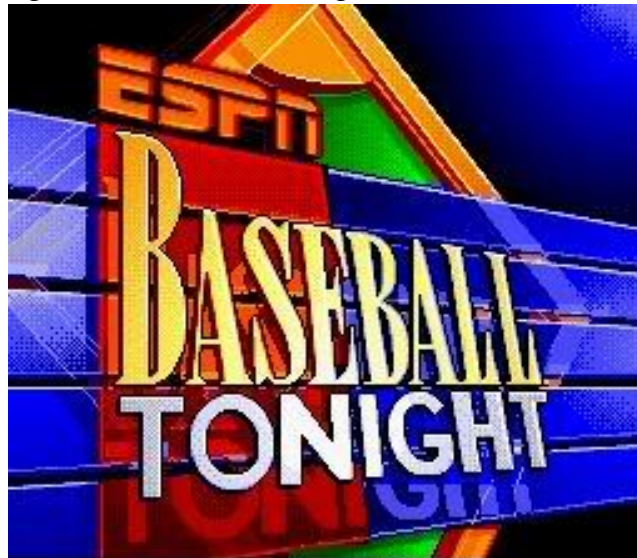


Baseball ... Not Tonight

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}
Thursday, May 24 2007 7:00 PM -

With the Indians rolling along at 28-17 on the year, winning every which way, Paul Cousineau goes a little off-topic for us this morning to address something that's been bothering him since Opening Day. The sad state of ESPN's Baseball Tonight.



With the Indians just rolling, winning every which way, it's time to go a little off-topic to address something that's been bothering me since Opening Day of 2007. The bothersome development is the sad state of ESPN's Baseball Tonight.

Has an institution that was so revered and loved ever fallen so far so fast?

Perhaps it's a byproduct of the overall decline of ESPN, which I feel started with Craig Kilborn's stint on SportsCenter. You won't find a bigger fan of Kilborn from those days than yours truly, but what he started was a movement by the ESPN "personalities" to become a bigger draws than the games and highlights themselves. A trend exacerbated by Kenny Mayne, then Stuart Scott, SportsCenter became half stand-up, and half anchors' "taglines". Lost in the mix was the actual coverage of games and insight and analysis that intelligent sports fans appreciated on a daily basis.

When ESPN made the movement to bring in loud-mouthed newspapermen,

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trying to make a name for themselves (Mike Wilbon being the exception), it only added air under ESPN's jump over the shark.

Don't get me started on how ESPN Classic went from a fantastic concept to a joke of a network, airing "Classic" bowling tournaments, World Series of Poker tournaments, and drag races.

Sadly, included in this decline is our beloved Baseball Tonight, which for years was a revolutionary concept - a nightly show of highlights of every game, inside information from Peter Gammons, insight and opinion from Harold Reynolds, and an occasional visit from well-spoken, intelligent baseball men (like Bobby Valentine or Buck Showalter) who took the opportunity to stay involved in the game while between jobs.

Baseball Tonight was a nightly fixture for any intelligent, interested baseball fan. Between Gammons' genius and infinite knowledge of seemingly every player in every organization in MLB (yes, his contacts are that good) and Reynolds calling like he saw it (regardless of whether you agreed with him, it was at least articulate and had opinions based in logic and MLB experience) - the show was relevant every night. Some segments worked (Web Gems), while others didn't (remember the "Name the Flying Baseball" that introduced the HR of the night), but you had to watch it because you didn't want to miss Gammons slyly intimating that a trade was afoot or Reynolds hilariously pretending to swing a bat about 3 times in a telecast to show what a player was doing wrong.

Well, as with most good things, it has come to an end.

Maybe it was Gammons' health scare that convinced him to not stay on the nightly show, or Reynolds' unceremonious firing from ESPN, but the show has

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devolved into a 3-ring circus. With the addition of John Kruk and Steve Phillips to the everyday lineup with Karl Ravech (who must just sit there every night wondering what the hell happened), the show has lost all credibility and fails to even be interesting. I can't tell you the last time I sat through a whole show, which would be simply unheard of a mere 2 years ago, when my post-game viewing revolved around it.

