

ESPN's 25th

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
ESPN's 25th
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When the history of Sport in America is written several decades from now ESPN may well be regarded as the most important development of the 20th century.

Do you remember sport on television before ESPN? Living in Central Florida prior to 1979 sport on television was severely limited: A few network college football games, a few NFL games on the weekend, an occasional Braves game on TV and the Baseball Game of the Week although even that was not every week. College basketball was there on Saturdays and sometimes Sundays. The National Hockey League didn't exist and the NBA, when it could be found at all, was mostly on tape delay after midnight, and that included playoff games.

I remember the first ESPN telecasts on our cable system, which came shortly after ESPN went on the air. It was a wonder and a marvel. My son and I watched in disbelief and then I boldly predicted that it probably would fail to find a sufficient audience, because there were too few people out there as crazy as us. I was wrong. There were millions of sports lunatics who seemingly would watch anything and do so at all hours of the day and night.

The staple of ESPN in the early days was sports news and highlights. Local news, weather and sports telecasts at six and eleven offered very little in the way of sports coverage in most cities of the country and it was universally bad. This was one key to ESPN's success. ESPN offered national coverage of many sports delivered with highlights by people who actually seemed to understand and care about the games. There were sometimes interviews, some live, with your heroes and mine.

Who would have believed that now I could watch University of Minnesota football games on tape delay on Tuesday or Wednesday morning? Who would believe that you could get full game reports on West Coast baseball from the previous night? Indeed the rebroadcast of the 2 a.m. SportsCenter became a must with breakfast: All I needed to know in thirty minutes with my pop tarts and coffee. Chris Berman became the sports guru of the breakfast table as he brought humor and irreverence to the world

of sport and not simply with his nicknames. The Swami was born there.

Paul Maguire who now haunts the NFL telecasts built his broadcasting career at ESPN with Berman, Terry Hanratty, and some guy name Austin who ran a sports-book in Vegas. They picked the NFL games each week and did so against the spread. One week Berman got all of them right and received a citation from the Vegas gamblers for his brilliance. The beauty of this show was that these guys didn't treat the NFL as if it were the Vatican or Pete Rozelle as if he were the Pope.

There was of course a lot of junk and endless reruns to fill those twenty-four hours each day, but slowly ESPN was building its programming: Hockey, baseball, college basketball, the early rounds of March Madness, tennis, horse-racing, motor sports galore, skiing, skating, gymnastics, and many more. Then there was the stroke of genius that turned a nonevent like the NFL draft into a cult gathering of the football maniacs.

Success, as it always does, led to imitation. The networks were forced to cover more sport, and other cable stations expanded their programming. Apparently the public thirst for televised sport had no saturation point. As time passed there was more and more live coverage on ESPN along with more and more highlights. Through it all the money kept rising as television seemed to have an insatiable appetite and sponsors seemed to be willing to pay any price for exposure to the sports demographic cohort. Initially it seemed to be awash in beer, while more recently it has attracted the wonder drugs of erectile enhancement.

Now it is a rare event that does not find its way onto television. ESPN itself has multiplied its outlets like some kind of electronic rabbit and now operates a raft of international/regional networks in multiple languages. It has also become a major Internet presence. Many imitators have appeared around the globe seeking to drink from this boundless trough of profit.

Television is producing its own sports events, while entertainment conglomerates are buying teams and players to use as television programming. And there seems to be no end in sight.

The NBA understood the significance of cable sports to its marketing effort and the NHL has tried to replicate that success. The NBA and NFL have their own cable networks and soon

Major League Baseball will join them. Even teams are planning to have their own cable channel. I can't wait for "All Devil Rays all the Time."

Players are now entertainers. Games are programming. The money is creating millionaires who can't remember who they are, if they ever knew. The result is a growing gulf between players and fans who no longer inhabit the same universe, and that has produced a sense of alienation and occasional hostility.

Some critics argue that ESPN has adversely affected the style of basketball with an overemphasis on slam-dunks and in your face one-on-one style featured in highlight packages. The team sport has been subverted by individual stars whose egos grow with their reputations established in the highlights rather than in the games.

Others point to the fact that the cable boom has meant that games of all sorts now appear at all times of the day and night. College football, once a Saturday affair, now runs six, and sometimes seven, days or nights a week. College basketball games begin at late hours to accommodate the needs for programming in those hours. These scheduling quirks have pushed the student part of the student-athlete further into the background, as the athlete has been transformed into one more commodity for public entertainment. This process moves further down the age scale with each passing season.

The infusion of massive amounts of money into sport by television has exacerbated the labor-management relationship. The necessity of agents flows from this, as does the entire sports marketing field. With the sharp increase in money, each party to the games wants more and more under the guise of asking only for their fair share. The number of sharks in the water has increased geometrically. Sport has become as much about economics, the law, and the courts as it is about what happens in the games as sport is awash in money. This too has led to the intensification of the already massive commercialization of intercollegiate athletics.

ESPN itself is showing signs of the perils of success as it is taking self-promotion to new levels. The network seems to be an event to be covered, and the on-air personalities have become superstars often overshadowing the sports they cover. Increasing amounts of airtime are consumed to promote upcoming programming distracting from the current event, a tendency that has been multiplied under Disney ownership. The increased use of graphics

and crawlers have cluttered the screen and reduced the significance of whatever is actually being shown.

The catalyst for change was born in Bristol, Connecticut, twenty-five years ago today and its impact rolls on.

Is this a Silver Anniversary to celebrate or to lament?

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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