

# Chicago Sun Times

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### **Big Ten Network counting on its fans to be suckers**

**Conference commissioner asking 'extraordinary' rate for second-tier product**

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Call me crazy, but I don't think a Big Ten synchronized swimming competition or a D-list football game is must-see TV, and I don't want to pay to watch either of them. But commissioner Jim Delany, the driving force behind the Big Ten Network, wants me to.

Delany thinks so highly of his network, which launches Aug. 30, that he is demanding it be carried on basic cable and wants to charge \$1.10 per household in the eight Big Ten states. Any carrier that gives in to his demands, of course, will pass that charge along to its customers, meaning many of us will have to cough up another \$13.20 a year, like it or not.

I don't know if the Big Ten is the best conference in the country, but surely it is the most arrogant. I wonder how an SEC or Big East fan living in Big Ten territory will feel about having to help finance BTN?

Comcast thinks the rate is too high and wants to put BTN in a sports-tier grouping rather than on basic cable. BTN says it's set to launch with or without Comcast's 5.7 million subscribers in the eight Big Ten states. Comcast says it's not budging. (And as a Comcast subscriber, a graduate of a Big Ten school and a taxpayer who helps support the University of Illinois, that's fine by me.)

#### **Not much free TV these days**

You won't find big games such as Michigan-Ohio State football on BTN for quite a while, as the conference has a long-term agreement with ESPN and ABC. But it's only a matter of time. As sports fans, we're suckers, and we know it. Cable has gradually taken over sports programming, and we've given in, figuring we have no choice. (Thank you, ESPN, and your \$3 charge per household.) And it just keeps getting more expensive. With ESPN embarking on a pay-per-view venture and the NFL Network beginning to push its way into our homes, soon we'll be unable to watch any game without paying a surcharge upon a surcharge.

"That is an extraordinary amount to charge," attorney Robert Johnson, president of Consumers for Competitive Choice, said of BTN's \$1.10 rate. "With 5.7 million Comcast subscribers, that's [about \$63 million] per year. The Big Ten is asking for the second-highest rate of any cable network. That's extraordinarily high, especially considering the network hasn't aired a show yet. The Big Ten is forcing this directly onto its fan base. And it's a slap in the face to the fans."

Delany talked up the channel during a June 21 conference call, saying, "We're going to have 400 events. We're going to have quality basketball and football games, archives and coaches shows. And we were able to obtain 4,000 Big Ten archived games -- the Big Ten classics that bring the history of the conference into the present day."

He also promised that within three years, the network would give women's events broadcast time equal to men's events.

He makes BTN sound so high-minded, doesn't he?

"Those words mean nothing to consumers who have to pay \$1-plus each month beginning this year for games that were free last year," said Johnson, an Indiana graduate and a Big Ten sports fan. "This is not about new programming, and it's disingenuous to suggest that. That's distorting the issue, which is that the top-tier games are still on ESPN and ABC. Until now, the second-tier games, however that is defined, would have been on local free TV. What fans got for free, they're now being asked to pay a lot for."

#### **Delany using Big Ten's muscle**

BTN has reached agreements with DirecTV and many small companies, but most of the big providers, including Comcast, still are holding out.

"It's a negotiation between two giant behemoths, one sports network and one cable provider," Johnson said. "They're playing a game of chicken."

Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over telecommunications, recently wrote Delany with some questions about BTN.

"I am increasingly concerned about the migration of previously free, over-the-air content to a pay-television tier," Dingell wrote.

Johnson thinks it's a legitimate public-policy issue because the conference is using publicly funded assets to leverage dollars out of consumers.

"The very taxpayers that have supported those institutions are now being asked to [fork over more money]," he said. "Delany is a shrewd businessman, but it's coming at the expense of the fan base."

A very loyal fan base, I might add. That's what Delany is counting on.