THE TELEVISION EFFECT

by David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow

On May 17, 1939, when there were barely 400 working television sets in the United States, station W2XBS of New York produced the first live telecast of a sporting contest—the Columbia-Princeton baseball contest for fourth place in the Ivy League. The quality of broadcast was poor; a *New York Times* reviewer wrote, "The players were best described by observers as appearing 'like white flies' running across the screen." The sportscaster, Bill Stern, didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. A director hollered into Stern's earplug: "Shut up! If they can see it, don't say it." A new era in sports had begun.

Forty years later, the most popular shows on television are sports events. When asked to list their favorite TV programs in a 1979 *Washington Post* national survey, 17 percent of the 1,693 respondents mentioned at least one sports show—a much greater response than any single dramatic or comedy series received. One-quarter of the average man's television-viewing time is spent watching sports; for women, the figure is 15 percent.

To many people, sports are simply competitive play, with no broader significance; in short, fun and escapism. For others, sports dramatize the human condition. But in today's professional sports, thanks to the ever-increasing influence of TV, neither interpretation holds. Sports and television, after all, seek somewhat different goals.

The logic of television is shaped by economics, as a sports contest is not. Since television must sell commercial time to be profitable, its managers' goal is to deliver the maximum number of viewers to advertisers. Sports events serve this goal admirably, but they must fit TV's normal entertainment criteria. Some of these criteria are inherent in sports—color, action, excitement, the appeal to a sense of idealized justice. TV exaggerates them. During lulls in action, viewers' attention is riveted on such sideline attractions as cheerleaders (e.g., the jiggling Dallas Cowgirls) or zany crowd behavior. (An ABC Monday Night Football camera once caught a spectator making an obscene finger gesture at the camera; sportscaster "Dandy

Don" Meredith explained to his partner, "Howard [Cosell], he means we're Number One".) While true sports fans are happy just to see the contest, instant replays and sportscasters' emotive commentary "hype" the drama for the less committed.

No one symbolizes the rise of the star sportscaster more than Howard Cosell, once described by a jealous critic as "the only man in the world who changed his name [from Cohen] and put on a toupee in order to tell it like it is." James Michener describes a Miami Dolphins–Pittsburgh Steelers football game he attended where one fan, who had a radio tuned to pick up television audio, became a center of attention:

> What's [Cosell] saying now?" people begged. "What did he say about that pass?" What Howard Cosell said about a play was much more important than the play itself. . . . It was as if only the presence of Cosell lent verity.*

Television's marriage to sports has made Cosell a millionaire. Its economic logic also means big money for professional sports that can attract national audiences:

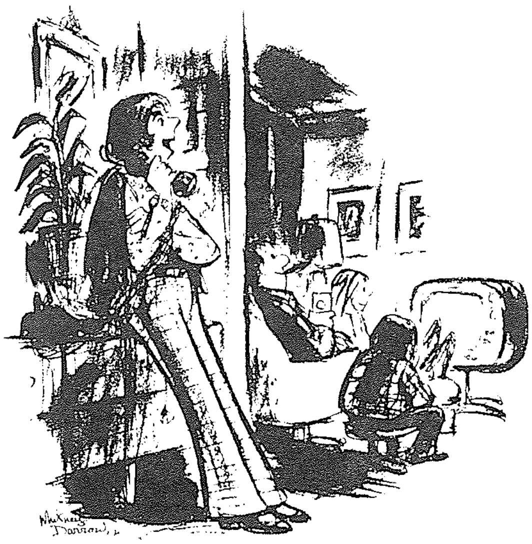
ABC, CBS, and NBC together spent approximately $160 million to broadcast National Football League games during the 1978–79 season. Baseball will get $54 million for the 1979 season for network and local broadcasters. The 22 teams of the National Basketball Association currently divide more than $40 million each year. And the Professional Golfers Association will receive $30 million from its contract with NBC and CBS to broadcast tournaments from 1979 to 1981. More than half that money will be reimbursed to corporations that sponsor tournaments on the PGA tour, with the remainder retained by the PGA tour for administrative costs and capital development.

Media revenue is a crucial source of income for the owners of professional sports teams. As Roone Arledge, ABC-TV sports and news chief, observed several years ago, "So many sports

*James A. Michener, *Sports in America*, New York: Random House, 1976, p. 311.

