

# Disney controls tv coverage of football

By Paul Farhi  
The Washington Post

The biggest name in football this season, college or pro, isn't Green Bay or Notre Dame. It isn't Barry Sanders or Brett Favre.

It's Disney. The conglomerate that gave the world "The Lion King" and the Mouseketeers has emerged as the most important and influential player in America's most popular sport. The company will be the unseen corporate hand behind two nights of primetime NFL TV coverage every week that began with the season premiere of "Sunday Night Football." Combined with its already ubiquitous college football coverage, ABC, ESPN and ESPN2 - the broadcast and cable networks Disney owns - will offer viewers a seven-days-a-week string of college and pro football programming.

At year's end, 18 of the 22 college bowl games will appear on one of the Disney-owned networks.

Disney's foray into football is remarkable for several reasons, not least of which is that the company wasn't even in the TV sports business until mid-1995, when it bought the parent of ABC and ESPN, Capital Cities/ABC Inc.

Since then, Disney has used a Dumbo-sized pot of money to keep its powerful broadcast and cable properties in the game. The total price for Disney's football contracts: some \$10.2 billion, most of which went toward buying Monday and Sunday night NFL games in a hyperinflated auction last January.

But that huge investment - the largest ever made for any kind of programming - has engendered questions and criticism.

Disney's commitment to football has in some ways blurred the lines between where its interests and the NFL's begin and end. ESPN's Web site (ESPN.com), for example, is directly linked to the NFL's official Web

site - which is produced by none other than ESPN. For this reason, some observers suggest the network has compromised its journalistic independence in favor of its financial interest.

Critics on Capitol Hill and elsewhere also have cited ESPN's \$4.8 billion NFL deal as a key factor in the continuing upward spiral in the cost of cable TV service for millions of households. In May, cable mogul Ted Turner - a losing bidder for NFL rights that went to ESPN - called ESPN's deal "unfair" to consumers.

The reason: ESPN's pricey contract

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Steve Bornstein, top tv executive

is ultimately paid for by cable subscribers, whether they watch football or not. This is because ESPN is effectively funding its NFL deal by increasing the fees it charges cable operators for its signal, which has become as standard a part of cable television as any over-the-air network. ESPN's fees - already the highest of any cable network - will double over the life of its NFL deal. Cable operators, in turn, say they must pass on these increased costs to their subscribers.

"We don't like it at all," said one local cable executive, who asked not to be identified, citing confidentiality agreements with ESPN. "What they bid to get the rights is almost absurd. In the long haul, we have no choice but to hand the bill to our customers."

Two lawmakers with oversight of the telecommunications industry,

Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-La., and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., have publicly highlighted the rising costs of sports programs in hearings this year, and the Federal Communications Commission has vowed to study it. So far, however, no formal legislative proposals have been introduced.

Some consumer advocates, such as Mark Cooper of the Consumer Federation of America, say cable operators have raised their rates far in excess of the increase in programming costs. Cooper and ESPN agree on one point: that the costs are being offset, in part, by additional local advertising revenue that the operators are getting during ESPN's NFL programming. "What we have is one monopoly (the NFL) ganging up with another monopoly (the cable operator) to . . . frustrate the consumer," Cooper says.

Cooper notes ESPN was in a powerful position as it bid for the NFL rights. Unlike non-cable networks such as NBC and CBS, which must rely solely on projected advertising revenue as they formulate their bids, ESPN knew it had two ways to recoup its rights payment - through advertising and through rate increases to cable operators who hardly are in a position to drop ESPN.

Some cable operators have proposed placing ESPN and ESPN2 on a special sports-only tier of service, enabling consumers to buy it at their option. At the moment, however, that step is prohibited by ESPN's current contract, which requires that the network be sold as part of a broad package of channels.

ESPN and ABC executives are quick to point out that Disney didn't cause the spiral in sports costs, and that all networks, including Turner's, are active bidders for high-profile contracts. They note that Turner raised prices to cable operators carrying his networks shortly after winning a bidding war for NBA rights last fall. Disney's top TV sports executive,

Steve Bornstein, says the company's big bets on football were simply necessary to keep the networks competitive.

