

Introduction

ABC SPORTS AND NETWORK SPORTS TELEVISION

IN SEPTEMBER 1994, *Sports Illustrated* published a list of the forty most influential sports figures in the forty years since the magazine's launch. Its top two selections—Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan—were no great surprise. At the height of their respective careers, Ali and Jordan were arguably the most recognizable people on Earth. *Sports Illustrated*'s third-ranked selection—the American Broadcasting Company's sports television mastermind Boone Arledge—was comparatively obscure. Arledge never fronted for global ad campaigns, had a shoe line, or divided a nation with his politics. But the magazine might have underestimated the influence of this producer and executive. During Arledge's thirty-eight-year stint at the network, ABC built and codified the media infrastructure that made possible global sport celebrities of Ali and Jordan's unprecedented magnitude.

ABC Sports is behind some of network sports television's most significant practices, personalities, and moments. It created the weekend anthology *Wide World of Sports*, transformed professional football into a prime-time spectacle with *Monday Night Football*, and fashioned the Olympics into a mega media event. It helped to turn Ali, the sportscaster Howard Cosell, and the daredevil Evel Knievel into stars and captured now-iconic instances that include Tommie Smith and John Carlos's raised-fist protest at the 1968 Olympics, the terrorist attacks at the 1972 Munich Games, Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs's 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match, the US hockey team's 1980 "Miracle on Ice" victory over the Soviet Union, and the 1999 Women's World Cup final. *ABC Sports: The Rise and Fall of Network Sports Television* offers a cultural and institutional history of ABC Sports from its beginnings to its 2006 rebranding as "ESPN on ABC." It uses the division to examine network sports television's development in the United States; the

aesthetic, cultural, political, and industrial practices that mark it; and the changes it endured along with the new sports media environment it spawned.

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Sports drove TV's ascendance into a commonplace appliance after World War II. By 1947 the trade publication *Variety* was hailing live sports as the new medium's "greatest contribution."¹ But TV confronted widespread resistance among many in the sports industry who believed it would decimate ticket sales—anxieties radio and print also faced when they emerged. A 1952 report commissioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) concluded that television had an "adverse effect on college football attendance." That same year, the Radio-Television Manufacturers Association—a group devoted to boosting the medium—trumpeted TV as "a constructive force" that "helps to stimulate new interest" in sports and that "promotes while it entertains."²

Despite the NCAA's reluctance, college football was popular enough to endure—and ultimately benefit from—television. But less prominent sports did suffer. Minor-league baseball attendance sunk by 30 percent during the 1950s, and the *New Yorker's* A.J. Liebling blamed TV for eviscerating his beloved boxing: "The clients of the television companies, by putting on a free boxing show almost every night of the week, have knocked out of business the hundreds of small-city and neighborhood boxing clubs where youngsters had a chance to learn their trade and journeymen to mature their skills. . . . Neither advertising agencies nor brewers, least of all the networks, give a hoot if they push the Sweet Science back into a period of genre painting. When it is in a coma they will find some other way to peddle their peanuts."³

Beyond television's impact on boxing's viability and quality, Liebling charged that TV broadcasts dulled the rich social experience of attending matches in crowded, smoky clubs. "Television gives you so plausible an adumbration of a fight, for nothing," he wrote, "that you feel it would be extravagant to pay your way in. It is like the potato, which is only a succedaneum for something decent to eat but which, once introduced to Ireland, proved so cheap that the peasants gave up their grain-and-meat diet in favor of it."⁴ TV, as Liebling saw it, sapped live boxing's humanity. Regardless, television established itself as the United States' dominant mass medium by the end of the 1950s. Accordingly, it became a permanent fixture in sports and a necessary ingredient in sports organizations' financial health.

