

# The ACC Loves Raycom-nomics

Leonard Laye

Tickets to Atlantic Coast Conference basketball games have attained a status all their own, it seems.

They've been given as anniversary presents and handed down from one generation to another in wills. They frequently demand a price many times their face value, particularly at tournament time. Sellouts are the rule at most arenas across the eight-university conference.

More and more, then, ACC basketball has become a television sport. The average fan watches the games not from the stands of Carmichael Auditorium or University Hall but from the same seat, miles from the court but a few feet across the living room or den from the TV set.

"I agree," said ACC commissioner Bob James. "As far as numbers are concerned, more ACC basketball fans see their games on television, rather than in person.

"That's one reason our television package is so important to us and to the fans. There is a severe limitation on the number of people you can accommodate in many of the arenas."

In the winter of 1982-83, the average ACC fan will be confronted with a new look when he turns on the television set. In addition to changes in the game itself — the conference will introduce a three-point field goal and 30-second shot clock this season — there will also be changes in the announcer's booth, the debut of a new Sports



Raycom will use the facilities of Jefferson Productions to bring ACC Basketball to the world. Pictured above are the executives of the new TV package: (left to right) Bailey Dwiggins, Jefferson Productions; Rick and Dee Ray of Raycom; and Jim Babb, Jefferson Productions.

Center show offering news and features on basketball and other ACC sports, and, starting sometime late in 1982 or early in 1983, a series of telecasts of conference championship events in sports other than basketball.

The package has been put together as a joint venture by Raycom Inc. and Jefferson Productions, both based in Charlotte, NC. Raycom/Jefferson won the rights, for three years, when conference officials completed a bidding process last March.

The scope of the package and the amount of the rights fee for three years — not announced but reported by ACC sources to be \$18

million, with \$5 million for the first year, \$6 million for the second and \$7 million for the third — show just how much the conference has gone "big business" in the past two years.

That revenue represents a giant step from the \$600,000 paid for rights in the 1980-81 season by C.D. Chesley, who initiated ACC basketball telecasts and produced them for 24 years. Chesley had an agreement for the 1981-82 rights, for \$1 million, but the conference purchased that last year of Chesley's contract, put the rights up for bid and gave the 1981-82 package to MetroSports of Rockville, MD.

continued

The price tag was reportedly \$3.75 million.

What would open the financial well to such tremendous growth, with a jump of 275 percent in one year and another of 400 percent in two years? The recent popularity, explosion of college basketball in general, for one thing. The rapid growth of cable television and the accompanying increase in national exposure to sponsors, for another.

But the ACC, too, is unique. Most of the eight schools are tightly knit, geographically, making rivalries and fan interest that much more intense. That is reflected in a 1982 Nielsen rating survey of 60 shows syndicated in five or more markets.

ACC basketball, the only sports program in the survey, ranked 23rd overall, seventh in total men surveyed and fourth in men ages 18-49. In the latter category, ACC telecasts ranked behind M.A.S.H. and ahead of such programs as PM Magazine and Barney Miller.

"One unique thing we have in the conference is the tremendous enthusiasm of the fans at the contest," James said. "That contributes significantly in building up interest among people at home. It's easy to get caught up in it.

"A lot of people in our area grow up with this. But some of our most intense fans are ones who moved into this territory and got swept up in the fever."

What will ACC fans find when they sit down in front of the television set this year? Here's a capsule look at the 1982-83 television season:

The schedules show ACC teams popping up on TV screens from almost every direction, from national networks (CBS, NBC) to a cable superstation (WTBS, Atlanta) to a national cable network (ESPN).

But the focal point of the schedule is the Raycom/Jefferson package, which will include 38 games, 31 during the regular season and seven in the ACC's post-season championship tourna-

ment. That number is unchanged from one year ago, when Metro-sports produced 38 games, but represents considerable growth in the number of games available just a few years ago.

The Chesley schedule for the 1975-76 season, for example, consisted of 17 regular season games plus the seven in the tournament. The biggest jump comes in week-end programming: only one Saturday afternoon double-header was televised in 1975-76; nine such double-headers will be shown this season.

The number of appearances for each school is spread, with each team being on TV at least seven times but no more than 10 times. Defending national champion North Carolina leads the way with 10 appearances, followed by Virginia with nine, Wake Forest and Duke with eight apiece and N.C. State, Clemson, Maryland and Georgia Tech with seven apiece.

"I don't think you'll see any major change, up or down, in the number of games on commercial television in the next few years," James said. "One wonders now if we have too many games on TV, though so far we have not found that this affects the gate at the games, unless there is inclement weather.

"It does concern us that too much might be available. Just prior to the start of the season last year, one writer in Winston-Salem checked the schedules and came up with about 260 games on TV in that city, and over 200 of those were live.

"When you can find games on any night of the week something has to give, either TV audience or attendance. But it's difficult to measure the impact of cable TV in basketball. And there are some people in the business who feel there is no such thing as a saturation point."