"From our perspective, it's worth it because football is the platinum standard of sports programming," says Bornstein, who serves as chief executive of ESPN and president of ABC Sports. "When the TV audience has more and more (channels available), live sports, and particularly the best live sport, football, becomes increasingly valuable." He adds, "We would certainly be opposed to cable rate regulation or any regulation which would mandate sports-only tiers of service."

"If you're Disney, the idea is to be in every room of the house, one way or another."

Rick Burton, University of Oregon

Disney may not have caused the runaway escalation in sports rights, but it has certainly been the largest player.

Last month, for example, ESPN and ABC swooped down on pro hockey, grabbing NHL rights away from the Fox network for \$600 million - or nearly triple what Fox paid in 1995. Disney also owns an NHL team, the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, and a controlling interest in Major League Baseball's Anaheim Angels. ESPN also has rights to show Major League Baseball games on TV and broadcast them on its ESPN radio network.

All told, the company has spent \$11.1 billion on national football, hockey and baseball TV rights over the past three years to supply its cable and broadcast networks. That figure is twice the amount spent on national sports contracts by any of its rivals, including Fox, CBS, NBC or Time Warner's Turner Sports. (Time Warner and Fox are sports conglomerates in their own right. In addition to owning various cable and broad-

cast networks, Time Warner owns the National Basketball Association's Atlanta Hawks and baseball's Atlanta Braves, and Fox owns baseball's Los Angeles Dodgers.)

"Sports to Disney used to mean a cartoon with Goofy swinging a golf club," says Rick Burton, who directs the University of Oregon's graduate program in sports marketing. "Now the Mouse is one bad dude."

Although TV has always influenced the pace and nature of the games it covers, Disney's dollars have already had a noticeable effect. In a concession to ABC, the NFL agreed in January to start "Monday Night Football" at 8 p.m. Eastern Time this season, instead of the traditional 9 p.m.

The one-hour difference will mean that the game will air almost entirely during primetime hours on the East Coast, which ABC hopes will increase the game's viewership and ad dollars. The NFL has also agreed to let all of its national television "partners" cram an extra three minutes of commercials into game telecasts this year (even so, Bornstein acknowledges that ABC will still probably lose money on its NFL deal).

Even more striking is ABC's impact on college football's postseason. The network last year cornered the market on the rights to the nation's leading bowl games - the Rose, Fiesta, Sugar and Orange. By making these deals, ABC helped coordinate the Bowl Championship Series, a creation of the network, bowl officials and the nation's major college football conferences designed to annually produce a game between the nation's top two teams.

The four big bowls will host the top game each year on a rotating basis. In exchange, ABC agreed to pay \$525 million over seven years to the bowls and the conferences. The agreement contains some tradition-busting features. Specifically, the deal requires the Rose Bowl to end its five-decade-old format of pitting the champions of the Pacific-10 and Big Ten conferences against each other.

Teams from those conferences will

play elsewhere on New Year's Day if they're ranked No. 1 or No. 2 during years in which the Rose Bowl isn't hosting the championship game. Conversely, when the Rose Bowl hosts the championship game in 2002, the Pac-10 and Big-10 champs will have to be ranked first or second in the nation to play in Pasadena.

"Conceivably, we could be hosting a Clemson-Syracuse game," says Jack French, chief executive of Roses Association. What influenced the Rose Bowl to dispense with tradition? Replies French without a moment's hesitation: "Money."

ABC will guarantee each of the major bowls \$19 million per year, a raise of some \$7.5 million per year in the Rose Bowl's case. For its investment in the Rose Bowl, however, ABC retained the right to sell all the commercial airtime and the game's "presentation rights" - a high-profile sponsorship that makes the game itself nearly synonymous with a corporation. ABC sold those rights to AT&T, meaning that whenever ABC viewers hear about the game, they will be hearing about "the Rose Bowl, presented by AT&T." That is another enormous change for the Rose Bowl, which, unlike nearly every other bowl game, had resisted such overt commercialism.

