to the 23 basketball games. Cable subscribers in the rest of the country got the games free.

Free is a misnomer, actually, since the viewers already had paid for ESPN. Of course, cable subscribers in the five-state ACC area also had paid for ESPN. But the rest of the country got the games; viewers in Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia did not. This development made many people in Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia angry.

Some of them did not realize what was going on until last Thursday, when North Carolina and Maryland played in the first big game of the ACC season. The game was televised on ESPN, but except for "Season Ticket" subscribers, blacked out in ACC country. Instead, viewers who turned to ESPN were treated to a black screen.



Tom
Sorensen

Will Espin — and he's glad there's an "i" between the "p" and the "n" — does not like black screens. Espin, who is a few credits short of a degree at North Carolina, did not go to court to get a temporary restraining order against the blackouts. Some fans did, with success.

What Espin did two weeks ago, was to put a sign outside his Multi-Video store on Independence Boulevard. It's not really his store; he is a part owner of the video end of the store and has stock in the photo end, which are housed in the same building. The sign said "Sign Against ESPN Season Ticket Here," and people did.

Espin, 34, collected about 250 signatures on the petition. On each page there were two columns with 23 slots per column. Virtually all the signatures came from regular customers, although a few people stopped because of the sign.

Espin, who did not subscribe to the service, watched two of the "Season Ticket" telecasts courtesy of the satellite dish outside the store. He made a list of the sponsors. He has written letters, suggesting a boycott, to one of the sponsors, and will write to those he hasn't. Included with his letter are copies of the petition.

You could say "Season Ticket" upset him.

Espin had just moved to a house in a neighborhood where cable was available, and decided to subscribe.

"I heard ACC games were going to be televised (on ESPN)," he said. "After I paid for it, I saw the ad that said I would have to pay extra for the ACC games."

Espin said he wouldn't object to paying if everybody had to pay, and he

See 'TICKET' Page 5C



Staff Photo By FRED WILSON

Will Espin championed the cause

Public Wins 'Season Ticket' Fight

Continued From Page 1C
wouldn't object to paying if the rules were laid out in advance.

"But I didn't like the sleight of hand, the way they dangled the carrot in front of us," he said.

As it turns out, nobody in ACC country will be able to see the remaining 12 games on "Season Ticket".

So nobody wins. Basketball fans will miss some good basketball games. And Raycom, Jefferson-Pilot and ESPN are left with the worst public relations gaffe since Tom Brookshier addressed

the collective I.Q. of the Louisville basketball team.

But Espin, who was still smiling, figures the consumer came out ahead.

"I'm really pleased to see that people realize they can have a positive effect on something," he said. "People are usually so apathetic. After 'The Day After,' there was reaction for one day, and then it was over. With 'Season Ticket,' there was reaction every day."

"I don't want to seem so shal-

low that this (the basketball games) is the important thing," said Espin, who was sitting in a small room in the Multi-video building, as the rain beat down outside. "The important thing is the principle."

SPORTS

The Charlotte Observer
Thursday, January 19, 1984



Staff Photo By FRED WILSON

Will Espin championed the cause

Court lets fans watch ACC game

The Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Officials of Entertainment and Sports Programming Network now know just how far Atlantic Coast Conference basketball fans will go to see their favorite teams — all the way to a court of law.

Armed with lawsuits, attorneys in numerous North Carolina counties and cities convinced judges to lift the Season Ticket pay-television blackout, allowing viewers to see Thursday night's ACC battle between fifth-ranked Maryland and second-ranked North Carolina.

By the 8 p.m. tipoff in College Park, Md., cable viewers in much of the state were watching the game, thanks to temporary restraining orders.

Under the Season Ticket plan, ESPN provides certain ACC games at a special price to

ESPN customers within the ACC region, which includes the Atlanta area. Those who do not subscribe to the games do not receive the signal. In most instances, alternate programming is provided.

The same games are provided free to ESPN customers outside the ACC region.

"Now the courts are trying to pre-empt our rights to the contract," said ESPN executive vice president for marketing Roger Werner. "In effect, that causes the product to be stolen. We are gonna defend our rights."

