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The passing of ABC's Monday Night Football

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The passing of ABC's Monday Night Football
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At the end of its thirty-sixth season, ABC's Monday Night Football will pass into history, sort of. It certainly has been an institution of historical significance for broadcasting and for American popular culture as well as sport. It will not exactly disappear but will migrate to Sunday night, while ESPN's Sunday night football will move over to fill the void on Monday night.

Much is being made of the passing of Monday Night Football, so well-known that it is now simply referred to as MNF. Of course, Monday Night Football ceased to be Monday Night Football quite some time ago. Its end can be dated from either the departure of Don Meredith or the subsequent departure of Howard Cosell from the Monday night line-up. It was never again the same as when Cosell and Meredith were at the heart of what made MNF a unique television and football experience.

When Monday Night Football was invented by Roone Arledge, he paired this infamous duo. 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. Arledge understood that by Monday the fans were looking for entertainment with their game, not just another game. Under his direction Monday Night Football offered something other than football. It offered melodrama and entertainment with a little football on the side.

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 both the most loved and the most hated man in American public life. Each week in a Denver bar a raffle was held, and the winner would be given the pleasure of taking a brick and throwing it through a television set while Howard's face was on screen. It was an immensely popular fundraiser.

Cosell and Monday Night Football grew in popularity, and Don Meredith was Howard's perfect foil. It was a shtick nearly as old as American humor itself. This pairing of Howard Cosell and Don Meredith turned out to be a stroke of genius. Part of the success is that neither man took the NFL seriously. Both knew that NFL Football was not a religion. Both brought a healthy skepticism to the television booth and turned it loose in American living rooms and dens. Both were highly opinionated and both had a certain amount of disdain for the other which they occasionally expressed. Most importantly, both men represented familiar American types with high visibility in American folk culture.

The amazing thing is how much the habits of the nation were transformed. The football weekend was extended, reducing some of the gloom that is Monday. The ratings exceeded everyone's wildest expectations. MNF became the king of the Monday night television. The other networks could not compete and sometimes gave up trying. People gathered in bars and homes in groups to watch these games and see what outrageous thing would happen next.

Late in a game in the Astrodome, with the home team getting hammered and most of the crowd already in their cars heading home, the camera panned the crowd settling in on what appeared to be a sleeping, scruffy-looking character. His eyes opened and he shot his middle finger directly into the camera. Without missing a beat Meredith said simply, "Number one in the nation, and number one in our heart."

Fans also learned to be creative with signs to get their faces or messages on camera. The most elaborate of such ploys came in Tampa where a large group of people held up a bed sheet with the words, "ABC and the BUCS." With the ABC cameras focused on the words, the sheet was dropped to reveal a second sheet with the words, "Howard Sucks." The camera went elsewhere. Silence followed. It was the only time in the history of MNF that Cosell was at a loss for words.

As for the players, they knew that the nation would be watching, and, more importantly, their peers would be watching, adding to the significance of the evening. Many players rose to the occasion and had the best games of their careers on MNF. It was a big stage and each player wanted to take a bow in the spotlight and for many it was a chance to make their first big splash before the football nation.

As for the television battles, MNF took on all challengers and dispatched them to oblivion. It would brook no challenger and had no peer. "It was," as Frank Gifford said, "not just a game, but an event."

Following the departure of Don Meredith and Howard Cosell there were a series of missteps and bad pairings, all suffering from the same fatal combination: self-importance and blandness. Those who followed Cosell and Meredith never understood that the game was seldom important, that MNF was a television entertainment in prime time. They violated the cardinal rule of prime time television as they failed to entertain.

At the end of each game, when the outcome was clear, Don Meredith, as we were reminded on the last ABC broadcast, would sing: "Turn out the lights, the party's over." What the producers missed was the fact that just before going off the air Meredith also said, "The dogs bark, and the caravan moves on." And so it does.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Happy New Year and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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