



Ted Turner's WTBS has dumped two highly successful wrestling programs, which now may reappear on ESPN.

# Wrestling dispute costs WTBS two top shows

By RICHARD ZACKS  
Staff reporter

Ted Turner, now engaged in a much-publicized struggle with CBS, recently completed a little-publicized wrestling match with Vince McMahon, chairman of the World Wrestling Federation.

The winner in a close bout was Mr. Turner, who, in effect, slammed Mr. McMahon and his "World Championship Wrestling" off the superstation on March 31.

But Mr. Turner didn't escape unbloodied: The net result of losing the wrestling package was that WTBS canceled two of its three

top-rated shows, which are also two of cable's top three.

To add insult to injury, Mr. McMahon is now in serious negotiations with ESPN. Mr. Turner's archival, about supplying ESPN with wrestling stars such as Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant. Sources at ESPN expect a decision within two weeks.

The cause of the cancellation dates back to earlier this year, when Turner Broadcasting System officials began demanding that the WWF stop supplying wrestling shows to other cable outlets, such as USA Network.

When WWF refused, TBS made the financial arrangements for advertising so undesirable that the federation opted to sell out to another wrestling promoter, according to WWF.

TBS officials refused to comment.

The WWF has been supplying "World Championship Wrestling" to superstation WTBS since July 14, 1984. WWF is paid a production fee for packaging two one-hour shows for WTBS, which have consistently ranked in cable's top five.

"World Championship Wrestling" on Saturday night from 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. (ET)—now expanded to 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.—drew a 5.3 rating (percentage of TV households) or 1.8 million homes in February—No. 2 in cable.

The "Best of World Championship Wrestling" on Sundays from 5:35 p.m. to 6:35 p.m. drew a 5.1 rating, or 1.7 million homes—No. 3 in cable.

A clause in the contract allowed WWF certain time for "promotional purposes," says Frank Tomeo, president of Creative Media Enterprises, which handles WWF's advertising and sales.

WWF interpreted that to mean it could drop in commercials and include WTBS in its national ad package.

The WWF sells national commercials that run on its shows on USA Network, Madison Square Garden Network, Spanish International Network and a syndicated network of 100-plus stations.

The WWF pulled a 16.2 average weekly cumulative rating for all of its shows, up from a 6 rating last July, according to Mr. Tomeo.

He also said that the WWF had sold about \$2.5 million in ad time over the last month.

TBS interpreted "promotional" to mean strictly program promotion, says Mr. Tomeo, and refused to let WWF drop in commercials.

The superstation then offered WWF a chance to buy commercial time on the two shows at a discount, which WWF could then resell to its clients at a profit.

That arrangement worked until early this year, when WTBS demanded that WWF break off its contracts with the other cable networks and supply WTBS on an exclusive basis.

WWF refused. Sources say WTBS responded by telling WWF it would have to charge WWF the full rate for commercial time.

WWF, realizing there was no profit to be made under those circumstances, sold its production contracts for the wrestling shows to Jim Crockitt, a wrestling promoter out of Charlotte, N.C.

WWF signed a contract with WAGA-TV in Atlanta to keep its presence in the market. But Mr. Turner is betting that Mr. Crockitt and his Southern wrestlers can maintain the high ratings. #

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