

J. MILLER AND
T. SHALES, THOSE
GUYS HAVE ALL THE
FUN: INSIDE THE WORLD
OF ESPN (LITTLE-
BROWN, 2011).

Reconciling the Dream: 2005-2008

"We have to distrust each other. It's our only
defense against betrayal."

— Tennessee Williams

CHAP. 7

In 2005, ESPN was monarch of all it surveyed, master of its domain, a top dog earning top dollar, and deserving of other clichés too predictable to mention. Financially the network was all but stamping out Franklins in its Bristol basement, thanks in part to the enduring genius of its dual-stream revenue—advertising revenues plus cable subscriber fees. It was a little like selling cake and getting paid to eat it too.

Despite losing hockey the previous year, ESPN was now gleefully obsessed with its professional football, baseball, and basketball coverage. In addition, College GameDay had developed into a certifiable phenomenon, drawing bigger crowds than ever before and becoming arguably the best sports show on television; ESPN: The Magazine was winning awards and new readers; hungry fans were crowding into ESPN Zone restaurants; the breadth and depth of ESPN's online offerings had made them a must-see for the rest of the industry; and the opening of a new \$100 million-plus digital center made the company's Bristol headquarters one of the wonders of the media world. While other networks were still planning a switch to high-definition, ESPN was already there.

But a rather large cloud was threatening to block the sun. A new round of negotiations for rights to broadcast the most popular, most expensive, and most desirable properties in all of sports television—National Football League games—was looming on the horizon. The NFL was offering up its entire inventory: Sunday afternoons, Sunday nights, and Monday night football. ESPN had been paying handsomely for rights to Sunday night games since

1987, but Monday night was glittering conspicuously against the black velvet because for the first time since its inception in 1970, it looked like ABC might drop the ball—even throw it away.

Monday Night Football had not only aired exclusively on ABC throughout its existence but seemed inextricably part of the network. Nevertheless, embattled Disney chief Michael Eisner reportedly no longer wanted Monday Night Football on the Disney-owned ABC television network. It was, like so much about television, a dollars-and-cents issue: the golden goose had been laying leaden eggs to the tune of at least \$150 million in losses annually for the past several years. Falling ratings combined with rising costs is no formula for success in television, and in the face of grim figures, Eisner in effect said, “To hell with prestige and tradition; we’re losing money!”

There were even rumors that one year, at the prestigious Allen & Company media summits in Sun Valley, Idaho, Eisner had offered the Monday night package to Les Moonves at CBS one year, and to Bob Wright at NBC the next—not that Eisner necessarily had the rights to do it without the NFL’s approval. In addition, the burgeoning success of ABC Entertainment’s *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey’s Anatomy* on Sunday night suggested that Eisner would not want to disturb such rarities as prime-time scripted hits.

Virtually every department at ESPN geared up for the bargaining. In all likelihood, this would be the most expensive deal anyone in Bristol had ever imagined. Sean Bratches, executive vice president of Sales and Marketing, held innumerable discussions with his team about a new football package, seen as the perfect vehicle for landing new A-list commercial clients and further strengthening bonds with those already signed. And Mark Shapiro, whose empire now included responsibility for ABC Sports, was actively developing plans for Monday night games, including a possible SportsCenter at halftime, or maybe even an episode of *Pardon the Interruption*. Everyone was optimistic. The excitement level was off the charts.

And then pop! went the balloon, or at least the “ssss” of a slow leak. The NFL announced that its chief negotiator would be none other than former ESPN president (and briefly ABC president) Steve Bornstein, who in his new job as the NFL’s executive vice president of media would be making all critical TV decisions for the team owners. That meant Bornstein would be the driving force behind which properties and packages went where, and he was hardly considered a disinterested party.

In Bristol, some thought having Bornstein across the table would be the ulti-

mate home-court advantage. After all, Bornstein had helped build the place, had handpicked George Bodenheimer as his successor, had mentored Mark Shapiro, and could claim many other friends at the network. But others at ESPN were far less sanguine. Bornstein was anything but the sentimental sort, and the four years that had passed since he was bounced from his executive post at ABC had done little if anything to mute his anger and resentment toward Michael Eisner and Bob Iger, the men who had forced him out.

For many, it looked as though Bornstein finally had at his disposal the perfect vehicle for revenge. The question at hand: Would his desire to strike back at Iger and Eisner trump whatever affection and loyalty he still felt for his dear old alma mater, ESPN?

BILL CREASY:

Iger had won. It was Iger versus Steve, and Eisner picked Iger. Steve was smart enough to know that he would be accused of running a hard deal against ESPN because of his history with Eisner and Iger. The other side of that coin was that he would go out of his way to make a deal so that he wouldn't be accused of that sort of heavy bullshit. He was in a tough position.

BOB IGER:

It is not unusual for negotiations of this magnitude to become difficult, and it is common for a certain level of frustration to arise at different stages. No one is totally immune from the ebb and flow of deals that big. That said, business never becomes personal for me. The NFL deal was always just business. It may have been personal for others, but I can assure you, it never became that way for me. As the steward of a multibillion-dollar company, allowing personal emotions to enter the equation would be a huge mistake.

STEVE BORNSTEIN:

Have you ever had a colonoscopy? Negotiation is similar to that. I have been involved in five different contracts for television rights from the NFL. The first four, I was on the ESPN side of the table, and then the fifth one, I was on the NFL side. The first one that we did at \$53 million was an incredibly expensive deal for ESPN at that time, as was the second at \$108 million. The third, \$135 million, represented a more

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modest increase—still a big chunk for us. But the fourth deal, the one that I did at \$600 million a year, was a career maker or breaker for me personally. It worked out, but each one was a very, very pricey deal. Each one took your breath away.

GEORGE BODENHEIMER:

To me, NFL negotiations at this level are purely business. There are billions of dollars flowing. I grew up negotiating in the company—not for programming but for carriage and license fees, so I can tell you that while some of those negotiations can be tension-filled, they can also be fun, and you can derive a tremendous amount of satisfaction from them. I personally enjoy them. I would say they are exhilarating.

CHRISTINE DRIESSEN:

The way we work is fairly collegial at ESPN. We have what I would call a strategic team that looks at any acquisition from a rights standpoint, and we sit and meet as a team. So we have George, most importantly. Mark was there. We'd have somebody from Production. My team would be represented. Ad Sales would be represented. And we would then analyze what the product was worth, and what it meant for us. We have a pretty good barometer on what we can afford. We even have a piece of paper detailing when we will walk away.

MARK SHAPIRO:

Chris doesn't negotiate at all. I would never bring her into a negotiating room with me on any deal. Do the background stuff; get me prepared to do what I need to do; work with me, help me; let's run a P&L; let's think about this; what are we missing? I mean, on the crap work for NFL negotiations her team does a really good job. But you've got to keep her out of the negotiating room.

CHRISTINE DRIESSEN:

The large important programming deals that were done under Mark when he was head of programming were driven by George Bodenheimer. Sometimes people lose sight of that because Mark was very vocal about his contributions and very visible. George is visible when he needs to be, but he isn't concerned with getting credit for himself;

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he'd rather give credit to the team. George made the final call. Under George's leadership, the big change here is that he has a negotiating style of being very honest and straightforward. When George says something, he has credibility.

At the end of the day, a lot of people talk passionately about the emotions driving these kinds of decisions, but a lot of that is overblown.

HOWARD KATZ:

The people who worked for Mark swore by him; the people he negotiated with swore *at* him. Watching him and Steve Bornstein negotiating with each other, the teacher and the student, you could sell tickets. Mark was brilliant and had incredible command of a room; he had an incredible ability to motivate people who worked for him, but he also had an incredible ability to piss people off. He may not have appreciated the sensitivity of the relationship between certain rights holders and ESPN, because he was a ruthless negotiator.

GEORGE BODENHEIMER:

ABC was losing \$150 million or more a year on *Monday Night Football*, and the clock had just run out on ABC's interest in continuing to do that. They were ready to move into a profitable, entertainment-based schedule. At the same time, you had a burgeoning ESPN always looking for more, always looking to improve itself, all of a sudden having an opportunity to step up to *Monday Night Football*. That's an opportunity that we gladly embraced. Everybody in the United States knows when *Monday Night Football* is on. It's the preeminent sport property. Having been at ESPN since 1981, you tell me I've got an opportunity to program *Monday Night Football* on ESPN, you better believe we're going to take advantage of that opportunity.

There were never any serious discussions, however, to acquire two packages, both Sunday and Monday.

MARK SHAPIRO:

I wanted both. I wanted to keep Sunday night on ESPN and Monday night on ABC as long as the price was reasonable, say \$1.5 billion a year. I thought we could have gotten it at one point, but Iger passed. What can I do? What you need to realize is, no matter how big one

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thinks I might have been in that job, when it came to *Monday Night Football* or the NFL in general, and spending that kind of money, I had input, George had input, and our voices were heard, but we couldn't make the decision. Michael Eisner and Bob Iger were running the ship.

But were Eisner and Iger really "running the ship"? Was anyone truly in a position to lead and make timely decisions for Disney during such critical negotiations? With Eisner clearly on his way out, Bob Iger felt the time had come at last for him to take control of Disney and save the day. His executive dexterity had been on display throughout his career but was never as evident as when he navigated the tightrope he had been walking under Eisner. Somehow, he had managed to serve under an increasingly controversial Eisner without being linked to him. Even though Iger was enormously successful and markedly handsome, and had an admirable track record, people who might have been expected to hate him didn't. There was something about the guy that disarmed skeptics and made people like him.

Many assumed Iger had the inside track and would effortlessly get Eisner's job, but others, including at least one member of the Disney board, believed that the company needed a totally fresh start. They wanted to make a clean break from everything Eisner. Either way, Iger was never one to suffer from hubris, and he had received no assurances that the job was to be his. Indeed, eBay's Meg Whitman had already been mentioned as a possible candidate.

Arguably the last thing that Iger wanted at this precarious moment was for Disney to throw billions of dollars at an NFL package that had lost the company tens of millions in the past, so for the second half of 2004 and the first few months of 2005, Iger decided the best course of action was to sit tight and do nothing with the NFL.

Critical to Iger's wait-it-out strategy was his belief that he wouldn't have to worry about competition from NBC, which had walked away from the NFL in 1998. NBC was slogging through tough economic times, and NBC Sports chairman Dick Ebersol hadn't voiced any interest in returning to the NFL.

Steve Bornstein had figured out from the start of negotiations that, as he put it, Disney was in "disarray," that Eisner didn't have the clout anymore to make such a huge decision, and that Iger would be hard-pressed to make a move. Sensing Iger's reluctance to act, Bornstein decided to box him in.

Bornstein spent over a year romancing NBC's Dick Ebersol; together the two developed a new Sunday night concept of a prime-time game, including a high-

light show before, and “flex” scheduling, which would give Ebersol the opportunity to pick his choice of game during the critical second half of the season. The strategy was clear: If Bornstein could convince Fox and CBS to renew Sunday afternoons, and get NBC to step up for Sunday nights, that would leave Disney with only Monday Night Football—and no bargaining position whatever.

Bornstein was ready with his first big message to Iger. When George Bodenheimer was inducted into the Broadcasting Hall of Fame in the fall of 2004, Bornstein took the opportunity to tell Iger that CBS and Fox had already renewed their deals for Sunday afternoons. Iger instantly understood what this meant: the number of remaining bidders had been drastically reduced. The second big message Bornstein sent was that Disney shouldn’t consider its position unassailable, and what better way to convey that than a very public lunch with NBC—the same NBC that Iger was convinced wouldn’t get back into football?

DICK EBERSOL:

We had a very famous lunch with the NFL at 21. It was Paul Tagliabue, Roger Goodell, and Steve Bornstein from their side, and they invited me, Jeff Zucker [President, NBC Universal], and Randy Falco. I said, we’ve got a private dining room, why not have it here? But I should have seen it coming, because we opened up the *New York Post* the next day, and there it was on Page Six.

They asked us if we would take over the Monday night schedule, because Eisner was desperate to get out of it, and we told them—as we had about a year and a half before—that the answer was no. We had done our due diligence and said, “Guys, we could never afford to pay you as much as they’re paying you, because the losses are so extraordinary and our losses would be so much bigger because we would be cutting into our late-night show on Monday night by doing it.” But we also said, “If you’re ever interested in Sunday night, we’d love to do Sunday night. We would take that over from ESPN, and we’d want the high-light package, so we’d have the game and fill four hours of prime time.”

STEVE BORNSTEIN:

Bob’s position was tenuous, and it was difficult for them to act. This was going to be a very big deal—a big transaction. Other than when Disney bought CapCities, this was the largest deal Michael Eisner ever did. It was getting very pricey, so that’s not for the faint of heart. If

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you're insecure as to what the board is thinking and whether the board is going to support you, there would be some hesitation there.

RANDY FALCO, President, NBC Universal Television Network Group:

I'll be perfectly honest: my first choice in all of this was to try to get a Thursday night package for our USA Network. The reason I thought that was so important for us is there are really only a handful of cable networks that have the rights to nationally televised sports. I wanted to take advantage of that if I could and separate USA Network from the competition. Obviously at the time Steve was trying to get a package for the NFL Network on Thursday night, so that probably wasn't his first choice, but they were very good about listening to the prospect of us coming up with something for Thursday night on USA.

SEAN McMANUS:

Our main priority was keeping the Sunday afternoon package because I think that's the most important window. I think we and Fox have the best packages—the highest rated by far, much bigger than Sunday night. That was our first priority.

One of the reasons we got as much money to spend from Leslie [Moonves] and, at the time, Mel [Karmazin] as we did originally back in '98 was because Leslie believed the NFL could help him launch a lot of successful prime-time programs out of NFL football—and he did with *CSI*, *King of Queens*, *NCIS*, and many more. As far as I know, NBC hasn't launched one successful show out of NFL football. So you can make the argument that the premium we paid to get football was worth it. I think Leslie would agree that one of the major reasons CBS was so successful in prime time was because of the hundreds of millions of dollars we've gotten in free promotional times with our NFL games.

With that in mind, we did look at Sunday night and had a plan. One concept was to start the Sunday night game at 8:45 or nine o'clock. The Monday night game used to start at nine o'clock. Our plan was to basically get off the air at, like, 7:15, which we do now, do *60 Minutes* as a full hour, and then come on with the football pregame show. And the football pregame show would be collapsible, so even if the first game went into overtime, we could still do a full *60 Minutes* and not be late

for the second game. Also part of our plan—which I thought was really valuable—was asking for complete flexibility in moving any of our games on a two-week notice to the prime-time window. It would have been the ultimate flex scheduling. And they would have been all our games anyway, so it wouldn't be like the lobbying we have now with the NFL when NBC wants one of our games.

We were asked to come in and do a deal for Sunday afternoon early before we needed to, and we got a deal done pretty quickly. Fox got a deal done pretty quickly too. We didn't pay a large increase. We're very happy with our package, and I think it was a good deal for both CBS and the NFL.

DAVID HILL:

Here it is in a nutshell: We make our money by selling ads on television shows, so we already make money on Monday nights. By putting football in on Sunday afternoons, we can sell ads and make some money. On Sunday nights we make money, on Monday nights we make money, so we never wanted Monday night. Sunday afternoon is just fine for us. As soon as you displace prime-time programming with NFL football, you lose a revenue stream.

RANDY FALCO:

I always looked at those kinds of acquisitions in three ways: Does it have marquee value? Certainly Sunday night did. Does it have strategic value? That would be if it would help us in prime time, and maybe give us time to rebuild the rest of our prime-time schedule and keep us relevant. And the third piece was the economic value. Now, here it seemed to me that if we were going to invest that kind of money, even though the NFL was a sure thing ratings-wise, maybe it would have been wiser for us to take the money and invest it in regular programming that we could build a franchise with—you know, along the lines of *Law & Order* or *CSI*. Remember we had just purchased Universal Studios. My only issue personally with the Sunday night package was the economics of it.

DICK EBERSOL:

Pat Bowlen [owner of the Denver Broncos] was the first person to say to me, "There still may be a chance for Sunday night. Steve Bornstein

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and I really have come around, and we believe Sunday night with you guys has more of an opportunity for us to maintain our rating. You should call Paul." So I called Tagliabue and I talked to him for an hour, and he basically said the same thing. Then he said, "We can't do anything until we get ESPN to move." This was the end of January.

The league agreed to extend the deadline to April 15. So now it's the very beginning of March, and I'm living in our house in Colorado, and one Sunday morning, the second Sunday in March, I called Pat at work—I just knew he'd be at work—and I said, "I can take *Sunday Night Football*," and he asked me about a number. I told him I thought it could be done for about \$600 million, and then he said, "All right, but I want you to put this to a vote of your coworkers. I want to make sure they're all in this thing. I don't want to find out later that you and Jeff were the only hot passionate guys and the others were forced to do something." So I went around to everybody and we were all on board for \$600 million. And then we just waited.

AL MICHAELS:

I did find out a day or two before the whole thing came down that NBC was the other player, and I called Bob [Iger], and he said, "That can't be. They're out of it." I said, "Bob, I can't tell you how I know, but I know it's NBC. I'm 99 percent certain." He said, "But that doesn't make any sense."

Friday, April 14, 2005, proved to be a major day in the histories of ESPN, the National Football League, and the National Broadcasting Company. Breakfast was served on the fifteenth floor of the NFL's headquarters in Manhattan. Iger, Bodenheimer, and Shapiro arrived and were met by Bornstein, NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue, his deputy Roger Goodell, New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, and Pat Bowlen, owner of the Denver Broncos.

Iger told the NFL guys that he had an offer for Monday night, but they didn't want to hear about it, at least not then. "We're not going to accept offers for Monday night," Bowlen announced. "You want to be in prime-time football, you have to be on Sunday night." Iger said he didn't want to do it that way, and proceeded to make a \$1.5 billion offer: \$1 billion for Sunday night football on ESPN, and \$500 million for Monday night football on ABC. So much for ABC dumping Monday Night Football.

Bowlen exploded; Kraft was frustrated. They couldn't believe Iger was now making a bid that Bowlen had practically begged him to make more than six months earlier. The NFL gang was so miffed, they left the room.

ROBERT KRAFT, Owner, New England Patriots:

I never used the word "insulting" about their offer. I don't think anyone can use that word when you're talking about \$1.5 billion. What I did feel was that their offer didn't reflect fair value for both nights, and we were pleased that the market proved that belief to be right.

While Iger agonized, NFL chief operating officer Roger Goodell called Dick Ebersol and asked how quickly he could get over there. Ebersol was at 280 Park Avenue in twenty minutes and was spirited up by a back elevator. The NFL negotiating team asked Ebersol if he was still willing to pay \$600 million for Sunday night. Ebersol said yes, and the NFL guys said, "Congratulations, you have a new football night."

Minutes later, Commissioner Tagliabue told Iger and Bodenheimer that Sunday night was no longer an option. The 21 lunch notwithstanding, Iger had been told by at least one knowledgeable insider that NBC was in the bidding and had simply refused to believe it. Now he knew it was true, whether it made sense or not. Sunday night was gone; only Monday night remained. And Iger knew what Bornstein had known for close to two decades: he just couldn't let ESPN go without football because it would brutally harm the brand, and more important, between 30 and 35 percent of its affiliate fees were from football. ESPN had to have football.

There would be no more ABC Monday Night Football. With almost no bargaining position, a situation aggravated by the fact that Bornstein knew from years of experience how much ESPN could afford to spend, Disney had to bid up to \$1.1 billion a year for eight years to place Monday Night Football on ESPN's roster. But there would be none of the flex scheduling that NBC received and, most shocking, no playoff games.

DICK EBERSOL:

There's no question that if ABC-ESPN had made the deal within two weeks of the time the other networks did, they would have held on to both packages, and I'd be shocked if they couldn't have held on to it for, like, a million-four for both. And that Sunday night package had one wild-card Saturday. But the point was, they ended up paying a billion-one, losing Sunday night, and not having any playoff games.

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STEVE BORNSTEIN:

They lost *Monday Night Football* after a thirty-six-year run on the network. You don't lose your number-one series after nearly four decades and not feel some disappointment. That was really part of the problem of being last. They weren't able to set the table. They were only able to react to what was left.

DON OHLMEYER:

Steve could not have pushed any harder for ESPN to make the deal back in October. In a way, it cost them [Disney] a couple hundred million dollars by not listening to Steve—or, to put it another way, Steve made a couple hundred million dollars more for the league when they didn't listen.

BILL CREASY:

I've heard there is criticism up in Bristol that the price ended up so high because of Mark. It is my 100 percent opinion that if Iger and George were not in the room, if the league and ESPN just put Steve and Mark in a room and said, "Don't come out until you make a deal," you would have never heard the price that they eventually agreed to. Mark and Steve would have hacked out a deal. I think Mark was frustrated. He knew he could make a deal but they never listened to him. From the league's point of view, ESPN messed around too much.

BOB IGER:

I was feeling good that we had secured an eight-year deal for sports television's most venerable franchise when the other TV packages went for six years. I also felt good that we had clearly strengthened one of Disney's core brands, ESPN, and had created a new opportunity for ABC on Monday nights. And ultimately ABC created a franchise, *Dancing with the Stars*, that has given Disney a strong, enviable position with both men and women on Monday nights.

STEVE BORNSTEIN:

I don't want to sound smug. I was pleased with the end result of these negotiations. Essentially, the NFL got paid more money for less

product. We created a new package, and we got another hour of prime-time television because NBC was going to program the seven-to-eight-o'clock block promoting our sport. By 2006, the first year of this new deal, our ratings were up double digits on every platform.

ESPN should be thrilled with the football package, and I think most people there are. They're making big money. It's the premier sports network and they have the premier sports product—they have the crown jewel in sports marketing called *Monday Night Football*. There is nothing better than that.

Some say they pay more than other partners and the other partners have playoff games. That's a specious argument. Who's extracted the most value out of their association with the NFL? ESPN, ESPN, ESPN. So anybody at ESPN who is disappointed or angry is not really being intelligent.

AL MICHAELS:

Was ESPN going to do okay? Absolutely. Their template because of sub fees doesn't allow them to fail. But they could have had Sunday night and Monday night and blown NBC out the door. Instead, NBC winds up with the number-one package. It was a major blown opportunity.

DAVID HILL:

Disney paid the big bucks on Monday night so they could jack up their cable prices; that's all it is. Sunday afternoon is great for us because we didn't sell advertising there and we do now. It's very simple.

SEAN McMANUS:

We thought the break-even number was \$425 million, and NBC paid \$600 million. You can ask them if they're making or losing money on it, but I know what the economics are, and I know how many more playoff games we have and what our ratings are, and I know that we generate probably 30 percent more rating points each year. So while we looked at it and thought it would make sense for us to go right from Sunday afternoon football to Sunday night football, we just couldn't get to the level that NBC eventually did.

I believe Disney could have swept in and kept NBC out of the marketplace, but I'm not sure they ever really appreciated—at least to the degree that NBC did—the value of the prime-time network package.

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They just decided that ESPN was strategically more important to them than the ABC television network—which was no surprise.

MICHAEL EISNER:

By 2004, we had *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and they had all done very well, but you can't give up football; it's *The American Pastime*, and it would be bad from a PR point of view. So by putting the big franchise, Monday night, on ESPN, we no longer had to have it Monday nights on ABC. It was a fantastic decision worth maybe a billion dollars to the company. So now you had Sunday night on NBC, which is a big loss for them, and Monday night on ESPN.

ESPN goes from a Ping-Pong network and a surfing network, and whatever else they were doing there in the beginning, to the key sports franchise.

STEVE BORNSTEIN:

Running these broadcast networks without a male delivery system, which is what *Monday Night Football* is, is really hard to do. ABC may be better positioned given the cross-promotional opportunities that they have within ESPN, but they'll want back in as well. Every time any of the big four networks has ever lost the football package, they've come back in.

GEORGE BODENHEIMER:

Would we like to pay less? Would we like to have a few more benefits than we had? Sure, as in any negotiation. The good news is, those negotiations continue to come around every few years. And we're not going anywhere.

Lost in the palaver about Monday night versus Sunday night, and in the widespread astonishment at the \$1.1 billion price tag, was the fact that NBC had also acquired the highlight show that preceded each Sunday night game. And that meant an abrupt bye-bye to NFL Primetime, the long-running ESPN institution hosted by Chris Berman.

CHRIS BERMAN:

It was a fuckup of the tenth magnitude. I knew somehow ESPN would maintain their NFL package, which was what we did, but what I

didn't understand was that *Primetime* was at risk. NBC came in through the bathroom window, to quote Joe Cocker or the Beatles. I didn't think that the world was going to change, that we—ABC-ESPN—would lose one of the two. I didn't know that. How could I know? Nobody knew.

MARK SHAPIRO:

All Berman cared about was *NFL Primetime*. We said, "Chris, we got *Monday Night Football*! Chris, we got eight years! Chris, we got Spanish language!" All he cared about was that *Primetime* would go away. That was his showcase. That was his baby. He called Tagliabue. He called Bowlen, trying to save it. Couldn't do it.

CHRIS BERMAN:

If you put my professional tombstone up, the first sentence would be: "He did *NFL Primetime*." First one.

TOM JACKSON:

I cannot remember the exact moment we found out we had lost *Primetime*, but I knew we were late in the negotiations. It was the loss of something that was very special to Chris. I know that he was disappointed, as I was. There couldn't have been anyone at our company who didn't know how important it was. In fact, I can't imagine there was anybody, including the NFL hierarchy, that was happy about that program disappearing—maybe with the exception of NBC. It certainly was one of those moments where everybody knew that they were losing something; you walk away with one of those feelings like "How could it happen? How could you let this happen?"

CHRIS BERMAN:

That show made football famous. I would always hear, "You guys made me a football fan. Now I can watch a whole game" or "We watch *NFL Primetime* together as a family."

In the early nineties, Don Shula told me he watched *NFL Primetime*. I said, "I know you're a football fan, Coach, but do you use it professionally because you have game film?" He said, "Yeah, I do." He told me, "We're playing the NFC East this year for the first time in four years, and starting about four weeks out, I'll pay a little closer attention

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to the Giants highlights that I haven't seen in four years on tape, and I might just make a couple of notes from your show when we get a little closer." I said, "Whoa, now you're just blowing me away."

