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New Life for Monday Night Football?

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The firing of Boomer Esiason as analyst for ABC's Monday Night Football seems to have caught a number of commentators and fans off-guard. Personally I have wondered why it took so long. That Al Michaels will not be heading out the door with Boomer should be the real surprise, but then Michaels is a golfing partner of Don Ohlmeyer who returns as the producer of Monday Night Football after a 23 year absence.

Also heading out the door are MNF's producer Ken Wolfe and director Craig Janoff. Wolfe totes away six Emmy Awards for his work on the perennial ratings leader. President of ABC Sports Howard Katz said that it was time to take the Monday night presentation in another direction. It was suffering, according to Katz, from a kind of "sameness." Ohlmeyer will try to make Monday Night Football special again.

Katz's observation about "sameness" is right on target and it is surprising that Monday Night Football has been permitted go on in its malaise as long as it has.

When Roone Arledge first sold the NFL and ABC on the idea of a Monday night game people thought he was crazy. Who would want to watch another football game on Monday night after spending all day Sunday with the NFL and all day Saturday watching the college game? Arledge understood this and under his direction Monday Night Football offered something other than football. It offered melodrama and entertainment and even a little football.

Since the departure of Don Meredith and Howard Cosell there have been a series of missteps and bad pairings all suffering from the same fatal television disease, self-importance and blandness. Putting Al Michaels and Dan Dierdorf in the booth with Frank Gifford illustrated one of the major dangers of cloning. The sameness bored everyone to tears. Add pontification to sameness and blandness turns to irritation and eventually to disgust. Those who followed Cosell and Meredith never seemed to understand that the game wasn't important, that his was an entertainment in prime time. They committed the cardinal sin of prime time television. They failed to entertain.

When Roone Arledge teamed Howard Cosell and Don Meredith it turned out to be a stroke of genius. Part of the success is that neither man took the NFL seriously. Both knew that this was not a religion and that Pete Rozelle was not a god. Both brought a healthy skepticism to the television booth and let that skepticism run loose in American living rooms and dens.

Both men were highly opinionated and both had a certain amount of disdain for the other and they occasionally expressed it. And most importantly both men represented certain American types with high visibility in the American folk culture.

Dandy Don Meredith represented the good ole boy. Former quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys he took on a Texas persona and could display flashes of what Cosell would later call "Texas mean." Usually he was just the relaxed cowboy with a nice drawl who could make fun of himself, his partners, and the foibles of those on the field. You could see yourself and Don sitting on the back porch with a longneck beer just shootin' the breeze about sports and life and whatever. He could also occasionally be the country bumpkin, at least when playing himself over and against Cosell's persona.

Howard Cosell was a walking stereotype of the loudmouth highly opinionated New York Jew that every American loved to hate. The sound of his voice could, to borrow a phrase from Mencken, "inflame half-wits." And it did, as well as a lot of folks who had all their wits about them. He was a walking lightning rod. He was rated in public polls as the most loved and the most hated man in American public life. Each week in a Denver bar a raffle was held in which the winner would be given the pleasure of taking a brick and throwing it through a television set while Howard was on the air. It was an immensely popular fund-raiser.

Between the two sat Frank Gifford. Yes, that Frank Gifford, who served as referee and steady rudder in this turbulent air. Frank Gifford spent twenty-six years as the anchor of Monday Night Football. The first twelve were with Cosell and Meredith and the time passed quickly. The fourteen years that followed were mostly with Michaels and Dierdorf and it seemed like an entire millenium.

It will be impossible for Ohlmeyer to recreate this magical atmosphere and he knows it. If on the other hand he can find other folk types to play contrasting roles, and if they are sufficiently irreverent and realize that by Monday night the Game is not the Thing, the success of the Sixties might be replicated. It is a tricky business but there is a formula for success.

One can only hope that Don Ohlmeyer will succeed in finding a pairing that will allow Al Michaels to serve as the anchor in the booth. If not he will only be part of the ballast that will add dead weight to a sinking ship.

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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