College Baseball Popularity Traced To ESPN Coverage

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College Baseball Popularity Traced To ESPN Coverage

By MICHAEL L. HILT
Special To Collegiate Baseball

OMAHA, Neb. — The College World Series began in 1947. But it did not have a national television contract until 1980, when ESPN agreed to carry some of the games.

Since then college baseball, and specifically the College World Series, has experienced a popularity explosion. That popularity increase can be directly attributed to ESPN.

ESPN, in turn, may not have reached its position in broadcasting without the experience it received in producing and airing college baseball games.

ESPN and College World Series

For the past 10 years the College World Series has been a featured event on ESPN. The popularity of college baseball in general, and the College World Series in particular, can be measured through attendance, and comments from those close to the situation.

The evidence gathered indicates that while the College World Series’ growth during the past 10 years would have continued, it could not have reached its current stature without ESPN. There also is evidence that ESPN may have reached its position in broadcasting without the experience it received producing and airing college baseball games.

Brief History of ESPN

ESPN took to the air in September 1979 promising 24-hour sports. The network’s principle source was the NCAA, with about 65 percent of its programming coming from college athletics.

College baseball and college basketball were two of the sports around which ESPN built its programming schedule. Both sports have enjoyed a decade of growth in popularity, unparalleled in sports history, and ESPN is responsible, to a degree, for this popularity explosion. But while the network earned its reputation with college basketball, it had to be convinced that college baseball would attract an audience.

CWS since 1980

In the beginning ESPN questioned the interest in college baseball, and thought the cost of televising the games was prohibitive. The network also was concerned with the threat of inclement weather, because Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha, the site of the College World Series, is an open-air stadium with natural grass.

At the time Jerry Miles was director of men’s championships with the NCAA. He is now the executive director of the ABCA. Miles has been involved with college baseball for nearly 20 years, and helped negotiate the NCAA’s first contract with ESPN.

“We tried to tell them at that time that one of the premier events, we thought a sleeping giant, was the College World Series,” Miles said.

He pushed the network to carry some of the games, and ESPN finally agreed to televise five CWS games.

11th CWS Year For ESPN

BRISTOL, Conn. — ESPN’s eleventh consecutive year of televising the NCAA College World Series will begin with live coverage of the first game Friday, June 1 at 4 p.m. EDT from Rosenblatt Stadium in Omaha, Neb.

The network will televise as many as 14 games leading up to the championship game. ESPN’s coverage will include up to ten live games: doubleheaders June 2, 4 and 8 (if necessary) and single games June 1, 3, 5 and 7.

CBS will carry the championship game scheduled for 1 p.m. Eastern time on Saturday, June 9. Announcers will be Greg Gumble and Jim Kaat for the national telecast.

ESPN’s Mike Patrick (first CWS) and Tim Brando (second CWS) will share the play-by-play duties. Jim Kaat (fifth CWS), a 25-year Major League veteran, and Larry Sorenson (first CWS), a former Major League pitcher with Milwaukee and Cleveland, will provide analysis.