

Cutting out the kid stuff

USA, TNT have repositioned afternoons to skew older as lead-in to prime time

By Jim McConville

With specialized cable channels Nickelodeon, the Cartoon Network and The Game Network gobbling up cartoon and game show programming, broader-based cable networks like TNT and USA have traded in their children's fare for new program blocks aimed at hooking an older audience and reeling it into prime time.

USA Network last spring cashed in its afternoon slate of game shows, sitcoms, light-action shows and cartoons for a three-hour action/adventure block featuring syndicated series *Knight Rider*, *Renegade* and *Highlander*.

Tim Brooks, senior vice president of research, USA Networks, says declining ratings in the early '90s and a scarcity of replacement product prompted USA to rethink its late-afternoon strategy. "We were blocked out from getting high-profile older stuff now reserved for the two game show networks and the Cartoon Network."

The network made its first move in September 1994, replacing its 4-5 p.m. game show block with syndicated *Magnum P.I.* USA later filled its 4-6 p.m. slot with *MacGyver* and *Knight Rider* and in January 1995 replaced its long-standing *Cartoon Express* (6-7 p.m.) with a second *Knight Rider* episode. Last September the network replaced its *Knight Rider* hours with syndicated *Highlander* (5-6 p.m.) and *Renegade* (6-7 p.m.).

USA hopes its late-afternoon action block will lead the network's coveted 18-49 age group right into its prime time evening schedule.

So far the move is working, according to Brooks, who says the time periods have registered a 33% increase in Nielsen daytime ratings, moving from a .9 to a 1.2 last year.

Nonetheless, USA is still tinkering with its 6-7 p.m. time slot and reportedly has a number of younger-skewing shows in development for next fall,

Your Choice is ABC's Choice

Capital Cities/ABC is giving Your Choice TV at least five years to determine whether TV viewers will order network programming on a "time-shifted" basis.

The broadcaster has signed a deal giving Your Choice TV exclusive rights to market select, as-yet-unspecified, CC/ABC programs. Your Choice TV's plan is to offer popular network shows on a pay-per-view basis shortly after their initial broadcast. Your Choice TV will deliver the programming across cable, wireless cable, direct broadcast satellite and video dialtone platforms using traditional pay-per-view channels as well as the much-ballyhooed digital video-on-demand systems of the future. Subscribers are willing to pay 99 cents per rerun, according to tests conducted by Your Choice TV.

Other programmers that have signed up with Your Choice TV so far include HBO, National Geographic Television, PBS, BBC Worldwide Americas, Encyclopedia Britannica, Discovery Channel and The Learning Channel. (Your Choice TV is a wholly owned subsidiary of Discovery Communications Inc., which owns Discovery and TLC. DCI's ownership includes multiple system cable operators Cox, Newhouse and Tele-Communications Inc.)

Your Choice TV has not yet begun distributing product, but company president and COO Nancy Stover says its distribution plans will be announced soon. Meanwhile, she says, Your Choice TV is focusing on closing additional programming deals. "You can't put the cart before the horse, and you can't sell the product without the product," says Stover. —RB

including a soap opera, talk shows and a relationship show.

Brooks says USA's afternoon moves also fit into the network's larger revamping being orchestrated by USA President Rod Perth, who last year mapped out a \$140 million budget for the network's 1995-96 original pro-

gramming schedule.

Turner's TNT network, meanwhile, has traded in its late-afternoon animated cartoon fare at 4-7 for syndicated shows *Starsky and Hutch* and *In the Heat of the Night*.

Bradley J. Siegel, president, TNT, says the growth of competing network

Turner goes 'Wild!'



Turner Broadcasting System in fall 1996 plans to debut *Wild! Life Adventures*, a monthly nature series that will be available on superstation TBS with a simultaneous broadcast syndication window.

Among the episodes will be four National Audubon Society specials, including *The Vanishing Birds of the Amazon*, with Kim

Basinger and Alec Baldwin, and a special about the Bering Strait, *A Journey to the White Bears of Beringia*. Also in the works are six National Wildlife Foundation specials, including *Swimming with Dolphins*, with Bridget Fonda, and *The Last Great American Gold Heist*, with Mario Van Peebles.

Other episodes will include six REBO Studios/NHK co-productions, including *Diving with the Great Whales* and *The Mischievous Meerkats of Africa*. Additional specials will be produced by African filmmaker John Varty and TV New Zealand.

Syndication is being handled by Turner Program Services, which offers a portfolio of Turner programming that includes nature-based series *The World of National Geographic* and *Jacques-Yves Cousteau*. —RB