

# Monday Memo

An independent TV programing commentary from Bruce Kriegsies, KOKH-TV Oklahoma City

## How an indie used football to find ratings happiness

Millions of NFL fans will soon be glued to their sets on Sunday afternoons as the new season gets under way. Oklahoma City viewers, however, are getting a one-month headstart with the opportunity to watch more preseason games than fans anywhere in the country.

KOKH-TV Oklahoma City is televising 11 NFL preseason games this month in what is believed to be a first in broadcasting. The channel 25 independent is showing games of four different NFL teams—the Dallas Cowboys, Washington Redskins, Kansas City Chiefs and San Diego Chargers. Aside from network games, stations in and around NFL cities typically broadcast only the games of the local teams.

The football schedule represents what many independent stations could do to boost viewer interest and, in turn, station ratings. The flexibility of independent station programing lends itself to new approaches. Nationwide, the impact of independents has been felt in recent years by the networks and their affiliates as network shares decline. Creative programing by independents can accelerate that trend, as is the case in Oklahoma City.

The KOKH-TV games are being shown on a one-day delayed basis. The station has double-headers on all four Sundays in August, along with one Saturday afternoon and two prime time telecasts. Among the match-ups are the Cowboys vs. the Dolphins, the Chargers vs. the Rams and the defending Super Bowl champion Redskins against the Cincinnati Bengals.

The concept of the multiteam schedule came from KOKH-TV president and general manager, David E. Murphy. His idea coincided with a call from the Cowboys, who were looking to expand their telecasts into the market. Dallas is the local pro favorite in spite of the traditional college rivalry between Oklahoma and Texas. Once KOKH-TV was awarded the rights to the Cowboys, the station began to pursue other teams.

The games were chosen by program director, Mel House. He decided on the Redskins because they are the defending Super Bowl champions. The Chiefs are geographically the second closest team, next to Dallas, and the Chargers are attractive because House felt their wide-open style of play would create interest even though local loyalties don't exist.

All three teams were "shocked," House said, at the idea of an Oklahoma station wanting to carry their games. But a check with the NFL office and their own managements led the teams to decide the extra



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exposure and revenue could only be beneficial.

The call from KOKH-TV gave the Redskins their own idea. The team decided to find out who else would be interested in their games and eventually put their own network together. The Redskins got enough stations lined up to warrant a satellite feed. KOKH-TV's other games are being distributed by tape, which is creating several logistical challenges.

A station employe will drive to Dallas or Kansas City the night of the games and hand carry the game tape back for broadcast the next afternoon. To get the Chargers games, KOKH-TV sends an employe to San Diego and hopes the airlines fly as scheduled Sunday morning.

The games are creating local interest in a state where any kind of football is king. Radio sportscasters are finding something new to talk about and advertisers are presented with an opportunity to have high visibility within the games. Commercial time in network games is limited, but KOKH-TV owns all the inventory in these games. More than 600 units are available for sale, allowing the station to offer sponsorships. That kind of exposure is normally limited to national advertisers.

Sales started slowly because some advertisers questioned the impact of a delayed game. But the station used the May ratings to show its strength as the number-

one station in the market on weekend afternoons. With higher than normal ratings expected and spot costs much more efficient than network games, advertisers started to fall in line. And any unsold time is still valuable as promotional time for upcoming fall shows.

The first games proved that the independent could deliver higher ratings than its affiliate competition. An Arbitron concidental taken Sunday, Aug. 7, gave KOKH-TV's Redskins-Falcons contest a 6 rating/22 share. The next highest program only achieved a 2/8. The second game, featuring Dallas against Miami, pulled a 7/20, second only to the PGA golf tournament's 9/25.

KOKH-TV's aggressiveness is a result of fierce competition in a crowded market. Oklahoma City has six commercial stations. There are three independent UHF stations which went on the air within the past three-and-a-half years. Their presence has been strongly felt by the affiliate stations. In May 1979, the combined Arbitron share of the three affiliates sign-on to sign-off totaled 89. That was before independents. In May 1983, the total share had dropped to 70, a decrease of 21%. Specific daypart losses are more severe. Combined affiliate shares from 5-6:30 p.m., for example, have dropped 27%.

That, plus 40% cable penetration, has created a television explosion in Oklahoma City. Consequently, all stations, particularly the independents, are looking for new ideas.

That's why KOKH-TV also jumped at the chance to carry ABC's *Nightline*, starting Sept. 5. The local ABC affiliate, KOCO-TV, wanted to delay the show past midnight, but ABC opted to give the show to KOKH-TV where it will air live in the market for the first time.

Murphy believes, in the long run, that independent programing like the NFL schedule represents "the beginning of the disintegration of the formerly strong network-affiliate relationship." He says the changes in technology, satellite capabilities, Independent Network News and ad hoc networks are all leading to a breakdown in the monopoly over quality programing previously held by the networks and their affiliates. "1980 is the decade for independents to emerge," Murphy said.

Being innovative isn't necessarily easy. There are always risks with any new venture, even NFL football. But independents should be creative and take chances because ratings have proved that people watch *programs*, not stations. If trends continue, a station that wisely selects its programing can look forward to a bright future.