

The Documentary as “Quality” Sports Television

Branden Buehler

This is an author accepted manuscript version of: Buehler, Branden. “The Documentary as ‘Quality’ Sports Television.” In *Sporting Realities: Critical Readings of the Sports Documentary*, edited by Samantha N. Sheppard and Travis Vogan, 11–34. University of Nebraska Press, 2020. Reproduced with permission of the University of Nebraska Press.

Abstract

Although sports television has long been largely absent from discussions of “quality television” typically centered around primetime narrative programming, a number of recent sports television documentaries have been highlighted as unusual examples of quality sports television. This chapter argues that the positioning of sports television documentaries as quality is the result of a rare discursive alignment that has seen a wide range of forces within and surrounding the sports television industry share an atypical interest in promoting sports television as quality - atypicality that, in turn, speaks to the industry’s historically unique cultural contexts and financial imperatives, as in its traditional prioritization of young male viewers. As the chapter further argues, the positioning of sports television documentaries as quality has broader ramifications for how sports television is valued and discussed, for the elevation of documentary entails both the continued denigration of the rest of sports television and a disproportionate critical emphasis on filmic texts largely unrepresentative of the genre.

The Documentary as “Quality” Sports Television

In the 1990s and 2000s, American television entered what a variety of critics referred to as a new “golden age of television” largely spearheaded by prestige cable series like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–15). Critics hailed such shows for their intricate narratives, complex characterization, dense thematic undertones, and technical precision. Following this discursive shift, a number of scholars either began or continued exploring similar terrain, not just by analyzing how television’s form and content may have evolved in recent decades, but also by asking how certain shows came to be labeled as “quality” and, more broadly, by examining how media industries and media audiences construct discourses of value.

Despite its cultural and financial import, sports television has largely been missing from the popular and academic conversations surrounding this new “golden age of television” and, as Travis Vogan has noted, the related questions of “quality.”¹ This chapter suggests that sports television’s absence from these conversations is largely a product of the sports television industry’s unique structure and economics, as well as its idiosyncratic place within the broader American media landscape. As Philip Sewell argues, “quality television” is perhaps best understood as a discursive construct uniting “network executives, producers, creative personnel, critics, regulators, and audiences” around shared interests, as in the desire by networks to positively spin ratings numbers and the impulse of television critics to legitimate their object of analysis.² Quality has thus primarily been linked to certain narrative series – particularly hour-long dramas – not because these series are necessarily aesthetically superior, but rather because of their “ability to serve as a contingent rallying point where disparate needs, uses, and values can be rendered culturally and/or economically productive.”³

As Sewell suggests, then, the discursive alignments that have continually equated the hour-long drama with quality have largely been a product of both the financial imperatives and the cultural contexts of primetime narrative television programming. In the case of sports television, though, these financial imperatives and cultural contexts vary. Sports television is not only composed of different forces than primetime television – lacking, for instance, the highly visible creative personnel often found in primetime – but those forces also have had different interests from those in other sectors of television. For example, broadcast networks have typically aimed their sports offerings at different audiences than much of their primetime narrative programming traditionally associated with quality television.

That sports television's absence from discussions of television quality is primarily a product of its distinct place within the broader television landscape is further confirmed by the discourses that have recently surrounded the sports television documentary. Over the past several years, a number of sports television documentaries have received great praise and, in the process, been explicitly highlighted as unusual examples of quality sports television. Significantly, the sports television documentary has been the rare instance in which a wide range of forces within and surrounding the sports television industry have shared an interest in promoting sports television as quality. Much as most of sports television has been absent from quality discussions because of the industry's unique financial imperatives and cultural contexts, the documentary has been positioned as quality because these imperatives and contexts more closely mirror those of primetime narrative television.

In exploring the relationship between quality and sports television, this chapter works to expand the understanding of how quality discourses operate and further illustrates how sports media industries define and position themselves. Moreover, in specifically analyzing how and

why the sports documentary has been positioned as quality television, the chapter examines the larger stakes involved in these discursive constructions. The positioning of the sports television documentary as quality has had several consequences that extend beyond the intended effect of creating an aura of prestige around the documentary genre and its producers. The discursive binary that elevates the documentary not only devalues sports television and its viewers by implicitly treating most sports television as pedestrian, lowbrow fare in need of transcending, but also flattens the critical discourse surrounding sports television by disproportionately emphasizing filmic texts largely unrepresentative of the multifarious genre.

“Quality” Boundaries

The reasons for television’s absence from “quality television” discourses appear, at first, to be relatively straightforward. Quality television has largely been associated with narrative television series, particularly dramas. To that point, in *Television's Second Golden Age*, Robert Thompson limits his discussion of quality television to the “hour-long dramatic form,” arguing quality “has come to be associated in the minds of many with the ‘quality drama.’”⁴ Most sports television programming, of course, shares few formal conventions with the drama. Moreover, sports television largely operates in its own separate sphere of the television landscape. Television networks, for instance, tend to house their sports programming, like their news programming, in independent departments. The sports television industry, too, has separate trade groups and its own awards.

Undoubtedly, sports television’s relatively unique formal properties and general remove from narrative television contribute to its omission from quality discourses. However, sports television’s exclusion from these discourses also has a more complex background rooted in the

history of the television industry and how concepts of quality emerged out of specific economic and cultural contexts. As Mark Alvey details, American television broadcasters initially gauged the success of their programming solely by measuring audience size. However, as the television industry grew more established in mid-century, broadcasters began to broaden their focus. As Alvey explains, major ratings services started offering demographic breakdowns of audiences in the 1950s and networks began to not just take heed of how many people were watching, but also who was watching. Significantly, as networks started conceiving of audiences in terms of demographics, they also started conceiving of audiences in terms of “quality” demographics – i.e. “younger, more affluent, better-educated adults” likely to appeal to advertisers.⁵ As Alvey notes, too, there was also a racial component to this rhetorical shift. He comments, “The unstated but implicit word in every network construction of ‘young adult’ or ‘urban, educated’ was, of course, ‘white.’”⁶

Unsurprisingly, networks soon began touting to advertisers their ability to attract the newly-conceived quality audiences. As Alvey details, though, the networks’ recognition and promotion of quality audiences began largely as a “defensive” rhetorical strategy.⁷ Initially, he writes, the networks continued to prioritize attracting the largest audiences possible and primarily used the new demographic data to spin low ratings as successes, strategically claiming that poor performing programs were nevertheless attracting particularly desirable viewers. However, the rise of “demographic thinking” eventually moved beyond rhetoric. As the 1960s progressed, the “quest for the upper audience slant” started to influence the selection and development of programming.⁸ In 1966, for example, CBS cancelled a number of shows whose audiences skewed older, such as *Candid Camera* (1960–67). A few years later, the network similarly eliminated several rural-themed shows, as in *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962–71),

that were particularly popular with older, rural viewers. NBC, meanwhile, pointed to “quality” demographics in deciding to renew several series with “marginal audience share,” such as *Star Trek* (1966–69).⁹ NBC vice-president Paul Klein commented, “A quality audience—lots of young adult buyers—provides a high level that may make it worth holding onto a program despite low over-all ratings.”¹⁰

While the 1950s and 1960s marked the beginning of “demographic thinking” that began to prioritize programming able to attract quality audiences, ensuing decades would see quality television emerge as an even more potent idea. As Jane Feuer documents, the 1970s and 1980s saw the growing success of MTM Enterprises, a production company that became known for quality shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–77) and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–87).¹¹ As she writes, too, networks increasingly marketed themselves as homes to quality programming.¹² To that point, Sewell notes that NBC, the most aggressive promoter of quality, ran ads proclaiming, “NBC, Quality Television.”¹³ According to Sewell, quality television began to emerge as a more prominent concept in this period because of its power to unite a number of competing concerns as “the interests of network executives, producers, creative personnel, critics, regulators, and audiences are not necessarily congruent.”¹⁴ The concept of quality, though, unified these often competing forces. It was, of course, logical for a production company like MTM to brand itself apart from competitors, but the appeal of highlighting “quality” stretched well beyond producers. Sewell details:

The discourse of quality facilitated a relatively efficient system of cultural and economic exchange. NBC made a profit selling value-added audiences while enhancing its prestige and arguably serving the public interest mandated by law. Advertisers marketed upscale products without having

to pay for the chaff of the mass audience. Critics who had long decried much popular television saw validation for their assertions that television could be better. The FCC, which had taken a decidedly deregulatory turn under the chairmanship of Reagan appointee Mark Fowler, could point to the programs and critical acclaim as evidence of the workings of the market. Viewers of programs hailed as quality could enjoy a sense of distinction along with the other pleasures of the program.¹⁵

Sewell further explains that quality's status as a discursive alignment means it is flexible and, as such, open to change. To that point, the concept of quality television has undergone a slight transformation since the 1980s.

