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'The electronic free ticket'

Early NCAA feared televised football would harm attendance

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The first televised college football game -- a contest between Fordham University and Waynesburg College -- was broadcast September 30, 1939, on what is now WNBC in New York.

The weak signal reached such a limited audience that it caused not even a ripple in how people regarded either college football or television.

Today, it's hard to find an audience that televised college football doesn't reach. But, strange though it may seem now, some within the NCAA at first resisted widespread television coverage because they feared fewer fans would attend games in person.

Television was not popular in 1939. Few people owned sets, and few acquired them over the next few years as World War II dampened progress. But postwar America took to the tube quickly, and the NCAA's most attractive product at the time -- football -- became a commodity.

The topic hit the 1948 Convention with a bang, in fact, commanding a roundtable discussion on the effects of television broadcasting on attendance.

By 1950, the membership was worried enough to appoint a Television Committee to research the concept of televised college sports. That group uncovered initial data indicating that television indeed had an adverse impact on gate attendance. Moreover, areas where TV was not available showed increased game-day crowds.

Overall, however, the data were alarming: Attendance in 1950 suffered a drop of 11.4 percent from the 1947-48 pretelevision average.

A national problem

Televised football in itself wasn't the problem. The Association at that time was savvy enough to know TV could in fact be its biggest ally. But the NCAA also knew it needed to control television to make it an effective medium. No one knew that better than Television Committee Chair Thomas J. Hamilton of the University of Pittsburgh.



The television era — An increase in televised football also contributed to the NCAA's regulatory ways as the Association unveiled its first Television Plan in 1952. Michigan State vs. Texas A&M (above) was the fourth TV game of the 1952 season.

Michigan State University photo

"The economic structure of college athletics and physical training programs depends a great deal on football receipts," Hamilton told anxious delegates in 1951. "We feel that with the drop in attendance, all of us are faced with a decline in revenue. As television has swept from one area to another, and with networks extending throughout all areas and able to carry games from one section to another, we feel the problem is truly national and needs collective action."

Hamilton's group proposed a resolution that included a moratorium on live football telecasts for 1951 in order for the committee to conduct various "controlled telecasts" with some "black-out Saturdays" to enable researchers to evaluate more accurately television's effect on attendance.

Francis Murray, director of athletics at the University of Pennsylvania, spoke against the resolution, stating the problem wasn't the Association's to solve. Murray wanted instead to have individual schools control their own television destiny.

"Television is taking sports, which are an extended part of any university, into the sphere of public relations and I don't know whether this body has the right to rule or pass upon it." he said. "It is a question of scope."

The majority of delegates, however -- 161 of 168, in fact -- disagreed with Murray and the resolution passed.

The Television Plan

That led to the Association's first Television Plan in 1952. Hamilton's committee's plan, which was overwhelmingly endorsed at the 1952 Convention, called for limited live television in 1952, controlled and directed by the NCAA. The plan was intended to minimize the adverse effect of live television on attendance, spread exposure among schools by not allowing one team to be televised more than once per year, and market the product to the general public.

Asa S. Bushnell, commissioner of the Eastern College Athletic Conference, was charged with administering the plan.

"The leadership of the people who were in favor of the plan, plus the overall membership wanting a level playing field, carried the day," said Thomas C. Hansen, current commissioner of the Pacific-10 Conference and successor to Bushnell as administrator of the plan. "Their concern as much as anything was not to let certain institutions dominate or almost exclusively use TV. In other words, even an opponent who saw TV as a necessary evil wanted to have it regulated by the NCAA to ensure a level playing field."

But attendance declined again in 1952 and 1953, which did nothing to dispel the growing concern about whether television and college football could co-exist. By then, though, television's stronghold on the country was firm. And college sports -- football in particular -- still had its fans. In 1954, the best of both worlds arrived: television remained popular while attendance finally increased. In fact, the 1954 rise would be the first of 20 straight.

Unique appeal

Researchers surmised that the unique characteristics of college football fans -- who loved the game and were unusually loyal to a favorite school -- ensured that fans would enjoy football on television but would still attend in person to see more than one of their favorite teams' games.

A steady increase in rights fees proved the point. The 1952 plan was sold to NBC for \$1,144,000, but 10 years later, CBS paid \$5.1 million. In 1966, ABC acquired the rights for \$7.8 million and kept the plan until the advent of cable television in 1982. By then, the network was paying \$31 million.

"Particularly in the 1970s, the number of televisions in homes was growing and the ratings were very good,"

Hansen said. "In administering the plan, we always were trying to find the balance between exposure and impact on attendance.

"One of the criticisms was that if the plan was terminated, then more schools could get on TV. While that was true, the value of any one telecast would have been devastated. I don't know of any one point at which the volume of income caught up with the 1972 or 1973 volume of income for all colleges. If it did, it certainly never approached the per-game value, and we'd have had to televise an extreme number of games to generate the same type of income."

The plan wouldn't meet another challenge until the early 1980s, when the College Football Association took it to task.

But the plan did prove that the NCAA could indeed get along with television -- in fact flourish because of television -- without harming the in-person attraction of sports. It had, in fact, defeated the notion that the "electronic free ticket" would be the downfall of college sports.

Television Plan of 1952 *The main provisions of the NCAA Television Committee's plan that passed a June 8, 1952, referendum vote by 185-15:*

- * Twelve Saturday afternoon dates shall be made available for "sponsored network telecasts."
- * Sponsors must provide national coverage on each of the 12 dates.
- * There will be only one game telecast nationally on each of the 12 dates, except that small-college games of regional interest may be added or substituted by local stations.
- * The 12 games in the series shall be "widely distributed geographically with respect to their points of origin."
- * Games other than those in the series may be telecast only with the specific approval of the NCAA Television Committee.
- * A member college may appear on television only once per season.
- * No member college shall be obligated to televise any of its games, home or away.
- * Sponsors shall be "organizations of high standards that meet traditional college requirements of dignified presentation."

Football television rights fees, 1952-79

Year -- Network -- Rights fee

1952 -- NBC -- \$1,144,000
 1953 -- NBC -- \$1,723,000
 1954 -- ABC -- \$2,000,000
 1955 -- NBC -- \$1,250,000
 1956 -- NBC -- \$1,600,000
 1957 -- NBC -- \$1,720,000
 1958 -- NBC -- \$1,800,000
 1959 -- NBC -- \$2,200,000
 1960 -- ABC -- \$3,125,000
 1961 -- ABC -- \$3,125,000
 1962 -- CBS -- \$5,100,000

1963 -- CBS -- \$5,100,000
1964 -- NBC -- \$6,522,000
1965 -- NBC -- \$6,522,000
1966 -- ABC -- \$7,800,000
1967 -- ABC -- \$7,800,000
1968 -- ABC -- \$10,200,000
1969 -- ABC -- \$10,200,000
1970 -- ABC -- \$12,000,000
1971 -- ABC -- \$12,000,000
1972 -- ABC -- \$13,490,000
1973 -- ABC -- \$13,490,000
1974 -- ABC -- \$16,000,000
1975 -- ABC -- \$16,000,000
1976 -- ABC -- \$18,000,000
1977 -- ABC -- \$18,000,000
1978 -- ABC -- \$29,000,000
1979 -- ABC -- \$29,000,000