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ADVERTISING / By JOANNE LIPMAN

Fox Intercepts Viewers From CBS With Super-Bowl Halftime Party

The real "Big Game" Sunday wasn't the lopsided contest played out by the Washington Redskins and the Buffalo Bills. It was the far more hotly contested battle for halftime viewers, fought tooth and nail by CBS and Fox Broadcasting.

And with the early returns in, score one for News Corp.'s Fox.

Fox this year took the novel approach of "ambushing" CBS's Super Bowl halftime by offering up a live, version of "In Living Color," its proud-to-be-tasteless comedy show. Heavily promoted by both Fox and sponsor Frito-Lay, the Fox show made an impressive debut: It snared more than a quarter of viewers watching television, and CBS's ratings plunged by 22% during that time, according to preliminary A.C. Nielsen figures.

"Extraordinarily successful," raved a Fox spokeswoman yesterday. Fox executives are already talking about repeating the ambush, next year. "We'll spend the year trying to top this year's successful show," the spokeswoman said.

The Fox-show, "Doritos Zaptime / The In Living Color Super Halftime 'Party,'" poked merciless fun at football with often juvenile humor. But the real target of the jokes may as well have been CBS.

CBS, which charged advertisers more than \$900,000 for 30 seconds during the game, had hoped to sell time during its own halftime show, a songfest with a "winter wonderland" theme. But those hopes were dashed after Fox announced its counterattack. "There was normal [advertiser] resistance to halftime, and that increased when the Fox counter programming strategy was made known," says David Poltrack, a CBS senior vice president.

CBS didn't sell out its ad time until late last week, and to do so it ended up having to promise advertisers their spots wouldn't air at all during halftime. Instead, it aired some local ads and promotions for its own shows. That hurt the network: In the 25 top markets

representing almost half of the nation's homes, more than four million households turned away from CBS during halftime, missing plugs for the network's lineup.

CBS executives, not surprisingly, are quick to belittle Fox's gains and pronounce this year's Super Bowl showing a resounding success. Executives proudly point to healthy ratings overall despite the lack of drama in the game.

For the 25 markets, Nielsen reported that 40.3% of homes with TV sets were tuned to CBS during the game, and 61% of all of the night's TV Viewers were watching the Super Bowl. Fox's showing, by contrast, didn't even match up to ratings of CBS's broadcast last Sunday of "Murder, She Wrote," Mr. Poltrack notes.

Still Fox clearly gained millions of viewers at CBS's expense. Preliminary figures show that in the half-hour before halftime, 42.8% of homes with TV sets were tuned to CBS, and 65% of all viewers watching TV were watching the Super Bowl. But at 8 p.m. EST, during halftime, those figures shrank to 33.4% and 49%, respectively, -a loss of 4.1 million viewers.

Fox, meanwhile, tripled its ratings during its halftime show, with 18.2% of homes with TV sets tuned to "Living Color" and a 27% share of all viewers.

Part Of CBS's problem no doubt, was its misfortune to air one of the least interesting games in Super Bowl history. The Redskins led 17-0 going into halftime, and scored again at the top of the third quarter. When national ratings are released today, Super Bowl XXVI is likely to have an unimpressive showing compared with previous Super Bowls. (Last year on ABC, 41.9% of homes with TV sets watched the Super Bowl and 63% of viewers were tuned to the Big Game).

Fox also made big inroads with a combination of hype, self-promotion and a willing sponsor in Frito-Lay's Doritos. Frito-Lay first brought the concept to Fox after being sold on it by the concept's creator, New York-based Entertainment Marketing & Communications International.

Fox, in turn, used the rest of its lineup to endlessly tout the Super Bowl special. Last week's episode of Fox's biggest hit, "The Simpsons," made fun of typical Super Bowl halftime fare. Frito-Lay also promoted the show heavily, tying it to a \$1million sweepstakes; it even got "In Living Color's" dancers, the "Fly Girls," to announce the sweepstakes winner during the show.

While each of the three major networks pretends the others don't exist, FOX takes pride in tweaking its bigger rivals by name. It even encouraged viewers to turn back to CBS at the end of the halftime show, with a countdown clock in one corner of the screen.

Still, Fox's ambush idea isn't for everybody. The program, with its young cast gleefully defying censors, reveled in bad taste. Its "Homeboyz Shopping Network" skit featured a

gagged Redskins quarterback Mark Rypien stuffed into a locker, as well as a big jar of "NFL vitamins" labeled "steroids."

"I think they strained the envelope. The content of the show was a little much," says Joel Segal, an executive vice president of McCann-Erickson whose USAir and General Motors clients advertised during the game but not the Fox show. While Mr. Segal likes the idea of the show, he says, "for certain clients, we would recommend against it."

Frito-Lay, though, says it received only two calls yesterday complaining about the racy show. "People around here are three feet off the floor it was beyond our wildest expectations," a spokesman said. "It validates the idea that alternative entertainment at halftime is an idea whose time has come."