

## The NBA On NBC Partnership

Relationship changed sports media and crowned the NBA

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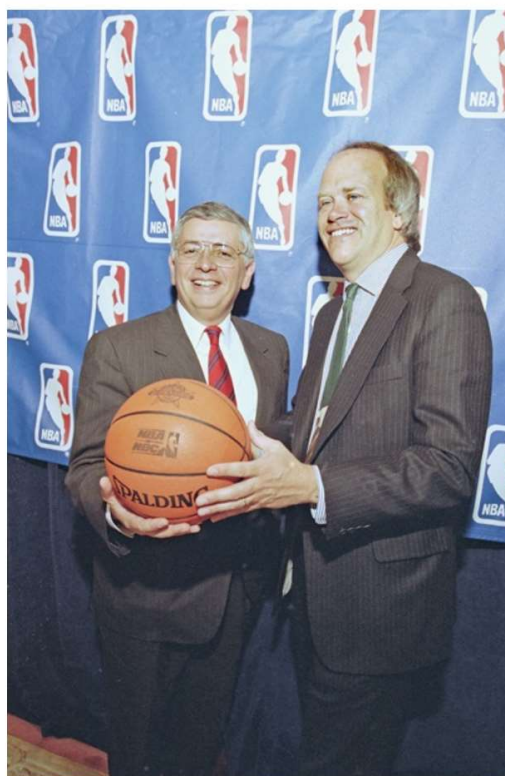
“A spectacular move!” Sports fans know the clip — Michael Jordan switching hands in mid-air to score; the call from the legendary Marv Albert. But we’re writing about another, similarly spectacular move made by the **NBA** and NBC on Nov. 9, 1989:

NBC stunned the industry 33 years ago by paying the NBA \$600 million-plus, more than triple what incumbent **CBS** had been paying, putting the NBA on the map, cementing the visionary reputations of NBA Commissioner David Stern and NBC Sports President Dick Ebersol as sports impresarios, and birthing a truly unique league/network “marriage” that netted (pun intended) a massive “win-win.” It represented a pivotal moment in our careers, and reordered sports media, transforming the NBA.

First, the context: Ed joined the NBA in 1982 as its director of broadcasting/executive producer; John started at **CBS Sports** as programming assistant. That season, CBS scheduled only five regular-season NBA games — each involving the Lakers, Celtics and 76ers. Until 1982, weeknight NBA Finals were on CBS late-night tape-delay, so concerned was CBS not to air NBA games in prime time during the crucial “May Sweeps.” The NBA was a programming stepchild. “Our fans like us,” Stern once mused to John, “but they don’t like themselves for liking us!”

The NBA began to rally in its final years with CBS, as Ted Shaker took over as executive producer, adding innovations like “At the Half with Pat O’Brien” and slicker productions that highlighted the many emerging NBA superstars, like Jordan. Just after 6 p.m. ET on Sunday, May 7, 1989, Jordan electrified the nation, hitting the hanging, series-deciding, buzzer-beater over the Cavs’ Craig Ehlo in the opening round of the playoffs. We took note.

We were now working together at the NBA. CBS itself shocked the industry (and us) by paying \$1.1 billion to take away NBC’s 41-year **MLB** national TV “birthright,” providing NBC with airtime and motivation, and us an opportunity.



— NBA Commissioner David Stern and NBC's Dick Ebersol worked together to greatly expand the league's coverage.

AP IMAGES



— The rise of Michael Jordan, shown here after winning the 1991 title, further added buzz around the NBA and NBC's coverage.

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With the NBA's TV agreements expiring, we set out to **NFL-ize** the NBA so that it could become the premium network sports property after football season. Rather than accept a network-centric new agreement, we drafted our own form, specifying key required elements — “the stuff.” We wanted weekly Sunday doubleheaders, “major sports” level of production equipment and an actual pregame show “in a studio,” not in front of a wall of monitors or a temporary set in the stands, as CBS had resorted to for budgetary reasons. And we wanted substantial on-air promotion, and cross-promotion between network and cable partners, to expand audience awareness of the NBA. “We willingly promoted games that were airing on **Turner Sports**, even though it was unheard of at the time,” Ebersol notes in his new book. Our goal made it very hard to stay with CBS, which had the NCAA Tournament, PGA Tour, and now MLB. And, perhaps most importantly, CBS didn't see the NBA as we ... or Dick Ebersol did.

“Within 48 hours of when I started the job at NBC Sports, I went to ... meet with David. We hit it off from that point,” Ebersol recalled recently. “Prime time was what we were selling — not just for the Finals or later rounds of the playoffs, but finding ways of getting Sundays into prime time.” Of course, Ebersol and Stern recognized the Jordan/Ehlo effect too.

Ebersol is on the Mount Rushmore pantheon of sports legends, along with his mentor, **Roone Arledge**, and Stern. What distinguished Ebersol and Stern was that not only did they think big — they did big. That summer, Ebersol (who ultimately served as NBC's chief executive, programmer, and executive producer for the NBA on NBC) traveled to D.C. to meet with FCC reps — the topic: Could a sports program that

summer, Ebersol (who ultimately served as NBC's chief executive, programmer, and executive producer for the NBA on NBC) traveled to D.C. to meet with FCC reps — the topic: Could a sports program that contained educational content qualify for the mandated Saturday morning Network TV kids block? The answer wasn't "no." Ebersol's legwork begat "NBA Inside Stuff," a weekly program produced by NBA Entertainment that ran midday on NBC just prior to live sports every Saturday for 12 years, indoctrinating generations of young adults to the NBA.

