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In Memoriam: Howard Cossell

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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There are nearly a half-dozen stories coming to focus over this past week that could be the subject of this week's commentary. Then Sunday morning came the news that Howard Cosell had died in New York during the night at age 77. He had been fighting a number of ailments over the past few years as he had faded from public view. The last significant public attention came a few months ago when he was given a richly deserved tribute at the ESPY awards.

Born and raised in Brooklyn's Jewish community between the wars this brilliant young man was trained as a lawyer but spent most of his career as a sports broadcaster. He made a major impact on his chosen field, transforming not only radio and television sports, but also the print medium. In the end he left a deep impression not only on sports, but on the larger American society. Cosell began his broadcasting career in New York doing a show for kids on baseball, but it was as a radio commentator that he first came to the attention of the nation during the 1960s.

The challenge to authority and the growth of the counter-culture in the Sixties were a perfect setting for the appearance of this strange new voice doing a twice daily commentary for the ABC radio network with the title "Howard Cosell, Speaking of Sports." In that three to four minutes, done without script or notes, Howard would rattle off scores or brief news items, but the heart of the slot was his patented acerbic comment on the current sports scene. Very often his style was attack, ridicule, or condemnation, and always he claimed to "tell it like it is."

It was the career of Muhammad Ali that became most intertwined with Cosell's, and this put Howard and the Heavyweight Champion into the national limelight. The decision to strip Ali of his title for refusing the military draft, a decision applauded so readily by the mainstream press, was denounced unmercifully by Cosell who used his legal expertise and his acid tongue with equal measure and effectiveness. On a daily basis Cosell attacked the boxing hierarchy and his fellow sports journalists for their ignorance, while defending Muhammad Ali and the Bill Rights. As he did the often anti-Semitic hate mail mounted along with Cosell's ratings and his notoriety. Ali and Cosell were a perfect anti-establishment pair for this turbulent decade.

When Monday Night Football was invented by Boone Arledge, Cosell was paired with Don Meredith. The New York Jew and Texas Good Ole-boy in counterpoint were perfect for those bored with football by the time Monday night rolled around and were looking for some entertainment with their game.

Cosell became the man the nation loved to hate. A Denver bar gave customers a chance to throw a brick through a TV screen when Howard's face was showing. It was an immensely popular promotion. Cosell and Monday Night Football grew in popularity, and Don Meredith was Howard's perfect foil. It was a schtick nearly as old as American humor itself. At one and the same time it placed Cosell on the most loved and most hated list of celebrities in America.

All the while Howard beat the drums for "tell it like it is" journalism. If Tom Wolfe was the father of the New Journalism, then Howard Cosell was the father of the new sports journalism. Many emulated Cosell seeking the same levels of success. Both electronic and print journalism were significantly transformed, as revelatory journalism became the new wave. Never again would sports journalism be confined to the games and the scores. The legal and economic news were reported, the private lives of the players were opened to public view, with drugs and sex as hot topics. The dark underside of sport was brought to light. Some of this was trash and some was excellent reporting. All of it was the legacy of Howard Cosell.

For all of the candor and aggression Cosell was oddly at his best when delivering a eulogy. Some of the most powerful radio I can remember were Cosell's comments at the time of the death and funeral of Jackie Robinson. Several days of emotion filled commentary hammered home the social significance of this great American hero.

As someone who listened faithfully to those morning and evening radio commentaries for years, and who was heavily affected by them, I want to acknowledge the contribution and the legacy of Howard Cosell, the man America loved to hate, as well as a man who did so much to reshape American sport and American culture in the 60s and 70s. He was at one and the same time a symbol, a shaper, and an interpreter of his times.

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