

Meet Johnny Football

The art of the creative nickname is becoming lost in American sports



BOB LATHAM

As I watched Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel accept this year's Heisman Trophy, I had the same reaction that everyone else probably had. It was not, "Wow, the Heisman Trophy was awarded to a freshman for the first time?" Rather, my reaction was, "How is it possible that after at least 120 years of organized football at the collegiate and professional levels, a college freshman is able to adopt the nickname 'Johnny Football?'"

In my search for answers I thought back to an awards presentation earlier this year that demonstrated how lame some nicknames have become and, thus, why "Johnny Football" was still available. Drew Brees, accepting an Espy this last summer, decided to thank his teammates by nickname, giving a shout out to "Sprolesy" (Darren Sproles), "Striefer" (Zach Strief) and "D.T." (David Thomas), among others. Alert from the nickname patrol: Simply adding a "y" or "er" to someone's name does not create a nickname, nor does simply calling someone by their initials.

Nicknames have historically added a great deal to the sports mosaic. Our sports conversations would be much poorer if we were not able to reference "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, Dick "Night Train" Lane, Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch and Dennis "Oil Can" Boyd. My favorite confluence of creative and memorable nicknames was the Oakland A's 1971 pitching staff, which included "Mudcat" Grant, "Blue Moon" Odom and "Catfish" Hunter. But nicknames need to arise organically, not in a contrived way. And they should also have some stickiness to them or they won't take.

Some athletes really don't need a nickname. An ill-considered effort took place in San Francisco in the early 1980s to come up with a nickname for 49ers quarterback Joe Montana. The contest produced such silly entries as "Cable Car Joe" and "Sourdough Joe." It was reminiscent of the Monty Python skit in which they tried to come up with a derogatory term for Belgians, only to suggest that the word "Belgian" might be enough. Guys named Elroy Hirsch and Dick Lane need nicknames, albeit for different reasons. A guy named Joe Montana? Not so much.

This is not to say that Johnny Football came into a nickname landscape completely barren of any offerings that rose

to the historical level of the "Galloping Ghost" (Red Grange). While the advent of political correctness would rule out another Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown, nicknames such as "Big Papi" (David Ortiz), "Kung Fu Panda" (Pablo Sandoval) and the "Flying Tomato" (Shaun White) are worthy.

I can already hear the voices chirping if I write a column about sports nicknames and do not mention ESPN's Chris Berman. While it would be tempting to put a few Bermanisms into the analysis of nicknames throughout sports history, I don't think Berman really intended for his nicknames to stick. Rather, they were a way to make a sportscast entertaining and to distinguish a fledgling network from other sports channels. Thus, I doubt anyone today calls Jim "Two Silhouettes On" Deshaies or Scott "Won't You Let Me Take You On A" Secules (two of my favorites) by their lyrically inspired, Berman-uttered names.

The name Johnny Football certainly has stickiness, partly because it was bestowed on him by an ardent fan base at Texas A&M, but primarily because Manziel created a playing persona to go with the name, remarkably in just 12 games.

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After all, it took Gordie Howe an entire (and long) career to be named "Mr. Hockey." Don Mattingly was well into his pro career before he was deemed "Donnie Baseball," though it is again surprising that Major League Baseball had been played for more than 100 years before anyone thought to hang such a name on a player. (Bob Uecker's facetious handle of "Mr. Baseball" doesn't count.) The closest thing in basketball parlance to Johnny Football may be the little known "Yommy Basket," the nickname for former Sam Houston State power forward Yommy Sangodeyi, probably the second-best player from Nigeria, behind his contemporary Hakeem "The Dream" Olajuwon.

So, Johnny Football, enjoy your new name. And if anyone tries to force a nickname upon your nickname by calling you "J.F.," don't let them. ■

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