

Raycom leads (money) cheers for college football

For Panthers fans frustrated by the I-85 traffic mess, team announcer Bill Rozinski suggested on a radio talk show this week that they relax and pretend it's an all-day college football experience.

One of the few differences between watching the Panthers and a big-time college game, he joked on WBT, is that these players are getting paid "above the table."

College sports isn't quite that corrupt yet, but there clearly is a gusher of money flowing into the major programs. And helping open the floodgates is Charlotte-based Raycom Inc., which recently cut the deal to create the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 2, 1996.

What makes this sponsorship special is that the conferences of the two universities playing in the game will each take home \$8.5 million. With the exception of pro boxing, that is believed to be the biggest single payday for a single game or race in any sport, college or professional, according to Ken Haines, Raycom's senior executive vice president.

Moreover, the deal also lays the



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groundwork for the college football national championship playoff that fans have demanded for years.

The nation's top two ranked teams are slated to play in the Fiesta Bowl, with the exception of the Big 10 and Pac 10 conference winners, who must play in the Rose Bowl. In years past, the various bowls have competed to attract the best teams, with the national championship rarely decided on the field.

At \$8.5 million, the Fiesta Bowl tops the Rose Bowl's \$6.5 million per-team payout, according to Lisa Ukman, editor of IEG Sponsorship Report, a Chicago-based newsletter covering sports sponsorships. Last year's IBM OS/2 Fiesta Bowl paid about \$3 million per team.

The decision by Tostitos' owner, PepsiCo Inc.'s Frito-Lay division, reverses a trend, Ukman said.

"There had been a general feeling that bowl games had peaked in terms of sponsors," she said. "But with Frito-Lay stepping back in, and such a big fee, it's clearly going to benefit all of the bowls."

Haines called Frito-Lay's decision "simply a marketing move to grab more of the chip-eating market." Brian Neuwirth and Ken Cerick, two Raycom salesmen in New York, had other companies ready to step in with sponsorship money if Frito-Lay had wavered, he said.

"Raycom has traditionally been known as a company that promotes regional college football and basketball, but this sponsorship makes a very significant statement about our ability to represent product to clients nationally on a very large scale," Haines said.

Formed by Rick and Dee Ray in 1979, Raycom is now part of Atlanta-based Ellis Broadcasting. As previously reported, Liberty Sports, a division of cable giant Tele Communications Inc., is negotiating to acquire Raycom.

The company has lots of bowl-game experience, having created the Blockbuster Bowl in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., later renamed the Carquest Bowl. Though it has helped the Jacksonville, Fla.-based auto-parts retailer gain recognition, that game remains a lesser bowl. It pits the third-best Big East Conference team against the fourth-best Atlantic Coast Conference team.

"The success of Raycom has always been their ability to sell," said Tom Mickle, the ACC's assistant commissioner. "They were a natural for the Fiesta Bowl, which has had trouble finding title sponsors. They've proven again, in a remarkably short period, that they have the ability to make the sale."

More money inevitably means more pressure on college athletes and coaches, Haines said. But he isn't too concerned about the issue.

"In relationship to what is happening in pro sports, I think college sports has more integrity in the eyes of the fans — and it probably actually does," he said. With its constant labor strife, he

noted, "pro sports right now is making college sports look pretty good."

Editor Ukman doubts that more money will change the atmosphere of college football. "College sports is so long past being anything amateur that it's not even worth worrying about," she said.

Indeed, the money spent on college sports is already immense. The annual athletic budgets of the nine ACC teams now ranges from \$12 million at Wake Forest to about \$21 million at UNC and Florida State, said Mickle.

Look for those budgets to get even fatter if Florida State winds up in the Fiesta Bowl — a good possibility given their top ranking in the Associated Press preseason poll. With all ACC schools sharing in the \$8.5 million bonanza, one assumes there will be lots of Tostitos at the schools' training tables.

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