

The Flat World of Sports

Why do television executives still think prime time is the best time to watch a sporting event?

There was a time when it was generally thought that the world was flat and the sun revolved around the Earth. Well, astronomers now have a more enlightened perspective, but American network executives are slow to give up the notion that sports viewing revolves around prime-time television—being defined of course as prime time on America's East Coast. So, while Thomas Friedman's popular book "The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century" suggests that historical norms and geographical obstacles are being broken down by globalization, the 21st century still hasn't completely taken root in sports programming.

Let's consider NBC's Beijing Olympics coverage. The fact that the rest of the world has a more flexible attitude as to when it can view sporting competitions, coupled with the money NBC plunked down for the TV rights, motivated organizers to place the Games' initial showcase events—swimming and women's gymnastics—in prime time in America, morning in China. This was not ideal, as the women's all-around competition ended at 1:30 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time, not exactly conducive to young, budding gymnasts being caught up by the drama of the live competition.

After the swimming and women's gymnastics had concluded, the decision as to what was broadcast live seemed to be arbitrary. U.S. basketball games were live whenever they occurred, be it 2:30 a.m. or 9:30 a.m. EDT. Most disappointingly, however, the track and field events were almost all on tape delay in America. Particularly unfortunate was the tape-delayed broadcast of the men's 100-meter final and Usain Bolt's world-record performance on a Saturday night, even though it could have been shown live at a comfortable time on Saturday morning—a time when Americans have grown accustomed to watching sports.

The real victim of the decision to broadcast track events on tape delay,

By Bob Latham

however, was Brian Clay, the gold medalist in the decathlon from the USA. Bruce Jenner became a household name after the 1976 Montreal Olympics because his decathlon gold-medal drama played out live (of course during prime time in America). Same with Dan O'Brien in Atlanta in 1996. However, the current world's greatest athlete had his

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signature performance telecast in his home country only via a documentary-style retrospective.

The question to be asked is whether the American sports fan is prepared to watch sports events at what once would have been thought to be peculiar times. We apparently used to think that we could only watch baseball on Saturday afternoon, we could only watch football on Sunday afternoon, and we could only watch tennis on tape delay late on a weekend afternoon. Then, eureka! We realized we could watch football on Monday night. We could watch college football on Thursday night. We could watch Wimbledon and the French Open in tennis, and the British Open in golf, on Saturday and Sunday mornings as they were happening. Later we could watch the soccer World Cup live whenever American teams were playing, even if it was 5 a.m. And Lance Armstrong caused many an American to get up in the mornings and watch the Tour de France on cable.

The first "Breakfast at Wimbledon" on NBC in 1979 was an extremely bold move, but we adjusted. As an aside, the big challenge for that first live broadcast was how to come on the air at 9 a.m.

Eastern with five minutes of opening montage and remarks, when Wimbledon organizers were adamant that the match itself would start at exactly 2 p.m. London time, 9 a.m. EDT. An elegant solution was reached when Roscoe Tanner, who was playing in the men's final against Bjorn Borg, agreed to stay in the men's room for five minutes, since the match could hardly start without him!

Sadly, that Wimbledon broadcast didn't immediately change the "prime time or not at all" philosophy. Indeed, the Olympic hockey "Miracle on Ice" in 1980 was broadcast live in the Soviet Union at 1 a.m. but not live in the United States even though it was played in the late afternoon.

Are Americans really that slow in catching up with the rest of the world in this regard—being willing to watch a sporting event when it happens rather than expecting the sporting event to happen when they want to watch it? Or are sports programmers just too afraid to try to break the mold and find out? It is perhaps instructive that residents of the West Coast seem to be able to adjust to NFL football games being on TV from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sundays whereas East Coast residents are comfortable viewing those games from 1 to 7 p.m.

I, for one, like my sports live. It doesn't work for me to pretend that I don't know or can't find out what happened. And I am willing to adjust my schedule to see the broadcast of that live event.

CNN made a bold move several decades ago, banking on the fact that Americans didn't just have to get their news at noon, 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. For those of us who want to see our sports as they happen, and not in repackaged retrospectives, I'm hoping the TV sports world does indeed continue to flatten. ■

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