

The ACC On TV

BY JACK BOGACZYK

It began modestly, if not with modesty. In the 1957-58 season, Castleman D. Chesley boldly told the ACC he could produce basketball telecasts for the young league. He promised quality, which eventually also evolved into quantity, which — almost four decades later — produced 164 regular-season TV appearances by the ACC's nine basketball programs this season.

The ACC has more network telecast appearances than any other league. No other conference has its entire tournament on national television, as the ACC has via Raycom/Jefferson-Pilot Sports and ESPN for the 13th straight year.

Are ACC fans spoiled?

Well, earlier this season, a woman caller to Roanoke's WDBJ demanded to know why the station hadn't televised the Clemson-Virginia game. Told the game wasn't available from Raycom/JP, the caller said, "All ACC basketball games are on. It's my right to see that schedule."

Maybe watching ACC hoops isn't among the inalienable rights in the U.S. Constitution, but there was a time when churchgoers in Concord, N.C., tried appealing to a higher authority.

Remember when Raycom tried the ill-fated — and quickly canceled — "Season Ticket" pay-per-view deal for some ACC games?

"One Sunday in a Concord church," said Raycom executive vice president Ken Haines, "the minister stood up and asked the congregation to pray that all ACC basketball games would be on free again."

Raycom owns the rights to all home games of ACC teams. With JP Sports as a partner — primarily on the production side — the two Charlotte-based marketing firms and TV syndicators parcel out ACC hoops to various networks.

"Four things can happen to an ACC basketball game," Haines said. "A game can be played on the Raycom/JP regional network. Or, it can go on ABC as part of our package there, or CBS, which had two games this year. Or, it can be part of the ESPN cable package."

"Or," Haines said, laughing, "it can be part of a very, very unusual situation and not be on TV."

Of the ACC's 72 conference games this winter, 57 were aired. Many of the Raycom/JP games seen over the air in the ACC's backyard also ended up on fledgling ESPN2 outside the league's region for additional exposure.



Raycom announcers Dan Bonner (left) and Tim Brant (right) discuss the N.C. State-Duke game.

Raycom owns the rights to all of the college basketball games ABC airs in its 11 exposures, mostly Sunday regional shows. Of the 60 team appearances in 1994-95, 15 belonged to the ACC, a conference high. ACC teams played in nine of the 11 telecast windows.

"The ACC is clearly the backbone of our package," said Tony Petitti, vice president of programming for ABC Sports. "We had two national games, and three of the four appearances in those were by ACC teams."

"Every week, roughly 30-50 percent of our audience is getting the ACC."

We know what we'll get with the ACC. For example, most weeks we probably do a (national Nielsen) rating in the

low 2s. In the ACC region, we'll do a 5."

Raycom buys the college hoops airtime from ABC and produces the games. Next year, ABC's schedule will increase from 11 to 17 exposures. "We're going to be relying on the ACC even more than we do now," Petitti said.

ESPN has 51 ACC appearances, with 32 in the shared Raycom-JP/ESPN2 arrangement. CBS had a pair of early season non-conference ACC appearances. The league also shows up on Home Team Sports, SportsSouth and Prime Network. There were 33 nonconference TV appearances by ACC teams this season.

"We handle a lot of college basketball and we know what other conferences are doing, too," Haines said. "The ACC easily has the most comprehensive television package."

"The reason? Well, it's the only place I know of where I think you can legitimately say a basketball conference is part of the culture. The Big Ten plays good basketball and there's good interest there, but it's not part of the culture like it is in this region."

"I can tell you that any station we go into to pitch ACC basketball, we're warmly received. People listen to the whole pitch. It's not a tough sell, and that's probably due in large part

to what C.D. Chesley started long ago."

An average of 2.2 million viewers per game watched ACC basketball on the Raycom/JP regional network in 1993-94, almost double the viewership in any other conference package. The ACC Tournament attracted a national average, per game, of 3.55 million viewers on Raycom/JP and ESPN.

The conference's telecast status further is reflected in the talent from the ACC package that also has worked national games over the years. It's a long list led by Billy Packer, who will be calling his 21st consecutive NCAA Final Four next month.

The games, however, just don't appear in viewers' homes without the league's blessing. Fred Barakat, the ACC's associate commissioner, handles all basketball scheduling. He works with coaches, athletic directors, assistant ADs, network executives and arena managers to figure out who's who when and where.

"All of the scheduling goes through our office and me," Barakat said. "We have a philosophy that when you have everybody doing their own thing, the rich will just get richer. That's not what we want.

"We have some rules, mostly unwritten, that we try to follow. We start basically with teams playing Wednesday and Saturdays, then we move some Wednesdays to Tuesdays and Thursdays.

"When we move someone to Thursday, we also try to move that team's Saturday game to Sunday. If a team plays Sunday, we try not to have that same team play Tuesday. And we try to hold the 9 p.m. tipoffs to a bare minimum."

This season, the ACC had only 11 conference games start at 9 p.m., a very low number considering the blanket exposure over the air and on cable.

"Our coaches are great," Barakat said. "They're interested in the exposure and know what it means. They're usually very willing to move games, and they've never shied away from playing big nonconference intersectional games."

One noticeable change in recent seasons has been a lack of those nonconference attractions on a Sunday after a conference game on Saturday. The back-to-back games were too trying in some cases, Barakat said, so if an ACC school has a TV opportunity against a nonconference foe in January or February, he tries to arrange no league date for the school that weekend.

Barakat makes a maximum of 45 games available to Raycom/JP and a maximum of 25 games to ESPN. There's

also a maximum of 20 team appearances reserved for national television (over the air).

The ACC basketball schedules are arranged over a four-year basis on Barakat's computer. Already for next season, the potential dates are piling up.

Among the tentative dates, Barakat has Georgia Tech in an ESPN doubleheader in December. Maryland might play in a four-team tournament with Massachusetts, George Washington and Florida at USAir Arena in Landover, Virginia is going to Connecticut.

UConn-Florida State is possible. North Carolina has Texas, Villanova and LSU. North Carolina State figures to play in the 7-Up Shootout at Arizona. Barakat is trying to arrange a Super Bowl Sunday date for Virginia. Duke has a return date with Illinois.

However, the conference package remains the cornerstone of Raycom's exclusive deal that figures to be extended through the 2000-2001 season.

In 1980-81, Chesley was paying \$1 million annually for ACC rights. Two seasons later, Raycom/JP bought the rights for \$5 million the first season.

In 1989-90, the ACC received \$12.7 million in basketball TV dollars, and by then the league had brought all of its games under one umbrella, with Raycom as the clearinghouse.

This year, the rights fee is \$14.5 million. The nine ACC members split that equally, bringing more than \$1.6 million to each school.

That contract runs through '96-97, but a 25 percent increase is likely to be announced soon, starting next

season. With the Raycom-ACC contract to exceed \$18 million annually, each school will earn more than \$2 million — in addition to the exposure.

Unlike some other conferences, the ACC wasn't and isn't a league made for or by television. It still plays to sellouts with no fear of overexposure. And certainly, no one can say ACC hoops comes at viewers in dribbles.



HUGH MORTON

If one person was most responsible for putting the ACC on the map, it was Castleman D. Chesley (center), being honored at the 1977 ACC by commissioner Bob James (right) and assistant commissioner Marvin Francis.

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