

# Olbermann Back At ESPN To Talk Sports And Hate On The Media

BY MARY MCNAMARA  
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Keith Olbermann's back and he knows you missed him during all those long months since he quit his Current TV gig (or years since he left MSNBC), even if you didn't know it yourself. And so on Monday night he returned to ESPN where, he will be happy to remind you every eight minutes or so, he helped found ESPN2 and perfect "SportsCenter."

He named this ESPN2 show "Olbermann," as if he were an iconic motor company or a beer, and opened it in classic Olbermann-ic style. "As I was saying," he greeted the camera, that careful quirk of a smile punctuating a pickup line so smugly flirtatious that it could have been lifted from Season 1 of "The Newsroom," which Olbermann claims to have inspired (though not Season 2, which is slightly less smug, certainly less flirtatious and better.)

And then he was off, on a 10-minute, breathless rattling rant about New York Jet Coach Rex Ryan and his decision to play quarterback Mark Sanchez in an exhibition game during which he was injured. Well, not so much a discussion of the incident as of the coverage of the incident, starting with a New York Daily News reporter's tweet that Ryan should be fired, which led to a spurious feeding frenzy and, according to Olbermann, the death of reporting in America (cue, literally, a headstone with "Reporting" engraved on it).

So, nothing overstated or sensational. During his searing indictment of American media (he knows he's part of it, right — the media?) and popular culture, Olbermann managed to reference Miley Cyrus, Chris Christie, President Obama and I think "Brigadoon," though that may have come later. He couldn't quite bring himself to work in "Sharknado" (oh, but it's lonely on the high road) though he did, and honestly this may be worth a Peabody or at least a Kids Choice Award, manage to pointedly correct the misconception that Will Smith and family had been caught on camera at the VMAs slack-jawed with horror over Miley twerking. Internet-fueled urban myth!



Olbermann

They were really slack-jawed with horror over Lady GaGa's performance, Olbermann revealed. So glad we got that straightened out.

But Olbermann wasn't just rehashing a now-5-day-old story about an exhibition game injury to prove that he knows how to accurately caption a VMA photo. He was using it as an Important Example of the De-evolution of Journalism in the Internet Age. "Even in this time of media madness," he said, hitting his signature syncopated syllables like any good preacher, Shakespearean or snake oil salesman, "where controversy has replaced reporting and at least one dying medium is doing anything short of armed robbery to get a dollar out of you, Rex Ryan must be wondering just what on God's gangrened earth is happening to him."

Of course he has a point; Olbermann always has a point, which he makes by swinging admirably through garlands of verbiage like Tarzan through the jungle vines. He's just having too much fun to realize that the jungle is a sound stage and the vines have been placed to ensure maximum swingage.

While KO (as he was referred to throughout the night by graphic devices announcing the various guests) was railing against the dangers of social media sound-bites, chasing clicks, manufacturing controversy and the quest to self-brand, he was doing pretty much all of those things: poking the Daily News (a famously contentious publication), rerunning and scathingly narrating news conferences, both empowering and lambasting Twitter (#haveitbothways) and generally mashing up his subject matter into such an unrecognizable stew it could only be identified by one term: "Olbermann."

Then he trotted out Jason Whitlock, who is black, and asked him to say a few words about racism.

OK, first they talked a bit about the life of the star athlete in the dog-eat-dog world of digital journalism — "We're all just fodder to be eaten and used to prop up some-

one else's relevance," Whitlock said — but then they somehow segued to race, which allowed Whitlock to imagine the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. speaking only to black athletes and chastising them for forgetting their roots.

"So much of the culture is build up your Twitter feed, your celebrity, your platform," he said. "The whole popular culture is so individualist, so denigrating to black masses as a whole."

Actually, that is pretty smart, as was much of what Whitlock had to say. His appearance and their conversation was, in fact, the highpoint of the hour. Still, some of its power was lost in its blatant positioning (hey, isn't it the anniversary of the March on Washington or something?) and the fact that it was followed by features including "Keith Lights," an overly narrated series of sports clips, many of them quite funny, and "This Week in Keith History" didn't help much either.

It is probably not a great idea to argue against the snark-factor, speculative nature and bite-sizafication of bloggy / tweety news when you have a feature called "The Worst Person in the Sports World" (a re-tread of the Current TV "Worst Person the World") in which you deride people for their spelling mistakes and make a big deal out of the Farmers Almanac predicting a disastrous snow storm for this year's Super Bowl. Though you have to love the Farmers Almanac reference.

