

Sport and Television in The 1950's: A Preliminary Survey

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We have become accustomed to heavy television coverage of a wide variety of sports. From soccer, baseball, football, and basketball to hurling and wrist-wrestling, the American public takes for granted the assumption that if there is a sports event worthy seeing, television will broadcast it. By 1982, the coverage by commercial and cable systems has become nearly that ubiquitous. However, television is still a relatively new medium and its early years did not offer viewers quite such an array of programs.

While there are numerous guides to prime-time broadcasting, many sports events during the decade of the 1950's were telecast during the day on weekends. Even the magnificently cooperative NBS Sports people have difficulty locating detailed records prior to 1960. Because of this lack and because most major broadcasts at this time originated from the New York metropolitan area, this paper discusses programming in that context. New York had seven commercial channels (2 - CBS, 4 - NBC, 5 - Dumont, 7 - ABC, 9 - WOR, 11 - WPIX, 13 - WNEW). Each had some sports coverage. Most famous and long-lived were "The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports" (September 1948 - June 1960) and ABC's "Fight of the Week" (January

1953 - September 1964). Appearing for shorter periods were shows ranging from "The Herman Hickman Show," to "Kid Gloves" to the "Cowtown, New Jersey Rodeo." During the decade the heaviest programming was concentrated around boxing, baseball, bowling, and wrestling with increased time devoted to football and basketball. While the variety might not have been up to 1982 standards, even the most insatiable television addict could have reached momentary fulfillment during the week of July 16, 1955. Sixteen baseball games were televised that week with thirteen games being broadcast earlier in the season.

American viewers watched sport in a decade when "Toast of the Town," "The Colgate Comedy Hour," "I Love Lucy," and "My Little Margie," flourished. Kids were tuning in "Captain Video," "Ding Dong School," "Howdy Doody," and "Time for Beanie." There was no Trashsport (depending on how one views professional wrestling), no battles between NFL cheerleaders, and no television dictated time-outs for commercials. Sport would seem to have had the chance to direct its own electronic fate, a role it soon relinquished to the television industry, corporate powers, and macho close shaves.



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