As a number of scholars have noted, quality has largely shifted from broadcast television to cable, with quality becoming particularly associated with HBO and its "Not TV" branding.¹⁶ Significantly, an embrace of quality has offered cable networks a way to separate themselves from their competitors and, again, to lure upscale audiences. For a pay network like HBO, quality has been a particularly helpful concept, as it has allowed the network to market itself as offering programming unavailable on broadcast networks and basic cable. Quality continues to serve other interests, too. Creative personnel, for instance, use quality as a way to position themselves as offering distinctively artistic products. Meanwhile, Avi Santo suggests the concept of quality also allows audiences to understand themselves as uniquely elevated, able to understand and appreciate the exclusive, supposedly sophisticated programming on offer on networks like HBO. He comments, "Pay cable sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television."¹⁷

With quality television understood less as a set of formal attributes and more as a series of discursive alignments, sports television's exclusion from discussions of quality can be understood in a new light. For a number of reasons, sports television is unlikely to produce a discursive alignment around quality. On the most basic level, discourses surrounding sports television are typically composed of different forces from discourses surrounding primetime narrative television. Notably, the sports television industry is structured much differently from other segments of the television industry. In the 1970s, the FCC sought to reduce the power of broadcast networks over both television distribution and production, introducing the Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (Fin-Syn Rules). These rules, which had the effect of limiting networks' ability to produce their own primetime programming, helped spur the growing success of independent television producers, like MTM and Norman Lear's Tandem Productions.¹⁸ Part of the reason quality emerged as a salient idea was that it allowed broadcast networks and independent producers to articulate themselves in a way that connected their intersecting commercial and cultural interests.

Sports television, however, largely fell outside of the fin-syn rules. Networks may have partnered with independent firms to provide production facilities and other services for their sports programming, but this programming was—and continues to be—largely internally produced. As such, networks have not been as wedded to outside producers for sports television programming as they have been in the case of primetime programming. Rather, the networks' closest partners in sports programming have arguably been sports right holders, as in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and professional leagues like the National Basketball Association (NBA).

Sports television is not just largely absent independent producers, but also visible creative personnel. Historically, some of the strongest proponents of quality have been showrunners and writers. Many of the creators of HBO dramas, for instance, have been prone to grand statements about their programs. David Simon, creator of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–08), has loftily compared the show to the Greek tragedy, while Nic Pizzolatto, creator of *True Detective* (HBO, 2014–), has been eager to celebrate his creative process and the depth of his storytelling, extolling the “multiple associations, multiple layers” written into the show.¹⁹ Although sports television has certainly not been absent publicly visible creative forces, as in Boone Arledge of ABC Sports and Steve Sabol of NFL Films, the vast majority of sports television is produced with comparative anonymity. Thus, there are neither independent producers nor creative personnel available to tout the aesthetic merits of sports television programming.

Further speaking to the idiosyncratic discourses surrounding the different realms of television, sports television has typically been missing from popular and scholarly analysis of television aesthetics. As Toby Miller and Linda J. Kim have remarked in explaining the lack of popular commentary on HBO’s sports programming, “In the world of press engagement with TV, sport is usually relegated to issues of access; reviews of content are largely restricted” to narrative television.²⁰ This phenomenon stretches back decades, with major newspapers like *USA Today* having featured sports media columnists primarily focused on the business of sports media rather than its form and content. Relatedly, sports television content has rarely been recognized by awarding bodies. To some degree, this is a function of sports television having its own set of awards, the Sports Emmys. However, sports television has also been largely missing from awards meant to cast wider nets, such as the Peabody Awards. Furthermore, sports television has long been absent from scholarly discussions of television, with Miller and Kim

writing that “in the world of TV scholarship, sport is generally a poor cousin,” and Vogan similarly noting that sports media, in general, has been a topic “neglected in academe.”²¹

The discourses surrounding sports television, then, have been mostly absent some of the primary forces that have historically rallied around the quality television concept, including producers, creative personnel, and critics. However, the primary reason sports television is unlikely to produce a discursive alignment around quality revolves around demographics. As mentioned, the concept of quality television has its roots in its association with the affluent quality audiences in high demand by advertisers – an association that lingers today. As Andrew Bottomley writes, “the ‘quality’ in Quality TV” still primarily refers “to the audience itself – it is programming that the networks produce to attract an audience with optimal age, education, occupation, and income demographic characteristics,” typically defined, much as it was in the 1950s, as “wealthy (\$100,000 household income), well-educated (some college), and young (18-49), as well as living in urban areas.”²² The term has continued to carry other connotations, too. As Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine suggest, the “quality demographic the television industry and its advertisers crave” is still often associated with attributes such as “straight,” “white,” and “married.”²³

To a certain degree, sports television programming has been aimed at exactly the sorts of “quality” audiences more typically associated with other realms of television. For instance, Deborah L. Jaramillo argues NBCSN (NBC Sports Network) has attempted to appeal to “valuable ‘quality’” audiences by emphasizing “sports attractive to followers of European sports and sports like hockey and polo assumed to be more popular with educated and wealthier viewers.”²⁴ Similarly, Garry Whannel notes that “sports with an upmarket profile,” such as golf and tennis, have held particular appeal to advertisers.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, then, both the Golf

Channel and the Tennis Channel have promoted themselves as having the same sorts of affluent audiences linked to prestige primetime programming. An executive at the Tennis Channel boasts, “The audience is just premium ... they're upscale, they spend a lot of money.”²⁶ Similarly, a Golf Channel executive argues, “Golf fans are some of the most affluent and highly engaged viewers.”²⁷ The channel bills itself as “the No. 1 most-affluent ad-supported television network.”²⁸

More typically, though, sports television has not been linked with these sorts of “quality” viewers. Rather, sports television has routinely been associated with large, wide-ranging mass audiences. As Victoria E. Johnson details, sports television—even through the fragmentation of the multi-network era—has carried with it the connotation of “the communal, ‘mass’ audience, shared cultural experience,” thus providing American culture with increasingly rare “water cooler talk.”²⁹ That said, sports television has long been specifically coveted by advertisers for its particular ability to attract large numbers of young adults, especially young men. Richard Sandomir, the longtime sports media writer for *The New York Times* comments, “For advertisers, sports remains the strongest avenue to reach men 18 to 34, a demographic group that is still forming its brand loyalties and is especially valuable to companies marketing themselves to sports viewers.”³⁰ He quotes an Anheuser-Busch executive who says, “The stability of that demographic is very comforting to us. It's more of a male field.”³¹ Indeed, longtime ESPN anchor Bob Ley jokingly refers to young males as “that targeted – and blessed – demographic.”³² Such demographic targeting in mind, discourses surrounding sports television have often taken on their own unique contours. Rights holders, for instance, have been quick to declare their sports’ power to attract young men to television sets. Following a new television deal in the mid-1990s, National Hockey League commissioner Gary Bettman boasted of the league’s “ability to

sell advertising efficiently because of our strong demographics, particularly among males 18 to 49.”³³ In the early 2000s, amid declining ratings across the television industry, National Basketball Association commissioner David Stern declared, “The young males that everybody is writing about abandoning the networks are not abandoning the NBA on ESPN and TNT.”³⁴