So strong was the partnership between Ebersol and Stern, and their respective standings so high with their employers, that Albert's trademark "Yes!" became the default response when the league or network asked something of the other. As Ebersol said in his book, "the partner always came first."

### **Links to NBC / NBA video clips:**

[John "Tesh Roundball Rock"](#)

[NBC's signoff \(all the great moments\)](#)

[An "NBA Showtime" pregame show from the first season](#)

In a novel move, NBC provided the NBA with a \$10 million/year bank of prime-time promotion, which led to the "I Love This Game" campaign. A dozen-plus executives, production people, marketers and ad sellers from both sides gathered weekly for lunch, forged relationships and created great value together. They were afraid not to because Ebersol and Stern made cooperation and success an imperative. "Meetings like that had never happened before in any partnership between a league and network," Ebersol said. The evocative "joint logo" was emblematic of the parties' collaborative, integrated spirit.

One star was Jim Burnette, head of NBC Sports sales. Burnette knew the NBA was particularly strong in the second quarter, which was heavy auto sales season. He boldly expanded CBS's previous two NBA-exclusive auto advertisers to eight, each getting one-quarter of exclusivity and four units every other game. And he moved fast. At the 1990 Super Bowl, Burnette successfully made the pitch, getting seven autos (including GM, which bought two eighths). He also lined up McDonald's as the halftime sponsor, locking in revenue of hundreds of millions in just a couple of months. Shortly thereafter, the economy collapsed. CBS's first World Series was a competitive and financial bust (a four-game **Reds** sweep). But the NBA on NBC was already on a solid financial launchpad.

Two years later, when the NBA and NBC extended their already hugely successful agreement early, the parties added an ad revenue share. That heralded an unprecedented amount of information-sharing and created a practically unheard of fertile environment, where the league was actively seeking advertisers for its network partners and vice versa.

Eight years after the NBA on CBS had scheduled a five-game regular-season slate, NBC aired 26 games featuring 14 teams. Now there was a legitimate pregame show, "NBA Showtime," superbly hosted by Bob Costas, and the doubleheader games voiced by play-by-play legends Albert and Dick Enberg. The sidelines were patrolled by Ahmad Rashad, who initially bristled at Albert's tag, "The Dean of Sideline Reporters," until he realized that fans liked it. The first NBC analyst, Mike Fratello, was similarly dubbed, "The Czar of the Telestrator." John Tesh wrote the score, "Roundball Rock." It was a show, and it was fun.

Whereas CBS was often plagued with local station preemptions, Ebersol had NBC affiliate relations offer the NBA schedule as an “all or nothing” block. The stations had little choice and the NBA had 99%-plus distribution. This helped ratings, as did Ebersol’s understanding of Nielsen. By forgoing a pre-tip break, Nielsen would start the national rating during live action, and the closer the last spot ran to the end of the game, the higher the game’s average. In its first season, NBC was also rewarded with a dream Chicago-L.A. Lakers final, an actual changing of the guard from **Magic** to Michael, and a ratings hit.



— NBC offered the prime-time exposure, and shoulder programming, the NBA needed to boost fandom.

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In late April 1992, the Rodney King riots gripped L.A., scrambling the playoff schedule. Working together with the NBA’s longtime schedule maker Matt Winick, we imagined an opportunity. With three games on Sunday, May 9, but only a doubleheader booked for NBC, what if ... we could convince NBC to go at 12:30, 3:00 and 5:30 p.m. ET — the first NBA network tripleheader, climaxing with a must-watch game: the champion **Bulls** with Jordan at the **Knicks** with Patrick Ewing and coach Pat Riley. Going nearly unopposed 5:30-8 p.m. ET on Sunday wasn’t possible at CBS (“60 Minutes” was untouchable). But we got to “Yes!” quickly, also by borrowing another NFL innovation: offering the local NBC stations a halftime news break to make up for the news preemption. That night, the Knicks shocked the Bulls, providing a powerful NBC prime-time lead-in during the May sweeps. From then on, tripleheaders and the late Sunday window became the norm for the NBA on NBC, many distinguished by remarkable performances from Jordan.

Stern taught us to understand and strategically use our “assets.” The 1992 Olympics **Dream** Team is a great example. The USA team had to qualify for Barcelona. The NBA and NBC staged and marketed their

“Beatles-like” Dream Team debut. At the Olympics, Ebersol opened prime time with Dream Team games, introducing huge audiences to stars like Karl Malone, David Robinson and Charles Barkley — not to mention Larry Bird, Magic and Jordan, captivating the world and catapulting the NBA to an even higher orbit.

“I miss David every day of my life. He was a ... stimulator in my life and a great, loyal friend,” said Ebersol last month. Stern would have said the same, especially if the NBA retained the 5:30-8 p.m. ET time slot and a share of ad revenue!

*Today, Ed Desser ([www.desser.tv](http://www.desser.tv)) and John Kosner ([www.kosnermedia.com](http://www.kosnermedia.com)) each operate sports media consulting businesses. They collectively served three decades as the senior media executives at the NBA, collaborating during the heyday of the NBA on NBC.*

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