

BIG MAN *on* BTN



Mark Silverman, MBA '91, Coaches Big Ten Network to Successful Launch

By Terry Kosdrosky // Photo By Jennifer Bisbing

AS A DIEHARD MICHIGAN FOOTBALL fan, Mark Silverman, MBA '91, watched the final moments of the Wolverines' disastrous loss to Appalachian State in September 2007 in sheer agony.

But as president of the fledgling Big Ten Network, which premiered that very weekend, he had to admit he felt a glint of professional ecstasy, as well: "This could be huge for us."

Michigan, then the No. 5-ranked team in the country, had been struggling much of the day against underdog Appalachian State, a team in the Football Championship Subdivision (formerly Division I-AA). There were only two ways to see that now-infamous game: live at the Big House or on television via the newly launched Big Ten Network, which reached just six million homes.

As Silverman watched the historic upset unfold, he knew it could be a watershed moment in terms of marketing, brand recognition, and distribution for the network, which had yet to ink deals with most cable carriers, including Comcast. Any other outlet showing highlights of the game would have to credit the Big Ten Network. Fans — and cable company managers — would see what they were missing.

Still, the Michigan man had high hopes for his team as the Wolverines lined up to attempt a last-second field goal for the win.

"I started thinking, 'This is perfect: an up-and-down game where Michigan kicks a game-winning field goal,'" Silverman recalls. "One of our production guys said to me, 'Aren't we better off if it misses?' I said I didn't want to think about that."

Lest anyone forget, Appalachian State blocked the field goal, and football history was made. The Michigan man in Silverman had to shake it off right then, as the Big Ten Network president in him had no choice but to exploit the emerging advantage.

"Everyone said, 'Sorry for your loss, but this is probably the best thing that could've happened for the network,'" he says. "The phone started ringing out of control, and we quickly went into marketing mode. It was the lead story on ESPN's 'SportsCenter' throughout the day. One of the biggest upsets in college football history happened only on this fledgling network."

A week later, the Big Ten Network reached a deal for distribution on Dish Network and a medium-sized cable TV carrier in parts of Michigan and Ohio. A deal with RCN, a larger carrier in Chicago, followed soon after.

"I know Michigan fans weren't happy about this decision, rubbing their face in this horrible loss, but we needed to promote the network," Silverman says. "I had to do that. I think it proved to



MARK SILVERMAN, MBA '91, on the set of Chicago-based Big Ten Network.

the conference and to the other 10 universities that any potential bias I have isn't going to get in the way of my work at the network."

IN LEADING THE BIG TEN NETWORK, SILVERMAN PUT TO use a host of skills gathered during a career in broadcasting and sports. He had been general manager and senior vice president at ABC Cable Networks Group, where he managed the company's stake in Lifetime Television, A&E Network, and the History Channel. He also had been general manager of ABC Family Channel.

Meanwhile, Silverman held various positions with the Walt Disney Co. and was general manager of ESPN Zone. In addition, he had co-founded and operated Silverkings Media, a media and entertainment consulting company.

"I am a major sports fan, and I helped launch the ESPN Zone in the mid-1990s," he says. "So I saw some analogies with taking the Big Ten brand into a new forum with a network. The idea of launching a new business was appealing. And I definitely had Big Ten knowledge and ties. So the framework was there to make this very successful."

The option to pursue that success came when Fox Networks Group CEO Tony Vinciguerra approached Silverman about the position. (Fox is a minority owner of the network with a 49-percent

stake, while the Big Ten Conference is the majority player.) And while Silverman wasn't the most experienced candidate for the job, he exhibited certain talents that Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany was seeking in a team leader.

"Mark's experience in terms of running a network was not at the top of the list, but he was number one on my list from the beginning after going through the interviews," Delany says. "It's hard to say exactly why, but I would point to his creative intelligence, his desire to run a company, and his enthusiasm. I was taken by the force of his intellectual and personal side, and I felt like he could really work well with our schools."

SILVERMAN WOULD NEED THAT ENTHUSIASM AND INTELLIGENCE during 2007 and the first part of 2008. Granted, some big early football games provided a boost to the business, and basketball season looked promising. But the network had yet to lock in a distribution deal with cable giant Comcast (along with other carriers in the region). The Big Ten Network wanted the channel on an expanded basic tier, while most cable companies were pushing for a digital sports tier. Those who want it will pay for it, the carriers argued. But Silverman and his team held firm. The faceoff quickly became heated and public.

