



Viewers will get a snail's-eye view of the action (l) from a "Floor Cam" embedded in the floor and a bird's-eye perspective from "Free Flight," a camera rigged to an arena's ceiling.

Cameras on the court

ESPN plans a raft of innovations for its NBA coverage

By Allison Romano

ESPN is hoping a few new technological toys will lure viewers to its National Basketball Association coverage, which tips off in late October.

Pro basketball is largely a cable affair these days: Cable net ESPN and broadcast sister ABC share the NBA's new six-year, \$4.6 billion TV package with TNT and the NBA's digital channel NBATV. This season, there will be 223 regular-season games on cable, just 15 on broadcast on ABC.

ESPN is spicing up its NBA action with clever new remote-controlled cameras. An overhead, roving camera, dubbed "Free Flight" and rigged by Cinflex Systems to an arena's ceiling. It's similar to the overhead "Sky Cam" that ESPN recently began using for NFL games.

Players will loom even larger with the experimental "Floor Cam," designed by Broadcast Sports Technology. ESPN wants to embed small cameras, which can pan and tilt, in the floorboards beneath each basket in all NBA arenas. Mainly out of concern for player safety, ESPN is working with the league to find the right positioning.

ESPN hopes to roll out "Floor Cam" by New Year's Day. (ESPN's first game is Oct. 30. There's no basketball on broadcast TV until ABC's Christmas Day double-header.)

The third innovation is the "Above the

Rim" camera, installed above the basketball hoop, a feature that ESPN uses for college-basketball telecasts.

Manufactured by BeXI, all the cameras snap 90 frames per second—compared with the usual 30 frames per second—for super-slow-motion replays.

ABC will use these features for its Sunday-afternoon NBA broadcasts. ESPN airs games on Wednesday and Friday evenings.

On TNT, a new interactive chalkboard will help viewers break down the game action. This season, TNT is rolling out a 3D imaging telestrator, dubbed Player Strater, which lets TNT commentators diagram plays on screen and synchronize graphics with live action.

To enliven its coverage, ABC plans to take its pregame show on location each Sunday, akin to ESPN's popular Saturday college-football lead-in *College Gameday*.

NBA Commissioner David Stern expects the combined force of ESPN and TNT to lift the league's cable ratings. Last season, TNT and TBS averaged a 1.2 for NBA action, up from 1.1 the season before.

TNT is touting its Thursday-night exclusive games as its powerful weapon. Those two games will be the only ones played that night. Exclusivity means "no local competition and no blackouts, two things we've dealt with for the last 18

years," said Turner Sports President Mark Lazarus, adding that ratings gains should be a modest few tenths of a Nielsen point.

TNT also gets the NBA All Star game and more playoff contests, including an exclusive conference final.

The cable competition doesn't appear to be hampering ad-sales efforts. TNT says it's sold out for the 4th quarter and 70% sold for first and second quarters 2003. ESPN says it's 70% sold.

"If the games are good, a viewer will watch" on either TNT or ESPN, said Horizon Media Executive VP Aaron Cohen.

As part of the TV deal, the networks will cross-promote each other's games. "There's a harmony there," Stern said. "As long as the NBA is doing well, the partners will do well."

ESPN could come out on top. "ESPN talks to sports fans all the times," Cohen said. "[TNT] does it once in a while."

ESPN's cross-platform offerings include four networks, its Web site and its magazine, sold in tandem with ABC Sports. "We can play ball with whatever an advertiser feels is important," said ESPN President George Bodenheimer.

For its part, Turner can offer packages with other networks like CNN and Cartoon and with AOL and Time Inc. properties.

As the regular-season tip-off approaches, MSOs have their own concerns. TNT, looking to recoup some of its \$2.2 million NBA investment, wants a 10% increase in sub fees on operators that carry the TNT Plus, the general-entertainment service plus NBA and NASCAR. "This is a new service ... we fully expect to be in partnership with all [systems]," Lazarus said, suggesting that talks could heat up later this year.

ESPN is already the most expensive programmer, charging up to \$2 per subscriber. ESPN, though not asking for an NBA surcharge per se, is looking to hike its rates 20%. And the NBA's new basketball channel (AOL Time Warner is a minority partner) will look for 50 cents per subscriber when it launches around February. ■