

“TELLING IT LIKE IT IS” A TRIBUTE TO HOWARD COSELL

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Over the weekend Howard Cosell was pronounced dead. He immediately argued that the doctor was in no position to make that call.¹

On April 23, 1995, Howard William Cohen died at the age of seventy-seven from a heart embolism. Better known as “Howard Cosell,” he was one of the most famous voices to ever grace the world of sports. Howard Cosell’s trademark nasal, staccato monotone voice, filled the American air and radio-waves for almost forty years. He was the first sportscaster to truly bring an investigative edge to the world of sports journalism. Cosell set out to revolutionize the sports broadcasting industry and succeeded, by asking the questions that no one else dared. Cosell was much more than just a voice or a face. Cosell was perhaps the single most influential sports broadcaster ever.

Howard Cosell was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He studied English Literature at New York University with the hopes of becoming a newspaper reporter, but was persuaded by his parents to pursue a career in law. Cosell attended New York University School of Law, where he was editor of the law review before graduating in 1940. Cosell served a brief stint in the Army during which time he was married. Upon rejoining the civilian ranks, Cosell returned to his legal practice representing such clients as the United States Little League and the television writers union. When Cosell first entered the world of sports in 1954, for a \$250.00 per week radio job, he left behind eight years of law practice and a \$30,000 per year salary. As one author noted, Cosell “made his entrance into the world of sports, stoop-shouldered under the weight of a forty-pound tape recorder that he carried on his back like some slightly de-

1. Bill Maher, *Soundbites*, ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY, 51 (May 12, 1995).

mented word Sherpa from Brooklyn.”²

More than just a pretty faced ex-athlete or a polished play-by-play announcer, Cosell was the first sports broadcaster to bring an advocate's passion to the realm of sports announcing. Cosell was quick to recognize and give his opinions on the “landmark legal struggles in sports — Curt Flood's challenge to baseball's reserve clause and the NFL's antitrust exemption, among others.”³ Cosell's approach changed the way sports broadcasts and interviews were conducted. No longer were athletes spoon-fed questions contrived to make them look better and keep the American sports viewing public in the dark. Instead, Cosell challenged and probed the athletes in a manner that was different from the norm. Exemplifying this “new” style of sports journalism was an interview Cosell conducted with a leading college basketball standout. Cosell told the young star that the interview would be a simple dialogue. After introducing the player as the country's top scorer and all-around talent, Cosell began intensely grilling the young man about his alleged selfish ballhandling habits. That was Cosell, always pushing for the truth, so he could “tell it like it is.” This style was not easy for many to digest, especially those that had been accustomed to the bland diatribe that was the world of pre-Cosell sports broadcasting. It may have been this fresh approach to sports broadcasting that led Cosell to be considered, in a 1970 TV Guide poll, the most despised and the most beloved sportscaster in America.⁴

It is easy for one to see why Cosell could win both awards. Cosell stimulated the American public with his probing questions and his unending mission to put sports, athletes and coaches on a personal level for the home audience. However, he frustrated many with his often harsh criticisms and his constant support of minority rights. While Cosell is famous for many interviews and stories, what put him in the national spotlight for good was his coverage of, and his relationship with, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Cosell, was perhaps the only sports announcer tough enough to stand in the ring with the silver-tongued Ali after the champion's

2. Bruce Newman, *Howard Cosell*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED — 40TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE, 104 (September 19, 1994).

3. *Id.* at 106.

4. *Id.* at 105.

bouts. Cosell enlightened and enraged different portions of America when he began quickly to refer to the champion as "Ali" following the boxer's conversion to Islam. Again, Cosell found his advocate's passion when the champion refused induction into the Army during the Vietnam War. "Cosell was among the first and one of the few figures in the sports world to publicly support Ali's stand on constitutional grounds."⁵ This stance was of course not the popular choice, but Cosell was a man of great conviction and stood his ground.

