

TELEVISION

The Stories of Their Time

ESPN's 30 for 30 fields a rich lineup of documentaries

The drug baron Pablo Escobar explodes onto the screen six minutes into *The Two Escobars*. The thrilling documentary from ESPN's 30 for 30 series explores the rise and fall of Colombian soccer during its era of narco-fútbol, the deadly marriage of the country's cocaine cartels and soccer clubs that contributed to the death of Andrés Escobar, a defender for the 1994 Colombian World Cup team (and no relation to Pablo). Pablo arrives in the film as a larger-than-life figure: speeding on his motorcycle through the grounds of Hacienda Napoles, his opulent playground ranch in Puerto Triunfo, in a scene that promises a ride unlike any sports documentary the viewer has ever seen.

In the same year that ESPN broadcast *The Decision*, the self-aggrandizing shamathon

featuring LeBron James, the network also produced some of its finest content since its inception in 1979. ESPN debuted 23 documentaries this year as part of 30 for 30, including arguably the four best documentaries of the series (*The Two Escobars*, *Once Brothers*, *The Best That Never Was* and *June 17th*, 1994). "We wanted to tell interesting stories that stood on their own," says Connor Schell, an ESPN Films executive producer and one of the men behind 30 for 30. "But we also wanted to tell a larger story collectively of what sports meant to the era, and where sports intersected with the era."

What started as a one-paragraph e-mail from ESPN.com writer Bill Simmons to his bosses three years ago about making documentaries on some of the iconic sports moments of ESPN's history has morphed into a critically praised franchise. The network tapped three groups of filmmakers for the project: those who had made significant sports films (such as Barry Levinson and Ron Shelton); accomplished documentarians with a built-in audience (Alex Gibney, Barbara Kopple, Steve James, Albert Maysles); and fresh voices, including Jeff and Michael Zimbalist, the codirectors of *The Two Escobars*, and Jonathan Hock, whose *The Best That Never Was* brilliantly chronicles the life of Oklahoma schoolboy football legend Marcus Dupree. The mix of directors provided a fascinating mélange of subjects and storytelling.

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TELLING MOMENTS This own goal by Andrés Escobar (yellow) was at the tragic heart of one of 30 for 30's illuminating series of films.

While 30 for 30 had misses (*Marion Jones: Press Pause*, *The House of Steinbrenner* and *Silly Little Game* were all muddled), collectively the series helped legitimize ESPN within the film industry. So impressive was *The Two Escobars* that it screened as an official selection at the film festivals of Cannes, Los Angeles and Tribeca, and at Amsterdam's documentary festival, the biggest in the world. ESPN executives say they are committed to long-form storytelling and want to be a player in the genre along with HBO Sports. "Documentaries are not medicine," said Schell. "They can be entertaining, interesting, informative, thoughtful and innovative in form."

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KEN BURNS'S rich and unblinking documentary, *The Tenth Inning*, which aired on PBS in September, makes it clear how deeply baseball's steroid era has stained the game. But the film also reminds us that the years from 1992 to 2009 defined our national pastime as much as any other period has—changing the way we evaluate not only sports, but also ourselves as fans. The film's core story is about how the most hallowed record in all sports fell to possibly the most polarizing figure ever to play the game, Barry Bonds. Burns strips away Bonds's exterior, shows how jealousy and ego fueled the late chapters of his career and makes the case that, in the end, Bonds's pursuit of baseball immortality left fans feeling a mix of anger and apathy.

HIGH Brow Beat LOW



AN NFL SEASON marked by the issue of concussions was kicked off in rambunctious style by a show called *Hard Knocks*. The HBO reality series followed the Jets for five weeks in training camp and, thanks largely to always-candid coach Rex Ryan, became a must-see for football fans, earning the highest ratings in the franchise's six-year history. All-Pro cornerback Darrelle Revis's contract dispute provided a key story line, but Ryan's profanity-laced rants in locker rooms and meetings (immortalized on YouTube) turned *Hard Knocks* into one of the most compelling, and oddly endearing, shows of 2010. —R.H.

