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ESPN is reaching a flashpoint with "Monday Night Football," and how the network approaches the upcoming changes to the program in the coming weeks and months could tell us a lot about its future in the NFL-broadcasting business.

A New York Post report on Friday suggested that ESPN and Fox, which just acquired the rights to the Thursday night NFL package, are in a bidding war over Peyton Manning to join their networks.

On the surface, that suggests that ESPN is following its old battle plans to outbid competitors for the most sought-after talent. Manning could be the big name the network needs not only to replace Jon Gruden but also be the kind of fresh voice that gave CBS a huge bump when it added Tony Romo.

We'll be the first to admit we were a little ambivalent about Romo in the booth, but even with some rough edges, he was a fantastic addition — maybe the most talked-about new color analyst since, well, Gruden when he joined MNF back in 2009.

If ESPN can lure Manning, would he have the same effect? Hard to say. On the one hand, he's a bigger name and likely would come in with a higher Q-Rating than Romo did, given Manning's longer and more successful NFL career and his comedic, charming forays into acting with commercials and "Saturday Night Live," among other shows. Manning appears a natural who could fit in seamlessly.

A few years ago, you might say that ESPN and Manning were a match made in heaven. But now? It's less clear. First off, "Monday Night Football" is no longer the lodestar for NFL broadcasts, and the network infamously has laid off tens of millions of dollars in talent and behind-the-scenes employees over the past few years.

[New York Times  
Fox News to join  
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Viacom merger](#)

They even dialed back in some ways with their “Monday Night Countdown” show, broadcasting more than once from the studio as opposed to on the road at the site of the game. Call it experimentation if you will, but it’s hard not to view that as much more than finding ways to trim from the operating budget.

It’s possible that we are seeing ESPN’s fork in the road here with Manning. He’s not, of course, going to signal the end of the network if Fox nabs him. That’s a foolish premise. But even against Fox’s deep pockets, ESPN seldom got outbid for someone they wanted in the past. Look no further than the network shelling out to Chip Kelly last May in the middle of its biggest talent bloodletting that saw several big-name (especially NFL) announcers let go.

But ESPN can go one of two ways here as we approach 2021 — the year in which their current “Monday Night Football” rights expire. It can go all in with its big productions such as MNF and spare no expense in an effort to outmuscle its competitors. Or it can dial back and creep toward backsliding out of the pricy NFL business.

At an annual cost of about \$2 billion, MNF is a breathtakingly expensive endeavor. But it also is — and has proven to be — the most popular sport and the most surefire way to generate advertising revenue. Other sports might be gaining in some ways, but they’re mere ankle biters until proven otherwise.

Imagine an “OMAHA!” segment with Manning. Picture a humorous mix of Manning’s quick wit combined with his voluminous football knowledge. You can see why he’s considered such a valuable commodity. He’s an instant story and revenue generator.

But don’t think for a minute that ESPN couldn’t go the other way and let those rights pass. In a revealing Hollywood Reporter column from last October, writer James Andrew Miller — who wrote a bestselling book on the network and continues to be as dialed into its inner workings as anyone in mainstream media — noted that ESPN pulled off the “judo move” of being allowed to avoid having “specific contract language that requires the cable giant to have NFL games in order to earn its lofty (and industry-envied) subscriber fees, currently more than \$7 per household.”

In shorthand: ESPN doesn’t need the NFL, even if largely dropping it in time would anger distributors and send more viewers to other networks. But the point is that it’s not at all inconceivable for ESPN to punt on an almost unwieldy broadcast schedule that might net four or five truly marquee, must-see games per season.

Of course, Manning also might say “thanks but no thanks” to both Fox and ESPN. According to the Post story, he has his eyes on a different role in football — something similar to the executive vice president role that John Elway holds with the Denver Broncos — and might not be in the broadcasting game long, if at all. To Manning’s credit, he apparently won’t accept an analyst’s gig, even if it might be terribly lucrative, unless he’s all in on it. Eyeing a front-office gig wouldn’t be too different from the annual flirtation Gruden had with the league before returning to coach the Oakland Raiders, and some might say that annual will-he-won’t-he speculation upped his star power and desirability.

But still, it appears that Manning wants to choose a career for the long haul, not just find some work to stay busy. He might be the white whale of broadcasting, but the allure of running a team could keep him out of the TV seas. If Manning did go to ESPN, it would be a big deal. It would show they’re still investing in the league three years before the MNF contract expires.

On the other hand, if Manning passes on an ESPN offer, it’s not as if it’s curtains for the network. But it certainly could tell us a bit about their future in the pro-football-broadcasting business. If they go all in for him, it might be a big push to reassert itself as a giant in the industry. And if they pass, it could be an indication that their priorities have changed.

But if ESPN did give up the MNF rights, it’s doubtful that \$2 billion annual cost would be reallocated dollar for dollar elsewhere. That’s the bottom line right there. Buying in or passing on one announcer won’t tip the network’s hand for the future, but it could be a precursor to big changes in time. - *Pro Football Weekly*



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