Unsurprisingly, though, the strongest proponents of sports television’s valuable, young male demographic have been the networks. Indeed, the young male demographic even fueled the creation of an entirely new sports league at the turn of the century, as NBC partnered with the World Wrestling Federation to create the XFL football league. Dick Ebersol, head of NBC Sports, explained, “NBC’s greatest interest in this new league is the ability to attract the most elusive audience in all of television, to get young males to the television.”³⁵ Particularly illuminating are the back-and-forth comments between the heads of the networks’ sports departments. As Sewell explains, the parameters of quality television in the 1980s were made especially apparent in the verbal sparring of network programming executives struggling to lay claim to the valuable “mantle of quality.”³⁶ Over the course of the past few decades, the heads of the networks’ sports departments have often butted heads, too. Especially intense were the rhetorical battles between Fox and NBC as Fox emerged as a major force in sports television in the 1990s and 2000s, offering up unprecedented sums for sports rights. Sometimes these verbal duels were matters of name-calling. In 1995, for instance, Fox won the rights to Major League Baseball (MLB), thus supplanting previous rights holders ABC and NBC. Dick Ebersol, head of NBC Sports, reacted with anger. Taking a dig at Fox, he commented MLB was “trading the promotion of the No. 1 and 2 networks for a pushcart.”³⁷ David Hill, head of Fox Sports, responded by bashing Ebersol, remarking, “I just see it as Little Dickie thrashing about...he’s being puerile.”³⁸

As in the case of primetime narrative programming, these sorts of rhetorical clashes between the networks have often centered on demographics. In the case of sports television, however, networks have typically promoted their ability to appeal to large numbers of young adults, particularly young men. In 1994, for instance, Fox took over the rights to the NHL. Chase Carey, the president of Fox television, commented, “It is a sport with demographics that match up tremendously well with Fox in the young-adult market.”³⁹ Ebersol responded with skepticism, stating, “It’s terrific for the NHL, but I cannot fathom how the dollars will work for Fox.”⁴⁰ In 2001, baseball was again at the center of controversy. That year, Fox placed full-page newspaper advertisements touting the favorable demographics of its World Series coverage, boasting that it had outperformed NBC’s Olympics coverage among men 18 to 34. Hill commented, “To quote Jack Webb, we just wanted to get the facts out, to show how well baseball has done.”⁴¹ In response, Ebersol critiqued Fox’s ad campaign as disingenuous, saying of the Olympics, “They’re sold as the biggest event in sports television for the family, not just women, not just young men, and not just children.” He added, “This is all rather sad, silly and desperate.”⁴²

Sports television’s absence from quality television discourses, then, has not been solely a matter of its formal differences from prestige narrative programming. As Sewell argues, quality can best be understood “in terms of contingent stability and the multiple material and cultural investments that give utterances substance.”⁴³ As the idea of quality television has been articulated and defined over the last several decades, there have been few “material and cultural” reasons for sports television to be included. Most significantly, much of the industry has remained focused on articulating its power to lure young male viewers rather than sketching out ways it could entice the affluent viewers associated with quality television. For sports television

to enter quality television conversations, then, the economic and cultural contexts of sports television would require a shift.

The Sports Documentary as Quality Television

Although sports television was rarely associated with quality television as the quality concept emerged and evolved over the last several decades, it has recently entered the quality conversation by way of the sports television documentary. As Vogan documents, the sports television documentary—like quality programming found in other areas of television—has been framed as transcending the supposedly pedestrian fare more typical of television. More specifically, he details how the sports documentary has been frequently lauded for operating in a different register from the rest of sports television, framed as offering something of greater depth and artistry. For instance, Vogan notes how director Jonathan Hock, who has created four documentaries for ESPN's *30 for 30* (2009–), praised “the series for bringing an element of quality and contemplativeness to the traditionally unrefined context of sports television.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Kevin Connolly, director of the *30 for 30* film *Big Shot* (2013) commented, “The quality and brand of the ESPN *30 for 30* series can make people go, ‘Oh, OK ... I know that they do work on a certain level of quality.’”⁴⁵

Documentarians, though, have not been the only ones to tout the quality of sports television documentaries. Critics have made comparable claims. *Deadspin*'s Tim Grierson, for instance, contrasted the shallow nature of ESPN's everyday programming with the complexity offered by the *30 for 30* series, arguing the *30 for 30* documentaries do more than just tell “old stories,” but rather get “at something deeper: that mysterious hold that sports have on us.”⁴⁶ “Sports are another way to think about the issues that make us human,” he opined.⁴⁷ “ESPN's

endless har-har-har, whoop-whoop-whoop misses that. The films of *30 for 30* understand that to their core.”⁴⁸ Ken Fang of *Awful Announcing* likewise chimed in, “There are many areas where ESPN has fallen short, but *30 for 30* is the network's star. It's quality television.”⁴⁹ Alan Sepinwall, writing for *The Star-Ledger*, similarly cited “the quality and sweep” of *30 for 30* films.⁵⁰

Critics have also singled out certain sports television documentaries as exemplary texts. Vogan documents, for instance, how ESPN's *O.J.: Made in America* (Ezra Edelman, 2016) – an atypically extensive 7.5-hour entry into the *30 for 30* series that perhaps represents the network's most visible reach towards prestige – “garnered nearly universal praise after its debut—often from arts and culture commentators who seldom pay attention to ESPN's programming.”⁵¹ He notes, for example, that *Rolling Stone* dubbed the documentary a “major cultural event,” and that *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott suggested it “has the grandeur and authority of the best long-form nonfiction.”⁵² Significantly, *O.J.: Made in America* also marked the rare occasion in which television critics have explicitly grouped a sports media text alongside the programs more commonly associated with quality. Daniel Fienberg of *The Hollywood Reporter* ranked *O.J.: Made in America* as the “best TV” of 2016, putting it ahead of quality standard-bearers like *The Americans* (AMC, 2013–2018), *Atlanta* (FX, 2016–), and *Veep* (HBO, 2012–).⁵³ *Washington Post* television critic Hank Stuever similarly cited the documentary as “the best thing on TV” in a 2016 year-end list, while NPR's Eric Deggans called it “one of the best TV shows of the year.”⁵⁴ The unusually lengthy *O.J.: Made in America* has not been the only sports documentary to receive such critical adoration, though. Both *The Atlantic* and *The Village Voice* placed *30 for 30* documentary *The Price of Gold* (Nanette Burstein, 2014) on their end-of-year “Best Television” lists in 2014, while the next year saw Neil Genzlinger of *The New York Times* put *30*

for 30 film *Of Miracles and Men* (Jonathan Hock, 2015) on his top ten “Best TV” list.⁵⁵ Again, these lists marked rare instances in which television critics have grouped sports television texts alongside – and even above – the comedies and dramas emblematic of quality television.

On a similar note, too, sports television documentaries have been showered with awards generally not bestowed upon sports television. In 1998, for instance, HBO was awarded a Peabody Award for its sports documentaries, which the Peabody board described as “consistently playing at a higher level.”⁵⁶ The next year, in 1999, ESPN won its first Peabody Award for its *SportsCentury* (1999–2007) documentaries, which were similarly praised for their “overall excellence.”⁵⁷ A decade later, the *30 for 30* series was also awarded a Peabody, with the board hailing “its rich and textured storytelling” that elevates “sport beyond its role as entertainment or diversion.”⁵⁸ Even more recently, *O.J.: Made in America* was honored with the Academy Award for best documentary feature.