David L. Altheide, 33, is associate professor of sociology at Arizona State University. He received his B.A. from Central Washington State College (1967), his M.A. from the University of Washington (1969), and his Ph.D. from the University of California, San Diego (1974). He is the author of Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events *(1976) and* Media Logic *(1979, with Robert P. Snow).*

Robert P. Snow, 42, is assistant professor of sociology at Arizona State University. He received his B.A. (1960), M.A. (1963), and Ph.D. (1967) from the University of Minnesota and collaborated with David L. Altheide on Media Logic *(1979).*



Drawing by Whitney Darrow, Jr. Used by permission.

"I'm afraid we're kind of tied up. Eddie and Paul are watching Game of the Week, then the Tulsa Open, Aussie Tennis, and the Big Fight reruns. Karen's signed in for Wide World of Sports, Celebrity Bowling, Gymnastics from Poland, and the Roller Derby. I'm watching the Innsbruck slalom trials, African Safari, free falls and gliding."

organizations have built their entire budgets around network TV that if we ever withdrew the money, the whole structure would collapse."

Consider, for example, the short-lived World Football League. Promoter Eddie Einhorn, whose independent TVS network had the league's television franchise during its opening (1974) season, was able to sell the games to 110 television stations around the country, including the top 36 markets. But after league scandals (such as manipulation of attendance figures), the audience ratings for league telecasts dropped drastically, and Einhorn decided not to renew his contract. Without TV revenue, the league's second season was its final season. Delivering an unkind epitaph, Eddie Einhorn declared:

> In the final analysis, the league had mediocrity written all over it. It had \$250- or \$500-a-game players written all over it. I think the lack of a national television package definitely hurt their credibility, too. If a league's not good enough to have a national TV game of the week,

> a guy doesn't want to go. It's bush, and he's not going to pay money to see it.

In the Big Leagues, the TV factor is no less important. And the rules of most games have been changed to suit the TV requirements for faster action. Offense is emphasized over defense. For example, professional baseball now has the "designated hitter" to bat in the American League as a substitute for the weak-hitting pitchers. Adding to the action are a larger strike zone to encourage more hitting, a livelier regulation ball (with a bigger rubber center and more tightly sewn cover), and umpires who are trained to keep games moving at a faster pace.

The Bowl Boom

Football began promoting the field goal for the last-minute victory and the longer kickoff for the exciting runback. New rules encouraged more passing (defenders may make contact with receivers within five yards of the scrimmage line but are restricted beyond that point; offensive linemen are allowed to use open hands and extended arms to shield the quarterback).

Basketball reinstated the exciting "slam dunk" and instituted the "24-second rule" to increase the offensive pace of the game. Teams in the NBA must attempt a shot within 24 seconds of receiving the ball.

Tennis adopted the sudden death playoff to court the media, and, to brighten the color TV screen, players no longer dressed only in white.

Golf also developed the sudden death playoff, as well as its par scoring system.* Long ago, it allowed noisy TV cameras to disturb golfers' concentration. When TV began to cover sports, one irate golf champion vowed, "I'll never accept a grinding camera on the course when I'm playing." A television executive prophetically responded, "When we start to offer big money, he'll learn to."

Sometimes, major changes have been made on the spot to adapt sports events to commercial TV's programming requirements. In one case, the Miz-Lou Television Network had contracted to produce a closely-timed three-hour "package" of the December 19, 1975, Blue-Gray College All-Star football game for syndication to TV stations around the country. When, at the beginning of the game, it looked as if the contest might last too long, TV officials ordered that the first period be 12 minutes

*In golf, tied players renew play at the 16th hole and play until one player wins a hole outright. In tennis, sudden death means that, after a 6-set tie, a tie-breaking set is played.

long rather than 15. When the game moved more quickly than they had expected, the third quarter was ordered stretched out. And when that tactic proved inadequate, additional minutes were added to the final quarter. In the last 31 seconds, after the game technically should have been over, the Blues scored a touchdown to win, 14 to 13. Bill Moseley, an official of the Blue-Gray Committee, later publicly apologized to the Grays for allowing TV to steal their victory.

To assuage TV's need, seasons are longer. More games are scheduled during the prime time evening hours (e.g., Monday Night Football); and during overlaps of different sports' seasons, schedules are adjusted to avoid conflict. The United States Golf Association split what used to be 36-hole Saturday marathons into 18-hole contests on Saturday and Sunday. College post-season football championship games were spread out (from December 22 to January 1 in the 1978–79 season), rather than all being played on New Year's Day. Football "bowl" games have multiplied like rabbits: There were 5 major bowl contests in 1940; the 1978–79 season saw 12.