It was the highest-rated studio show in the history of cable television by the way—sports or otherwise. And what I liked about it most was it was just football. There were no pretenses. It was not "Let's be stars." There was no script. Tommy and I would just finish each other's lines. It was great. And the beauty of that show was there was very little time for management to tell you how to do it, because nothing happened until 1:01 on Sunday. We'd spend six days formatting the pregame show but six hours doing the night show.

We'd spend all week figuring out why New England was going to clobber so-and-so and then they wouldn't, and it's like "Oh, what the hell happened there?" Then we get to talk about it. And I loved that. I was feeding off the energy of our building, of our job, and the fact that we were all football fans. Look, I still love the game, and I still really enjoy the people who run it. It's just that now, in getting to the post, if you will, getting the horse in the frickin' gate so we can run the race, is certainly a lot more challenging than it used to be.

STEPHANIE DRULEY, *Coordinating Producer:*

It is disappointing that we can't do those long highlights, because that's really where Boomer was at his best. When he's voicing highlights, they feel big and important and exciting. Nobody does it better than he did with that show. And whatever you try to do, you can't really re-create that immediacy, because it was right after a game. But we romanticize *Primetime* because it's been gone for a couple of years. You have to wonder today, with all the different ways you can get your highlights, would it have been as popular now?

Triumph was the title Jeremy Schaap gave his book about Jesse Owens's historic performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, when Germany had been taken over by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party. But Schaap would score an impressive triumph of his own in 2005, two years before the book was published.

He'd already won a total of four Sports Emmys for his work and was arguably the best on-air reporter at ESPN, but nothing compared to his confrontation in Iceland with quixotic chess champion Bobby Fischer. Perhaps it was because the

American expatriate, whose reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was to say, "I want to see the U.S. wiped out," had been thought of as insane; perhaps it was Fischer calling Jeremy's late father, the legendary Dick Schaap, a "Jewish snake."

Whatever it was, the stage was set for a poignant confrontation.

JEREMY SCHAAP:

Ever since I became a reporter at ESPN, I wanted to do a Bobby Fischer story because of the family connection. When Bobby was twelve years old and he was the U.S. national champion, he and my father developed a close relationship. My father was a writer at *Newsweek*, and he was covering chess among other things. Bobby didn't really have a male figure in his life. He was raised by his mother, sisters, and grandmother. My father became kind of a surrogate father. He'd take him to ball games and play tennis with him. They became very close. When Bobby was moving up the ranks internationally in the sixties, my father kept very close tabs on him, often writing about him in magazines. When Bobby would come back from having defeated some grand master somewhere, the first person he'd see waiting for him at Kennedy or Idlewild would be my father, and that would often be the only TV interview he'd do. And when he came back after winning the world championship, my father was the MC of Bobby Fischer Day at Seton Hall. My dad even threw a party for him. And then Bobby disappeared.

Nobody could find him. I mean literally no one in the West interviewed him in twenty-five years, maybe more than that. He was a white whale for a lot of reporters. Then, in 2004, he surfaces in Japan, where he gets arrested on a passport violation. His U.S. passport had expired, and they put him in jail. So now at least we know where he is. And a producer I worked with a lot named Jon Fish told me there were rumblings that he was going to be released. Then we hear that the Japanese are letting him go and that Iceland is going to grant him citizenship. We also found out a private plane is going to take him all the way to Iceland from Japan. He's going to be in the air for sixteen hours.

Some of ESPN's loftiest qualities came together in that moment and in the buildup to it, turning the encounter into a stunning piece of personal and yet professional journalism. ESPN also showed itself, perhaps contrary to its reputation, willing to

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spend whatever was necessary to chase down a big story, even if superficially it seemed to have little to do with sports.

JEREMY SCHAAP:

I knew I had to get to Iceland. This might be our only chance to get the guy, 'cause he's going to step off that plane and then probably go back into seclusion. So I'm looking at the flights. There's one flight a day from the United States to Iceland and it was at 7:30 in the evening. It's now 3:30 in the afternoon. So I call Glenn Jacobs, who at the time was coordinating producer and number two in the feature story unit, and explain the situation. I said, "You gotta make a decision right now. I need a crew, and you gotta get us on a plane tonight." I knew it was going to be an expensive proposition. And he just said, "Go." I threw some clothes into a bag and ran for the airport. We landed at two in the morning in Iceland.

When Bobby arrived at the airport, he looked very scary. He was hustled off right away. I did get a chance to say my name, but he didn't stop, he didn't even blink. I spent the entire night thinking he must have forgotten my father. The next day was bizarre at every level. I was shocked he decided to hold a press conference—he hadn't done one since 1992—and he did it at the same hotel where he stayed during the '72 match with Spassky. There were only two American news organizations, the rest were Russian, English, Icelandic, and a couple other places. The room was packed. I was expecting a typical press conference and was hoping I'd get in some questions. It never occurred to me for a second that that thing would deteriorate into a one-on-one confrontation. None of my questions mentioned my father. I was trying to ask questions that any American media would be asking, like why he thought the attacks on 9/11 were the chickens coming home to roost for the United States. I asked him why he went into seclusion. He had never before put himself in a position to be asked, and I was thinking about all the ground I had to cover. But I was getting no help from the rest of the media. They wanted to know if he was going to learn the Icelandic language. There was a question: Would he plan to go whale watching? And there were a number of specific questions from the Russians about chess. I was literally standing there thinking, these people are crazier than Fischer.

Then he started ranting about the Jews and the U.S. and George Bush and said he wanted to come back to me. He looked over at me and said, "Your father was Jewish, wasn't he?" I said, "Yes, as are you." If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't have said that to him, but it was very emotional, I was in the middle of this island in the Atlantic Ocean, and I was feeling disoriented.

Then, we're having this strange, bizarre, intense back-and-forth. He's saying the most horrible things to me while explaining to the entire room the relationship he had with my father. There were moments of lucidity throughout and almost sweetness in the way he would phrase things. It seemed sometimes like he was actually really hurt that my father, as he saw it, had turned on him. There was obviously some unresolved history between them. But then he called my father "a typical Jewish snake," I remember those exact words. It was the last straw. I decided I couldn't stand there anymore. I didn't give a shit about his answers anymore. He was telling everyone that my father had written that he didn't have a sane bone in his body and asked me if I read it. I told him I wasn't sure if I had but added, "You've done nothing here to disprove anything he said." Then I walked out. The room was silent. He didn't say a word for a good twenty seconds.

I was shaken and called Vince Doria to tell him what happened. He wanted the tape and we had to go through seventy different paths to get it fed back to the U.S. They ran the piece and then a couple weeks later, I did a bigger piece which ran on *World News Tonight*, and that piece made an even bigger impact.

On June 23, 2005, in an announcement that did nothing to alleviate stress levels, ABC Sports employees were summoned to an important meeting in the thirteenth-floor conference room at ABC corporate headquarters in New York. Word of the meeting heightened anxiety, already rampant, among the ABC Sports staff about the rapidly encroaching dominance of ESPN, moving like lava from a volcano over their work and, they feared, their futures.

Fortunately, George Bodenheimer was there to calm them, reassure them, and promote cooperation—even though, as he knew, the message flew in the face of history.

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MICHAEL EISNER:

We had decided that we were going to get rid of ABC Sports, and ESPN would be on ABC. ESPN was "The Brand!"

MARK MANDEL, VP of Media Relations:

All of us from ABC Sports knew that we would have to adapt to new business realities once ESPN took over. Like many of my colleagues at ABC, we believed our brand was valuable and could have thrived under ESPN. But we soon came to recognize that merging the two under the ESPN brand was the right business decision, even if that was difficult for us personally. So we were on board and eager to contribute to ESPN, and I along with others expressed this to George.

We were told at the beginning that we would be welcomed onto the ESPN team and that the process to combine the two entities would be an "integration." On June 23, George came to the ABC Sports offices to make it official. The entire ABC sports staff was assembled in the thirteenth-floor conference room. I was traveling but listened in on the conference call. George's point that day was, this was going to be a great thing for everybody in the room because it would create more opportunities, and the combined company would make us all even stronger.

I wasn't in the room, so I couldn't smell anything, but what I heard was sheer mendacity. This was not an integration; this was a hostile takeover.

Immediately after returning to his office from that meeting, at least one longtime ABC executive was issued his walking papers. That very day. Within months, many others learned their fates, and the process of eliminating ABCers continued methodically. In 2005, there were approximately seventy-five to ninety full-time people working at ABC. By 2008, there were about forty who survived to work at ESPN. By 2010, there were about ten. And any of us who were "lucky" enough to have employment at ESPN had to accept diminished roles. You would have thought at least a few people from ABC would get top jobs within ESPN—it's the law of averages that some people at ABC would have been better than their counterparts at ESPN. Every single ABC Sports employee had their responsibilities diminished. We either

lost our jobs or had to accept lesser roles. I was even told by an ESPN senior vice president that the people of ESPN didn't believe that the people of ABC Sports worked very hard. Perhaps it was inevitable that the big Bristol bureaucracy would clash with the small, efficient ABC Sports team that produced a lot of the most memorable sports television during the last forty years.

BRENT MUSBURGER:

Bornstein came over and became the head of ABC, and then Bodenheimer did. They tried to run it as different shops, but you knew that eventually the accountants would take a look at the books and say, "Why do we need to pay two guys when we can pay one guy and get the same job done?" And management at Disney was absolutely right; there was no question about it. ESPN had experienced a lot of resentment about the way they had been treated for so many years. There was definitely a feeling on the part of ABC Sports that "we are the big guy and we will tell ESPN what to do." So, believe me, those guys really enjoyed it when they finally took over all of ABC. There's no question about that.

MARK MANDEL:

Three years after we were "integrated" and supposedly full-fledged ESPN employees, all of the thirty-seven remaining former ABC employees who were now working for ESPN received an ominous e-mail informing us to report to one of two conference rooms the next morning for a very important meeting. It turned out that twenty-five were assigned to a conference room in which they were told they would have to move to Bristol or lose their jobs. The other twelve of us, who were also rounded up in a conference room, were told that we were safe for now and we could remain in New York. It was clear that all thirty-seven of us were different from our fellow ESPN employees. After all, there were many ESPN employees who worked in New York who were not corralled into conference rooms and had to fear for their jobs that morning. Only ex-ABCers were subjected to this pain and suffering. It was clear to those of us who were rounded up only to be told we would keep our jobs in New York: we could be rounded up again, anytime.

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ESPN often claims great reverence for the history of ABC Sports but obviously had a collective bias against the ABC Sports employees.

On December 26, 2005, the Patriots and the Jets would collide for the 555th NFL game to air on ABC. It would be the end of a long-standing tradition—the last NFL game on ABC.

DON OHLMEYER:

To me, the legacy of Roone lives on in what ESPN does. But there was no reason anymore for the existence of ABC Sports.

Nearly everyone at ESPN and across the TV sports world assumed that the new Monday Night Football would look just like the old, except it would be on a different network. That would mean the stellar duo of John Madden and Al Michaels would continue to man the booth, backed by popular producer Fred Gaudelli, who joined ESPN in the early eighties and was generally regarded as its top producer, and director Drew Esocoff, Gaudelli's partner and one of the most highly respected directors in the business.

They obviously hadn't been talking with Mark Shapiro.

AL MICHAELS:

In October of '05, in our lame-duck *Monday Night* year on ABC, Bodenheimer comes to Indianapolis for a game. I'm walking out onto the field with him before the game, and I am hearing from unimpeachable sources that the *Monday Night* schedule beginning in '06 will look a lot like the *Sunday Night* schedule had looked in previous years, and that *Sunday Night* is going to get the *Monday Night* schedule. This meant the league wanted to make *Sunday Night* the primary night.

I knew the guys who were making out the schedules, and I knew Bornstein had an ax to grind, and Howard Katz, who was now at the NFL, had also been let go by Disney. So I'm walking out onto the field and I said, "George, I'm nervous about the schedule next year." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because I'm hearing the schedule is going to be far inferior to the way it's been." He said, "Oh, no, Mark said we're going to get the *Monday Night* schedule." And I looked at him and I said, "I tell you what, here's the litmus test, George. In all of the years I've been on *Monday Night Football*, save maybe one or two, the defending Super

Bowl champion has been on the schedule three times, which was the maximum number of appearances that they could have (this was of course pre-flex). So the litmus test is going to be next year, to make sure they're on three times. Here's what I'm hearing. They will not be on three times, they will not even be on twice, we're going to get 'em once." He said, "No, Mark said we're going to get the *Monday Night* schedule."

George had always been straight with me, so I think he got bamboozled, because here's how the schedule turned out: in 2006, the first year of ESPN football on Monday nights, the Super Bowl champion Steelers did not appear three times, they didn't appear two times, they appeared just once—week three on the road at Jacksonville.

HOWARD KATZ:

We had the deal, and were getting ready to negotiate the long-form agreement. We sat there with a bunch of lawyers and said tactically, how should we approach this meeting since the fundamental issue was them [ESPN] understanding what they bought? And we started the meeting by saying to Mark, you understand what you bought now, right? It's the Sunday night cable package moved to Monday night. Mark said, "I know."

SANDY MONTAG, Agent, IMG:

So Madden is at *Monday Night Football* and has a great run there with Al Michaels. He loved working with Al. For him, as a coach, having Howard Cosell broadcast your game was the best. When John became a broadcaster, he probably didn't say it at the time, but in his heart, his career would not have been complete if he'd never gone to *Monday Night Football*. So he was thrilled. So then the world changes and NBC gets back in, and *Monday Night Football* goes to ESPN. And we're thinking, "Well, same company." Really we're thinking he'd just move over to ESPN and do *Monday Night* there.

I'm on vacation at Hilton Head in April, and I get a call from George Bodenheimer and Mark Shapiro. In addition to representing John Madden, I also represented Joe Theismann at the time, along with Fred Gaudelli and Drew Esocoff. They said to me, "Well, we have a decision to make. Which team do we pick for *Monday Night Football*? Do we

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take Mike Patrick, Joe Theismann, [Jay] Rothman, and [Chip] Dean, or do we take Al, John, Fred, and Drew?" And with all due respect to my friend Joe Theismann, I thought they were joking. Mark being one of my best friends, I just thought they were pulling my leg. Because look, Al and John? They're legendary. Then I quickly realized, these guys aren't joking. They really think that they have a decision to make.

So my next call was to John. In his mind he was somewhat surprised they hadn't already re-signed him, because at the time you knew that *Monday Night Football* would stay on ABC or go to ESPN. But they hadn't done that. So John asked me, "Did you talk to George?" "Yeah, I talked to George." "So, what's the timing here?" For a second there I thought maybe I shouldn't tell him, because maybe these guys will go to sleep, wake up, and say, "What were we thinking?! Forget about what we said yesterday." But I told him what I knew. I said, "I've got to tell ya, John, they told me they have a decision to make." And John says right away, "Well, that's the end of them."

You don't do that with John Madden. It's over. Done. When you stumble at the line with John Madden—when you show an ounce of weakness—the game is over.

JOHN MADDEN, Announcer:

George called me when I was in my truck driving with my son after a lunch. He told me ESPN had got *Monday Night Football*, and that I should hold tight, because they weren't sure what they were going to do about the booth. He said, "I'll get back to you." That's a call I remember.

It definitely shocked me. First, because when you look at the growth of pro football, there are three or four things that jump out at you: One was the Giants-Baltimore Colts game, the second was the AFL-NFL merger, and the third was *Monday Night Football* bumping it up to another level. To me, ABC was such a big part of NFL football. It was the only game on that day, and there wouldn't be another game until the next Sunday. It was just something that ABC started and I thought it would always be there.

Then I found out the schedules were going to be reversed, that Monday night would be Sunday night and Sunday night would be Monday night, and that's when I decided I wasn't going to be stuck with the old

Sunday night football schedule. Dick Ebersol called me and said, "I'll be out there tomorrow."

FRED GAUDELLI:

John was fuckin' pissed. It was the first time I ever heard him like that, man. He called me and said, "I got a call today from Bodenheimer, and he said they didn't know what they were going to do with their talent and production teams. He said they felt like they had two great teams." And he paused, and I said, "Yeah, and what do you think?" And he goes, "Forget them." Now, when George placed that call telling John he had two great production teams and didn't know what he was going to do, guess who was sitting in John's office? Dick Ebersol.

They actually said, "We have two great production teams, now what are we going to do?" That's like tomfoolery! That's like, you gotta be kidding me, man. You're talking about the greatest television analyst who ever lived, and may ever live, and you can't decide what you want to do?! I remember I got a call the day it was going down from George saying, "Hey, look, we're losing *Monday Night Football*; I just want you to know you always have a job at ESPN. I can't tell you what that job is going to be, but we're not going to let you go. You're going to be fine." He said, "I can't say that for everyone on your show, but you and Drew [my director] are going to be fine." Okay, great. So a month later I get another call from George and this time he says, "Hey, Fred, Mark and I are meeting with Al Michaels today, and we're going to tell him that you're not producing *Monday Night Football* after this year." I said, "All right." He then said, "Mark Shapiro will be in contact with you."

AL MICHAELS:

They'd given Mark the deed to the ranch in terms of production and he'd already determined that Jay Rothman and Chip Dean would be producing and directing *MNF*. George always felt uncomfortable dealing with anything that we would term the creative side. It was as if, if it had to do with content, with editorial, with production, he just acquiesced to Shapiro. "Capitulated" would be a better word. I always thought he should have given himself more credit.

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MARK SHAPIRO:

This is a defining moment. ESPN, the biggest brand in sports unarguably, succeeds in getting the biggest property in sports. George walks into my office with one of those toy semi trucks with *Monday Night Football* on it and gives me a hug. So I have to think, "Who are we going to give this to?" To Jay, who's been toiling for, like, thirteen years as our guy, or are we going to go with Freddie, who was working over at ABC. When Freddie went over to ABC Sports, things changed. Fred was not an ESPN guy anymore. Fred became one of "them," the guys who frowned on the cable guys.

Sandy Montag called me and said, "You're making the wrong decision. Gaudelli is better than Rothman." And I know that was the general consensus, but I said, "Look, I think Jay's better. Al Michaels controls his guys. Jay tells it like it is. He would beat the shit out of Theismann. But even if their talents are even, maybe Freddie's a little better, maybe Jay's a little better, it's pretty much even. Okay? I'm going to go with the guy who's loyal."

FRED GAUDELLI:

Mark Shapiro called me and said, "I want to meet with you," and I said, "All right, fine." He made me come to a restaurant near his house at, like, seven in the morning on July 4, and he walks in and says, "Look, you can have any job you want in this company other than *Monday Night Football*. Is there anything you really like?" But before I can answer, he asks, "How about management? Would you do management? Would you come in and would you run all of college sports?" I told him, "I'm not interested in management." Then he says, "How about if you come in and be the executive producer of NASCAR?" I said, "I have no affinity for that sport, and I don't want to acquire one." So he's, like, "All right, just give me one. Just tell me what it is." I said, "You know Mark, I don't really know, there's not a lot left. Maybe the NBA Finals would intrigue me, yes, how about the NBA Finals?" He said, "Argh, you can't have that job either." So I said, "Why not?" He said, "You know we got to be loyal to Eddie." Eddie is Ed Feibischoff, who had come from NBC a year and a half earlier.

I just looked at him. “Well, hold on, man, I spent twenty years at ESPN. I did every major show in the remote production department that ESPN had. So you’re telling me that a guy who’s been here less than three years—and you can’t even put us in the same league as producers—and you’re going to apply loyalty to him and not to me?” He said, “I’m sorry, I hired him.” That’s when I was just, like, “This is ridiculous.” So then he started throwing out other jobs that I don’t want to mention because these are jobs that my friends currently have. And I was, like, “Those guys are my friends. I can’t just come in and take their job.” And he’s, like, “Oh, they won’t mind. We’ll just give them something else to do.” I said, “No, no, no, they *will* mind.” Then I said, “Maybe we should just table this conversation for now and have it again.” Where I left it for me was, ESPN is going to be my last resort. I’m going to pursue every other job that I can possibly get, just knowing that ESPN is the fallback, but I don’t want to go back to ESPN because I don’t want to work for this guy.

AL MICHAELS:

I don’t want to say “stunned,” but I was very disappointed when *Monday Night* was no longer going to be on ABC. At that point, there was never a question in my mind that if I wanted to remain on *Monday Night*, I’d be the guy.

It was upsetting when I was told by George that Jay Rothman was going to be the producer and not Fred Gaudelli because of “a loyalty factor.” That’s when I said to George, “I don’t understand this. What do you mean by loyalty? Fred has been with the company longer than Jay, and he went from *Sunday Night* to *Monday Night* at the behest of the company. Clearly that meant that Fred was the best man, because *Monday Night* is the crown jewel package.” So I never understood what that “loyalty factor” was. I read that to mean that loyalty only extended to the ESPN brand, and when Fred went to ABC he was no longer an ESPN guy—even though they asked him to make the move and ESPN and ABC were both under the same umbrella.

I felt for Freddie. Fred Gaudelli had been their best guy, and they wouldn’t have elevated him to *Monday Night Football* if they thought somebody else was better. And, by the way, nobody is. Freddie is the best producer I have ever worked with.

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HOWARD KATZ:

Freddie Gaudelli is the best football producer on the planet. I respect a lot of other people's work, I just think Freddie's the best. So I was sort of surprised that Mark made the decision that he did. In Mark's mind, I think he was trying to be loyal to his guys. Well, you know, Freddie had been one of his guys too, so to that extent Freddie certainly got caught in the crossfire.

FRED GAUDELLI:

There is no loyalty in business; we all know that. But for me it was just the up-close and personal example that it really doesn't exist, it really doesn't. When I sat there and thought, "Okay, why is he choosing Jay over me?" and I'm just kind of making a checklist—you know, experience and all these different things—I mean, I don't want to make this about me and Jay, but there was no comparison. This was, like, crazy! John, Al, myself, and Drew had all done this for quite a while, and certainly Al and John had achieved a mega-status in their roles, and I'd been doing mine for a long time. Even Mark had said publicly more than a few times that I had set the standard for football production. He was quoted on that from the producers' standpoint in various places. So I knew what it was about.

I was not jumping onto the Kool-Aid wagon. Mark Shapiro ran a dictatorship, and ESPN still suffers from it today.

NORBY WILLIAMSON:

There were people here who haven't been around that long, and they thought of Freddie as an ABC guy. No, that's wrong. He's part of the fabric of this place. He helped build this place. That was a tough one, a really tough one. And that's what happens sometimes. We have a spoil of riches. We have a lot of talented people. That was a high-profile decision with two high-profile unbelievably talented people. There are a lot of people here vying for positions who are unbelievably talented. That's the thing about this place.

SANDY MONTAG:

I called Dick Ebersol. John had hosted *Saturday Night Live* when Dick was there, and they had known each other since then. I also called

Sean McManus, who's been a good friend of mine. I told them, "I really don't want to put you in a three-man booth, but if it were a three-man booth at CBS with Nance and Simms, that one might work." John loved Phil Simms. I basically felt I could have done a deal with either place, to be honest with you.

Dick Ebersol can be as charming as anyone in our business. You don't want to say that John Madden fell in love, but the passion that Dick has for production and the passion that John has, it's almost like two light bulbs went off and they'd invented something. So then I get a call from Al Michaels. During the season. That would be fall '04. And he says, "You know what? I want to stay with John. I want to get out of my contract, and I think you're the only person who can get me out of it because of your relationships." I said, "Really? Okay." So first I thought, "Well, I have to see if Dick wants Al Michaels. He may not." I have a whole diary I kept during that time. My wife said, "Sandy, you're having these calls every day, which are mind-boggling. Write everything down." So Dick and I talked, and because we can trust each other, he says, "Are you serious?" And I said, "If I can get him out, and I don't know how, but if I *can* get him out, would you take Al Michaels?" And he said, "Well, I have Collinsworth, but how can I not take Al Michaels?"

At some point in late spring, Mark came back and said, "Well, we're not 100 percent sure with our decision. We may want to keep John." At that point I said, "The ship sailed."

But I still had a Fred Gaudelli problem because he was out of a job. Now during this time, Dick and I became very, very close. We had a lot in common, we spent a lot of time together, and I became a confidant of his in a lot of different areas. So at some point I said, "I want you to do me a favor, and after that, if you don't like it, I'll drop it. I want to go to *Monday Night Football* with you, and I want you to see Fred Gaudelli in action." So Dick and I fly to a game in Baltimore in fall '04. Very quietly I get us credentials. Not a lot of fanfare. Freddie knew we were coming. I said, "After the game starts, at some point, just so you know, I'm going to come into the truck with Dick. We're going to stand in the back. Pay no attention." So we do that—and Dick has been in more trucks than anyone in our business—and within ten minutes he turns to me and goes, "This is like watching the frickin'

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ballet." Meaning how they work together. If you ever see a sport production truck that's in sync, it's this truck. That just the way it is. So he says, "Tell Fred to meet us in the suite after." We go back to the Harbor Court Hotel to Dick's suite, and Dick tells Fred, "Congratulations. You're the new producer of *Sunday Night Football* next season."

FRED GAUDELLI:

Dick came to a Monday night game in December, and he sat in the truck and watched me produce for the first half. At half time, he said to me, "Hey, I'll talk to you later." Then my agent, Sandy, called me after the game and said I should go up to his room after the game. Dick offered me the job and I accepted it. Then he goes, "And let's go downstairs and talk to your play-by-play man." So we go downstairs to the bar, and the whole crew is there. I pretty much tell them I'm going to NBC, and then Dick cozies up to Al and proceeds to have, like, an hour conversation. So now John's going, Drew's going, I'm going, and now I think Al starts to really question what he's going to do, because his entire team is moving over to NBC without him.

SANDY MONTAG:

Clearly Mark was making the decisions then. Mark had as much power at ESPN as any number two there, ever. Even now. That's just Mark Shapiro. He made every major and minor production and talent decision.