As Vogan documents, sports television networks have also worked to celebrate the quality of the sports television documentary, publicly extolling the many virtues of the genre. Recently, for instance, following the creation of a new *Sports Illustrated* video channel on Amazon, *Sports Illustrated* executive producer Josh Oshinsky announced the company’s plans to emphasize documentaries, stating that documentaries offer “high-end storytelling.”⁵⁹ ESPN has been even more aggressive in boosting the documentary genre. Vogan mentions how ESPN executives like Connor Schell and Keith Clinkscales have touted the *30 for 30* series as being able to “provide a layer of intimacy that you just can’t get from the normal way sports are covered” and, in contrast to the rest of the television landscape, being “intellectual and smart.”⁶⁰ ESPN executives, too, have not hesitated to invoke the language of quality. Following *O.J.: Made in America*’s Academy Award, ESPN president John Skipper argued the win stood as “a

reflection of years of hard work that has gone into building the *30 for 30* brand and setting that high expectation of quality among our fans.”⁶¹ Similarly, Schell suggested the win cemented ESPN’s reputation as a “home for really high-quality, non-fiction sports storytelling.”⁶²

Much as Sewell observes in the case of 1980s primetime narrative programming, the sports television documentary has come to represent a site for discursive alignment around quality. There are several reasons why the documentary has defied the sports television norm. On a basic level, the discourses surrounding the documentary have been composed of different forces than is typical of sports television. While the majority of sports television lacks visible creative personnel, sports documentaries have often been publicly touted by their creators. Although this is certainly not a uniform phenomenon—sports documentaries are often still produced with relative anonymity, as in ESPN’s *SportsCentury* series—documentaries are increasingly produced and marketed as authored texts. To that point, whereas most sports television is internally produced, networks have often partnered with outside producers and filmmakers for their documentaries. ESPN, for example, has worked with a number of independent filmmakers, like Hock and Connolly, in producing the *30 for 30* series. HBO, appearing to follow the lead of ESPN, has recently teamed with LeBron James and Maverick Carter’s production company SpringHill Entertainment for the documentary projects *Student Athlete* (Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy and Trish Dalton, 2018) and *What's My Name? | Muhammad Ali* (Antoine Fuqua, 2019), with Bill Simmons’s production company Ringer Films for the documentary *Andre the Giant* (Jason Hehir, 2018), and with sports agency IMG for the docu-series *Being Serena* (2018). Moreover, the network has worked with several prominent filmmakers for their recent sports documentaries, including Jeff and Michael Zimbalist for *Momentum Generation* (2018) and Antoine Fuqua for *What's My Name? | Muhammad Ali*. Just

as significantly, networks – particularly ESPN – have worked to make these sorts of creative partners highly visible. This not only provides the films additional mouthpieces, but also serves to position the films as pieces of auteurist art.⁶³

The discourses surrounding the sports television documentary, too, differ from the discourses surrounding the rest of sports television in that they feature critics and, relatedly, awarding bodies. As mentioned in the previous section, critics have generally paid little attention to the form and content of sports television. That has changed, though, with the rise of the sports television documentary. The above quotes reveal how critics and awarding bodies have approached many sports television documentaries through deliberative, interpretive frameworks—treating these films as significant texts to be studied in terms of their aesthetics and how they historicize sports, media, and culture. Indeed, these groups have touted the prestigious credentials of sports television documentaries, explicitly praising their quality and positioning them, as the Peabody Awards have done, as transcending sports television’s typical “role as entertainment or diversion.”⁶⁴ Speaking to this sort of phenomenon, Joshua Malitsky argues the genre’s “associations with seriousness, rigorous analysis, and topics of public importance provide cultural capital...to sponsoring institutions.”⁶⁵ Although Malitsky is describing networks like ESPN, it would appear critics and awarding bodies—who might otherwise be reluctant to praise sports television given its low culture connotations—are similarly leaning on the genre to protect their cultural capital. Notably, this rhetorical strategy fits within the larger history of attempts to legitimate television. As Michael Curtin notes, documentaries have long been “characterized as the key genre for transcending the superficial and commercial aspects” of television.⁶⁶

Most notably, though, it has been in the interest of networks to promote sports documentaries as quality television. Again, it is a matter of audiences and their demographic profiles. As with other segments of sports television, executives have trumpeted the ability of their documentaries to attract young adults. Schell, for instance, has boasted to journalists that the *30 for 30* series has done particularly well with 18-34 year-olds.⁶⁷ Ross Greenburg, formerly the head of HBO Sports and now a documentary producer, has similarly commented of sports documentaries that “younger demographics eat this up, not just the 50-somethings who’ve lived a life in sports.”⁶⁸ In fact, rhetorical battles have been waged over sports documentary demographics. As ESPN launched *30 for 30*, Greenburg positioned the HBO documentaries as superior, saying, “It’s like walking into a gallery and seeing a David as opposed to something I chipped out when I was 10 ... [ESPN will] do what they do. We’re always going to feel like we own this category.”⁶⁹ Simmons, who was instrumental in creating *30 for 30*, replied on Twitter: “Yes, ages 55-90. You still do.”⁷⁰ Responding back, Greenburg defended the youth appeal of HBO’s documentaries on subjects like Vince Lombardi, saying, “If it’s a story we feel needs to be told, we think all ages will come to the television set and watch.” He continued, “I think a lot of times, people underestimate the minds of a younger generation, and their thirst for knowledge and entertainment.”⁷¹

However, the networks’ positioning has not solely focused on sports documentaries’ ability to appeal to the 18-34 demographic. As Vogan explains, a network like ESPN might have a number of reasons for incorporating sports documentaries into their brands. He describes, for example, how sports documentaries have allowed ESPN to reinforce its status as the “Worldwide Leader in Sports” by illustrating the network’s ability to serve as an authority on sport’s history.⁷² The specific emphasis on quality, though, is undoubtedly wrapped up in the pursuit of

quality viewers. Again, quality programming has long been synonymous with quality audiences. Bottomley, for instance, describes how quality has come to “operate in a double sense, meaning both a socioeconomic category (class) and a particular aesthetic form (taste).”⁷³ Similarly, Sewell notes that networks’ emphasis on quality in the 1980s “relied on an economic and discursive sleight of hand, in which the quality of a program, the audience it draws, and the goods and services pitched to that audience” became commingled.⁷⁴ To that point, Vogan notes how ESPN’s marketing of the *30 for 30* series aims to “satisfy viewers who yearn for more refined programming.”⁷⁵

While the above quotes indicate that young men—that “blessed” demographic—remain the most coveted demographic, the documentary push reflects a desire to target new niches. Indeed, Vogan suggests ESPN’s *SportsCentury* documentaries represented an attempt by the network to “broaden its demographic reach.”⁷⁶ Dawn Heinecken, meanwhile, argues ESPN’s *Nine for IX* (2013) documentaries, which the network described as “stories of women in sports told through the lens of female filmmakers,” were marketed as being “particularly consequential for women viewers” and reflected an attempt by the network “to appeal to women.”⁷⁷ Executives’ comments explicitly reflect such demographic strategizing. ESPN executive John Dahl, for instance, has touted the ability of the *30 for 30* documentaries to reach beyond sports television’s usual male-dominated audience and to draw in new viewers to the network.⁷⁸ He comments, “They’ll tell me I’m not much of a sports fan, but I love the stories you tell.”⁷⁹ Schell, meanwhile, says in one interview that the *30 for 30* series is “great complementary programming to what is core to the network.”⁸⁰ In another interview, he appears to comment on the desire to use the *30 for 30* films attract a new group of viewers while still appealing to young men, saying, “We try and strike that right balance between nostalgia and discovery.” He continues, “I

remember Jimmy Connors' epic run at the '91 Open. For a whole generation of ESPN's audience, that's completely new. This happened 22 years ago, and for our key demographic of men 18-34, they may not even have been aware of it."⁸¹

The sports documentary, then, has done something relatively novel within the sports television landscape. Although the documentary has not represented the first time sports television has been aimed beyond its core demographic, it has represented the rare occasion in which the networks have found themselves in sync with several other forces in promoting the idea of sports television quality.⁸²

Quality Stakes

The discursive alignment around the documentary that has brought sports television into the quality television conversation is atypical, reflecting the unique financial imperatives and cultural contexts surrounding the genre. Few other instances of sports television, for example, are likely to involve public-facing filmmakers touting the depth of their work. For the foreseeable future, then, to speak of sports television quality will be to conjure up the sports television documentary. This narrow association is more than semantic, though, and has larger ramifications for how sports television is discussed and positioned within American culture.