Superstar Economics

In 1974, ABC offered to broadcast the Notre Dame–Georgia football game if its date were shifted from Saturday, November 9, to Monday, September 9, as a season opener. Both schools quickly agreed to the change. Some adverse criticism followed, but Bear Bryant, the University of Alabama coach, commented, "We think TV exposure is so important to *our* program and so important to this university that we will schedule ourselves to fit the medium. I'll play at midnight if that's what TV wants."

Television has also changed the style of athletes. Some veteran golfers, for example, have reputations as frightful grouches on the greensward, but as soon as they come on camera, they become all sweetness and light. A few athletes find the opposite technique equally pleasing to the media—at least one boxer and one tennis player come to mind as accomplished actors using on-camera nastiness to pique the attention of audiences.

TV officials believe that, for prime time, an "ideal norms" format, emphasizing honesty, hard work, team spirit, and fair play, is best. The commissioners of the various professional leagues have sought to reduce the amount of visible violence on the playing field, notably by imposing cash fines on erring players. While brute force has always been part of most contact sports, it embarrasses the networks when witnessed close-up by millions during family viewing time. Ex-gridiron star Frank Gif-

BASKETBALL DOLLARS

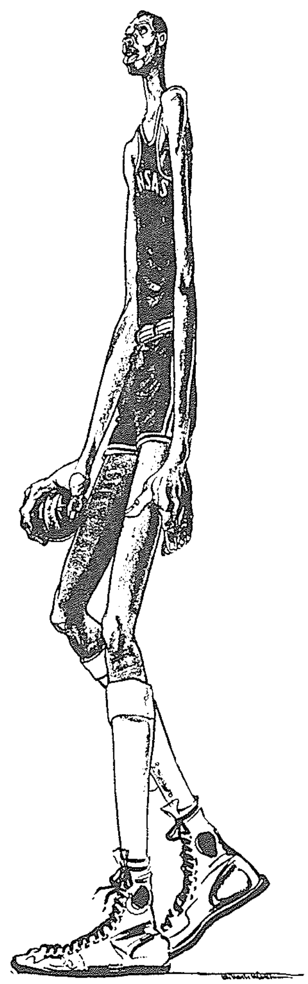
For the past three years, the office of Lawrence F. O'Brien, U.S. Basketball Commissioner, has been compiling a profile of a hypothetical professional basketball team. Sources of revenue and major expenditures for such a team are shown below. According to the Commissioner's office, the figures are quite close to the average for U.S. professional basketball teams. Figures for expenses exceed 100 percent because the typical team in the National Basketball Association operates at a loss.

REVENUES

Gate receipts	71%
TV, radio, playoffs, concessions	29
	100%

EXPENSES *(as percent of revenue)*

Player salaries, pensions, etc.	51%
Administrative and miscellaneous expenses	19
Arena costs	13
Advertising, marketing, public relations	6
Coach, trainers, scouts, etc. salaries	5
Team travel	5
League assessment	4
Legal	4
	107%



Adapted from a drawing by Willard Mullin.

ford, who fostered his share of mayhem during his playing days, is now heard to intone as a commentator on Monday Night Football: "Violence has no place in this game." On the other hand, TV would lose many viewers and, as a result, advertising dollars, if *all* harum-scarum were eliminated.

Player salaries have also been affected by television. Management has been using TV revenue to stay in the black for over a decade; in some cases, a team can play to an empty house and still make money. Now players have decided that they have not been getting their fair share of the dollars. Multi-year contracts in excess of $100,000 a year are no longer uncommon for individuals. A few players even have multi-year million-dollar contracts.*

Inevitably, superstar economics have developed, with players both employing business agents to negotiate contracts and increasingly playing out their contracts to become free agents.† To earn big money is to prove that one is a superstar; to earn less is to be second-class. The top players are now both highly skilled athletes and wealthy entrepreneurs who, like Hollywood actors, sell their services to the highest bidder.

Selling the Sizzle

For their part, the sportswriters have largely adopted the management perspective, saying: "It's just a job, and why shouldn't players get paid a lot of money," or "The owners still have a lot of money," or "The only problem is that some players aren't worth what they are getting."

Each of these statements makes sense in the context of worker-employer wage negotiations. They still seem alien to amateur players and numerous fans who cannot understand how anyone could possibly put a dollar value on athletic endeavor. Strikes have become relatively common in professional sports: the 13-day strike by the Major League Baseball Players Association in 1972 that caused a 10-day delay in the season's opening and the cancellation of 86 games; the 1979 baseball umpires strike; the brief 1979 walkout by some athletes in the North American Soccer League who wanted to form a players union, but who were forced back to work when a judge threatened to deport striking foreign athletes.