AL MICHAELS:

Within twenty-four hours of NBC getting Sunday nights, I knew Dick Ebersol had already told John how much he wanted him to come to *Sunday Night* and pretty much be the centerpiece of the package. It also became very clear to me that Ebersol wanted me to come to NBC as well, if there was a deal to be made, and he said just that in a conference call in June when they announced that John Madden was joining NBC.

As it turned out, we couldn't come to an agreement. I was willing to take less money to go to NBC, but the gap between what I was making at ABC and what NBC was offering then was just too wide. So I agreed to sign with ESPN for Monday night.

When it became obvious that Gaudelli and Esocoff were going to NBC, there were a lot of sleepless nights, for me. I had met with Jay Rothman—he'd flown out here a couple of times—but John had made it clear he wanted me to be his partner at NBC, and when Esocoff and then Gaudelli joined him, they wanted it as well. I had no faith in what would be the new *Monday Night* schedule, but more importantly, I was without John, Freddie, and Drew. I knew in my heart that at that point in my life and my career, to start over with a completely different group of colleagues was not something I was going to be comfortable with, so at that point, my lawyer, Sam Fisher, and I asked ESPN for permission to negotiate with NBC.

SANDY MONTAG:

I went to George and asked, "Will you let Al Michaels out of his contract?" Al had one year left, and George said, "I don't know," because at that time it was going to be Michaels and Theismann in their booth. At the Super Bowl in '04, I remember being with George and going to the booth after the game and having an awkward moment with George and Al. George wanted to hear it from Al directly. "Do you want out of your contract?" and Al said yes. Bob Iger had a good relationship with Al and said, "Okay, George, go ahead."

From what I understand, the precursor to Mickey Mouse is a character called Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. It was an initial drawing, which was before Mickey Mouse, which the Disney family knew about. For some reason, it went to Universal Studios, and no one knew this, but NBC Universal owned the rights. George says to me at the time, "I'm going to give you a list of six things that we want. If Dick agrees to all six, we will let Al out of his contract." The first thing he says is, "We want the rights to Oswald the Lucky Rabbit." I go, "I can't believe George Bodenheimer is making a joke at a time like this." I'm up in my office and I googled "Oswald the Lucky Rabbit." A mouse—a rabbit-y mouse—comes up, and I go, "Holy shit. Universal owns this character?" And the grandkids to Walt Disney knew that for years and wanted the rights back. Bob Iger knows this and says, essentially, "I'm going to deliver this back to the Disney family." So that's number one. I'm, like, "Unbelievable." And then there's a list of, like, five other things, like

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insular rights on something, some web thing, some US Open promo, whatever.

So then I call Dick, and he says, "So you have the list?" "Yup." So I said, "First one, they want the rights to *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*."

Now Dick Ebersol in his infinite wisdom knows *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit*. So he called Ron Myer, head of Universal Studios. "What are you doing with this rabbit? Anything?" "No problem with the rabbit." Then we worked the trade out.

AL MICHAELS:

I looked around and realized that I was one of the last guys standing from an ABC Sports operation that had basically been told to move on. There was a scarlet letter put on anyone who had been at ABC, with Freddie being Exhibit A.

To their credit, ESPN understood how unhappy I was and allowed me to go back again and see if an agreement could be reached with NBC. This time it worked. I wound up asking to get out of my contract with ESPN to sign for less money with NBC, even though I knew it was probably going to cost me the NBA—which it did. No matter. That decision was one of the best of my entire career.

JED DRAKE:

Freddie left here to do *Monday Night Football*, and Jay had been here doing *Sunday Night Football*. So Jay was on staff and deserving of the position and was given it. It's that simple.

Freddie is a great football producer. And by that I mean that he produces the game very, very well. Where we like to take our productions is to not just limit it to the game, but to bring in, when appropriate—and that's the key thing, that's the art of producing, *when appropriate*—other elements that may be germane to that game, that telecast, ultimately, to the viewers. We might think that the story needs a discussion point—whereas Freddie is going to stick to the game, the game, and nothing but the game. Which is okay. That's fine. It's a different presentation. And you can absolutely be certain that that view is the view of Al Michaels and then John Madden, and Freddie and Drew. Tony Kornheiser was the biggest personification of the very difference in philosophy that I just suggested.

FRED GAUDELLI:

At the end of the day, if I'd gotten the Monday night job, we would have been in constant conflict. Because in my opinion—having done football for twenty years—that's not the way you set up an NFL telecast. To call it a platform for something larger is just wrong. That's looking at it from the wrong perspective. You just paid all this money for this product. You can do things around it and use it to make your network better, as Dick has done with Sunday night. But you don't stop producing around the game. That just shows your inexperience and lets people know you don't know what you're doing.

Think about if ESPN goes the other way, okay? If it's Al and John and Drew and me on *Monday Night Football*. Number one, they'd probably get better games because the league's going to want to give Madden better games, and they don't have to go through three years of fighting off the critics about all the shit in the booth. That show has been in total flux from the beginning because they didn't make the easy decision, and they made a bunch of wrong ones. The announcers—Tirico, Jaworski, Kornheiser are terrible; they're terrible. They're nowhere near Nantz and Simms, or fuckin' Aikman, let alone Michaels and Madden.

TONY KORNHEISER:

Fred Gaudelli has gone out of his way to say mean things about me. We met once in our life for ten seconds in Tampa or Orlando before the whole thing started. He is quoted saying that I'm a "rinky-dink bullshit guy," and that I've ruined the telecast. He got a better job. Why's he attacking me? I'm fine with Jay. I have problems with Jay because Jay is sort of like a Dalmatian in the firehouse, when the bell rings, it doesn't matter what's said, it's going to be this particular way, but we talk, and I love him.

FRED GAUDELLI:

We had this great synergy amongst the four of us. Each of us knew what the other was thinking, when they were thinking, and what the other required. It just made for enjoyable and productive work. And that meant that we could function at a really high level. I remember

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when John joined the show, people said to me, "Oh, my God, you're going to get Al and John, it's going to be a nightmare." Nightmare? It was the easiest time I ever had. I had the two best guys who had ever done it, and all they cared about was getting it right.

DICK EBERSOL:

Freddie was the producer from '01 to '05 for the last years ABC had Monday nights, and Drew was the director. They were both available to me for reasons I will never understand. Those two guys were born at ESPN, rose all the way through the ranks, then they were told, in front of the entire industry, that they didn't get the job producing this billion-point-one property because the other guys were the loyal guys who had stayed with ESPN. But you fucking made the decision to take them from ESPN to ABC!

Now, I thank you immensely, I'm the luckiest guy in the world. Freddie and Drew are the two best hires I've ever had in my sporting life as a producer and director—their skills and their temperament and their ability to teach young people are unparalleled. Freddie told me Mark said, "These guys who stay here are really the loyal ones." What kind of system develops that kind of fucked-up logic? Mark, by the way, made the decision and left two months later. He wouldn't have been able to control Freddie and Drew.

MARK SHAPIRO:

When I first took the reins of programming and production, I saw two divisions that were lacking leadership. They lacked risk takers and decisive decision-making. Communication was weak, and in such a big place, that led to morale issues. We worked very hard to change dialogue and feedback—in both directions.

Employees needed to not just understand my vision, I also wanted them to fully appreciate their role inside of the journey to reach that vision. Toward that end, I felt it was my duty to inspire, push, and reward. But I was also committed to listening to them, and being open to their ideas. I took great pride in holding town meetings so I could listen directly to as many of them as possible, and I spent a lot of time on the road going to events and meeting crews to make sure everybody felt a part of it all, and they had a personal connection with me. This

was the culture I felt I had to create in order to move this massive organization forward.

DAVID BERSON:

We were in the middle of a big run of programming acquisitions and knew we had to pass on some. We played close attention to where these properties would go. NFL rights ultimately went to NFL Network, PGA Tour to the Golf Channel, NHL to Versus, MLB's second cable package to Turner, just to name a few. It played out very well for us, as they were scattered across several networks. And in the interim we acquired or re-upped NASCAR, World Cup, NBA, Big Ten, SEC, US Open [golf and tennis], BCS, and others.

GEORGE McNEILLY, *Senior Director of Communications:*

There was an incredible amount of excitement when we announced NASCAR would be returning. The sport and the network had truly missed one another, and we were prepared to devote unprecedented amounts of people and technology to the effort. NASCAR was great to us as well, offering access to the drivers and crews that was second to none. A lot of people have talked about how NASCAR and ESPN grew up together, but they had been away from each other for the previous six years, and during that time, ESPN had become more determined than ever to cover not just events but news from the sports world. And that went for rights holders too. After the deal was announced, I vividly remember telling NASCAR's longtime head of corporate communications, Jim Hunter, that he should be careful what he wishes for, because the network would not play favorites with the league in terms of news gathering. And that's exactly what happened. ESPN covered all parts of the NASCAR world, from attendance drops to suspensions and civil suits. No other sports network was as comprehensive.

CARL EDWARDS:

When they first said they were going to have an in-car reporter, they asked, would I be interested in doing that, and I thought, man, that's a great idea. If a fan likes to watch, I love when they talk to drivers in the car, and so ESPN said, "Hey, we're going to take this idea to a new level and have an official in-car, in-race reporter. And so I was on board for

that along with Dale [Jr.] There was definitely some nervousness over the idea, but I wound up having a good time doing it, and Rusty [Wallace] and some of the on-air guys did as well.

FRED GAUDELLI:

ESPN had always been a place where you could have productive discourse. That's what made the place—that people were free to disagree, free to argue, and free to make your point, but at the end of the day, whoever was in charge when they made the decision, everybody got on board. That was just the way it was. That was not the way Mark Shapiro operated.

Mark Shapiro left ESPN in October 2005 and went to work for Washington Redskins owner Daniel Snyder and his Six Flags amusement parks. His salary jump was one of the broadest on record: he'd been making \$425,000 at ESPN ("What a joke," he recalls) and Snyder gave him a base salary of \$4 million plus benefits. Oh, there was also a signing bonus: \$10 million.

Those who'd regarded Shapiro as a ruthless boss would have this bit of reality to consider: no fewer than sixteen ESPN employees would follow him to Six Flags.

AL MICHAELS:

There was a running gag among the *Monday Night Football* crew that there should have been bumper stickers made saying, "Honk if you haven't been told by Shapiro that he's getting ten million dollars from Snyder."

MARK SHAPIRO:

When I look back on my final year, it's with a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. I had surrounded myself with an extraordinary team, and we secured ESPN's position in the marketplace, with the sports fan, and in the industry for years to come. I was so proud. I had worked relentlessly and sacrificed an unbelievable amount of time with my family to accomplish all this.

And then an odd thing happened: some people wanted to just stamp me with the original entertainment label, like that was the headline of my legacy. In a way, I could see how this might have happened, since

the shows my regime created, like *PTI*, *Around the Horn*, *Rome Is Burning*, *OTL Daily*, were such huge hits for the network.

But to characterize it as just entertainment was so wrong. It was the combination of all that incredible development plus the right stick-and-ball properties that gave ESPN brand dominance in the sports world. No one can rewrite that history, and all they have to do is look at what we did. We moved the biggest game in sports, *Monday Night Football*, to ESPN. We extended our Major League Baseball contract for another seven years, and we brought NASCAR back to ESPN. Add to that, three of the four tennis grand slams, the Belmont and Breeders Cup. We gave birth to the poker craze with the *World Series of Poker*, and we capitalized on the television reality craze with the hit series *Dream Job*. And *Mike & Mike* exploded on the radio. The greatest digital facility in the world opened on our campus, and we launched both HD channels and ESPN Deportes. ESPN2 had serious traction; ESPN Classic was now in over seventy million homes. We had also invested in our journalistic enterprise and had the deepest, most authoritative reporting organization in sports. We were honored with the company's first two Peabody Awards. And perhaps most importantly, I had to look back at my mandate upon being hired—improve ratings—and in my final two years, they were on fire: eight straight quarters of growth.

So when the offer came in from Dan Snyder, I believed ESPN was now going to be in the driver's seat with or without me. I looked out at the next three years and really viewed them as maintenance years. Surely ESPN would grow, but not at the speed I had been accustomed to driving. Disney would be more conservative with ESPN, digest the enormous profitability, while they invested in other areas and looked to cut costs. This was the right window for me.

I felt I had accomplished all that I had been charged to do. I was in search of a new challenge. Something more entrepreneurial. Another platform to turn around, fix, and grow.

Look, did we make some mistakes? Of course, who doesn't? Do I have any regrets? Absolutely not.

Once Shapiro decided to leave for his next challenge and its \$10 million signing bonus, he began a series of talks with Bodenheimer about succession plans for

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ESPN. Shapiro's choice was Tony Petitti, then the number-two man at CBS Sports under Sean McManus. Shapiro believed Petitti's prior history at ABC would mitigate any outsider status working against him, and that a breath of "outside air" might actually do the company good. Bodenheimer gave Shapiro the okay to make a play for Petitti, but McManus got wind of it and hurriedly notified CBS boss Les Moonves, who made a counteroffer that Petitti couldn't refuse. It marked the second time that CBS had to defend its borders against big-game hunters: Shapiro's first choice for the Monday Night Football booth had been Jim Nance, but CBS had Nance's two great loves—the Masters and the NCAA basketball tournament. He was going nowhere.

With Petitti out of the running, Shapiro was "forced to look inward," and suggested to Bodenheimer that John Skipper be given the title of editor in chief, with Jed Drake and Norby Williamson reporting to him. The title fit Skipper's publishing background, Shapiro thought, but it made Bodenheimer uncomfortable; it didn't sound like television to him. Norby, meanwhile, made his attempt to oversee production, but Bodenheimer nixed that idea. With no clear heirs apparent, ESPN's organizational chart was suddenly in treacherous flux.

JOHN SKIPPER:

When Mark Shapiro resigned, I called George within hours and asked if I could speak with him about the job. I think it was on a Friday morning. George said sure—in fact, he said, why don't we go out for a little boat ride tomorrow and discuss? Now, George is not a fancy guy. He has a boat, but it is just a little fishing boat.

So Saturday comes and I am more than a little nervous. First off, I am not a fisherman or a boat guy despite being a Skipper. We meet, head out into the Long Island Sound, and aren't out of the harbor before I say, "George, I want you to consider me for Mark's job." He expressed surprise, and maybe what he meant was it was surprising to hear a guy who had not a lick of experience in television ask for a job producing and programming television.

He asked me what my thoughts were about the job and may have been surprised again to see me pull out a wad of yellow legal pages with my prepared thoughts about what I would do. I had spent the night before on the phone with John Walsh coming up with all of it. I had had significant differences of opinion about the direction we were headed with our programming, so it was not a chore to come up with a plan.

When we returned to the dock, George, who is a close-to-the-vest guy, gave me no clue as to whether he liked it or not but simply suggested that he would think about it.

I do suspect that at some point he turned to John Walsh and asked, “What do you think? Can he really do this?” Of course, John was invested in saying yes. And remember, John and I had been partners already in launching the magazine and in running ESPN.com.

However it happened, it is a great job and a fun job. And I think it has mostly worked out.

GEORGE BODENHEIMER:

I felt like I had an executive in John Skipper with great untapped potential. I thought that with John’s creativity and business acumen he could quickly learn what he needed to prosper in that position. And I feel like ESPN has the culture where you can plug somebody into a spot who may not on a piece of paper have all the experience that you might call for from central casting if you were asking for a head of all content. But he has—we had—still do today—a tremendous executive team underneath that position.

When rights to the 2010 World Cup became available and preliminary discussions began between ESPN and FIFA, global soccer’s governing body, observers saw nothing like the Mark Shapiro whose triumphant rampages of determination had landed rights to the NBA, Wimbledon, and other big events. Seemingly apathetic (for him), Shapiro clearly wasn’t of like mind when it came to soccer.

With ESPN holding back from the bidding war, it wasn’t surprising that Gary Zenkel, Dick Ebersol’s number two at NBC Sports, was able to secure a handshake deal for the rights, reflecting the lack of enthusiasm by other networks. But then something happened: Chuck Blazer, the only U.S. citizen ever to serve on the FIFA executive committee, went into a tirade, denouncing the NBC deal to the board and claiming it could mean the death of soccer in the United States.

For every person who thought Blazer sincerely believed that NBC lacked sufficient commitment to the sport, several others saw a different explanation. At that time, Shapiro was “suspected” of having accepted an offer for a new executive position from sports magnate Daniel Snyder, and rumors flew that the soccer-loving Skipper might soon be moving into Shapiro’s old office. Indeed, at

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that very moment, Skipper was making the World Cup one of the central items in his pitch to Bodenheimer for the top job.

Despite the fact that FIFA's finance committee had approved the deal—which traditionally led to semi-automatic acceptance from the full board—the board suddenly balked and voted to table the NBC deal. NBC's delegation was not even present for the board vote because FIFA executive Jerome Valke had told them not to bother, that approval was mere formality. Naturally, the NBC troop was more than aghast at the board's about-face. But again they were cautioned not to worry; the deal would be theirs after a two-month delay.

Within forty-eight hours of getting his new job as executive vice president for content—and with Bodenheimer's blessing—Skipper was on a plane to Switzerland, accompanied by programming executive Leah LaPlaca and house attorney Eric Kemmler. Their mission: a full-tilt campaign to nab the 2010 World Cup rights for ESPN.

Skipper and his fellow executives were aware of the extensive talks between NBC and FIFA and knew the two sides might even have worked out an agreement, but Skipper was undaunted, determined to snatch the tournament away. Fortunately for him, FIFA members knew of Skipper's love for soccer and were gratified to have him on board. And a fight for the U.S. rights would only drive the price up.

Meanwhile, Ebersol, Zenkel, and the whole NBC network were waiting for word from the board, not knowing that for six of those eight weeks of delay, some board members were quietly meeting with Skipper.

Skipper pulled out all the stops and offered \$100 million from ESPN and another \$345 million from Telemundo's prosperous chief competitor, Univision. Promises made to FIFA included televising every game in high-definition, whether on ESPN or ABC, with many games also streamed live on the Internet. In addition, twenty-five matches would air on ESPN's new poke-in-the-eye 3-D channel, even though few Americans were technologically equipped to watch them that way.

It didn't seem to matter that NBC had offered the same distribution arrangements as ESPN, or that the network went as high as \$325 million with Telemundo. FIFA never asked NBC to match ESPN's offer. NBC had made its bid thinking this was a one-on-one situation.

The FIFA board was elated and delighted with the ESPN proposal. Now all that remained was to break the bad news to NBC: ESPN had won the rights to the 19th World Cup games in 2010. "You've lost," said a FIFA functionary

in a call to NBC Sports. But NBC wanted to know, “Where did ESPN come from?” and to register a hardly surprising gripe: “You told us we had it. We were just waiting for the board to meet again.”

Naturally, it was great news for John Skipper—but with the rights came a new array of pressures and stresses. Would he learn, after all the wrangling and scheming, that ESPN was overreaching, that it really didn’t have the resources for such a colossal project? Skipper knew that the network’s reputation would be on the line with this most immense of all its undertakings so far—and so would his.

JOHN SKIPPER:

I fell in love with soccer back around 2001–2002 when, as a fairly small assignment, I had some responsibilities relative to [ESPN-owned] Soccernet in the U.K., and I took half a dozen trips to the U.K., started going to games with the guys who run Soccernet, and fell in love with the game. Then I started spending a lot of time watching it, including watching the World Cup in 2002, and loved the spectacle of it.

I got this position in 2005 literally the week that the rights for the World Cup were sort of tipping away from us. We had never bought the rights of the World Cup; we had sublicensed them from SUM [Soccer United Marketing], which is the marketing arm of Major League Soccer. NBC and Telemundo had decided that they wanted to buy the World Cup, made a bid, which was sort of approved by the board or not approved by the board. NBC and Telemundo were not interested in Major League Soccer, and they had cut out Univision, which had been the broadcaster for Spanish-language rights in the U.S. They had also gone around Comcast. So there were a number of constituencies that were not pleased that there was a potential deal which was between FIFA, NBC, and Telemundo. I got the job and asked George—even before I got the job—for permission. “I realize we could all be wrong, and it’s been a long time coming, but I’m gonna be the latest guy to tell you, George, that soccer is actually going to happen in this country. It’s a world sport. The demography of this country is changing. The rest of the world can’t be wrong. And it’s gonna come. And it’s gonna come down from World Cup to our national team to our domestic team.”

At the time, I did not understand how important international soccer could be in that equation. So it’s actually turned out to be World Cup, international soccer, European Cup, Champions League, Barclays

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Premier League, national team, and Major League Soccer—all those things.

I'll tell you it was \$108 million. I mean, I told Don [Garber, Major League Soccer's Commissioner], "Look, I'm committed to doing something with the MLS, I understand if I'm going to do this overall soccer plan, it will include your league." And Don trusted me that I would do something with him. He said, "I'm going to lend you a certain amount of support"—which wasn't going to be official, since Don didn't have a vote, but he certainly made it clear that he wanted soccer to be a growing sport in the United States. Here they had an alternative that would support the national team, would support the domestic league. I didn't have the international piece at all in line at that point.

Skipper may have been playing offense when it came to soccer, but he needed to be on the defensive when it came to the network's NFL talent. Having surgically removed John Madden from the ABC/ESPN ranks, Dick Ebersol turned to the next item on his wish list: a top-notch sideline reporter for NBC's upcoming Sunday night NFL games. His first choice happened also to be at ESPN—Andrea Kremer, commonly regarded in Bristol as one of the best reporters at the network, if also high on the high-strung list.

Ebersol put in a call to Kremer's agent, Sandy Montag, and asked him to make it happen. Montag, never out of the loop, knew that Mark Shapiro was making plans to leave ESPN, and what better time to ask Shapiro for a gentlemanly farewell favor—let Montag talk to Ebersol outside the exclusive negotiating window. Shapiro even told Bodenheimer that he was going to let Ebersol talk to him.

Shapiro had said yes, basing his decision not just on his regard for Montag, but also on his respect and fondness for Kremer. He figured out NBC would be offering Kremer assignments that ESPN would never be able to match, including work at the next Olympics, something at which Shapiro knew she would excel. Montag delivered the good news to Ebersol, and Kremer agreed to go to NBC for the next six years at \$400,000 a year, a contract worth \$2.4 million, which seemed like a bonanza at the time. All was well with the world.

Or seemed to be—until John Skipper took over from Shapiro. By the time Skipper finished securing the rights to the upcoming World Cup competition for ESPN, he was more than merely peeved to learn that Kremer, whom he considered one of his resident superstars, was all set to leave for NBC. Skipper turned to John Walsh, then making a dramatic return from the equivalent of a banish-

ment to Siberia during the Shapiro years and enjoying new status as a minister (without portfolio) in the Skipper regime.

Both were appalled at the thought of losing Kremer and launched an intense campaign to keep her. Skipper flew to Los Angeles and began wooing her—with compliments (on her first-rate NFL reportage); with the lure of glamorous gigs (major roles on Sunday's NFL Countdown, Monday Night Football, Super Bowl coverage, plus hosting duties on a new weekly magazine show); and, oh yeah, with money. And more money. As much as \$700,000 per year.

However tempting and however generous the offer, Montag advised Kremer to turn it down. For one thing—one very important thing—he did not want to betray or alienate Ebersol, the man who'd just signed Montag's star client, John Madden, to a fabulous deal of his own.

ANDREA KREMER:

I did not leave ESPN for more money. That's almost comical—ESPN ended up offering me a lot more money than NBC—and the reasons that I chose to go to NBC were threefold. First, I'd never worked full-time in remote production. I had the opportunity to work on the top-rated show on the network, to do a prime-time broadcast with Al Michaels and John Madden, and to work first and foremost with Dick Ebersol, who to my mind is the top sports producer in the business. To work with him is something I always wanted. That's all number one. Number two, I'd never worked an Olympics before. And, finally, I had the opportunity to work with [HBO's] *Real Sports*, which enabled me to tell stories, and that's what I built my career on. So after seventeen years in one place, I would get to do something new. You have to understand, I was very content at ESPN. I was not looking to leave. I never solicited anything.

MARK SHAPIRO:

Some people get away, you lose 'em, okay. But some people you can't lose. And there's very few of those at ESPN. I would never have let Andrea get away. She is the best reporter, the best correspondent, we had. Andrea would have never left if I had stayed; not in a million years would I have ever let her get away. She never would have wanted to leave. But this was just before I left there myself. So she calls me as a friend: "I need your advice. ESPN blah, blah, blah. NBC this and that." She said, "The money's going to be more at NBC, but I think I can

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push this." Sandy called me, you know, "What do you think?" I said, "She's a huge asset. If they lose her, that's their fault. But you're asking me now outside of ESPN—I'm not wearing my ESPN hat now—what I think she should do." Andrea really trusted me. That's why they were calling me. And I said, "Not even a contest."

When she went to NBC, she told me, "I have you to thank." It's the only time I know that anybody over at ESPN got mad at me about anything I did, because I really stayed away. I was told that a lot of people said my fingerprints were on it, and what a jerk I was to let her move out of there. But she was asking me as a friend, and I felt like I couldn't lie to her. "You're going to get to work the Olympics and do *Sunday Night Football*. And your work load will be 20 percent what it was at ESPN. And they're going to pay you just as much, if not more? Get out of there!" And she went.

"What is it about you?" David Letterman asked Keith Olbermann on a 2007 Late Show broadcast. "You seem to burn bridges wherever you leave." To which Olbermann replied, "I don't burn bridges, I burn rivers. If you burn a bridge, you can possibly build a new bridge, but if there's no river anymore, that's a lot of trouble."

Back in Bristol, Mike Soltys, vice president for communications, remarked, "Keith Olbermann doesn't burn bridges; he napalms them."

Olbermann did come back to the wonderful world of ESPN, but ESPN executives were damned if they'd embrace him without caveats and qualifiers. Bloggers reported, and Olbermann confirmed to Letterman, that although Olbermann did return to the empire in 2005 via ESPN Radio, cohosting an hour-long segment of the Dan Patrick Show with his old SportsCenter cohort, ESPN issued a warning that under no circumstances was Olbermann permitted to set foot on the Bristol campus. They didn't say security guards would shoot him on sight but came just short of that.

