

Sports on Television

The How and Why Behind What
You See

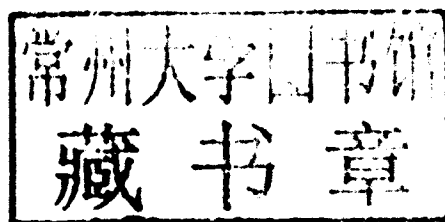
Dennis Deninger



SPORTS ON TELEVISION

THE HOW AND WHY BEHIND WHAT YOU SEE

DENNIS DENINGER



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SPORTS ON TELEVISION

Dennis Deninger takes the reader through every aspect of the medium: from its simple beginnings to its rich and complex present, behind cameras, inside board rooms, explaining everything from TV rights to TV wrongs. This serves as a fine guidebook for anyone who wishes to understand the many layered dimensions and decisions that shape and affect how sports comes through the screen and into our homes.

Mary Carillo, television commentator

In *Sports on Television*, Dennis Deninger provides an all-encompassing view of the sports television industry. He progresses from the need for this book, to the history of the industry and discipline, to the pioneering events of sports broadcasting and sports television, to a nuts-and bolts, behind-the-scenes look at a sports television production. All the while, he examines the impact that sports and the mass media have had (and are continuing to have) on one another and on society.

Dennis Deninger is an Emmy-award winning television producer and educator who has produced television programs from six continents and across the USA. He spent 25 years at ESPN leading production teams for studio programming, live remote events and digital video platforms. He now teaches at Syracuse University and serves as president and executive producer of Deninger Media, USA, a consulting and production firm based in Cheshire, Connecticut.

To Gail,
who has watched more than her share of sports on television with me.

And to our sons Matthew and Kevin, who grew up as sports fans.

Foreword

The US hockey team's Miracle on Ice. David Tyree's acrobatic Super Bowl catch for the New York Giants. Landon Donovan's extra-time, game-winning goal in the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Few things in life match the exhilarating excitement of sports and moments like these.

This unique human drama stokes people's emotions unlike any other entertainment genre, and, because a majority of fans can't be in the stadium or arena to witness most events first-hand, they consume sports primarily through television—it's how they fulfill their sports passions.

Sports is even more compelling because of the "power of live," sharing in real time the elation of your favorite team's victory or even the emptiness after they suffer through what *ABC's Wide World of Sports* dubbed "the agony of defeat." Watching a sporting event after the fact is just not the same as watching it live.

When ESPN launched in 1979, conventional wisdom questioned whether there would be enough interest to sustain a twenty-four-hour sports network, much less a dedicated hour-long sports news and information program like *SportsCenter*. Today, ESPN has eight domestic networks in the United States and fifteen localized versions of *SportsCenter* around the world. And, beyond ESPN, there are countless other networks and programs devoted to sports.

The astonishing growth of sports television over the past three decades has been fueled by fans and their unquenchable thirst for sports, and we haven't even approached the saturation point.

While digital media continues to grow substantially, television remains the driving force in sports media with its ability to reach a mass audience. High definition has transformed the viewing experience, and 3D quite possibly could do the same. Beyond TV, the industry is constantly evolving, with new technologies and innovative platforms emerging before our eyes.

Sports video content is available on a plethora of digital platforms, computers, phones, tablets, etc. There has never been a better time to be a sports fan or a more exciting time to be taking a course on sports television.

That you are reading this textbook demonstrates not only your passion for sports but also your curiosity about this industry.

Dennis Deninger spent twenty-five years at ESPN. He understands the industry—what makes it unique and how it has evolved. I know you will enjoy his perspective and the special insights he brings to the chapters within this book.

George Bodenheimer
Executive Chairman, ESPN

Preface

It would be hard to overestimate the impact of televised sport on the United States of America that we know in the early 21st century. Since its primitive beginnings at a college baseball game played on the afternoon of May 17, 1939, on Columbia University's Baker Field, live sports television has affected virtually every aspect of American life: how we spend our time, the clothing we wear, the words and phrases we use, the qualities we value and seek to embrace for ourselves, even our understanding of people who come from racial or ethnic backgrounds or from countries different from our own.

Sports on Television: The How and Why Behind What You See will explore the origins, influence, reach, and current state of sport on American television. In so doing we will discuss the forces and processes involved in the decisions that affect the programming, content, and production of sport television, as well as the roles played by people at every level of the industry. We will look at how these forces and processes work for the coverage of international sports events, and at how sports television is changing as it spreads across multiple distribution platforms.

The objective is to take you several layers deep, beyond "just the game," to help you understand why you are seeing the selected events and programs that are televised, how sports television works as a business, how sports has changed television, and how television has changed sports.

