

Neo Sports Confident of Maintaining Strong Cricket Broadcasting Position in India Sport Cal

India's Neo Sports Broadcast Pvt. Ltd, a subsidiary of Nimbus Communications, the international sports agency, has said that it is unconcerned by the newly-heightened competition for cricket broadcast rights in the country, and remains confident that it can maintain its market-leading position.

Neo owns and operates two channels, Neo Sports and Neo Cricket, the world's first dedicated cricket channel.

However, in early August, Zee Entertainment Enterprises, the rival Indian media group that operates Ten Sports, rolled out Ten Cricket, another channel solely dedicated to India's favourite sport. Ten Cricket launched with live coverage of a one-day international tri-series in Sri Lanka involving the hosts, India and New Zealand.

Speaking exclusively to Sportcal, Prasana Krishnan, chief operating officer of Neo Sports Broadcast, claimed that his firm does not feel threatened by Zee's move, and is well-placed to excel in a competitive environment.

He said: Neo Cricket draws its strength from the volume of Indian cricket that we showcase. It has been ranked the number-one channel by viewership in India for two years in a row and we are certain that we will be able to maintain this domination in future also, particularly given the long-term rights agreements we have in place now for premium content like the Board of Control for Cricket in India deal and the Asia Cup.

The extended deal struck between Nimbus and the BCCI, worth Rs20 billion (\$450 million), began in April and covers all international and domestic matches played in India until March 2014. In all, a minimum of 64 international matches and 312 days of domestic cricket will be shown over the length of the contract.

In April, Nimbus was also chosen to market the commercial rights and secure broadcasters for three editions of the Asia Cup, the biennial one-day international competition involving the leading teams from the continent, running to 2014.

Krishnan said that the networks position is also strengthened by the number of distribution partners it has signed.

Neo recently joined TheOneAlliance bouquet, the distribution company of Sony-owned subsidiary Multi Screen Media and Discovery Communications India, which also includes the SET Max channel, the home of cricket's Indian Premier League.

The deal involves MSM Discovery distributing both Neo Cricket and Neo Sports on

cable systems across India, with Neo continuing to distribute the channels on direct-to-home platforms.

Neo also has nine international distribution partners covering large parts of the Middle East, North Africa and Asia Pacific.

Krishnan said These really help us to expand our geographic footprint, and we have plans to enter more territories internationally through widening our distribution net

As well as expanding territorially, Neo said that it is also increasingly looking to broaden its range of sporting output.

India's soccer audience is growing in a big way, Krishnan noted, with interest reaching beyond just the large states and major cities and into the regions. Neo Sports holds the rights to televise Germany's top-tier Bundesliga and Italy's Serie A.

Golf US PGA Tour is also broadcast on Neo Sports, and viewer numbers have been steadily increasing.

That interest is set to escalate following Arjun Atwal's victory at the Wyndham Championship in North Carolina in August, which saw him become India's first ever winner on the tour.

In his victory press conference Atwal said: I'm pretty sure it's going to be huge back home. My in-laws called my wife and said the coverage was just unreal with me leading.

Krishnan told Sportcal that two other sports were also making a surge up Neo's ratings, as India's sportsmen and sportswomen enjoy success around the world.

He said: Saina Nehwal has ensured badminton makes a strong presence in the daily schedule of sports fans, while Narain Karthikeyan's exploits in Nascar has led to interest in this sport.

Nehwal is ranked third in the world by the Badminton World Federation, while Karthikeyan is the first Indian-born driver to compete in US stock car racing Nascar.

Krishnan added: We are always on the look out for acquiring new sports properties which appeal to our audiences. At the moment we have a strong programme that suits our audience