

viewership (they are received in 55 percent of all households that have cable TV), they aren't at a decided disadvantage in terms of maintaining its market for black college sports.

For one, they have become "the" network for black college athletics. They've developed a niche in the minds of their viewers because they provide coverage on a regular basis and in prime time viewing hours.

"We were there before anybody else thought about the numbers (total households reached)," explained Whigham. "We've always been committed to black college sports and that won't change. Our sports programming is geared specifically towards that. We were the first to show people the kind of pass catching talent that Jerry Rice (Mississippi Valley State) had before he started playing for the 49ers."

Even though ESPN has a big edge in terms of viewers, the feeling among media observers is that they won't pursue black college sports and cover it in the way that BET does. At this point, ESPN's stock has risen as a major force in cable TV.

They've landed contracts with major league baseball, major college football and basketball, plus there's NFL Sunday night football. For them to actively go after black

college sports would require them to cover Division I and Division II. That's not likely to happen.

"My feeling is that we won't go in that direction," Matthews said. "We have the major events we're covering and those are the items that will drive the train (generate profits)."

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## Black College Sports Today to debut on ESPN

Phillip McAlpin's long term objective as a broadcasting entrepreneur was to initiate a national television network show about black college sports. In September, he will have the opportunity to turn that dream into reality when *Black College Sports Today*, a 30-minute weekly program, airs on the ESPN network.

ESPN has committed itself to broadcasting the show for 26 weeks. It will air on Wednesdays at 2:30 p.m. EDT. The show debuts on Sept. 13 and will run through the end of the black college basketball season.

*Black College Sports Today* will highlight athletic happenings in the SWAC, MEAC, CIAA, and SIAC -- the four predominantly black college athletic conferences.

The show will focus on football, basketball, and the other sports that are in season. McAlpin, president of Focus Marketing in Greensboro, NC, is the show's executive producer.

This program represents an expansion of national media coverage for black college athletics -- something that has been sorely lacking.

However, there are those who feel that McAlpin's efforts could undermine Black Entertainment Television's sports coverage.

The thinking is that ESPN may be considering how to best take advantage of reaching a sizeable market of black consumers, many of whom are avid followers of black college athletics. Since ESPN has more financial resources and reaches more households, it appears that they could be in position to eventually take over BET's market niche.

McAlpin doesn't agree with that reasoning. "We don't view the show as competition for BET," he said. "We look at it as providing an additional outlet for black college sports. When I first started this, I explained that to the executives at BET and to the administrators at black colleges. All we're doing is giving a closer nuts and bolts look at black college sports and presenting it to a larger audience."

While ESPN hasn't done a great deal of programming geared specifically to black colleges, McAlpin asserts that it's unlikely that the network will attempt to capture a considerable portion of the black college sports viewing audience. To do that, he said, would mean that the network would have to cover Division I and Division II.

"I can't see them doing anything on a

regular basis on Division II schools whether those schools are black or white," he said. "They're already doing some live programming with Division I. And of course they'll want to do as much Division I football and basketball like anyone else."

The initial 26 week run will be crucial to the success of McAlpin's show, which will be produced in Greensboro, NC. And some of the skeptics are wondering aloud if the show

at that time of day, there's always someone watching at all times. We could have been put on at a worse time, like midnight Sunday."

