

SMITH, RONALD A. *Play-by-Play: Radio, Television and Big Time College Sport*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. Pp. vii+304. Notes, appendix, bibliographical essay, and index. \$45.00 cb.

Given the expanding coverage of sporting events by the broadcast media over the last several decades, it is surprising that sport historians have not focused more attention on the subject of sport and broadcasting. Benjamin Rader and Joan Chandler published studies on television and sport in the 1980s, but these concentrated mainly on the recent era. Ronald A. Smith, a preeminent authority on the history of college athletics, provides a thorough examination of the relationship between big-time intercollegiate sport and the broadcast media.

In twenty-five concise chapters, Smith traces the interaction of radio and television and college sport beginning with the first intercollegiate athletic contests in the nineteenth century through the continuing controversy concerning an equitable post-season playoff system for big-time college football powers in the early twenty-first century. Smith's overriding theme is that intercollegiate athletics became commercialized from the very beginning and remain so. By the 1880s, football emerged as the preeminent (and only big-time) college sport and remained in that role until the relatively recent rise of college basketball. Thus the main focus of this book is on football and the broadcast media. The one chapter devoted to the development of college basketball and its coverage on television is superb.

About a quarter of the book covers the rise of radio and its relationship with big-time football. In the beginning, radio stations and later networks broadcast games as a public service without commercials. This did not last long, as Smith shows, because colleges sought extra revenue, especially after the onset of the Great Depression. Popular periodicals predicted that fans would not stand for announcers hawking gasoline products and the like between downs, but they did and continue to do so. Smith provides excellent chapters on early radio technology and the early broadcasters such as Graham McNamee, Ted Husing, and Bill Stern. Most impressively, Smith has mined the archives of more than fifty colleges and universities as well as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) papers in piecing together a comprehensive overview of the relationship between the colleges and the broadcast media.

In the early period of college football broadcasting, the NCAA maintained a policy of "home rule" for colleges, i.e. individual institutions made their own deals with stations and networks for broadcasting rights. With the advent of television (which Smith covers well in terms of origins, technology, and broadcasters) and the potential for greater revenue, the NCAA took control of scheduling televised games in the early 1950s in order to protect against a decline in attendance at games. A struggle ensued for more than three decades between popular football powers such as Notre Dame, who stood to gain from scheduling their own games, and the "have not" football programs who benefited from the NCAA monopoly over television broadcasting. Interestingly,

Smith speculates that a viable alternative to the escalating commercialism that dominated big-time college football over the last half century might have been to confine telecasts to public educational stations coming on the air in the early 1950s. It seems clear, however, that the blatant commercialism of college football dating back to the nineteenth century could not have been reversed so easily.

When the NCAA television monopoly was broken in the mid-1980s, college football had already fractured into a number of parts. The most visible are College Football Association members and other big-time powers who are professionals playing under the banner of amateurism. The remaining college football teams range from true amateurs (Division III) to schools hoping to break into the ranks of the elite and reap the bounty of television revenue. While his theme that rampant commercialism has infected big-time college athletics for well over a century and corrupted those associated with it is clear, Smith presents his evidence in a moderate and even-handed manner.

There is not much to dislike about *Play-by-Play*. Because Smith uses so much archival material (e.g., official letters and memoranda), his narrative at times becomes slow and ponderous. He avoids this problem frequently by using faster-paced secondary sources to play off against the drier official sources. In discussing broadcasting policy, for example, he uses Lindsey Nelson's autobiography to lighten up the commentary. Much the same might have been done at other points in the book by using a higher content of popular periodicals, newspapers, and biographies. The book is not organized on a strictly chronological basis and this leads to some events being repeated and people being introduced more than once. These are minor matters, however, compared with Smith's outstanding research and major contribution to a neglected area in sport history.

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