Millions of Americans watch a wide variety of sports on television every week. We will go beyond the numbers to find out why people watch what they watch, what they spend their money on, how advertisers and sponsors make their buying decisions, and how televised sport can change behavior.

Sport has become part of America's connective tissue. Our team loyalties, the rivalries between teams, colleges, cities, and states, and our interest in the stars and personalities of sport all bind us together. They give us topics to strike up conversations with family and friends, colleagues and strangers. The shared experience of watching on television as great players perform amazing plays provides us common ground for social interaction and spirited debate. Sports on television is entertainment derived from human stories that strike a chord in all of us, stories of determination and achievement that play out live before our eyes, with results that very often keep us in suspense until the final whistle sounds.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my mother, who first got me excited about her beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. And thanks to everyone along the way who has given me the opportunity to learn about broadcasting and to grow as a professional. From Charles D. Henderson, who hired me when I was still a senior in high school to do the morning news on WLEA Radio in Hornell, New York, to all of the generous mentors who have taken the time to share their knowledge and expertise.

Michael Schoonmaker, Dona Hayes, and David Rubin gave me the chance to start teaching at Syracuse University, and share the lessons I have learned with new generations of young professionals. The encouragement and support I've received from all my Syracuse colleagues, Michael Veley and Rick Burton in particular, have been invaluable in this project.

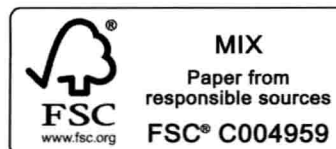
Special thanks go to my publisher at Routledge, John Szilagyi, who led the way for this first-time author, and to Arlin Kauffman and Kristen Shilton, for their enthusiastic and expert research and clearance assistance.

I also want to acknowledge the generosity and contributions of Chris LaPlaca at ESPN and David Plaut at NFL Films.

And thanks to all my students, who inspire me to keep learning right along with them.

Dennis Deninger

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1 TELEVISION THAT MATTERS

Why do you watch sports on TV? For most people the answer includes one or more of these factors:

- To see your favorite team.
- To follow and admire favorite players.
- To see competition, collisions, and confrontation.
- To see performances by individuals who are the best in the world at what they do.
- To see human drama that is unscripted.
- To see how a story will end, to see who wins and who loses. (If you have wagered on the game or event, or if you play fantasy sports, you want to see if you will be the winner or loser.)

Substitute the words “actors” for “players” and “shows” for “teams,” and the first four of these reasons for watching could just as easily be the answer to, “Why do you watch scripted entertainment shows on television?” The critical differences are in the unscripted nature of sports, and the fact that the results of the games and events *matter* to you.

Watch any fictional entertainment or non-fiction “reality” show on television and you will always find a set of stories, some more obvious than others, that will be resolved by the end of the episode or the season. But does that resolution matter to you? Do you carry with you what happened to a character in a drama, or is it important to you who is voted the best dancer or who goes off to live “happily ever after” with “The Bachelor” or “The Bachelorette?” Probably not.

Compare that to how you feel when your team wins the Super Bowl, the World Series, the NCAA championship, the NBA Finals, the Stanley Cup, or even a regular season game against a long-time rival. The results mean something to us. The plot of the story may seem apparent, especially when a big favorite faces a decided underdog, but the ending is always in suspense because the drama is unscripted.

The same can be said for the unforeseen stories that almost always provide layers of texture and multiple plot lines within each live event. The commentators may tell us before the game begins which stars to watch for and why, but there is no guarantee that they will be at their best, that they won’t run into a defense they

cannot overcome, that they won't be injured in the first few minutes and spend the rest of the day on the bench. Unheralded second-string players may step forward and become the stars of the contest; a veteran past his or her prime may rise to the occasion and temporarily recapture the form and fame of old.

Every sporting event is filled with human narratives of hardships endured, commitments made, dedication to family or mentors, goals achieved or yet to be attained. These are all stories we can relate to, they drive our interest and build audience. There are real consequences to the events we watch each week: starting positions will be gained or lost, players will be traded or released, and coaches will be fired or hired based upon the results of their seasons. And then there's the money. The unscripted outcomes of events will determine which athletes top the money list, who will get the most lucrative endorsements, which teams and leagues will succeed, be forced to move, or fail, and how large the next television rights deal will be.

The money generated by sports on television fuels a set of businesses from television networks and distributors to the sales of high-definition and 3D televisions, the manufacture and sales of sneakers and jerseys, and a lot in between. Big money and large audiences create power. And power always attracts politicians.

Sports is television that matters to people in ways that no other entertainment can.