For Olbermann, being banned from Bristol was probably not a devastating blow. He was never fond of the facility or the town in the first place. Besides, Patrick's radio show originated at ABC studios in New York City—and even ESPN muckety-mucks were powerless to ban him from there.

KEITH OLBERMANN:

Dan first managed to talk a few in management into having me contribute once a week to the radio show. He'd wanted us to do radio

together since 1992 and used to negotiate with Walsh in hopes of getting us our own show and then lessen the *SportsCenter* schedule—even though I didn't want to do it.

Late in '05, I guess, we went from once a week to an hour a day, and of course I loved it. We were much, much better on the radio than on TV, though it's tougher to be psychic on TV. In any event, there was talk at this time, I guess from Shapiro, of moving the 6:00 p.m. *SportsCenter* to New York, possibly to the ESPN Zone restaurant, and of moving the 2:00 a.m. to L.A. Dan's pitch was to bring me back to co-anchor with him, and Shapiro seemed warm to it. This is in the pre-Special Comment era, and I had no idea where things would be going at MSNBC, and I thought, "What a great solution." Just like the Sundays-only idea in '97—they'd never have to deal with me in person, nor I with them, and it was so much fun to work with Dan again.

Then Shapiro left and Bodenheimer was still pissed at something I'd said about him when they'd hired that overmatched ex-Fox reporter to work the sidelines (namely that he should've been led away in handcuffs), and the idea died.

"Reality TV" has been called one of the most egregious misnomers in television history—it's TV, all right, but is it reality?—and yet, when it became the rage, especially on cable channels, early in the twenty-first century, ESPN decided it had to get in there and snare a piece of the action. But whose reality would it be? Came the answer: Barry Bonds, the elusive and outspoken slugger who was expected to break both Babe Ruth's and Hank Aaron's career home-run records in the summer of 2006.

What better time to follow Bonds around with cameras and strap a microphone pack to his back? Whatever Bonds was seen doing in the show, it was bound to seem at least interesting, maybe fascinating, to the fans at home. There was one little problem, however: Barry and his representatives wanted the subject of steroid use avoided, which was a pretty big request considering it had been all over the papers, as well as on TV and radio, for months. Steroids were, in fact, considered potentially responsible for Bonds's hitting seventy-three home runs in 2001 and bulking up in 2003.

Steroid use in baseball proved to be the show's proverbial elephant in the room—or eight-hundred-pound gorilla, if you like—and it was going to be awfully hard to shoot around it. The series premiered on April 4, 2006, and by

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June, relations between the producers (Mike Tollin and Brian Robbins) and Bonds's agents and lawyers—and Bonds—were so bad that the final show was yanked from the schedule and never aired.

But then, relations weren't the only things that were bad. So were the ratings. ESPN wasn't exactly risking a huge public outcry when it canceled the series and called it a day.

JOHN SKIPPER:

There are people who've been up there for twenty-eight years who still think, "It's the little company that can, we're up here in Bristol, middle of nowhere, we're the underdog." It's the classic mentality that created the place. The most typical experience I've had, and John along with me in this, was the Barry Bonds thing, where we contracted with a filmmaker named Mike Tollin to do a reality series in which he would follow Barry Bonds around.

MIKE TOLLIN, Producer:

I wasn't close with Barry, but it was a nice relationship and we knew each other a little bit.

Barry's injured, but he comes back the last month and hits like eight homers to get within like eight of Babe Ruth's record. He gets to 706 or 708. And it's like, wow, Barry was hurt but Barry's still got it, and next year's going to be amazing; all the eyes of the sporting world are going to be on Barry. And so Rachael [Vizcarra, Bond's PR person] called me out of the blue and asked to have lunch and sat down and said, "We want to know if you'd be interested in doing for Barry what you did for Hank." That's where it started. What does that mean? "Do a documentary which shows the other dimensions of Barry Bonds and introduces a Barry Bonds to the world that nobody ever sees because all anybody thinks of is this Barry Bonds, this surly, arrogant, aloof home-run hitter, steroids abuser. Right?" So I said, "I'm thinking, Barry Bonds is not Hank Aaron. So that's a tall order. But I'm interested because I'm a filmmaker, I'm a sports lover. I'm really a documentarian at heart. And what could be a greater challenge?" People for the next year would come up to me and say, "What *were* you thinking?" That's what I was thinking. I'm thinking this is a really interesting challenge and I don't know what's there.

But the first thing we do is that Barry and I sit down to discuss what his expectations would be and what sort of—the level to which I'd have free rein, and what kinds of control—I mean, yes. The point I was trying to make was that I'm intrigued but I'm skeptical, and it's all going to depend on the dynamic between Barry and me. So it wasn't really necessary to discuss it with Rachael. It was important to discuss it with Barry. Right? He's the one that's either giving me the keys to the kingdom or not.

If you're a celebrity and you're shy, it's perceived as arrogance, aloofness, or superiority. But what I found was a guy who was almost desperate to come out of the shell and reintroduce himself to the world, which is what, as a filmmaker, you would hope. The discussion didn't really take place on a pragmatic level, like, "Do we do this?" or "What limitations would be imposed?" or "What are the expectations?" It was really Barry telling his story. It's almost like he was auditioning for me.

So I'm thinking, with Barry, there are a lot of surprises, and there are going to be a lot of discoveries for an audience to make, and so I'm intrigued. At which point I started talking to ESPN.

A documentary, first of all, is one film. You have the opportunity to collect material, spend the time necessary to massage it, nurture it, and shape it, and the ability to reflect and really live with the material and essentially write the script in the edit room—to tell a story that will stand on its own. A reality series, by definition, or by convention at this point, is following reality as it unfolds and spitting it out immediately.

But I'm sort of passionate about telling this story and, as we were getting closer and as Barry was proving to be very agreeable every step of the way, I got excited about the challenge as a filmmaker. And now ESPN's putting a whole other kind of deal on the table, a seven-figure deal for multiple episodes. It's pretty lucrative, and I start lining up all the things that I would need.

There was reluctance everywhere, and incredulity, like, "What are you doing?" and "Are you sure you want to do this?" and "Are you crazy?"

But it was going pretty well in spring training, and I really was getting the access. An excerpted *Game of Shadows* came out. And everything kind of changed.

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PEDRO GOMEZ, Reporter:

If you remember Barry Bonds's first day of spring training, he tended to have a press conference—kind of a “state of the Bonds,” so to speak, and this was the infamous day when he walked in and called every reporter a liar. “All y’all are lying.” He walked by, and I’m sitting there on the aisle, and I’d covered Bonds in the past because I’d been a baseball beat writer and I worked in the Bay Area, so he definitely knew who I was, but we didn’t have any big interaction at that point. I’m sitting on the edge right there, and he walks by and looks down at me and says, “You still lying, Gomez?” And he keeps walking up to the dais where he was going to sit at the table. That was the very first thing he said to me that spring. At that point he had no idea that I was going to be there every day.

And then the next morning, I approached him and said, “By the way, ESPN has given me this assignment where I am basically going to be here every day chronicling you.” And he just said, “Okay, dude, whatever,” and walked away. That was the season he was on the D.L.—the disabled list. If you remember, he had those three surgeries during spring training. The first one was simply to clean out some cartilage; he was supposed to be back within three to four weeks, but then he rushed himself. He tried to get back within two, and he ended up worsening his knee and had to have another surgery. And then his knee had gotten infected, so he had to have a third surgery before the end of spring training. And he was on the D.L. until either late August or early September. He didn’t play until that time. It was one of those things where he might play in two weeks or he might play next week. So it was always this little—I don’t want to say “cat and mouse,” but there’s always this expectation that he’d come off the list. Bristol said to stay with him every day. And it was a difficult season. I remember saying to Bristol, “Are you sure you want to do this? He’s still on the D.L.” Bristol said, “Yes, we still want to be there.”

There were times when it was contentious. There were times when it was actually fairly good, but that’s really the way Bonds is with a lot of people. His mood swings were legendary. Late in the season, when he had only been activated about a week, the Giants were at Dodger Stadium, and I asked him something in the postgame, and he looked at

me and said “Pedro, dude. You’ve got issues.” I had to really, really bite my tongue, because it was one of those things where you know how it is with a reporter, you don’t want to become the story. So I didn’t say anything back. I just said, “Okay, yeah, whatever.” But I remember thinking to myself, “I have issues? Me? I have issues?! Have you ever looked in the mirror?”

JOHN SKIPPER:

It was widely reported that Barry Bonds had creative approval—not true. Widely reputed that Barry Bonds was getting paid—also not true.

JOHN WALSH:

Some of that stuff in that show was really, really good. Mike got him to take cameras into a warehouse in San Francisco and took him on a tour of the warehouse where Bonds has videotapes of every home run he’s hit from like 380 on, and he has a storehouse of the socks he wore for each home run, the uniform he wore—they’re all different. He has a whole warehouse of memorabilia. He took us on a tour of it. It was great.

If you really got to know him, you could see what he wanted to reveal, and the insecurity he had over it. I think that show had a shot to do something very special that no one else would do.

Anybody who knew Mike knew nobody was going to tell Mike what to show. Mike was a real diplomat, he knew how to figure things out, and in fact, the show wound up being killed because Bonds said, “You’re going to have to do this,” and Mike said, “I’m not doing it.” And that’s why the whole thing ended.

GEORGE SOLOMON, *Ombudsman*:

Barry Bonds had his own reality show when he was in the midst of the steroid controversy. And I criticized that a lot. That was awful. They did about six, and I had big problems with that; it would be the same thing if NBC in the last six months of the Bush administration did a reality show with Cheney. You know, you just wouldn’t do it. They have an entertainment division, it was done by that group. They palmed it off on them. They’ve got a million subsidiaries, they can do whatever they want.

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JOHN SKIPPER:

We endured a fair amount of criticism about: What are we doing in bed with this guy whom we also have to cover? If that came up at CBS and CBS was doing a reality series about Barry Bonds, nobody would say, "Gee, you can't do a reality series about Barry Bonds because CBS News covers Barry Bonds." They have it compartmentalized, so it's okay. Well, we sort of think we have it compartmentalized. We have our news group—they do the news. We have an ESPN development group—they did the Barry Bonds series. But that isn't accepted. People look at ESPN as kind of a totality. It's "You guys have these fun-loving anchors—are they journalists or are they entertainers? You've got games, you're in bed with your partners, with the leagues, but yet you're covering them as well."

To me, and I'm not a journalist by trade, the company is remarkably conscientious about separating those ventures. I've asked Vince Doria, who runs our news, "Vince, have you ever been told to pull off of something and not go after the NFL because we will damage our relationship?" His answer is no. Now more subtle is the pressure of "Should I do that because we're in partnership and it will cause trouble?"

JASON WHITLOCK:

On *The Sports Reporters*, Mike Lupica and Joe Valerio had a problem with my perspective on the steroid issue. They had pretty much decided that they were going to beat up Barry Bonds and kind of portray him as the most evil person in sports because of his steroid use, and I came at it differently because I felt like all these guys were using steroids. We'd have arguments before the show, and I would kind of express that perspective, and this was before it became clear that steroid use was rampant throughout all of baseball and really throughout all of sports.

Joe Valerio and these guys would try to send a message to me that they didn't like the way I addressed it, so they'd keep me off the show for a month or two—they just wouldn't ask me to come on. And it would just so happen that every time I would come back on, something would happen in the news related to steroids; the last time I think it happened, it was the guy who won the Tour de France after Lance

Armstrong, I can't think of his name. And I'll never forget it, Lupica says to me on the air, "You know what? Then maybe you need to be on the *Entertainment Tonight Sports Reporters*." It was basically a threat—he told me on the air that "we're booting your ass off the show." I said something like, "Hey, Mike, do you know what the 'E' in ESPN stands for? It stands for Entertainment. We're already on that show"—which was basically my point.

Those guys were pissed at me after the show—Lupica and Joe Valerio—the exchange was pretty heated. It was great television. So the next day, I called Jim Cohen, who was in charge of *The Sports Reporters*, and just said, "Man, these guys are pissed at me." He said, "Look, I saw it, it was great television. I don't understand why they were pissed." And then I think I did an interview with that blog *The Big Lead*, and they asked questions about my work at ESPN and I took potshots at Lupica and then at Scoop Jackson, who was writing for ESPN.com. And I did it knowing it was going to piss Lupica off, but, you know, I didn't care.

Jim Cohen called me the next day and said, "Hey, man, you can't be on our TV shows anymore." And I said, "Fine, no problem." I think ESPN's original thing was "Okay, we're going to suspend him from our TV shows and that'll show him and shut him up." But I was, like, fine, no problem, and I wrote a column for a dot-com the next day saying, "ESPN called and fired me because of X, Y, and Z." I'd had it with Lupica, I'd just had it with the whole deal, so I didn't care what they did—and that was that.

JOHN WALSH:

David Stern said at one time, "Would you have liked to have a camera in the bunker with Hitler, yes or no?" It's an interesting analogy. You'd have access to stories. I think we mishandled that internally, because internally there was such a brouhaha over it and the press got it and it was, like, "This is journalism, this is journalism." Probably the most famous modern-day interview of a president, which is now made into a Broadway play and looks like an award-winning movie, was a paid interview. That doesn't justify it or make it right, but that happened. I spent one evening with Barry Bonds. And I think that Barry Bonds is an interesting character who would love to tell his story but

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he's got to be made comfortable telling it. And given all the factors coming into play for this particular show, that wasn't going to happen—because there was this knee-jerk need for us to ask him every other minute, “Have you taken steroids?” Do I think that there's a great story there? Absolutely. I don't know if we would have had it, but in the time I spent with him and watching him talk about himself, talk about his life, I think there was a chance that we might have gotten a real interesting look at him.

Booths were originally meant to be heard from, rarely seen, in televised sports—until ABC invented Monday Night Football in 1970. Suddenly the booth had a new identity, a new role, and such a high profile that it sometimes upstaged the football game going on far below.

The practice of inviting occasional non-football guests into the booth began in the ABC era. Not all the guests were lightweights from showbiz. One fateful night, both John Lennon and a pre-presidential Ronald Reagan were slated to appear. Before the game, when it was time to decide who would interview whom, Frank Gifford remembers Howard Cosell telling him, “I'll take the Beatle and you take the governor.”

If ABC was chided for occasionally turning the Monday Night Football booth into a watering hole for the glitzerati and an opportunity to promote the network's shows, as part of its renovation ESPN cranked up the celebrity machine even more. It could get awfully crowded in there.

The New ESPN Booth of 2006 looked as much like a parallel TV talk show as a mere adjunct to football. When it increased the frequency of gratuitous celebrity appearances, ESPN risked appalling purists and die-hard sports fans.

Monday Night Football had become a sports event that transcended sports. Was that good? ESPN's invited guests tended to be mostly TV “stars,” and ABC sent its whole lineup. Eva Longoria stopped by that season to plug Desperate Housewives, Patrick Dempsey stopped by to plug Grey's Anatomy, and Matthew Fox stopped by to plug Lost.

Others who made appearances: “actress” and Internet sex-tape star Paris Hilton; producer-director Spike Lee; actors Ashton Kutcher, Jim Belushi, and Ben Stiller; rap star Ludacris; actor and ESPY awards host Samuel L. Jackson; and Arnold Schwarzenegger, former bodybuilder and movie star and, at the time, governor of California.

One unexpected arrival in the booth, though very much part of the sports

world, was Tony Kornheiser. Kornheiser was tetchy and opinionated enough to inspire comparisons with the great man Howard Cosell himself, though Kornheiser did not irritate fans to such an extreme that they threw mock bricks at TV screens. Nor, for the record, did Kornheiser wear neckties embroidered with the names of his grandchildren as the softhearted Cosell did.

Joining the Monday Night Football party in 2006, Kornheiser wrote and delivered a series of “essays” dealing with such sports topics as Brett Favre and the “demise of the Oakland Raiders,” and such non-sports topics as the inadequacy of rescue operations following Hurricane Katrina. Some viewers loved him, some didn’t. But then, not everybody was crazy about ESPN’s glitzed-up booth, either.

MIKE TIRICO:

I think every one of us who does football play-by-play dreams of a couple of things: of doing the Super Bowl, and then of being involved in some network’s lead broadcast team. Al had done *Monday Night Football* for, what, twenty years at that point? Once it was announced that we had the rights and Al was going to be coming over and staying with *Monday Night* and coming to our place to do it, there wasn’t much thought about it beyond that. It’s certainly one of those unbelievable career jobs that you don’t think will ever be on your radar. So even when we acquired it, knowing Al was there kept it from being “Oh boy, how disappointing.” It was “Oh, that’s great for us that Al will be working at ESPN, because he’s associated with it as much as anyone. He’s as associated with it as Cosell and Gifford were over the years.”

When I heard that he was leaving, I was pretty intrigued. I was doing college football for ESPN and our Thursday and Saturday package of games. I had a lot of exposure to the NFL doing the *Monday Night* pregame show that we did for about a decade. I thought that with all the moving parts, there was a possibility it might happen. I thought that my work as our lead golf announcer and the big football assignments I had been given—whether Thursday night games, or big bowl games, or significant games with ABC and Bowl Championship Series—plus my NFL experience would make me a good candidate. But by no means did I think it was a no-brainer. Hopeful? Absolutely. But thinking it was really going to happen? Nope, not realistically, to be quite frank.

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TONY KORNHEISER:

I had never watched *Monday Night Football*. It was on too late. I went to sleep. I never saw one complete game in twenty years.

Walsh called up and said, "Skipper and I are coming down." I hadn't known Skipper well. I hadn't met him very often, a few times here and there. "What do you want?" "We want to talk to you." "What do you want to talk to me about?" "We just want to talk to you." "Okay." I hung up, and I said to my wife, "This is going to be bad." She said, "Why?" I said, "They could offer me *Monday Night Football*." So they came down and told me they wanted me to do *Monday Night Football*. And my exact response was "Get the fuck out of here. No, seriously, get the fuck out of here. Why me? Why are you doing this? *Why are you ruining my life?*"

They said, "Why are we ruining your life?" and I said, "Because I have to take it. I love my life now. I got radio. I got *PTI*. I'm happy. I just bought a house in Delaware, you know? Everything is great, and I'm going to have to do this because no one can refuse this." Then I said, "I'm not qualified for it. I don't know anything about football. I don't particularly like football. I'm terrified of airplanes. I don't know how to do this—and I cannot say no to you. Get out and die!"

Here's what I thought: "I'm going to fail."

I had to do it because Cosell had done it, and I thought, "Why should only jocks do this? Where is it written in the Constitution that because a guy played football, he has the automatic right to sit in that booth? Goddammit, I want this for people like me." And I don't want to sound selfless here, but that's part of the thinking—because if I do well or well enough, then maybe the next person doesn't have to be a jock. How hard is football? If I've spent thirty-five years as a sports-writer, you think I don't know you get six for a touchdown? You think I don't know that? You think I don't know you get three for a field goal? C'mon, c'mon. And I can actually speak English okay, so that would be a difference between me and the guy who spent his whole life playing football. Now, not all of them are like that, but it's that thinking that says, "We have divine right of booth." No, you don't. No, you don't.

MIKE TIRICO:

Monday Night Football is one of the unique things in our business because it's lasted so long. I mean, stuff doesn't last forty years in sports, in television, and especially in sports television—and at that point it was thirty-six. So the whole uniqueness of it made it one of those “wow” moments of my life. I remember being in the house and taking the phone call. I think my delay in saying yes came out of shock, to be honest with you. It certainly was a surprise.

I knew that Kornheiser was in the mix right away, and I assumed that Joe was staying. When it got to my radar, I was pretty much under the assumption it was going to be myself, Joe, and Tony. I was not in the pre-Tony discussion, and candidly, I think part of the equation was, I think, Tony would certainly be different, less like calling a pure game and more of the elements of a studio show, because Tony is topic driven and issue driven. Because of that, my experience of hosting studio shows for many years *and* doing play-by-play made the natural triangle work with Joe and Tony. At least in concept it was going to work.

JOE THEISMANN:

The first telecast we did, he sat there sweating, and I kept telling him, “Don't worry. You'll be great.” Tony was as nervous a puppy as you're going to absolutely find. When he first sat down in front of that camera, I sort of chuckled. Amy is the girl that takes care of him, and God bless her. You know, Tony would need his bottles of water. He'd have to have his little pretzel before. He'd have his washcloth that he brought to pat himself down with. He was a little finicky. It was fun to watch. We all have our little idiosyncrasies. I'd watch Tony, the way he'd prepare. The things he would try and inject into the football game. The whole telecast was set up really to try and include Tony in it, because he really wasn't a football guy. We'd bring guests in, and Tony would ask the questions. They're all friends of mine, so I'd end up in conversation with them, so it was really funny. I wasn't supposed to ask them a question but here I am in dialogue with them.

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TONY KORNHEISER:

When we started, we never got panned. We got praised beyond words, beyond words! It was like we came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments. It was great, so I knew that had to end. I knew that I was going to be in for something much rougher than that. And I was afraid of failure.

JAY ROTHMAN:

God bless Mark Shapiro. I love him to death. He was on a mission, and he got what he wanted, man. When we first got *Monday Night Football*, he was shrewd but there was also this whole enthusiasm going around that "We're going to do it bigger and better than ever. We're going to blow it out. We're going to have a great opening. It's going to be star-studded. It's going to be a celebration. It's going to be a bigger-than-the-game kind of thing." And we all bought into this stuff.

One part of that was we were going to have booth guests every show. Huge stars every week. That obviously didn't pan out, but there were a couple that were pretty good. And you know a funny thing? Truthfully, the reaction that these stupid things got. If you talk about actual TV time, by the time these people actually sat in the booth was like nothing out of a three-hour telecast, and yet from the negative reaction and criticism and feedback that we got, you'd think that we were, you know, violating something. It was outrageous the feedback we got. I think the playbook we were running with was not aligned with what our fans wanted.

JOE THEISMANN:

ESPN hired Rush Limbaugh. ABC hired Dennis Miller. So you have to understand that ESPN to a degree catches itself in the middle of sports and entertainment. It knows that it does sports better than anybody in the world, but it keeps wanting to sort of reach over into this world of entertainment and see if it can combine both in certain areas, which is part of the progressive nature of ESPN. But when it comes to football, I think that the game is something that the football fan wants to see. So in an effort trying to increase the demographic, they add certain entities, certain individuals. And in doing so, it doesn't work. And they always wind up going back to a football booth. What everybody at

ESPN has tried to do—and ABC—is try to recapture the Howard Cosell, Don Meredith, Frank Gifford booth. And you can't do that. I think you have to allow people to create their own identities. And that's really what Paul [Maguire], Mike, and I did. We're as different as night and day to those three guys, but the fun part was we were able to make our own connection to the fans.

RON JAWORSKI, *Football Analyst*:

I'll be blatantly honest with you. When guys like Christian Slater and some of these other booth guests came by, I would have to ask my wife who they were and what they did. I'm pretty much a television guy. I wish I could say I was this worldly guy that understood all the movies and things like that, but I'm not. I was a football guy. And I would have to ask my wife and kids, "Hey, what movies did this guy do?" Quite honestly, it was a distraction for me. I knew it was a direction that ESPN wanted—the entertainment part. But it was very difficult to maintain flow and to stay focused when you'd go eight or ten minutes and pretty much not break down the game.

MIKE TIRICO:

We had Russell Crowe and Christian Slater in the booth. When those guys are in the booth, you're trying to broadcast a football game and trying to get these guys involved in it. With Sylvester Stallone it was easy. With Charles Barkley it was easy, because he was talking about football and the game right in front of you. But when you get somebody who is a superstar and a *huge* attraction but they can't add one drop to what's going on in front of you, those are the times of frustration. Slater was frustrating. So was Russell Crowe. We had gone down to meet him in his suite before the game and were just kind of talking to him, and I remember walking back from the hotel going, "What the hell are we going to do with this guy?"

JOE THEISMANN:

They wanted to recreate *PTI*. But this is what executives don't understand sometimes: the dynamic of a booth. On *PTI*, Tony and Mike can spend a minute and thirty seconds in conversation on a subject. In a booth you have about an eight- to ten-second sound bite, and

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Tony really needed time to set things up. Every one of his opens was teleprompted. It had to be because that's what Tony was used to. Tony came from a different element of television than the live booth.

I loved working with Tony. And I really felt like toward the end of the year we had started to develop, I guess, what management was looking for—not that management ever told me or anyone else what they wanted.

TONY KORNHEISER:

Joe's always the quarterback. I had terrible reservations about working with Joe because I could picture me literally kneeling at his feet, taking quotes at his locker after a game, because I covered him, I wrote columns, I had to get quotes. I didn't think that was a good posture for two people working together as equals.

But Joe could not have been more welcoming to me. Joe said, "This is going to be great. I really like your work. I've loved your work for a long time and this is going to be great." But—and these are the parts that I'm reluctant to say—Joe would say things like, "You just stick with me, I'll lead us, everything will be fine." Joe's the quarterback. Joe had to be the quarterback. Joe didn't even respond to me in the booth. So I had *two* guys not responding to me.

JOE THEISMANN:

On March 23, 2007, I was called to New York for a meeting with the executives, and what they basically did was explain to me that they wanted to make some changes. And you see, here's the thing: Jaws, Ronnie, and Tony had done some stuff—Jaws had done some stuff on *PTI* with Tony, and I think they liked the chemistry and interaction. So what they did was—this is only pure hypothetical on my part—they liked the looks of it, and I'm only assuming that that's the way it went because Jaws wound up taking my spot in the booth. So at that meeting they explained that they wanted to take the show in a different direction, and this is a direct quote: They noticed that when the telecast came back to me, I talked about *football*.

