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New-and-improved "SportsCenter" throws ombudsman curveball

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ESPN Ombudsman

In a column last summer, posted in response to the insipid, monthlong Who's Now competition on "SportsCenter," I broached the notion of ESPN's producing a crisp, clean half-hour evening edition of "SportsCenter," focused on news and highlights, minus cross-promotions, gimmicks and miscellaneous fluff.

The chorus of amens that I received from readers was one of the year's largest outpourings, exceeded only in volume by the precolumn mail from viewers who felt Who's Now represented the final step in the devolution of "SportsCenter" from must-see to can't-watch TV.

Six months have passed, and I recently noticed something I am hesitant to write about for fear of jinxing it. "SportsCenter" has changed.

While on vacation last month, I recorded 10 day's worth of 9 a.m. "SportsCenters," beginning Feb. 15, so I could catch up on the sports news upon my return. I approached the task of review reluctantly, regarding it as punishment for taking time off. Once I plunged in, though, I was amazed to find myself enjoying hour after hour of "SportsCenter."

They were not crisp, clean half-hours, but far more often than not, they were crisp, clean hours dominated by highlights and news, with remarkably few gimmicks, sponsored segments, cross-promotions or padding of any kind.

Prominent credit was given to other news sources for breaking stories when appropriate. Most surprisingly, there were almost no opinion segments, even after news updates on the kind of off-the-field scandals that normally become occasions for commentator overkill. Analyst segments were few and short, usually a single analyst giving a pithy 30-second answer to a single focused question rather than a whole crew of studio analysts repeating each other for several minutes, or pairs getting into snarly dogfights for our presumed entertainment.

The time saved went to more highlights of more teams and more sports, including hockey and NASCAR, as well as to more interviews and reporting. Relatively speaking, especially compared to my first months in this job last spring and summer, these "SportsCenters" seemed too good to be true. Perhaps I had soaked up too much sun on vacation. Perhaps it was some kind of seasonal fluke.

I checked my mailbag for complaints about "SportsCenter," but the only steady drumbeat I found for the second half of February was directed at the month's gimmick, The Greatest Highlight competition, in which viewers chose "the best all-time highlight" from a tournament-style bracket of 16. Viewers actually liked the concept, but they wished the archival footage had been played with the original audio instead of voice-overs by Chris Berman. As one wise viewer put it, "The original emotion of the moment is integral to the highlight."

Even those complaints represented progress. Viewers who thought the Who's Now competition was all wrong thought "SportsCenter" had gotten The Greatest Highlight competition at least half-right.

After extending my scrutiny of the 9 a.m. "SportsCenter" for another week, it was time to ask ESPN if the changes I noticed were real, intentional, a sign of things to come or a temporary aberration. I called senior coordinating producer Craig Bengtson, who came to ESPN from ABC News in August 2006 and who in August 2007 was charged with overseeing all editions of "SportsCenter."

Were the faster, crisper, newsier "SportsCenters" with reduced use of analysts and shorter sponsored segments a fluke? "No," Bengtson said. "It is deliberate."

"We are always looking to make segments more concise," Bengtson said, identifying the "we" as himself; Glenn Jacobs, senior coordinating producer for the 6 p.m. and weekend morning "SportsCenters"; and Michael Shiffman, coordinating producer for the 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. editions that are re-aired from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. the next day.

"We certainly are hitting news stories hard," Bengtson said. "We have cut back on the use of analysts and try to use them only when it makes sense to use them. We have also made sponsored segments shorter, sometimes split them in half. When I first got here, they used to have 5-6 minute sponsored segments. Now we've cut them into maybe a 2-minute segment in the first half of the show and a 2-minute or less segment in the second half of the show. The point in all of this is to have more and shorter segments. And smarter ones.

"We are also making a concerted effort right now to give anchors a little more time to develop chemistry and to engage viewers."

A little alarm bell went off at that last point about anchors, but I focused my next questions on analysts, because more selective use of them had seemed the key aspect of the changed "SportsCenter" to me, making other enhancements possible. What was Bengtson's take on the role of analysts?

"My expectation is, if they are the so-called experts, they should tell me something I would not have thought of on my own," he said. "When we don't get that, it is usually not their fault. It's the questions we ask them. We need to be smarter with our questions, and we should only offer analysis when it is needed. Sports fans are smart. They don't need analysis after every story."

