

Filling the cracks of regional sports

New cable networks are emerging to deliver local teams to underserved areas

By Rich Brown

The nation might already be blanketed with regional sports networks, but some newcomers are showing there is room for additional services.

Group W Sports Marketing and Group W Network Services last month struck a deal with the Milwaukee Brewers to launch the Wisconsin Sports Network, a new regional cable sports service featuring games from the baseball team and the Milwaukee

Bucks pro basketball team (an earlier version of the service, Bucks Network, debuted in January).

Wisconsin traditionally has been served by such networks as SportsChannel Chicago and Midwest Sports Channel, which have broad reach and cover several states. Some regional sports networks,



Group W has launched the Wisconsin Sports Network with the Milwaukee Brewers and Bucks.

like Atlanta-based SportSouth, serve as many as seven states. Group W's pitch is more localized.

Group W has a five-year cable rights deal with the Brewers to handle ad sales for 35 games telecast on the network. Group W also is responsible for securing cable carriage of WSN throughout the

Latest in sports marketing: Out-of-market

Direct-to-home (DTH) satellite companies are hoping to parlay sports programming into a long-distance revenue source.

To that end, three DTH companies last year began offering "out-of-market sports packages," which give subscribers a selection of professional team sport telecasts not available on cable.

DBS companies DIRECTV and Primestar Partners, and C-band company Liberty Satellite Sports are the first to offer out-of-market packages. DBS newcomer EchoStar, just launched in March, says it will offer out-of-market sports once its second satellite is launched this fall.

Industry experts say such packages may provide a steady, albeit modest, revenue stream, once DTH companies build a sizable subscriber base.

Barry Gould, president of sports marketing research firm Gould Media, says that given the relatively small number of DBS subscribers, revenue from out-of-market packages now is modest at best.

"You're looking at a subscriber base of 2.2 million DBS subscribers and as many as 2 million C-band dishes subscribing to Liberty Satellite Sports," he says. "So far it's a very small amount of money that's being generated."

DIRECTV, Primestar and Liberty Satellite Sports last September rolled out Extra Innings, a package featuring Major League Baseball games for \$149 per season.

The MLB deal, negotiated with baseball rights-owner ESPN, allows the satellite companies to transmit games to viewers outside the home and visiting teams' markets. Previously, companies were barred from



NBA games are available out-of-market in a variety of configurations.

transmitting games produced by the regional programmers to out-of-market viewers.

The deal doesn't interfere with local broadcast and cable deals, or with games for which ESPN has procured out-of-market rights. The packages don't include games carried nationally by ESPN, although viewers still are able to see those games by turning to ESPN which has deals with PrimeStar and DIRECTV.

Primestar and DIRECTV have similar out-of-market deals with the National Hockey League and the National Basketball Association.

NBA packages include League Pass, which consists of 800 NBA

games from the NBA's 28-team schedule for \$149. This year, both DBS companies also are offering Team Pass, a package featuring the games of one out-of-market team for \$99. NHL Center Ice is a package of out-of-market NHL games for \$119 per season.

DIRECTV also has an exclusive deal with the National Football League to offer NFL Sunday Ticket, an out-of-market package of approximately 200 NFL regular-season games at \$159 per season.

Dennis P. Wilkinson, Primestar senior vice president of marketing, says the packages appeal to displaced sports fans who want to watch their former team and die-hard sports fans hungry for any games.

Ironically, the success of out-of-market sports packages may have worked to undercut the pay-per-view market. PPV, which pulls in healthy revenue from national distribution of theatrical movies and championship boxing and wrestling, so far has had limited success offering professional team sports on a PPV basis. —JM