

Beyond North America

Televised Sport: Britain and the United States

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T. V. coverage has undoubtedly influenced the form and content of professional sport, but has not done so in *vacuo*. In Britain, the T.V. industry does not dominate pro sport as it does in the U.S. because values held by the British audience, the structure of the British T.V. industry, and of the national sports industries of cricket and soccer do not allow it.

Turner (A.H. Halsey, et al., 1961) has suggested that attitudes towards upward social mobility are fundamentally different in Britain and the United States. In Britain, the educational system is intentionally selective; mobility is achieved by sponsorship. In the U.S., elite status is conferred on those who earn it through competition. In a society where mobility is achieved by sponsorship rather than by contest, competition in all facets of public life is played down. This attitude is reflected in the structure of the British T.V. industry; ratings therefore do not wholly determine programmatic content. In cricket and soccer, winning is not “the only thing”; to draw is honorable, and British legal betting on soccer, “the pools”, largely depends on draws.

The content, style and amount of T. V. commentary are related to the British concept of game-in-itself and the U.S. concept of game-as-spectacle. Virtually any popular T.V. program except baseball and football is rerun in the United States; in Britain, few live soccer games are shown. Edited versions of soccer matches, the results of which the audience already know, are broadcast, because it is the game itself, not simply its outcome, which is the focus of interest.

British colleges and schools have no historic function in providing public entertainment; there are no athletic scholarships in Britain, nor are children’s sports a focus of community interest. Further, the line between pro and amateur adult sport is blurred, and there are no franchises or Commissioners in British cricket or soccer. The special antitrust law protection afforded U.S. baseball and football has no equivalent in Britain; consequently, the relationship between the T.V. and sports industries is fundamentally different. And while “limited over” cricket was introduced to woo spectators who had learned to value speedy action, Packer’s attempt to package cricket for Australian T.V. was thwarted by immediate international action.

T. V.’s domination of U.S. pro sport is simply one facet of the medium’s influence on U.S. public life. Since British T.V. holds a less prominent place so it exercises less control over the content, style, and conduct of British pro sport.