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## Canada set for a new TV routine

New NHL partners bring big changes, bit of fan anxiety

By **John Ourand**, Staff Writer

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When Rogers executive Scott Moore met with a group of Canadian broadcasters in mid-September, he showed them an internal marketing plan around the launch of the NHL season.

Tucked within a broader marketing plan were seven pages devoted solely to editorial initiatives — everything from a piece in the Rogers-owned “Today’s Parent” magazine on picking out the right hockey equipment for kids to a photo spread in the Rogers-owned “Hello” magazine on the league’s most eligible bachelors.

This represents just one small part of a multi-pronged marketing approach Rogers is using to alert Canadian hockey fans that the way they historically have watched the NHL on TV is about to undergo its most significant changes in 57 years.



NHL on Sportsnet host George Stroumboulopoulos and the Maple Leafs' Phil Kessel are featured in Sportnet's brand campaign.

Photo by: Rogers

Last November, Rogers outbid public broadcaster CBC for the league's media rights in a 12-year, \$5.2 billion deal, effectively cutting CBC out of the NHL business for the first time since the 1950s. CBC still will carry games, but they will be produced and sold by Rogers, which has spent the past 10 months launching a bevy of sports channels under the Sportsnet brand and announcing plans to put more games on TV than ever before.

TVA, the French-language broadcaster in Quebec that licensed the NHL's French-language rights for a reported \$120 million per year, has taken a similar approach, putting NHL players on shows such as “Le Banquier” — TVA's version of “Deal or No Deal”— and “Signé M,” a

cooking show. Like Rogers, TVA's owner, Quebecor, has several media holdings and, for example, has plans to use its NHL talent and some players as guest columnists in its newspapers Le Journal de Montreal and Le Journal de Quebec.

The main purpose for Rogers' and TVA's extensive marketing campaigns is to let Canadian hockey fans know about the changes before the season even starts.

So far, it's not clear that the messages have gotten through. While many Canadian fans are aware that Rogers now owns the league's national rights, they still do not know what the on-screen changes will look like.

Take Marco Evangelista, a 38-year-old fan of the Canadiens, who lives outside of Montreal. While he said he hasn't noticed Rogers' or TVA's marketing pushes yet, he knows he eventually will have to upgrade his cable service to be able to access all of the games. "We're just going to have to change our routine a little bit," he said. "NBC has had a superior NHL package to ours for years, so I'm anxious to see what Rogers is going to do with it."

Some of Evangelista's anxiety centers on persistent rumors about how TVA will handle its games. It's long been rumored that the Canadiens' games eventually will be available only on pay-per-view — though company executives say such a move is not being planned. "I would say that's my biggest worry," Evangelista said.

Across the country is Matt Barkoff, a 44-year-old Canucks fan who grew up and still lives in the Vancouver area.

Barkoff liked the coverage provided by TSN — "the Canadian ESPN," he called it — and is wary about how Rogers will produce the games. Rogers' Sportsnet picked up the Canucks' local rights, cutting TSN out of the Vancouver market.

TSN now does not have a national NHL package, though it has picked up some regional ones.

Barkoff also said he hasn't noticed much of the marketing around the start of the season, adding that he is taking a wait-and-see approach to how Rogers presents the sport that he loves, though he predicted that his viewing habits will be hard to break.

"I'm still going to get all my non-game programming from TSN because I like their reporters and trust their information," Barkoff said. "There's always a question about how coverage is going to change with Rogers."

Hockey fans across Canada are sounding similar concerns about Sportsnet, which has had 10 months to build up a hockey production unit capable of handling such a busy schedule of games.

"It will be interesting to see how people develop new habits. It's going to take people time to get used to it," said Bruce Arthur, a sports columnist for the Toronto Star, who appears frequently on Sportsnet rivals TSN and TSN Radio. "They are creating such a big, new universe for hockey, it would seem impossible for it not to have some bumps in the road at the beginning."

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**SCOTT MOORE**  
PRESIDENT, SPORTSNET

Rogers and TVA have heard those concerns and say that they recognize the need to win over the hearts of Canadian fans like Evangelista and Barkoff. Overall, the public seems to be wary of the deal, at least according to some public opinion polls. Earlier this year, nearly half the respondents to an Ekos poll opposed the deal.

“There’s always fear of change,” said Moore, president of Sportsnet and the NHL for Rogers. “When you have a new production entity taking over a game that Canadians feel so strongly about, there’s a certain trepidation about what we’re going to do with it. I think that fear will disappear at about 7:15 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 8. I think they’ll find that the game is in good hands and that it’s improved for them.”

## Programming plans

Industry watchers say the public confusion about the new TV packages should not come as a surprise. Sports media consultant Ed Desser, who has had the Toronto Maple Leafs and Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment as clients, said there’s no U.S. equivalent to the NHL’s move from CBC to Rogers.

“It’s tantamount to ESPN losing the NFL and college football, with both moving over to Fox,” Desser said. “That’s how big a thing this is, and there are all kinds of implications. For example, how does it change programming?”



TVA has used NHL players on various shows to highlight its upcoming NHL coverage.

Photo by: TVA

Rogers and TVA executives are mindful about not changing their game productions too much. “We don’t want to turn this into a laboratory,” said Serge Fortin, vice president of sports for TVA.

But the Rogers and TVA executives are confident that fans will embrace the new TV deals once they realize how many more games will be available. The biggest change occurs on Saturday night, which previously was dominated by CBC’s “Hockey Night in Canada.”

For the past six decades, the CBC game was the only one that Canadians could see on Saturday night; all regional games and digital streams were blacked out. NBC’s

broadcast feed would spill across the border, but not its cable channel, NBC Sports Network, which carries most of the NHL’s games in the United States.

