

Meet The New Boss

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Friday, May 02 2008 7:00 PM -

It's a popular debate these days. The old print sports media versus sites like this, bloggers, and the new online sports media. Bob Costas, on his usually insightful HBO show, *Bob Costas Now*, took the debate front and center this past week with a variety of panels and commentators, which included Browns receiver Braylon Edwards. Gary Benz watched it, and has his own thoughts on the matter, which he lays out in his latest column for us.



There's a debate raging and kick yourself if you missed it. It's not the on-going Jeremiah Wright/Barack Obama saga. Hard to miss that since it's been on the cable news spin cycle for several straight days. The same goes for the faux outrage over the Miley Cyrus pictures that seems to have parents in a twitter even as they help crash *Vanity Fair's* web site itching for a peak. The debate I'm talking about is the old media and the new and its impact on sports journalism, itself a somewhat oxymoronic term.

Bob Costas, on his usually insightful HBO show, *Bob Costas Now*, took the debate front and center the other night with a variety of panels and commentators, the purpose of which I guess was to shed light on this emerging topic. It informed little and entertained even less. If you could get through the whole episode, and gosh why would the average person want to, the underlying theme that emerged was the old school sports journalists complaining that blog writers just need to get off of their lawn

Debates like these go on every time a new technology begins to mature and the arc is always the same. You have the so-called traditionalists suspicious of anything new that potentially threatens to invade their comfort zone going up

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against the early adopters who often lack an appreciation of history and generally come across as smart asses. It may seem like a recipe for interesting television, but in terms of providing any real insight you'd be better off watching an episode of *Family Guy*.

By this point, Costas has become like MSNBC's Keith Olbermann in that he has a ready stable of go-to pundits to author ghost opinions that are designed to make the host look neutral while still getting his real point of view across. A Costas symposium these days wouldn't be complete without an appearance by either Charles Barkely or John McEnroe to explain the plight of the victimized modern athlete.

But Costas really outdid himself by inviting Buzz Bissinger, author of *Friday Night Lights* and

Three Nights in August

, to parry against Will Leitch, the creator of the internet site

[Deadspin](#)

. As a backdrop, though, recognize that Costas himself caused somewhat of a stir himself a few months back by essentially denigrating sports bloggers with an incredibly broad brush. In an interview with the

Miami Herald

(no longer available on its web site), Costas came across as someone with a stick in his colon because the emerging trend doesn't just violate most of the basic principles of responsible journalism, but that it, in his words, "confuses simple mean-spiritedness and stupidity with edginess." (A summary of the interview can be found

[here](#)

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Thus came Bissinger, a veritable buzz saw of opinions, laying waste to virtually everything and anything about sports blogs in a way that Costas could only dream about. His vitriol was so widespread and so complete it was actually hard

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to discern his overall point. From what I could tell, he doesn't like, for example, the profane nature of many blogs and he made this point as forcefully and profanely as he could. He's no fan of the fact that many of the postings are done anonymously, the opinions offered by cowards who won't use their real names. For good measure, he also thinks nearly everything on these sites is poorly written, lacking in insight, and authored by a bunch of boobs, misfits, and idiots.

Deadspin's Leitch, representing the new guard, actually came across as the adult in the room. He didn't defend some of the more ridiculous examples that Bissinger cited but neither did he find it necessary to point out that these examples didn't represent the level of electronic discourse any more than *People* magazine represents the level of printed discourse.

Costas did his best to appear as the moderate voice, reminding Bissinger in a "there there" fashion that from time to time there is some insight to be gained from bloggers, even if you have to dig through 10 layers of cow dung to find it. How could Bissinger disagree? He couldn't so he didn't. But if Bissinger came away with a more complete picture of his nemesis he didn't let on either.

And then there was the odd sight of Braylon Edwards of the Cleveland Browns sitting with these two wearing a look that suggested "what am I doing here?" Edwards said, I think, that he reads the various internet sites but didn't seem to have a strong opinion one way or the other about much of anything. The guess here is that he was invited because he's one of the bigger loudmouths in sports. Instead he used the opportunity to finally shut up. If Edwards thought this might be a tryout for a media gig post football, he needs to get back in the weight room, so to speak.

In addition to the Bissinger/Leitch carnival, there was another somewhat similar panel about athletes and the media. It featured the aforementioned McEnroe

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along with former New York Giants running back and current NBC commentator Tiki Barber and Selena Roberts, columnist for Sports Illustrated. It was less theatrical than the Bissinger segment but basically it made the same points.

Roberts didn't directly attack the internet like Bissinger, but she made it pretty clear that all of this attention has made athletes much more guarded and made her job much more difficult. She complained, for example, of the obstacles placed in front of her just to interview LeBron James about his relationship with Jay-Z. Without saying it specifically, she let it be known that ultimately it was the reader that suffered because she was not able to bring her special insight to bear on such a hot topic. Ah for the old days when a beat writer could sit in the hotel bar with Mickey Mantle and knock back shots until 4 a.m.

Perhaps what neither Bissinger nor Roberts really understands is that the paradigm in sports journalism has shifted permanently and no amount of old-school whining is going to much change that. For a variety of reasons, sports fans find their opinions and insights on what they see to be every bit as valid and credible as the next person's, even if that next person has a journalism degree from Columbia.

That doesn't mean that they won't read someone else's opinions, but they don't necessarily feel compelled to do so either. Nearly every game in every sport is televised and if you miss it there are almost limitless options to view the highlights. This allows the average person to understand just as well as anyone else why Travis Hafner can't hit. The ready availability of even the most esoteric of statistics allows the average person to gain his or her own insights without the need of a third-party journalist. And for good measure the celebrity-obsessed culture in which we live hasn't magically by-passed the sports world. A picture of Matt Leinert using a beer bong is going to get more views than still another Costas article about how allowing a wild card team in the baseball playoffs is brining about the decline of modern civilization. Sometimes you just have to give the public what it wants instead of what you think it needs.

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It would have been much more helpful if Costas, Bissinger and Roberts were focused less on turning back the clock and more on carving out their space in the new media as a way of remaining relevant. By living up to their traditional roots and bitching about the shrinking readership of traditional newspapers and the proliferation of cellphone cameras, it only made them seem less relevant.