MEDIA

If the MEAC's basketball deal with the All College Sports Group reaps dividends, the league's football teams, featuring such talent as Howard's Maurice Haynes, might be next on the tube (photo courtesy of Howard University).

MEAC Snares A Promising Television Package

A Recently-Signed Contract Calls for 13 Live Basketball Telecasts

By GREG BROWN
Review Staff Writer

A Durham, N.C.-based production company which purchased the broadcast and cable rights to the MEAC's 1985 basketball games says it has a potential viewership of 30 million households after striking a deal with a cable TV network.

"At this point, the project looks excellent," said Robert Drakeford, general manager of the fledgling All College Sports Group, formed last year. "This will be the largest black sports network in the history of the country."

And, for the first time, the games will be aired live -- not six to seven days later as were most of the black college games this year. Operating with a staff of about 30 persons, the production company plans to relay the television signal to a satellite, which will beam the live action to non-cable stations across the country, including many independents. The Satellite Programming Network will carry the games via cable TV systems.

The All College Sports Group bought rights to the next three years of MEAC games. MEAC Commissioner Ken Free said the conference will receive "between $30,000 and $40,000 annually for rights to the regular-season coverage. "It's not a lucrative contract," Free said. "It's a trade-off for more exposure." Negotiations for the tournament rights still were under way when the *Review* went to press.

"Basically, we have the TV and cable rights for the MEAC and we are currently in the process of stitching a network together," Drakeford said. "Our understanding is that, of the top 25 markets, we should get at least half of them."

That would represent a giant leap for MEAC coverage and progress for black college basketball as a whole.

Last season, only 10 black college basketball games were aired, all of them tape-delayed broadcasts on the Black Entertainment Television cable network. Even those games weren't the best pairings, since their selection was more dependent on available production facilities than anything else.

Drakeford said the new black sports network will be three times larger than the Black Entertainment Television network.

"We're going to be doing a lot of women's basketball. We're interviewing a lot of female announcers for the women's games.
-- Robert Drakeford

ESPN, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, carried more than 150 college basketball games last season, but not one of them between two predominantly black schools. The USA Network, NBC and CBS also have refrained from broadcasting black college games.

Such a lack of exposure affects not only TV revenue for the schools, but, more importantly, their ability to recruit blue chip athletes who tend to go to the wealthier white schools whose teams appear regularly on regional and network telecasts.

The lack of television exposure also can affect a team's ranking.

"We feel there are two or possibly three (MEAC) teams which should be ranked in the Top 25, and we will cover those teams," Drakeford said, adding that one or two of the teams would have ranked in the nation's Top 10 with better TV exposure.

The sports group's coverage will begin in December, when MEAC teams face nonconference foes like Georgetown, Maryland and Georgia Tech. Conference coverage will kick off Saturday, Jan. 12, when N.C. A&T faces Howard in Greensboro, where it will resume two days later when A&T faces Delaware State.

But the real test of the ambitious producers' capabilities will come Saturday, Jan. 19, when the network will cover games in separate cities for simultaneous broadcast in different regions. North Carolina and Florida viewers will see the matchup between Bethune-Cookman and N.C. A&T from Daytona Beach, while the rest of the country will watch Howard take on Delaware State.

Drakeford said the split-game approach will be tried again on Saturday, Jan. 26, when black college basketball fans in Maryland and Florida will view Morgan State and Bethune-Cookman in Baltimore while other stations carry N.C. A&T's game against S.C. State from Greensboro.

Game coverage will follow the standard network format, alternating play-by-play description with live interviews, commentary and special features. Calling the games will be Don Shea, sports director at WTVD in Durham for 20 years before joining Jim Valvano Enterprises, and Donnie Tuck, another former WTVD sports announcer and former Howard University sports information director who now edits *The Sports Gap*.

Fred Snowden, former head coach at the University of Arizona and the first black coach in America at a predominantly white school, will handle the games' halftime shows, featuring highlights of each of the MEAC schools. Snowden will provide the shows with analyses of conference, nonconference and league play, as well as tips from other coaches.

What's more, Drakeford said, "We're going to be doing a lot of women's basketball. We're interviewing a number of female announcers for the women's games." The company has signed Eva Watts, a 10-year veteran of ABC, as one of its producers for the women's coverage. If All College Sports gets the tournament rights, Drakeford said, it plans to televise 13 women's games this year and field an all-woman team of announcers to call the women's tournament games.

If the venture succeeds, Drakeford said, the producers may expand their coverage into other conferences -- or possibly into MEAC football.