Werner said the courts are "making it impossible to give (Season Ticket) a fair reading. The courts have basically stolen our property and given it away."

Subscriber interest has been spotty throughout the ACC region, but Werner said he expected the package to return next sea-

son.

"The negative press and court action contributed to an attitude on the consumer's part that this programming was gonna be free," Werner said. "I don't blame consumers for not signing up if they think a week later it's gonna be given away to the neighbors who don't sign up."

"The basic logic of the thing, I think, will prevail. If we have to fight it all the way to the Supreme Court to prove this, we will do that."

A South Carolina attorney said he is looking at the North Carolina decisions to determine if they can be applied within that state. Dennis Autry of Columbia said there may possibly be a suit filed if local subscribers were led to believe that everything broadcast by ESPN would be shown locally.

Charlotte Observer

Wednesday, January 18, 1984

Cable Sports Package Abandoned

By MARK WOLF
TV Writer

"Season Ticket" is dead.

And it's unlikely to be mourned by the ACC basketball fans who questioned its birthright, jeered its adolescence and drove it to an early grave.

"Season Ticket" was a pay-cable package of 23 basketball games involving ACC teams, which were packaged by Raycom and Jefferson-Pilot Telecommunications and distributed by the cable network ESPN.

The games were televised nationally by ESPN but were blacked out in the five-state ACC region unless cable subscribers paid an additional fee (\$64.95 in Charlotte) to receive them.

The package was discontinued effective today, Raycom, Jefferson-Pilot and ESPN said. The announcement came one day after the N.C. Court of Appeals refused to hear a request to lift several temporary restraining orders that prohibited cable systems from

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Cable Sports Package Abandoned

Continued From Page 1A
blackening out the ESPN signal.

None of the remaining 12 "Season Ticket" games will be added to the regular 38-game television package that is carried by television stations in the ACC region. ESPN may buy rights to one or two of the games for national cablecast and, if so, those games will not be blacked out.

"Recent court decisions have made it impossible to continue the package this season," said Rick Ray, president of Raycom.

Fewer than 1% (about 2,000) of the potential customers chose to subscribe to "Season Ticket." Subscribers will receive a refund through their local cable systems.

Far more damaging than the subscriber response, however, were the lawsuits, which resulted in 13 cable operators being ordered to carry the games — even though their contracts with ESPN required blackouts. The basis for several of the suits was that some cable systems specified in their franchise agreements they would provide ESPN.

No such suit was filed against Cablevision of Charlotte, where the franchise agreement was signed in 1978, before ESPN came into existence.

N.C. Attorney General Rufus Edmisten also waded into the fray, vowing to lift the ESPN blackout.

"It would be unfair to expose cable operators to continued undue hardship and expense resulting from the local legal proceedings," said Bill Grimes, president of ESPN. "However, we will continue to fight in the state and fed-

eral courts to defend and confirm our mutual rights to market programming on a cable-exclusive pay basis."

In addition to the low subscriber turnout, cable customers besieged local cable companies with complaints about "Season Ticket" and the package became a hot conversation topic on sports call-in radio shows or wherever ACC basketball fans gathered.

Much of the controversy seemed to center on the distribution method, with cable subscribers resenting having to pay for a product that was seen without additional charge in the rest of the country.

Even Raycom officials concede there was a problem with the "Season Ticket" delivery mechanism.

"We have to look at the distribution method and come up with something that's not so confusing," said Ken Haines, vice president for network operations at Raycom. "There has to be a method the consumer feels is equitable. With the games being distributed by ESPN, a lot of people feel they've paid for ESPN already and why should they have to pay more for something that's free to the rest of the nation."

However, neither Raycom nor ESPN was willing to write off the concept of pay-TV for ACC basketball.

"Right now it's too early to tell," said Haines. "We're going to have to wait and see what the courts will allow us to do."

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Last week, The Observer asked readers to write letters

with their opinions about "Season Ticket." We also offered to pay for a "Season Ticket" connection for the person who wrote the letter we judged best. We will publish a selection of those letters in Thursday's sports section and name the winner of a substitute prize.