Howard Cosell was more than just a sportscaster. His intelligence and ability to create fantastic interviews transcended the world of sports. Cosell could be heard on various radio shows, discussing the affairs of the day with such persons as former Governor of New York, Nelson A. Rockefeller, former Mayor of New York City, John V. Lindsay, and political columnist, William F. Buckley, Jr.⁶ Cosell also became a producer and the president of Legend Productions, Inc., whose sports documentaries received prime network time.⁷ Indeed, the network executives at the American Broadcasting Company ("ABC") thought so much of his ability that he was given a prime-time slot for his own variety show. However, it was then ABC Sports president Roone Arledge, who created for Cosell his most famous platform . . . *Monday Night Football*. Cosell reached his peak during his years as a commentator on ABC's *Monday Night Football*. Cosell is credited with turning the program into the American institution it is today.

Ironically, one incident during a Monday night game forever changed the path of Cosell's career. On September 5, 1983, during a game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Washington Redskins, Cosell was extolling the virtues of Redskins receiver Alvin Garret. Garret played a superb first half and Cosell made the comment: "that little monkey gets loose doesn't he?"⁸ This single comment stirred up a national controversy. Was Cosell a racist or not? Spearheading the attack on Cosell's reputation were the President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, The Reverend Joseph E.

5. *Id.*

6. Myron Cope, "Would You Let This Man Interview You?", *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, 94 (Mar. 21, 1994).

7. *Id.* at 96.

8. HOWARD COSELL, I NEVER PLAYED THE GAME 331 (1985).

Lowery, and a writer for the Washington Post, Leonard Shapiro. Shapiro's articles fanned the flames of racial tension over Cosell's comment. Cosell himself was amazed by the uproar. While Cosell admitted that the comment was insensitive, he noted that he heaped praise on Garret for the entire first half. Indeed, many prominent African-American leaders, such as The Reverend Jesse Jackson, Georgetown University basketball coach John Thompson, and Dr. Harry Edwards, professor of sociology at the University of California-Berkeley, wrote or phoned Cosell with words of support. The irony of this incident is painfully obvious today. Cosell, himself a minority, was always considered a proponent of equal rights, since his days defending Ali and serving on the board of directors of the Jackie Robinson Foundation.⁹ He supported Tommie Smith, the American sprinter who raised his gloved fist in a black power salute while being awarded a gold medal at the 1968 Olympics. He was persistent in thrashing Major League Baseball for its obvious, if not intentional, lack of black managers. Cosell was sensitive to and disgusted with the way African-Americans were treated. The American public's rush to judgment as a result of this incident, combined with a growing disgust with what he perceived to be the rampant corruption and "sleaze" in boxing, led Cosell to retire from the broadcast booth. After his departure, Cosell was viewed by the sports broadcast industry as bitter toward his former profession. His scathing book, *I Never Played the Game*, blasted many notables of the sports world and was perceived as a culmination of his bitterness.

Howard Cosell was a man who dedicated his life to sport. Cosell could be, as he described himself, "arrogant, pompous, obnoxious, vain, cruel, persecuting, distasteful, verbose, a showoff,"¹⁰ but he was also honest and forthright. Cosell often pontificated that he lacked "sufficient mediocrity" to survive in the sports entertainment business.

In 1986, while under cross examination in the USFL's \$1.5 billion lawsuit against the NFL, Cosell was asked by one NFL law-

9. *Id.* at 335-336. The Jackie Robinson Foundation, which originated in 1972, is an organization dedicated to the struggle for human rights and equal opportunity for minorities. From the inception of the Foundation to the time of his death, Cosell served as Vice Chairman. *Id.*

10. Robert Lipsyte, *Howard Cosell Dies at Age 77*, STAR TRIBUNE (MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL), 1C (April 24, 1995).

yer to confirm his oft-quoted assertion that he was one of the three great men of American TV, along with Walter Cronkite and Johnny Carson. Cosell told it like it was: "I feel I'm a unique personality who . . . has had more impact upon sports broadcast in America than any person who has yet lived." He was, after all, under oath.¹¹

Howard Cosell may have never "played the game," but he always "told it like it was." In life, Cosell, will be remembered as a sportscaster who brought an advocate's passion, integrity and inquisitiveness to the events that he covered. In death, he should be remembered as a man who brought the art of the sportscast to a new level, and in so doing completely altered the way Americans listen to and watch sports. He will be missed.

11. Newman, *supra* note 2, at 107-108.