AN AUDIENCE THAT MATTERS

In the first decade of the 21st century the top-ten rated television shows in the United States were all Super Bowls. The Nielsen Company reports that the most-watched single program in the history of American television was Super Bowl XLV on February 6, 2011. An average of 111,041,000 viewers were watching the Green Bay Packers play the Pittsburgh Steelers every minute of the telecast on CBS. That represents a rating of 46.0, which means just short of half the television homes in the nation were watching. The share of the televisions that were in use on that day and were tuned to FOX TV for the Super Bowl was 68 percent. It is very likely that successive Super Bowls after the publication of this text will surpass Super Bowl XLV and move into that all-time number one position.

If every Packers fan and every Steelers fan in America were the only people watching Super Bowl XLV as Green Bay won 31–17 at Cowboys Stadium in Texas, the total television audience would have been only a fraction of the record-breaking total. Clearly the collective stories that developed over the course of the entire NFL season, regardless of which of the thirty-two teams was a fan's favorite, drove audience to the Super Bowl. Add to that the attraction that Americans have for big events like championship games, the Olympics, and the Oscars, and you get an enormous number of viewers who care about the outcome and want to see the event live.

An audience of over 110,000,000 people on commercial television will see a lot of commercials from sponsors who are willing to pay very high rates to deliver their messages to the masses. There were 115 ads during the Super Bowl XLV game telecast on FOX, occupying forty-eight minutes of air time. The commercials sold for approximately \$3 million per thirty-second spot. That put the cost of reaching 1000 viewers in Super Bowl XLV at roughly \$27.27. The value of television advertising is measured in cost per thousand (CPM). Shortly after Super Bowl XLV, NBC announced that it would start selling thirty-second commercials in Super Bowl



Figure 1.1 The Super Bowl is the most-watched American television show year after year. The game is fed to over 180 countries and territories in thirty different languages

XLVI at \$3.5 million each, the highest price ever charged for a half minute of advertising on American television.

When you add the commercials that aired in the four hours of the FOX pre-game show, plus the post-game show, you get a sense of how Super Bowl Sunday has become one of the most important advertising days of the year in the United States. The agreement that FOX has with the NFL gives the network the exclusive rights to televise the Super Bowl every three years in rotation with NBC and CBS. But the network with the game is by no means the only network covering, or generating advertising revenue from, the Super Bowl. For example, ESPN originates a week of “surround” programming each year from the Super Bowl for its networks as well as ESPN.com and ESPN Radio. The NFL Network blankets its schedule leading up to the Super Bowl with over one hundred hours of content related to the upcoming game. NBC has hosted *The Today Show* from the Super Bowl site and a variety of networks create and produce programs that connect with fans and/or the host city. Sports and general interest publications and web sites cover the preparations and the game as do radio networks and stations.

All of these platforms sell advertising, and all of those dollars piled together represent a major economic impact from this one televised NFL football game. Sports has not banished scripted or reality entertainment shows from the television universe. Those programs in prime time and throughout the day and night continue to draw millions of viewers and bring in billions of dollars in advertising, but, when reaching the absolute largest audience of the year matters, the answer is a televised sporting event, the Super Bowl.

Table 1.1 Top ten most watched US television shows, 2000–11

	Program	Avg. Viewers per Minute	Rating	Share	Date	Network
1	Super Bowl XLV (Green Bay Packers vs. Pittsburgh Steelers)	111,041,000	46.0	69%	2/6/11	FOX
2	Super Bowl XLIV (New Orleans Saints vs. Indianapolis Colts)	106,480,000	46.4	68%	2/7/10	CBS
3	Super Bowl XLIII (Pittsburgh Steelers vs. Arizona Cardinals)	98.7 million	42.1	65%	2/1/09	NBC
4	Super Bowl XLII (New York Giants vs. New England Patriots)	97.5 million	43.3	65%	2/3/08	FOX
5	Super Bowl XLI (Indianapolis Colts vs. Chicago Bears)	93.2 million	42.6	64%	2/4/07	CBS
6	Super Bowl XL (Pittsburgh Steelers vs. Seattle Seahawks)	90.7 million	41.6	62%	2/5/06	ABC
7	Super Bowl XXXVIII (New England Patriots vs. Carolina Panthers)	88.4 million	41.4	63%	2/1/04	CBS
8	Super Bowl XXXIX (New England Patriots vs. Philadelphia Eagles)	86.1 million	41.1	62%	2/6/05	FOX
9	Super Bowl XXXVII (Tampa Bay Buccaneers vs. Oakland Raiders)	88.6 million	40.7	61%	1/26/03	ABC
10	Super Bowl XXXIV (St. Louis Rams vs. Tennessee Titans)	88.5 million	43.3	63%	1/30/00	ABC

Source: copyrighted information of Nielsen, licensed for use herein.

When the stakes are this high, the pressure on everyone involved in the production, programming, promotion, and sponsorship of the television event is multiplied. We will examine each of these functions and identify the sets of skills and attributes required of these individuals in the coming chapters.

