

ESPN increases coverage of Black college sports

By Zachary Kenworthy
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - In the 1960s, Grambling State University publicist Collie Nicholson came up with a novel idea to showcase the Tigers' football under legendary Coach Eddie Robinson. The small Black, Louisiana school would begin playing many of its "home" games in such far-away places as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

That resulted in Grambling becoming the Black Notre Dame — or Notre Dame becoming the White Grambling. Either way, the nation got a better look at Eddie Robinson's players, more than 200 of whom made it in the NFL.

In a move bound to improve the recruiting efforts of Black colleges in two athletic conferences, ESPN, the cable TV giant, has announced that it will broadcast some games next season involving teams in the South West Athletic Conference (SWAC) and The Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference.

And no one could be more pleased than Nicholson, the former sports information director for Grambling, a member of SWAC.

"In my time, we never had a chance at this kind of coverage," he remembers. "When we wanted something to happen, we had to do it for ourselves. Black college football and Grambling had to stick up for itself." Not anymore.

"The greatest advantage is exposure," says SWAC Commissioner Robert Vowels. "Now a coach can go into a prospect's home and let them know that there will be national coverage at his school. That has a big impact."

Early in Nicholson's ca-

reer, Black colleges had a monopoly on Black players. To visualize how loaded Black colleges were with talent, someone suggested imagining all of the Black football players at the University of Florida, the University of Miami and Florida State being on one team. During the segregation era they were on one team — Florida A&M University.

When universities in the Deep South were desegregated in the late 1960s, many of the top athletes, lured by the appeal of playing on national television, picked predominantly White institutions over historically Black colleges and universities.

Even in that environment, Black colleges still produced all-pro performers such as Walter Payton of Jackson State, Jerry Rice of Mississippi Valley State, Bob Hayes of Florida A&M, Doug Williams of Grambling and John Stallworth of Alabama A&M.

Both conferences are hoping the ESPN deal will help return them to the glory days. The 7-year deal calls for games of Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference and the South West Athletic Conference to be broadcast on ESPNU, the cable network's most recent addition.

"This provides our universities with more collegiate television coverage," explained MEAC Commissioner Dennis Thomas. "It gives the university a greater opportunity to show the nation what we are about in the MEAC."

As part of the deal, ESPNU will televise at least seven football contests and eight basketball contests a year from each conference.

In addition, ESPN 2 will continue to honor its contract to cover both the MEAC and the SWAC men's basketball

conference championship finals. On March 12 and 13, ESPN 2 will air the MEAC men's championship game and the SWAC men's championship game, respectively. That agreement has been in place since the beginning of the season.

The new deal should not cut into other network coverage of Black college football. Black Entertainment television, along with New Vision Sport Properties carried 18 games, including football games from the MEAC, the

SWAC and the SIAC. With each football team in each conference playing an 11-game schedule, there are enough games to go around.

ESPNU will be launched on March 4, and the deal is in place until the 2011-2012 season. The long-term commitment by the cable network underscores the practicality of the deal.

The season of coverage begins with the SWAC/MEAC Challenge on September 3. The match-up features a team from each con-

ference and will be played on neutral turf every year. The inaugural game this season will feature South Carolina State and Alabama State at Legion Field in Birmingham Ala.

"ESPN has stepped up and made a commitment," Commissioner Thomas explained. "We have a great product here in the MEAC and it has tremendous value. The MEAC brand has a lot of potential," he concluded.

That product does not end with coverage by ESPNU,

ESPN2 and ESPN Classic. In fact, according to ESPN's press release, the pact will be extended across all ESPN platforms and both conferences will benefit from exposure by ESPN, ESPN the Magazine, ESPN Mobile, ESPN.com, ESPN 360 (broadband) and a host of other ESPN outlets.

"We had to open up all available opportunities at Grambling," says Nicholson. "We had to open doors that were closed all those years. This is just a continuation."

Ex-Steeler Swann raises cash for bid

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) - Former Pittsburgh Steelers star Lynn Swann has formed a campaign committee to raise money for a potential run for governor in 2006.

Swann named his committee Team 88, the number he wore as a wide receiver for the Steelers from 1974 to 1982, when the team won four Super Bowls.

"I will spend time introducing myself to communities across the commonwealth," the NFL Hall of Famer said in a statement last Wednesday. "We will also explore the potential political and financial support for my candidacy."

Swann, who turns 53 next month, faces at least two prospective opponents in the GOP primary. The winner will take on incumbent Democratic Gov. Ed Rendell in November.

A Quinnipiac University poll of voters conducted earlier this month showed Rendell winning a hypothetical matchup against Swann, 50 to 34 percent.

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