

The Sports Television Personality

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The duality of the sport television personality represents the larger contradictory and conflicting roles of sport within society. Sport is at once presented as a pop cultural escape: a reality show encompassing narrative twists, mythologized characters, and year-long story arcs that cumulate in dramatic finales. At the same time, sport is an industry based in the reproduction of culturally significant social rituals that intersects with serious issues and inequalities related to gender, race, sexuality, and nationality (among others) in both the staging of these rituals and in the running of the organizations that participate in them. Sports personalities then, must carry the weight of two roles: of the in-story performer, offering analysis and updates related to matches, and of the reporter, covering the significant news stories that emerge from and circulate around the events. The increasingly tenuous balance between these roles reflects the heightened interrogation (and integration) of popular culture and political/social debates and the evolving platform realities of sports media.

The most visible and immediate example of this is the NFL players' kneeling protests against police brutality and racial inequality that have received heightened attention from President Trump and others. By performing the protests during the national anthem—an entrenched part of the television broadcast—the protesting NFL players have made their protests inseparable from the game itself and destabilized the ways in which broadcasters work to marginalize and make invisible the uncomfortable social realities that surround any given sporting event. Social media has also increasingly broken down the performed separation of sports and politics as these platforms have thrust athletes, politicians, reporters, fans, and others into closer conversation. LeBron's James' tweet of "U Bum" to President Trump and Trump's later tweet impugning the intelligence of James were national stories that received massive attention not just from sports media, but national news media as well.

Within this space, then, I argue that the traditional separation of church and state in sports—sports as escapist entertainment and sports as a reflection of social realities—is disintegrating. Further, as television, long the main bastion of sports as escapist entertainment, increasingly folds into the emerging digital multi-platform apparatus, its stars and personalities are increasingly expected to engage in the murkier waters of social media where sports is increasingly tied into the rhythm of daily political and ideological debate. To be a sports television personality these days increasingly no longer allows the privilege of just "sticking to sports."

While the rapid shift of influence in sports discussion away from television and toward social media and the internet at large has brought critiques about sport television's antiquated ways into the forefront, television and the sport television personality have already been evolving in response to these shifts in the way we consume and interact

with sport. The onslaught of “debate” format shows on sports television, starting with PTI in 2001 and continuing through with Around the Horn, First Take, and many other disciples and imitators, reflects the new normal of sports as a continually contested space, where topic shifts between statistics and politics are routine and expected. Some of the “stars” that have emerged out of these shows, most infamously Skip Bayless, harvest their celebrity in much the same way as celebrity political pundits, with “hot takes”, uncompromisingly brash rhetoric, and an opinion on any topic with traction on social media.

As someone who has long saw the “sticks to sports” mantra as a convenient way to consume sport while ignoring and dismissing the structural inequalities and ideological foundations that animate it, I tentatively welcome a television landscape and sports television personalities that have to grapple with social and political issues more than previous generations did. However, with that grappling comes the opportunity for the same levels of abuse, sensationalizing, and distraction that we see in political media.