The youngest of the United States' three major networks, ABC ranked a distant last among them in the 1950s. It used sports to build a distinct image and attract a steady audience. The network initially contracted its sports programming to Edgar Scherick's Sports Programs Inc. The subcontractor then hired Arledge—who had never before worked in sports—to produce ABC's autumn 1960 slate of college football broadcasts. The rookie producer made up for his greenness with ambition and confidence. He audaciously proclaimed that ABC would revolutionize the staid representational method guiding sports TV. It would "take viewers to the game" and provide what the network eventually branded as an "up close and personal" view of events and participants through innovations that borrowed from documentary, journalism, and even drama. As Arledge decreed, "We are going to add show business to sports!"⁵

Arledge aspired to capture the vitality Liebling accused the medium of depleting. ABC Sports broadcasts privileged building stories over displaying events and assumed viewers might watch the tales it packaged no matter their interest in sports. It humanized competitions by presenting them through familiar narratives (rivalries, records about to be broken, battles against the elements) and by making their participants relatable. These often-simplistic tropes—such as the pregame profile of an athlete desperately yearning to bounce back after an injury—quickly became clichés. As such, they are easy to discount as commercialized pandering. But they function through engaging the cultural codes that make TV so important. "In order for television to achieve its work," writes media scholar Herman Gray, "it has to draw upon and operate on the basis of a kind of generalized societal common sense about the terms of the society and people's location in it."⁶ This common sense, of course, reflects existing power relations. Like all mass media, then, television has tremendous potential to reinforce and reshape culture. Arguably the medium's most visible, durable, and valuable genre, sports TV is a key voice in the culture industries. It flexes this clout as much through the resonant stories it tells—and the ways of looking at the world they create—as through the events and people it exhibits.

ABC Sports expanded sports television's previously narrow aesthetic scope into the realm of cinematic storytelling. It also looked beyond the genre's traditionally rose-tinted promotional ethos to report on the sometimes-divisive social issues—many of which its sponsors and clients would have preferred that it overlook—informing and surrounding the competitions it covered, such as the Cold War tensions that marked international

events and the discrimination faced by female and nonwhite athletes. These controversies made compelling narratives that lent ABC's coverage drama and newsworthiness. ABC Sports, in fact, boldly denied broadcast partners influence over its content or personnel—a unique policy at the time that gave the network greater creative and editorial leeway than its more docile competitors. Apart from sporadic commentaries by on-air columnists like Cosell, ABC Sports remained neutral on the more prickly issues it reported. It both allowed Ali to express his dissident point of view on *Wide World of Sports* and made space for Ronald Reagan to recite jingoistic platitudes during its 1984 Summer Olympics coverage. But ABC Sports provided a forum that raised important questions about sport's sociopolitical contours while demonstrating the crucial role media play in showcasing, fortifying, and questioning them.

Network television was particularly potent when ABC Sports emerged and thrived. Between the 1960s and 1980s, ABC Sports' regular Saturday afternoon programming—from football to bowling—drew total audience numbers that rival those for the most popular programs in the fragmented, digitized, and multiplatform media environment that has replaced the network era. Not coincidentally, many of the twentieth century's marquee sporting moments appeared via ABC airwaves and gained their status through the expansive visibility and distinctive shape ABC Sports gave them. Besides reflecting Arledge's creative approach, these representations and the cultural work they performed grew out of ABC's efforts to create a brand, compete for market share, and promote content—industrial priorities that extend beyond the network's involvement in sports. Both ABC Sports' history and the larger story of network sports television emerge from these intersecting aesthetic, cultural, and economic concerns.

Media studies scholarship has painstakingly detailed television's profound cultural power and the historical, political, industrial, institutional, and technological contexts that inform it. However, and surprisingly, this robust body of work pays only scant attention to sports television, one of the medium's most popular genres. Sports television is—unfortunately and short-sightedly—an intellectually suspicious section of a medium that is already traditionally dismissed as a “bad object” of scholarly inquiry.⁷ Despite its evidently questionable cultural status, sports television informed and, in some cases directly shaped, television programs and practices that have attracted substantial scholarly treatment—scrutiny that can be enriched by the lessons sports TV teaches. Similarly, scholarship on sport culture and

history typically gives television only superficial consideration despite its crucial role in showcasing and shaping sport. When this work does comment on TV, it tends only to offer textual analyses of productions and largely ignores the industrial, institutional, and technological circumstances that make possible those ideologically loaded productions. These traditional approaches to studying television and sports, in short, miss a lot. But they can accomplish a lot when brought together. This book uses ABC Sports to demonstrate sport's vital role in shaping what television does, and television's crucial part in impacting what sport does. It unites these intertwined but rarely conjoined areas of study and demonstrates the fruits their articulation can yield—benefits that span far beyond this study's scope.