For one, the limited equation of the documentary with sports television quality has the effect of reinforcing the reputation of sports television as uncultured fare watched by those looking for a distraction from serious thought. Vogan explains, "Sports media have a reputation for not providing much in the way of credibility, complexity, or edification," and, even more specifically, argues sports television has frequently been depicted as "a mundane excuse to avoid thinking (along with spouses, kids, and jobs) rather than a site that provokes thought."⁸³

Significantly, these criticisms have also been attached to sports media consumers. As Vogan continues, “Those who consume sports media have a reputation for not demanding” qualities like complexity.⁸⁴ The elevation of the sports documentary, rather than subverting these reputations, reifies them.

Newman and Levine explain that discourses of television legitimation—as in discussions of quality television—have long operated by invoking hierarchies. Acclaimed quality shows like *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004–2006) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013), for instance, are not just praised by critics for their ability to stand alongside the finest works of cinema, but also for being so unlike the rest of television.⁸⁵ As they write, too, legitimating “more respectable” forms of television has not only meant separating television supposedly more worthy of “admiring, critical appraisal,” but also distancing that television from “less valued” audiences.⁸⁶ Similarly, sports documentaries have been positioned as transcending the usual mire of sports television to better serve quality audiences. Such positioning re-entrenches the belief that sports television is unremarkable fare best enjoyed by indiscriminating, “non-quality” audiences. As Charlotte Howell writes, judgements of quality “always carry a political implication.”⁸⁷ Similarly, Charlotte Brunson argues, “There are always issues of power at stake in notions such as quality and judgement.” She continues, “Quality for whom? Judgement by whom? On whose behalf?”⁸⁸ In the case of sports television, the concept of quality has been used to again mark most sports television programming and audiences as lowbrow, thereby reproducing what Newman and Levine term “class-based hierarchies of cultural value.”⁸⁹

The limited equation of sports television quality with the documentary does not just have the effect of producing a problematic binary that devalues sports television and its viewers, but also of restricting the critical imagination around sports television. Although sports television

documentaries represent but a miniscule portion of the sports television programming available to viewers, they have been disproportionately singled out for praise by critics and awarding bodies. The critical discourse surrounding sports television, then, has been oddly dominated by filmic texts and terminology that are largely unrepresentative of sports television. For instance, in commending television documentaries like HBO's *Journey of the African-American Athlete* (1996) and *Ali-Frazier I: One Nation...Divisible* (2000), the Peabody Awards have often reverted to language reminiscent of the film review, highlighting, for instance, "sharp, fast-paced" editing and skillfully "smooth" narration – plaudits only loosely applicable to most sports television.⁹⁰

This critical imbalance surrounding sports television speaks to debates that have previously surrounded quality discourses. As the concept of quality television became a central point of debate within television studies in the 2000s, Michael Kackman intervened to remind television scholars the increasing focus on quality programming—as typified by critical explorations of “narratively complex” programs like *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10) and *The Wire*—was not necessarily to the field's benefit.⁹¹ As he explained, television studies has its roots in feminist analysis, with scholars originally looking to “television's low cultural value as a provocative starting point, exploring the overt gendering of its pathologized, culturally subordinate viewers.”⁹² He continued, “Many of the medium's most compelling possibilities lay not in its aesthetic sophistication, but precisely its low status.” He argued, then, that the interest in quality television represented something of an abandonment of the field's roots and, instead, “a return to elitist aesthetics.”⁹³

Although Kackman was speaking primarily of scholarly interventions, especially those related to the “gendered hierarchies” that have long denigrated the melodrama, there is much to

be gained by heeding his call in analyzing sports television.⁹⁴ In a variety of ways, sports television represents unique territory within the television landscape, featuring unusual attributes that range from a pronounced emphasis on the human body to a frequent comingling of text and image. Because of these distinctive attributes, sports television often eludes the language regularly used to critically analyze television and film. This slipperiness may contribute to sports television's "low cultural value" by ensuring sports television escapes easy comparisons to more prestigious forms of media, but it simultaneously makes sports television fertile ground for novel aesthetic and ideological explorations. For critics and awarding bodies to solely recognize the sports television documentary and its familiar cinematic conventions is to potentially miss much of what makes sports television compelling. Although there might be a temptation to read the association of the sports television documentary with quality as a breakthrough for sports television, representing a newfound ability for sports television to be treated as meaningful and worthy of analysis, this association may ultimately end up continuing to limit how sports television is valued and discussed.

¹ Travis Vogan, "ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige in Contemporary Sports Television," *International Journal of Sport Communication* 5, no. 2 (June 2012), 138.

² Philip W. Sewell, "From Discourse to Discord: Quality and Dramedy at the End of the Classic Network System," *Television & New Media* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 238.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Robert Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 17.

⁵ Mark Alvey, "'Too Many Kids and Old Ladies': Quality Demographics and 1960s US Television," *Screen* 45, no. 1 (March 2004), 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Walter Spencer, "TV's Vast Grey Belt," *Television* (August 1967), 74, quoted in Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies," 51.

¹¹ Jane Feuer, "MTM Enterprises: An Overview," in *MTM: "Quality Television,"* by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi (London: BFI Pub., 1984), 1–31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ Sewell, "From Discourse to Discord," 240.

¹⁴ Ibid., 238.

¹⁵ Ibid., 239.

¹⁶ See, for example, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO’s Original Programming: Producing Quality TV,” in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 83–94. See also Avi Santo, “Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO,” in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 19–45.

¹⁷ Santo, “Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction,” 20.

¹⁸ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized, Second Edition* (NYU Press, 2014), 99.

¹⁹ “‘The Wire’: David Simon Reflects on His Modern Greek Tragedy,” *Variety*, March 8, 2008, <https://variety.com/2008/tv/news/the-wire-david-21043/>; Andrew Romano, “Inside the Obsessive, Strange Mind of True Detective’s Nic Pizzolatto,” *The Daily Beast*, February 4, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/04/inside-the-obsessive-strange-mind-of-true-detective-nic-pizzolatto>.

²⁰ Toby Miller and Linda J. Kim, “Overview: It Isn’t TV, It’s the ‘Real King of the Ring,’” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 218.

²¹ Ibid.; Travis Vogan, *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5.

²² Andrew J. Bottomley, “Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting Friday Night Lights,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (July 1, 2015), 485.

²³ Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 154.

²⁴ Deborah L. Jaramillo, “NBC Sports Network: Building Elite Audiences From Broadcast Rights,” in *From Networks to Netflix*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 123.

²⁵ Garry Whannel, “Television and the Transformation of Sport,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625 (September 2009), 215.

