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## MNF dilemma: How to entice casual fans, not alienate purists

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In this brief interval between the end of ESPN's lavish NFL season coverage and the beginning of its equally lavish offseason coverage, I want to look back at its marquee NFL show -- "Monday Night Football."

MNF is ESPN's most expensive, most watched and, almost by definition, most criticized show. Minutes after 8:30 p.m. every Monday this fall and early winter, my mailbox began to balloon with messages from a segment of fans who were unhappy even before the kickoff. They didn't need to see the game to know what they didn't like. They did not like seeing three men in the booth. They wanted two -- a play-by-play announcer and an analyst who stuck to X's and O's. They did not want a color commentator. They did not want sideline reporters, especially female ones. They wanted no talk of off-the-field matters. They wanted no booth guests.

These viewers offered a hard knot of resistance to MNF from first game to last, and I imagine they are ESPN's nightmare -- they are football's true faithful, purists important to please, and yet perhaps impossible to please while MNF seeks an audience large enough to justify its eight-year, \$8.8 billion rights contract with the NFL.

Enlarging the audience means drawing in the so-called casual fan, aka the fickle or occasional or marginally interested fan, who is widely presumed to be more attracted by bells and whistles and booth guests than by X's and O's. ESPN's dilemma: How to entice one kind of fan without alienating the other.

My mail, and my own experience, suggests that the dilemma may be a false one, that the distance between the purist and the occasional (my term of choice) football fan may not be as large as conventional wisdom holds. My evidence: The fluctuating pattern of my mail from game to game and from quarter to quarter within a game. Also my own reaction, which triggers the impulse to check the mail mid-game to see if my reaction is shared.

Whereas the purist is angry from the get-go, the outcry of occasional fans rises and falls, subsiding to near silence during some games and rising to a shrieking chorus during others. Both groups, however, object to essentially the same thing: too many distracting interruptions of the game. The main difference is that diehards anticipate the interruptions and occasional fans are surprised by them.

The largest shared complaint of the two groups is the booth guest. Purists get mad at the mere mention of a booth guest's impending arrival. Occasional fans wait until the guest arrives and booth talk strays to upcoming movies, old sports lore or rehash of the latest over-covered sports scandal. If the booth guest behaves well, restricts his comments to the moment of the game at hand, the occasional fan is fine, but it's small consolation for the purist, whose gastric juices are stirred by prolonged anticipation of the worst -- divided attention during a quick TD drive, a thundering sack or a game-tying field goal.

The only booth guest who drew positive mail last season was Deanna Favre. She kept her eyes glued on the field, on her husband, Green Bay quarterback Brett Favre, even, she said, after the ball left his hands, because there was still a risk of injury. For a few minutes, we watched a spot on the field through her eyes, riveted to the game by a guest.

Occasional fans as well as diehards want to be engaged in the game, not distracted from it. They want a booth and a production that enhances that engagement by providing information, expert analysis, perspective and the feeling that the viewer is part of a large, shared experience.

At its best, the Monday Night booth of Mike Tirico, Ron Jaworski and Tony Kornheiser provides that. Tirico's smart, alert play-by-play lays down the base of information that allows us to follow the action better than our unassisted eyes could. During instant replay, Jaworski plucks the crucial detail from his instant mental encyclopedia to illuminate what

made the play explode or fizzle. Kornheiser leaps in with the unabashed knee-jerk reactions of Everyfan, making us feel less isolated or foolish as we ride the roller coaster of our reactions over the peaks and valleys of mounting or flagging hope, jubilation, boredom, disgust.

At its best, "Monday Night Football" invites us to be the fourth man or woman in the booth. At its worst, it excludes us from a loud private party, not letting us get a word in edgewise and blocking our view of the game. At its worst, MNF feels as if someone is being rude to us in our own home.

After its second year on ESPN, MNF is still a work in progress. Its booth and production teams are idling a bit now before offseason evaluations and tune-up, which is why I want to seize this moment to summarize the highlights of a season's worth of viewer feedback.