There was also an interview with Mark Cuban, that was mostly a rehash of his appearance on Leno, and a feature called "Time Marches On," which features Instagram and YouTube videos of athletes, some famous, some not, doing odd things.

All of which was presented in high Olbermann fashion, that tangy mix of self-deprecation and utter arrogance, truth-telling and self-indulgent horse hockey, the poetic and the morbidly self-righteous. He is truly an embodiment of opposing forces, evoking same — you love him, you hate him, you hate to love him or love to hate him, it doesn't matter. He's honestly just happy you're watching him talk.

In other words, he hasn't changed a bit.

## NBC Trying To Create Big Event With Game

NEW YORK (AP) — A giant hourglass structure being built on the rooftop of an abandoned Manhattan car dealership may look like Godzilla's futuristic toy but instead represents NBC's hope for the television event of the season.

It's the set for "The Million Second Quiz," a prime-time competition with Ryan Seacrest as host that will play out over two weeks starting Sept. 9. Someone adept at trivia will win a \$2 million prize on the Sept. 19 finale.

More than a game, the event is a peek into the future of broadcast television.

With the sources for quality content expanding along with the ability of viewers to watch when and how they want, showing big live events like football games and awards shows is becoming the most reliable way broadcast networks can draw a big crowd and distinguish themselves from rivals.

"The rewards of doing the same thing every day are relatively small in TV land these days," said Paul Telegdy, head of alternative and late-night programming at NBC Entertainment. "We have to be taking risks. We have to be doing things to scale. We have to do everything we can to energize the audience."

NBC moved quickly to build the show from scratch after Telegdy heard a pitch from executive producer Stephen Lambert last December. There's the physical structure, which includes a chamber for the top four players to stay day and night, and a duplicate indoor set in case of rain. Three truck trailers provide 600,000 watts of generator power.

Producers also needed to build the infrastructure of the game: composing nearly 25,000 quiz questions, processing applications for the estimated 800 to 1,000 participants in the round-the-clock contest, and building an app that allows people to play at home. The free tablet app became available two weeks ago; NBC won't say how many have been downloaded, but estimated that 4.5 million "bouts" have already been played online.

With the play-at-home app, NBC hopes to capture the imagination of people who have grown accustomed to watching television with a second screen open.

"If things play out the way we hope things play out, we could be changing the course of television" with the integration of digital and viewer participation, said David Hurwitz, an executive producer.

Seacrest is a big "get" for producers. Sure, the "American Idol" host seems to be everywhere, but his presence will signal to many viewers that "The Million Second Quiz" is worth checking out, Hurwitz said.

"It was something that really stood out to me as big and different and ambitious, something I had not truly done to this level before," Seacrest said. "I've hosted game shows in the past, but none to this caliber. I love the live event aspect of it."

## Summer

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**COMING-OF-AGE COMEDY YOU HOPE YOUR KIDS WON'T EMULATE** — "The To Do List."

**COMEDY YOU HOPE THEY WILL** — "The Way, Way Back"

**BEST LIBATION** — Beer, so vital to saving humanity in "The World's

End," such a grand social lubricant for romance in "Drinking Buddies," and a sea monster repellent in "Grabbers."

**BEST HORROR PICTURE** — "The Purge." "You're on your own" politics debunked by science fiction.

**SEQUELS NOBODY ASKED FOR** — "RED 2," "Smurfs 2," "Kick-Ass 2," "Percy Jackson 2."

**ONE DRINK OVER THE LINE** — "The Hangover Part III."

**WORST TIMING** — "White

House Down," too soon after "Olympus Has Fallen," and "The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones," good enough for April but a disaster in August.

**BEST POPCORN PIC** — "World War Z" with its ant-piles of zombies scrambling over walls.

**MOST VIOLENT** — "You're Next."

**BEST CAR** — The Jensen Interceptor wheeled by Michelle Rodriguez through "Fast & Furious 6."

**BEST FAREWELL TOUR** — The "Shaun of the Dead" team takes one last bow together with "The World's End."

**WORST PRODUCT PLACEMENT** — Google in "The Internship." Some say a passable Owen Wilson / Vince Vaughn comedy was stillborn thanks to its celebration of the hydra-headed tech company.

**THE GREATEST GATSBY** — Leo, who made this one work and made it a hit.

**BEST RAPTURE PICTURE** — "This is the End," co-starring Craig Robinson.

**WORST RAPTURE PICTURE** — "Rapture-Palooza," co-starring Craig Robinson.

**WORST PICTURE** — Disney's "Planes," the nadir of a weak summer for children's animation.

**BIGGEST BOMB** — "R.I.P.D." lost even more money than "The Lone Ranger." Which is saying something.

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