

WORLD LEAGUE DISAPPOINTS IN DEBUT SEASON

Ratings fall far short of expectations of rightsholders, advertisers

As the World League of American Football closes out its inaugural season, it is being summed up by advertisers and rightsholders ABC and USA Network, as disappointing.

WLAFL ratings on ABC have fallen short of the 3 to 4 rating that network executives were hoping to get for the games. "The ratings quite honestly are not where we'd like them, but in terms of demographics, it's right on track," said an ABC Sports spokesman. Sixty-five percent of WLAFL viewers have been in the age 18-49 category, he said, which is 15% higher than viewers in that demo for baseball and golf telecasts.

Ratings for the WLAFL on ABC sank as low as 1.3/4 for a May 5 matchup between the New York/New Jersey Knights and the Raleigh-Durham Skyhawks, but overall the games have averaged about a 2 rating. The league's highest rating as of last week was a March 31 pairing of the Knights and the London Monarchs that scored a 2.7/9. But the games had been hovering about a 1.5 rating each week since April 25.

Ratings for the WLAFL averaged 1.9/6 on ABC for the period March 25—May 20 down 14% from the golf, auto racing and other sports aired by the network during the same period last year. The WLAFL coverage represented more than twice the 11 hours of sports programming aired by ABC during that period in 1990.

Coverage-wise, the WLAFL games on ABC have generally cleared in the area of 92% of the U.S., peaking at 96% for the March 31 game and dropping as low as 90% for a midseason game featuring the Birmingham Fire and the Orlando Thunder.

According to one advertiser, ABC offered guarantees to some clients, depending on how large a buy they made, or whether the ad buy was part of a larger package. Spots on ABC were originally said to be going for \$40,000, although the price quickly dropped to less than half that amount as the season got underway.

USA Network, though, which aired games Saturday and Monday evenings, had guaranteed all advertisers a 3 rating. The highest rating USA got was a 2.1 for the first game on March 23. Ratings slowly declined week after week, with the last several games of the regular season (which ended Monday) averaging from a 0.8 to 1.0 rating. The season's ratings averaged out at a 1.2.

"Obviously, I'm not real thrilled about ratings levels," said Gordon Beck, USA vice president, sports. "But we're focusing our efforts on what we can do to turn it around. With time it will work."

USA had sold about 75% of its ad inventory, most of it, luckily, before the season had even started. The rest was used largely for makegoods, according to John Cronopolus, USA vice president, corporate accounts and special events. Advertisers said 30 second spots were being sold for about \$4,000 to \$6,000 on USA, way below the \$15,000 USA had said it thought some spots would go for before the season.

"We didn't buy any time on the WLAFL because we didn't think it would do very well," said Lou Schultz, executive vice president, director of media services, Lintas: Worldwide. "The results have shown that we were right. But it was a reasonable risk considering how few sports are available to men in the spring."

Some of those who did advertise are not happy with the ratings, but don't rate the WLAFL a disaster either. "I was pleased as far as how the league looked, in terms of professionalism. Even weeks before, I was concerned that the games would look pretty silly," said Chris Pfaus, manager, promotional events for Kentucky Fried Chicken, which advertised on both ABC and USA. "Of course, though, it was a disappointment as far as the ratings."

But the level of play still has a long way to go, according to some. The biggest disappointment, next to the ratings, said Bill Sherman, who had some clients on the WLAFL, was that "some of the play has been pretty shoddy."

Both USA and ABC have gotten high marks from advertisers on the production values of the games, as well they

should have, since according to Beck, USA spent what is usually spent on an NFL Monday night telecast up to \$250,000 per game. Considering that USA was producing on average four games a week (two games per time period, since games were blacked out in certain areas), that means the network spent as much as \$10 million on production. ABC will have produced only one game a week, plus a playoff and World Bowl, and its costs likely averaged about \$3 million. Each network spent about \$25 million in rights for two years, and USA has options for a third and fourth year.

The biggest mistake the WLAFL made was negotiating a two network deal, according to Bill Sherman of McCann-Erickson. "The fastest way to kill something is give product too much exposure. The league should have created one window and accepted lower rights fees revenues," he said.

USA's Beck and others think one thing that will help turn the WLAFL around will be the expected addition of more U.S. franchises next season, and getting an earlier start on marketing. The deal with the WLAFL was not done until November, four months before the league was set to begin.

Lintas's Schultz suggested that greater efforts be made to promote the league either during or immediately following the NFL Super Bowl. "They should also start creating stars and not treat it like minor league football," he said. (The defunct United States Football League of the early 1980's started with double-digit ratings and continued to hold onto 4 or 5 ratings by signing such names as Herschel Walker and Doug Flutie.) But attracting established star names to the league is no easy task, particularly while the WLAFL has set a cap of \$25,000 on player salaries.

—SDM, RB

UNIVERSAL OPENS NEW TOON TOWN

MCA/Universal Family Entertainment President Jeff Segal said Universal Cartoon Studios has officially opened an animation production office in Burbank, Calif., and has plans on the drawing board to construct a permanent on-site Universal Studios Tour production facility within the next two years. Segal, who joined MCA last year after heading animation development at Hanna-Barbera Productions, has been spearheading MCA/Universal's entry into cartoon production by creating Universal Cartoon Studios for production of network and syndicated series and theatrical features.