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RATINGS GAME

Neo remains optimistic on cricket ads

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After the Champions Trophy cricket tournament came the Champions League Twenty20 (T20) tournament and now the India-Australia series, the Hero Honda Cup, that started on Sunday. This time around, the action is on Neo Cricket, a part of Neo Sports Broadcast Pvt. Ltd. The channel's six-month long season of non-stop cricket has just kicked off.

Recent viewership ratings for cricket, however, have not been

good. The Sri Lanka tri-nation series in September on Ten Sports brought in average television rating points of 2.28%, according to ratings firm TAM Media Research Pvt. Ltd. Champions Trophy clocked an average 1.1% and Champions League, 0.7% in the first couple of weeks.

But Neo Cricket is optimistic as advertiser support for cricket remains high. For the Australia-India one-day international series, Neo Cricket has al-

ready has eight sponsors, including Hero Honda Motors Ltd, Tata Docomo, Gillette India Ltd and Hewlett-Packard Co.

Ad spots are selling at an average Rs2.5 lakh for 10 seconds and 80% of the inventory has been sold, according to Neo Cricket.

"For viewers in India, especially the large cricket fan who is always supporting (the) home team, there are six months of fantastic bilateral nations format cricket

happening," said Yannick Colaco, chief operating officer (COO), Nimbus Communications Ltd, which owns Neo Sports and Neo Cricket. "The viewership ratings should be really high."

Nandini Dias, COO at media buying agency Lodestar Universal Pvt. Ltd, said the general high interest in an Australia-India game itself will bring in the ratings, along with the fact that all the matches will have India playing. "You have to watch it whether we win or lose. I am predicting ratings between 4% and 5%, and no programme in Indian TV is getting

that kind of ratings."

Nimbus has another reason to celebrate. With the end of this season comes the end of the Rs2,400 crore, four-year broadcast deal that Nimbus struck with the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) in 2006.

Last week, the broadcaster exercised its first right of refusal and renewed its contract for Rs2,000 crore, till 2014. This deal will cover a minimum of nine tours by international teams and at least 320 days of domestic cricket.

But with no fixed future tours programme, unlike when the first deal was struck, the big question being raised is whether placing such big money on an unclear programme is too much of a risk.

Nimbus said there is already a draft in place for the cricket sched-

ule till 2014, which has been tabled and discussed, to be finalized by the International Cricket Council. "We've got enough comfort from the relationship with the BCCI for the past three years. They have given us a decent valuation and a sense of what the events are going to be. We've got decent comfort and protection to be able to justify that risk," said Colaco.

Another risk for Nimbus may be the rising popularity of T20 cricket. The firm said it is not an issue. The opening match in Vadodara on Sunday between Australia and India brought ratings of 3.5%, according to Audience Measurement and Analytics Ltd, during the most exciting part of the match, which may have boosted Nimbus' confidence.

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