²⁶ Jon Lafayette, “New Ad Execs Create Advantage At Expanding Tennis Channel,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/new-ad-execs-create-advantage-at-expanding-tennis-channel>.

²⁷ “NBCUniversal Expands Golf Channel’s International Reach with Strategic Agreements within Influential Japanese Golf Market,” *NBC Sports Pressbox*, February 28, 2017, <http://nbcuniversalsportspressbox.com/2017/02/28/nbcuniversal-expands-golf-channels-international-reach-with-strategic-agreements-within-influential-japanese-golf-market/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Victoria E. Johnson, “Everything New Is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition for a Multi-Platform Era,” in *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Amanda D. Lotz (New York: Routledge, 2009), 123.

³⁰ Richard Sandomir, “The Decline and Fall of Sports Ratings,” *The New York Times*, September 10, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/10/sports/tv-sports-the-decline-and-fall-of-sports-ratings.html>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Dan Caesar, “NFL Reigns Supreme on TV,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 7, 2004.

³³ Prentis Rogers, “NHL’s TV Rights Go for \$600 Million,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1998.

³⁴ Jonathan Feigen, “NBA Commissioner Rolls on through Good Times, Bad,” *Houston Chronicle*, February 1, 2004, <https://www.chron.com/sports/rockets/article/NBA-commissioner-rolls-on-through-good-times-bad-1973234.php>.

³⁵ Leonard Shapiro, “NBC Gets In on WWF Football,” *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/2000/03/30/nbc-gets-in-on-wwf-football/9308639f-aa5d-4b10-8742-2ca86abe4f85/>.

³⁶ Sewell, “From Discourse to Discord,” 249.

-
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Steve Zipay, "NHL Believes TV Deal Is Foxy Move," *Newsday*, September 14, 1994, sec. Sports.
- ⁴⁰ Rudy Martzke, "Fox Makes Hockey Its Newest Surprise," *USA Today*, September 12, 1994, sec. Sports.
- ⁴¹ Richard Sandomir, "Truth Twisted As Fox Pats Itself on Back," *The New York Times*, May 12, 2001.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Sewell, "From Discourse to Discord," 251.
- ⁴⁴ Richard Deitsch, "The Stories of Their Time: ESPN's 30 for 30 Fields a Rich Lineup of Documentaries," *Sports Illustrated*, 2010, 26, quoted in Vogan, "ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige," 149.
- ⁴⁵ Christopher Rosen, "Kevin Connolly, 'Big Shot' Director, On John Spano's Stranger-Than-Fiction True Story," *Huffington Post*, April 25, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/25/kevin-connolly-big-shot_n_3158420.html.
- ⁴⁶ Tim Grierson, "Welcome Back, '30 For 30': In Praise Of ESPN's Documentary Series," *Deadspin*, September 27, 2012, <https://deadspin.com/5946977/welcome-back-30-for-30-in-praise-of-espns-documentary-series>.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ken Fang, "30 for 30's 'Survive & Advance' Elevates ESPN's Documentary Series," *Awful Announcing*, March 18, 2013, <http://awfulannouncing.com/2013/30-for-30-s-survive-advance-elevates-espns-documentary-series.html>.
- ⁵⁰ Alan Sepinwall, "Review: ESPN Scores with '30 for 30,'" *NJ.com*, October 6, 2009, http://www.nj.com/entertainment/tv/index.ssf/2009/10/review_espns_scores_with_30_for.html.
- ⁵¹ Travis Vogan, "ESPN: Live Sports, Documentary Prestige, and On-Demand Culture," in *From Networks to Netflix*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 113.
- ⁵² Rob Sheffield, "What 'O.J.: Made In America' Says About America Right Now," *Rolling Stone*, June 29, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-sports/what-o-j-made-in-america-says-about-america-right-now-111004>, quoted in Vogan, "ESPN: Live Sports, Documentary Prestige, and On-Demand Culture," 113; A. O. Scott, "Review: 'O.J.: Made in America,' an Unflinching Take on His Rise and Fall," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/movies/oj-made-in-america-review.html>, quoted in Vogan, "ESPN: Live Sports, Documentary Prestige, and On-Demand Culture," 113.
- ⁵³ Daniel Fienberg, "The Best TV of 2016," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/best-tv-shows-2016-daniel-fienberg-956329>.
- ⁵⁴ Hank Stuever, "The Best TV Shows of 2016: 'O.J.: Made in America,' 'Veep' and 'The Americans' Lead the Pack," *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/the-best-tv-shows-of-2016-oj-made-in-america-veep-and-the-americans-lead-the-pack/2016/12/08/8bc47f20-b81f-11e6-a677-b608fbb3aaf6_story.html; Eric Deggans, "2016 Had So Much Good TV, It Was Almost Too Much — We Pick Some Standouts," *NPR.org*, December 19, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/19/505714262/2016-had-so-much-good-tv-it-was-almost-too-much-we-pick-some-standouts>.
- ⁵⁵ "The Best Television Episodes of 2014," *The Atlantic*, December 15, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/12/the-best-television-episodes-of-2014/383551/>; Inkoo Kang, "The Ten Best TV Shows of 2014," *The Village Voice*, December 24, 2014, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2014/12/24/the-ten-best-tv-shows-of-2014/>; James Poniewozik, Mike Hale, and Neil Genzlinger, "The Best TV Shows of 2015," *The New York Times*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/arts/television/best-tv-shows-2015.html>.
- ⁵⁶ "HBO Sports Documentaries," Peabody Awards, accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/hbo-sports-documentaries>.

-
- ⁵⁷ ““ESPN SportsCentury,” Peabody Awards, accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/espn-sportscentury>.
- ⁵⁸ “30 For 30,” Peabody Awards, accessed June 28, 2018, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/30-for-30>.
- ⁵⁹ Andrew Bucholtz, “New SI Executive Producer of Sports Video Josh Oshinsky on SI TV: ‘We Need to Be That Legitimate 30 for 30 Alternative.’,” *Awful Announcing*, January 4, 2018, <http://awfulannouncing.com/online-outlets/josh-oshinsky-si-tv-30-for-30-alternative.html>.
- ⁶⁰ Tim Lemke, “ESPN Documentaries 30 Years in the Making,” *The Washington Times*, October 6, 2009, quoted in Vogan, “ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige,” 142; Bill Simmons, Interview with Conor Schell and John Dahl, 30 for 30, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnradio/podcastarchive?Id=4531638>, quoted in Vogan, “ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige,” 149.
- ⁶¹ Jennifer Cingari Christie, “Academy-Award Winning Documentary ‘O.J.: Made in America’ to Air on ESPN2 Over Five Nights,” *ESPN MediaZone U.S.*, February 27, 2017, <https://espnmediazone.com/us/press-releases/2017/02/academy-award-winning-documentary-o-j-made-america-air-espn2-five-nights/>.
- ⁶² Neil Best, “ESPN Films at Top of Its Game with Oscar for ‘O.J.: Made in America,’” *Newsday*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.newsday.com/sports/media/espn-films-at-top-of-its-game-with-oscar-for-o-j-made-in-america-1.13196346>.
- ⁶³ Vogan, *ESPN*, 136.
- ⁶⁴ “30 For 30,” Peabody Awards.
- ⁶⁵ Joshua Malitsky, “Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary,” *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 213.
- ⁶⁶ Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 24.
- ⁶⁷ Marc Tracy, “It Was a Great, Awful Week in ESPN’s History,” *The New Republic*, December 15, 2012, <https://newrepublic.com/article/111086/rob-parkers-racial-remarks-30-30-series-make-history-espn>.
- ⁶⁸ Richard Sandomir, “Documentaries Are the Go-To Players of Sports Television,” *The New York Times*, March 21, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/sports/documentaries-are-the-go-to-players-of-sports-television.html>.
- ⁶⁹ Neil Best, “NBC, Then HBO Tweak ESPN; ESPN Tweets Back,” *Newsday*, April 29, 2010, <https://www.newsday.com/sports/media/nbc-then-hbo-tweak-espn-espn-tweets-back-1.1887164>.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Paulsen, “SMW Q&A With Ross Greenburg,” *Sports Media Watch*, October 29, 2010, <http://www.sportsmediawatch.com/2010/10/smw-q-with-ross-greenburg/>.
- ⁷² Vogan, *ESPN*, 63, 139.
- ⁷³ Bottomley, “Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television,” 486.
- ⁷⁴ Sewell, “From Discourse to Discord,” 237.
- ⁷⁵ Vogan, “ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige,” 146.
- ⁷⁶ Travis Vogan, “Institutionalizing and Industrializing Sport History in the Contemporary Sports Television Documentary,” *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 197.
- ⁷⁷ Amanda DeCastro, “ESPN Films and EspnW’s Nine for IX Documentary Series Focuses on Female Sports Icons, Issues,” *ESPN Front Row* (blog), February 20, 2013, <https://www.espnfrontrow.com/2013/02/espn-films-espnw-announce-nine-for-ix-documentary-series-focusing-on-female-sports-icons-issues/>. Dawn Heineken, “For Us All? Nine for IX and the Representation of Women in Sport,” *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 26, no. 1 (April 2018), 23.
- ⁷⁸ Selina Chignall, “Realscreen Summit: Scoring with Sports Docs,” Realscreen, January 24, 2017, <http://realscreen.com/2017/01/24/realscreen-summit-scoring-with-sports-docs/>.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸⁰ Tracy, “It Was a Great, Awful Week in ESPN’s History.”

