
Media Review

NBC's 1999 World Series

The 1999 World Series, a four-game sweep by the New York Yankees, lacked overall mystery, but not drama within the individual games or outside the lines. As to game coverage, NBC's production was of a generally high quality and the presentation of the games was delivered with a skill and tempo that was all one could ask of the game announcer and analyst. Unfortunately, the network became part of the story and failed in its coverage of the resulting flack, which briefly overshadowed the games. There were other small irritations in game production which are all too common to those who study baseball.

Bob Costas and Joe Morgan are not just highly skilled television presenters—they work together very well. Costas offers a steady and understated voice in play-by-play, which he modulates in harmony with the action. Calmness and accuracy in reporting developments on the field and on the screen are welcome and necessary traits in presenting the game to a national audience. Morgan supplied astute analysis of hitting and pitching confrontations, strategies and adjustments, and made superb use of the “pitch sequencer” to analyze individual at-bats. Joe Morgan is certainly the best analyst working on the networks today. His knowledge of the game, his ability to specify what went wrong and what went right in any given situation is impressive, and at the same time he knows when he should talk and when he should keep quiet. This latter trait makes him far superior to the overrated (and overexposed) Tim McCarver.

This is not to say that the two were perfect—only that they did a very good job. There were in fact a few irritants from both Costas and Morgan. Although I do not find the Mr. Baseball persona, which Costas has taken on in recent years, particularly irritating, many do. What I do find irritating is Costas's insistent whining about the DH in the sanctimonious tone of the baseball purist, while at the same time presiding over the desecration of the game by delivering an endless blather of NBC promotional announcements in the middle of the action.

Morgan occasionally wore out the use of the “pitch sequencer,” and he became repetitious in Game Three. He made the point about the need for the hitting adjustment that was made by Brave batters, essentially hitting to right—but didn't need to make it over and over and over again as the game proceeded. Oddly, in Game Two, when Cox changed his line-up to get more hitting, neither Costas nor Morgan pointed out that the Braves' manager thereby had removed the two best Braves hitters for average in the Series to that point—Boone and Perez.

The other tiresome theme that both broadcasters had apparently decided they would ride throughout the series was the defensive problems Chuck Knoblauch had been having at second base prior to the Series. This was a valid point, and one that Fox had demon-

strated during the playoffs when it showed replays of Knoblauch watching the ball leave his hand as he threw to first on a routine ground ball, rather than looking at the first-baseman's glove—something one learns before Little League. In the fifth inning of Game Three when Knoblauch took a ground ball off Perez's bat on the third base side of second and made an off-balance throw and got nothing on it, Costas immediately said this illustrated Knoblauch's problem, which of course it didn't. If anything it illustrated Knoblauch's range to his left, nothing else. Throughout the Series, Morgan and Costas discussed Knoblauch's problem *ad nauseum*, but it never did surface. In the second inning of Game Four Costas brought it up again, although Knoblauch still hadn't committed an error in the Series (and never did). Late in the game he did have a throw to first which was routine, and he looked at his hand as he threw the ball to first. Costas did not mention that one sign of Knoblauch's troubles. Any fan watching the game with no sound would never have known of Chuck Knoblauch's fielding problems. This is not a huge issue, but it does point out that too often announcers and analysts come in with an agenda and will work it whether appropriate or not.

NBC is not above reproach, and indeed I would quarrel more with NBC's decisions than with those of Costas and Morgan. Indeed, the barrage of NBC programming promotional announcements is tiresome at best, and when it cuts into the game itself it is a violation of the public trust. Baseball, inning by inning and batter by batter, has an ebb and flow that should not be disrupted by commercial imperatives. To promote *The Leprechauns* between batters is inexcusable and should be stopped by baseball authorities.

Camera work was generally good in terms of angles and replays, although, in one of the great gaffes of recent memory, a 2-0 pitch to Strawberry in the eighth inning of Game One was not seen because the camera was scanning the dugout. Rather than admit this gaffe and show a replay of the pitch, there was no mention of it and no replay. This may indicate that NBC's cameras didn't even get the pitch on tape. A home run here would have been just desserts, as the networks seem to be increasingly careless in presenting the game.

Game Two produced the biggest controversy of this World Series, and unfortunately this Series may be remembered more for the Gray–Rose Affair than the excellent play of the Yankees. The pregame presentation of the All-Century Team lacked dignity, although the mere presence of all that talent on the makeshift stage in Atlanta was inspiring. Unfortunately, Commissioner Selig's tribute to baseball as the game that could not be stopped by World Wars and the Great Depression was nauseating, and no one called him on it. The NBC analysts failed to note that the great game had been stopped by Selig himself and his fellow owners in their futile attempt to crush the Players' Association. Not a word of any of this was mentioned, and of course could not be, because major league baseball has approval of the announcers and because NBC did not want to anger the powers that be—including the sponsors of the event.

