

COLONIAL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION MAKES COMMITMENT TO ALL-DIGITAL COVERAGE WITH FLOSPORTS

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CAA men's basketball champion Northeastern is one of the conference members whose content will be featured on FloSports.

Photo: AP IMAGES

Anyone following Colonial Athletic Association games during the next four years will need a good broadband connection.

The CAA has sold its rights to FloSports as part of a comprehensive college media rights deal that is believed to be the first time an NCAA Division I conference has gone all-digital with its primary rights agreement. The arrangement will have FloSports paying the CAA a rights fee, something the mid-major conference has never had before. Select CAA games were on CBS Sports digital and the Fox Sports Go app last season.

When FloSports started offering a rights fee in the low seven figures, the conference made its move.

"This is going to be a cutting-edge deal," CAA Commissioner Joe D'Antonio said. "To be honest, for a conference our size, this will be a significant revenue source for all of our schools."

Based in Austin, Texas, FloSports launched by carrying niche sports including EuroLeague basketball, the International Volleyball Federation and the Professional Bowlers Association. Recently, FloSports has been picking up rights to leagues

and teams that historically have not had rights fees. It bought the local rights to two MLS teams, D.C. United and FC Cincinnati, this season. FloSports currently has 250 employees.

FloSports' college rights

Colonial Athletic Association (*all sports*)

NCAA (*gymnastics regionals*)

Big Ten Network (*variety of sports*)

Big 12 (*five winter/spring championships*)

Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (*basketball, spring sports*)

Mountain West (*winter, spring championships*)

Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (*all sports*)

The move to carry more mainstream sports has had its share of hiccups. The first D.C. United match it carried this season had so many technical problems — fans weren't able to access the game for several minutes after it started — that FloSports offered rebates.

But the streaming service has made itself a factor in the pursuit of media rights by paying attractive rights fees and going after content that previously did not have a broadcast home, such as NCAA gymnastics regionals. The CAA provides FloSports with its most comprehensive deal and creates a de facto CAA network.

FloSports will stream more than 300 live CAA events, including 50 conference football games, 140 men's and women's basketball games and 110 other events. Most CAA championship events are part of the package. The CAA comprises the College of Charleston, Delaware, Drexel, Elon, Hofstra, James Madison, Northeastern, Towson, UNC Wilmington and William & Mary, along with a host of associate members across different sports, including Villanova and Maine in football.

The live events will be produced by the schools. D'Antonio said the CAA's athletic departments already produce live games for CAA.TV, the league's in-house digital channel, so only minor upgrades in production quality will be required for streaming on FloSports.

The CAA worked with Michael Schreck and Ray Katz at Collegiate Sports Management Group, a college media consultancy, to find a partner for its media rights. Lindsey Ross, the former ESPN executive hired by FloSports as director of rights acquisition 11 months ago, led the negotiations for the digital company.

Subscriptions for the Colonial content will cost \$12.50 per month, the price for a FloSports subscription. Viewers can access it through FloSports.tv or the FloSports app, and the content will be available internationally as well.

Additional profiles, shoulder programming and insider shows will be produced by FloSports, and the majority of that content will live in front of the paywall.

"Investment in storytelling is a big part of our model," said Mark Floreani, FloSports' CEO and co-founder. "The CAA is a great conference with great content, the kind that often goes overlooked."

The CAA rounded out its media agreements, all of which begin in 2019-20, with a package of basketball games on CBS Sports Network's linear channel.

For certain football games that don't stream on FloSports or air on CBS Sports Network, CAA schools will have the capability of taking them to a local RSN for broadcast. In some cases, games could stream on FloSports and simulcast on a local RSN. That flexibility was important to CAA members who have longstanding relationships with local channels.

"The fact that we were able to find a partner that valued us has been tremendous," said D'Antonio, a longtime Big East executive who was named CAA commissioner three years ago.

D'Antonio hired CSMG shortly after he arrived at the Richmond, Va.-based conference office and they've been working on a media strategy since.

Some conferences have media rights deals that lean heavily digital but also contain some games on linear. The Ivy League, for example, has a comprehensive deal with ESPN that is largely digital, but also includes at least 24 games on ESPN linear channels.

Schreck and Katz said they couldn't find another example where a Division I conference had an all-digital deal for its primary rights agreement. CSMG had done a similar digital deal with a rights fee between FloSports and the Division II Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference last year, so there was familiarity with FloSports' model.

The CAA had talks with every major media company, D'Antonio said. Every other negotiation came up short with the rights fee, the flexibility to share games with local RSNs or the ability to stream in international markets. FloSports was the one that had a solution for each of those questions.

"We're in an age where live streaming OTT is certainly a way that folks are now beginning to consume more of their media," D'Antonio said. "Especially our fans in a younger demographic category. So, we're excited to be the first college partner with an entity that's basically committed to exposing media in that way."