⁸¹ Alison Willmore, "TCA: Kevin Connolly, Brian Koppelman, David Levien Talk Their '30 for 30' Docs While Keith Olbermann Touts His Return to ESPN | IndieWire," *Indiewire*, July 24, 2013, <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/07/tca-kevin-connolly-brian-koppelman-david-levien-talk-their-30-for-30-docs-while-keith-olbermann-touts-his-return-to-espn-36379/>.

⁸² Travis Vogan, "Chronicling Sport, Branding Institutions: The Television Sports Documentary from Broadcast to Cable," in *Routledge Handbook of Sport Communication*, ed. Paul Mark Pedersen (Routledge, 2013), 129.

⁸³ Vogan, *ESPN*, 2-3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁵ Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 9.

⁸⁷ Charlotte E. Howell, "Legitimizing Genre: The Discursive Turn to Quality in Early 1990s Science Fiction Television," *Critical Studies in Television* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2017), 40.

⁸⁸ Charlotte Brunson, "Problems with Quality," *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990), 73.

⁸⁹ Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 167.

⁹⁰ "Journey of the African-American Athlete," Peabody Awards, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/journey-of-the-african-american-athlete>; "Ali-Frazier 1: One Nation...Divisible," Peabody Awards, accessed October 23, 2018, <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/ali-frazier-1-one-nation...divisible>.

⁹¹ Michael Kackman, "Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity," *Flow*, October 31, 2008, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2008/10/quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity>.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Works Cited

- “30 For 30.” Peabody Awards. Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/30-for-30>.
- “Ali-Frazier 1: One Nation...Divisible.” Peabody Awards. Accessed October 23, 2018. <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/ali-frazier-1-one-nation...divisible>.
- Alvey, Mark. “‘Too Many Kids and Old Ladies’: Quality Demographics and 1960s US Television.” *Screen* 45, no. 1 (March 2004): 40–62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/45.1.40>.
- Best, Neil. “ESPN Films at Top of Its Game with Oscar for ‘O.J.: Made in America.’” *Newsday*, March 4, 2017. <https://www.newsday.com/sports/media/espn-films-at-top-of-its-game-with-oscar-for-o-j-made-in-america-1.13196346>.
- . “NBC, Then HBO Tweak ESPN; ESPN Tweets Back.” *Newsday*, April 29, 2010. <https://www.newsday.com/sports/media/nbc-then-hbo-tweak-espn-espn-tweets-back-1.1887164>.
- Bottomley, Andrew J. “Quality TV and the Branding of U.S. Network Television: Marketing and Promoting Friday Night Lights.” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (July 1, 2015): 482–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2015.1031624>.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. “Problems with Quality.” *Screen* 31, no. 1 (1990): 67–90.
- Bucholtz, Andrew. “New SI Executive Producer of Sports Video Josh Oshinsky on SI TV: ‘We Need to Be That Legitimate 30 for 30 Alternative.’” *Awful Announcing*, January 4, 2018. <http://awfulannouncing.com/online-outlets/josh-oshinsky-si-tv-30-for-30-alternative.html>.
- Caesar, Dan. “NFL Reigns Supreme on TV.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 7, 2004.
- Chignall, Selina. “Realscreen Summit: Scoring with Sports Docs.” *Realscreen*, January 24, 2017. <http://realscreen.com/2017/01/24/realscreen-summit-scoring-with-sports-docs/>.
- Christie, Jennifer Cingari. “Academy-Award Winning Documentary ‘O.J.: Made in America’ to Air on ESPN2 Over Five Nights.” *ESPN MediaZone U.S.*, February 27, 2017. <https://espnmediazone.com/us/press-releases/2017/02/academy-award-winning-documentary-o-j-made-america-air-espn2-five-nights/>.
- DeCastro, Amanda. “ESPN Films and EspnW’s Nine for IX Documentary Series Focuses on Female Sports Icons, Issues.” *ESPN Front Row* (blog), February 20, 2013. <https://www.espnfrontrow.com/2013/02/espn-films-espnw-announce-nine-for-ix-documentary-series-focusing-on-female-sports-icons-issues/>.
- Deggans, Eric. “2016 Had So Much Good TV, It Was Almost Too Much — We Pick Some Standouts.” *NPR.org*, December 19, 2016. <https://www.npr.org/2016/12/19/505714262/2016-had-so-much-good-tv-it-was-almost-too-much-we-pick-some-standouts>.
- Deitsch, Richard. “The Stories of Their Time: ESPN’s 30 for 30 Fields a Rich Lineup of Documentaries.” *Sports Illustrated*, 2010.
- “ESPN SportsCentury.” Peabody Awards. Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/espn-sportscentury>.
- Fang, Ken. “30 for 30’s ‘Survive & Advance’ Elevates ESPN’s Documentary Series.” *Awful Announcing*, March 18, 2013. <http://awfulannouncing.com/2013/30-for-30-s-survive-advance-elevates-espn-s-documentary-series.html>.
- Feigen, Jonathan. “NBA Commissioner Rolls on through Good Times, Bad.” *Houston Chronicle*, February 1, 2004. <https://www.chron.com/sports/rockets/article/NBA-commissioner-rolls-on-through-good-times-bad-1973234.php>.

