

Televised Sports and Its Contexts – Response  
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I found this topic and the questions asked in this roundtable intriguing because as both sports fan and television scholar, I have noticed the lack of scholarship in this area. I also believe that televised sports are a bit of each of the three questions and I had summed it up this way: As live television programming, sports in all its glory is indeed a genre full of racial and political struggle with state of the art production that utilizes the latest technology while creating one of the most extensive examples of media convergence that is sponsored very well by a diverse number of corporations and products. I added in my abstract that we should study the subject from every angle because there are many layers in the television coverage of sports, some subtle and universal, others bold that are important to only specific sports.

As a genre, sports are more compelling and elicit more emotion than any comedy or tragedy. In that respect, “the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat, the human drama of athletic competition” line from the opening of the old ABC’s Wide World of Sports sums it up nicely; there are other genres that can be seen through television’s coverage of sports, whether scripted WWE Monday Night Raw or an unscripted boxing match. If we are to examine the recent Olympics as a site of racial and political struggle, its television coverage had it all – the other countries, China and its politics, lots of young photogenic Americans and oh, yes, the events themselves. NBC’s multi-channel, multi-media extravaganza of coverage did an incredible job of bringing it all home and on our television sets and on the web. The Olympics are a genre itself, that has the new technologies and the media convergence every other year, whether the Winter or the Summer games and what makes it truly come alive in the past 50 years is television.

NASCAR – National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing – owes everything it is today to television. Between network and cable, every race is televised during the season from mid-February to mid-November. It has technology from all ends – cameras, graphics, telemetry, the cars and the things the crews use – it creates television production technology and the current coverage takes you on a wild ride into the top drivers cars from a myriad of angles. Nowhere in sports are there more opportunities for sponsorship and you can count hundreds of different ones before the race is over. What was primarily a southern audience in its early years has expanded as NASCAR has marketed itself well and has made many inroads all over the country, due to the adding of tracks nationwide and the never-ending television coverage, which is a far cry from the mid-1960s when the Daytona 500 was shown in an edited, half-hour package on Wide World of Sports. I remember when Dale Earnhardt Sr. hit the track in the late 1970s, when the first Daytona 500 was covered live flag to flag for the first time in 1979, Richard Petty reigned and it was all good ol’ southern boys back then with minimal sponsorship. Without television, NASCAR would still be below the Mason-Dixon line and only a regionally known sport.

Television and NASCAR have grown together over the past 30 years. One more question that can be raised is the corporate synergy that has developed because of the relationship between the two. NASCAR has had several breaks that brought it on to more television sets through the various networks fortunes & misfortunes. FOX was a fledgling network when it landed a large part of the NASCAR schedule for airing. When NBC lost the NFL for several years, it happily picked up the other part of the NASCAR schedule. NASCAR was also one of the first sports to work with cable, giving it a lower-tier advertising stream to those sponsors who want to reach the public but cannot afford to pay network spot rates. Like golf before it, NASCAR has also expanded sponsorship opportunity by having corporate underwriting that includes the sponsor’s name in the race itself. The World 600 became the Coca-Cola 600. Networks that used to be skittish when it came to product placement and other sponsorship have now embraced this and will run promos for these races. One last word and that is about the stereotypical NASCAR fan – the white, right-leaning southern middle-class male fan. Nowhere in television’s coverage of the past 30 years has this stereotype appeared on a regular basis and the crowd shots from races do not justify the stereotype.