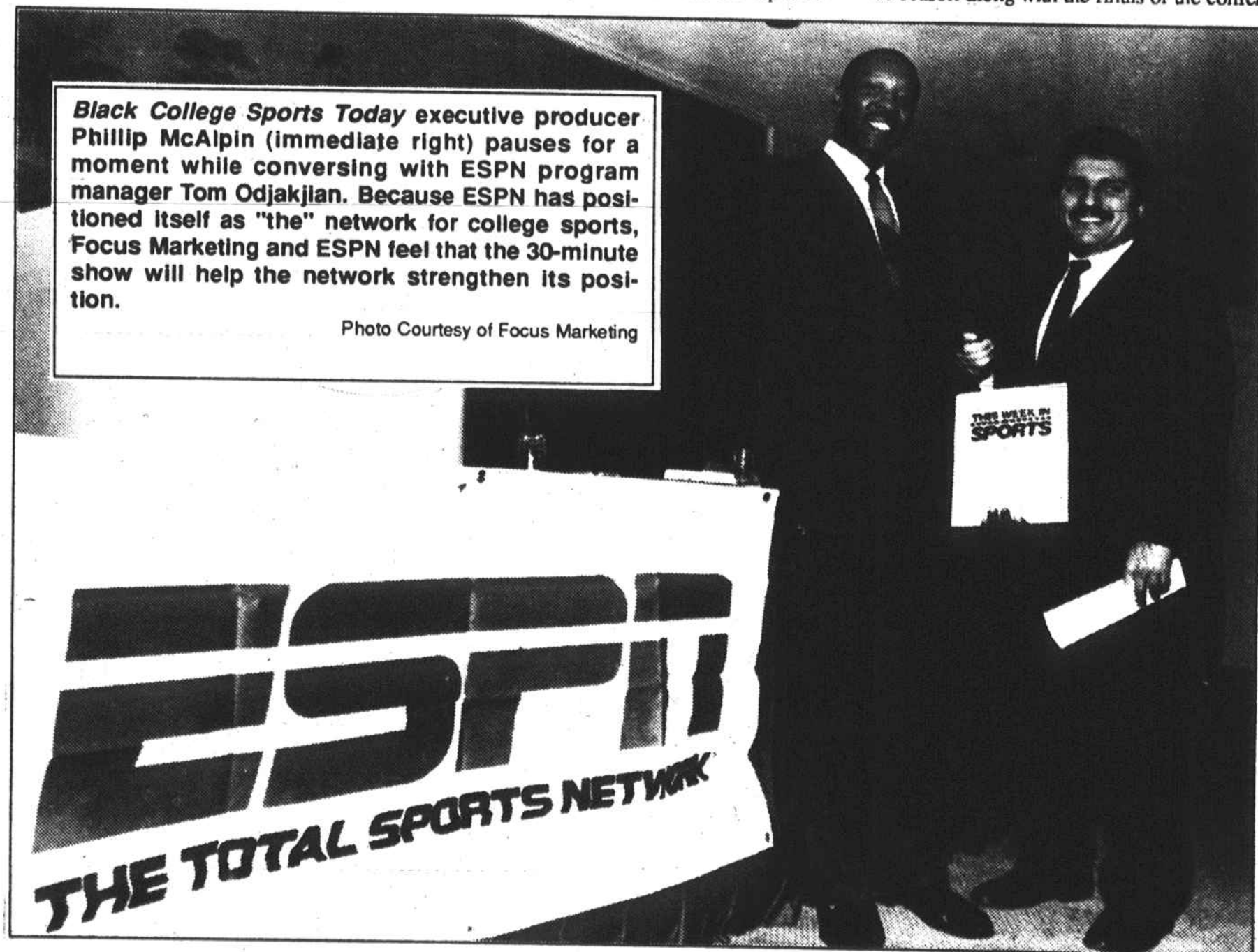
From all indications, it appears that ESPN will give the show a chance to prove itself. The 2:30 p.m. time slot puts the program in the anchor position for the network's programming for that time of day. The show follows Coach's Corner, which features conversations and interviews with the top colle-

be able to get a better time slot."

Focus Marketing has been involved in black college sports coverage before this venture with ESPN. The firm had aired *MEAC Today*, a weekly program that aired on Saturdays which covered highlights, issues and personalities in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference. Focus provided regular season coverage of MEAC basketball during the '87-'88 season along with the finals of the confer-

**Black College Sports Today executive producer Phillip McAlpin (immediate right) pauses for a moment while conversing with ESPN program manager Tom Odjakjian. Because ESPN has positioned itself as "the" network for college sports, Focus Marketing and ESPN feel that the 30-minute show will help the network strengthen its position.**

Photo Courtesy of Focus Marketing



has a chance because it's not slotted in a prime-time position when more people are more likely to be tuned in.

"It's a new show, so you really can't expect to be on at prime time because the network executives want to see how the show will fare," he said. "After all, you don't see networks replacing shows that work in prime time with shows that haven't been tested. So sure, I would have loved to get a prime time slot. But while fewer people are watching TV

giate athletic coaches around the country.

McAlpin feels that the show will survive its 26 week acid test if the production quality is like it should be for national TV and if viewers let ESPN know that they want to show to stay on the air. The same principle applies to getting the program's time changed to prime time, he adds. "If there are enough people contacting their local cable system operators and telling them that they want to see the show on the air at a better time, we'll

ence basketball tournament.

Even though McAlpin's program has yet to be seen, he is optimistic that the show can cut it. "Black college athletics needs that kind of exposure. It needs to be advertised, it has to be marketed, it has to be promoted. That's what fills up stadiums. I feel that if you do those things, the black community will respond as other communities have when they're exposed to the same stimuli."

- Lonnie Sheldon