

## ***ABC Sports: The Rise and Fall of Network Sports Television***

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In the multichannel digital-media landscape of the 21st century, it might be difficult to imagine or recall a time when television was new, consumers were presented with programming delivered by three or four major commercial networks, and social mores dictated a certain level of restraint in broadcasting. In Travis Vogan's skillfully crafted work *ABC Sports: The Rise and Fall of Network Sports Television*, readers are invited to encounter or revisit this past by taking a guided tour through the evolution of ABC Sports over the span of a half century from its early beginnings in the 1960s to its final days in 2006. A journey well worth embarking on, the stops along the way offer abundant material to reflect on technological innovation and disruption; the symbiotic relationships between the sport, entertainment, news, and television industries; the ways in which media shape culture, engagement with the world, and consumerism; the tensions between serving corporate partners versus the public good; and challenges of maintaining position as an industry standard bearer.

For ABC, dubbed the “Almost Broadcasting Network” in the 1950s by its larger, better-funded, more established, and more respected competitors NBC and CBS, the investment in sport television was a strategic decision to draw viewers and create brand identity. The vision and leadership for ABC's emergence in the realm of sport, which would eventually echo throughout the network, were those of Rooney Arledge. Anyone who has ever seen an athlete look into a camera and say hello to his or her mother or watched an inspiring segment examining the life of an athlete has glimpsed Arledge's emphasis on story as a driving force behind televised sporting events. Introducing innovative production approaches to the televising of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) football in 1961, Arledge sought to make the fan experience more intimate through the use of multiple cameras and coverage shot at various angles. Sideline cameras brought the human emotion of coaches and football players, as well as officials and fans in the stadium, closer to those watching at home. Exciting action on the field was accentuated with the accompanying roar of the crowd. Split screens allowed viewers to see a football launched by a quarterback descend into the waiting arms of a wide receiver sprinting downfield.

Responding to Major League Baseball's restrictive blackout policies, which resulted in 30% of their games not being televised in local markets, ABC executive and producer Ed Sherick conceived of a show that introduced viewers to lesser

known sport competitions and events. Sherick's idea to "go everywhere on weekends" became the iconic *Wide World of Sports*, a blend of prerecorded and edited segments of "fringe sports." The show's aspiration was expressed to viewers in the compelling and captivating opening segment of each episode, as host Jim McKay intoned, "Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sports. The thrill of victory. The agony of defeat. The human drama of athletic competition" (Vogan, 2018, p. 34).

For large swaths of viewers who had yet to experience air travel in the 1960s and '70s, remote and exotic locales became something more than images on a map or text in an encyclopedia entry. Sport was represented as a cultural form that spoke to a shared human experience but reflected vast differences in political structures, ways of life, and worldviews. National tensions in the era of the Cold War became a part of *Wide World's* coverage of track and field competitions between the United States and the Soviet Union, a device that helped grow ABC's audience.

The intrepid nature of ABC's sport coverage through *Wide World* positioned it well to later emerge as the network of the Olympics. Not only did ABC become adept at handling international broadcasts and managing the logistical complexities of how to make their coverage available to U.S. viewers across time and space, they also developed relationships with news entities and outlets in other countries that were critical to both their sports and news divisions on an emerging global scale.

With the experienced and well-read McKay in front of the camera and Arledge behind it, as well as news anchor Peter Jennings on scene as a result of prescient planning because of his expertise about world affairs in the Middle East, ABC Sports covered news that unfolded during the 1972 Munich Olympics when Black September, a Palestinian terrorist group, held 11 members of the Israeli team hostage. Failed attempts by the West German police to rescue the hostages and to negotiate with the terrorists resulted in the deaths of all the Israeli hostages and one police officer. At one point, McKay remained on air for 16 hours straight, breaking the grim news of the final outcome to viewers by saying,

When I was a kid my father always told me that our greatest hopes and our worst fears are seldom realized. Tonight our worst fears have been realized. . . . They're all gone. What will happen to the Games of the XXth Olympiad? . . . What will happen in the course of history? . . . I have nothing else today. (p. 139)

The emphasis ABC Sports placed on well-constructed narratives was amplified by the narrators themselves. The chemistry between Howard Cosell, a lawyer turned broadcaster with a delivery and cadence all his own and a penchant for bombast, and the telegenic and magnetic boxer Muhammad Ali, whose verbal acuity was as fast and as fleet as his fists and his footwork, made for good television. Humorous and light-hearted at times, their interviews also dealt with deeply entrenched racial animus and injustice. Amid the racial upheaval of the Civil Rights Movement, the boxer changed the name given to him by his parents, Cassius Marcellus Clay, to Muhammad Ali after converting to Islam and becoming a Muslim. As a result, Ali tapped into America's unease with powerful Black men, drawing the ire of some viewers. During the Vietnam War, at the height of Ali's boxing career, he was arrested and convicted of draft evasion. Stripped of his