I had been *asked* to talk about football. This is what Jay wanted me to do, focus on football. You basically follow orders, and when they ask you to take a certain approach, you just do the best you can. And that's

what I tried to do. The thing I said to Norby and Skipper was "Look, you already made your mind up. You don't want me, so I'm not going to sit here and beg for my job." But I did say to them, "The only thing that I would've liked was, if you didn't like my work, I would've at least appreciated the opportunity for you to say to me, 'Joe, we would like you to do this.'" I think if you don't like something that someone is doing, if you want to keep them, you give them a chance to modify. It was never pointed out to me that I had to do something different. In fact, they were extremely complimentary of my work when I got into the meeting. They said they thought it was one of the best years I had. That's when I knew that something was coming. That's when you sort of stick your jaw out and wait for the right hook.

Jay had no idea that I was fired. I called Jay and told him. Normal management, if there is such a thing, sits down with the people in charge of an entity that they put them in charge of and talks about changes that they want to make. The only thing that bothers me about the whole situation is that I only would have liked Norby and Skipper to sit down and honestly look me in the eye and tell me the truth, and the truth was: "Hey, Joe, look. We've taken over from Mark Shapiro. We're changing the booth and we're going to bring in our guys." That's all you had to say, just be honest with me. But then again, you're talking about television, and it doesn't work that way.

You get hurt, but you understand the nature of the business. We're only leasing space in time anyway. I look at it this way: our time here on this earth is limited. The amount of energy that you want to spend being bitter or upset you could be spending doing positive things in your life and enjoying life. What's done is done.

Don't kid yourself and think it didn't hurt. I mean, it hurt as deep as anything. I did learn a great lesson, and that was simply this: don't ever do things in life and don't ever work in life for the satisfaction of someone else.

TONY KORNHEISER:

I called Joe. I didn't really know what to say. I can't honestly say I was terribly surprised, because I saw what happened with Boomer Esiason. I think this happens a lot; it's just a business I don't understand.

Was I surprised it was him and not me? Yeah, a little bit. He had a

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longer contract and he'd been doing this for a long time and he was the expert. Theismann and Jaworski and Aikman—when you sit in that booth, it's incredible. They don't need replay. They can see it, they can see it all. I can't even see it *with* the replay. So I just assumed if there was going to be a change, somebody was going to say, "Well, Tony, we need to make a change," because what was I bringing that was so special? I seemed to be the person that was polarizing.

MIKE TIRICO:

I was just told, same thing as with Tony. I don't exactly wield a huge amount of power here. I'm on the *told* end, not the *input* end, with this stuff.

I was disappointed that Joe left, just because Joe had been a friend. When I first started doing the NFL in '93 at ESPN, it was with Joe in the studio. And over fifteen years you just get to know people and get to like people, and I always liked Joe. I think for whatever reason, whether it was the critics, writers, or people talking about us not doing something, or us being a part of the pop culture portion of the show, that created a negative feel about what we were doing and then created a feeling that something needed to change. That's probably where things led to a change. I thought Joe tried to adjust and change when we all got it going the first year. What Joe did in those games was a lot different from what Joe had done earlier. I'm sure in some ways it was frustrating to him, but I don't necessarily think that was the problem, to be honest with you.

JIMMY KIMMEL, Comedian:

I got banned from *Monday Night Football*. Here's what happened: I was on in Seattle, and the truth is, no one up there seemed to like Joe Theismann. Everywhere I went, every ESPN person I ran into said, "Hey, you going to do jokes about Joe? You going to fuck with Joe? You've got to say something to Joe." So it made me wonder, "What's going on?" I didn't know Joe Theismann, I didn't know anything about him, but it certainly didn't seem like there was harmony in the booth. So when I was in the booth, I did a few jokes to Joe. I asked him how his leg was. He was a little bit annoyed. He said, "That was twenty-five years ago." I said, "I know, I haven't seen you since then." It was pretty light.

But then the second time I was on the show the next year, again I got people, like, “Oh, you’ve got to say something about Joe”—even though he was no longer in the booth. There’s a lot of whispering about me saying something about Joe. And I did say something about Joe because it seemed like the elephant in the room to me, the fact that Joe wasn’t there and nothing had ever been said about that. And to be honest, I enjoy making people uncomfortable, especially on live television, where there’s nothing they can cut out. So I said something to the effect of, “Do you think Joe Theismann’s watching right now? He probably has steam coming out of his ears.” The truth of the matter is, the guys in the booth were laughing, but you don’t see the video, you only hear the voices, so the guys in the booth are covering their mouths and cracking up, nervously laughing but you can’t hear any laughter on television. And afterward, everybody seemed very happy with the appearance. They gave me T-shirts, thanked me, they walked me out to my car, various people said, “Oh, that was hilarious,” and the next morning I read, I think in the *New York Times*, that Rothman said I was “classless.” He called me later and apologized, and then said I was welcome on *Monday Night Football* anytime—although I have not yet been invited. I guess if I just happen to drop by the booth, I’ll be welcomed in.

I think what happened was, these sports reporters are ridiculous. You get a guy like [*New York Post* columnist] Phil Mushnick, for instance; you would think the guy was a cardinal or something, he is so puritanical, and he takes shots at everybody for everything; if he sees somebody spitting, he lambasts them about what a terrible example it is for American kids. The truth of the matter is, the guy writes for the *New York Post*, which—really, they’ve got to be kidding. Somebody gets their head chopped off and they’ve got a pun on the front page of the newspaper.

When somebody does something that’s way over the line, like Michael Vick, for instance, these sportscasters go nuts. They go out of their way to get up on their high horses and really let the guy have it. And I think the reason they do that is it’s a smoke screen because of all the other terrible things that these players do all year round that people don’t find out about, all these lousy things that go on. It’s like if they trumpet the big ones, nobody will notice that no one ever says anything about the little ones.

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There's a lot of hypocrisy. When there's blood in the water, they will all feast, but no one will ever say anything about the little things. People like to make big stands over nonissues. You watch football and everybody's got their pink shoes on, and it's breast cancer this and breast cancer that—certainly this is a worthwhile charity, but it's PR. You've got a lot of guys on the field who are flat-out criminals, and they're wearing breast cancer scarves, so it makes it all okay.

It's so obvious to me. I guess because they have the final word and there really aren't too many voices that can point that out. Even your sports talk radio hosts who make their living giving their opinions, most of them work for one of the major sports providers—ESPN or some network that relies on a team to fill their programming time, so everyone is handcuffed and no one says anything about this stuff.

I think that really in the heat of the moment, Rothman said something about me that he wished he wouldn't have. He's an okay guy, there's just this standard in sportscasting that is so far beyond the standards of any other area of broadcasting. I really can't explain it; it's very strange.

RON JAWORSKI:

I've always had a great advantage: I live twenty minutes away from NFL Films. I'm sitting in my office right now, looking at the Super Bowl tape. And it's an advantage that really no one else has. And I can sit here thirty to forty hours a week and just look at football. And being at NFL Films, there are always coaches, players, coming through. And we sit and talk and look at tapes. So as a guy that probably hasn't thrown a pass in nineteen years, I stay close to the game basically by studying the game. Fortunately I was doing preseason games, so I had the in-booth experience—obviously not the profile of *Monday Night Football*, but I was doing preseason games for the Philadelphia Eagles, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the New Orleans Saints. I was doing five and six preseason games a year. I did the Senior Bowl back in '96-'97. I was doing some college football. So I was working in the booth. I wasn't a complete novice. I was aware of the dynamics.

Monday Night Football is an extravaganza with some of the most talented people in the television business that you could ever meet. I realized at those early meetings that I had a lot to learn—the camera

positions, the replays, the angles that we have, the Skycam, all those things. I never had a problem with the football side, but on the technical side, because of the amount of resources and equipment and technology that ESPN throws into the game, I had a lot to learn in that regard.

MIKE TIRICO:

I'd had a lot of experience in a three-man booth, plus I had studio experience; *PTI* is a studio show, and that's where Tony thrives. Tony had done some radio hosting and things like that, so Tony's skill set for what he could bring to the game, the vision of what he was going to bring to the game, I think they felt that my pure experience would make them work and would give them the best chance to succeed. So that's where I think I ended up as the person that they pointed to regarding that. I hope it doesn't come off as conceited. I think the work I had done as a football play-by-play guy in college for most of those eight, nine years before that—on those merits I deserved the opportunity as well. I had not done it at the NFL level, but I had hosted NFL studio shows for over a decade. I heard there was a lot of effort to make Tony understand the rhythm of the booth and that it was very difficult in the first year. We tried to rewrite the way football on television had been broadcast. I think a lot of it gets pointed to Tony, but there was also the philosophical decision to be more than just broadcasting the football games, that it would be stepping out a little bit for pop culture, incorporating some of that within *Monday Night*. The difficulty came when we tried to rewrite the way football on television had been broadcast. We were the only broadcast that was trying to do that, so there was uniqueness to that. Take that and combine it with someone who had never worked a football game before, and you had some pretty significant hurdles, no doubt about it.

TONY KORNHEISER:

They may have had Cosell on their minds, but I'm not Howard, I don't have that intellect. I don't have that bombast, and unlike Howard, I never worked in that setting before. Howard was so brilliant. I used to watch Howard do his radio show. There's no clock on the wall, and Howard gets to three minutes and fifty seconds [*snaps fingers*]*—ends*

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the story, that's a wrap, it's done, you can go home, and you go, "Oh, my God." The only other person I've ever seen do that is Costas. It's Costas and Howard—Howard one and Costas two. Nobody else can do that, clocks in their heads *all* the time, know how to end it, how to stretch it, how to make it work. I was awestruck by that. But it's hard for me because there's a game going on and you're supposed to talk to the game. I mean, I used to like to hear Howard say, "I had breakfast with Liza the other day and Liza..." But they apparently didn't want that from me. I'd hope they'd want that, but they didn't want that from me.

JOE THEISMANN:

Tony's tough on everybody. Tony's a cynic. Tony doesn't like anybody. Come on, let's be honest. As a matter of fact, I worked hard to get Tony to go to production meetings. Tony didn't want to go to production meetings, and he'll tell you that. Tony's very honest about that whole thing. I loved working with Tony. It was going to be a lot of fun. I really feel like I could have helped him a little bit more possibly, given the opportunity. But Tony did not want to meet with coaches, and the reason he didn't want to meet with coaches or players is that he was afraid he would like them. And if he liked them, he couldn't be critical of them. And it would take away what Tony is famous for. That's criticism. Everybody's got a shtick, okay? Tony's is liking nothing.

TONY KORNHEISER:

In my life as a sportswriter, I never believed that athletes didn't read the papers when they said they didn't read the papers. I believed they read them and they just said they didn't. The first criticism I read of me was in my own newspaper by Paul Farhi, a duplicitous backstabbing snake and weasel who I would happily back over with a bus, okay? After I read that, I said, "You know what, I'm done. I'm not reading anything else." When my son would read something and say, "You know what, this guy hates you," I would say, "Michael, don't tell me that. If you want to read it, read it. Don't tell me anything good and don't tell me anything bad." My picture popped up on AOL, and my wife would say, "They think you're the worst guy," and I said, "Please, I don't want to know."

I listened to my good friend Mitch Albom, who was in that trouble

in Detroit where he quoted a couple of guys and said that they were at a game and they didn't actually get to the game, and I defended Mitch for this because he's my dear friend and because I believe in his position. I said, "Do you read what's written?" And he goes, "No, because I don't want to have to change any friends." I don't google myself, and I didn't read things specific to *Monday Night Football*. I had a sense that there was a lot of criticism. I told people, "You can gather all this stuff and put it in a box and I'll read it at the end of the season." But I never read a word.

MIKE TIRICO:

Tony is brilliant. I enjoy watching Tony work. I enjoyed working with Tony, I really did. I learned a lot. Tony has been incredibly successful in places where you come to hear Tony's opinion on something, like his column or *PTI*. You come for Tony's opinion. To me, you come to a football game for the football game. The football game is surrounded by a bevy of wide-ranging opinions in the pregame shows, the postgame shows, the talk shows during the week. People come to the game for the game itself. So it's trying to take what Tony does best—strong, interesting, intelligent, and timely opinions on people in the game—and make that work within the body of the game.

That was the challenge, and I'm going to tell you, it pisses me off that people will look at those three years and say, "Well, it wasn't that good." Or they'll say, "Oh, Christian Slater was on." If you took all the non-football people who were on—although anybody who worked on the show will tell you I was not a huge fan of it—at most 2 percent of our three years of Tony or two years of having "celebrities" in the booth, 2 percent of our broadcast was that. The other 98 percent was football or football content. So I think people have done an incredible disservice of overdramatizing the impact that had on the broadcast.

The problem working in the booth was that you're trying to cover the game, and then you're trying to get Tony's opinion on the stuff that's going on. We were the only football show that was nominated for an Emmy three years in a row. So I still stand on that merit; the show was not the be-all and end-all, trust me, but the shows we did were pretty good football shows.

The challenge day to day, hour to hour, play to play, was that a play

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happens on the field, right in front of us, and we're so used to watching TV—"Here's a play, here's a replay, here's what happened"—but Tony couldn't *add* to what just happened. He could add to the person and give it some definite context, but the viewer has become conditioned to hear someone say what happened.

The brilliant success of Madden over the years was that he turned a lot of viewers into wannabe defensive coordinators. Nobody could draw up a chalkboard and do all this stuff and squeeze x's and o's inside the twenty seconds between a play until Madden. I think that's just become the way that job is measured. So having a non-football guy in one of those traditional seats was just hard for people to get used to.

I absolutely love the fact that for eighteen years I've worked for a place that is willing to try something different. We see people do the same TV over and over, and it gets very stale. Who would've been ridiculous enough to put *SportsCenter* on live in the morning? Who would've been silly enough to put two columnists on TV carrying on their in-the-hallway conversations? Who would've been silly enough to do all these different shows we've done over the years? Well, guess what? More ideas we've had as a company work. And this was an attempt to say, you know what, football is done the same way by everybody, can we add something? Can we make it broader and better? Because at the end of the day, we're a business. The bottom line of our business is to attract more viewers. How do you attract more viewers? Maybe you grow the audience by expanding the audience. Or maybe people would've come to look forward to that segment as the years went on—who knows? I think we realized that it wasn't the best road to go down.

JOHN SKIPPER:

John Walsh wanted to extend journalism to everything we do, including event production. I mean, John—and this is not without controversy—still believes that within the event broadcast we should be doing journalism. We should be covering stories. I believe Jed Drake is the original guy who used the visual image of concentric circles to talk to the announcers. It's not my favorite conceptual way to talk about it. It is fairly simplistic. There are a series of concentric circles and the game itself lies at the center of the circles. The circles outside are the

things that aren't actually happening in the action but which are closest to the action. You're watching a game and it's the first circle. The second circle is, let's say, the star quarterback and his football life. The third circle is his personal life. The fourth circle, larger trends. It's meant to show the game is the most important thing, and the more intense the game is, the less you go outside. But if you get to a game that's 40–0 in the third quarter, you get further outside. And there is a place—I don't know which circle it is; it's not quite as well constructed as Dante's inferno, but it's almost as painful. There is one circle where you get outside the sport itself and that is where you begin to get into great controversy, where you bring a guest into the *Monday Night Football* booth where Tony is talking about the election. John [Walsh] loves to tweak convention and to tweak the gods, and there's where you offend the sports guys, right?

MIKE TIRICO:

One of the places where I know Tony expressed to me that he felt uncomfortable, and I certainly understand it, was "Can you look at me and talk to me more during the game and engage me in conversation back and forth on things?" That's really hard when you got ninety guys on the football field and you're trying to identify who made the tackle, what's the gain, what's the down and distance, what's the game situation, what's the time-outs, challenge a play—the things that are the play-by-play person's number-one priority. And to me, whether it was accurate or not, and varying people have their opinions on it, I maintained that the most important thing for me to do was "Who's got the ball? What's the down? What's the distance? What's the game situation?" All that above and beyond engaging Tony in conversation.

JOHN SKIPPER:

We wanted to put Kornheiser in the booth. We thought, with it moving over to ESPN, how cool would it be if we could re-create a little of the Howard Cosell magic? And I think we succeeded. We said, "Gee, we want the production to be really big. We don't want there to be any sense as it moved from ABC to ESPN that the stature of it, the sort of number of cameras and elements, had declined a little. We don't want it to feel like it's lessened."

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Let me give credit to my bosses who let us experiment. We said this was what we wanted to do. We want to try something. By the way, I think it was a pretty interesting contemplation. Tony is so good. He's so smart. Anybody who knows him at least understands what we hoped we would get on the air. To me the ideal booth would make every fan think that being the fourth guy sitting next to those three guys on the sofa is the best place to watch a football game. It's fun. It's insightful. It's just relaxed. I said, "Please make it feel like you guys are having fun, you love the game, you're cracking wise a little bit, you're sharing a little bit of information, and the best place in the world to be would be in the next seat." I shouldn't say we don't want people to take it seriously; we do. But personally, as a sports fan, I love sports. I do get emotionally involved, but I never lose the perspective that you're just watching a game.

The fans actually ultimately understand whether there's something going on that's fun, that's interesting. I'm not sure that Meredith and Cosell and Gifford loved each other, but you had something electric going on, and we didn't get that either.

I don't think Howard Cosell cared if anybody wanted him there or not. And Tony ultimately is a sensitive human being and cared about whether somebody wanted him there.

TONY KORNHEISER:

Our season ends, no playoffs. We're paying *double!* And no flex and the worst schedule humanly possible. If you get steady diets of Jacksonville and Carolina and Tennessee even when they've got a 10-0 record, you're not getting the big cities. There's no compelling reason to watch the game. We had Jacksonville at Houston. Jacksonville at Houston? I did an essay on how nobody's going to watch this game.

NBC gets flex and NBC can live on the NFC East; you know, Dallas every week, and you'll be fine. It's unbelievable, but it says that ESPN is cable and it's second-rate, it's the minors. Look, look—Mike Tirico, Tony Kornheiser, Ron Jaworski—that is not Al Michaels, John Madden. That is not Joe Buck and Troy Aikman in peoples' minds. That's not. It's just not.

Jaws is my friend now, which I never thought would be possible for any kind of jock and me. He is my friend, and I dearly love him. I've

looked for the devil in Ron Jaworski for two years—there is no devil in Ron Jaworski. He was drafted into the pros in two sports. He was a Super Bowl quarterback, a multiple Pro Bowl quarterback; there is nothing that he does or says that would indicate to you he was anything other than a *guy*, just a guy. We play golf together. Our kids play golf together. He's patient with everyone. He's made a ton of money in a ton of different things by being a nice fella, by never having any airs. There's no air of superiority. There's an air of superiority with Theismann, but he can't help it.

RON JAWORSKI:

I had worked with Tony on radio shows and *PTI* and things like that, so we got a good relationship. And it was interesting because—and I don't know this to be fact, but the undercurrent was that Joe and Tony just didn't get along. But Tony and I forged a great relationship and a friendship, and our families did. I enjoyed every second with Tony.

I think people turn on *Monday Night Football* for *Monday Night Football*. Does that make sense? They want to watch a football game. I think everyone, at least at ABC and then at ESPN, was about football/entertainment, and that was always the hard juggling act, because I was pretty much a football guy and Tony had a different perspective on the game. I think the way he verbalized it was 100 percent correct. He saw the game from the outside in; I saw the game from the inside out. I was in the locker room; he was outside the locker room. But I thought it made for good commentary; it lent a positive aspect because we saw the game differently. Mike always had a difficult job because the first couple years we were still using booth guests and things like that, and it did make it a little more difficult because he never really developed a flow for the game. So in regards to Mike, I think it put him in a tough position.

SUZY KOLBER:

When I was originally offered the sidelines job for *Sunday Night Football*, I was a reporter on *Sunday Countdown*, and really enjoyed what I was doing. So I wanted assurances that it wasn't a typical injury-report role, that it was going to have more substance to it. The official job offer came from Steve Anderson, but Jay is who I talked with about what the role would be. And, at the time, we discussed me defining the

role, because he had worked with Lynn Swann on ABC, and Lynn almost acted as another analyst out on the field. And he knew my background—that I did so many different things: I was an anchor and I was a reporter and I was a good storyteller. So he wanted to be able to utilize all of that. And we talked about redefining the role in a sense that I would be another voice—three guys upstairs and I was the fourth voice of the broadcast.

What I really enjoyed about it was that on *Monday Night Football* there was a separate producer in the truck for the sideline, but Jay wanted to talk to all of us. So I had direct communication with him and was just considered another voice in the broadcast. I was integrated much more than any other sideline reporter. I did highlight packages and told stories, and I did significantly more than what other sideline reporters were doing.

When we made the switch to Monday night, Michele Tafoya and I both felt comfortable because Freddie also used her a lot on the broadcast. I was probably used a little bit more, but we were used in similar ways. And what made that transition easier for the two of us suddenly being put together on Monday night was that right before that switch, we did the Super Bowl together. I thought we were both used really well in that game.

So it became Michele and I plus the three guys in the booth. Jay is producing. And there's clearly too many voices. And it's a lot of pressure on Jay because he feels obligated to use everybody, but the broadcast is too crowded. So right in the middle of the season, right in the middle of the day, the entire philosophy changed. We were in Philadelphia, and Jed Drake delivered the news that they're changing their philosophy and how we're now going to be used. He said, "We'll be strictly interested in observations that you might see but not really any sort of depth to the storytelling." And I remember it's like being hit by a truck. All right, could you have told us before we prepared for the game? The game is in four hours. I was pretty angry at the sudden shift. There was no warning.

MICHELE TAFOYA, Reporter:

Three guys in the booth, two people on the field. I certainly understood that, and I was very much okay with the notion that all I would

be doing on the sideline was observations and breaking news. Nothing prepared. Nothing like that. But then it came down to we're told not even to do observations. I remember covering Brett Favre with the Jets last season, and having covered Brett for so many years—watching the difference in his sideline demeanor, learning this new offense—versus the guy he was in Green Bay. I did a report on that. I thought it was very appropriate. It was an observation I was able to make standing right next to him on the sidelines, and I was told days later that we can't even do that anymore. We're not going to do that. That's not the philosophy, you know? Basically, if someone major breaks a leg, that's now what you're covering. So that, in a nutshell—if you can call that a nutshell—is the rather dramatic shift that the role has taken.

Suzy and I are trying to make the most of our roles now, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't frustrated with the lack of opportunities to have an impact on the telecast. It's tough when you've worked as hard as Suzy and I have, developing relationships with players and coaches and trainers and coordinators, where you feel you have something really relevant to add to what's happening on the field, and you're seeing it right there, close up, not through the lenses of a camera but right there with your own eyes. And you know the context of it because you've been down there the entire game observing the body languages. You've been hearing people talk. You've been watching interactions. You've been seeing it all right there, close up. I think to say that none of that is worthwhile is a shame, but unfortunately it's just what I have to live with right now.

I remember watching John Teerlinck of the Indianapolis Colts just jawing into his offensive line. It was fierce. It was a long chewing-out. It was getting to the point where a couple players were clearly displeased with what they were hearing. It was quite visual. We had plenty of time to get a camera over there and show this to the audience as well, with some explanation—but that did not make air.

You know, we asked for other opportunities after *Monday Night Football*. We've asked to be involved in some of those things. I think what ends up happening in Bristol is that people who work for ESPN but don't live there and aren't at the compound every day get forgotten about to a certain extent. If I was really ready to pound my fist and say, "I want to do this story. There's a story I really want to do. I feel really

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strongly about this,” and I chased and chased it, I’m sure they’d consider it and think about letting me do it. The diminished role on *Monday Night Football* is one reason they did come to me and ask me if I wanted to call play-by-play on college football. So that was one particular opening, but again, my desire to do that was not there.

HEATHER COX, Reporter:

The hardest part, I think, about reporting is you only get two, three, four questions at the most, so I really have to figure out what is the most important story line and what I want to hit home. If we could sit down for twenty minutes, I’d love to ask fifteen questions. But we just never have the opportunity to do that, and to develop a real in-depth, Barbara Walters-type interview. It just doesn’t happen in the format that we’re given.

ERIN ANDREWS, Reporter:

When I was younger, I would always come home on Monday night, and I would always love to watch *Monday Night Football*. I would always love to see what the sideline reporter was doing that night. I would sit there and critique them when I was younger, and it made me really, really want to be a part of it.

When I was at Florida I used to camp out for *College GameDay*. I always would try to get my picture with Kirk [Herbstreit] and Chris [Fowler] and Lee [Corso], and there’s a couple of times where my camera didn’t work and Kirk would come back and take another photo and Chris would too, and I just remembered how nice they were to stand and how great they were and how appreciative toward their fans. And I always try to remember that, because I think at the same time, when people are screaming your name and “We love you. We love you,” I just think to myself, “I’m the biggest dork. I sit on my couch and I’m watching *NFL Live* right now. I’m just a dork.” I guess I just don’t take it too seriously. I never have.

As the years started to pass, I started developing great relationships with a lot of coaches and a lot of athletes, and to be honest with you, they don’t give me inside information, and they don’t allow me to just call them up and ask them questions or help because of the way I look. They’ve got more things to do than worry about that. Within the last

couple years, I've started to take pride in the fact that I can "up" Mac Brown. I can call Urban Meyer. I can call Pete Carroll and just say, "Hey, can you help me out with this? I'm working on a game and I need some stuff for this." These guys, you know, they see pretty girls every day. They don't care. They don't have time for it. They know how hard I work. And another thing that's helped me: I have great talent around me—Chris Fowler, Craig James, Kirk Herbstreit—and I think that these coaches see that I have a good relationship with them, and they trust me. "Well, gosh. If Herbie trusts Erin, and Chris Fowler does too, then she's going to be great with me on the sidelines."

LISA SALTERS, Reporter:

I watch the NFL and I watch how we've basically gotten rid of the sideline reporters—two of the best sideline reporters that are out there, we've just gotten ridden of them for *Monday Night Football*. I don't understand how that happened. But it happened. And in college football as well, they've really trimmed down. Not all of the games have sideline reporters anymore. Thankfully the game that I do, the prime-time game with Brent and Kirk, we still do; otherwise, I would be not doing it anymore either.

I think it's kind of unfair to kind of lump all sideline reporters in together when, to me, on any network there are some who are better than others. So I don't want to be judged—I don't want my work to be judged by the work of somebody else who I might think isn't as good. Or I wouldn't think that Michele Tafoya or Suzy Kolber would be judged by somebody else on another network who I would think, like—well, of course you would say the sideline reporter isn't that good, because that person is doing it. But if you had Michele or Suzy doing it, it would be a lot—you would get a lot more value out of it.