- Viewers thought the addition of Ron Jaworski, so likeably upbeat and ebullient, improved the chemistry of the booth. That the three men seemed to enjoy one another's company was a plus. Sometimes, though, they enjoyed one another too much, laughing, cracking inside jokes and seeming to forget that we, the viewers, were there, too.
- Early in the season, Kornheiser, a veteran sportswriter and football outsider, often turned to Jaworski, a former quarterback and football insider, with the kind of questions likely to be on a fan's mind. Viewers, whether insiders or outsiders, liked the tutorial. As the season progressed, though, Kornheiser seemed to enter his a-little-knowledge-is-a-dangerous-thing phase, becoming the upstart student whose quibbling with the teacher dominates the class. Viewers would have preferred moving on to the advanced tutorial.
- Viewers had few complaints about Tirico's play-by-play. Too often, though, viewers took in the game not through play-by-play but through replay, because the switch to game action from extras (sideline reports, pop-up stat graphics, "SportsCenter" updates, booth guests) came too shortly before the snap for the viewer to refocus attention. When replay becomes the primary way of experiencing the game, something is wrong.
- Sideline updates from Michele Tafoya and Suzy Kolber on player injuries and coaching decisions were a plus. Viewers complained, however, about mid-game interviews not directly related to the game, especially if they ended in one of those too-quick switches back to the field. ESPN confirmed reports that the mid-game role of sideline reporters will be reduced next year.

It seems to me that all the complaints I received about "Monday Night Football" have one root: There is too much going on for viewers to feel they are experiencing a game. If ESPN wants its three-man booth to succeed, it needs to give the viewer some room to breathe, to have his or her own thoughts and reactions, to enjoy a few moments of blessed silence over the long haul of three or four hours. The obvious way to do that is to cut down on the aural and visual clutter that comes between the viewer and the game.

For starters, I am convinced that elimination or drastic reduction of booth guests would be the single greatest gift ESPN could give its MNF audience. It also would be the single greatest gift they could give Kornheiser, who as prime interviewer of the guest gets the prime blame for that worst-of-game interruptions. I doubt Kornheiser lined up Drew Carey to talk about his new role as host of "The Price is Right" during a game, but he took the hit for it. The purists don't want a third man in the booth to begin with and are quick to blame Kornheiser for everything they don't like about the production. They know he is not their man. He knows it, too.

"I'm not the hardcore fan," Kornheiser said when asked how he saw his role. "I'm supposed to articulate what I think 90 percent of the people are thinking, which is, *This game's over* or *That guy's got some explaining to do* or *What was that?* Jocks don't do that. Jocks defend the turf of jockdom.

"I'm wrong every day on 'Pardon The Interruption,' and I learned from PTI it's OK for me to be wrong on national television. Fans are wrong a lot, but not every announcer thinks it's OK to get it wrong."

What makes it OK for Kornheiser to get it wrong is the presence of Jaworski and Tirico, who are quick to offer the corrective, much as co-host Michael Wilbon and "stat boy" Tony Reali do on PTI. What is not OK with viewers, though, is pounding the point/counterpoint too long and hard, lingering on it after the game has moved on.

Kornheiser also thinks of himself as "the English major in the booth," the writer looking for the dramatic narrative lurking behind the X's and O's. That's more than OK, but some viewers, including me, wish for a more expansive narrative, with plots and subplots, major and minor characters, not just a single hero, usually a star quarterback or flamboyant wide receiver, whose rise or fall is followed so exclusively that the narrator forgets football is a team sport.

This brings me back to the presumed divide between diehard and occasional fans. The best chance of bridging it is simply by respecting the game and respecting the viewer's desire to be engaged in it. Why else would anyone sit down for a beefy several hours when they could easily snack on half-hour sitcoms or reality shows?

When the booth is serving the game -- supporting it with information, analysis, perspective, storytelling, spontaneous humor, honest reaction -- viewers seldom rise from their sofa to write me. When the booth seems to be serving itself or mistaking itself for the show, I get what has become a slogan among the discontented from both sides of the gulf: "We didn't tune in for a talk show."

"It is a very busy show," conceded MNF producer Jay Rothman. "There were five voices, lots of technology, but I thought we made good strides this year, and I know we are going to get a whole lot better. We will be sitting down for meetings in March to talk about how to do that."

## Trash Talk

Whenever an athlete takes a verbal shot at another player or team, ESPN's pundits are quick to label it "trash talk" and wonder why anyone would go out of his way to make himself a target like that. I wonder the same thing about ESPN's trash talkers. In the past few months, ESPN has enraged vast legions of fans by what seems a steady stream of gratuitous insult. Sometimes, it is couched as humor. More often, it is pure vitriol.

- In December, ESPN.com briefly ran a poll question on Page 2 asking if readers would like to see Celtics star Kevin Garnett "blow his knee out." Garnett's response: "Man, I mean, that's my life, my career. You don't joke about something like that." ESPN publicly apologized to Garnett and the Celtics.