THE LIST: Mark Silverman's Top 5 Impact Games on Big Ten Network

#1

**MARCH 2008
MINNESOTA
VS. INDIANA**

**Big Ten Basketball
Tournament**

The Gophers' Blake Hoffarber nails a last-second shot to beat Indiana, closing the network's opening season of Big Ten basketball.

#2

**SEPTEMBER 2007
APPALACHIAN
STATE VS. UNIVER-
SITY OF MICHIGAN**

Football

Appalachian State stuns Michigan's football team on the opening day of the network's football coverage.

#3

**NOVEMBER 2007
INDIANA
VS. PURDUE**

Football

Indiana hits a field goal as time expires to secure a bowl appearance for the Hoosiers. The win fulfills late coach Terry Hooppner's goal of "playing 13 games."

#4

**MAY 2008
INDIANA VS.
PENN STATE**

**Big Ten Baseball
Tournament**

Indiana's Tyler Cox, whose error allowed the lead run to score, redeemed himself in the bottom of the ninth with a walk-off grand slam.

#5

**JANUARY 2009
NORTHWESTERN
VS.**

**MICHIGAN STATE
Basketball**

The Northwestern Wildcats upset Michigan State, snapping the Spartans' 28-game home winning streak.

Silverman knew it would take some time before the network achieved the kind of presence it wanted in Big Ten states and national households. That comes with the territory of launching a new channel. But the public nature of the distribution fracas took him by surprise. Both sides took the fight to the airwaves, leaving frustrated fans to watch from the sidelines.

"It was beyond anything I had ever seen," Silverman says. "But you had a lot of converging factors. You have an industry that's sort of not loved. You have escalating ticket prices and other costs that sports fans endure. Then you fan this flame that you're not going to get the games you want to watch. That just set everything up to get so heated."

Behind the scenes, negotiations started moving in early 2008, but it took a long time to finalize any deals. Meanwhile, a staff of 100 had to be managed, and leaders of 11 universities had to be kept in the loop. Delany says Silverman's leadership during a tough time was a big factor in keeping the network focused.

"When we were going through the dispute, which was hard and in some ways a disappointment, you still had 100 people who work here and you have to keep their morale up," Delany says. "Managing those two, the morale and arguing our case on the road, I think Mark handled that well. I think that's a very important quality in a leader."

In June 2008, the Big Ten Network signed a deal with Comcast that put the network on expanded basic cable in the Big Ten states. This spring, Comcast can move the network to a broadly distributed digital tier, which most customers receive. In the other states, Comcast makes the Big Ten Network part of premium sports tiers.

Similar deals with cable companies such as Bright House Networks followed, and now the network is in about 90 percent of homes in Big Ten territory and also is available to 70 million homes nationwide.

Despite the long dispute with Comcast, Silverman says the network is profitable in its second year and will be "significantly profitable" in the near future. Last year, the network exceeded its

advertising sales goals and signed Nissan Motor Co., State Farm Insurance, and restaurant chain Buffalo Wild Wings as major advertisers. The goal is to grab more of those blue-chip sponsors.

WITH THE FIGHT FOR DISTRIBUTION LARGELY BEHIND it, the network's focus now is on improving the on-air product and promoting its forays into new media, such as streaming games online and video on demand. Silverman says he'd love to have 400 sporting events on the TV network and 400 streamed on the website. The network especially wants to grow baseball and women's softball as streaming sports.

Right now, he's taking a hard look at original programming that would be of interest to all Big Ten fans and advertisers.

"We now need to make the next stride to get better," he says. "That means improving game telecasts, studio shows, and original programming."

On that score, the network has attracted such personalities as former ESPN host Dave Revsine and CBS Sports basketball play-by-play announcer Gus Johnson. The network also has several former Big Ten players and coaches, including Jim Jackson and Gary DiNardo, adding color and commentary.

Delany says he's pleased with the results so far, especially with the journalistic integrity of the network. He cites stories on Penn State football players being dismissed and Indiana's basketball coach, Kelvin Sampson, resigning in the wake of recruiting violations. And while the network has a responsibility to cover those stories, Delany says he's committed to keeping game telecasts focused on just that: the game.

Reflecting on the network's launch, Silverman calls it a win, despite some of the early struggles and the negative publicity during the Comcast negotiations.

"There are definitely worse things to spend your day doing than representing 11 of the finest schools in the country," he says. ■