This project offers a mostly chronological account of ABC Sports through a vast collection of archival sources, programming and marketing materials, popular and trade press commentary, and interviews with those who worked at and with the organization. It begins by examining the economic, industrial, and institutional circumstances that prompted ABC to invest heavily in sports during the late 1950s and charge Arledge with overseeing this programming. Chapter 2 turns to *Wide World of Sports*, ABC Sports' signature show and the primary testing ground for its creative approach. The Saturday afternoon anthology possessed a meager budget that permitted it to secure rights to televise only the most marginal sports. Ski jumping and demolition derbies, for instance, were commonplace during its early years. The Cold War provided a way to dramatize many of *Wide World's* prerecorded and otherwise unpopular events. The program established its popularity and culled much-needed acclaim through carrying a series of track meets between the United States and the Soviet Union that at once emphasized sports television's capacity to cultivate international harmony and advertised ABC Sports as innovative and edifying.

Chapter 3 discusses how ABC adapted *Wide World* to cover the Olympics. *Wide World* offered year-round promotion for the athletes who would eventually compete in the Olympics, while the high-profile quadrennial event built interest in *Wide World's* weekly installments. *Wide World* introduced two of its biggest stars—Ali and Cosell—between ABC's first Olympics in 1964 and 1968, when it began to cover the event consistently and bill itself as “the Network of the Olympics.” The duo's many appearances capitalized on Ali's polarizing views and Cosell's similarly divisive defense of the boxer. A key thread in ABC's coverage of the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City concerned whether the United States' African American athletes—many of

whom were inspired by the outspokenness Ali exhibited on *Wide World*—would use the Games to protest the racism they faced in the country they represented. Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s infamous demonstration composed ABC’s biggest story of the event, much of which aired during prime time. *Wide World*’s creative approach, programming practices, and stars fueled ABC’s investment in and identification with the Olympics.

Emboldened by the success its 1968 Olympics coverage enjoyed in prime time, ABC teamed with the National Football League to launch *Monday Night Football* in 1970. *Monday Night* extended Arledge’s lavish aesthetic to fashion a spectacle that would attract a broader audience than typical weekend telecasts. It particularly set its sights on women—a necessary audience for any successful prime-time show. While *Monday Night* grew out of ABC’s Mexico City broadcasts, it avoided discussing racial tensions that might splinter the consistent prime-time viewership it sought. ABC used *Monday Night*’s popularity to create successful TV events that utilized the programming flows it forged and reproduced its pasteurized racial politics, such as the 1971 made-for-TV movie *Brian’s Song* and, more significantly, the 1977 miniseries *Roots*. Chapter 4 contextualizes *Monday Night*’s development and explains how it informed the depiction of race on network TV events beyond sports broadcasts.

ABC’s coverage of the 1972 Munich Olympics amplified its reputation as the Network of the Olympics and took advantage of the consistent space *Monday Night* forged for sports in prime time. But Munich was overshadowed by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September taking as hostage and eventually killing eleven members of Israel’s Olympic team. ABC Sports’ marathon coverage of the incident became the department’s most celebrated achievement to date. This success eventually convinced ABC to entrust Arledge with its languishing news division in 1977, which he revamped by modifying the recipe he developed at ABC Sports. Chapter 5 uses Munich to explore how ABC Sports composed a template through which the network reinvented ABC News, and network sports TV more broadly.

