"Sonny...Just Like in Money
and the Making of "Broadway Joe""

Pre-Game

Would you rather be young, single, rich, famous, talented, energetic and happy?
—or President.
—Joe Namath

Thanks to television, pro football is a multi-billion-dollar industry. With seventy percent of American consumers self-identifying as fans, the National Football League last season generated revenues of $13.68 billion with the average franchise valued at $2.5 billion.

The NFL's thirty-two teams in 2017 each received $355 million from their shared pool of television monies from a total figure of over $8 billion.

The crucial step in pro football's evolution may well have taken place on January 2, 1965. On that day, the consummate showman secured the services of pro football's first genuine media sensation, all under the watchful glaze of the television camera.

First Quarter

I don't know whether you'll play on our team or make a picture for Universal.
—Sonny Werblin to Joe Namath

The notion of sports as entertainment is the innovation of David "Sonny" Werblin. He fundamentally transformed the pro game by bringing a show business aesthetic to football. "I believe in the star system," was his mantra. "It's who you put on stage or the playing field that draws people." Sonny cut his teeth by brokering deals for Frank Sinatra, Johnny Carson, and Ronald Reagan.

"No one had better contacts. Know more secrets, swapped more information, flew more airline miles, ate more meals at "21", made more deals, or sold so many hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of programming" than Sonny.

Overseeing MCA-TV's sublime contribution to the business of broadcasting was "the package deal!" What Henry Ford was to the automobile, Sonny was to television. MCA-TV would sell and re-sell programs (westerns, sitcoms, variety shows) pieced together from its assembly-line of actors, directors, writers, and production personnel.

Such was its dominance, that MCA-TV was deemed a "virtual monopoly" by the Justice Department and was successfully sued on anti-trust grounds.

Rudolph Camenaty

Fighting his way to big-time sports, Sonny realized, sooner than most, that football provided the perfect convergence of mass consumption and mass media.

Sonny officially became a part of the pro game after enrolling to blow with Harry Wiener, owner of the New York Titans. Wiener had hired an anti-Semitic slur at Sonny one night at the 21 Club.

Vowing "I'm going to own your team," Sonny and his partners picked up the team for $1.3 million dollars in bankruptcy court last month.

Putting on practice every hour he learned in Hollywood, Sonny remade the team in his own image, the image of success.

The rechristened New York Jets, in their sparkling green uniforms, would soon be awning 62,720 fans a game at the new Shea Stadium right next door to the 1965 New York World's Fair.

Second Quarter

The following program is brought to you in living color on NBC.

—NBC promo

Before acquiring the Jets, Sonny played a pivotal role in consummating the relationship between pro football and television. Back then each franchise sold its over-the-air broadcasting rights to the given media market.

But football, unlike other team sports, consists of one game a week, and at the time played only on Sundays.

The American Football League came up with a revolutionary idea: a league-wide television contract. All teams would place their broadcasting rights for the full league schedule into a single pot for sale to the highest bidder.

In turn, each team received an equal share of the total figure, irrespective of market size.

Negotiated in 1960 by Sonny, on behalf of the AFL, and ABC, the first league-wide contract was for $8.5 million over five seasons.

Peter Rolfe, the wunderkind commissioner of the NFL, made the league-wide contract fit his own, thus setting the paradigm for all future negotiations between professional football and the television networks.

Five years after the AFL-ABC initial pact with ABC, Sonny made an even bigger deal with NBC for $36 million for five seasons. Soon the league and the network realized both would benefit from NBC advancing $1.25 million in anticipated TV monies, so AFL teams could trade their NFL counterparts in signing top college prospects.

Third Quarter

With that kind of salary, Joe Namath will be playing quarterback in a business suit.
—Bob Hope

For Sonny, the elements of the 'package' were nearly all in place. Shea Stadium provided the stage. The inherent drama of athletic competition meant the script would write itself. But "a million-dollar jet is worthless if you put a $2,000 actor in the main role!"

What he needed was a star.

He found his star in Joe Willie Namath, a quarterback from the University of Alabama by way of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. Western Pennsylvania had long been fertile ground for football players. Coach Rose Bryan's Crimson Tide had a winning tradition. But Sonny was looking for something more.

Like Sinatra a generation earlier, Sonny saw what Namath had: "He's got the face and the eyes. Women tell you bedroom eyes. He's got that animal sex appeal!"

He knew instinctively Namath had a stage-presence that few personalities, in or out of sports, could match.

In 1964 Namath was drafted by both the Jets and the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals. Both organizations pursued Namath with interest, but Sonny did it with class as well as cash. Whereas the Cardinals bullied at Joe's open demands of $200,000 and a Lincoln Continental, Sonny simply smiled.

Money wasn't the issue, as he upheld the ante to $300,000. As for the Jets, he threw in the car without giving it a second thought. Sonny was casting a spectacle for television. He knew if the "casting" was right, the deal would make more than pay for itself.