Rick Ray, president of Raycom, believes "there is a limit to the number of games you can put on

and the amount of revenue that they can produce."

But no one is quite sure just where the line should be drawn. Two of the three major national networks, CBS and NBC, have full college basketball schedules this season, in a weekly (and sometimes twice weekly) format. Some of their games will go to a national audience and others will go on a split network to regional audiences.

CBS will have one national game and at least one split-network game involving ACC teams; NBC will have ACC teams on three national telecasts and four split-network productions.

North Carolina will be involved in all four national network games. The Tar Heels' November 27 game against Missouri in St. Louis will be shown on CBS; the Carolina games against LSU on Dec. 4, Virginia on Jan. 15 and Villanova on Feb. 13 will be telecast by NBC.

NBC will also televise the championship game of the ACC tournament to most of the country. Stations in the conference area will get that game as part of the Raycom/Jefferson package.

Split-network games include Marquette at Wake Forest, Feb. 6, on CBS; and Maryland at Notre Dame on Jan. 22, Louisville at Virginia on Jan. 29, Arkansas at Wake Forest on Jan. 30 and Notre Dame at N.C. State on Feb. 12, all on NBC.

ESPN (the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network) will put the Raycom/Jefferson package games in a national category as well. The cable network has been adding affiliates and subscribers at a rapid pace since the inception of its 24-hour programming in September, 1980. It now reaches over 16 million homes in all parts of the country, and is adding an average of 500,000 homes monthly.

The ACC telecasts on ESPN may be subject to a blackout in the District of Columbia and the five

continued

## Raycom-nomics

conference states of Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia to protect the commercial stations buying syndication rights from Raycom/Jefferson.

Ironically, one of the season's most attractive games, which involves an ACC team, escaped the grasp of the national commercial networks. The Virginia-Georgetown game, to be played Dec. 11 in the Capital Centre outside Washington, DC, will be televised by Atlanta's WTBS-TV, which is carried on cable systems in many parts of the country.

The prospects of the matchup between the teams, both certain to be ranked near the top of the national polls, and the superstar centers (Ralph Sampson of Virginia, Pat Ewing of Georgetown) brought interest from the traditional corners, NBC and CBS, as well as from WTBS, a newcomer to college basketball production. It also brought big money to the schools.

Terms of the agreement have not been announced. But the schools turned down a CBS offer reported to be \$500,000 to put the game on in prime time on Jan. 8. More money will be coming from closed circuit television, especially in the Washington area, which is not reached by WTBS.

The most obvious of the new looks for the TV fan this season will be the faces and voices of the announcers doing the Raycom/Jefferson games. Three of the five involved will be in their first year with the network.

Two major league baseball announcers, Marty Brennaman and Fred White, will share the play-by-play responsibilities. Brennaman works with the Cincinnati Reds network, White with the Kansas City Royals network. Each has a radio and TV basketball background, developed primarily in other markets.

Billy Packer and Jeff Mullins will return to the network to provide

color commentary, with Larry Conley joining the team when Packer is unavailable due to his telecast schedule with CBS. Each is a former player, Packer at Wake Forest, Mullins at Duke and Conley at Kentucky.

"We plan to use them as teams," Ray said, "with the announcers working roughly on an alternating schedule. We believe it's best for the announcers to be fresh, to work only a few games each week."

The new lineup comes in part due to the departure of Jim Thacker of Charlotte, a fixture on ACC telecasts as the primary play-by-play announcer for the past 17 seasons. Thacker signed a multi-year contract with Metrosports and will work games in the Big Ten Conference.

"It's as tough a decision as I've ever made," said Thacker, who negotiated with Raycom/Jefferson before deciding to leave. "I don't think I've ever been involved in anything that I've enjoyed the excitement of as I have the ACC, and I'm going to miss it."

"But this was strictly a business decision, and right now I'm just thinking about doing a good job in the Big Ten."

Thacker said his decision was not based solely on money but said the difference in fees available from Raycom/Jefferson and Metrosports "was pretty substantial."

"A lot of it had to do with income, but not based on what was offered by Metro but what was made available to me elsewhere."

Neither Thacker nor Ray would reveal details of Thacker's contract with Metrosports or any offers made by Raycom/Jefferson.

"We set a budget, and that is a factor," Ray said. "We have to maintain a reasonable level of expenses. We budgeted at a level that is considerably higher than that of any of the conference television packages in the country, that we know of."

The number of games Thacker

was to work — "the role I was to play in the conference schedule" — was another major factor, Thacker said.

"My idea was to continue in the same type situation I had been involved in for the last 15 years or so. In other words, if I'm going to be involved in ACC basketball games I want to do as many as possible."

That philosophy was apparently at odds with Raycom/Jefferson's plans to use two teams of announcers this season.

"We think an announcer can do two, maybe three games a week," Ray said. "We want them to be as fresh as possible and when they are doing too many different things they can become overworked."