All in all, professional sport has become more a matter of TV entertainment than a straight competitive contest. And yet, the push to produce a winner—and a top-rated TV attraction—at any cost has actually undermined, to some extent, sound business logic. Many owners of teams spend more money on players than the teams are making as profit; the "bottom line"

*First baseman Pete Rose switched from the Cincinnati Reds to the Philadelphia Phillies in December 1978 for a contract averaging $745,000 a year (with part of his salary paid by a Philadelphia television station). Pittsburgh Pirates right fielder Dave Parker has a complicated contract that, after allowing for inflation, should net him an average of $1 million to $1.5 million a year. California Angels first baseman Rod Carew's five-year contract gives him a $900,000 a year average.

†In baseball, a player must announce a year in advance that he intends to become a free agent in order to have his name placed in a draft. Other major league teams may then bid for his services.

may, in the short run, show a loss. And the current willingness of a few team owners to make huge investments to capture the top players has given sports a certain oligopolistic flavor. As the *Los Angeles Times* commented after the 1977 World Series:

> The world championship New York Yankees weren't built. They were just a complicated business merger. A $3 million pitcher here, a $2.9 million outfielder there, a $1 million shortstop on top, and presto! Instant World Champions. . . . The pennant will be decided in a countinghouse in November, not a playing field in October.

Yet, ironically, in some cases, the guarantee of TV revenue may actually lower owners' incentive to win, especially if they know they cannot spend enough to produce a championship team. Asked in May 1979 if he thought this was true in the National Football League, George Allen, former coach of the Los Angeles Rams and Washington Redskins, replied, "I think that's right. Nobody is losing money; everybody is making it, even if his team is in last place. You don't have to win to make money. Look at the [San Francisco] 49ers—they won two games."

In short, professional sports have become like many another industry—operating in accordance with the dictates of *its* special marketplace. To mask the internal cynicism, massive public relations efforts are made to promote the notion that nothing has really changed, to maintain the image that professional sports still embody the magic, altruism, uncertainty, rivalry, and super-human capacity for heroism.

We are repeatedly told by team publicists that players perform out of personal pride and team loyalty. Along with this ideal, we see professional athletes engaging in charity drives and coaching at youth training camps. National Basketball Association stars appear in commercials for YMCA basketball leagues. Reggie Jackson, the notoriously temperamental New York Yankee slugger, once stated, "Being a pro athlete is one of the most difficult things in the world. Realistically, it's not realistic."

For his part, Toronto Blue Jays baseball club president Peter Bavasi noted that his organization was involved in selling "the illusion of baseball." He added:

> I grew up in the time when . . . the only acceptable way to promote a baseball team was to win the World Series. We don't have that luxury [in Toronto], so we must sell the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of baseball . . . the sizzle instead of the steak.

But there is more to image-making than baseball game "bat nights" and "guaranteed win nights" (fans who attend home games of a normally unlucky team are guaranteed tickets to another game if the team loses). Team owners make major financial investments such as million-dollar player contacts, in part so that they seem dedicated to preserving interteam competition; those owners who do not are berated by the local sportswriters and fans for "not caring."

Amateurs Profit

Largely because of television, the real values of professional sports have become the standard for amateurs as well. At the college level, it is helpful to have winning teams to bolster institutional prestige and alumni loyalty. Fund-raisers for Yale, for example, contend that a victory over Harvard by the university's football team spurs an extra $500,000 in Old Blue alumni contributions over the following year.

For some universities, sports are big business, attracting tuition-paying students, alumni dollars, and lucrative television contracts. For example, the College of William and Mary, a 6,000-student school in Williamsburg, Virginia, with a high academic reputation, wants to expand its present 15,000-seat football stadium to accommodate 30,000 spectators, despite substantial opposition from students, faculty, and the local community. Supporting the proposal, which bears an estimated price tag of $4.8 million, are alumni and the school's official governing board. The enlarged stadium, it is said, would enable William and Mary to again host its traditional opponents, including Navy and the University of Virginia, who demand higher revenues from ticket sales than the college can now provide. Such games, in turn, would attract remunerative TV coverage.

Perhaps sports may again be played less for fortune than for fun. Unhappily, the more predictable outcome is a wider gap between the traditional *ethos* of sports on the one hand and the commercial realities on the other. If so, collective self-delusion will reach a new level, and the sports dramas provided by television in pursuit of top audience ratings will assure us that the fiction we are watching is real.