



Sept. 7, 1979: Debut night in ESPN's studio.

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

At 7 p.m. Eastern Time on Sept. 7, 1979 — 45 years ago — the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, or ESPN, first began broadcasting on U.S. cable TV systems.

At first, ESPN was available to only 1.4 million cable subscribers. But that would grow as the network added programming that the larger networks had passed over for being too niche.

AN IDEA THAT MIGHT ... GO ... ALL ... THE ... WAY ...

In May 1978, 46-year-old sports broadcasting veteran Bill Rasmussen was fired from his job as communications director for the New England Whalers professional hockey team.

While pondering his job prospects, Rasmussen began to consider cable television, which, at the time, was in its infancy. What if, he thought, there was a cable channel that showed sports — and nothing *but* sports?

He pulled his son Scott and a local insurance agent into a partnership and began seeking a way to make his vision come true. At first, Rasmussen envisioned a sports channel driven by local sports, so he began calling his project the Eastern Sports Programming network — mostly because he liked the acronym ESP.

He shelled out \$91 on July 13, 1978, to incorporate ESP. But Rasmussen had no equipment, no customers, no financial backing and no permission to show live events. Local media officials laughed at him.

He realized early on that he'd need a satellite dish in order to distribute his



ESPN founder Bill Rasmussen in 1979 ...



... and his first two satellite dishes at the ESPN facility in Bristol, Conn.

TV signal. The cost of such a device caused him to widen the scope of his plans: ESP would now broadcast nationwide, and 24 hours a day, Rasmussen decided.

He bought an acre of land in Bristol, Connecticut, atop a closed garbage dump. He began to find investors — most notably, Getty Oil, which in February 1979 paid \$10 million for 85% of the venture. Rasmussen

began building a modest broadcast headquarters, installed the vital satellite dishes and began buying cameras and other equipment.

By late summer, ESP had been rebranded as ESPN. The broadcast facility was still unfinished. Only five dozen or so employees were on payroll, and many of them had to work out of trailers in the parking lot. Much of the video equipment had

not yet arrived. Restrooms weren't yet operational, so Rasmussen had porta-potties set up outside.

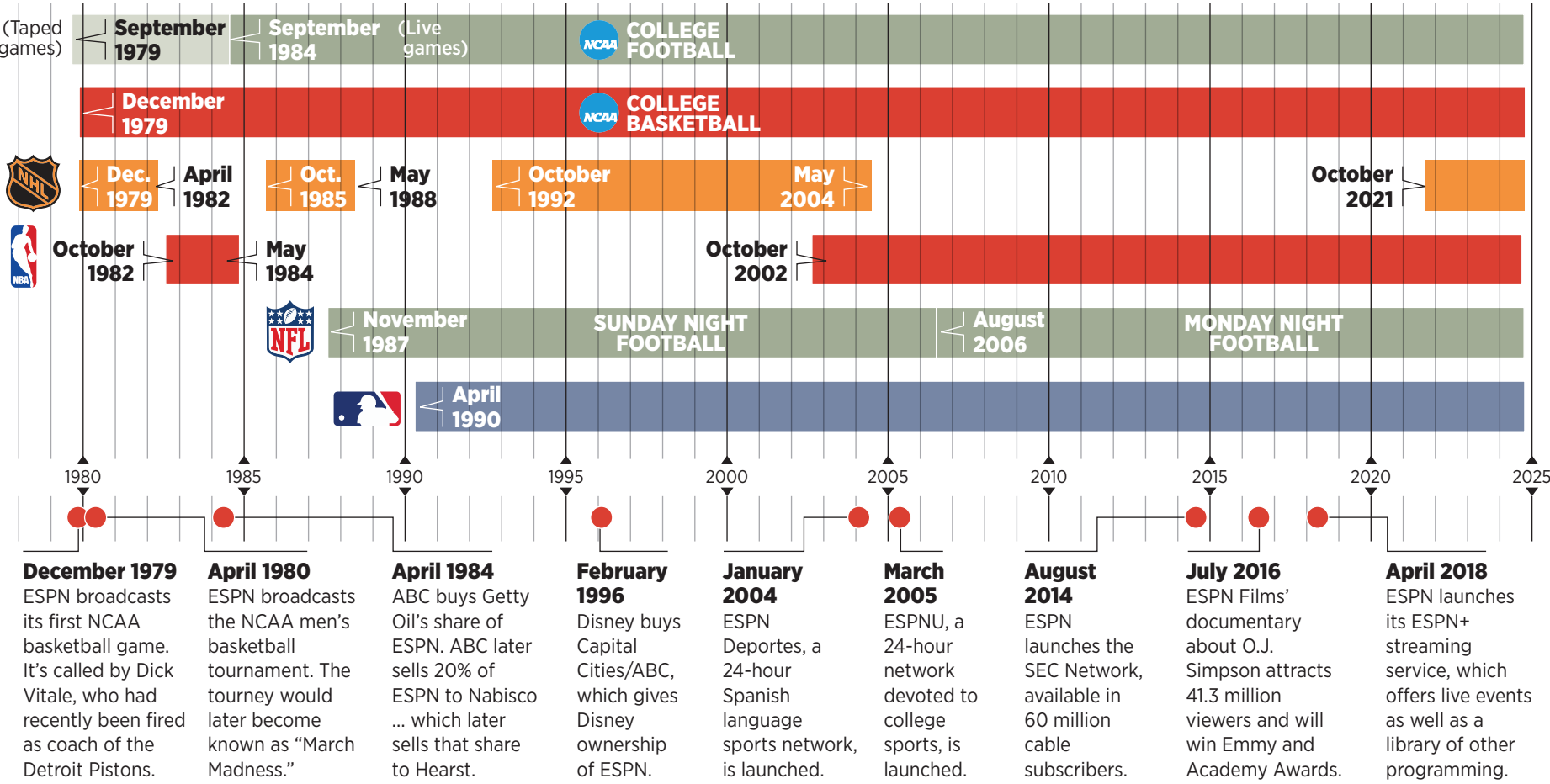
But at 7 p.m. Eastern on Sept. 7, 1979, ESPN went on the air with its first broadcast — the first edition of what would be its daily sports news show, "SportsCenter." Anchor Lee Leonard, who Rasmussen had hired from a New York TV station, introduced the network.

"If you're a fan ... If you're a fan ..." Leonard said, "what you see in the next minutes, hours and days to follow may convince you: You've gone to *sports heaven*."

That first broadcast was rather plain. Only later did Rasmussen's team come up with the idea of using video clips of various game highlights. Later still would come major deals with the NCAA and professional sports leagues for live coverage and key hires such as Chris Berman, Dick Vitale and Dan Patrick.

The catchy "Dah nuh nuh ... Dah nuh nuh!" SportsCenter theme song wouldn't debut until November 1989.

WHEN MAJOR SPORTS CLIMBED ABOARD ESPN



ESPN BY THE NUMBERS

