

Two Views of ESPN

I. "There Seems to Be No End in Sight"

by Richard Crepeau

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

When the history of Sport in America is written several decades into the twenty-first century, ESPN may well be regarded as the most important development of the twentieth century.

Do you remember sport on television before ESPN? Living in Central Florida before the coming of ESPN, sport on television was severely limited: A few network college football games, a few NFL games on the weekend, an occasional Braves game on TV, and the Baseball Game of the Week (although even that was not every week). College basketball was there on Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. The National Hockey League did not exist on TV. The NBA, when it could be found at all, was mostly on tape delay after midnight-and that included playoff games.

I remember the first ESPN telecasts on our cable system, which came shortly after the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network went on the air. It was a wonder and a marvel. My son and I watched in disbelief; then I boldly predicted that it probably would fail to find a sufficient audience, because there were too few people out there as crazy as us. I was wrong. There were millions of sport lunatics who seemingly would watch anything, and do so at all hours of the day and night.

The centerpiece of ESPN in the early days was sport news and video highlights. Throughout most of the country, local news, weather, and sport telecasts at six and eleven offered very little in the way of sport coverage; what little there was, was universally bad. This remains one key to ESPN's success. It offered national coverage of many sports, delivered with highlights by people who actually seemed to understand and care about the games they covered. There were sometimes interviews, some live, with your heroes and mine.

Who would have believed that now I could watch University of Minnesota football games on tape delay on Tuesday or Wednesday morning? Who would believe that you

could get full game reports on West Coast baseball from the previous night? Indeed, re-broadcast of the 2 AM *SportsCenter* became a must with breakfast: All I needed to know in thirty minutes with my Pop Tarts and coffee. Chris Berman became the sports guru of the breakfast table as he brought humor and irreverence to the world of sport and not simply with his nicknames. The Swami was born there. Paul Maguire, who now haunts the NFL telecasts, built his broadcasting career at ESPN with Berman, Terry Hanratty, and some guy named Austin who ran a sports-book in Vegas. They picked the NFL games each week, and did so against the spread. One week Berman got all of them right and received a citation from the Vegas gamblers for his brilliance. The beauty of this show was that these guys didn't treat the NFL like the Vatican, or Pete Rozelle like the Pope.

There was, of course a lot of junk and endless reruns to fill those 24 hours each day, and some of it even created cult followings—such as that which grew up around Australian Rules Football. Slowly ESPN was building its programming: Hockey, baseball, college basketball, the early rounds of March Madness, tennis, horse racing, motor sport galore, skiing, skating, gymnastics, and many more. Then there was the stroke of genius that turned a non-event like the NFL draft into a cult gathering of the football maniacs. Later there would be live college football, the NFL, and Major League Baseball.

Another change, although perhaps not as great a change as some would prefer, was an increase in the number of women's sports and sporting events being covered. ESPN contracts with the NCAA required some inclusion of women's sport; women's basketball and field hockey began appearing with some frequency, with women's soccer emerging a bit later. Women's tennis and golf events not being shown by the networks were often to be found on ESPN. In the 1980s there was a weekly program devoted to women's sports, which gave an award to the Woman Athlete of the Year. The 1985 winner was Michelle Akers. Women as talking heads on *SportsCenter* introduced much of the nation to the idea that a woman could anchor a sports report, and the use of women on the field as reporters was not unusual on ESPN. More recently, women have appeared regularly as analysts for such macho events as the NFL and the NBA; this has not resulted in the end of the world. Although one could argue that ESPN could do much more in this area, the fact that women in the locker room and women as reporters has become a non-issue has something to do with the policies of ESPN.

Success, as it always does, brought with it imitation. The networks were forced to cover more sport; other cable stations expanded their programming as it became apparent that the public thirst for televised sport had no saturation point; indeed, other twenty-four hour sports stations of both a national and regional character appeared. The superstations arrived bearing first the Braves and Hawks, Cubs and Bulls, with others to follow. As time passed there was more and more live coverage on ESPN. Players became more accessible, although that had both good and bad sides. Through it all the money kept increasing as television seemed to have an insatiable appetite for more sport programming, and sponsors seemed willing to pay any price for exposure to this demographic cohort. At times televised sport seemed to be awash in beer and cars, but of course there were many more sponsors with deep pockets. Now it is a rare event that does *not* find its way onto television. Only college hockey has failed to find a national niche, although regional cable stations carry this wonderful sport. ESPN itself has multiplied its outlets like some kind of

electronic rabbit and now operates internationally in many languages. There has been the birth of ESPN2, ESPNNews, and ESPNClassic, as well as ESPN Radio and ESPN.com. The mania for sport that came out of these developments fueled the massive growth of sportstalk radio at both the local and national level. This has had a mostly negative impact on the relationships between the fans and players, as well as the fans and managers, owners, agents, and one another.

Television is producing its own sporting events, while entertainment conglomerates are buying teams and players to fill television programming slots. The FOX empire of Ruppert Murdoch threatens to totally restructure the sports business. Disney has purchased ESPN and ABC, and has used them as outlets for its sporting events and teams. The interlocking directorates centered on television, especially cable television, are growing on a daily basis, and the growth can only portend more change in sport.

Players are now entertainers. Games are programming. The money is creating millionaires who cannot remember who they are, if they ever knew. The result is a growing gulf between players and fans who no longer inhabit the same universe, and that has produced a sense of alienation and occasional hostility. The gulf has been further widened by players being pressed to comment on anything and everything. At times this leads to the exposure of the player's ignorance, or even insults to large groups of people at a single sweep of the tongue. In either case the public is not enamored of the notion that "someone like this" is a millionaire simply because they can play a game.

There seems to be no end in sight. The NBA understood the significance of cable sport to its marketing effort, and the NHL has tried to replicate that success. Overseas marketing via cable television has internationalized both leagues and team merchandise sales. All this exposure diminishes the size of everyone involved in sport. Babe Ruth was larger than life in part because he was seldom seen or heard. His garbled syntax and excessive profanity were not on full display. His crudity was hidden, his whoring and drinking only whispered about by insiders. One wonders the impact that round the clock public exposure would have had on the public persona of Babe Ruth. One wonders what kind of coverage there would have been of Ruth's automobile accident, in which The Babe was accompanied by an underage girl.

The infusion into sport of money flowing from television has exacerbated the labor-management relationship. The necessity of agents arises from this, as does the entire sports marketing field. One might think that with this massive increase in money there would be a corresponding willingness to share the largesse. Instead, each party to the games wants more and more, under the guise of asking only for their fair share. Sport has become as much about economics, the law, and the courts as it is about what happens in the arena or on the playing field.

Indeed, sport has dramatically changed with the growth of ESPN, the catalyst born in Bristol, Connecticut, some twenty years ago. As competitors have appeared and as ESPN has become a member of the Disney Empire, it too has changed. The willingness to challenge the establishment has waned, while the awareness of the entertainment component, the 'E' of ESPN, has been more acutely evident. Success does bring change, and we will see where that will lead over the next twenty years. For now, roll the videotape highlights.