

## COVER STORY

# MORE TELEVISION FOR BLACK COLLEGE SPORTS?

## BET is the incumbent, but ESPN is expanding

Past history notes that when it comes to national television exposure, black college athletics have been largely omitted. On occasion, there were a few games aired on a regional basis, but on the whole, national media coverage was null and void.

But now it appears that black college sports may begin to receive the kind of media exposure that has long been missing. On the one hand, there's the Black Entertainment Television network, whose sports programming focuses primarily on black colleges. On the other hand, ESPN, the all-sports network, has entered the picture on a small scale.

Having two national networks get involved in media coverage is good for black college sports. Because of increased coverage, black college sports can only benefit.

The publicity that athletic programs get via national television is something that can't be measured by money. And very few, if any black college sports administrators will argue that they don't need all the media coverage they can get for their respective programs.

In '80, BET was the first network to make a concerted effort to cover black college athletics on a regular basis. They aired football and basketball games and showed them on a delayed basis during prime time hours on Saturdays.

The *Budweiser Sports Report*, a weekly talk show, featured guests from the four black college conferences which gave viewers an inside look at teams, players, coaches, and issues.

Last fall, BET started providing live coverage of football and basketball games every week during prime time hours on Saturday.

Enter ESPN.

Before this year, the all-sports network had done very little programming focusing specifically on black college sports. The one event they did cover was the football game between Grambling and South Carolina State, which was broadcast live and in prime time.

But now, that network has expanded its coverage to include Division I black college basketball. The carried both the MEAC and SWAC Basketball Tournament championship games live and during prime time.

In past years, BET provided coverage of the MEAC and SWAC hoops finals. The only post-season tournament they covered this past season was the CIAA Basketball Tournament.

And in September, they will air *Black College Sports Today*, a weekly 30-minute program showcasing sports action in the four

predominantly black athletic conferences (see page 9).

So what gives?

Is this an indication that ESPN is moving in on BET's turf? Is there a network war about to start?

"We don't see ESPN as a challenge to what we're doing," answered Marion Whigham, manager of BET Sports. "There's enough out there (market-wise) for everyone."

"It made sense for them to get the MEAC and SWAC finals. They were already involved in Division I basketball, so since those conference winners go to the playoffs, they already had the footage and information about those teams because they would play in at least a first round game."

ESPN's move into covering the Division I black college tournaments shouldn't be construed as an attempt to knock BET out of its market, according to a network executive.

"We don't look at it from a standpoint of black or white," said Loren Matthews, vice president of programming for ESPN. "We look at it in terms of broad and narrow appeal. We're on the air 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so we try to stay as broad based as possible. When it comes to sports on TV, we want to be all things to all people. Our bottom line is that we want to create the strongest appeal that crosses all demographic lines."

"If you're talking about us competing against BET, that doesn't come into play. Our competition comes from the major networks and Turner Broadcasting."