Namath was represented by Mike Bitts, an Alabama real estate attorney, was the only lawyer Namath knew personally and he had one impressive credential, the confidence of Coach Bryant.

Sawyer but inexperienced, he told the Cardinals: "You're talking about a ball and I'm talking about a star." He and Sonny spoke the same language.

Widely reported as a $400,000 acquisition of a swinging college quarterback with questionable issue, the deal, which was for three years with an option for a fourth, was all-business. It provided for a signature bonus paid-out in deferred payments, it took care of Namath's relatives, it covered Bitts' fee and it included the Lincoln, of course.

Both sides played coy as to specifics in order to generate media speculation. More than fifty years later, there are the actual terms of the contract signed by Werblin and Namath before the cameras on January 2, 1965:

1965 salary $25,000
1966 salary $25,000
1967 salary $25,000
1968 option year (renegotiable upward) $25,000
Bonus (deferred) $300,000
Lawyer's fee (10% of salary package) $30,000
Jet-greens Lincoln Continental automobile $7,000
Brother's salary as scout for three years $30,000
Brother's salary as scout for three years $30,000
Brother-in-law's salary as scout for three years $30,000
Total $427,000

Garnering an avalanche of publicity that you couldn't buy for a million dollars, the signing pep'd the public's fancy in New York and around the country. Overnight a star was born as Joe Namath became "Broadway Joe."

Fourth Quarter

Hey, I got news for you. We are going to win Sunday. I'll guarantee you.
—Joe Namath

Jets season ticket sales took off with word of the team's rise to the top of 2,800 the first week, with 35,600 season tickets being sold in his first season with the team.

With Broadway Joe at quarterback, the Jets routinely sold out Shea Stadium, averaging 88,000 fans a game.

He was an instant box-office success. In football terms, Broadway Joe proved himself worth every penny. During his first season in 1965, he was the AFL Rookie of the Year; two years later he became the first quarterback in either league to pass for 4,000 yards, and he was named the NFL's Most Valuable Player in 1968 and 1969.

The true payoff came when the jets upset Sen BROADWAY JOE, Page 21
the Baltimore Colts in Super Bowl III. Despite being 18-point underdogs, the Jets won 16-7. Broadway Joe burnished his legend by not only winning the game, but by publicly guaranteeing victory.

The "guarantee" as it became known captured the zeitgeist of the times. Having beaten the establishment on his own terms, Broadway Joe would forever be associated with the rebellious Sixties. Transcending the football firmament, the ostentatiously apostolic Namath even found himself on Richard Nixon's "Enemies List."

Post-Game

Baseball may be the national pastime, but pro football has become the national obsession.

-Time Magazine

In 1968, Sonny lost control of the Jets, having been bought out by his partners. However, he would be back. In the 1970s, as head of the New Jersey Sports & Exposition Authority, he created the Meadowlands Sports Complex, luring the New York Giants to New Jersey. During the 1980s he was also the CEO of Madison Square Garden. 14

So the charge of some New Yorkers, the Jets have not won another championship. Perhaps it was something of a Faustian bargain that Warnam and Namath struck. A few moments of glory were exchanged for fifty seasons of mediocrity. What the football gods giveth, they taketh away.

The team has yet to find another marquee quarterback to take the place of Broadway Joe, on or off the field. Not have they ever found someone of Sonny's caliber to take the helm of the organization. Wherever the answer lies for the unglamorous New York Jets, something larger was also at play that goes beyond the fortunes of a single franchise.

The huge sums generated from television fundamentally transformed the game, making pro football a phenomenon of unparalleled dimensions. Who won or who lost was still important. No one roots for a loser.

But more important to the overall scheme of things was the fact that pro football had won the battle for the entertainment dollar. It was this victory that truly made the NFL a cultural touchstone for the American people. And it all began with the knock-out combination of Warnam and Namath and national television in 1965.

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4. 2.
7. The television division of the Music Corporation of America.
8. Robert H. Boyle, Show Biz Sonny and His Quest for Fame, Sports Illustrated (July 19, 1965).
9. Thomas, supra n.5.
11. Id.
13. Carrus, supra n. 6, at 161.
14. The American Football League (AFL) was a rival league made up of owners who were denied expansion franchises by the NFL. The AFL merged with the NFL in 1970.
15. Carrus, supra n.13, at 132.
17. Carrus, supra n.13, at 132.
18. Miller, supra n.16, at 145.
20. Carrus, supra n.6, at 166.
22. Sonny Namath's son, Joseph Alexander Namath, the "Willie" came from his playing days at Alabama.
24. It has been asserted by various sources that the Cardinals were acting on behalf of the New York Giants.
28. Roberts and Krzemeinski, supra n.15.
29. Carrus, supra n.6, at 166.