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Howard Cosell Retires: A Tribute - Baseball, Seattle, and Japan

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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At the end of January Howard Cosell retired from broadcasting. For the most part talking heads come and go without making a major impact, but the retirement of Howard Cosell marks the end of career that transformed sports broadcasting and left a mark on American society.

In recent years it has become the vogue to mock and satirize Cosell, and in some ways he had become a caricature of his own persona. But Howard Cosell transformed radio sports, television sports, and the general approach to sports by writers, commentators and fans.

Trained as a lawyer Howard 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 were a perfect setting for the appearance of this strange new voice doing a twice daily commentary for the ABC radio network. It was a five minute slot broken by a commercial with the title "Howard Cosell, Speaking of Sports." In that three to four minutes Howard would rattle off scores or brief news items, but the heart of the slot was some acerbic comment or another 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 Muhammed 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 Muhammed Ali and the Bill Rights. As he did the anti-Semitic hate mail mounted, along with Cosell's ratings and his notoriety. Ali and Cosell were a perfect anti-establishment pair for the turbulent Sixties.

From radio they moved onto television where Ali and Cosell became a tandem for ABC Sports. Then Monday Night Football was invented by Roone Arledge, where 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 the 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.

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 culture in the 60s and 70s. He was both a symbol of, and a creator of his times.

One other item needs mention this week, the matter of the sale of the Seattle Mariners. The point of controversy centers on the fact that 60% of the money will come from Japan and the Nintendo Corporation, although other major Seattle corporate figures from Microsoft and Boeing are involved in the ownership group. But Commissioner of Baseball Fay Vincent has joined the throng of Japan bashers, saying that Major League Baseball will not sell

to foreigners. Would he be saying this if it were British money? Is there perhaps just a little of that old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon racial thought at work here?

Vincent should realize that things could be worse. A group of Taiwanese Little Leaguers could be trying to buy a major league franchise. Now that would be a serious problem.

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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