

**BOOK REVIEWS**

**Joan Chandler**, *Television and National Sport*, (Urbana And Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Notes, index, pp. xvi+240, \$US24.95

**David A Klatell and Norman Marcus**, *Sports for Sale: Television, Money and the Fans*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Bib., pp. 253, \$US18.95

**Benjamin G Rader**, *In Its Own Image: How Television Transformed Sports*, (New York: The Free Press, 1984). Bib., index, pp. 228 \$US15.95

The tremendous expansion of sport and the creation of television have been two of the more significant influences on twentieth century western culture and society. However since the 1950s, the increasingly symbiotic nature of the relationship between the two has unleashed in the last two decades a tidal wave of controversy as to the need for such a relationship and concern for its ultimate effect. The rapid growth of the sport- television nexus has also resulted in a dramatic increase in the amount of scholarly attention, from a variety of diverse perspectives, devoted to this issue. The three books under discussion have as their central focus the strong interconnection between sport and television yet they differ significantly in ideology, context and ultimate utility.

Benjamin Rader's work examines the significant impact television has had on sport. He asserts that it profoundly influenced owners, players and fans as well as the quality of athletic competition, the rules and the organisation and management of sport. Rader's main thesis is that television not only altered the nature of the games

played and the sport institution, but it changed it to its detriment. (pp. 1-6)

Rader divides the history of televised sport in America into two principal eras -- from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, and from the mid-1960s until the present -- to indicate its impact on the ethos of sport and more importantly on how it altered the role sport played in American life. His work explores the major events and defines the critical moments in the creation of the symbiotic relationship between sport and television. Rader discusses how this medium contributed to the demise of boxing, wrestling and minor league baseball. He points to its role in the relocation of professional teams, its contribution to problems associated with intercollegiate athletic programs and he is at his best when he details the profound impact television has had on the growth of professional football. Running throughout Rader's chapters is the view that the dollars generated from television strongly encouraged sport magnates to alter their products and how and to whom they delivered it. The author's final three chapters on the decline of amateur sports, the lack of modern heroes and how television 'ultimately trivialised and diluted the sporting experience' (p. 196) illustrates his yearning for a bygone era.

Rader offers a readable work, one that is generally well researched. Though its lack of footnotes limits its scholarly usefulness, its breezy style indicates that it may have been intended for popular consumption. While *In Its Own Image*, offers a good overview of the history of televised sport, the work is not without its flaws.

There are two significant and interrelated problems. The first one is the underlying premise of the book. Rader presents a romantic notion of sport prior to the introduction of television. This perception too easily leads him to minimise a whole host of problems that had previously plagued American sport and that promoters ongingly

altered their produce and the delivery system in response to shifting social and institutional conditions. Equally problematic is Rader's treatment of the relationship between television and the vast cultural changes that simultaneously occurred. His failure to explore these linkages in detail results in his presentation of television as the symbol for sporting change rather than its cause. For example, was television responsible for the decline of minor league baseball or was it more likely intimately connected to shifting demographic patterns and the decline of the small sized communities which nurtured such teams?

Joan Chandler's study is a welcome companion to Rader's as it argues the other side of the coin. She asserts that changes in the nature of sport are far more intimately related to its basic internal structure and societal shifts than to the influence of television. Far from precipitating developments in the sporting world, television merely responded to the opportunities presented by a changing form. Chandler believes that televised sport represents cultural continuity and that television executives have mainly built upon the commercial dimension already established by the sports industry (pp. xi-xvi).

Chandler analyses the major sports in England and the United States to illustrate her thesis. She is at her best when she demonstrates how the fundamental structure of each of these sports and their associated problems were in place prior to the television age. Chandler does not deny that the introduction of television has exacerbated many of these problems but she also notes that it has torn away the mystique in which it has been packaged. Unlike Rader she welcomes this de-mythologising quality and while television has exposed much of the seamy underbelly of sport we now 'see players in the flesh rather than in fantasy.' (p. 39)

Chandler also explores how cultural differences shaped both the character and organisation of sport, as well as the development of television in each of the countries. Against the background of these

variations she points to the significant differences in the cultural context from which televised sports were presented. Whereas market forces and private enterprise shaped what Americans saw on their sets, parliament and government forces dictated the direction in England. Chandler indicates that the success or failure of sport on television depends on 'the significance the viewing public attaches to it, its cultural symbolism, the core values its views share and the habits of attention they have acquired growing up as members of a cultural group.' (p.23)

While Chandler does an admirable job in eradicating the perception of television as the villain behind sporting change, she is much less effective in analysing and assessing the role it currently performs in establishing the boundaries of sport and the direction it is moving. Consequently she is far less successful than Rader in detailing the emergence of the symbiotic relationship that has evolved between television and sport and its significance, consequence and meaning. It is one thing to indicate that sport entrepreneurs have continually altered their game to meet the new market forces, but it is still mandatory to acknowledge and examine how and why the new technological medium presently influences and shapes their decisions. What Chandler offers us is a good cultural study of why and how sport in America differs from England but she does not satisfactorily explicate the dynamics behind the growth and influence of television on sport.

