



TURNER'S DIGITAL MADNESS

Turner Sports' huge deal with the NCAA will make the Time Warner-owned network an even bigger player in the TV and new media sports scene.

Barry Wilner looks at their plans to exploit the broadcast rights.

ANYONE WHO DOESN'T consider Turner Sports a key player in the US TV sports market needs to think again. In a few months, Turner will most likely be mentioned alongside ESPN, DirecTV and the major over-the-air networks as a major home for American sports.

This is the way it was back in the 1980s when cable TV sports had just begun taking off. Ted Turner's flagship station, TBS in Atlanta, was in the forefront, particularly with its baseball coverage.

TNT, another Turner outlet, has been a long-standing partner of the National Basketball Association and has a big presence in professional basketball along with ESPN/ABC, both for the regular season and the playoffs.

Other sports properties under Turner's umbrella also include NASCAR and golf's PGA Tour but still Turner has tended to be overlooked. Not any more - in April Turner Sports and the NCAA reached a groundbreaking 14-year deal that includes management of NCAA.com, the primary web site for all 88 NCAA-run tournaments, as well as TV rights for dozens of events.

"I think people won't understand until March how prominent [Turner's] role is going to be in this agreement," says Greg Shaheen, the NCAA's

executive vice president of championships and strategies. "The tournament is going to have a different look and a different feel and how it is covered will be a much better experience for the viewer. They are the ones who did a lot of the homework on this and they're formidable."

How formidable?

Turner already had an agreement with CBS to become broadcast partners for March Madness, the NCAA men's basketball tournament that is not only college sport's premier event, but has become a national obsession for both TV and internet viewers. Turner and CBS are jointly spending \$10.8 billion from 2011 to 2024, adding \$740 million a year to the NCAA's vaults, and guaranteeing that every game in the 68-team showcase event will be broadcast live for the first time.

Turner will use TBS, TNT and truTV to show the games CBS is not handling; which for CBS includes all matches in the final eight, final four and the title game. In 2016, when cable TV should have maximum nationwide penetration, Turner and CBS will begin alternating carrying the championship match.

All digital rights for every NCAA



Butler take on Duke in the NCAA earlier this year - Getty Images Sport

championship on all three levels (Division I, II and III) will belong to Turner - from basketball to baseball to water polo.

"Turner Sports is a perfect fit to manage the NCAA's digital assets," adds Shaheen. "NCAA Digital will provide fans, student-athletes and their families with reliable, in-depth resources to engage with NCAA championship events both live and on demand.

"In addition, NCAA.com will showcase the tremendous, every-day accomplishments of NCAA student-athletes on the court, in the classroom and in the community."

That might sound like a party line, but it rings true because, more than any other US sport, college basketball has that down-home feel and connection with the public. Workers throughout America re-arrange their work schedules or take annual leave during the first two rounds of the tournament in order to watch the games.

Digital consumption

More and more, viewers are consuming college sports digitally and now Turner will be the prime provider of the action.

"We're going to see if something is missing," says Lenny Daniels, COO of Turner Sports. "If you look across the whole college sports world, you'll see [internet coverage] is pretty fragmented. We want this to become the place you go to for college sports."

In addition to Turner's coverage of various sports on the pro and college levels, it manages the official sites PGATour.com, PGA.com,

NASCAR.com, and NBA Digital. "We're doing this for a couple of reasons, and we would never do a stupid economic deal," Daniels adds.

"The long-term television world is going to change, and we think everything is, eventually, going to be interconnected."

Shaheen praises Turner for handling any costs for upgrading the NCAA's digital presence, even though the college sports governing body will make a profit from those digital services, too. The re-launch of NCAA.com is scheduled for early 2011, and Turner will oversee NCAA March Madness on Demand on broadband, in addition to the tournament's mobile platforms.

"It really is a commitment by Turner to handle the start-up and the overall expense ... depending on the site's performance," Shaheen said.

Turner will not oversee NCAA.org, the NCAA's public and administrative website. Nor, at least for now, will it handle the NCAA's digital archival video rights. However, Turner is well known for its film library - the highly acclaimed Turner Classic Movies channel is home to some of the greatest film properties - and, in the future, the NCAA might benefit from making its own classic games available through the Turner TV empire.

One possibility for the future, however, could be the most significant of them all: Turner and the NCAA teaming up to create a multi-platform broadcast channel that could overtake (college sport networks) ESPNU or CBS College Sports and become the dominant home for everything NCAA.