- That same month, when LSU football coach Les Miles repeatedly and categorically denied ESPN-flogged rumors that he intended to leave LSU for Michigan, several ESPN pundits repeatedly and categorically called him a liar -- not in the "I think" language of opinion but in flat-out statements. "Les Miles is a liar" was the opening line of Jemele Hill's Page 2 column. No public apologies were forthcoming when Miles renewed his contract at LSU, as he said he would.

If pundits say, "He is a liar," when they mean, "I suspect he is equivocating," much stronger insults must be flung when someone actually breaks his word and his contract.

- When head coach Bobby Petrino abruptly left the struggling Atlanta Falcons before season's end to take the head coaching job at the University of Arkansas, I heard pundits on air call him "sleazy," "slithery," "sickening," "a fraud," "a coward," and "a creep." Analyst Sean Salisbury advised college football recruits to stay away from Arkansas and its untrustworthy new coach. Online, Pat Forde and Len Pasquarelli mounted what one reader called "chainsaw attacks" on Petrino's character. Another reader was "shocked at the transparent amount of personal dislike" that dominated coverage of Petrino's move, and he asked how ESPN could call such coverage journalism?

The answer is, they don't call it journalism. They call it opinion. The problem is, with so much opinion and so little reporting on why Arkansas hired Petrino, one might easily conclude all those Arkansas fans cheering his hire were idiots. I found one lonely voice, ESPN The Magazine senior writer Bruce Feldman, on his blog on ESPN.com, telling readers that "Arkansas had lucked out by hiring Bobby Petrino," because "the guy is one of the best offensive coaches the college game has seen in a long time."

I understand that overwrought opinion is a time-honored form of sports entertainment, but I can't help wonder who is served by this climate of escalating insult? Judging from my mail, vitriol from ESPN simply begets vitriol toward ESPN.

I also wonder if the escalation of on-air and online insult played a role in anchor Dana Jacobson's serious

miscalculation about the bounds of off-air insult. Most of you who wrote me about reports of Jacobson's off-air comments at the roast in Atlantic City for ESPN Radio's Mike and Mike have already received a reply detailing what I know and think about that incident. Anyone interested can [read that reply](#).

## Spygate II

On the Friday before Super Bowl XLII, many people were astounded, as I was, when the dormant Spygate scandal was revived on ESPN.com with a story about Matt Walsh, a former Patriots' video assistant who "hinted" that he might or might not have evidence that he might or might not divulge about whether or not the Patriots engaged in more spying than was previously known. Why would ESPN.com run a story so potentially damaging to the Patriots on the basis of murky allegations from a source who, as one reader/journalist put it, "should give anyone in our business a good case of the squirms"?

The timing also made several readers suspicious, especially those who noted that the story, written by investigative reporter Mike Fish, listed columnist Gregg Easterbrook, notorious critic of Patriots' coach Bill Belichick, as a contributor. Was ESPN seeding the clouds to rain on the Patriots' widely forecasted Super Bowl parade?

I called ESPN.com's editor-in-chief Rob King with these questions, and he explained, "ESPN did not choose the timing of that story. The New York Times and Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter did."

That same Friday, the New York Times broke the news that Sen. Specter, a longtime Philadelphia Eagles fan, wanted the Senate Judiciary Committee to investigate NFL commissioner Roger Goodell's handling of spying charges against the Patriots. The Times story included quotes from Walsh, similar to those he had given to ESPN.com's Fish, who had been talking to Walsh for several weeks.

"We were not ready to run a story using Matt Walsh's comments," King said, "but once the New York Times identified him as a potential witness in Congressional hearings, we thought we should contribute what we knew about him."

That was a judgment call, and I think a reasonable one. The risk, given ESPN's power to direct the national sports conversation, is that it may have helped give a huge amplified megaphone to an unreliable source.

And what was Easterbrook's role?

"He got an anonymous tip about Walsh back in September, which he passed on to us after he began talking to him," King said. "We assigned Mike Fish to report out the story, and eventually that led to Mike's going to Hawaii, where Walsh lives, to do an interview."

Easterbrook may have taken some satisfaction in rain falling on the Patriots' parade, but he was not the rainmaker on Super Bowl weekend. Blame for that goes to Specter and the New York Giants.

We will learn much more about Walsh's credibility in the coming weeks. In the meantime, I share this reader's view: "I hope, for ESPN's sake, that there is some meat behind the sizzle on this story. Otherwise, I would be very disappointed at the sensationalistic nature of this sequence of events."