

10-2-2007

The Braves and TBS

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Braves and TBS" (2007). *On Sport and Society*. 747.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/747>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Braves and TBS
OCTOBER 2, 2007

I doubt that many people were watching late Sunday afternoon as the Atlanta Braves ended their disappointing season notching one final loss. I doubt if very many, other than longtime Brave followers, knew the significance of the moment. It was in fact the end of an era.

Sunday marked the end of a thirty-year run that did much to change the nature of baseball on television and the relationship between baseball and cable television. There was in fact great irony in the moment, as it was the very success of baseball on cable that ended the Braves' reign at TBS, a reign that created Braves fans all across the United States as well as north and south of the border. The revolution succeeded and the revolutionaries have been eaten by their own offspring.

For those of us who have been witness to the entire thirty-year epoch, it was a bittersweet moment.

When I moved to Florida over thirty years ago there was very little baseball on television. The Game of the Week and for a time Monday Night Baseball were all there was. The World Series came each October but most daily baseball came via radio. The massive Braves radio network blanketed the Southeastern United States in the manner of King Cotton. A vast radio and television network had been one of the great inducements for the Braves ownership to leave Milwaukee and move baseball south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Little did I know that renewing my membership as a Braves fan, which I could only do after Ted Turner replaced the previous ownership that sucker punched Milwaukee, would lead me to a cornucopia of Braves baseball. Over the years, the small faithful ragtag band of Braves fans were transformed into a massive army of Braves fans spread all across the country, maybe even the globe, or wherever the Superstation could be found on cable or satellite.

The man whom the baseball owners called "Terrible Ted" may have been terrible to them, but to baseball fans in the vast wasteland that was without baseball, Ted Turner was the Santa Claus of the Diamond. The fact that the Braves were most often a losing team didn't matter one bit. It was baseball, it was our

baseball, and we could see it frequently at first and then nearly all the time, once Ted Turner saw the money rolling into his cable empire.

In many ways, the thirty years are a blur: so many games, so many days and nights, so many losses, and then, in recent years, so many wins. There were, of course, great moments. Hank Aaron's chase of Babe Ruth involved a two-year countdown for Braves fans. With the Braves quickly out of pennant contention most seasons, Aaron's quest became the touchstone of the Superstation.

There were great players, entertaining players, at times producing false hopes. Among my favorites was Ralph Garr, the fireplug leadoff man. Dale Murphy arrived as a promising catcher only to suffer from the inability to throw the ball back to the pitcher. We shared his agony and then rejoiced when he went to the outfield to become a bona fide all-star. Phil Niekro seemed as if he would pitch forever. He could dazzle with the dancing knuckleball. He could produce a train wreck when the knuckleball couldn't find the strike zone and he had to bring his 75mph fastball down the middle and turn the game into batting practice.

There were all those games played in near empty stadiums as season after season of futility seemed nearly pointless. But of course they never were pointless. They were the Braves playing, be it on a Wednesday afternoon or Saturday night, in Montreal or Atlanta. They played and we watched, and that is all that really mattered.

Taking us through all of this were the stalwarts of the TBS broadcast team. Pete Van Wieren, the professor, who for many years doubled as team travelling secretary, was steady and full of information, some of which at least seemed meaningful. Ernie Johnson, Sr. was the baseball man. Former relief pitcher for the Milwaukee Braves, Ernie knew the game and the players and could tell those stories that were needed to fill lopsided games and rain delays. He had a wry sense of humor, often overlooked, and was a perfect set-up man for the comic-cynic Skip Caray. Skip moved to Atlanta from St. Louis with the Hawks, and had learned his baseball from his father, the legendary Harry Caray. Skip served as a sharp-tongued critic, he seemed cynical about nearly everything and everybody, and he knew the game. He was the perfect voice for the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era. The chemistry among these three was nearly perfect and would never

quite be duplicated, although Skip and Joe Simpson had more than their share of great exchanges in recent years.

The first great change of fortune for the Braves came at the beginning of the 1982 season when under Joe Torre they opened the season with thirteen straight wins, drew hordes of fans to cable, and became truly "America's Team." Soon the Braves began drawing crowds of Braves fans to National League parks across the country. With the arrival of the great pitching staffs of the 90s and the Jones boys, the Braves became consistent winners. By then the TBS team was changing as well. The only unchanging fixture was Skip Caray, the unreconstructed voice of the past, whose continued cynicism and sharp wit never failed, even after Ted Turner's departure and the arrival of the corporate suits from Time Warner and a dwindling number of games offered on TBS.

Now all of this has ended. TBS will no longer be the Braves flagship; instead, it will do a "Game of the Week" on Sundays as well as the first two rounds of the playoffs. Skip Caray has been passed over for the new TBS broadcast team in another tribute to corporate executive stupidity. And of course the TBS revolution inspired a legacy of baseball on every media venue.

For those of us who survived the thirty-year run along with Skip there are great memories. All those one-liners and sharp comments will occasionally return, triggered by some incident in some game down the road. The Braves will still be on television in various cable incarnations, but the Braves on the Superstation will be no more.

The baseball culture was enriched by TBS for those thirty years, and will be poorer with its departure. But as Skip would have told us, that's Progress?

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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