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Roone Arledge: A Tribute

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The death of Roone Arledge this past week marks the passing of one those remarkable figures in recent history who had a major influence on mass culture in America. He changed the viewing habits of Americans, transformed the way in which television covers sport, altered the nature and character of American sport, and transformed the way in which television presents reality to the American public. For all of these reasons Roone Arledge cast a large shadow over America in the second half of the twentieth century.

Although the marriage of television and sport had been consummated well before Roone Arledge took up his college football post at ABC television, Arledge changed the nature of the relationship between the two. Not content to simply present the games, Arledge felt that fans must be drawn into the contests. He saw televised sport first as television programming and then as sport. If the fans did not enjoy the game, then Arledge was bent on insuring that they would enjoy the program. This subtle shift of emphasis has had an enormous influence on both television and sport.

He made this point as an assistant on NCAA football telecasts in the now legendary 1960 memo in which he laid out his vision of the future. For college football Arledge wanted hand-held cameras on the sidelines to show close up shots of pensive coaches, intense players, and pretty cheerleaders. "Hi Mom!" the title of Arledge's first television program became the most common phrase in American sport, as athletes greeted mom whenever they became aware of the camera's presence.

He would deploy sideline microphones to pick up the sounds on the field: the hard-hitting tackles and the tremendous volume of crowd noise. Arledge focused on the fans in the stands, the marching bands, and what is termed "all the color and pageantry of college football." He put cameras on cranes, in jeeps, and in the air aboard helicopters and blimps to offer one more angle of vision to the home viewer.

The new focus on the fans would invite a certain amount of exhibitionism in the stands and at times that spilled over onto the field of play. Fans would bring banners with messages of support for the teams, and they learned quickly

that if they mentioned the televising network they were more likely to get on camera. Nor was obscenity a stranger to these roving cameras which brought a feigned shock from the announcers and no doubt a delight to the director and producer.

In 1961 Arledge began producing "Wide World of Sports" for ABC bringing unknown sports to America, some from obscure (at least to Americans) locations around the globe. Here Arledge was the first to use satellite feeds and stop action sequences. He presided over the first live sports telecast from the Soviet Union. Wide World of Sports won four Emmys its first year. Arledge introduced Howard Cosell to the American television audience with his interviews of Muhammad Ali that quickly became the stuff of legend.

In 1964 Arledge purchased the American television rights to the Innsbruck Winter Olympics for a miniscule \$200,000 thus initiating the television love affair between the Olympic games and the American public. One of the keys to this success was Arledge's use of his "Up Close and Personal" technique to bring unknown athletes to American attention. The emphasis was on star quality, triumph over adversity, and the struggle and competition inherent in sport. Unfortunately this technique has degenerated into saccharine melodrama and self-parody.

In 1968 Arledge put the Summer Games from Mexico City onto prime time television. The world record set by Bob Beamon in the long jump and the drama of John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their gloved fists on the medals podium helped to make this a memorable event in televised sports. In 1972 in Munich the even more memorable coverage of the games and the Palestinian attack on the Israeli athletes saw Arledge take over the personal direction of the telecast for over 17 straight hours while ABC collected 29 Emmy Awards as a result.

In 1970 the NFL came to prime time with Arledge's creation of Monday Night Football which transformed America's viewing habits and introduced the best tag-team on the national sports scene. Don Meredith and Howard Cosell verbally jostled as good ole' boy and loudmouth New York Jew to the delight and outrage of millions. It was a ratings bonanza and liberated televised sport from the confines of the weekend. Monday Night Football was also the point at which Arledge wrested the approval of network

announcers away from the NFL and back to the networks, a victory that has not held.

In addition to all these innovations Arledge brought NBA basketball to ABC in 1964 after NBC had dropped it. Then when the NBA walked out on ABC, Arledge created The Superstars which he slotted opposite the NBA on CBS and buried them in the ratings. "Roone's Revenge" was followed by The Woman Superstars, the Super-Teams, the Battle of the Network Stars, the Challenge of the Sexes, and the Celebrity Challenge of the Sexes, and a host other trash sport imitators across the vast wasteland.

What Roone Arledge accomplished in his days at ABC sports led to his move to ABC News where he continued to transform television. What he left behind was a sports television culture that was much broader in scope, more diversified in programming schedule, and took a much wider look at sport beyond the field, into the stands, and outside the arena. The changes Arledge wrought in televised sport necessitated changes in the print media coverage of sport.

The impact of the massive entrance of television into sport has led to a massive infusion of money into the games leaving sport both inflated and diminished. It is now a much larger part of our consciousness but in some ways less glorious in its character as it has become part of the entertainment industry.

It would be good to remember during the richly deserved eulogies of Roone Arledge that for better or for worse he is largely responsible for both of these contradictory trends.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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