DAVID BERGMAN (RYAN); HENZ KLUTWEIER (BONDS); CHRIS HUTTON/ESPN (DARKE); GABRIEL BOUVS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES (DOVONAN); NIKE/AP (WOODS); RICH ARDEN/ESPN/PEPA (LEBRON); HENZ KLUTWEIER (THE FOOT); AL HELMANS (SHULMAN); JEFF NEHRAY/CBS (JOHNSON); ALMESHESCHMIDT/GETTY IMAGES (PEREIRA); BILL RECORDS/ABC (MONTY BRINTON); GUY LAWRENCE/ABC (MARIOTT); MONTY BRINTON/CBS (JOHNSON); COURTESY OF SPIKE TV (BLUE); COURTESY OF VERSUS (TOCHO SHOW)



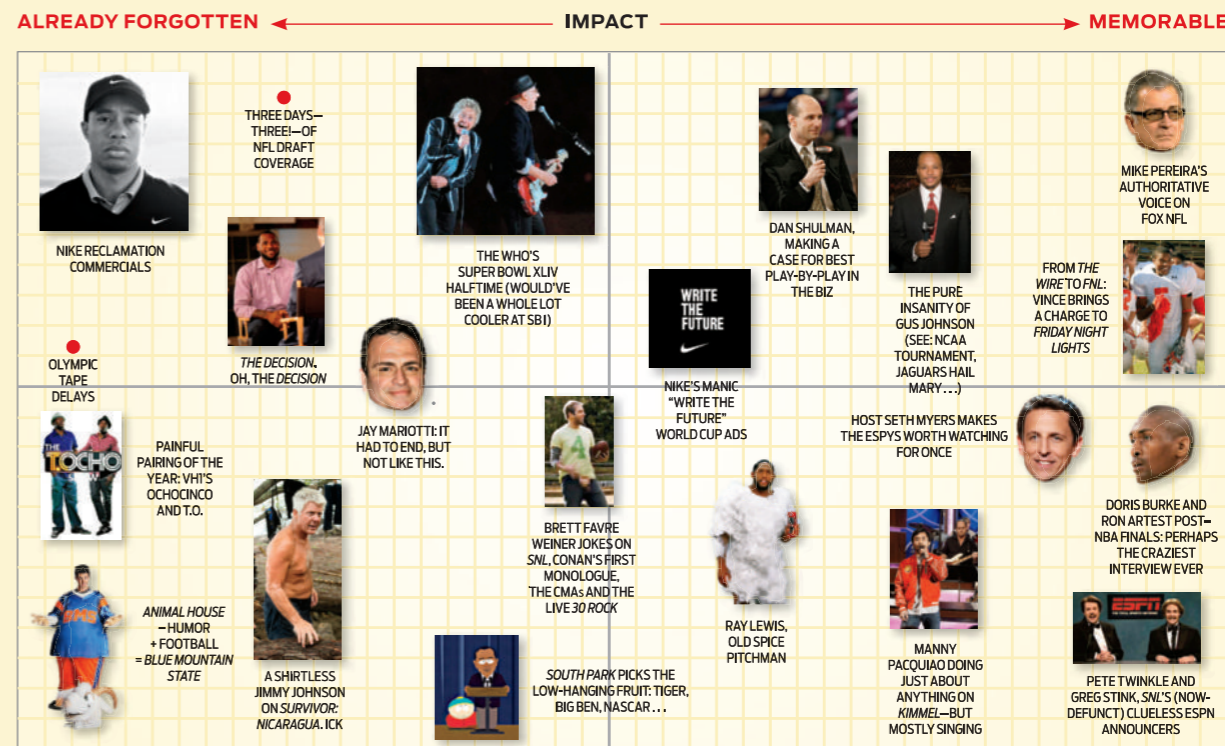
SPOTLIGHT Darke Knight

Whether soccer is ever embraced in the U.S. as a truly major spectator sport remains to be seen. If it is, one man will be due much of the credit. Longtime English announcer **Ian Darke** burst onto the American TV scene last June with his indelible call of one of the biggest moments of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa (go to YouTube and type in "Donovan goal") and has become the voice of soccer for U.S. audiences after accepting a reported three-year offer from ESPN following the tournament. Darke terms the move, "a new lease on life." After calling games for Sky Sports in England for some 20 years, Darke says, he wanted a new challenge. Part of that challenge? Helping to get the U.S. up to speed with the rest of the world in the global game. "It's important we don't talk down to the audience," Darke says. "We want to call [the game] in an authentic way." Authentic, of course, meaning non-American.

But that doesn't mean soccer can't flourish in the States, especially with more games and moments called by Darke, such as Donovan's game-winner over Algeria. "[That goal]," he says, "was just a sort of ... orgasmic moment." —R.H.



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LOOKING AHEAD 2011



LIKE TO LAUGH? Like watching sports on TV? Then look no further than *The Onion*—"America's Finest News Source"—coming to a small screen near you. **Onion SportsDome**, a scripted, half-hour program capturing the absurdity of modern sports coverage will premiere on Comedy Central next month. Anchors Alex Reiser and Mark Shepard (left) will host, providing "in-your-face coverage of hard-hitting sports news stories," with headlines such as "Yankees Build New Vacation Stadium in the Hamptons," and "Michael Vick Getting Confident enough To Do Something Terrible Again." Sounds like a must-see for area sports fans. —Ryan Hatch