

Mike Furlan's contributions go back to the earliest days of this website, and I'm fired up to get him back into the fray with one of the better pieces we've run in quite some time. In it, Furls takes the self proclaimed "Worldwide Leader In Sports" head on with this revealing column talking about what ESPN has degenerated into.



Here is an old trivia question for you, and something to ponder next time you are channel surfing; what does ESPN stand for? In the days before Google, no one was actually certain, speculation abounded. Now all one needs to do is plug ESPN into a search engine and you get the answer pretty quick, Entertainment and Sports Programming Network.

Now that this mystery of the ages has been solved, the answer begs another question; when did ESPN become EsPN? At what point did the entertaining take precedence over the sports? My guess is that it occurred sometime immediately following Disney's purchase of the network, but I suspect that you could make a case for points much earlier or much later. In the end it is a subjective discussion with all the fuzzy edges and blurred lines that make for great philosophical debate. Unfortunately, it also leaves us, the intelligent sports audience, longing for what we used to have, an objective, national sports broadcast with real analysis and responsible reporting.

There are still throwbacks to the golden era of ESPN, guys like Chris Mortenson and Peter Gammons, but it sure is getting hard to hear them over the played out Bermanisms or the yelling of PTI/Around the Horn. I wish I could say that the problems at ESPN are limited to a few hacks and big mouths on the air, but the problem seems to be much deeper. I would say that it is in fact organizational and somewhat unavoidable.

Think about it for a second, is ESPN a news station or an entertainment station? Is it CNN or is it HBO? Many of us tune in to grab our sports news, but is it objective or are there deeper hidden agendas within ESPN's programming?

Well right now ESPN is in a unique and difficult position as a news source and an entertainment source, and frankly, they have done a miserable job managing the double duty. In fact, I would say that their performance has taken a turn to the unethical.

As the self proclaimed "Worldwide Leader in Sports," ESPN is clearly leading us exactly to their bottom-line. I am fairly certain that it is now common knowledge that ESPN has recently acquired a minority ownership in the Arena Football League, and they are now apparently hell bent on jamming it down our throats.

In the years prior to this arrangement, ESPN's coverage of the AFL was limited to letting us know that it did in fact exist about two times per year. That is a stark contrast to its current coverage. AFL injury reports now stream by on the sports ticker at the bottom of the screen and AFL highlights, which before now were very rare, now appear with shocking regularity in their news shows replacing highlights from sports that people actually care about in top ten plays lists. Is it coincidence? I think not. Is it a coincidence that ESPN selected two of its biggest media stars, Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic to broadcast games,

knowing full well that they would discuss it on their nationally syndicated “Mike and Mike in the Morning?”

According to ESPN’s own Ombudsmen, Lee Anne Schreiber, shortly after acquiring a stake in the league, John Skipper, ESPN’s executive vice president for content, frequently said, “We will help grow the league across all of our multimedia platforms.” Is this a reputable news source with an agenda that supports journalistic ideals? I think not, unfortunately many of us to use it as a sports news source. I could assume that this is the result of a programming shift based on a “dynamic paradigm shift in the interests of its viewing constituents,” but given the context and ESPN’s recent history in market manipulation, that is an assumption I am not willing to make.

Think about the statement ... what does it really mean? It means that they are going to give us the AFL, whether we want it or not. ESPN is going to use its “multimedia platforms” to blitz us with the AFL. I am guessing that ESPN is not attempting to benevolently raise awareness of a sport that has long suffered for national exposure as a charitable act; I am reasonable sure that this campaign has the sole purpose of increasing AFL revenues (revenues that trickle back into the corporation) through exposure. They are affecting their own bottom line, which no business should be faulted for doing (let’s not forget that television is not charity), but by masquerading as a news source ESPN is not being upfront in its agenda, an agenda that apparently includes growth of the Arena Football League.

How about the NHL? I know the sport is floundering, and right now it is as cold as the ice that they skate on, but does it actually have a smaller following than the AFL? I doubt it, but right now it definitely has lower billing on ESPN (even during the playoffs). I am no fan of hockey, but don’t tell me that ESPN is objectively sticking with the sports that drive ratings, the sports that pique the interests of the nation.

This is not the first time that ESPN has changed its news programming to support its own best interests and television contracts. Anyone remember the NASCAR push in the early to mid 90's, while ESPN owned television rights to the sport? You couldn't watch Sportscenter without hearing about Jeff Gordon and Dale Earnhardt. Shortly after ESPN lost the television rights to NASCAR it fell to "back page" standing.

In case you haven't noticed by its coverage, ABC/ESPN has started its first year of a pricy and demanding contract with NASCAR. You really cannot blame ESPN for jumping into NASCAR with both feet, it is arguably the hottest sport right now, but the contract riders are clearly the most surprising part. Walt Disney Company had to guarantee NASCAR that all ten of its Chase for the Nextel Cup races would be broadcast on its flagship network, ABC (not ESPN or the "Deuce") and that no less than four Busch Series races would be aired on ABC. This is a pretty serious commitment considering the eight-year length of the contract, and the fact that NASCAR's previous (and similar) agreement with NBC was a big loser for the network.

Further complicating matters is that it appears as though NASCAR leveled off in popularity during the 2006 season which saw the racing league draw its first stagnant/decreasing ratings in ten years. Some will argue that this is the result of NBC's lackluster promotion entering the final year of the agreement, but in any case this underscores the risk that Walt Disney Company was taking in laying out somewhere between \$200 million and \$300 million per year, a 60% increase from NASCAR's 2000 contract. So should ESPN's viewers now be surprised that following ABC/ESPN's acquisition of an extensive, and expensive NASCAR contract that the sport has now reemerged to front page coverage?

It is interesting to note that in this case, it is not only in ESPN's best interest to sell NASCAR to its viewers, the network is actually contractually obligated to launch "[specially NASCAR-branded news and information programming](#)."

Additionally, under the terms of the new contract, ESPN is also going

to air Nextel Cup qualifying and practice on ESPN or ESPN 2. Is this really what their viewership is asking for? Racing practice?

Is it also coincidence that entering the second year of a very expensive rights to Monday Night Football, NFL talk dominates the network all year? I will not go so far as to say that network is trying to garner viewership for programming that is still nearly a year away, but the fact that it popped into my head is cause enough for me to wonder whether or not it is worth it to continue to tune in. It is like getting your political news from a source owned by the Republican or Democratic Party, reading an energy report written by an oil lobbyist, or participating in a cancer study authored by the tobacco companies.

No one is talking about this and the reason is pretty clear, if ESPN is not reporting on it, who will? This is a pretty obvious conflict of interests, but unfortunately there is no real competition out there to keep Walt Disney and its subsidiaries honest, and there will not be in the immediate future. Networks buy programming and advertise that programming to increase viewing in order to drive ratings (and advertising revenues) up. This is accepted in the implicit viewer/programmer "agreement," but advertising under the premise of news and within its news programming clearly steps outside of the bounds of ethical and responsible journalism. We, as viewers, expect commercials on free television; we just don't expect them hidden within the programming.