In addition to the Big Ten schedule, Thacker will work some other games produced by Metrosports, plus the Sun Belt Conference game of the week on ESPN.

The highlight of an expanded format with the network telecasts will be Sports Center, a 30-minute program to be shown on Saturdays for 23 weeks beginning Dec. 4.

"This program will have two functions, information and magazine-style features," said Dee Ray, Rick's wife, who is executive vice president of Raycom. "It will air prior to the Saturday games during basketball season and will also be on at pre-game, halftime and post-game."

This will be produced at Jefferson Productions in Charlotte and will be completely separate from the basketball telecast. It will have its own director and announcer."

The format will be similar to the one used by some national networks on National Football League telecasts, which open with a news/feature show at a studio site away from game locations, then switch back to the studio at halftime for updates and scores on other games.

"This will be ACC oriented but not exclusively ACC," Rick Ray

*continued*

said. "We will include anything and everything.

"I heard (N.C. State coach) Jim Valvano say he found ACC basketball fans to be more interested in what was going on in the sports in other parts of the country than most others he had come in contact with. We want to build on that national interest and offer them as much as possible. We're working out agreements with other networks to exchange feeds so they can use video from our games and we can use video from their games."

Sports Center will continue after basketball season, providing news and features on spring sports and recruiting for basketball and football. Its schedule will be expanded to 35 weeks beginning in the 1983-84 school year.

"We wanted to be more than just a basketball supplier," Rick Ray said. "We believe it is in the long-term interest of the conference to expand."

With that in mind, the Rays set out to make the most of their alignment with the ACC. After starting Raycom on a small scale only three and a half years ago and producing basketball games on an independent basis, they are now moving into football and a variety of non-revenue ACC sports as well as basketball.

Raycom will also produce 11 ACC football games to be shown on a same-day delay basis, four basketball telecasts of Virginia Tech games and four of South Carolina games, radio broadcasts of Virginia Tech football and basketball games and a weekly coach's show for VPI football coach Bill Dooley.

Also scheduled as part of the Raycom/Jefferson package will be telecasts of eight non-basketball events which will be picked by ACC officials. Sports most likely to be involved are baseball, soccer, women's basketball, lacrosse and swimming.

Other specials planned are a

preseason basketball show, previewing each of the league's eight teams; and a one-hour tournament program, to be televised before the start of the championship game in March.

The quality of the telecasts should match the appeal of the schedule, say the producers.

"We're in the process of completing a new remote unit to give us the most modern, sophisticated equipment available," said Bailey Swiggins, vice president and general manager of Jefferson Productions. "The result is that fans will be seeing the best basketball telecasts in the country."

Jefferson has a strong track record as a leading film and videotape commercial production company. The firm has supplied equipment and personnel for such events as U.S. Open Golf and NCAA football (ABC) and Masters Golf and pro football (CBS). It has also produced commercials for such companies as Coca Cola, General Motors, Ford Motor Company and Eastern Air Lines.

How did the Atlantic Coast Conference reach this stage of sports television success? And what lies in the future?

The answers come in part from the homework, much of it of a crash course variety, done by conference officials and athletic directors.

"We've been involved in telecasts for a long time but the business has changed so much in such a short time recently, we've really had to work at staying abreast of developments and what they could mean to us," James said. "And we've been very fortunate to have had the help of Chet Simmons."

Simmons, former president of NBC Sports and later head of ESPN, met with conference officials each of the last four years, discussing the state of the TV sports business and his ideas on the future.

"Chet is a very perceptive individual," James said. "He would

spend a day or so with us and tell us how he viewed the future, where we were heading with cable, things like that.

"He didn't try to turn us one way or the other. But he helped very much. I just don't think we could have made the decisions and progressed as we have without his advice."

That progress is reflected in the windfall-size financial growth of the basketball package. It couldn't have come at a more opportune time, as far as James is concerned.

"Money is very crucial to all college athletic programs right now," he said. "Everyone is familiar with the state of the economy and inflation. But I don't believe the general public understands that the rate of inflation affecting athletics is very much higher than that affecting the public as a whole."

"Equipment costs are staggering . . . Costs in things like travel and meals are going way up."

"Our institutional costs over the past 10 or 12 years have really jumped. If you're entering one of our schools this year, you'll find that by the time you're going into your fourth year, your educational cost will be up about 33 percent. You multiply that by the number of students (on scholarship) in the athletic programs, and you have a tremendous amount."

Money from the television games, whether from a single network game or the ACC package, goes to the conference and is then distributed to the schools in eight even shares. There will apparently be more and more to split up as the seasons go by, though James admits he's not sure just where the ever-changing sports television business will take the ACC.

"A lot of people believe the future lies with the cable," he said. "That's why we like to keep our contracts to a maximum of three years — then at the end of that time we're able to adjust to the changes." ●



# ACC Basketball Handbook<sup>TM</sup> 82/83

*New Rules  
Who Benefits  
The Most?*



\$3.95