

The Pros of Pre-Game

The pre-game shows are shifting line-ups—who'll be the winners and losers?

When you mention the term “pre-game” to the casual fan, it’s a chance to barbeque, drink down a cold one and tailgate with friends. For an athlete, it can be the gateway to a second career. Twenty years ago, pre-game shows were as serious as the evening news, stone-faced mugs staring into the camera and talking about schemes, football pride and how meaningful that day’s game was. Now, it’s still serious, but silly is just as important. Thanks to Terry Bradshaw, Howie Long and the Fox gang, jokes became as key as running back jukes and personality was right up there with knowing every team’s personnel. Up ahead, an analysis of the lineups for the upcoming season and tips for how you can get involved as well:

NBC

A crew that’s had its ups and downs, NBC has been uttering a four-letter word all off-season: Tiki. Yes, with Tiki Barber hanging up the cleats and grabbing a microphone, Football Night in America is hoping he’ll add a shot of life to the lineup of Collinsworth, Costas and company. But let’s deal with a five-letter word that’s been getting just as much lip service: Keith. With demonstrative Keith Olbermann snagging his most significant sports position since Sportscenter—a job he left on not-so-friendly terms—one wonders how he’ll co-exist with so many other strong personalities. “It’s clear that Olbermann will be caustic and will be unlikely to pull punches,” says Will Leitch, editor of Deadspin.com, a popular sports humor site which many consider the unofficial media watchdog of television sports. “He’s emerged as a trusted voice in more than just sports and it will be interesting to see if he’s allowed to bring that into the broadcast.” Olbermann, who hosts the allegedly leftist program *Countdown* on MSNBC, is considered a political pundit, which isn’t a good omen for football. Just ask Rush Limbaugh, who lasted only weeks into his Monday Night Football broadcasting position before controversial comments led him to resign.

One signing which no one expects to result in controversy is the addition of Tiki Barber to the NBC team. But that’s part of the problem, says Leitch, who feels Barber may lack edge because of his close ties to players: “Part of the reason Collinsworth ended up doing well later is because less players he played against were on the field. It makes it easier to criticize people when you don’t see them like family. Barber has to decide that he’s no longer a player, that he’s a commentator and that everyone’s fair game. But that means not always being seen as the nice guy.” Mark Lepselter, Barber’s agent, doesn’t think it will be an issue whatsoever. “Tiki’s always been a straight shooter in his radio work and would call out players he thought weren’t getting it done,” Lepselter says. “I think NBC and all the networks saw that because they were all in negotiations for his services.” Despite this defense, Lepselter admits Barber has much work to do. “Tiki will continue to evolve in broadcast and he’s clearly still learning the craft. What sets him apart is he’ll do research, study, takes pride in what he does. The Dick Ebersols and Bob Costases of the

world are *pretty good* people to listen to and sponge knowledge from. It was a ballyhooed contract he signed and he wants to earn his money.”

One other concern beyond Barber’s learning curve and lucrative contract, says Leitch, is whether too many cooks may not just spoil the NBC pot, but poison it. “Bettis needs to dig in and make some deeper analysis...A lot of times he’d stare into the camera and basically say, ‘I’m Jerome Bettis’ and little else. Fans know when they’re just being given a cliché comment that says nothing and that just won’t cut it.” You still have Sterling Sharpe in there, too, and he’s not going to just fade into the background either. Says Leitch: “Sharpe was thought of as sometimes negative on the field, so it’s interesting that he’s so positive in front of the camera—he seems to love it... For NBC, they want to get everyone air time but you also want to make sure people are given time to expand on their points.”

ESPN

Though Fox started the present format, it’s not about who came first but who does it best (just ask Friendster about MySpace sometime). ESPN has thrown its hat further into the ring by trading in Sunday Night Football for a fairly decent replacement: Monday Night! With record-breaking ratings last year, not just for MNF but for the history of all cable ratings, ESPN isn’t looking so much to change the formula but to improve upon it. Bob Rauscher, senior coordinating producer for NFL Studio Shows, believes one advantage is they aren’t tied to either football conference. “With Fox doing the NFC and NBC taking on the AFC, their pregames both ignore many teams,” Rauscher says. “For us, we have an all-encompassing pregame...Our philosophy is to make it about entertainment *and* analysis—making it all lighthearted is a big mistake.” But, looking at the lineup, is adding Keyshawn Johnson adding too much flash without the substance? “Keyshawn got the chance to do coverage for the NFL Draft. That’s 10 hours of live coverage and some people have had trouble sustaining that kind of air time,” Rauscher adds. On the other side, Rauscher says Johnson still has to focus more on getting comfortable and understanding the pacing. “He needs to get his reps, just like on the football field.” For another guy who could catch the football, Mike Ditka, he also will be sharing reps, so to speak. Bringing in Bill Parcells doesn’t just add another strong personality, but someone else with a “coach” mentality. Can these two personalities get along? “They were adversaries off the field, but Parcells showed himself to be cooperative when he did Sunday Countdown before joining Dallas—he’s direct and authoritative,” says Rauscher. And, keeping with Rauscher’s point about covering both conferences, Ditka could focus on the NFC while Parcells can add AFC perspective as a former coach of the Jets and Patriots. One thing is for sure, it will be interesting to see what kind of teammates these two can be.

Fox

Now we come to the originators of the present format, but sometimes you can be thought of as a golden oldie or a moldie oldie. For Fox, mold may be starting to show. Kicking out longtime host James Brown last season, they’ve kept the Bradshaw/Long show, a

classic pairing of opposites, one wild and exuberant, the other playing the reluctant straight man. Leitch thinks Bradshaw will be the last to go, though he may be the biggest problem. “He is the Dick Vitale of football analysts—an entertainer more than an analyst. I can’t remember the last thing Vitale said that was important but he’s so associated with the network that it’s hard to get rid of him. Same for Bradshaw. If he put the bayou Cajun thing to the side and did more straight up analysis, there would be more for him to work with.” Long is a better analyst, says Leitch, but he “plays up schtick that doesn’t seem to be him.” “I don’t think it’s natural what he’s forced to do,” Leitch says “and he may be a great hire for the NFL network, so he can get back to more serious coverage.”