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Monday Night Football

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It is the twenty-fifth Anniversary of Monday Night Football. The other networks laughed when ABC announced it was going to take NFL football into prime time. Who would watch? By Monday everyone was suffering from football burnout what with the College games on Saturday, and the double network double-headers on Sunday. It just wouldn't work.

Twenty-five years later Monday Night Football, the creation of Roone Arledge, is a national institution that has changed TV viewing habits, revolutionized the way in which not only football but sport in general is reported, and left a rich legacy in the collective memory of American sports fans.

What was the key to the success of Monday Night Football? Although there is no short answer, clearly Roone Arledge understood those who warned about football burnout by Monday night. Monday night would need to offer more than football. It had to have a character and personality of its own, and it had to be entertaining beyond the game.

To fill these requirements Arledge went out and got a vaudeville act which in style predated vaudeville. Don Meredith and Howard Cosell were the city slicker-country bumpkin tandem with deep roots in American folklore. As a bonus they were a cowboy and a Jew. A down-home guy and a loudmouth. Perfect!

The beauty of the act was how naturally both Cosell and Meredith played their parts and how occasionally their genuine mutual animosity came through to the couch. There was both humor and pathos, a lethal and winning combination. And there were stereotypes oozing from the booth.

They offered great and memorable moments both individually and together. The verbal exchanges were marvelous with Howard using his pseudo-power vocabulary featuring the routine misuse of words, running up against the homespun phrases of Dandy Don. Howard always wanted to tell it like it is, while Don would put us to bed with "the dogs bark and the caravan moves on," followed by his vocal rendition of "Turn Out the Lights, the Party's Over." That song became a marking point at which the losing team could no longer mount a comeback.

There were so many great moments over the years. One night in the Astrodome in the midst of a blowout with Judge Hofhienz's

mausoleum nearly empty, the camera was panning across the vacant seats lingering on a cowboy who looked like he was in a deep sleep. Almost on cue, he opened his eyes, raised his hand toward the camera, and saluted the nation with his middle finger. Casually Meredith drawled, "Number one in the nation, and number one in our hearts."

Howard too had his special moments. He could bring hatred to the surface by simply showing his face. Viewer surveys showed him both the most loved and most hated person on television. In Denver one enterprising bar owner held a weekly raffle with the prize being the opportunity to throw a brick through a TV screen while Cosell was on camera.

But to me the most memorable moment came in Tampa where the sheer ingenuity and effort put forth by fans reached record proportions. At one point during the game there was one of those crowd shots. A large group of fans had a full size bed sheet displaying the words, ABC AND THE BUCS. When the camera focused on the sheet the fans suddenly let the front sheet drop, to reveal a second sheet that read HOWARD SUCKS. As quick as the director could react the picture changed, but the full message went out and there was a long and painful silence over the air, while across the nation Howard haters cheered lustily.

Then there was the night that Howard threw up on Meredith's shoes, and another night when Dandy Don threatened to punch Howard if he didn't just shut up.

It was all immense fun and produced massive ratings. It also produced an entirely new way in which the National Football League was presented to the American public. The biggest change was that football was now entertainment not religion, presented with fun and irreverence. Cosell's abrasive and seemingly candid style at first shocked, and then transformed sports reporting in America, and not just on television. The results have not always been positive, but they have been lasting, producing an entirely new generation of revelatory journalists who tried to "tell it like it is," bringing a more aggressive and less reverential reporting style to sports.

And finally Monday Night football brought major sports events to prime time television, while changing the Monday habits of America's football fans forever.

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