Jim Gray's interview of Pete Rose followed Selig's hypocritical pontificating. Rose was given a tremendous ovation by the fans, and Gray asked Rose for a reaction. Then Gray attacked the gambling issue. A question on this subject was appropriate, but when Rose clearly was not budging, it was not appropriate for Jim Gray to assume the role of chief prosecutor, badgering Rose, and putting a damper on the entire proceedings. It was un-

called for, unprofessional, and generally offensive. It was also typical of Jim Gray. This is not the first time that Gray has badgered athletes and coaches, and each time I have seen it done it was inappropriate and disgusting. He has, in fact, built his dubious career on this style. The producers at NBC seem to like it, as Gray seems to be at every important NBC sports telecast.

The pre-game show for Game Three featured a tightly scripted and tight-jawed apology by Jim Gray that had all the sincerity of a Bill Clinton statement of regret for indiscretions in his sex life. NBC clearly felt the heat from fans and even some of the players. NBC and its affiliates were flooded with calls after the Gray Gaffe after the local affiliates both here in Orlando and other cities put the NBC New York telephone and fax numbers on the screen and told people to contact NBC New York directly on Monday.

I do not like Pete Rose and never have liked Pete Rose, and I do not think he should have been in the ballpark that night. I do think that once he was there he deserved to be allowed to enjoy the evening and the adulation of the fans. The fact that Rose came from the casinos in Atlantic City and was late for the event was proof enough of his thick-headedness. It would have been enough for Jim Gray to point that out. We did not need Jim Gray there to badger Rose, and I would hope we do not see Jim Gray again. His style is either smarmy or offensive, and in either case it does not belong on TV. Or maybe it does; maybe that's what TV is; maybe that's the problem.

Game Three ended with the excitement of Chad Curtis's homer in the 10th, his second of the night. As Curtis left the field, Jim Gray stopped him for an interview. Curtis on camera told Jim he would not talk to him, that the Yankee players had decided to boycott him (later reports are that only some of the players were boycotting), and that they were upset over the Rose interview. He also dedicated the homer to his grandmother. When the broadcast was thrown back to Costas and Morgan they said nothing about what had just happened. Costas has since claimed he didn't have enough time to make any comment. In the CNBC post-game show, Gray was not seen; Craig Sager interviewed Yankee players, including Curtis, asking his usual lame questions, and no one mentioned the Gray-Curtis incident. Time was not the problem here, as Hannah Storm and Barry Larkin had time to discuss everything *but* the incident. On what turned out to be one of the most talked about moments in the World Series, NBC was silent.

In the pre-game show of Game Four, Gray was back to ask questions of Joe Torre and Chuck Knoblauch. Gray was all smiles and hit everyone with creampuff questions. It is obvious someone got to someone. One report says that the boycott was not agreed to by all Yankee players, and another report says that George Steinbrenner personally apologized to Gray following Curtis's snub. NBC producers later admitted that maybe the interview went on too long and that maybe Gray had pushed Rose too hard. At the end of Game Four and the Yankee sweep, Gray was in the Yankee locker room looking like an altar boy adoring the icons.

The entire incident got more attention than it deserved, but few commentators mentioned some central issues raised which go well beyond the Gray style and the propriety of his attempt to get an exclusive out of Rose. The more disturbing aspects of the incident center on the reaction by the Yankee players, whose first instinct was to strike at Gray, and the sponsor of the All-Century Team, MasterCard International, who demanded an apol-

ogy from Gray. Both of these reactions point out the sad reality of the relationship between journalists and their material, especially when that material is human.

Journalists, not just sportscasters, are dependent on the people they cover if they are to do their jobs. If those being covered refuse to talk to the journalists, then their jobs become extremely difficult, if not impossible. It is, therefore, incumbent upon all journalists to recognize this reality, and this, of course, impacts the way in which they report, on what they report, and on their subject. When sponsors begin to dictate style and when players seek to shape reporters' questions, they are undermining the objectivity of the press, something that is important to protect under all circumstances, even if the reporter is at fault. It is also important for everyone to recognize that this relationship puts pressure for self-censorship on each reporter, and that too shapes the form of truth one gets from journalists. This does not even consider the corporate power of sponsors and network executives, who can exercise considerable censoring power when they are offended.

Another thing that this entire sorry episode should remind us of is that television journalists are now entertainers, and television sports journalism, for all its pretension to being hard and tough, is part of that same entertainment complex. This is unfortunate but true, and the only thing one can do about it is adopt an attitude of *caveat emptor* toward the entire enterprise.

After all was said and done, the telecast by NBC was generally a good one. Morgan and Costas offered a first-rate presentation, with Morgan supplying astute analysis and Costas supplying the understated and steady voice of the play-by-play. If there were a few minor irritations, one can hardly complain, as the two of them were on the whole superb. It was unfortunate that they didn't have something a bit more interesting toward which they could apply their considerable talents. A four-game sweep, with an air of inevitability to Game Four, was not the best of circumstances for them, but they handled it well. Both are at ease and convey the kind of relaxed atmosphere one gets when sitting in the ballpark, something decidedly lacking from Fox's coverage of the National Pastime. For the most part NBC offered fine camera work, good use of replay, and excellent use of technologies such as the pitch sequencer. As with most telecasts there were probably too many replays, but that can be tolerated. The one thing that can not be tolerated is the interruption of the flow of an inning with a promotion for a television show. It is bad enough that the time between innings is now long enough to go the bathroom, open another beer, and order a pizza. Major league baseball must nip this little practice in the Bud, as it strikes at the essence of the game.

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