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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Sport History Review*, 2008, 39, 84-93  
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### ***Kicking Off the Week: A History of Monday Night Football on ABC Television, 1970-2005***

By Wesley Hyatt. Published in 2007 by MacFarland & Company, Inc, Jefferson, North Carolina and London (203 pp., \$45 US)

*Reviewed by Richard C. Crepeau, University of Central Florida, US*

For thirty-five years, Monday Night Football (MNF) has been a mainstay of programming for ABC Television. For the first decade of its existence, MNF was one of the premier events of televised sports in the United States. When the commissioner of the National Football League, Pete Rozelle, first approached Rooney Arledge of ABC Sports about the possibility of producing a Monday night NFL game for a national audience, he found Arledge and network executives receptive to the concept. However, across the world of both football and television, there were many skeptics who doubted that after a Sunday stuffed with NFL offerings there would be any interest in a game on Monday night.

From the outset, MNF was a huge success, primarily because Rooney Arledge understood that Monday was as much about entertainment as it was about football, and if a national audience was to be maintained it would require both good football and high-intensity entertainment. The key to the combination was the casting of Howard Cosell, sportscaster and defender of Muhammad Ali, and Don Meredith, former Dallas Cowboy quarterback, in the roles of dueling analysts.

In this brief but informative book, Wesley Hyatt offers a lively history of MNF from his perspective as a television historian. Hyatt tracks the origins, development, successes, and failures of MNF through the years. He provides analyses of ratings fluctuations, advertising value, and profit and loss for ABC.

There were many personnel shifts in the booth over the years following the breakup of the Gifford, Cosell, and Meredith team. Hyatt chronicles these and analyzes the successes and failures of the various personalities that passed through the booth. There is a wealth of anecdotal material and gossip that makes for lively and entertaining reading. Hyatt addresses the difficulties created by Howard Cosell's personality and ego and the significance of Cosell to the success of the broadcast. Hyatt's presentation of the relationship between Cosell and Rooney Arledge is a fascinating story in its own right.

For the sport historian, *Kicking Off the Week* is deficient in at least two respects. First, although much is revealed about MNF and the circus that swirled around it, Hyatt offers no real insight into why MNF became so important an event on the American weekly calendar between September and January. However, there is a treasure trove of material on the growth and development of the game.

Hyatt never really gets to the heart of what made Monday football different from Sunday football. Certainly, he offers the ratings numbers, the advertising dollars, and the fact that there was only one game on Monday night. As he points out, the players themselves sensed the importance of the stage they were on nationally,

and the game took on added significance for them as they knew that not only the nation but many of their peers were watching.

It is surprising that Hyatt does not explore the symbolic nature of the Cosell–Meredith relationship because for many viewers this was the heart and soul of MNF. These two analysts became battling archetypes, with Cosell representing the loud-mouth highly educated New York Jew and Meredith representing the good-old country boy who bested the New Yorker with his down-home common sense and lack of pretension. Meredith was in some ways the anti-intellectual American man of action, who, as he often reminded both Howard and the audience, had indeed played the game.

Cosell's role as lightning rod on MNF was clearly a key to the popularity of the event. At a bar in Denver, there was a raffle each Monday night during the game, with the winner throwing a brick through the television screen while Howard was on camera. Another great moment came when fans in Tampa held up a large sheet with the words "ABC and the Bucs" printed on it. As the ABC camera focused on it, the fans dropped the front sheet to reveal another that proclaimed "Howard Sucks." The cameras quickly shifted and there was a deafening silence in the booth. The fact that Howard Cosell was the man the fans loved to hate played a very large role in the success of MNF, at least as long as Don Meredith remained in the booth to offer the proper counterpoint.

*Kicking Off the Week* is a lively piece of narrative history loaded with information and gossip. What it lacks in analysis it more than makes up for in entertainment. It is a great read, and a good starting point for anyone looking to do serious historical and cultural study of this American phenomenon.

### ***Gymnastics and Politics: Niels Bukh and Male Aesthetics***

By Hans Bonde. Published in 2006 by Museum Tusculanum Press, Copenhagen (376 pp. \$ 72 US)

*Reviewed by John Bale, Keele University, UK*

This book emerges from Danish historian Hans Bonde's two-volume doctoral thesis, published in Danish in 2001. Typical of Scandinavian university presses, *Gymnastics and Politics* is beautifully produced and lavishly illustrated. Additionally, it includes a DVD with over 130 film clips in Danish, English, and Japanese. The book is well written and the translation into English is satisfactory, with only occasional glitches. Briefly, the book chronicles the life of Niels Bukh (1880–1950), a major figure in interwar Denmark as a result of his gymnastics movement, his folk high school at Ollerup, and his attempts to introduce his particular brand of gymnastics to nations north and south of the equator. Three important themes are included in the book: Bukh's sympathy for Adolf Hitler and Nazism, his emphasis on masculinity in his gymnastic model, and his homosexuality.

The book has much strength that outweighs some relatively minor weaknesses. Bonde leads his readers on a chronological tour from Bukh's emergence from a rural boyhood to the enfant terrible of Nordic gymnastics and his flirtation with Nazism, followed by his subsequent fight for survival in a nation that ultimately rejected his ideas. Simply put, by the late 1930s, the modest Danes felt that he