

The Sports Television Personality

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Because sports television lacks many of the features that typically define television programming, it can occasionally be a challenge to critically analyze. To that point, even pinning down the sports television “text” can be difficult. A televised game, for instance, has a vague status. Is it a distinct televisual text? Or might it instead be considered a paratext of the sporting event itself, which is nominally meant to serve a different audience? Critical studies of sports television, then, may be particularly well-suited to embracing the analysis of celebrities and celebrity culture, focusing not just on athletes, but also the liminal figures who emerge in the media environments that surround athletic competition. That in mind, the study of sports television personalities offers the advantages of both opening a wider range of televisual phenomena to analysis and facilitating novel interrogations of the complex relationship between sports, media, and culture. As the recent discourses around figures like Jemele Hill indicate, sports television personalities are perhaps just as likely as sports television programs to become the center of broader cultural conversations and, in the process, reveal how sports television is structured and consumed.

One example of the way that sports television personalities refract the larger social and cultural issues that surround sports television involves the twisting career of announcer Gus Johnson. Although the play-by-play announcers who narrate the ongoing action of televised sports are often rather anonymous figures, prized for their ability to seamlessly blend their voices into a game’s proceedings, the occasional broadcaster nonetheless manages to break through and become a star in his or her own right. In recent years, few play-by-play announcers have become better known among American sports fans than Johnson, who has gained fame and a devoted set of fans by calling events with an unrelenting enthusiasm punctuated by trademark fits of hysterical excitement. But for all of Johnson’s star power, Fox attracted puzzlement and criticism by initially selecting him as the primary voice for the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. Latching onto Johnson’s lack of experience calling soccer games, both fans and journalists attacked Johnson as a soccer novice and called on Fox to instead use the veteran broadcasters that ESPN had used for the 2006 and 2010 World Cups. At first holding firm, Fox continued with its plan by gradually placing Johnson into more and more prominent soccer matches in preparation for the World Cup assignments. This firmness was not to hold forever, though, for while Fox’s experiment succeeded in attracting attention, it slowly turned into a minor fiasco. Johnson was lambasted for a series of poor performances and was eventually forced to step away from his soccer duties.

Fox's unconventional decision to put Johnson at the forefront of its soccer coverage served as a novel test of the power of sports broadcasting celebrity. The selection of Johnson, an American with a background in sports like basketball and football, ran counter to a recently developed norm which entailed American networks leaning on experienced British sportscasters to call their soccer properties – a norm closely related to fan-driven discourses centered around notions of expertise and “authenticity” apparently linked to the close association between the United Kingdom and soccer. As Johnson struggled through matches, it was not uncommon to read comments like those from *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Bruce Jenkins, who wrote, “How do you feel about an American voice calling big-time international soccer? I’m dead-set against it.” He continued, “One grows accustomed to the British elite ... and the undeniable ring of authenticity.” Fox, though, banked on the star power of Johnson to overcome this norm and attract new fans to soccer, particularly young viewers apt to consume soccer coverage across multiple platforms – an assumption that, in the end, proved faulty. Apparently absorbing lessons from the Johnson experiment, Fox did eventually incorporate several American broadcasters into its 2018 World Cup coverage, but avoided major names, preferring commentators with significant soccer experience. Regardless, some fans continued to express a preference for British announcers.

Fox's failed attempt to turn Johnson into a soccer announcer demonstrates that it is not just star athletes who can help us better understand how social and cultural issues refract through the lens of sporting celebrity, but also the rarely studied sports media stars who orbit those athletes. In Johnson's case, we see that sports television personalities exist at the center of larger issues such as globalization and technological change, among others. However, as Johnson's failure also demonstrates, sports media celebrity is distinct from athletic celebrity. Even the most popular sports media figures operate at a lower wattage than athletic stars, thus making them particularly vulnerable to the broader forces at work in the intersection of sports, media, and culture.