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ESPN's 20th Anniversary

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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"Anniversary of everything these days. Enough to give a guy the creeps." This line from Robert Coover's brilliant baseball novel "The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop." speaks to our excessive penchant for celebrations of milestones and anniversaries.

However there are anniversaries that are significant and ESPN's 20th is one of them. When the history of Sport in America is written several decades into the next millenium, ESPN may well be regarded as the most important development in sport in the 20th century.

Do you remember sport on television before ESPN? Living in Central Florida prior to 1979 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 didn't exist and 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 ESPN went on the air. It was a wonder and a marvel. My son and I watched in disbelief and 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 sports lunatics who seemingly would watch anything and do so at all hours of the day and night.

The staple of ESPN in the early days was sports news and highlights. Local news, weather and sports telecasts at six and eleven offered very little in the way of sports coverage and it was universally bad. This was a key to ESPN's success. They 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 the rebroadcast of the 2 a.m. 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 name 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 as if it were the Vatican or Pete Rozelle as if he were the Pope.

There was of course a lot of junk and endless reruns to fill those twenty-four hours each day, but slowly ESPN was building its programming: Hockey, baseball, college basketball, the early rounds of March Madness, tennis, horse-racing, motor sports 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.

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, and indeed other twenty-four hour sports stations of both a national and regional character appeared. In baseball the superstations arrived bearing first the Braves and Cubs with others to follow.

As time passed there was more and more live coverage on ESPN, both events and coverage of events. Players became more accessible and that had both its ups and downs. Through it all the money kept rising as television seemed to have an insatiable appetite for more sports programming and sponsors seemed to be willing to pay any price for exposure to this demographic cohort. At times it seemed to be awash in beer, 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. ESPN itself has multiplied its outlets like some kind of electronic rabbit and now operates internationally. Television is producing its own sports events, while entertainment conglomerates are buying teams and players to use

as television programming. And there seems to be no end in sight. The NBA understood the significance of cable sports to its marketing effort and the NHL has tried to replicate that success.

Players are now entertainers. Games are programming. The money is creating millionaires who can't 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 massive amounts of money have exacerbated the labor-management relationship in sport. The necessity of agents flows from this, as does the entire sports marketing field. One might think that with the 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 courts as it is about what happens in the games.

Sport has dramatically changed and will never be the same. The catalyst was born in Bristol, Connecticut, some twenty years ago this week. Roll the videotape.

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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