How ESPN -- now 40 years old -- changed the sports world, from your growing cable bill and round-the-clock programming to the glut of bowl games

Rosenthal, Phil . Rosenthal, Phil.

ProQuest document link

FULL TEXT

Sept. 08-- Sep. 8--ESPN was not quite 3 months old when the late Red Smith, a New York Times sports columnist as well known in his day as Tony Kornheiser or Michael Wilbon now, took stock.

Smith quoted an unidentified man, presumably himself, as saying it was "the ghastliest threat to the social fabric of America since the invention of the automobile."

ESPN marked the 40th anniversary of its launch Saturday and, while one might accuse Smith of exaggeration, he wasn't that far off.

There's no question ESPN has been a catalyst for widespread change.

The soon-to-be-behemoth was a few months away from becoming the 24/7/365 operation the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network promised with its launch on Sept. 7, 1979, when host Lee Leonard told viewers they were "standing on the edge of tomorrow" and might well believe they've "gone to sports heaven."

Years would pass before it shook its reputation as home to tractor pulls, darts, Irish hurling, slow-pitch softball, Australian rules football, go-kart racing, skeet shooting and karate.

But virtually from the start, it began altering and accelerating upheaval of not just sports media but sports itself.

What follows are but a few of the changes it factored into over its first four decades:

1. It rewrote schedules.

ESPN encouraged schools and conference conferences to play games on non-traditional days and at unorthodox times with the promise of exposure and/or money. Midweek college football games? Basketball tipoffs at odd hours? ESPN needed programming and offered exposure.

2. It rewrote routines.

Launched before the internet and mobile phones put scores, highlights and even faraway games at fans' fingertips, "SportsCenter" liberated fans from having to catch the sports segment on local newscasts or wait for the morning paper, whether they watched before bed or woke up to it in the morning.

3. All the games are on TV.

People born after the launches of ESPN and its rivals don't know of a time when relatively few games were available on television, especially featuring non-local teams. ESPN helped spur that change.

4. Highlight hustle.

ESPN upped the ante on highlight-worthy plays. Jocks now were trying to impress their peers around the country via "SportCenter," where home runs, spectacular dunks, touchdown bombs and long-distance shots were the coin of the realm.

"ESPN has changed the way sports are now played -- absolutely," ESPN anchor Steve Levy told the Los Angeles Times 20 years ago. "I'm not so sure that's a good thing. Look at baseball. So much emphasis in the highlights on power pitching. You see all the big strikeouts. You don't often see the 81-mph curveball that falls off the table."

Twenty years ago!

5. Bowl madness.

Wonder why there's a Bad Boy Mowers Gasparilla Bowl, an Academy Sports + Outdoors Texas Bowl Bowl, a Servpro First Responder Bowl or any number of second- and third-tier postseason college football games?

ESPN owns and operates 14 bowl games, using them to fill schedule dead spots from mid-December to early January.

6. Round-the-clock TV.

It's almost inconceivable today, but TV outlets used to shut down in the wee hours, then play the national anthem when they resumed programming before dawn. ESPN was on the front edge of channels, such as CNN (which launched in 1980), to offer content around the clock. In time, everyone would.

7. Niche programming.

First there was ESPN with its singular focus. Then came others such as CNN and MTV. They established a template for national cable networks that weren't content presenting a little bit of everything the way broadcast networks did and still do.

8. Bracketmania.

One of two smart programming moves in ESPN's first year was to secure early-round NCAA men's basketball tournament games in the spring of 1980, exploiting the surge in tournament interest from the famous Magic Johnson-Larry Bird championship matchup a year earlier.

It boosted the value of its investment in college basketball during the season, which gave rise to a largely unknown former coach who introduced the nation to new honorifics such as "diaper dandy," "glue guy" and "PTPer": Dick Vitale.

Vitale, incidentally, made his debut with an ESPN telecast of a DePaul-Wisconsin game at Chicago's Alumni Hall on Dec. 5, 1979.