MICHELE TAFOYA:

I don't feel that the playing field is completely level. I can only speak from the roles that I handle, which are primarily reporting, and that's one aspect of it. I think that women are predominantly looked at as reporters. I think we have our share of anchors and so forth, but we're predominantly reporters. We're always thought of as quote-unquote "sideline reporters." "Female sideline reporters." I hear those terms an

awful lot. So just by virtue of that, I don't think the playing field is particularly level. However, I have never, ever, ever used my gender or my sex as any kind of excuse. I never had a chip about it. When I started in this business back in 1993, I told myself as I marched off to Charlotte, North Carolina, to work in sports talk radio that I was going to be a reporter. Not a "female reporter." Just a reporter. Diane Sawyer. Barbara Walters. Women that are being allowed to age gracefully in their roles, for lack of a better term. I don't see that happening in sports. I don't see a sixty-year-old woman being able to continue on covering sports, because I just don't think that idea goes over well with viewers and therefore with management. Now is that unacceptable? I don't know. It is what it is, but it underscores just one more time that the playing field ain't level, and you can have one guy doing sports who is bald and maybe twenty pounds overweight. If you had a woman who was deemed less attractive, she might not get those same roles that the more attractive women get. That makes it an unlevel playing field.

Hosting the 14th Annual ESPY Awards in 2006, Lance Armstrong looked out at the audience in Hollywood's Kodak Theatre and said he was surprised to see Brokeback Mountain costar Jake Gyllenhaal sitting in the front row—having assumed from the movie that the actor "likes it in the rear." Armstrong told other arguably tasteless jokes that night, but this one got the most attention—and the attention was certainly not in the form of lavish praise or even "ha ha, good one" (although the joke did get loud laughs from the audience that night—including from Gyllenhaal).

Most of the comments provoked by the joke had to do with disbelief that it wasn't edited out of the tape before broadcast, since when given the chance to edit out questionable material, ESPN usually reaches for the scissors. Critics pointed out that ESPN's own SportsCenter anchors would have been in big trouble if they'd told the same joke on that program, even one of the editions airing at a later hour than the ESPYs did. John Walsh had made practically a crusade out of keeping humor at the awards show positive and—to use his favorite adjective in this context—"celebratory."

"When you're trying to attract the best, most contemporary, and most talented people from the entertainment community, they have an expectation of being attached to a show that takes risks," Walsh said in response to criticism, but his would not be the last word.

LANCE ARMSTRONG, ESPY Host:

Well, I was honored that ESPN would be willing to take a risk on an athlete hosting the show. It was a bit weird to be taking jabs at some people in sport, but I think most appreciated that it was all in good fun. I was extremely nervous. It is easy to participate in a live sporting event because most of the time you don't see the cameras or you are so focused on the race. But when that curtain went up, it was real. And you are feet away from your peers in sports.

You do the rehearsals and it seems funny, but you never know until you start going live and have to face that audience.

JOHN WALSH:

The sports guy in late night is Jimmy Kimmel. He did the ESPYs one year, and we hated him. He did a terrible job. He's a nice guy, a big sports fan. So we hired him, and I said, "Jimmy, you understand, this is not late-night television, it's not a nightclub. It's a celebration of sports. We're here in prime time to celebrate sports. It's not raunchy." Then we told him the monologue is four minutes. So he writes a monologue and delivers it—eight minutes and thirty seconds. We cut out all the bad stuff, the stuff that was *not* celebratory, and he was *so* pissed off.

JIMMY KIMMEL:

I had a lot of material. I knew some of the stuff was going to be cut out, I just didn't know how much. I understood some of it, but some of it made absolutely no sense to me. Like you can't make fun of soccer. Everything was so political. I didn't realize cuts were made until I watched the broadcast. I was at Huey Lewis's house in Montana, fly-fishing, and we said, "Hey, let's watch this." And we did.

It was a lesson for me, I think. The lesson was that I should have expected that to happen in the first place, and they had wanted me to sign a five-year deal to host every year.

The fact of the matter is, they can't afford to make jokes at the expense of the characters in their world. And they're not used to that sort of thing. They're just not willing to take that risk. They claim they cut the stuff for time, but eh. "David Beckham comes to L.A. this

618 Those Guys Have All the Fun

month. I have to say I have never seen my gardener so excited." Maybe that one seemed racist, I don't know.

The truth of the matter is, ESPN is great. It's just when you make the mistake like I did of thinking you can do something edgy on that network, and you can't. You just can't. It's McDonald's.

DANICA PATRICK, *Race Car Driver:*

The ESPYs are just the coolest party that I get to go to all year. I'm kind of girly—I like to get made-up and walk the red carpet and look like a girl for the night. It's nice to show everyone that I'm a girl. Not many people really see that because most of my photos and interviews are done without any makeup or without anything done to my hair except maybe a ponytail. And it's always flattering to hear what people say.

I also get to meet a lot of people who I wouldn't normally meet. I particularly enjoyed meeting Will Ferrell. That was pretty cool. I was presenting with Luke Wilson and we were talking when Will came over. He had just done a little skit onstage and he said, "Oh, my gosh, my two favorite people!" and I thought, "Wow, this is so cool." I was so flattered he remembered me.

DWYANE WADE:

When I first started going, Jamie Foxx was the host, and he was hilarious. I loved the skits. When LeBron hosted, I thought he did a good job. He was funny and entertaining, and he really showed another side of him that was kind of cool. And it looked good for a basketball player to be doing that.

I'm a big fan of the game, but I'm also a student of the game. You have to do your homework. So I watch *SportsCenter*, ESPN News, and go on ESPN.com all the time. You just gotta do your homework.

SHAUN WHITE, *Professional Skateboarder and Snowboarder:*

I was standing at the ESPYs and some famous football player came up to me and he was, like, "There's no way in the world I could do what you do." And I just looked at him and said, "Well, there's no way I could go tackle someone." There's just a common respect at the ESPYs between all the athletes that you don't get anywhere else.

But for me, ESPN is obviously also about the X Games. Before our sport really took off anywhere, back before I even started, X Games were our Olympics. ESPN had Travis Pastrana jumping his motorcycle into the water in San Francisco. I remember I wasn't even allowed to compete, I was so young—but it was my goal to end up getting in the event. And by the time I was old enough and all that, it really started to take off, so it was kind of our platform to get noticed. The X Games have grown from the little backyard event that it was to a full-fledged marketed thing. And now it's a cultural thing too, because everyone is used to seeing football and basketball, but our sport has grown dramatically all across the world, so it's become something where they need us. You know what I mean? We're the new thing, and they're open to us. I gave them input all the time, and always made sure I was around to help with any course design or any feedback, like if the course wasn't working, because it's a very rider-driven thing. It's been a great relationship, and we've certainly helped each other out.

STEVE YOUNG, *Football Analyst:*

Oh, there've been some classic fumbles, that's for sure. Tom Jackson loves this one: I had written down a quote from a player that he'd told me, that I felt like I needed to say on the air verbatim, and so at some point in my comments, I looked down at my piece of paper to read it—but my handwriting is very, very small. It was so small, I couldn't read it. I was trying to read the quote and Tom had to say on the air, "You can't read your own writing," and I had to admit it. I said, "Yes, you're right, I can't read my own writing."

There are times when I go on the air and my wife will text me, "You forgot to shave half your mustache" or "You look awful; comb your hair." Because at ESPN, they just talk sports, they don't look at you before you go on. I was actually on-set at the game and my hair was flying up in the air, and it goes back to Chris in Bristol, and Chris says, "Steve, that was electrifying."

COLIN COWHERD:

If this were a small business and I owned it, I'd just have to be accountable for me. But as it is, I have to be accountable for advertisers and the affiliates and the company, and as I've grown in stature at the

company, that's a bigger shield to carry. I'm always okay taking the heat. It doesn't bother me. But I always worry about my kids, or the company, or my bosses, or the brand. That's where it gets uncomfortable. I'm never uncomfortable reading about me because I know me better than anybody else knows me, and I know I'm a good guy. I get along with my ex-wife. I get along with every woman I've dated. I don't have any enemies. My best friends have been my friends for years. I have an incredible group of friends. So I'm never worried about the criticism of me. What I'm worried about is that other people suffer because they're associated with me—my kids, my friends, my company, my advertisers. So when I'm being broadly attacked, I tend to, like most people, build a fence around those who are close. I get closer to my kids, probably. I spend more time with the people I trust. I think any time you're a politician or a media person, if you're going through a horrible personal tragedy, you just draw closer to the safest and most loving people. I think you have to come to terms with it. The one thing that I shake my head at is people who criticize yet can't be criticized. I always laugh at these people. Keith Olbermann's brilliant but he's so thin-skinned, and yet he criticizes for a living, sharply and often with daggers. You can't do that for a living and then not take a punch. I'm always shocked at the talented people who criticize and then are seemingly outraged at any salvo directed at them. I know the way I speak is going to generate hate mail and criticism, and I'm ready for it. I accept it.

That "end zone" thing was really just nothing. That was more Internet babble. I read something that somebody sent to me anonymously. I'd never seen it before. I just said, "This is funny," and then we read it on the air. We didn't know who it was. And then we got a bunch of people e-mailing us and killing us for it, and after a while I e-mailed back to somebody and said, "Come on, dude. Get over it. We get it. We made a mistake." And then I wanted to apologize, and the company said, hey, they wanted to review the situation. ESPN's an aircraft carrier, not a sailboat. Our turning radius is pretty slow; when controversy happens, it takes twenty-four or thirty-six hours to get everybody huddled, listen to the tape, see what they think. So I would have apologized immediately but management said, "Stay away from it for twenty-four hours, then we'll address it." And I did. But that was nothing. Now with the Sean Taylor thing, my superior, Mo Davenport, an

African American, listened to it and had no problem with it. A lot of it was turned into a racial issue. "Insensitive." And I would say it again. Sean Taylor came out of the University of Miami with a reputation. I really leaned on African American journalists—Stephen A. Smith, Michael Wilbon—who were critical of him. This is a guy who had an SUV riddled with bullets several years earlier. His best friend told him, "Stay out of Miami." If you listen to my commentary and go to the Internet, it was warranted, it was reasonable, and yes, it could have been wrong. But I'm not in the business of reviewing everything before I talk about it. I'm in talk radio. A story breaks, I need an opinion. I'm not ESPN News.

I came out later and said, "Here are the facts. Here is the truth." I never really apologized. I came on the air and said, "Many of you were offended. You were offended by my tone or tenor. I understand it. That's my Colin tenor. Some people love it. Some people hate it. But I'm not going to apologize for my tone. Go back and look at exactly what I said." One of the comments that bothered people—people said, "He turned his life around." And I came out and said, "Hey, a lot of times you clean the carpet, but you don't get all the stains out." And people are, like, "What does that mean?" Well, just because you turn your life around doesn't mean everybody else is going to accept your apology. I mean, Sean had made a lot of enemies in his life apparently.

There's been a coarsening of the country. I'm not blaming conservative radio, but I think there's just been a coarsening of the airwaves over the last fifteen years. Much more partisan. Much more anger. And in sports, because the athletes have separated themselves from the common guy, it costs significantly more to go to games, so fans feel more of an ownership. "I'm paying for this, so I'll damn well say what I please." There's clearly a feeling of ownership of the player because you're paying his salary and because there's a distance now between the athlete and the media and the athlete and the fans. There's a resentment that's built up, and that caustic sort of resentment bares itself on the radio on a daily basis. It's funny; many people have labeled me "controversial." I find myself to be so overwhelmingly reasonable. I often go on the air and I say, "People, settle down. We're overreacting here. Michael Vick? We're overreacting." But the ratings are in overreacting. So I listen to a lot of radio and some of the stuff that comes out of political radio talkers' mouths is just wrong. It's just absurd. It's clearly stirring the

masses—often the less-educated masses who react emotionally to everything. So some of it can be blamed on the media. Some of it can be blamed on the ticket prices and the separation of fan from player. And some of it is just the coarsening of the country. We have more media. People see more now. People get numb to stuff. And I think as civilizations age, you see this all over. You just see a coarsening because we see more, we get used to more, we get numb to harsher action and harsher dialogue.

I do believe that I bear some responsibility—all of us do—to know that our words can create actions. And there have been times where I've tried to cool volatile situations. There are other times where I've probably riled people up. But I know that when you get a very emotional racial situation or social situation, my psychology is "We're going to be okay. Let's settle down. Let's stop overreacting." The most educated people I've ever met in my life not only have a high IQ, they have a high EQ, an "emotional quotient." People who overreact tend almost always to be wrong. The truth is always gray, not black and white. The truth is almost always in the middle and emotions need to be tempered.

People are happy at ESPN. People smile. A lot of people wanted to work in sports, and they are working in sports. And they have a good health plan, a nice company, a beautiful campus, a good cafeteria, and I find people enjoy ESPN. Now there are the downfalls of corporate America. The ills of corporate. But by and large, I've never worked at a happier place. And that goes a long way in quality of life. I don't know what the pay is at ESPN compared to other media companies, but the happy quotient is way above average. And I've worked for several good media companies that didn't have this general sense of contentment.

I'm not some shill. It's a big corporation. As I said earlier, it's an aircraft carrier, not a sailboat. The turning radius is slow and gradual, and sometimes you have to wait for stuff, and you're, like, "Can't we cut through the red tape?" But that's just corporate America. It's different than a law firm with eight guys or gals. So that is just innate in a company of our size.

JALEN ROSE, *Basketball Analyst:*

The funny thing about athletes and even entertainers is that they all say the same two things: first, they don't care what the media says about

them—they never watch or read anything about themselves and it doesn't matter or motivate them at all; and second, it's not about the money. Well, they're lying on both.

VENUS WILLIAMS, Tennis Player:

I don't listen to a lot of what's said about me, especially if I'm playing. I find it never helps to evaluate someone else's opinion of you. So when I watch my matches, I usually watch with the sound off. When I do listen, I hardly ever agree with anything they say, to be honest with you. I sometimes think, "Don't they know the game at all?" There are very few commentators who I actually agree with. But then I've never done a commentating job. You probably have to find some way to keep the conversation going, so you might end up saying anything.

Not even ESPN can win them all. Of ESPN's misfires, there is probably no better example than the great Mobile Phone Runaround of 2006, a case of ESPN trying to branch out in a forest where it was a complete stranger—and so quickly that it promptly got lost. It sounded good: a mobile phone that supplied not only the basics of a telephone but also, for the sports fan, nearly instant access to scores (five whole seconds before they'd appear on a TV screen!), breaking sports news, columnists, and other assorted jock poop. A specially designed phone seemed a handsome creation in black with red buttons. It had a retro aura, but if anything, viewers of ESPN are accustomed to high-tech glitz—bold graphics, futuristic displays.

But design was only a small factor in the phone's failure—and it definitely did fail. When 240,000 customers are projected for a service, and only 10,000 show up, that's not success. Disney also had a troubled mobile phone division, and in fiscal year 2006, the combined loss from the Disney and ESPN phones was \$135 million.

The story goes that ESPN president George Bodenheimer attended the first Disney board meeting in Orlando, Florida, just after the company had bought Pixar, the innovative animation factory, and spotted Apple CEO Steve Jobs in a hallway. It seemed like a good time to introduce himself. "I am George Bodenheimer," he said to Jobs. "I run ESPN." Jobs just looked at him and said nothing other than "Your phone is the dumbest fucking idea I have ever heard," then turned and walked away.

STEVE BORNSTEIN:

The phone was a stupid idea. I told that to George and to Skipper. It was a big bet that was bound to fail also thought it was off-brand, because I get very angry at my cell phone when it doesn't work. When the phone doesn't work—which is every fucking day—I don't want to be angry at ESPN. I'd rather get angry at Verizon. That's what I mean by off-brand. I didn't want to have to call ESPN and say, "From my house to my office, it's six point six miles, can you just make it so I can make a fucking phone call on my way to work?"

JOHN SKIPPER:

Going into the mobile phone business, there were a few fathers, despite it being a failure, and I was one of them. But there were a number of other people. The strategic planning guys at Disney had identified that going into the mobile phone business might be a good idea. Remember you had a model in Europe and Asia where these things had been big business, and we have the philosophy at ESPN that we are not going to allow ourselves to be flanked by a platform, the way lots of companies have been.

SALIL MEHTA, *Executive Vice President of ESPN Enterprises:*

I was working at Disney's Corporate Strategic Planning group and we developed the first business plans for the branded Disney cell phone and ESPN cell phone. We made the first feasibility assessments, then started advocating the concept to a handful of ESPN executives. Yes, there were concerns: for example, would subscriber frustration at an ESPN phone's call quality boomerang to become resentment for ESPN? But for the most part, ESPN executives, especially John Skipper, aggressively supported the concept, using the mission of ESPN—"to serve sports fans"—as a key rationale. "If fans were going to get their sports on cell phones, ESPN has to be there," he would argue. It evoked a long line of successful new-product introductions at ESPN. Skipper himself argued several years prior that if fans were reading about sports in a magazine, ESPN had to be there. Others had argued that if fans were going to try to get scores on the Internet, ESPN had to be there.

JOHN SKIPPER:

Sports Illustrated was a magazine; they ended up getting flanked by cable television and Internet, any number of things. We decided we were never going to get flanked by anything. Where fans get sports news and information, we're going to be there.

We completely miscalculated two things—primarily, in my opinion, with two major outside factors. We had made the calculation that approximately 5 percent of people change carriers in any given month. Gee, well, when you make it possible to take your phone number, that percentage is going to 6, 7, and 8, right? But what happened is, all the phone companies did massive retention efforts—Verizon, T-Mobile, and Sprint, who was our partner but also a competitor. Everybody went, “No way we’re letting people move,” so they did lots and lots of plans—“Stay with Us,” Verizon Family Plan, they did all these things to keep people, so it actually went from 5 to, like, 3. Our pool to get customers from is only the people who are switching, and that pool went down.

By the way, this all happened under me. I was in charge of the mobile phone. It was Skipper’s Debacle. It was the company’s. We’ve moved on, and we’ve done well, and by the way, under George, yes, it was livable, there didn’t have to be a scapegoat. A lot of companies might have made me a scapegoat, right? “He fucked up, he’s out of here.” Not here.

SALIL MEHTA:

The decision to approve the project went all the way to Michael Eisner, and to tell the truth, this was actually one of the easier projects to get funded in my experience at Disney. The combination of the enormous passion that ESPN brought out in its fans, along with the unique ability for an ESPN phone to give you one-click access to the world of ESPN convinced Disney’s senior team that an ESPN service was close to a slam dunk.

We could not have been more confident in our eventual success. But almost immediately after it went on sale, the phone ran into problems: (1) We underestimated the stickiness of the big carrier networks and their newly introduced “free in-plan calling” offers; (2) the ESPN bulky handset was no match for the slender appeal of the Motorola RAZR; (3) the first price was far too high; (4) we were only available

at Best Buy; (5) in truth, consumers simply did not pick phone service for even the best possible content experience. We began cutting the price and flooding the ESPN airwaves with our marketing message, but to no avail. Within six months of the launch, it became clear that we were not going to make it. The phone experience really did show the limits of ESPN. Market research backed up our intuition that if the mobile phone's screen could really showcase ESPN, consumers would sign up. But in reality, mobile phone service is an extremely complicated selection decision for consumers, and not even the best content experience, nor the best marketing from ESPN, could really impact that.

That said, we surmised that the ESPN content experience would be extremely attractive to the big carriers. We were able to establish an auction between AT&T, Sprint, and Verizon, and reached an innovative agreement to license the Mobile ESPN application to Verizon. The deal was lucrative enough to help offset most of the losses incurred by the experience. But far more importantly, the experience gave ESPN a critical edge that it still enjoys today in mobile. There are strong competitors to ESPN.com online, but there is no one close to ESPN's position in mobile. And as mobile only increases in importance, the Mobile ESPN experience will in the long run prove critical to ESPN's ability to continue its dominance on all platforms.

JOHN KOSNER, Senior Vice President of Digital Media:

I think it was the right intention, but I think it was a business miscalculation, meaning that we tried to get into a business that was different than what we specialize at. We got into a business built around hardware. We got into a business where the purchase intent is determined by a lot of factors other than what we really do great. So, if you take a look at our success in mobile today, where we have like 65 percent market share on the mobile web for sports, a lot of that was born of the work that went into Mobile ESPN. Some of the work on the product side was quite good. I think overall they took a look at what they thought the idea was and what they thought the business plan was and they decided that they could make it work. Again, this is a company that largely has been very successful at everything that it has tried. I've been at other companies where that's been up and down, and so sometimes when you've been involved in some big failures, it gives you hesi-

tation the next time. But this is a company that has always succeeded, and I think that is part of what led into it.

GEORGE BODENHEIMER:

I love it when people want to talk to me about how the phone was a flaw or a mistake or a black mark on my record. I don't look at it as anything like that. It was a tremendous learning opportunity in a portion of the sports media business that's going to be huge. If you're not doing things to learn and try to get out in front, then you're truly going to diminish your company. We tried, but we were on the wrong business plan; we made a quick correction and shifted gears and now we have the largest sports mobile website that exists. So we're off to the races. There's absolutely margin for error here. Any time something like that happens, I think it's good for the employees and good for all of us. ESPN isn't bulletproof, and the day we start thinking we are will be a bad day.

BOB IGER:

Companies that don't take risks don't grow. We are going to keep trying new things to improve the fan experience, and ESPN's move to local websites and a 3-D network are just the latest iterations of entrepreneurial thinking that's smart, and calculated, even if the future isn't crystal clear.

By 2008, bloggers, online columnists, and instant analyzers were beginning to dominate the newly digitalized world of sports, and ESPN increasingly found itself a target: "Turner was better on basketball"; "Watch Monday Night Football with the sound turned down"; "Joe Morgan sucked on Sunday Night Baseball"; "The network blew it with NASCAR," and so on, and on.

But for Mark Gross, Norby Williamson's right-hand man and one of the highest regarded executives at ESPN, none of those things mattered, because Gross was in charge of a show unique to the network—a show prized as if it were the Golden Fleece and the Hope Diamond put together. Above all the whining and bellyaching, one could almost hear Gross and his fellow executives saying, "Thank you, Lord, for College GameDay." And the Lord said, "You're welcome."

GameDay wasn't just "the show that had everything"; it was the show that defined what "everything" about college football was. That included the best

analysis, the best predictions, and the best inside information, all served up amid the excitement and spectacle of a great American celebration.

One big plus was the equivalent of perfect casting in a drama or sitcom: Kirk Herbstreit had graduated from quarterback at Ohio State to highly credible football analyst on GameDay; Lee Corso, surviving member of the original 1987 starting lineup, would go to great lengths, yet somehow never too great, to get a laugh; host Chris Fowler captained the ship and kept it steadily on course; and cohost Erin Andrews had great contacts among the coaching ranks and great popularity among the college crowd, having replaced the old Farrah Fawcett poster as reigning campus sex symbol. Who needed a poster when you could see and hear the living goddess in person holding forth with effortless expertise?

CHRIS FOWLER:

Virginia Tech obviously has had a close relationship with the college football unit and with *GameDay* since the late nineties. Very few other campuses are as close-knit, had the sense of unity, had the sense of pride that came from being somewhat isolated geographically, a little bit of an outsider, a latecomer to the landscape. So when you go there, you sense that, if your antenna is up at all, there's something different about this place.

When the shootings happened, I didn't like the national media coverage; I thought it was missing the point. I think that people who had parachuted in, descending upon Blacksburg, had no understanding of what they were doing. I don't think it was being represented in a way that was all that informed.

Now, I'm an outsider, I'm not a Hokie. But I felt like I was qualified to write an essay expressing what I saw on the TV screen over those few days. And it wasn't intended to be a healing thing for Virginia Tech. I would never presume to speak for them. I was just trying to explain to people that this isn't just another campus, so when something like this happens here, it has a little bit of a different poignancy than even something that awful would have somewhere else.

I never had any kind of response to anything I've written like that. I mean, the comments that were made after the piece was posted, the way that it was getting virally spread around the community of the alums and students, and the responses that I got were unbelievable. It shook me up. My wife and I would sit there and read notes on it. I

wasn't trying to provide them medicine for their grief. But they really appreciated that perspective from an outsider. I still get comments.

GameDay going there was not a big part of the event. Being that together for the first time, in that big a number as a community after they'd been away all summer, *that* was the event, the pregame ceremony, the team running out, how [Virginia Tech football coach Frank] Beamer and the team chose to draw inspiration, and what it meant to have the football team on the field for those students—*that* was the thing. I was very proud of the collective effort and the sensibility that prevailed.

LEE CORSO:

I can describe *College GameDay* for you like this: in the studio, it's like an actor who's doing a TV show with a canned audience. There's no audience, no feedback, no nothing. And then there's the actor that goes on Broadway. He immediately gets a rush because he's playing to an audience. That's exactly the way it feels. And you know that actors will tell you they have to do Broadway every once in a while just to stay sharp.

It's the most gratifying thing to be done at ESPN. Because you get instant reaction to the performance and that's great stuff. College football is our vehicle, but we're in the entertainment business. And once you lose that, you're never going to make it.

KIRK HERBSTREIT:

My dad played at Ohio State. He was a captain there. So before I even went to Ohio State, I was probably more of an Ohio State fan than I was while I was *at* Ohio State as a player, and since leaving. Now, I'm not going to hide the fact or pretend that when the camera's off I am not an Ohio State fan and that my four boys aren't dressed every Saturday in their scarlet-and-gray jerseys and are at home with my wife singing the fight song when they wake up to breakfast. I mean, that's just the way I am and that's the way I always will be and that's the way my kids will be. But with that being said, I still feel that I would challenge anybody to look at me in the fifteen years that I've been on air to ever see if—without somebody on set kind of needling me about Ohio State, you wouldn't know where I went to school. And that's my goal: just to tell it like I see it, and if it's good, it's good, and if it's bad, it's bad, and nothing personal. For me, for whatever reason, it's not difficult to

analyze teams and, if they happen to be Ohio State or Tennessee or Texas, it's just what you do. And away we go.