Unlike its deal with the NFL, ABC's Bowl Championship Series deal is projected to turn a profit. By working so many angles at once, the University of Oregon's Burton believes Disney's football strategy is ultimately a financially sound one.

"They will lose money on the ABC deal but they'll make it up on the ESPN side," he says. And that's the beauty of being a multitentacled conglomerate, Burton says: "It all goes into the same pocket sooner or later. If you're Disney, the idea is to be in every room of the house, one way or another."

## Yet another baby switch at University of Virginia hospital

By Michael D. Shear  
The Washington Post

ROANOKE, Va. - Mistie Fritz, 17, gave birth a month prematurely at a Roanoke hospital on Feb. 6. Her baby, whom she named Jasmine, had severe birth defects and was moved to the University of Virginia Medical Center.

Six weeks later, Jasmine died, and Mistie asked to take the baby's body with her back to Roanoke, so the remains could be buried near the family. The hospital put the baby's body in a small white plastic casket for transport. As Mistie and her boyfriend were about to drive away, she realized she had forgotten a baby blanket. Hospital employees searched the morgue and found the blanket. They also found Jasmine's body.

Mistie then opened the little coffin. Inside was the body of someone else's baby. U-Va. hospital had switched another pair of babies, just three months before the world would learn that newborns Callie Marie Johnson and Rebecca Grace Chittum had been sent home from there with the wrong mothers three years earlier.

"By the time they realized what was going on, they had found Jasmine," said Rhonda Fritz, Mistie's mother. "It wasn't a very pleasant thing. But Mistie was more upset to realize that another infant had died."

"Thank goodness they had not left the parking lot. Thank God it didn't go that far."

Rhonda said Friday that Mistie did not want to talk about the incident, but she and her boyfriend are hiring a lawyer. She said the family was too upset about losing the child to think about suing the hospital at the time, saying they assumed it was an honest mistake. But Rhonda got angry last month when she saw hospital officials claiming that their safety procedures were foolproof in the case of Callie Marie and

Rebecca.

"I was mad because of their initial statements," she said. "The hospital administrator said it rarely happens. I thought, it happens, even in the morgue."

Hospital officials confirmed the family's account of the incident, and said the mix-up happened because the hospital employee who put the baby's body into the "burial cradle" before giving it to Mistie didn't check the cardboard tag that is attached to each body bag.

"Sickening as it is to say, yes it did happen," said hospital spokeswoman Marguerite Beck. "The person that released the remains just didn't check the tag on the body bag. Of course, it was corrected immediately. The hospital administrator talked with the family and apologized."

Mistie was given the coffin at 2 p.m. on March 22, Beck said. Hospital records indicate that the hospital administrator was contacted 19 minutes later and told there was a problem. She said the administrator, who she would not name, immediately met with the Fritz family.

There is no indication in medical records that the family of the other dead child ever learned of the incident, Beck said.

Beck said the hospital did not fire the employee, who she declined to name. She said that employee and others were given a stern lecture about the importance of following procedures carefully. A laminated checklist of procedures was attached to the key that is used to get into the hospital morgue.

"It was stressed how important it is to check and recheck everything," Beck said.

Thomas Massaro, the chief of staff for the medical center, Friday said that the hospital is "extraordinarily sorry" about the switch involving the Fritz baby and said that everyone involved at the hospital feels devastated by the incident.

"Here was a family that was go-

ing through a very difficult time," Massaro said. "By an error and individual not following a procedure, we added to that grief. We compounded it."

Massaro said he can understand why Rhonda Fritz draws parallels between her daughter's case and that of the babies switched three years ago. But he said he believes the two incidents are fundamentally different.

"This one, we see a clear cause and effect, an error we made," Massaro said. "We are able to say there are logical things we can do to prevent it. The other incident, we still don't have that logical step-wise understanding of what could have occurred."

Asked whether the Fritz case, in combination with the switched babies case, indicates a deeper problem at U-Va.'s hospital, Massaro defended the institution. He said the other case has come to light because the hospital is under a microscope.

"I, to the bottom of my heart, believe we give wonderful care," Massaro said.