9. Procedural obsession.

The other vein of gold it unearthed in early '80 was convincing NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle to allow it to cover the NFL college draft, an event no one else had ever thought worth televising. Everyone knows what it has become, the cottage industry it has spawned and its role in sustaining year-round fan interest.

Its success has led to similar coverage of not just other sports' drafts but of combine testing as well as trade deadlines, free-agency filings and other paper shuffling.

Critically, it also got ESPN's foot in the door with the NFL, helping it score the rights to live NFL games in 1987, a first for cable. It landed Major League Baseball games in 1990.

10. Local TV sportscasting.

"SportsCenter" led local newscasts to be less concerned with reporting all the scores and offering much more than abbreviated home-team highlights, which in turn shortened the segments.

Also, it helped fuel a trend of sportscasters increasingly trying to infuse humor in their reports. The incomparable wit and interplay of "SportsCenter" co-hosts Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick raised the bar after Chris Berman's punny nicknames piqued interest.

11. 'The Big Show' as the show of the future.

A recent article from The Ringer effectively argued that the DNA of the Olbermann-Patrick "SportsCenter" can be found throughout today's late-night TV.

"It's not that John Oliver and Trevor Noah and every other disciple of Jon Stewart are doing Dan and Keith, exactly," Bryan Curtis wrote. "But I'd argue Patrick and Olbermann anticipated the way news and comedy would merge."

12. Yes, snowboarding is a sport.

By launching the X Games, a high-profile platform for nontraditional sports such as skateboarding and snowboarding to fill another programming void and appeal to a broader audience demographic, ESPN helped legitimize those competitions en route to Olympics acknowledgement.

13. Your cable or satellite bill just kept growing.

In cable's heyday, ESPN wrung the lucrative combination of advertising revenue and carriage fees from cable and satellite providers more effectively than anyone. It used the expense of rights fees and popularity of sports that came with them to siphon off more per-subscriber cash from service providers than anything else on cable, regardless of how many of those subscribers actually watch ESPN.

14. Diversity.
ESPN has been out in front of its media peers in the diversity of its staff, integrating women and people of color into a business populated mostly by white males.
15. Arguments. (Or should that be ARGUMENTS?)
You don't agree with this analysis of ESPN? What's your hottest take? Even as argument shows such as CNN's "Crossfire" were falling out of favor in news -- they've since rebounded -- ESPN was doubling down on the genre with shows such as "Around the Horn" and personalities such as Stephen A. Smith trading in high-volume disputes that leave little room for shades of gray.
CREDIT: By Phil Rosenthal

DETAILS

Subject:	Athletic drafts & trades; Australian football; College basketball; Professional soccer; Tournaments & championships; Advertising campaigns; Basketball; College football
Business indexing term:	Subject: Advertising campaigns; Industry: 71121 : Spectator Sports
Location:	Chicago Illinois; Wisconsin; Texas; New York; Los Angeles California; United States--US
People:	Ol iver, John; Johnson, Earvin (Magic Johnson); Bird, Larry; Patrick, Dan; Kornheiser, Tony; Rozelle, Pete; Wilbon, Michael; Vitale, Dick; Olbermann, Keith; Berman, Chris; Noah, Trevor; Stewart, Jon
Company / organization:	Name: CNN; NAICS: 516210; Name: Los Angeles Times; NAICS: 513110; Name: Major League Baseball; NAICS: 813990; Name: New York Times Co; NAICS: 513110, 516110, 516120; Name: National Collegiate Athletic Association--NCAA; NAICS: 813990; Name: Bad Boy Mowers Inc; NAICS: 333112; Name: National Football League--NFL; NAICS: 711211, 813990
Classification:	71121: Spectator Sports
Publication title:	TCA Regional News; Chicago
Publication year:	2019
Publication date:	Sep 8, 2019
Publisher:	Tribune Content Agency LLC
Place of publication:	Chicago
Country of publication:	United States
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
Source type:	Wire Feed
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News

ProQuest document ID:	2286598603
Document URL:	http://uri.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/how-espn-now-40-years-old-changed-sports-world/docview/2286598603/se-2?accountid=28991
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Last updated:	2026-02-04
Database:	ProQuest One Academic,ProQuest One Business

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