

Response to “Televised sports and its contexts” roundtable
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Given the lack of attention in the Academy paid to mediated sports, it seems that media scholars should ask the question, Why? Are sports perceived as “male” and/or “lowbrow”? Certainly other TV texts share similar monikers, but few share the financial, technological and social “business” of televised sports. In this brief response, I’d like to outline just a few of televised sports’ more interesting, salient and unique characteristics.

The Masters golf tournament in April provides a fascinating example of how different certain televised sporting events are with regard to television’s other fare. CBS has been virtually held captive by Augusta National Golf Club since 1956: the club holds CBS to one-year contracts, allows only four minutes per hour for commercials and offers critiques of the broadcast after the tournament’s conclusion about verbiage used by announcers (*patrons* not *fans*, and *bunkers* not *sand traps*) and technological/production choices (buried production cables and wires, placement of cameras). Novel situations such as these—to say nothing of the fact that sports is live, and in the case of golf takes place over four days and not in the usual TV windows of 30-60 minutes—are unique in broadcasting and deserve more rigorous attention by media scholars.

A more recent example is the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. One evening early in the Games, my wife and I were in a local restaurant that would not be considered a sports bar. (Another aside and unique distinction for sports is its corporate viewing nature. There are no such things (to my knowledge) as “soap opera bars” or “*CSI* viewing restaurants.” Yet there is an entire economy built around providing food, drink and televisions to sports fans. But I digress ...) Suddenly and dramatically, the patrons all began screaming and exhorting toward the eatery’s televisions. Seemingly ordinary people seated in the restaurant were no longer eating, drinking or conversing. They were yelling, cheering and willing Michael Phelps to victory in a pool some 8,000 miles away. To call swimming a niche TV sport is an understatement at best, but, suddenly, 100 or so strangers were leaping from their dinners to cheer the USA to victory in the Watercube. Suffice to say, this doesn’t happen with *Buffy* reruns or John Ford retrospectives.

Televised sports are live and thus are the original reality TV. The reason Tiger Woods’ heroic and superhuman effort at this year’s US Open drew 16.4 million viewers over the weekend and almost 5 million for the Monday playoff has little to do with Woods, his knee or Rocco Mediate as everyman. The numbers do not belie the beauty of Torrey Pines or the sublime nature of golf in high-definition clarity. Sports on TV draws casual viewers and rivets like nothing else on TV for one reason: sports is broadcast live and thus isn’t scripted, which means anything can happen.

There is no way to know that Appalachian State will beat Michigan in the season opener of the 2007 college football season. There is no reason to imagine that the United States hockey team will upset the Russians in the “miracle on ice” in the 1980 Winter Olympic Games. Certainly, no one could predict NBC’s infamous “Heidi Bowl.” NBC cut away from the New York Jets vs. Oakland Raiders football game on November 17,

1968 with the Jets leading 32-29 with only 65 seconds left in the game. The Raiders scored 14 points in those 65 seconds, winning 43-32, but fans outside of the Pacific Time Zone did not see the outcome because NBC cued a hard schedule break to show the movie *Heidi*.

Sporting events on TV are usually broadcast live and thus are unpredictable. Such unpredictability is TV sports' unique element for product differentiation up and down the TV dial. Derek Kompare (*Rerun Nation*, 2005) writes that one of TV's guiding economic and programming principles is its reliance upon reruns and thus re-broadcasting knowable and repeatable outcomes. Certainly, sports is not immune to TV reruns (*ESPN Classic*, highlight shows, blooper reels, etc.) but sports' calling card is its liveness and thus its possibility for surprise. This brief and broad outline is but one option to broaden the discussion of televised sports within the Academy. Given the big business of sports and its convergence across multiple, media platforms, media scholars should devote more research efforts to televised sports and broaden the scope of our discipline in the process.