Questions about the identification of babies at the U-Va. hospital first surfaced in late June with the discovery that the two baby girls had been switched at the hospital in 1995. A series of genetic tests have since confirmed it.

Callie has lived with Paula Johnson, a 39-year-old construction worker in Ruckersville, and Rebecca lived with Kevin Chittum and Whitney Rogers until the couple was killed on July 4 in an auto accident. Since then, Rebecca has been cared for by her grandparents.

Paula Johnson has questioned the hospital's procedures regarding identification bracelets for babies and mothers, which is the primary way they are identified in the maternity ward and the nursery.

## A passion for pickles

By Lyndsey Layton  
The Washington Post

RELAY, Md. - For four days, Betsy Hedeman hovered over tiny green cucumbers bobbing in a pot on her stove and stirred in vinegar and sugar and spices.

She knew just when to cook them and when to let them steep, guiding them over the threshold from vegetable to pickle.

"You have to cook it for days, pouring it off, adding more vinegar, getting the syrup thicker," said Hedeman, 74. "I love it, but it's a four-day pickle and it's a pain in the tush."

But one with its own rewards. After she finished the last half-pint

"When I saw those little squash pickled over there in France, I thought they were just darlin'"

Betsy Hedeman

jar of sweet cucumber pickles, Hedeman did what few people ever consider these days. She took the jar from her kitchen in a rapidly developing community between Washington and Baltimore and drove it to the state fair in Timonium.

And when the 117th Maryland State Fair ends Monday, Hedeman will take with her a blue ribbon, a \$3.50 cash prize and a rare satisfaction in today's takeout world.

"I don't enter them to win the money," said Hedeman, a retired secretary who also won a blue ribbon for her pickled pattypan squash and a third-place ribbon for her cherry pie in this year's fair. "I enter for the challenge, just to see if I can do it."

For 42 years, she has been cooking for the state fair. That makes Hedeman one of the few longtime regulars, said Anna Troyer, who supervises the home arts section at the fair. Troyer

said she does not know whether Hedeman is the longest-running contestant.

This year's fair attracted about 5,000 entries in home arts, Troyer said. The canned-goods division, with more than 130 categories, had about 100 more entries this year than last, she said. "These things are sort of cyclical," Troyer said. "Right now, people seem interested in doing things that have that country flavor-canning and hug hooking."

Dorothy Ludwig, a pickle judge, said a prize-winning pickle is made from a firm, young vegetable in a clear liquid that has no single overpowering spice or odor. "I do not like a mushy pickle," Ludwig said.

The Maryland State Fair has 40 pickling and relish categories, with no single pickling champion.

In a storage room in Hedeman's basement, three bookshelves are filled with jars. Pint jars of pickled tomato beets. Quart jars of bright red tomatoes. Half-pint jars of tiny green cucumbers floating in brine. Atop the bookshelves is a stack of ribbons - for canning, baking, quilting and needlework.

"Well, there was that chocolate thing - a chocolate mousse - and then there was the Great Seafood Search and, jeez, I can't remember them all," she said, green eyes squinting behind her glasses. "Won a trip to New York

once, gave that away."

"Cooking is an art," said Hedeman, who cobbles her own recipes after reading food magazines and cookbooks. "You can have 10 people following a recipe and you will get eight different versions."

Hedeman's state fair career began in 1956, when she entered clothes she had made for her two daughters. Once Hedeman and her husband, Bill, moved to a house with some land, they grew a garden and started entering fresh vegetables, then canned vegetables and fruits at the state fair. She shuns county fairs. "There's more prestige to the state fair," she said.

Hedeman came up with the pattypan squash after spotting a jar of the miniature, scallop-shaped squash in a grocery in Provence. "When I saw those little squash pickled over there in France, I thought they were just darlin' and I called Bill over and I said, 'Look at these things, can we grow them at home?'"

Hedeman already has a goal for next year's state fair: a ribbon for her bread-and-butter pickles.

"I've been entering my bread-and-butter pickles for 20 years, and I cannot win," she said. "This year I tried to make it different. I added fresh ginger, thinking it would give it a twang, but that didn't do it. I'll have to come up with something for next year."

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