

Making the Call

Our memories of magical moments in sports are often accompanied by the words of a sportscaster

In reviewing some of the most memorable moments in sports, it is noteworthy how many times those moments were enhanced by the call of a sportscaster. Name a moment, and for many of them the call and the play have become inseparable—even before YouTube gave us immediate access to these historical sports gems.

The broadcasters who have uttered words that have fused with a particular sports feat have performed a difficult trick. They have had to capture the spontaneity of the moment, share the amazement of everyone watching, and frame the moment for history. It's a daunting trifecta, but generally speaking, the best sportscasters of our times have been up to the task.

Could you picture Tiger Woods' remarkable chip-in off the 16th green at the 2005 Masters, pausing on the lip of the cup with the Nike logo showing before going in, without Verne Lundquist's "Oh wow! In your life have you seen anything like that?" Could you imagine watching a replay of the end of the 1980 U.S.-Soviet Olympic hockey game without Al Michaels exclaiming, "Do you believe in miracles?"—a phrase so apt that it has been used for movies, books and any reference to the game? Would Bobby Thomson's "shot heard 'round the world" in the 1951 National League playoff game over the Dodgers have had the same reverberation without radio announcer Russ Hodges' unrepentant pennant celebration—"The Giants win the pennant!"—repeated five times?

Each of these instances underscores what seems to be one of the prerequisites for a memorable sports call: It cannot be rehearsed. Neither Lundquist nor Michaels nor Hodges could have possibly anticipated what they would be called upon to describe. Indeed, counterintuitively, the more time an announcer has to think of what he might say for a particular moment, the less memorable the call tends to be. Perhaps this is

by Bob Latham

why there have been few, if any, memorable calls of milestones in baseball.

To prove this, one need look no further than Jack Buck. When the unimaginable happened—a limping Kurt Gibson hitting a walk-off home run for the Dodgers against Oakland in the first game of the 1988 World Series—Buck was up to the occasion: "I don't believe what I just saw!" Same thing when Buck called the surprising Ozzie Smith home run that won Game 5 of the 1985

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National League Championship Series: "Go crazy folks! Go crazy!" However, when he had time to think about what to say when Mark McGwire hit his 61st home run in 1998, he was less than his Hall-of-Fame self: "McGwire's Flight 61 headed for planet Maris." What?!

Sometimes a baseball announcer like Buck has tried to do too much with a situation, and other times he has simply not been up to the task. Such was the case with Phil Rizzuto 37 years before McGwire's feat, when Roger Maris hit his 61st home run and passed Babe Ruth. Rizzuto's call? "Holy cow. He did it. 61 home runs."

To be memorable, the announcer's words need not be poetic. Sometimes it is not what is said but rather the way it is said. Johnny Most's excited "Havlicek stole the ball!" when the Celtics won Game 7 of the 1965 Eastern Conference finals preserved the moment for posterity in one gravelly take. When Michael Jordan made one of the most athletic moves ever by a human being—or any other species—driving the lane against the Lakers in the 1991 NBA finals, initially going for a dunk with the right

hand then, in gravity-defying fashion, changing the ball to his left hand and laying it up, all without ever touching the ground, Marv Albert spoke for everyone watching: "Oh! A spectacular move by Michael Jordan!" Nothing particularly memorable about the wording, but the delivery was perfect.

When an announcer is describing a scene in a way that enhances our emotional reaction to it, we actually seem to enjoy the fact that he is caught up in the moment like the rest of us. Track announcer Chick Anderson captured the thoughts of everyone watching Secretariat win the Triple Crown with his 31-length victory in the Belmont in 1973, as he continued to tick off Secretariat's lead on the best thoroughbreds in the world. "He's moving like a tremendous machine! Secretariat by 12. By 14 lengths on the turn...

Secretariat is all alone! By 18 lengths...An unbelievable, an amazing performance!" Anderson's call was so compelling that Secretariat's jockey, Ron Turcotte, admitted that it prompted him to turn around atop his mount to see for himself.

Sure, there have been some times when announcers didn't enhance the moment, or simply screamed into the microphone: the Christian Laettner shot that beat Kentucky in 1992, the Kordell Stewart Hail Mary to Michael Westbrook that beat Michigan and the Cal-Stanford "play" were accompanied by what can only be described as noise from the booth. But if you surf YouTube for your favorite play, you will find that those examples are the exception, not the rule.

So my congratulations go to a sometimes maligned profession. When sports brilliance—or ignominy—has needed an immediate historian, in most instances sportscasters have filled that role well, and our audiovisual sports history is much the better for it. ■

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