BUSINESS MATTERS

Sports is big business in the United States, providing a livelihood for hundreds of thousands of people far beyond the celebrity athletes with the multi-million dollar contracts and endorsement deals. Research by PricewaterhouseCoopers for the *Sports Business Journal* and by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (SGMA) shows that, in the year 2009, the sports sector of the economy totaled \$235 billion. If you add the \$27.33 billion that Americans spent in 2009 on recreational transportation—bicycles, snowmobiles, motorcycles, pleasure boats, and RVs—the total would come to \$262.3 billion, over a quarter of a trillion dollars.

It would be impossible to extrapolate how much of that money is attributable to the fact that sports is on television every day of the year, reaching millions of consumers who buy the shoes, hats, and jerseys they see worn by athletes, buy the Gatorade and other foods the athletes consume, pay the monthly fees charged by the cable, digital, or satellite providers who deliver the live programs to their homes, or who buy tickets and travel packages to future games to be played by the teams they follow on TV. In the early years of television many leagues and teams feared that live television coverage would result in fewer people attending games in person because they could sit home and watch, never having to open their wallets. But

Table 1.2 The sports business in the US, 2009

Advertising	\$27.43 billion
Spectator spending	\$26.17 billion
Operating expenses	\$22.98 billion
Gambling	\$18.90 billion
Professional services	\$15.25 billion
Travel	\$16.06 billion
Medical spending	\$12.60 billion
Licensed goods	\$10.50 billion
Media broadcast rights	\$6.99 billion
Sponsorships	\$6.40 billion
Facility construction	\$2.48 billion
Multimedia	\$2.12 billion
Endorsements	\$0.897 billion
Internet ads/subscribers	\$0.239 billion
Sporting goods	
Sports apparel	\$28.17 billion
Sporting goods equipment	\$20.2 billion
Athletic footwear	\$12.3 billion
Exercise equipment	\$4.2 billion
Team uniforms	\$1.13 billion
Total	\$235 billion

Source: *Sports Business Journal* media kit.

the reverse has proven to be true: a lack of television exposure can consign a league or team to anonymity and red ink.

The economics, advertising, and power of sports television are major topics that we will be covering in depth later in this book. However, when billions of dollars are changing hands it's abundantly clear that there is far more at stake than the latest "scores and highlights."

A MATTER OF IDENTITY

Each year I have assigned my students to write a short "self-portrait" explaining how televised sport has influenced who they are, what they wear, the expressions they use in everyday speech, their perceptions of races other than their own, and how they spend their time. These "self-portraits" have been most revealing both to me and to the students who take the time to think about the things that define them as individuals. "My life would be considerably different if I didn't have televised sport in my life," wrote one 21-year-old male. "Actually, I can't even imagine what my life would be like. I ask my dad from time to time what it was like when he was growing up" when there was far less sports on television. The young man's father responded that he "didn't really know," but that it must be like remembering how we all existed before there were cell phones.

A woman who was a junior wrote about how she remembered watching the 1996 Summer Olympics when American gymnast Kerri Strug injured her ankle on her first vault and battled through the pain to land her second vault, helping the US women's team win the gold medal in Atlanta. "The determination and courage displayed by these women throughout the entire 1996 Olympic Games," she said, "served as my inspiration and commitment to athletics, leadership, and willingness to succeed in any endeavor." Many others have said how the games they saw on television influenced one of the most important choices they will make in their entire lives—which college they would attend.

Young men and women from small towns in New Hampshire, Delaware, and upstate New York have all described how sports on television provided their first opportunity to learn about and see the amazing accomplishments of African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and players from foreign countries. They said it helped broaden their understanding of humanity and prepared them for the diversity of people on campus and in the world outside their home towns.

A senior from Seattle echoed the observations of many when he wrote that "televised sport has provided me with the ability to connect and share experiences with others, even absolute strangers." He said that, "I truly believe sport in any form, but especially at the collegiate and professional levels, is a form of social currency."

Sports on television matters to each of these young people far more than it ever did to generations of Americans who preceded them. To find out how the increased availability and mass distribution of live television sports has changed us we need to go back to the years before World War II when the United States was a very different place.

DISCUSSION TOPICS/ASSIGNMENTS

- 1 Do your own "self-portrait" describing how sports on television has affected who you are, what you wear, how you speak, and how you spend your time.

- 2 Take your favorite team or sport and research its current economic health. Include television rights deals for local, regional, and national distribution. Has the size of the television audience for this team or sport increased or decreased in the past five years? Who are the biggest sponsors? What are their attendance and ticket pricing trends?
- 3 If you were an investor, which sport would you buy into now? What factors would you have to know before making your decision?
- 4 What is your first memory of watching sports on television? Why is it memorable? Who were you with? Has it affected your sport preferences or team loyalty to this day?