- Feuer, Jane. "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV." In *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, 145–57. I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- . "MTM Enterprises: An Overview." In *MTM: "Quality Television,"* by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, 1–31. London: BFI Pub., 1984.
- Fienberg, Daniel. "The Best TV of 2016." *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 15, 2016. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/best-tv-shows-2016-daniel-fienberg-956329>.
- Grierson, Tim. "Welcome Back, '30 For 30': In Praise Of ESPN's Documentary Series." *Deadspin*, September 27, 2012. <https://deadspin.com/5946977/welcome-back-30-for-30-in-praise-of-espns-documentary-series>.
- "HBO Sports Documentaries." Peabody Awards. Accessed June 28, 2018. <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/hbo-sports-documentaries>.
- Heinecken, Dawn. "For Us All? Nine for IX and the Representation of Women in Sport." *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 26, no. 1 (April 2018): 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2017-0005>.
- Howell, Charlotte E. "Legitimizing Genre: The Discursive Turn to Quality in Early 1990s Science Fiction Television." *Critical Studies in Television* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 35–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602016682749>.
- Hyden, Steven. "Is 'O.J.: Made In America' The Year's Best TV Show Or Its Best Movie?" *Uproxx*, December 14, 2016. <https://uproxx.com/movies/oj-made-in-america-best-tv-movie/>.
- Jaramillo, Deborah L. "NBC Sports Network: Building Elite Audiences From Broadcast Rights." In *From Networks to Netflix*, edited by Derek Johnson, 117–26. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Johnson, Victoria E. "Everything New Is Old Again: Sport Television, Innovation, and Tradition for a Multi-Platform Era." In *Beyond Prime Time: Television Programming in the Post-Network Era*, edited by Amanda D Lotz, 114–37. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- "Journey of the African-American Athlete." Peabody Awards. Accessed October 23, 2018. <http://www.peabodyawards.com/award-profile/journey-of-the-african-american-athlete>.
- Kackman, Michael. "Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity." *Flow*, October 31, 2008. <https://www.flowjournal.org/2008/10/quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity>.
- Kang, Inkoo. "The Ten Best TV Shows of 2014." *The Village Voice*, December 24, 2014. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2014/12/24/the-ten-best-tv-shows-of-2014/>.
- Lafayette, Jon. "New Ad Execs Create Advantage At Expanding Tennis Channel." *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 9, 2018. <https://www.broadcastingcable.com/news/new-ad-execs-create-advantage-at-expanding-tennis-channel>.
- Lemke, Tim. "ESPN Documentaries 30 Years in the Making." *The Washington Times*, October 6, 2009.
- Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized, Second Edition*. NYU Press, 2014.
- Malitsky, Joshua. "Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary." *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 205–14.
- Martzke, Rudy. "Fox Makes Hockey Its Newest Surprise." *USA Today*, September 12, 1994, sec. Sports.
- McCabe, Janet, and Kim Akass. "It's Not TV, It's HBO's Original Programming: Producing Quality TV." In *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, edited by Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, 83–94. New York: Routledge, 2008.

- “NBCUniversal Expands Golf Channel’s International Reach with Strategic Agreements within Influential Japanese Golf Market.” NBC Sports Pressbox, February 28, 2017. <http://nbcSPORTSGROUPPRESSBOX.COM/2017/02/28/nbcuniversal-expands-golf-channels-international-reach-with-strategic-agreements-within-influential-japanese-golf-market/>.
- Paulsen. “SMW Q&A With Ross Greenburg.” Sports Media Watch, October 29, 2010. <http://www.sportsmediawatch.com/2010/10/smw-q-with-ross-greenburg/>.
- Poniewozik, James, Mike Hale, and Neil Genzlinger. “The Best TV Shows of 2015.” The New York Times, December 7, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/arts/television/best-tv-shows-2015.html>.
- Rogers, Prentis. “NHL’s TV Rights Go for \$600 Million.” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1998.
- Romano, Andrew. “Inside the Obsessive, Strange Mind of True Detective’s Nic Pizzolatto.” The Daily Beast, February 4, 2014. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/02/04/inside-the-obsessive-strange-mind-of-true-detective-s-nic-pizzolatto>.
- Rosen, Christopher. “Kevin Connolly, ‘Big Shot’ Director, On John Spano’s Stranger-Than-Fiction True Story.” Huffington Post, April 25, 2013. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/25/kevin-connolly-big-shot_n_3158420.html.
- Sandomir, Richard. “Documentaries Are the Go-To Players of Sports Television.” The New York Times, March 21, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/22/sports/documentaries-are-the-go-to-players-of-sports-television.html>.
- . “The Decline and Fall of Sports Ratings.” The New York Times, September 10, 2003. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/10/sports/tv-sports-the-decline-and-fall-of-sports-ratings.html>.
- . “Truth Twisted As Fox Pats Itself on Back.” *The New York Times*, May 12, 2001.
- Santo, Avi. “Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO.” In *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, edited by Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley, 19–45. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Scott, A. O. “Review: ‘O.J.: Made in America,’ an Unflinching Take on His Rise and Fall.” The New York Times, May 9, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/movies/oj-made-in-america-review.html>.
- Sepinwall, Alan. “Review: ESPN Scores with ‘30 for 30.’” NJ.com, October 6, 2009. http://www.nj.com/entertainment/tv/index.ssf/2009/10/review_espn_scores_with_30_for.html.
- Sewell, Philip W. “From Discourse to Discord: Quality and Dramedy at the End of the Classic Network System.” *Television & New Media* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 235–59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476409351289>.
- Shapiro, Leonard. “NBC Gets In on WWF Football.” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2000. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/2000/03/30/nbc-gets-in-on-wwf-football/9308639f-aa5d-4b10-8742-2ca86abe4f85/>.
- Sheffield, Rob. “What ‘O.J.: Made In America’ Says About America Right Now.” Rolling Stone, June 29, 2016. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-sports/what-o-j-made-in-america-says-about-america-right-now-111004/>.
- Simmons, Bill. *Interview with Conor Schell and John Dahl*. 30 for 30, n.d. <http://sports.espn.go.com/espnradio/podcastarchive?Id=4531638>.
- Spencer, Walter. “TV’s Vast Grey Belt.” *Television*, August 1967.

- Stewart, Larry. "Ebersol in the Middle of Baseball Turmoil." *Los Angeles Times*, June 30, 1995, sec. Sports.
- Stuever, Hank. "The Best TV Shows of 2016: 'O.J.: Made in America,' 'Veep' and 'The Americans' Lead the Pack." *The Washington Post*, December 8, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/the-best-tv-shows-of-2016-oj-made-in-america-veep-and--the-americans-lead-the-pack/2016/12/08/8bc47f20-b81f-11e6-a677-b608fbb3aaf6_story.html.
- "The Best Television Episodes of 2014." *The Atlantic*, December 15, 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/12/the-best-television-episodes-of-2014/383551/>.
- "'The Wire': David Simon Reflects on His Modern Greek Tragedy." *Variety*, March 8, 2008. <https://variety.com/2008/tv/news/the-wire-david-21043/>.
- Thompson, Robert. *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997.
- Tracy, Marc. "It Was a Great, Awful Week in ESPN's History." *The New Republic*, December 15, 2012. <https://newrepublic.com/article/111086/rob-parkers-racial-remarks-30-30-series-make-history-espn>.
- Vogan, Travis. "Chronicling Sport, Branding Institutions: The Television Sports Documentary from Broadcast to Cable." In *Routledge Handbook of Sport Communication*, edited by Paul Mark Pedersen, 128–36. Routledge, 2013.
- . "ESPN Films and the Construction of Prestige in Contemporary Sports Television." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 5, no. 2 (2012): 137–52.
- . "ESPN: Live Sports, Documentary Prestige, and On-Demand Culture." In *From Networks to Netflix*, edited by Derek Johnson, 107–15. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- . *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire*. University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- . "Institutionalizing and Industrializing Sport History in the Contemporary Sports Television Documentary." *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 195–204.
- Whannel, Garry. "Television and the Transformation of Sport." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625 (September 2009): 205–18.
- Willmore, Alison. "TCA: Kevin Connolly, Brian Koppelman, David Levien Talk Their '30 for 30' Docs While Keith Olbermann Touts His Return to ESPN | IndieWire." *Indiewire*, July 24, 2013. <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/07/tca-kevin-connolly-brian-koppelman-david-levien-talk-their-30-for-30-docs-while-keith-olbermann-touts-his-return-to-espn-36379/>.
- Zipay, Steve. "NHL Believes TV Deal Is Foxy Move." *Newsday*, September 14, 1994, sec. Sports.