The problem with the show in its current incarnation is that it seemingly tries to be like The Best Damn Sports Show Period or TNT's NBA Studio Crew (a bunch of guys who enjoy each other and talk sports while having fun); the difference is that there's nothing fun about the show, and the personalities couldn't be less compelling (unlike Chuck and Magic). To pass the show off as anything remotely insightful or "insider" is irresponsible.

Blame John Kruk and the ridiculous comments that he makes and the rest of the studio for letting him skate on his nightly inaccuracies and bombast just because he talks the loudest. Kruk's exchange with Orel Hershiser about Chris Young and Kruk's absurd ideas about how Young should pitch smarter because he's from the Ivy League, which were challenged by Orel, lends only a microcosm as to why Kruk is the wrong analyst for this show as he just yelled louder than Orel to make his "point". He may know something about baseball, but it certainly doesn't come across as he appears lazy or misinformed for not knowing things about MLB that even casual fans do. Kruk is a personality and a meathhead, who has a place in TV - but please, not commandeering the Baseball Tonight set, bullying his patently false information and ill-formed opinions on the dwindling viewership.

But Kruk comes across as Stephen Hawking when compared to the embarrassment that is Steve Phillips. Phillips once famously said that Cliff Lee was the best LHP in the AL (over Santana, Francisco Liriano, C.C., Zito, Buerhle, Kenny Rogers, etc.), leading Reynolds to scoff (correctly) that Lee wasn't even the best LHP on his team. The problem now (among many, many others related to Phillips) is that nobody challenges Phillips as he makes observations and

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opinions that are regularly about 95% crazy talk. He provides no inside information (shocking for a former MLB GM) and deals mainly in generalities, which should basically be vanilla, except that those generalities are ALWAYS wrong. I never thought I'd be able to completely tune out a man who spent time as a Minor League Player and a MLB GM who SHOULD know something about baseball. But every time that Phillips appears on my TV, my radio, or my computer, I rush to get his ignorance and misinformation as far away from my brain as possible so as to avoid any possible osmosis from the Village Idiot.

It's a sad state of affairs when I go out of my way to NOT watch Baseball Tonight and it's not because they show Red Sox and Yankees highlights for 20 minutes, analyze those two teams for the next 20 minutes, THEN get into the other highlights of the night - sometimes not even showing ONE highlight from a game. In an hour, they won't show ONE highlight from an MLB game, but can talk about Darrell Rasner's injury and what it means to a team 10 games out of 1st (in mid-May) going forward. I was able to get over that fact (BBTN has always been Red Sox/Yankees Central) because the rest of the show was so chock full of highlights, so informative and compelling.

Is BBTN too far gone to save?

I don't think so, but it needs to return to its roots, to become the source for baseball information for intelligent baseball fans everywhere. Send Kruk back to BDSSP or send him to the locker rooms of different games where Kruk is most comfortable, enjoying some post-game pops with the boys. It would certainly be an improvement over having the players call in, which in this age of technology is frankly embarrassing. As for Phillips, I don't care...give him the Old Yeller treatment or do whatever is needed to make him disappear from the baseball broadcasting landscape forever.

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Then what can be done with Baseball Tonight?

It's likely that Gammons won't return to the nightly gig, but Tim Kurkjian and Buster Olney (or how about Rob Neyer) need to make up a rotation for a permanent spot on the set, where they can impart their passion and knowledge about the inner workings of the front offices around MLB. For former players to join the desk to provide insight and analysis, why not have Hershiser to talk about pitching and Tony Gwynn (who now has a contract with TBS) to talk about hitting? Those two would be able to explain why a player would be mired in a prolonged slump or why a reliever may be experiencing some recent difficulties.

It's telling that I'd rather watch the one-hour show on FOX (with Zelasco, Karros, and Kennedy) on Saturday than watch any episode of BBTN at any point during the week. It's because the FOX show focuses on baseball and offers the opinions of informed broadcasters, while BBTN has become a shell of its former self.

Years ago, a good trivia question was what the E in ESPN stood for (it's Entertainment).

Now, the better question is what the S stands for.

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Baseball Tonight, in its current form, is just one example of that disturbing trend.

It is the example that disappoints me most as the summer nights continue.