But, he pointed out, "We're still trying to get the bugs out of this one before we attempt that."

THE SCHEDULE

Jan. 12	N.C. A & T vs. Howard at Greensboro, N.C.
Jan. 14	N.C. A & T vs. Delaware State at Greensboro, N.C.
Jan. 18	UMES vs. Morgan State at Princess Anne, Md.
Jan. 19	Bethune Cookman vs. N.C. A & T at Daytona Beach, Fla.
Jan. 19	Howard vs. Delaware State at Washington, D.C.
Jan. 21	Bethune-Cookman vs. S.C. State at Daytona Beach, Fla.
Jan. 26	Morgan State vs. Bethune-Cookman at Baltimore, Md.
Jan. 26	S.C. State vs. N.C. A&T at Greensboro, N.C.
Jan. 28	Howard vs. Morgan State at Washington, D.C.
Feb. 4	N.C. A&T vs. UMES at Greensboro, N.C.
Feb. 9	Delaware State vs. N.C. A&T at Dover, Del.
Feb. 16	Morgan State vs. Howard at Baltimore, Md.
Feb. 25	Delaware State vs. Howard at Dover, Del.

MEAC *CONTINUED*

BARRY COOPER

The Harsh Reality of Big Versus Small In College Athletics

By BARRY COOPER
Syndicated Columnist

It seems that historically black colleges, once at the forefront of education in this country, are weathering assaults on all sides these days. Among their woes are money cutbacks from the federal government, as well as drops in enrollment and apathy among alumni.

The problem is especially severe in athletics, where many black schools are experiencing acute financial pains. Once powerhouses that attracted professional scouts in droves, the black schools now have taken a back seat to larger universities which have outbid -- oops, outrecruited -- them for the best talent.

The effect of having to settle for less than the very best has been devastating. No longer can Grambling match up on the football field with larger, more well-known schools. Florida A&M football Coach Rudy Hubbard, who once boasted that his team "can line up against any team in the country and expect to win," can no longer make that claim.

It is the same for most other black schools, and in every sport. The Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference basketball champion is embarrassed each year in the NCAA Tournament. Except for Alcorn State, the champion of the Southwestern Athletic Conference has not fared any better. Most other sports at black colleges, except for some track programs, are a virtual joke, their worth having been ruined by a lack of money and facilities.

For the most part, this decay has taken place at the country's Division I black schools, such as Grambling, Florida A&M, North Carolina A&T and Maryland-Eastern Shore. The strain of trying to compete just a notch below the big boys in football and on the same level in all other sports has been too much for the schools to handle.

Many of the other black colleges, particularly those which remained in Division II, have relatively healthier bank accounts and seem much more competitive on their own level.

The bottom line, however, is simple: Most black college athletic programs are losing respect. It seems that few people take them seriously anymore. Players from black colleges are left off of the major all-America teams, have no chance at being considered for the Heisman Trophy and are not invited to participate in major post-season all-star games.

Furthermore, black college players often are overlooked in the NFL and NBA drafts, and have to rely on free agency to find their places on pro rosters.

Such a tactic could mean the loss of more than $1 million. Take Grambling's Everson Walls, for example. A few years ago, the Dallas Cowboys signed him as a free agent after the Cowboys and every other NFL club declined to draft him.

All Walls did was lead the league in interceptions that year and make all-pro. His salary: a paltry $40,000, the NFL minimum.

Had Walls been drafted on the first round as he was worthy of, he would have signed perhaps a three-year contract worth $300,000 per year, plus a $250,000 signing bonus.

So you figure Walls, under the initial contract he signed, lost some $260,000 a year plus the signing bonus.

Fortunately for Walls, he was able to renegotiate his contract last year. Still, he'll never catch up with the player who was taken in the first round.

On the surface, much of this appears to have racist overtones. How else could the NFL, which claims to have college scouting down to a science, miss out on Everson Walls?

How could quarterback Doug Williams, who shattered numerous passing records while at Grambling, not have been considered a candidate for the Heisman Trophy?

Why isn't the nation's press raving over Mississippi Valley's Jerry Rice, a wide receiver who right now may be the best in the college ranks this year and is destined to be a No.1 NFL draft choice?

How can black college football teams like Mississippi Valley and Tennessee State be excluded from the NCAA Division I-AA Top 20 poll?

It would be easy to blame the above on sheer racism and nothing more.

That is not true, though.

What is hurting black college athletic programs is not so much