

Skirting the Issues

by Kimberly Gadette

“IT’S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL”

ESPN’s SportsCenter made an announcement last December about its new relationship with the Arena Football League. When I saw the broadcast on Denver’s ESPN Zone® Sixteen Foot Big Screen, I almost dropped my ESPN Zone® Burger right on top of the melted cheese of my ESPN Zone® Queso Chips. Or wait, did I hear the news over ESPN Radio? Radio Disney? Forgive me, I’m getting confused ... maybe it was just part of the local news broadcast on ABC.

Whichever Disney-owned tentacle that happened to catch my eye (ow), this was the upshot: ESPN, owned by ABC, Inc., an indirect subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, had just acquired a ten percent ownership of the Arena Football League. With programming rights waived, and advertising revenue split between the AFL and ESPN, the upside is that for this 2007 season, a total of 26 AFL games will be broadcast on ESPN/ABC. You can’t miss them. Seriously, you can’t—more than 90 percent of American homes now have access to ESPN and ESPN2.

Per AFL commissioner David Barker, referring to ESPN/ABC/Disney: “There is no better partner to help grow the AFL into a leading global, multimedia property.”

On one side of the gridiron, I thought, O joy! It’s Monday Night Football with nets! The AFL now finally gets its place in the sun! (Well, no, not really, it’s Arena Football, so it still has to take place indoors.). Even better, “The Worldwide Leader in Sports” is broadcasting five of the 2007 Colorado Crush games. The fact that the public at large gets to see Damien Harrell’s brilliant athleticism for more than 30 seconds on a highlight reel is stupendous!

Yet rushing over to the other side of the gridiron, I had to wonder—does Colorado get more on-air game time than other teams because John Elway is not just an owner, but the newly appointed chairman of the AFL executive committee?

And how about that Philadelphia Soul, scoring a total of seven games for the ‘07 broadcast season? Is the Soul favored because co-owner

(Continued on page 24)

Skirting the Issues

(Continued from page 22)

Jon Bon Jovi happened to write the brand new AFL theme song, “We Got It Goin’ On”? (Written with bandmate Richie Sambora, another co-owner of the team.) A song that was part of the opening video for ESPN’s weekly AFL game telecasts? A song that will also be included in the upcoming Bon Jovi album, scheduled for imminent release?

Per ESPN executive Norby Williamson “Jon Bon Jovi has become a symbol of Arena Football, and his band remains one of the most popular on the planet, so it’s only fitting that their music be part of ESPN’s presentation of the AFL this season.” Jon Bon Jovi is a symbol of the AFL? More than a Rashad Floyd? What position does Mr. Bon Jovi play? Defensive lead singer?

And just what *is* goin’ on?

I understand that broad corporate synergy is the way of the world. Research states that the current Big Six media conglomerates (Disney, Time Warner, News Corp, Bertelsmann AG, Viacom and General Electric) own more than 90% of the media marketplace. It therefore makes sense that some of the lines become blurred. But when the “E” on the Snellen standard eye chart signifies the “E” in ESPN, it’s time to take a closer look.

Another Philadelphia Soul co-owner, Ron Jaworski, is now announcing some of the games on ESPN. What is this, family nepotism gone mad? “Hey, my sister’s oldest boy Joey always wanted to be a broadcaster. You wanna give him a try? It’d be a big favor to me, and I won’t forget it.” Silly me, I’m exaggerating. I’ll bet that even though Jaworski is both a co-owner and the acting President of the Soul, he’ll be as journalistically neutral as, say, any one of those dudes on Fox. (Which is a part of the Rupert Murdoch’s empire, News Corp., a whole other media oligopoly and



(Continued on page 26)

Skirting the Issues

(Continued from page 24)

please—don't get me started.)

But how about the journalistic neutrality of the rookie owners of the AFL? How neutral will ESPN remain if the players have a grievance or two? Let's say that the AFL Director of Housekeeping suddenly does away with a high-end sweat towel, sneaking in a lower grade, cotton/polyester blend that's a favorite with management over at Disney Cruise Lines. And then there's the soap. I shudder to think of the uproar in the showers if the Life Buoy were to be exchanged for Little Mermaid mini-soap rosettes.

Or even worse ... what if there's a dispute over salary caps? Seriously.

If ESPN gets caught in the no-man's-Fantasyland between reporter and owner, will the cable giant still think of itself as part and parcel of the happiest place on earth? Involvement in the conflict is Disney Worlds' away from involvement in the profits.

My head starting to spin out, I turned on my DVD player to watch Disney/Pixar's animated hit from last year, "Cars." Wrong choice. I suddenly remembered hearing about ESPN's new multi-year, multimedia agreement with NASCAR, with special promotions in ESPN The Magazine, SportsCenter and ESPN.com. And before I could put on the brakes, my own wheels started turning. Disney produces a homage to the racetrack with "Cars" ... and then bringing up the rear, tailgating too close for comfort, comes its very own ESPN spawn, pushing profits into overdrive.

As those weird little dollies incessantly intone during that vile ride, "It's a Small World After All."

If the Crush takes the AFL Championship this year, if the faceless announcer says, "Colorado Crush, you've just won Arena Bowl XXI, what are you going to do now?" I imagine that Damian Harrell would happily declare, "I'm going to Disney World!"

But dude, why bother? You're already there. ❁

Send Comments/Feedback to kimberly@thedenversportsguide.com