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Raycom has lead role in proposal TV firm becomes expansion visionary

By Lynn Zinser
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The 16 athletic directors mulling their schools' entrance into the proposed Super Metro haven't yet agreed to form the conference, but they do agree on one thing — the proposal itself is a masterful stroke.

→ Taking the bows for that would be Ken Haines, executive vice president of Raycom Sports Inc., the television syndication firm that owns the Metro's TV rights. After he and his staff devised the concept of the Super Metro, Haines has presented it as many times as someone wanted to listen.

"It's a fantastic job of putting together a comprehensive proposal," Florida State athletic director Bob Goin said. "It has a lot of merit. It certainly justifies the kind of evaluation we're going to give it."

The kudos have reached Haines from all sides of the negotiating table, and from all around the country. Since January, when expansion of the conferences first became a serious subject, Raycom has been on center stage.

→ "All the conferences have talked to us in varying degrees," Haines said. "This (the Metro) was the first conference that approached us and we've really put all our efforts into the superconference."

Loyalty, said Haines, has been what kept him concentrating on the Metro. He has compiled television household data for other leagues that came calling, but hasn't researched other expansion plans.

Raycom is in the midst of a five-year contract giving it rights to all Metro basketball games. Any station wishing to broadcast those games must negotiate with Raycom.

The company has contracts with other conferences, including the Atlantic Coast Conference, but the Metro was the first to set his imagination working on the reconfiguration of the nation's conference structure. In January, the league commissioned Raycom to research the possibilities.

"Our initial responsibility was to present different scenarios and the implications and ramifications of those scenarios, one of which was the 16-team superconference. It was up to the conference to decide," Haines said.

During the Metro's annual meetings in May, the athletic directors of the eight schools voted to pursue the 16-team football setup and 12-team all-sports league.

In June, the essence of the proposal was announced to the public. It has topped expansion conversations ever since. The 16 teams would make up the largest football conference in the country and would reach the most television households.

"Raycom has given us a very impressive, very detailed presentation which will be the basis for the University of Miami to evaluate entrance into the conference," said Miami vice president Cyrus Jollivette.

What would the conference accomplish for Raycom?

"We would hope if this comes together that we would be the marketing and television component of the new conference," Haines said.

He hopes, in other words, for some loyalty in return.

→ "It would certainly keep us in the forefront of television and college athletics. It puts us in on the ground floor of a very exciting new conference concept," he said.

Haines and his associates invested a great deal of research into the proposed conference, bringing applause from the athletic directors who have studied it.

The television numbers (see graphics) have raised the greatest number of eyebrows, but they are only a portion of the research. None of the athletic directors or university presidents is pretending this alignment is motivated by academic goals but Haines hasn't left that part out either.

"We researched athletic and academic variable and the compatibility of the institutions," he said.

The results have pushed Raycom into a flattering role as the nation's premier expansion visionary. Even if the Super Metro never materializes — and Haines says he hopes it does — Raycom will likely remain active in the nation's changing conference landscape.