Parting was much more sorrowful than sweet when Dan Patrick announced, in the summer of 2007, that he was leaving ESPN after eighteen years with the company. Fans were heartbroken; Patrick had been not just popular but deeply popular—a “voice of witty sanity,” as Richard Sandomir put it in the New York Times. Patrick was one of the ESPN greats, and he personified the kind of integrity that can't be faked.

Patrick had played just about every role available at ESPN on nearly every possible show, but of course his greatest success had come as co-anchor with Keith Olbermann on SportsCenter. But Patrick's versatility had become something of a curse. ESPN worked him to a frazzle, and in announcing his retirement from the network, Patrick said that “management knew I was tired and needed to recharge my battery” while denying there was any “animosity” between him and his ESPN bosses. Inside observers were skeptical. Patrick conceded he'd just been “going through the motions” in his last couple of years at the network.

Executives balked when Patrick wanted to talk on his ESPN Radio show about where he might go next and issued a terse, hard-nosed statement: “ESPN contractually bans all employees from making specific announcement of their futures on the airwaves.” Later, executives would grumble about, and threaten, any ESPN personalities who wanted to appear as Patrick's guests at his new venues.

A devoted family man and clever wordsmith, Patrick could write even better than he talked, contributing popular features and columns to ESPN: The Magazine and later serving as senior writer for Sports Illustrated. He was one of a kind, yet so productive and prolific that there often seemed to be three or four of him working at the same time.

DAN PATRICK:

All I wanted to do was simplify my schedule so I could be at home with my kids—that was it. It was nothing. It wasn't money. I don't care what anybody will tell you. It was so simple that the quality of life was all that I was asking for, and they refused to do it. All I'd asked George to do is help me stay there, and he didn't, and it was disheartening that I only heard from him after I left, and then he called to say, as if he was reading from a piece of paper, “Dan Patrick, we really appreciate you being here,” and after that I was, “Yeah, okay, great. Thank you, George.”

No matter what anybody says there, that was what it came down to—"give me quality of life," and Norby wouldn't do it. I obviously got knocked back—it took the wind out of me. So I blame myself because I could have said to Shapiro, "Fuck you," but I didn't, because this is where I'm supposed to work, so it was "Thank you, sir, may I have another?"

I'm not a victim, and I don't want to come across as "Oh, woe is me." I thought it could have been run in a more civil way, like grown-ups, but everything was precedent setting, and that's a shame, because I didn't want it to end like that. I just felt bad that that's the way it ended. And it didn't have to. That's why I told you, if I was taken advantage of or manipulated or whatever, I did it to myself—big deal. Big boy. All I wanted was a little respect in the final days there; if we could have done something, I would have been a lifer.

Television is, of course, awash in awards. ESPN not only doles them out but has shelves full of those it has won. Among the most meaningful were the first two that the network ever received from a group called Military Reporters and Editors (MRE), which, in 2007, gave top prizes to "An Un-American Tragedy," a four-part series that appeared on ESPN.com, and Tillman's Final Mission, a half-hour documentary hosted by Bob Ley; the film also won a prize from the Deadline Club of New York and was nominated for an Emmy. Tillman was Pat Tillman, a seeming hero who led what appeared to be an idealized all-American life: playing pro football for the Arizona Cardinals, then quitting to enlist in the U.S. Army Rangers. On April 22, 2004, in Afghanistan, three bullets brought that all-American life to an end.

A simple story of heroism and courage? To investigative reporter Mike Fish, who already had an array of awards under his belt, something seemed wrong. Many months of work resulted in the revelatory online series and documentary in 2006. Fish's work was heaped with praise—perhaps most poignantly from one of those Internet websites that seem always to be negative: "We bloggers bash ESPN a lot, and often with good reason, but they sometimes do phenomenal journalism at the Worldwide Leader, and this is one instance of that."

MIKE FISH, Investigative Reporter:

Imagine this whole image of Pat Tillman, the great American who joins the Army and whatnot: his death was shocking. I think a lot of

people were just really taken aback by it. And I personally was, because I'd followed his career, knew who he was, and he was someone, from a distance, I thought very highly of. And his death obviously jarred me and jarred a lot of other people. I think the stories that followed are what triggered my investigation. The people at ESPN encouraged me to pursue it. None of it seemed to make sense. It didn't add up. The idea that he's supposedly shot by the enemy, tried to charge up this hill—it sounded too much like a drama or a movie, if you will. Too scripted.

And then the fact that it was sometime after that that it was revealed that he wasn't shot by the enemy, that indeed he may have been shot by friendly fire. Then a lot of things started to come out. There were a lot of holes in the image that the government was putting out, that he was this great war hero, and it turns out that he was also in adjudication with Noam Chomsky, who was antiwar, and all sorts of things were starting to leak out. And at that point, probably a half dozen people at ESPN had a very strong interest in this particular story and encouraged me. Soon I was battling the military and the Washington establishment, plus trying to gain the confidence of Tillman's family. And the other thing is the effort back in Bristol of putting that package together, like the graphics and the way it was designed—all those kinds of things which I'm totally clueless on and were magnificent.

A lot of people were really moved by it. It's probably the thing I've written that has moved the most people that really had a passion and really had a lot of concern about it and really enjoyed it. There was also a faction that was just adamant, that thought that "Hey, you signed up for the military. Pat Tillman's no different than, you know, Joe Jones from Hoboken or Saginaw, Michigan. And why are we playing up this professional football player?" Then there were other people who thought it was, you know, uh, we were denigrating the war effort or being critical of the administration, stuff like that. It went both ways.

Ultimately—I'm not saying it necessarily resulted in, but I think that the story itself kind of fueled, the Congressional hearings that followed. And at the end of the day... Well, let others judge, but I think what we did really stood out.

Perhaps in an attempt to expunge all the tales of ESPN's allegedly having been a wild wellspring of sexual misconduct in its youth, the network got very tough

with employees who faced such charges in its adulthood. Two of the saddest cases reflected the new severity: Harold Reynolds in 2006 and Sean Salisbury two years later. They seem linked by circumstance; it was even said that when Reynolds was confronted with allegations, he complained that others, including, by name, Sean, were getting away with worse.

Salisbury would merely suffer the indignity of not having his contract renewed. But Reynolds was outright fired by a tribunal that included Norby Williamson, Marcia Keegan, and Steve Anderson. Whatever the similarities, there also seems to be a wide disparity between the two offenses. Reynolds supposedly gave an overly enthusiastic “hug” (some called it a “grab”) to a twenty-one-year-old intern while dining ever so elegantly at an Outback Steakhouse. Salisbury’s principal misdeed was decidedly more colorful; he took a cell-phone photo of his “junk”—his genitalia—and showed it to coworkers while gambling at a bar.

Reynolds, a baseball analyst, was an eleven-year veteran of ESPN, and Salisbury had logged twelve years as an NFL analyst for the network. It would be years before Salisbury owned up to precisely what he’d done, but always he maintained that while it was “stupid,” “dumb,” and “sophomoric,” it was not a firing offense. In the hypersensitive new climate, however, and whether or not the exhibition of the photograph had met with approval or revulsion, Salisbury’s fate was sealed.

His reaction was to go ballistic, threatening even to sue Deadspin, the web mag that had never been successfully sued even though it ran inside scuttlebutt all the time. Reynolds went less public with his anger, even though his firing occurred just four months after he signed a six-year, \$5 million contract.

Lest the punishments seem unduly harsh, both men suffered from damaged reputations—from previous complaints that had been biding time in their files. Reynolds probably had the thicker file, and yet he was also a particularly well liked guy around the office—and elsewhere. A former pro ballplayer, he volunteered time to Little League kids and became “the Pied Piper” of the sport, according to a colleague who also accurately summed up the case: “Sad, it was sad, but it is what it is.”

SEAN SALISBURY:

The incident didn’t happen on campus, it was at a bar. It was just a stupid couple-of-minutes incident. It was not like somebody went into the bathroom. It was just a thing that college kids do. I’m not

pooh-poohing it. It was dumb. I take full 100 percent responsibility. But I also know that I wouldn't sell out the other couple guys that are superstars that could have got in trouble. I wouldn't do it. I would never give up a name. You don't sell people out, and if I'd sold them out it would have caused them embarrassment for their careers. I wouldn't have done it, and I still won't to this day, and nobody will ever know who it is. I will never ever let anybody inside on that, ever. Because it's friends of mine, and they're popular, and I would never ever get anybody in trouble. So we'll leave it at that.

MIKE SOLTYS:

In Harold's case, you've got a twenty-, twenty-one-year-old college student who's in your employ, who wide-eyed trusts him, goes right along, and then he grabs her. And it all was work related. In Sean's case, he's doing crazy things at local bars. And ultimately he didn't get renewed.

SEAN SALISBURY:

When you're having a few drinks with buddies, and you do something stupid, you've got to sometimes suffer the ramifications that come with it. And you ask if it was off campus, you ask if it was a private cell phone, you ask if it wasn't walking around showing thirty people, but if it offends one person, then you've done wrong, and ESPN's right. I was raised to make good decisions, and sometimes I make stupid decisions, and it's amazing how a very short few minutes or few seconds of time can have a lasting effect on your career and life. And that incident for me did. I'm trying to forgive myself.

Believe me, I have probably done worse in my life than what I did with that cell phone in a bar one night, honestly. We've all gotten behind the wheel of a car when we've had probably three beers instead of one, saying, "I shouldn't be doing this." We've all done that, and that's far more tragic than me doing what I did. But it's really helped me rehab my life—my social life and the rest of it, and how I appreciate it more. I'll never ever take for granted what I did, and I'll always pat ESPN on the back for what they did for me, and there's still some major hurt that I have inside. Since then I've gone to anger management because I was hurt inside, and it was the same time my dad was dying,

so I'm to blame for allowing something to creep in; I allowed them to have that decision to make.

I worked for two more years, I didn't get fired. Then on March 2 or 3 of 2008, I had a meeting, and we sat there and talked, and they said because they had just signed Cris Carter and I had been there twelve years, they said, "You know what? We're not going to renew your contract." I really didn't think they were going to anyway. I mean, I knew they loved me, and had the incident in 2006 not happened, I believe I'd still be there. I know I would be.

But I also understood the position they felt that they were in. I was up for another raise and it would have been a lot of money, and they felt it was time to move on, and I said, "Okay." You know, what are you going to say? It's not like they looked at me and said, "You're fired because of the incident two years ago." I shook hands with Steve Anderson and Norby Williamson and we talked for a few minutes, they wished me luck, and I was out the door, and that was it. It was pretty much that simple.

MATT SANDULLI:

Harold Reynolds was the first and only Major League Baseball player ever to introduce himself to me, which I kid him about to this day. He was a Mariner and I was in Detroit doing a feature on Dave Fleming, the left-hander for Seattle who pitched at Georgia. I was standing outside of their dugout, and Harold comes up. It's three o'clock in the afternoon when he walks up, looks at me, and goes, "Hey, I'm Harold Reynolds." I'm, like, "Hey, I'm Matt Sandulli from ESPN." "So what are you doing?" "I'm doing a feature on Dave Fleming, dah, dah, dah, dah." Just out of the blue he decided to come say hello to me. I don't know what he was doing or whatever. I kidded him about that when he came to work for us. But from a professional standpoint, one thing I would say about Harold, when he first got here, he really didn't have much to say—he was, like, oh boy, enthusiasm, great personality, good guy, not sure he's going to do well because he doesn't have much to say. And he really worked at it and got himself to talk. He does a good job. I loved working with him on the college games because when he was analyzing the game, he did it from a coaching perspective. He was teaching; the whole game, he was teaching. It was the perfect forum for him.

I was on vacation when it happened, so it was July, and I got an e-mail. I'm, like, "Okay." As a group we were told that Harold was no longer with the company.

DANA JACOBSON, *Anchor*:

In one of the end zones there's a mural called *Word of Life*, but nicknamed Touchdown Jesus, and this is part of Notre Dame football. I'm a Michigan grad, and I bet on Michigan–Notre Dame games. So in 2008, when I spoke at this roast for Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic [of ESPN's *Mike & Mike in the Morning*], I was obviously going to rip Notre Dame and make fun of Notre Dame football. Drunk, in the state I was in—not funny, cursing around the reference to Touchdown Jesus—not funny. I think it was a combination of the amount of cursing that I did, of continually going back to Notre Dame, of referencing Touchdown Jesus, it was probably just the combination. There's a great picture on the Internet; I drank vodka from the bottle. I think I said something like "it's my liquid courage."

It was probably the most embarrassing night that I've ever had. Some of my bosses were there, and then the next morning having to send out e-mails right away and apologize—that is *so* not like me. I've been at a million events before and never been drunk and a million events after. It was just a bad night.

Deadspin broke the story when I had already been suspended. A week had gone by, and I was suspended for the following week for inappropriate behavior, one week's suspension without pay. I had already sent a bunch of "I'm sorry's" especially to Greenie and Golic; it was their night, and I felt that I had embarrassed them from just being drunk and making a fool of myself, being inappropriate and being that drunk on a stage with a microphone.

My biggest thing that I have stood firm on is I just don't like the fact that people think I "cursed Jesus." That I was drunk? Fine. That I was inappropriate? Yeah. That I was at a level of out of control that I shouldn't have been at a work-sponsored roast? You bet. I made a fool of myself. I embarrassed myself, I embarrassed the company. But I did not curse Jesus!

I was scared for my job, even. I didn't get in trouble ever in my life, except once in sixth grade, I think, on the playground. So I was scared;

was I going to have a job? What was going to happen? I was suspended before the *Deadspin* article came out. I was suspended on Friday, the *Deadspin* article came out on Sunday. It was a week. A week's suspension without pay. I accepted that as my punishment. I knew when one of my supervisors came down after the show on Friday that clearly I was going to be suspended. There was no other reason that he was down there. Then we needed to go to building five, which was Human Resources. I was, like, "Okay, I'm getting suspended," and the worst thing, in some ways, was I missed the Winter X Games from it, and I do stuff there and I left them in a lurch. So even worse that I had already embarrassed myself and let people down, I then let them down as well. Calling my parents that weekend to tell them was one of the worst phone calls I've ever had to make, knowing that it was in an Atlantic City paper, knowing that my dad goes into work and googles.

I got some nasty mail; there were a lot of phone calls. It was not a bright, shining spot of my career. The following Monday, when I came back to work, I did an apology on the air that I wrote—a lot of people think it was written for me; it wasn't, I wrote it. I mean, it makes me laugh, I'm a writer for television, it's what I do, I write my stuff; why would somebody else apologize for something I did? Golic and Greenie were great actually. I called them Sunday right after it happened and I was very emotional, crying on both their voice mails. When I came in on Monday and saw both of them, they both just gave me a big hug.

RECE DAVIS:

We've all had our moments. I remember we were once doing a series where Jay Bilas had gone all-access with different basketball programs throughout the country, and he had done something with Sherri Coale and the Oklahoma women's basketball program. I don't use a prompter unless I'm doing *SportsCenter*, so what came out on the air was, "Jay Bilas takes you inside the Oklahoma women." As soon as the tape rolled, my head immediately hit the desk. Bilas was across the room cackling and just killing me.

DANYELLE SARGENT, Reporter:

It was an after-midnight show, it was me and Robert Flores, and it was literally about 1:30, two o'clock in the morning. We were just

waiting for one game to be over so we could finish our show. And the ESPN board went out on *SportsCenter*. So they, like, tossed it over to us and we had no idea what we were doing. They were, like, we're coming over to you. And so we vamped for, like, ten, fifteen seconds, and they had cut to a tape segment we had already done because they had nothing—technical crew had nothing ready to go because we weren't even supposed to be on. So they cut to a taped segment of Robert and me saying, "What the f—was that?" It was not really my personality, though. I don't get wound up with this kind of stuff. My audio person never cut my mic, so I blasted the United States.

Right after they told me about it, I was, like, oh, my god, I'm, like, am I gonna get fired? And then the next morning, I called the guy who was in charge of ESPN news at the time. He was, like, yeah, come in and talk to me. And they weren't making a big deal about it. They were, like, yeah, you shouldn't have done that. Anyone who works in TV knows it's something that everybody does. It's no excuse.

BONNIE BERNSTEIN:

I have an insatiable need to learn and an equally insatiable desire to share—and to provide global perspective. And I think global perspective can be really effective if you can share analogies outside of sports. So I was on *Mike & Mike*, and we were talking about high school basketball players, and I thought about the *New York Times* article before I shared it, and I said to myself, "As long as you attribute it, before you share, while you're sharing, after you share, people will understand that this is not some opinion that you concocted on your own, it was information you gleaned from a first-person article in one of the most reputable newspapers in the world." That's the way I thought about it. And so I prefaced it by saying, "This is an article in the *New York Times*. It was a female Palestinian suicide bomber who couldn't understand why she couldn't fight for the nobility of her country the way her brother and father did." And then I brought it back to young basketball players who are told not to worry about the classroom and just focus on basketball.

The analogy was 100 percent applicable. What I failed to understand was sports talk radio is simply not the forum for sharing those types of intricate analogies, because people will take a very small snippet of that and attach it to your thought processes. It's wrong, if you listen to it—

which many of the people who wrote about it probably didn't—but that's the way the world spins. My intentions were nothing but pure: to try to spin it to where I'm comparing high school kids to Palestinian suicide bombers is ludicrous and offensive, especially if you know anything about my background and how my circle of friends is nothing short of a veritable melting pot.

So I wanted to put an apology out there to try to set the record straight, and the interesting thing is, the president of, like, the Palestinian Journalists' Association wrote me the sweetest e-mail. We wound up getting a wonderful e-mail exchange going—so much so that he wrote an article that ended up in the *Huffington Post*, commending me for reaching out and trying to rectify the situation. And while for that brief news cycle it was really disheartening, I actually felt good about it on the other side because I'd made a new friend. I thought that we were able to come to an adult understanding about it, and you know, ultimately those things live through a news cycle and we move on. Nobody's perfect. And it was a great lesson learned for me, and I felt like I was a smarter and better person for having gone through it.

LOU HOLTZ, College Football Analyst:

Forty-seven years ago my wife bought me a pipe, and I started smoking at age twenty-six. Now she wants me to give it up. I said to her, "I don't abuse you verbally or physically. I don't gamble. I don't drink, and I don't run around. Which one of those vices do you want me to take up? I'm going to have a vice, and if you want me to run around, I'll put the pipe down and never pick it up again." She said, "The pipe is fine."

It's amazing how many people recognize me on TV as "Dr. Lou" and don't have a clue that I'm in the Hall of Fame as a coach or had the second most wins at Notre Dame. I never thought people would recognize me for being on TV. I'm surprised by how many people not only watch ESPN but live and die with ESPN.

What I said about Hitler was taken out of context. I talked about leadership, and leadership on a losing football team. People said, "They need leadership," and I said, "I disagree, they have leadership. Every organization has leadership." And I said, "A good leader leads a people forward. Hitler was a good leader, for a bad cause. Just because you have people follow you and you're a leader doesn't mean it's necessarily

positive. They got leadership on that football team, but obviously it's not the right type of leadership, because they're losing." Jimmy Jones was a good leader but nine hundred people died for a bad cause. All I was trying to say is that not all leadership is good. Maybe I didn't express it as well as I should have. If Jimmy Jones wasn't a leader, he wouldn't have been able to talk nine hundred people into drinking the poisoned Kool-Aid. Every football team has leadership, and it doesn't necessarily mean it's good leadership. Leadership means people follow you. If you're leading for a good cause, that's great. But if people are following you for a bad cause, that's bad. That's the only point I was trying to make.

RECE DAVIS:

I knew exactly what Lou Holtz meant. Lou served in the military and is to some degree a student of military history, and I think from that generation I've heard that analogy used before, that because of the message and the way people followed him, Hitler exhibited qualities of leadership, but they were leading in the wrong direction. That's all he meant—that when you're a leader, you have to make sure that you're leading to the right place. But in our culture now, that's one of the taboo words, that's one of the taboo analogies. It was why I immediately tried to extricate him from it on the air and say—I think if I remember correctly, what I said was, "What you mean was, Hitler was a bad leader. He led them to the wrong place." And I tried to mitigate it as much as I could, because I sensed what the reaction would be, even though I knew exactly what he meant. I knew he wasn't comparing Rich Rodriguez to Adolf Hitler; that was obvious if you listen to what he said.

LOU HOLTZ:

I had to apologize, and I really didn't want to, because my intentions were good. I think the point I made was very valid, very solid, and it was a different angle than the way people look at it. I did tell ESPN I didn't want to apologize, as a matter of fact. I didn't think I should. But for the benefit of ESPN, I did. They had it written up there. I would have rather put it in my own words, but I read what they put up there, and it was the right thing to do for ESPN. I felt that what I was trying to say was a very solid point that people don't always look at in that way. I think what I said was true and accurate.

RECE DAVIS:

You want Lou to be himself. That's the magic of Lou Holtz. It's not that he's trained at the Connecticut School of Broadcasting. The magic of Lou Holtz is that he is a master communicator because of his personality. I remember he once was trying to make a point right off the top of the show that you have a winner and a loser, but what he said was, "Every week, 50 percent of the teams lose and 50 percent win." What he meant was somebody has to win, and I just sort of looked at him then looked at the camera and said, "I promise we'll try to get more insightful as we go along."

GERRY MATALON, *Senior Coordinating Producer*:

I often say, talent are the same as us and different from us, and we need to recognize when they're the same and when they're different. To me, they're the same when they're sitting in a cafeteria talking about a family situation or something they have to fix in the house. But it's totally different when we go to do our jobs, because when I have a bad day, what happens? I get a bad phone call, a bad e-mail, have a bad meeting, or possibly a change of assignment. Those guys have a bad day and they get all four that I got, plus it shows up in newspapers and on the Internet. And it's there forever.

STUART SCOTT:

I can't be that concerned with how I'm perceived. I care about how my mother and father think about me and how my friends and how my loved ones think about me. I care about how my ex-wife thinks about me; she and I are still good friends and we do a good job raising our kids. It matters to me. But it doesn't matter to me what people who are writing a blog on the Internet think. I can't think about that.

Being a father. That's it. That's the answer. That's my answer. I'm convinced of that. I remember there was a day—my oldest daughter, who is fourteen now, but when she was about two or three, there was a show called *Gullah Gullah Island*, a Disney show, that was her favorite TV show. I was doing the late-night *SportsCenter* that aired all morning long. So there was one morning and I'd done the show the night before, and I got up and I said, "Taylor, do you want to watch Daddy on TV?"

And she said—and it's not just what she said but how she said it—"No, I want to watch *Gullah Gullah Island*." And I remembered thinking that day, if it's not a big deal to her, and she was my life, then it can't be that big of a deal.

JIM ROME:

Of course, I don't want a bunch of lunatics calling up and ranting and raving irresponsibly and recklessly. If they take offense at something I say, and they want to challenge me or go up against me, great. That's fine. I'd say the same thing about a guest. Most people would never ever call a radio show. Who can afford to stay on hold for an hour or ninety minutes or two hours to call a radio show? Our research indicates that, like, 1 or 2 percent of the audience would ever call in. You need to program to the 98 percent that would never call and not cater just to the 2 percent that does. You gotta know your room. There's a wide sampling of the audience that would never call the show, so don't assume that everybody who calls in is everybody who's listening and that it's one and the same, because it's not.

CHRIS BERMAN:

I've been treated unfairly by the TV sports critics. They say I'm a clown. It's an act. When they use the word "act," it's like "aaact." "Act" would be playing a character who you're clearly not, by definition in Webster's. To act is to take on the characteristics of someone else. "We don't like Berman's style." Fine. "Don't like Berman's act" is, "*What act?!*" What is that? What would that be? Or that he's a clown. You mean I don't come prepared? Stop. Stop. The most hurtful thing they write is that I'm just out there making events be about me. God, no. I'm just excited to be part of it. So maybe it's a little over the top for some people. But some people aren't excited enough. I think, "God, I wish he would show a little bit of excitement. Doesn't he like being at this football game?" The company really hasn't had my back on that front. They never felt it was important enough.

STUART SCOTT:

I had cancer last year. I had appendicular cancer, which is very, very, very rare, like extremely rare. I had appendicitis. It didn't rupture. It

was inflamed, it got taken out—I was in Pittsburgh for the Monday night game. It was malignant.

So three or four days later I had surgery to remove, like, anything close. I got a big scar. They took apart my colon, anything. I did six months' chemotherapy. Now, after they finished the surgery, they didn't find any more cancer, but they said to do chemo anyway. Every six months I have to have a CT scan. Now, I've been clean. I worry, what if this comes back and I've got to live every day? So juxtapose that up against what somebody says.

As late as 2000, Bill Simmons was still thinking seriously about quitting the sports business and getting into real estate, imagining he'd never make it as a writer.

Many years earlier, little William J. Simmons III had first been turned on to sports journalism when he read David Halberstam's 1981 bestseller *The Breaks of the Game*, an account of the author's travels with the Portland Trail Blazers during their 1979–80 season. Halberstam reflected on what he'd learned about the NBA, pro sports, and life in general while traveling with the team. Simmons "plowed through" the book in one weekend and kept rereading it over months, and years, to come.

After earning a BA in Political Science from Holy Cross College in 1992 and a masters in print journalism from Boston University in 1994, Simmons went looking for work. Hired to report on high school sports for the Boston Herald, he found himself mainly going on "food runs" for the "real" writers on the staff. A subsequent gig at the Boston Phoenix left him so discouraged and broke that he quit the paper to work as a bartender.

Then, in 2001, he gathered his resolve and what money he had and launched his own website, *BostonSportsGuy.com*—while holding on to the bartending job just in case.