ABC Sports capitalized on the notoriety it achieved during the 1970s by licensing an eclectic collection of items and producing nonsports programming. Along these lines, the subsidiary demonstrated that it did not need preexisting events to create popular sports television by developing made-for-TV specials, including Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs’s Battle of the Sexes, Evel Knievel’s bone-shattering stunts, and *The Superstars*, which featured athletes competing in sports outside their areas of expertise. Though commercially successful, these programs were widely belittled as “TrashSports”

that degraded the respectability ABC Sports had steadily built. Amid ABC Sports' investment in TrashSports, the division became embroiled in a scandal surrounding the 1977 US Boxing Championships, in which elements of the competition were fabricated to ensure its value as a TV spectacle. Chapter 6 examines how ABC's brand extensions and involvement in TrashSports took its sports programming to lengths that no longer necessitated preexisting events and uses the controversial Boxing Championships to investigate the limits to which ABC could manufacture engaging sporting content.

Cable outlets emerged in the mid-1970s and used the practices ABC Sports had established to gain a toehold in the new industry. To mitigate the effects of this competition, ABC acquired majority ownership of ESPN, the first all-sports cable channel and the biggest threat to its market share. But traditionally reliable ABC Sports programs like *Wide World* and *Monday Night* sank in popularity as the sports TV market expanded. Adding to these changes—and reflecting the upsurge of corporate consolidation that marked the 1980s—Capital Cities Communications acquired ABC in 1985 and implemented a swell of budgetary, procedural, and personnel changes that saw ABC Sports give up both Arledge and the Olympics. Chapter 7 considers how these shifts altered ABC Sports' previously secure place within the reconstituted American Broadcasting Company, sports TV, and popular culture while contextualizing the broader industrial transformation they foretold.

As ABC Sports' metamorphosis continued, ESPN established itself as TV's most lucrative cable outlet and one of the most recognizable brands in media—sports or otherwise. ESPN's rising value prompted the Walt Disney Company to purchase Capital Cities in 1996. Immediately after the acquisition, Disney began to position ESPN as the company's featured sports TV brand while it adjusted to the Web-driven and convergent sports media ecosystem that was replacing the network era ABC Sports represented. These changes culminated in 2006 when Disney moved *Monday Night* to ESPN and rebranded all ABC Sports programming as “ESPN on ABC.” The book concludes by tracing Disney's reinvention of ABC Sports in the image of ESPN and probing the network division's scattered remnants in postnetwork media culture.

In telling ABC Sports' cultural and institutional history, this project touches on several topics that have inspired their own books, documentaries, and even big-budget feature films like *Ali* (2001), *Munich* (2005), and *Battle of the Sexes* (2017). It sheds new light on these familiar subjects by reading them through the lens of ABC and sports television. Likewise, it offers a more nuanced treatment of ABC Sports figures and programs that have

received individualized treatment—Roone Arledge, Howard Cosell, *Monday Night Football*, and so on—by piecing together the broader cultural contexts out of which they emerged and avoiding the nostalgia, selective memory, and cronyism that marks the memoirs and popular histories that compose most of the literature on these topics. Moreover, it demonstrates sports television’s intimate relationship to and influence on other TV genres and the broader industry—connections scholarship on sports media has been slow to identify. This book, then, explains how ABC Sports grew out of and reshaped the diverse circumstances surrounding it and suggests historical approaches to understanding such media institutions should tend carefully to these intersecting contexts and how they change over time.

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“One of the happiest relationships in American society is that between sports and the media,” wrote James Michener in 1976. “This interface is delightfully symbiotic, since each helped the other survive.”⁸ Today, this remains truer than ever. However, sport and media’s relationship has become more complex in the internet-driven media landscape that has replaced the network era ABC Sports dominated. Live sports broadcasts maintain special status as appointment viewing in an industry increasingly organized around on-demand content. But alternatives have emerged that allow consumers to skirt traditional distribution channels and enable content providers to serve as their own media producers. The economics and cultural meanings of sports television have changed apace.

Tracing sports TV’s emergence, properties, and transformation, then, demands careful scrutiny of the diverse elements that constitute it. The history of ABC Sports helps to do this work. Network sports television is a shared site of cultural production that informed which types of people receive popular media attention, propelled the Super Bowl into a veritable national holiday, and cemented the Olympics’ status as a global festival on which entire nations pin their geopolitical identities and aspirations. ABC Sports was the key institutional force in establishing sports TV’s conventions, visibility, and power. The storied network sports division tells a larger story about sport, media, and culture from the 1950s into the present.