

The 10 Best TV Network Sports Theme Songs

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Thursday, January 12 2012 1:00 PM - Last Updated Friday, January 13 2012 9:52 AM



Admittedly, it's something vaguely disgusting that reflects the canned, pre-packaged, "this-is-solely-about-the-entertainment" aspect of big-time sports. And yet, we can't help but be drawn to it anyway:

The television network sports theme song.

It's bizarre that something as artistic and dignified as a short musical score can play such a huge role in defining how well a network covers a given sport. When a theme song sucks (as the majority of them do), it glazes a greasy film over the entire broadcast, from the opening prelude when the theme sets the tone to all the in-and-out commercial break interludes throughout.

But when done well, like a beautiful score accompanying a masterpiece film, it can be magical, sometimes raising the game itself to another level. And over the past 40 years, a handful of networks have done it quite well, leaving us with some sweet ear candy to go along with our cherished sports memories.

Here's a rundown of the 10 best:

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10. NBC Sunday Night Football (2006-present)

The most film-like orchestral arrangement of all network sports themes, this one is a natural selection. It combines a military-march tempo befitting American football with a slightly classical/*Star Wars*

-y interpretation from the greatest composer of our time, John Williams. And quite frankly, something written by John Williams should be included on every top 10 list ever created, even if the list has nothing to do with music.

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9. NBA on CBS (1983-1990)

To be sure, this one reflects the saccharine Kenny Loggins, quasi-jazz/light rock wave of its era, but there's just enough percussion for it to serve as a nice appetizer for a Sunday afternoon of professional basketball. Plus, this was one of the first themes to use the intro music as a soundtrack to the prologue for the upcoming contest, which - with so many commercials to squeeze in nowadays - has become something of a lost art. By showing clips beneath a voiceover giving you a quick glimpse of the teams about to play and what was at stake, what is now stretched out into a pompous, bloated, and wildly unnecessary pregame show was packaged nicely into one musical minute.

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8. CBS College Basketball (1987-1992)

This is the song that launched the March Madness we know and love today. In the late 1980s, the NCAA tournament field had just expanded to 64 teams, CBS had wrested away the broadcasting rights to dine out on for the next quarter-century, and this peppy little ditty emerged out of the ether to embody the excitement and delicious unpredictability of college basketball. Essentially taking its then-current NBA theme and adding some collegiate energy and enthusiasm (plus a “Jack and Diane” clap-track), CBS had us all humming this one as we traveled along the Road to the Final Four.

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7. MLB on Fox (1996-present)

Today it's difficult to imagine October baseball without the FOX theme (especially since most of us simply refuse to accept the somber reality of TBS televising postseason games). But back in the mid-1990s when Tim McCarver was semi-lucid, FOX brought life to its baseball broadcasts with an arrangement that for all intents and purposes is its well-known NFL theme wearing Groucho glasses. But dammit if it doesn't work, especially compared to the whiny baseball themes cranked out by CBS and NBC over the preceding ten years.

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6. CBS College Basketball (1993-present)

When CBS decided to scrap its popular college basketball tune in 1993, it seemed to make as much sense as trying to rewrite the Bill of Rights. But for perhaps the only time in history, a television network tried to fix something that wasn't broken - and made it better. Coinciding with CBS landing the rights to broadcast all NCAA tournament games, this energetic toe-tapper has come to reflect more than just a pre-game theme. You hear it and know spring is just around the corner and you've survived another dismal winter. And while CBS has tinkered with it over the years, they've kept the tune largely intact for almost two decades. Like March Madness itself, it's too good for anyone to screw up.

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5. NFL on FOX (1994-present)

In 1994, most of us thought FOX landing NFL football was something straight out of the Book of Revelations. How could the network whose previous claim to fame was *Married... With Children* possibly carry America's most popular sport with any kind of dignity? To answer us, they cooked up this intense musical assault that not only got you ready to watch the game, but fully prepared

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to run head-first into a concrete wall. Unlike 98% of FOX's sketchy programming, its NFL theme has persevered to this day, and will likely be examined by scholars in studies of our culture hundreds of years in the future.

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4. CBS College Football (1986-present)

CBS was on a roll in the mid-1980s, but for all of its hits, this is the only one still in circulation. And it only takes about four-and-a-half seconds to hear why. Aside perhaps from an upbeat percussion section that may or may not be intended to reflect the pageantry of collegiate marching bands, there's little symbolism here - just kick-ass, adrenaline-pumping music that whets the pallet for some good football.

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3. NBA on NBC (1990-2002)

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NBC had been a non-entity in the sports-theme genre until John Tesh came along to pen this dazzling little jingle that essentially every network has unsuccessfully tried to copy. Fans would watch NBA games on winter Sunday afternoons solely to hear NBC's epic theme song that echoed out into living rooms like a choir of angels playing golden synthesizers. While CBS's previous NBA tune had been fun, NBC's somehow gave the sport an energy and legitimacy that it's been lacking ever since. Bless you, John Tesh...wherever you are.

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2. *Monday Night Football* (1970-present)

Long before Hank Williams Jr. began incessantly questioning our football readiness, ABC coincided its groundbreaking concept of *Monday Night Football* with the granddaddy of all sports theme songs. Titled "Heavy Action," it combined the glamour and glitz of primetime television with the grit and intensity of pro football. The result was a brassy, 1970s-hard-boiled-undercover-cop-swings-by-Battlestar Gallactica-to-play-the-Cowboys tune we'll be able to tell our grandchildren about.

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1. NFL on CBS (1986-1988)

Like a brilliant shooting star blazing across the night sky, if you blinked, you missed it. But the short run of the weirdly named “Pots and Pans” tune has only added to its legend. Intense, upbeat, and celebratory, this percussion-heavy theme served as the perfect musical foundation for CBS’s well-crafted NFL game prologue. Sadly, after just three seasons CBS made the ill-advised decision to scrap it for a banal replacement that likely played a huge role in the network losing NFL coverage altogether in 1993.

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