Reassured by that, I asked Bengtson what he meant by giving anchors more time.

"The shows have not been personality-driven," he said. "In fact, we often cover up our anchors with video. A viewer can watch an entire segment sometimes without knowing who is talking to them. So we are looking to do less of that, and give our anchors opportunities to display a little more personality on air."

I know many readers of this column will fear, as I do, that more "personality" will mean more schtick, more imposition of anchor ego onto the news. Perhaps, though, it will mean anchor teams who have more of a stake in guiding us reliably through the news, providing context, perspective and the tone that best matches the content. Bengtson, who spent 12 years of working with the Peter Jennings at ABC News, surely knows the difference.

"A lot of this is just common sense," Bengtson said of the recent efforts to improve 'SportsCenter.' Yes, and the consistent exercise of common sense is all that most of those who write me ask of ESPN.

I understand that 1,000 words of praise for "SportsCenter" is going to make some readers think their ombudsman has jumped the shark. All I can say is that I still recognize what drives viewers crazy even in the best of "SportsCenter" months.

I too groaned at the overplay of Yankees owner Hank Steinbrenner's disparaging comments about "Red Sox Nation," taking it as the opening salvo in the annual hyping of the great East Coast rivalry. I, too, was appalled at the shameless cross-promotion that is ESPN The Weekend, especially when athletes were asked to name their favorite Disney rides. And I don't understand how a sponsored segment called Coors Light Cold Hard Facts can feature anchors asking analysts to be fortune tellers on such questions as, "Are you convinced Brett Favre will stay retired?"

Old School

Once upon a time in journalism, there were reporters who gathered facts and stuck to them; analysts who drew on their expertise to provide context and perspective for those facts as objectively and impersonally as possible; and commentators who after long experience were granted the privilege of offering their personal opinions on the facts.

There are still viewers and readers who expect ESPN to respect those categories, and they are extremely frustrated by the blurring of boundaries, particularly by the infiltration of personal opinion into reporting and analysis.

This frustration was perfectly expressed in a message I received from Mike Swanander of Brooklyn, N.Y.: "Who is a journalist on ESPN? Who is a commentator? Who deserves my trust? Who is who? ... I don't need anybody's opinion unless I ask for it. If I tune into "PTI," that's me asking for it. Maybe I'm asking for too much. Am I too old school for the 24-hour news cycle? Please encourage ESPN to lead the charge and draw the line between hype, B.S. and news."

The truth is, barring a revolution among consumers of information, those lines are unlikely to be restored. The question is no longer who is a reporter, but when is a reporter reporting? When is he analyzing? And when is he offering personal opinion?

Vince Doria, ESPN senior vice president and director of news, a veteran of old-school print journalism, says of the blurring, "It's an occupational hazard. It is out of the bottle now, and the way I have come to feel about it is, if you don't give reporters a little rein, you are going to lose out on the special insights they have to offer, and if you do give them rein, you are going to have some missteps, and you are going to have to do damage control when that happens. The best you can hope for is that there is a controllable amount of this."

Outside the enterprise unit, is anyone at ESPN charged with being a traditional objective reporter? "Right now," Doria said, "that is primarily our [TV] bureau reporters, like Jeremy Schaap, Rachel Nichols, Ed Werder, Kelly Naqi. They are the last pure specimens, and sometimes they are not pure either, but we are trying to keep them that way."

"We have attempted to pass on plenty of traditional journalistic principles here, but when my generation and yours is gone, I don't know if the discipline is going to exist. The landscape is changing."

I am not quite so fatalistic about the future of the discipline, not even at ESPN. There are still reporters, analysts, producers and editors trying their best to establish new boundaries within the changed landscape. More selective use of analysts at "SportsCenter" is one sign. A new enterprise unit is another. And although not much prevents an individual from blurring the lines on air, I am told that if someone wants to hold the line, those wishes are respected.

T.J. Quinn, one of the new "old school" reporters on ESPN's block, says that occasionally, especially on radio, he has had to remind an anchor or host not to ask him for his personal opinion. But, he adds, "everybody I have dealt with here on every platform has respected my standards as a reporter. I have never been pressured to blur the line."

