

Stations decry MLB squeeze play

By Steve McClellan

Local baseball rightsholders say they're getting short shrift from Major League Baseball (MLB).

The result could be a drop in the value of local broadcasting rights (which totaled about \$350 million in 1993) that mirrors the steep drop in rights that occurred this year with the national MLB deals.

Last week, longtime rightsholder WLWT(TV) pulled its renewal offer off the table after prolonged and fruitless talks. The offer was said to be significantly less than the \$4.5 million or so the station paid this past season, the last in a three-year deal. It was also the only offer left on the table by a local broadcaster.

The Reds are now considering producing the games in-house.

Other National League teams face tough renewal talks this year, including the Pittsburgh Pirates, San Diego Padres and St. Louis Cardinals.

Rightsholders for several local teams said last week they were dismayed that the national rights deals put limits on local coverage, with ESPN getting two exclusive prime time windows throughout the seasons (Wednesday and Sunday), while The Baseball Network will do weekly regionalized coverage the second half of the season.

Under the TBN deal, ABC and NBC would have exclusive rights to cover every MLB game played each night they provide coverage. ABC plans coverage on Monday or Saturday, while NBC plans to air its games on Friday nights.



“‘The fan be damned’ has always been the attitude of Major League Baseball,” says an angry Kevin O’Brien, general manager of KTVU(TV) Oakland, which is entering the final year of a deal to carry the San Francisco Giants next season. Cox Enterprises owns the station and is part-owner of the Giants. ■

WB backs off after Paramount successes

By Joe Flint

Warner Bros. is rethinking plans for its fifth network, BROADCASTING & CABLE has learned.

“We are reconsidering and making our plans more flexible,” says WB Network President Jamie Kellner. “A more Fox-like slow-rollout plan.”

Specifically, Warner Bros. may scrap plans to program the 5-6 p.m. and noon-2 p.m. slots. Also, the company likely will delay rolling out the cable elements of its network.

Warner Bros.’ decision came after Paramount’s fifth-network effort signed WPWR-TV Chicago, WXMT(TV) Nashville and Cannell Communications’ WUAB(TV) Cleveland, to give its network 33% national coverage. WB Network officials were particularly stunned by Paramount’s signing of WUAB(TV), which it had sought.

Under the WB Network plan, stations will pay the studio about 25% of incremental profits from WB Network programming, as well as an up-front investment.

Paramount’s network is an all-barter deal. Its affiliates seem more at ease with the studio’s five-night/10-hour network plans than with WB Network’s seven-night/15-hour plans and its desire to program 5-6 p.m., now revised.

“All stations agree that Warner Bros.’ kids products are a plus of WB’s effort. It is the other components of our proposal that have delayed stations’ response. Those are the areas we are talking about addressing,” Kellner says.

While Paramount’s station signings were played up by the studio, downplayed was the signing of Fox affiliate WHNS(TV) Greenville, S.C.

Although WHNS, which is owned by WUAB-parent Cannell, will remain a Fox affiliate, it also will carry Paramount’s network programming.

Fox executives declined comment on the agreement until they have spoken with station management. Cannell and WHNS officials also declined comment.

“Ultimately, the network will have a lot of different secondary affiliations, but I can’t comment [further],” says Paramount Television Group Chairman Kerry McCluggage.

Fox executives privately have said they fear the Fox identity could be hurt by mixing with another network. Fox affiliates have been discouraged from signing with either Paramount or Warner Bros.

McCluggage also downplays talk that the studio will revise programming contracts of potential affiliates. ■