Starting this season, Rogers will show up to five games on Saturday nights — and that doesn’t count all of the other games that night that will be available on digital. Think of the NFL’s Sunday afternoon package, with several games occurring at the same time, and you can see Rogers’ strategy. To get access to all of those games, most Canadian fans will have to subscribe to a higher level of service on, most likely, Rogers’ cable system or Rogers’ mobile platforms.

NHL Chief Operating Officer John Collins pointed to Rogers' Saturday night plans as the most radical change between the league's new and old Canadian media deals.

"Rogers is going to program it based on teams that are going to drive ratings," Collins said. "But they are motivated to tell stories across the entire league. Whatever's news, they are going to program it that way. This sounds like a simple idea and an obvious idea. But that's not the way it happened."

Rogers also bought a Sunday night package and a Wednesday night package for national games. The Sunday package is patterned after the NFL's "Sunday Night Football," which is the top-rated prime-time show in the U.S.

The Sunday night package allows the NHL to put a spotlight on some of its bigger games. The Wednesday night game is patterned after NBC Sports Network's "Rivalry Night." The rivalries could involve Canadian clubs, such as Montreal-Toronto. Or it could involve U.S. clubs such as Philadelphia-Pittsburgh.

TVA is using a similar approach, branding its two-game Saturday night package as "Super Soirée" ("NHL Super Night"). One of those two Saturday night games will include the Montreal Canadiens. TVA is branding "Rivalries" and "Stars" for games that fall elsewhere during the week. Starting in January, it will program a "Fan Night," allowing fans to vote for the game that will be aired.

All of its NHL games will be on a cable channel, called TVA Sports, to which Quebec residents would have to subscribe.

"We want to make sure that people feel comfortable — that they like what they see," Fortin said. "But we want to give it a different take because now there are two broadcasters bringing hockey to Quebec."

With so many games available at the same time across Rogers and TVA, media consultants expect average ratings to drop. But they believe that the TV networks will more than make up for that ratings drop with a viewership increase.

"The total viewership will be higher because there will be more platforms and more opportunities to view," Desser said. "But the average viewership, particularly on Saturday night, will be less because they will split the audience up."

## Pledge for better production

Rogers has taken pains to make sure that the quality of its productions will be high. It built a state-of-the-art studio in Toronto that will house its shoulder programming, Moore said.

"One of the challenges we have in Canada is that all the U.S. network feeds come in here, and everybody sees how well NBC and Fox and CBS do sports," he said. "We get compared to those networks, and we're a market one-tenth the size. Our budgets are not comparable to what U.S. networks can do. We're going to be every bit as slick and competitive and cutting edge as NBC, CBS, ABC and Fox."

Moore said Rogers is viewing the deal as a partnership. It will help grow the game for the NHL; in turn, TV ratings and revenue will increase for the media company. As part of the deal, Rogers sells all of the NHL's national inventory on every platform. Plus, it is the exclusive distributor for Center Ice and GameCenter Live and is set up as the NHL's exclusive telecommunications sponsor in Canada.

While the deal was expensive, it was a no-brainer for Rogers, Moore said, to partner with Canada's most popular sport.

"If people feel better about the Rogers brand because it's associated with the NHL shield, and some of the stars who played the game, then it enhances Rogers' brand perception. That's why people do sponsorships. But this is so much more than just a sponsorship."

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## NHL IN CANADA: REGIONAL TELEVISION AND RADIO RIGHTS

Rogers Communications signed a 12-year, \$5.2 billion deal to carry NHL games on its Sportsnet channels on Saturdays, Sundays and Wednesdays. It sublicensed some Saturday night games to CBC (the former NHL rights holder in Canada) for four years and sublicensed French-language rights to Quebecor, which will carry games on its TVA Sports channels.

Rogers and another former rights holder, TSN, will split the country's regional TV rights. With the expanded national schedules on Sportsnet and TVA, the full regular-season schedules for almost all of the Canadian teams will be on television. For the first time, all Montreal Canadiens regular-season games will be on English-language TV.

### CALGARY FLAMES

**TV rights holder:** Sportsnet, regional package, 50 games

**Radio rights holder:** Sportsnet 960 The Fan, all 82 games

### EDMONTON OILERS

**TV rights holder:** Sportsnet, regional package, 50 games

**Radio rights holder:** Corus Radio, 630 CHED, all 82 games

### MONTREAL CANADIENS

**TV rights holder (English):** Sportsnet, regional package, 42 games

**TV rights holder (French):** RDS, regional package, 60 games

**Radio rights holder (English):** TSN Radio 690, all 82 games

**Radio rights holder (French):** Cogeco, CHMP 98.5 Radio, all 82 games

### OTTAWA SENATORS

**TV rights holder (English):** TSN, regional package, 53 games

**TV rights holder (French):** RDS, regional package, 54 games

**Radio rights holder (English):** TSN Radio 1200, all 82 games

**Radio rights holder (French):** Radio de la communauté francophone d'Ottawa, 94.5 Unique FM, all 82 games

### TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS

**TV rights holder:** Sportsnet and TSN. Sportsnet's regional package includes 16 games; TSN's regional package includes 26 games.

**Radio rights holder:** Sportsnet 590 The Fan, which shares radio rights with TSN Radio. Each broadcaster gets 41 games.

### VANCOUVER CANUCKS

**TV rights holder:** Sportsnet, regional package, 48 games

**Radio rights holder:** TSN 1040, all 82 games

### **WINNIPEG JETS**

**TV rights holder:** TSN regional package, 60 games

**Radio rights holder:** TSN Radio 1290, all 82 games

Source: SportsBusiness Journal research

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