

Just Paying Attention

By Mark London

Women's bowling made its annual return to ESPN for the finals of the USBC

Queens in May and now at this point as my eight regular readers know, I give a review about the show on its technical merits and general presentation. In this sentence, you read the comparisons of what works on cable-access TV verses national TV. Finally, in this sentence, I explain why this show looked like every other show of the last ten years.

But not this time. I liked this show on a couple of levels. First, the overhead camera framed the lanes and allowed us to see revolution rates and entry angles into the pocket. Combine that with great commentary from Marshall Holman, he knew when to be more detailed about what he saw, as well as when to use the broadcast cliché "that was a great shot." and let the replay tell the story.

Did you like the bowlers explaining to the camera their equipment arsenal? I loved it! The bowler explained what each ball is designed to do on the lane in a quick, easy to understand fashion. This is a fantastic way of getting to know the bowlers rather than basing an opinion solely on their competitive body language during a match. Sure, they are talking about bowling balls, but we get to hear them speak conversationally to us. Known as "the fourth wall" in television lingo, it refers to the person you see on the screen talking directly to you rather than interacting with everyone else on the screen. Why are some TV news anchors and talk show hosts liked more than others? Those that are well liked appear more personable to each individual viewer. This idea has to be looked at by the ESPN production crew for the PBA Tour for the upcoming season. It doesn't take any more money out of the production budget and better yet, 30-second segment can even have a sponsor. The suits would really like that.

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Even in the summary written for the annual PBA Yearbook, there appeared to be nothing special about this particular ABC Pro Bowlers Tour show. The first match featured Ron Williams and Ricky Ward in the King of the Hill segment, which Williams had parlayed into a notable string of consecutive TV appearances over the previous months. However, Ward was the victor in this one 194-167. The four-man stepladder format featured a couple of soon-to-be Hall of Famers, and two definite contenders. The show's tone certainly changed after the first match, a 200-199 Doug Kent win over Steve Jaros, especially if you did not know what was about to unfold. A retrospective on Bo Burton followed. Uh oh, is he leaving? Well, sort of. If you had not seen the *USA Today* article from that week, now you knew for sure. Just ten years ago this month on June 21, 1997, the first face of network TV bowling went away. No more Chris and Bo, no more King of the Hill matches, no more Tip of the Week, no more Saturday afternoons watching the show, then going out to practice what you had just seen. This was the final Pro Bowlers Tour telecast on ABC Television forever.

Sure there was ESPN on various days and times with Denny Schreiner and Mike Durbin, Jay Randolph and Earl Anthony on NBC in the '80s, but Chris Schenkel and Billy Welu and later Bo Burton were there first. Always the lead in to Wide World of Sports Saturday afternoons at 2:30 Central, then 2:00, the PBT was the peak of Saturday afternoon TV viewing from January through April. And now it was time to say goodbye, then wonder what was going to happen next.

The next montage before the Kent- Pete Weber semifinal was a look at the show since its earliest days in the '60s when shows were saved through kinescope, which was done thru the not-so-highly scientific process of pointing a film camera at a TV monitor

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and placing a microphone in front of the audio speaker, Videotaping was very expensive at the time. Hard for today's 20-something crowd to comprehend how TV watching was done without the graphic bars and replays from 10 different angles, but that's how television was in those early years. Before the Walter Ray Williams, Jr.-Weber finale, another montage featured broadcast legend Chris Schenkel, who was the first big-name sportscaster hired by ABC Sports chief Boone Arledge in the early '60s. That montage brought the crowd in attendance at St. Clair Bowl in downstate Fairview Heights, Illinois to their feet while Schenkel fought back tears.

By this time, it was hard to get into the match itself knowing within a few minutes what was going to unfold, or in this case what was going to be folded up and put away in our warm-and-fuzzy memory scrapbook of yesteryear. Walter Ray defeated Pete Dinklage in 1966 to get within a few hundred dollars of \$2 million in career winnings, but this TV finals was more than that. After a final montage showed familiar players who bowled on the show, Chris Schenkel and Bo Burton returned to the screen. Schenkel looked like he wanted to say more, but a voice from the control booth appeared to be talking in his ear telling him time was running out. Like a true professional, he said goodbye, followed by Burton. And that was it. The second longest sports series (35 years, followed by ABC's College Football) in American network TV history faded to black.

Renowned television shows leaving the air on their own terms get the privilege to wrap things up in a neat little package. Gunsmoke, All In The Family, M*A*S*H, Cheers, and Seinfeld, and The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson each got the farewell tour before taking a graceful final bow. (Who can forget the last two nights of Carson hosting The Tonight Show? It was network TV at its finest.) Shows getting

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cancelled get the kicked-to-the-curb treatment and don't get the chance to thank viewers before saying goodbye. It's a shame Schenkel was not given the chance to say a few more words, although the humble native Hoosier may not have wanted to. I know it's just a bowling show, but it's also about respect. After 35 years, buh-bye, see ya. I hate to think what ABC didn't do for Schenkel that week or the week after. Now that he's no longer with us, we'll never know.

What made things a bit queasy was the unanswered question of the PBA Tour's return to over-the-air network TV. Later that fall, CBS announced a two-year contract for '98 and '99, featuring an eight-man, three-match 60-minute show. Yikes. Things would certainly be different from now on.

The freefall dated back to 1994, with TV rights fees dropping from \$3.5 million in '93 to \$750,000, which corresponded to first place checks falling from the \$40,000-\$50,000 range to the \$13,000-\$18,000 range for the ABC televised shows. In '96, the network didn't pick up the tour until March rather than January (ESPN telecast those shows). Simply put, ABC Sports made more money on lower rated college basketball than the higher-rated Pro Bowlers' Tour. But no one knew how dire the situation would become by November 1999. Commissioner Mark Gerberich discovered the day before Thanksgiving the PBA would not be able to make payroll the following week. Microsoft executive Chris Peters had contacted him on and off in the prior months about buying the tour outright. Just before closing the office that Wednesday afternoon, the phone rang. It was Chris Peters. And the rest, my friend, is history.

Next month, a recap of the annual goings on in Merrillville at our version of Q School known as the PBA Tour Trials along with another edition of Pro Shop 401.