Quinn has had to adjust, though, to fewer safeguards on TV.

"At newspapers, we had a rigorous system of vetting information long before it ever showed up in print," he said. "Here, because it is a live medium, there is nothing to stop somebody who wanted to venture off and say whatever they wanted unless they had their own set of standards, or unless it had been made very clear to them what their role is."

"When you are on a live medium, being asked about your reporting, it's easy to be drawn to a conclusion. It's a seductive and a natural direction for a conversation ('So this looks bad for Roger Clemens...'), and it takes an effort to avoid it. My mantra is 'I don't know what I don't know,' and I try to remind myself to live by that."

Holding the line is trickier for Buster Olney, who, as an ESPN the Magazine senior writer and ESPN.com columnist, is called upon to serve as a baseball reporter, analyst and commentator on all platforms.

"I try to be cognizant all the time to separate the roles," Olney says. "If I am doing a breaking news story on Major League Baseball and steroids, I step back and try to carve myself and my opinions out of it entirely. Then there are times when an anchor will come back and ask what I think, and I will give my opinion. When I switch caps, I try to preface it with, 'Well, my opinion is ...' but there are probably some viewers who don't know we just made the switch from reporter to analyst."

There are certain sensitive topics on which Olney will not give any opinion -- such as whether or not Roger Clemens is telling the truth about performance enhancing drugs -- because it might later compromise him as a reporter. Producers have been asked not to box him in with that question.

"There is a chance with Clemens that I will be asked to be a pure news-gatherer," he says, "and it is important to stay

out of that corner."

In old-school journalism, staying out of the corner did not just mean not expressing an opinion, it meant not forming an opinion until all the facts were in, lest it leak into and color one's reporting. Maintaining that mental discipline becomes harder when one exercises it in some situations, but not in others. For Olney, that means no opinions on Clemens while at the same time writing a baseball blog, of which he says, "there is probably not a day that goes by that I don't issue five billion proclamations and opinions."

ESPN analysts drawn from the ranks of former athletes and coaches face entirely different boundary issues, which are identity issues of sorts. Are they part of the media or part of their sport, and whose best interests are they serving when those two conflict?

ESPN baseball analyst Steve Phillips, a former New York Mets general manager, says, "There are a lot of people who come into broadcasting from the sports industry with their foot still halfway into their sport, thinking they would like to have another job in their sport again, and they hold back on what they say.

"I don't have that aspiration. Still, as I think back on the day of the Mitchell report's release, I was defensive for Brian Sabean and Peter MacGowan, the San Francisco Giants front office people mentioned in the report, because I have that front office perspective."

On a recent "Outside the Lines" report, Phillips seemed to take a giant step onto the media side of the fence when he acknowledged that, as general manager of the Mets, he had signed a player whose performance declined upon joining the team. When Phillips learned the cause was the player's going off amphetamines, he thought, "Well, dear God, will somebody please get him back on those? That's the truth, and I say it with some sense of shame and responsibility."

After that show, Phillips says, "I got a lot of reaction from people at ESPN, pats on the back, and I wondered if I had opened up too much about it."

Such disclosure may not be in the best interest of baseball, but it is essential for an ESPN baseball analyst who is asked to comment on others' complicity in the steroids era. To me, it seemed Phillips had chosen the media side of the line, but I also noticed that when asked later in that same show what baseball management should do now to clean up the game, he began talking about what "they should do" and then shifted to what "we should do."

"I wasn't aware of switching from 'they' to 'we,'" Phillips says. "But I do believe that we as broadcasters are part of the game. We still have an impact on the game. I don't know whether this crosses the line in broadcasting or not. I don't know if writers like Buster Olney and Peter Gammons consider themselves part of the game, but as a GM I always thought of the media covering the game as part of the game."

I knew what Olney's answer would be, but still I asked him whether he thought he was part of the game.

"No," Olney said. "There is definitely a hard line there for me. I don't think of myself as part of the institution of baseball."

Quinn, Olney, Phillips -- all drawing different lines or trying to locate them within the shifting landscape of journalism. Old-school straight lines may have toppled to the ground like a pile of overlapping pick-up sticks, but I think ESPN should make sure all its reporters, analysts, producers and editors know where the old lines are so they can recognize when it is in everyone's best interest to pick them up again.