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[20443001]

The Oakland Athletics' four-game sweep over the San Francisco Giants in the World Series may widen already-sizeable losses that the ABC network will incur on the current, final year of its baseball contract.

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The first three games were seen by an average of only 17 % of U.S. homes, a sharp decline from the 23.7 % rating for last year's Series.

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A final ratings tally from A.C. Nielsen Co. is due today.

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The network had been expected to have losses of as much as \$ 20 million on baseball this year.

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It is n't clear how much those losses may widen because of the short Series.

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ABC had based its budget for baseball on a six-game Series.

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A network spokesman would n't comment, and ABC Sports officials declined to be interviewed.

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But some industry executives said ABC, in anticipation of a four-game sweep, limited its losses by jacking up the number of commercials it aired in the third and fourth games.

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A World Series telecast typically carries 56 30-second commercials, but by the fourth game ABC was cramming in 60 to 62 ads to generate extra revenue.

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ABC's baseball experience may be of interest to CBS Inc., which next season takes over the broadcasting of all baseball playoffs in a four-year television contract priced at \$ 1.06 billion.

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CBS Sports President Neal Pilson has conceded only that CBS will have a loss in the first year.

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But other industry executives contend the losses could reach \$ 250 million over four years and could go even higher if the World Series end in four-game romps.

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ABC's hurdle was even higher this year with two teams from the same area.

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Then came the earthquake and a damaging delay of 11 days.

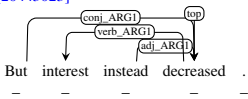
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Some people had hoped ABC's ratings would go up because of the intense focus on the event in the aftermath of the earthquake.

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An analyst's opinion to that effect even sent Capital Cities/ABC shares soaring two weeks ago.

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