Even though BET can't match ESPN's

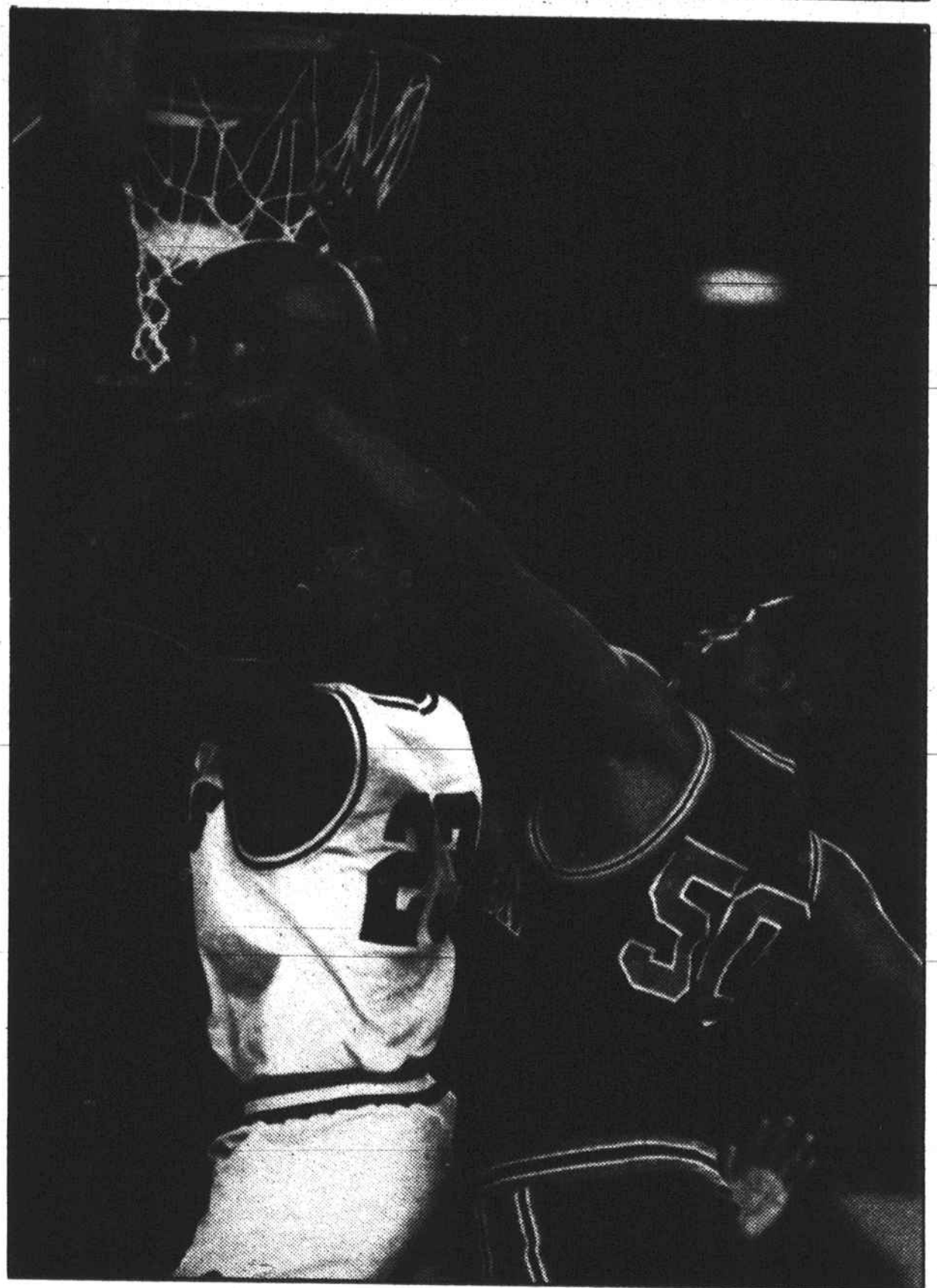


Photo by J.D. Schwalm

On BET, basketball has produced higher ratings than football. And among the basketball games, the CIAA basketball finals have consistently drawn the largest viewing audience.

## Network Profiles

### Black Entertainment Television



**Households reached:** 20 million

**Type of network:** General interest for black Americans

**Sports coverage:** Primarily black college athletics. Football and basketball games aired live on Game of the Week starting in September and ending with conference basketball championships. Games broadcasted during prime time hours on Saturdays and on a regular basis. Covers both Division I and Division II black colleges. Programs geared specifically for the black audience.

**Top rated sports program:** CIAA Basketball Tournament -- Saturday, 8 p.m., February 25, 1989



**Households reached:** 52 million

**Type of network:** All sports

**Sports coverage:** A wide variety, running the gamut from spectator sports to recreational sports, plus sports news and information. Emphasis is on providing sports programming that will appeal to as many different types of viewers as possible. Starting to do a little more black college sports programming.

**Top rated black college sports program:** SWAC Basketball Championship -- Sunday, 7 p.m. EDT, March 12, 1989