

# Sports Television and the Culture of Personalities

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Professional sports television personalities perform a range of specialized discursive functions. Their appearances are defined by a variety of significant and overlapping distinctions: between athlete-celebrities and media industry professionals, between local and national sports television personalities, between play-by-play, color commentators, studio-show hosts vs analysts and league “insiders,” and between quasi-journalistic professionals who work and have worked exclusively in media industries and the current and former athletes and coaches who appear alongside them. I’m going to concentrate on this last distinction and on sports punditry because I think it clearly manifests the significant changes that are shaping 21<sup>st</sup> century sports media, particularly the pressure on the myth of sports as a neutral and apolitical field. While there remain significant differences between the discourse and performative functions of coaches, athletes and “sports reporters,” trends in the cable sports television industry along with the rise of social and digital media have blurred these boundaries. Reporters have always shared with athletes the responsibility for hyping spectacles, but 21<sup>st</sup> century athletes contribute more than ever to a broader and more diverse discourse on sport. As it has become part of the job of the TV sports reporter to repeat their takes on Twitter, podcasts, and radio, it has become more difficult to separate their commentary from the current and former athletes and coaches who share those spaces.

A key moment in the expansion of sports punditry was the turn to relevance in 1970s television and the relationship between Howard Cosell and Muhammad Ali. Cosell is important not only in his own right but because his stardom and legacy is part of the hegemonic influence of ABC and Disney over US sports media. His ability to inspire passion and rage among sports fans and his willingness to foreground the politics of sport make him a key antecedent for the hyper-opinionated hot takers that dominate 21<sup>st</sup> century sports television. Cosell’s relationship with Ali pushed race to the forefront of the sports conversation, and made sports hipper in the process. ABC/Disney and their chief competitor in the national sports television market, Fox, have tried to capitalize on this legacy by staging interracial conversations about sports ever since. Cosell and Ali’s influence was clearly evident in *SportsCenter’s* urbane and urban rhetoric in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and in Tony Kornheiser and Michael Wilbon’s *Pardon the Interruption*, which launched a new era of TV sports punditry in 2001. Kornheiser’s Long Island attitude, ironic posture, and dubious sports knowledge mark him as a clear descendent of Cosell, and his and *Pardon the Interruption’s* success facilitated the emergence of a new class of ESPN personalities on *Around the Horn* (2002--) *First Take* (2007--) and the fan-centered digital platforms of *Page 2* and *Grantland*. Gradually, these personalities have become more diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation as Disney has tried to maintain its position atop the US sports media market through the post-network era.

The personalities of 21<sup>st</sup> century sports television carry traces of Cosell in their frank discussion of the politics of sports, their often-adversarial relationship with leagues and athletes, and in the way they politicize sports fandom itself. Boone Arledge made *Monday Night Football* a national event by exploiting an on-screen tension between Cosell and Don Meredith that mapped legibly, for a popular audience, onto demographic distinctions similar to those that Nixon exploited during his presidential runs: Coastal urban elite vs down-home country boy. While Meredith openly voted Democratic, his comic feud with Cosell nevertheless encouraged fans to develop a taste for sports commentary that expressed difference, raising the stakes and intensity of sports talk in the process. This legacy is felt in the emphasis on argument and opinion in contemporary sports television, in the diversity of national sports commentators, and in Fox Sports' recent strategy of counterprogramming Disney/ESPN through the conservative sports commentary of Colin Cowherd, Skip Bayless, and Jason Whitlock. Ultimately, the dog-whistling of these conservative commentators is an extension of the signaling that Arledge, Cosell, and Meredith used to reach the top of the sports media market. Where the classic network era maintained some illusion of consensus, however, the use of these tactics in the post-network era has transformed the displaced politics of sport into openly political discourse.