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## Turner Broadcasting

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

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I don't know about you, but most everyone seems to be underwhelmed by the announcement from Turner Broadcasting and NBC last week that they were preparing to launch a new professional football league. Reactions have run the gamut from charges of stupidity to diagnoses of insanity.

Although it's not clear when the league will begin operations and what time of year they will operate, I would caution those who are ready to dismiss this as a form of mid-summer madness or contract envy. NBC and Turner Broadcasting have been shut out of the broadcasting rights for the NFL for the next eight years, and eight years is a long time to wait. It is a long time to go without having access to the goose that lays the golden egg in television sport. It is a long time to go without hosting the Super Bowl.

It should also be noted that a lot can change in eight years.

Before dismissing the NBC and Turner venture two factors need to be considered. First, these two television entities are subsidiaries of extremely large and wealthy corporations. NBC is an arm of General Electric and Turner Broadcasting is an arm of Time-Warner. This represents money, money, and more money.

Second, both NBC and Time-Warner are television companies that are in a constant search for programming, and non-sports programming can be very costly. This being the case NBC and Turner Broadcasting may be willing to pour enormous amounts of money into this operation. Think of this new league as programming or software and suddenly the meaning of its success takes on a very different look.

We know from recent history that new football leagues have not had great success. The WFL and the USFL did not create many millionaires.

Less recent history may be more instructive. In 1959 when a million dollars still was a lot of money, two Texas oil millionaires, Lamar Hunt and Bud Adams decided to start a new football league. They too were motivated by being shut out by the NFL. They too seemed to have endless amounts of money.

In the first year the AFL lost some \$3M and the future was in doubt. Then ABC came forward with a television contract which offered the league both money and exposure. The losses continued as the salary wars intensified, but in the end the AFL survived and the NFL surrendered.

No one would suggest that this sort of history will repeat itself. It is a different time and there are different economic and demographic circumstances. But there are similarities. The new venture has both money and television, and they are built into the fabric of the league.

With money and television this new league is already on the road to possible success. If there is patience by those involved, and a willingness to take major financial losses on the teams, and regard the costs as program development, then the odds of success increase.

What is not often discussed and what was in fact a major reason for the success of the AFL was the ability of that new league to offer a new look to the television audience. I remember distinctly being among the group of people who were NFL loyalists, and were sure that the AFL offered an inferior football product. This league played no defense. The teams rolled up and down the field, the scores skyrocketed, the long bomb became the AFL trademark. Every now and then I would switch channels and take a peak. Almost every time I did I saw a 60-some-yard touchdown pass. The more of this I saw the more intriguing it became. I found myself watching for longer and longer stretches.

The product was different. NFL games had become too predictable, too stifled by defense, too conservative in an increasingly free-wheeling culture. It was the Sixties. Let'er rip. Just do it. Let it all hang out. Daryle Lamonic let it all hang out and thensome. It is also significant that long hair, facial hair, and Joe Namath were all to be found exclusively in the AFL.

This brings us to the other point about the new league. The NFL has become the staid and stuffy league-The No Fun League. A new league with a new and less predictable product just might catch the eye of the fan. There is a malaise on Sunday afternoon, and night, and Monday night, and even Thursday night. Bring on a league with the flavor of the X-Games or the Canadian snowboarding team, and it just might catch the glazed over eye of the current NFL couch zombie.

Finally it should be noted that the business of television is fragmenting and going through a revolution whose destination is still not known. In six or eight years what will television be? In six or eight years what will sport be?

Think back just six or eight years ago and examine all the changes that have taken place in television, in sport, in the entertainment industry, and in mass communications. Given this level of "Future Shock" in action who out there would care to predict what combinations of things we might be looking at in six to eight years? And given the power and money behind this new league, who would then dare to say with certainty that this league will never make it?

By the mid-Sixties the NFL found it necessary to surrender and merge with the AFL. It could happen again, no matter how unlikely it seems today.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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