While there are problems with *Television and National Sport* its positive features outweigh the negative ones. This cannot be said about Klatell and Marcus's study since there is little of value in this work. The intent of *Sports for Sale: Television, Money and the Fans* is to make understandable to consumers 'the realities of the sport/television interaction.' (p. viii) However they never deliver on this promise. This work written by the Directors of Boston

University's Institute in Broadcast Sports is filled with cliches. However its more serious limitation is its failure to link both television and sport to historical change in the larger socio-cultural process. The inter-connection between the fan and the products they consume, and the part played by the former in the decision making process between television and sport, is largely ignored.

The authors acknowledge the intrusion of politics, nationalism and other associated 'isms' including racism and sexism, on televised sport. Unfortunately their opposition to such practices is rooted in conservative and traditional thinking and their perspective indicates that the white-middle class is comfortable in its cultural cocoon and does not wish to be exposed to, or even comprehend sport as an expression of social inequality in American life.

Despite its numerous flaws this book does have some utility, albeit limited. It describes in detail the development, growth and possible scenarios for the future of cable and pay-for-view television. This should prove insightful to the non-North American reader but it also gives cause for concern since access to such services is not unlimited. As more sports move from network to cable television, target markets for advertisers will become increasingly defined. Those who cannot afford these services, or who are physically dislocated from such, will possibly be deprived of viewing major sporting events on television. Klatell and Marcus clearly welcome cable calling it 'the goose that can lay golden eggs,' (p.45) and cynically argue 'the constitution of the United States has never guaranteed unlimited protection from having sports removed from free television, and the Founding Fathers never guaranteed free televised access to the stadiums of America.' (p.69) However they ignore the fact that television support of sport exists only as long as fans support sport, a fact Rader also declined to acknowledge. Given their embrace of sport on cable television it is not surprising that they do not discuss

its potential dangers. For example, will the placing of sport solely on cable television contribute to the alienation of many of those fans that have traditionally supported America's leading games?

*Sports for Sale* also provides a useful chronology of televised sport in America. It alludes to the influence of Roone Arledge and the rise of ABC sports and the NFL/television relationship, but such issues are discussed much better elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> My frustration with the book culminated with the final chapter which examines the future of televised sport. At this stage I hoped for some synthesis and analysis of the material presented. However, for their conclusion Klatell and Marcus invited several prominent executives in broadcast and cable sports, and from the sports marketing industry, to elucidate their vision of the future. This orientation is akin to asking Coke to predict the future of soft drink; purely a self-serving exercise.

The works by Rader, Chandler, and Klatell and Marcus collectively offer a good overview of the development of televised sport and each work provides useful examples to illustrate its major points. As such they are informative for the non-North American reader although lack of familiarity with certain names, places and events may hamper their ultimate utility. Those that subscribe to neo-Marxist or hegemonic forms of analysis will be dismayed at the position the authors have adopted and their failure to explore how televised sport helps reproduce the dominant culture. Even scholars with more liberal leanings will be dissatisfied with their intergration of the sport-television nexus into broader cultural developments.

For all the strengths and weaknesses of these works they demonstrate the kind of research that needs to be done in Australian sport studies in order to add substance to much of the rhetoric concerning the symbiotic relationship between sport and television. Whilst some Australian scholars have tentatively tackled some aspects of this nexus, the need exists to develop a comprehensive and

indepth overview of the growth and development of televised sport and how its cultural context is shaped and influenced by Australian culture and society.<sup>2</sup> Clearly such an overview would facilitate better analysis than the present rushing to judgment, especially on pre-conceived sociological notions and frameworks.

Whilst the forces that structured television in Australia more closely parallels the development of television in England, attention to the American situation will help contextualise that which is unique to the Australian situation and that which is part of a universal process. The blending of national and international forces would enhance understanding of the critical moments in televised sport in Australia, for example World Series Cricket. This issue has been examined purely from the internal perspective yet clearly Packer was influenced by international developments.

The works of Rader, Chandler, and Klatell and Marcus all have limitations but they do provide a launching pad for future research. As such, it behoves Australian scholars who are interested in the sport-television nexus, and its accommodation in contemporary society, to make themselves familiar with such works.

Shayne Quick

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## NOTES

1. For a succinct treatment of Roone Arledge and ABC sport see David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game* (N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 1981), pp. 236-250; and for a thorough examination of the NFL/television relationship see, David Harris, *The League: The Rise and Decline of the NFL*, (N.Y.: Bantam Books, 1986).
2. The works by Brian Stoddart, *Saturday Afternoon Fever: Sport in Australian Culture* (North Ryde, N.S.W.: Angus and Robertson, 1986); Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner, *Up Where Cazaly? The Great Australian Game* (London: Granada, 1981); Nicola Cronwell, 'Sports, Cents and Cinecameras: The Development of the Symbiotic Relationship between Sport, Business and

Television within the Australian Context', unpublished B.Ed. (H.M.) Honours Thesis, (University of Sydney, 1986); and Bill Bonney 'Packer and Televised Cricket' *Media Papers No. 2*, Occasional Papers in Media Studies, (New South Wales Institute of Technology, 1980) provide good examples of a more enlightened approach to the sport television nexus in Australia.