BILL SIMMONS, Columnist:

My first goal was to play pro sports. My dad had season tickets for the Celtics, and he took me to games. I just assumed I was going to play for them. But my backup plan was writing a sports column. I was always writing as a kid, I was always reading the best sportswriters, and I had every sports book from the last forty years. I had a popular column in college, and this was the early nineties, the toughest point

probably to break into newspapers because everybody had the same idea: "I'll go to college, I'll write, and then I'll work for a newspaper." I worked at the *Boston Herald* for three years, covering high school sports and writing features, but it became pretty clear to me that nobody ahead of me was leaving. It was like being on an NBA team where you don't get to start until you're forty-five years old.

So I just kind of gave up, and in 1996 I decided to leave. I didn't know what I was going to do. I started bartending, but I felt like something was missing. So I started a website that you could only get with an AOL account. It was with this website called Digital City Boston. At the time, the thinking was it was going to be an electronic newspaper.

I was killing myself, and making \$50 a week, but in two years, I built my audience to two thousand diehards, which sounds low now, except that there weren't a lot of people online at the time. By 2001, I was up to, like, fifteen or sixteen thousand readers, and that's when ESPN came calling. It's funny; the reason they came calling was because in February of 2001 I was doing these running diaries, where I'd watch something on TV and just write down my thoughts as it happened. Now it's called the live blog, but at the time I'd write everything down and hone it and keep the best jokes and then that's what I'd post. And I did this scathing diary of the 2001 ESPYs, I just killed it. I went after everybody. It was a terrible show. They had Joe Theismann doing comedy, and it was like everything people hate about ESPN. It was perfect for me; I made fun of everything. Well, somebody at ESPN read it, and it started getting passed around to the higher-ups and it landed with John Walsh, who started following me. Then he went back and read all my columns.

JAY LOVINGER, Editor:

When I got to ESPN and started working on the Internet, I realized two powerful things about being an editor on the Web: it got rid of the tyranny of time, and it got rid of the tyranny of space. You could run stuff as long as you wanted, and you realized that when you weren't spending a huge amount of time trying to fit text into some kind of arbitrary hole, you had twice as much time to do meaningful work. Not only could you close stuff and have it be published immediately,

but even after you closed it, you could then go back and change things if somebody pointed out an error, or if you had something to add or remove. So for me it was really kind of liberating and even fun to edit on the Internet.

Walsh found Bill when he was doing his sports-guy thing in Boston and recommended him for our Page 2 [columns and commentary], and Simmons did some stuff for us that was really good. The first piece he ever did, "Roger Clemens, the Antichrist," was a great piece. He started doing stuff for us on an irregular basis, and we were futzing around; we wanted to hire him, but ESPN kind of see themselves as being able to hire whomever they want, so they never want to seem in too much of a hurry unless it's a competitive thing.

I was speaking to Bill after he'd been doing freelance stuff here for about a year and he told me he was thinking about taking a job the next week at the *Boston Herald*. So I called Walsh up and I said, "John, you've got to do something right now or we're going to lose this guy, and that's really going to be a mistake." So Walsh said something like "We're working on it," and I said, "No, you can't 'work on it.' Call him right now and make him an offer or it's going to be too late." So he did, and the rest was history.

Bill's obviously good for the company, it's just that he's an incredibly pain-in-the-ass guy to work with. You don't really edit him. He turns in his thing, you suggest stuff, he writes "Stet all changes" on the copy, you fight with him over things, he goes to Walsh or Skipper to complain, and you say to yourself, "I don't need this grief." His goal is to get you to the point where it's such a pain in the neck that you just put the stuff through—unless there's something that you're going to get sued over.

I also edited Olbermann, at *Sports Illustrated*. He was a pain in the ass and a whining little baby, but ultimately he was more professional than Simmons. If you edited Keith, he'd whine and scream as if you had betrayed him in some way, but then he'd read the thing, and if the editing was actually helpful, he'd respond—unlike Bill, who would just say no. Bill's thing is "I know what I'm doing, so that's it." You know: "Don't touch anything." It was more satisfying editing Olbermann.

JIMMY KIMMEL:

Simmons is a guy I really like. ESPN.com was my homepage for a long time. I'm not the kind of person who posts things, and I'd never heard of Bill, I'd just happened upon him myself, but he wrote some things that really rang true with me—even some non-sports things. The thing that really made me take notice is that he wrote about the movie *Fast Break*, which was one of my favorite movies as a kid. I couldn't believe that anyone else had even *seen* it. But Bill gave a detailed analysis of the film. Then a few months later, he wrote something nice about my appearance on a Shaquille O'Neal roast, and I sent him an e-mail thanking him. We started corresponding, and when I got a talk show, I hired him to be one of the writers. He's a character. He likes analyzing the show more than writing for it. He's great to work with, a very funny guy who came up with a lot of good ideas, and I miss having him here.

JOHN SKIPPER:

When I went to run ESPN.com, I am not sure I had ever been on the site. I didn't know the first thing about the Internet; I was not an early adopter of technology. In fact, I believed in not being overly involved in the agony and the ecstasy of the early adopters—"Oh, we're the leaders of a new movement!" It's almost evangelical.

John and I didn't have that. We're not leading a movement; we're coming over there to create great content. So we hire Hunter Thompson and David Halberstam and Ralph Wiley and Bill Simmons; we like to read. By the way, you look at the Internet from 2001 to 2003—we brought in feature writers and design and photography; we *magazine'd* ESPN.com. The piece we did miss early on, we missed the big piece on technology. Technology is *part* of the content.

RICK REILLY, *Columnist*:

In 1997, Skipper came to me and said, "Look, we're starting a new magazine, and we want you to write for it." And so a guy named John Papanek, who used to be at *SI*, and I met a bunch, and I was, like, "Why would I leave *SI* for this?" and it was going to be a big, broad, cheap-looking magazine, and they were going to have columns by the

announcers, and I just thought it sounded awful. And he says, “No, it’s going to be great! It’s going to be like *Inside Sports*.”

So I thought about it and said no. Five years later, when I had my contract renewed, they came to me again, and I got closer but still felt like the magazine wasn’t anywhere nearly as good as *SI*. But because Skipper had given me this attention in 1997, I went to *SI* and said, “Look, they’re offering me this great job!” And my boss, a guy named Bill Colson, said, “Well, what do you want?” And I said, “I want to write the back-page column every week,” because they’d never had anybody write it every week, and I just felt like it needed one guy. And they said okay. And so I really loved doing that. And it worked out great, and then in 2002, they said, “Will you come this time?” And I said no—but I got a little raise out of it. Then in 2007, Skipper sees me at the NBA All-Star Game, and he said, “This time I’m not going to take no for an answer. Whatever they offer you, I am going to offer more.” It’s like you put your finger in your ear to make sure, did he just say that? I was ready to try something new. I’d been at *SI* for twenty-two years, I loved it, I think it’s the best magazine in the country, it’s got the most loyal readership—but I just had done it. And I wanted to shake up my life. And he said, “Think of it as a Chinese menu: take three from column A, two from column B, and five from column C,” and so he let me just totally carve out what I wanted to do. And what I wanted to do is do an interview show on TV, I wanted to learn how to write on the Internet, I wanted to see if I could bring my kind of writing to TV, I wanted to still do televised essays like I did for NBC for a while on golf and tennis—and he said, “You got it!” And Skipper just wouldn’t take no for an answer. Every time *SI* would offer something else, he would go 50 percent higher. And I’m, like, “Wow, it sounds fun, it sounds like a change of pace, and I really like him; he’s one of my favorite guys.” And so I jumped at it.

I can almost tell a guy coming up to me in an airport or restaurant, depending on his age, what he’s going to say to me. If he’s over forty or forty-five, he’s going to say, “Why did you leave *Sports Illustrated*? Oh, my God, that was the first thing we’d read. I’d call my son and we’d talk about it or call my dad and we’d talk about it.” And they’d say, “Why’d you give up writing?” And I’m, like, “I haven’t given up writing. I do the exact same kind of column every week on ESPN.com and

in *ESPN: The Magazine*, and they always go, "You do?" And then if it's a young guy, he'll come up and say something like, "I read you on ESPN.com all the time. Where were you before this?" It's like two totally separate worlds.

JAY LOVINGER:

Reilly was the king of *Sports Illustrated* and now he's not even a factor—but he makes a huge amount of money. He's probably the highest-paid person ever, a writer for a normal publication. Bill Simmons might be the closest one. If Bill was making less than Oprah Winfrey, it wouldn't be close enough. Only "Bill World" will ever satisfy Bill. He's really made it big, though, hasn't he? I wonder sometimes what's going on out there in America.

By the way, Reilly was a total pro when I worked with him. Hard-working total pro. I don't know if that's still the case. I think that kind of money can really spoil you.

RICK REILLY:

Bill Simmons writes so many words. I kid him, you can only get five thousand words on Kevin Garnett for this week. But he breaks it up in kind of a brilliant way so that people can skim and look for stuff that they want to read. I still like well-chosen words. I think it's harder to be short. It's, you know, the old line, "I'm sorry this piece is so long, I didn't have time to make it short." He's obviously a brilliant writer. I think he needs a Greyhound bus full of editors. He doesn't want any words cut. But that's because he grew up with no fences. I grew up with an eight-hundred-word fence: that's how long a column was. He has no predetermined length of what a column is, because in the cyber world he can go until it's done.

I hadn't read him much till I got there. I hadn't met him. He said something on the radio, on Boston radio or something, like "What do you think about working with Rick Reilly?" And he said something like "He needs me." Ha ha, which is kind of funny. And then someone from the *New York Times* asked me, "What do you think of Simmons's writing?" and I pretended the phone wasn't working and didn't answer. So he kind of had to apologize to me for that, and I had to apologize to him for that. And now we get along fine. I just think we are two com-

pletely different types of writers. He loves the games, he loves the score, he loves the trades, and who's going to win and how many points the guy had—I'm just writing about people. All I really love is the stories about "people who happen to play sports," and I just find that sports has some really great human stories. So I think it's a pretty good mix. He loves the games and I love the people who play them.

JEMELE HILL, Columnist:

When you get to ESPN, people assume you're more seasoned than you actually are, but it changes your life. Before I got to ESPN.com, I was used to writing columns and getting maybe twenty e-mails; at ESPN, I was getting five hundred or a thousand. I wrote a column once about Kobe being better than Michael Jordan and got 2,200 e-mails!

Sometimes it's a little jarring. I was used to being part of the background, not part of the story. But ESPN intentionally and unintentionally created the celebrity sports journalist. People were all of a sudden recognizing me, writing about me, and it was difficult. I also had to get used to the difference between print and television. TV is about how things look and sound, but mostly about how things look. I was a pretty secure person until I started doing TV. Once you start doing it, especially if you're a woman, you become superaware of your weight, your hair, and how you physically appeal to viewers. I think viewers value my opinions, but I understand that you have to be a little bit of eye candy too. I mean you're going to tantalize the viewer. I guess an analogy would be, you're constantly lifting your skirt up. Being on TV taught me a different way of looking at things, not only on the screen but about journalism and what I did on the print side.

One would have thought the worldwide leader in sports would be thrilled to land an interview with potential Free World-wide leader Barack Obama. Suddenly and mysteriously, however, ESPN canceled Bill Simmons's scheduled podcast with Obama, then the front-runner among Democratic presidential contenders, in April of 2008. Stuart Scott's planned sit-down with Obama was also killed.

Network executives may have had sensible reasons for pulling the plug, but if they did, they weren't sharing. Instead, public relations vice president Josh Krulewitz was trotted out to say tersely, "Fans don't expect political coverage on our outlets." They don't? Critics were quick to counter that in Election Year

2004, George W. Bush and John Kerry were each interviewed twice for ESPN by Jim Gray. Bush was even the subject of a special four-part series. And Simmons was not likely to have asked Obama "political" questions anyway, since the candidate was known as a major sports fan.

One blogger derided the cancellation as a "stupid move from the worldwide follower," while another jeeringly called ESPN officials "nervous Nellies." Still another speculated there was fear in Bristol that the event "would embarrass the rest of ESPN's coverage by actually being relevant to the world." A popular blog had one word for the decision: "Insanity."

Even *The Atlantic*, stately old periodical though it be, had harsh words on its website, suggesting sarcastically that since "a Simmons-Obama podcast would have been widely listened to and gotten a lot of attention," then "naturally, ESPN decided the right thing to do was kill the idea and cancel the podcast." The Obama campaign, meanwhile, decided to high-road it, with spokesman Tommy Vietor saying simply, "Senator Obama would be happy to appear on ESPN at any time."

BILL SIMMONS:

When they wouldn't let me have Obama on my podcast, they had this whole edict in place that none of their talent was allowed to editorialize about the election. I'm handing in an NFL-picks column the day before Sarah Palin gives a speech in front of fifty-five million people or whatever, and I'm not allowed to reference it in my column. So at some point—as I made the case passionately and repeatedly—are we not reflecting what real life is like? Everybody I know is talking about Sarah Palin's speech and I'm not even allowed to breathe a mention of that in my column? What kind of alternate universe are we trying to create here? If they want to do this right, then designate your six, seven people who can talk about whatever they want and make it seem like a little bit better reflection of what real life is like.

Skipper has been my boss, and really, anything I've wanted to—other than interview Obama for the podcast—I've been able to do. They've never stood in my way, they've always tried to make things happen, and they're always asking how to figure out how to do what I do under some of the constraints that we have, which I feel I've kind of figured out for the most part. So then the Obama thing happened. Just 'cause I felt like the guy was gonna be president and I wanted to tell my

kids fifty years from now that I interviewed this guy before he was gonna be president. And I really had a hard time dealing with that.

CHRIS BERMAN:

Everybody thought it was cool. Several people changed their vote because they said McCain was nicer to me than Obama was.

BOB LEY:

I interviewed John McCain during the campaign, and they had to drive him away from me, his handlers, to keep him on schedule, at a raceway in New Hampshire, because he wanted to talk about the Ohio State–USC game the night before, this and that. Same thing when I interviewed Bush at the White House, for our twenty-fifth-anniversary project. He shows up early, which he had a wont to do when he was in office, so he sat for twenty and he stood around for another twenty-five to shoot the breeze with us on sports. He was supposed to go out and introduce Jack Danforth as the new UN ambassador, but they kept that waiting for a few minutes. This was the second Bush. First Bush I interviewed a couple times as well. Politicians are fans. They're part of the numbers that people may scoff at, but there's that cultural affinity.

In fact, I interviewed Bush 43 at the White House on the same day that Saddam Hussein made his first appearance in court. So I had a chance to ask Bush about that.

It's quite something to go knee to knee with the president and he starts telling the story of 9/11 again. Throwing the first pitch out. Like tears in his eyes telling it. But it didn't even occur to me, because I had Dan Bartlett right over there, saying, "None of this stuff's airing today, right?" and I didn't respond to that. Imagine if I had jumped in with a question as to Saddam. It would have poisoned the relationship. I mean there are ground rules you have to respect. We're granted an interview under certain parameters.

John Walsh was determined to round up really good writers for ESPN, and sometimes he found them even when he wasn't looking. Like when he paid a visit to the journalism school at the University of Missouri, his alma mater, to pick up an alumni award. He was intercepted at the airport by a student who said he was Walsh's driver, even though Walsh had specifically requested that

there be no car and driver waiting. He wanted to take the bus and thereby relive school days of yore—or so he said.

But the self-appointed driver, Wright Thompson, wouldn't take "go away" for an answer, and for the next few days, he drove Walsh all over the city. Although he grew up in the same southern town—Clarksdale, Mississippi—as playwright Tennessee Williams, Thompson's favorite among fellow southern writers was William Faulkner. He was also influenced by such bad boys of American literature as Ernest Hemingway and Norman Mailer.

He and Walsh had plenty to talk about.

Thompson went on to graduate from Missouri and find work at a southern newspaper or two. Then one day Walsh got a call from his former driver: "I'm ready to come to ESPN, if you'll have me," Thompson told him. Walsh offered Thompson a job, and in 2006 Thompson was named senior writer for ESPN.com.

Described by colleagues as relentless, in a constant state of educating himself, being a "literary lion," and maintaining a stubbornly positive outlook on life, Thompson will call people who work at the company to ask them what they want to read about—and take it from there.

Thompson has written many a memorable story over the course of his career, including, in 2007, the profile of a young Georgia man, a promising high school athlete and homecoming king, who was sentenced to ten years in prison for receiving oral sex from a high school girl two years younger than he was. Thompson's persistent reporting and poignant prose got the young man sprung from the slammer after serving only thirty-two months of his sentence.

"It just reminds you," Thompson told an admiring interviewer, "that these things that we write can have power and can do something good in the world." With Liz Merrill, Howard Bryant, Jeff MacGregor, and Wayne Drehs, Thompson is part of an auspiciously talented bench for ESPN.com and produces what has been called not only some of the best sportswriting in the country, but some of the best writing, period.

WRIGHT THOMPSON, Writer:

About a year and a half before the 2008 Olympics, my editors and I came up with a story we thought was important. The idea was to drive across China, on back roads, into the small places, into the places that weren't getting a lot of attention outside of the cities. We wanted to see what people really felt about these Olympics.

I wrote a long pitch to John Papanek, who was then the editor of

ESPN.com, and made my case. The top editors, I think, were worried about what we could do in China, what we could do efficiently, what we could do affordably. And I basically said, if this were the 1930s and we were prepping for the Berlin games, I would hope we would go write a story about what was happening in Germany. I think when a sporting event coincides with a force that is changing our world, it's our job to cover that.

The trip itself was nuts. The road was Highway 108, and the driver spoke no English and drove like a maniac. His name was Singing Songs and he roared around these thin mountain switchbacks. We were in a green Jeep Grand Cherokee that we really beat the hell out of. In my small act of cultural exchange, I introduced Singing Songs to Mötley Crüe and Bruce Springsteen.

ROB KING:

Wright's got a bunch of talent. I didn't have anything to do with bringing Wright here, but one of the first things I did when I got here was make sure that he had a contract that laid out for him a huge commitment to making sure that he gets to cover the kinds of stories he wants to cover for some time. He just asks the kinds of questions and talks to the kinds of people that make the experience for the reader deeper and richer. I am far from the only person at ESPN who understands how important he is as a storyteller, and that's one of the reasons why he found himself on *E:60*.

Rob King had held many jobs during his twenty-two years in print journalism—even editorial cartoonist and graphic artist—before arriving at ESPN in 2004. In those next few years, his responsibilities ranged from golf coverage, including the Masters and the US Open, to Outside the Lines. But the biggest job, and one of the most strategically important at ESPN, came in August 2007, when King was named editor in chief of ESPN.com, the empire's Internet voice.

King's extremely varied background in both print and television had to serve him well in dot-com, since, as he's said himself, "The Internet is a space where all those things tend to coexist." ESPN's website claims eighteen million unique visits monthly and draws upon talent from the entire ESPN spectrum. King reports to John Kosner, general manager of digital media.

Though he hasn't tried his hand at on-camera work, King cuts a striking figure on the campus. The fact that he's African American has helped inspire

him to promote the employee diversity in which ESPN was once considered deficient. King's father, Colbert I. King, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning (2003, Commentary) columnist for the Washington Post. Rob says, however, that his father actually went into journalism after Rob did.

Twitterers who follow King know that many of his tweets relate to his kids—example: “Picasso said it took his whole life to learn to draw like a child. Amen.”

RICK REILLY:

I think the moment I realized the power of the Internet was when I wrote this column about Virginia football and they had this new rule that you couldn't bring signs into the game—no signs.

Al Groh, the coach there, had had a bunch of bad years, and I was, like, “Are you kidding? What they're trying to do is censor the students, because the students were unhappy with Al Groh.” I said, “That can't happen at Virginia! This is Thomas Jefferson's school! He practically invented freedom of speech.” I said, “Students of Virginia, you can't take this: riot, protest, have a sit-in at the president's office, wear white T-shirts that say this is not a sign, hold up white pieces of poster board with nothing on it. You cannot let this happen at Virginia of all places, because if they start taking away your freedom of speech in the stadium, they're going to take it away with the law next, and then pretty soon they're going to take it away with the student elections after that.” Well, it was just my usual ranting and stuff. But these kids at Virginia read the column and started forwarding it around to each other and decided that they *would* protest the rules at the next game. And with two minutes to go in each quarter, seven thousand kids stood up with blank pieces of paper all over the stadium. And it did make a big splash down in Virginia, and it got the athletic director all upset and thinking, so he reversed the rule. He went back to, “Okay, you can bring your stupid signs in,” and the next year, Al Groh was fired. My point is, that would never have happened at *SI*. At *SI* people used to say, “Oh, I clipped it out and I've got it hanging behind my desk” or “Oh, you know, we buried it with Grandma” or “I Xeroxed it and faxed it to twenty of my friends.” Well, you take twenty people to read it at *SI*: you can get two thousand at ESPN.com! And so I just think it opened my eyes to what can happen there.

JEMELE HILL:

It was the Celtics–Lakers finals in 2008. With me being from Detroit, I decided I would write a Celtics column, since they were on the verge of winning the series. Growing up in Detroit, I hated the Celtics because they had such an intense rivalry with my Pistons. But I noticed a strange thing. A lot of people from Detroit were actually rooting for the Celtics because Paul Pierce, Kevin Garnett, and Ray Allen are all likable and popular guys. So I wanted to write about how, even after all these years, it was still difficult to see them win. I also wanted to get on Detroit fans in a good-natured way for forgetting that we're Detroiters; it's ingrained in us to hate the Celtics, whether we like their players or not.

So I write the column, file it, and because it was a weekend, a Saturday, the editing chain wasn't the same as it might be on a regular workday. I'm not sure exactly who edited the column; even now I don't know and have never bothered to find out, because that wasn't important to me. I just know it was read by more than one person.

Sometime late Saturday night I ran into one of our NBA editors in the media hospitality room, and he says, "Oh, we had a little bit of a problem with your column, but it got fixed." I asked, "What was the problem?" He said, "I took something out." He was kind of vague about it, but it didn't seem like a big issue. I figured if it was a big deal, someone would have reached out to me already.

The next day was Sunday and I was leaving for Bristol before Game Five because I was appearing on *First Take* on Monday morning. I'm in the security line at LAX and all of a sudden, my cell phone starts blowing up. I'm getting call after call from the 860 area code, which is Bristol's. The first person I talked to was one of my editors, Kevin Jackson, and he's like, "Where are you?" I told him, and then he said, "We got a major problem."

He then explains that the Celtics column hit like a total shitstorm. He was, like, "Have you been online today? Have you seen any of this?" I was, like, "No, literally I got up to catch my flight, and that was it." I hadn't seen anything. I had no clue Boston fans were outraged.

The irony is, the column wasn't really supposed to be a dig at Boston fans but at Detroit fans who were rooting for Boston. I was calling

them traitors. In the column, I named a bunch of these crazy, silly, stupid analogies, as a supposed comparison to how crazy it was for Detroiters to root for the Celtics. And one of the analogies was if a Detroit fan cheers for the Celtics that's as bad as somebody rooting for Hitler. Stupidest thing I've ever written. I look at it now and can't believe I actually put that in a column.

Anyway, Kevin Jackson told me the column posted with that Hitler line in it. He didn't edit it but saw it online and went in the system and wiped it out. It was only up for an hour and an half, but in that short time, everything just went *poof*. Everything went crazy. The *Boston Herald* picked up the story, a Boston TV station picked up the story. It was all over the blogosphere. It then went national. Kevin told me, "I know what you were trying to say, but at this point we're in containment mode. Go ahead and board your flight. We'll talk more about this when you land."

When I got off the plane, the first person I called was my manager. As I'm talking to him, Rob King, the editor in chief of ESPN.com, called and told me, "You're not going on the air today. I think you need to come to my office." I was petrified. I'm thinking, "Oh, my God. Am I about to lose my job?!" You see your career just flashing before your eyes. Nobody at ESPN said I was going to be fired, and on the plane ride to Bristol I was trying to reassure myself, thinking, "Okay, I can get out of this situation. It'll die down. Today's game will go on and nobody will care because they want to watch Game Five." That changed once I got to Bristol. I met with Rob, and while he comforted me, I didn't leave feeling good about my job security.

I flew back home to Orlando. My manager called me with updates every time he talked to a higher-up. He told me, "Everyone knows you didn't do it intentionally, but people are thinking you should have known better. But I'm containing things. Everything's okay." Once again, I thought it would die down, but it just seemed to pick up more speed. A *Boston Herald* columnist essentially called me an idiot, and they had another news story quoting Rob, who said, essentially, ESPN was taking the matter seriously. Sometime after that, Rob called me and told me I was suspended for a week—no writing, no TV. I understood he had to suspend me because I put him in a tough spot. I'm not angry about it. It was my fault. I got what I deserved.

Once I was officially suspended, I stayed away from the Internet for about a week. I was embarrassed and humiliated. I was deeply concerned about my professional reputation. I didn't want my colleagues or friends in the business—many who are Jewish—to think less of me or believe I was an insensitive jerk.

Then the same day I was suspended, I started getting these phone calls at my house—people calling and hanging up, one after another. I didn't understand it. It seemed bizarre. Why are people calling just to hang up? Then one of my friends sent me an e-mail telling me that a Boston radio station gave out my phone number on air and posted it along with my home address on their website.

That was the only time I was really pissed off. Then someone at ESPN told me that same radio station, just before Game Five, had a poster up outside of the Celtics arena that said "Fire Jemele Hill" and they were handing out fliers expressing the same sentiment. That was kind of strangely cool, but giving out my address and my number jeopardized my safety.

During my suspension, I was put on military silence with the media. People think I didn't talk because I didn't want to face it. I wanted to face it. I wanted to do interviews, but ESPN didn't think that was best. They wanted it to die down and thought if I started responding to media requests, that would keep it alive in the news cycle. I just thought people needed to hear from me. I wrote my own apology statement. No one at ESPN did it for me. I wrote it on the plane from LA and gave it to an ESPN PR person on Monday when I got to Bristol, but they didn't release it until Tuesday. So then some people assumed I wasn't sorry or contrite, and I only wrote it because I was told to. None of that was true. Thankfully, I got the opportunity to do an apology column once I came off suspension. I just hope that showed people what was really in my character.

I'm never going to forget what happened. Besides, I couldn't if I wanted to since my name and "Hitler" is the first thing that comes up when you put my name in the Google search engine. Not that career mark I'd hoped for.

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