

# Televising a game not as easy as ABC

By MATT HERB  
and MARK BRENNAN  
Collegian Sports Writers

Amid miles of cable, dozens of video cameras and several million dollars worth of other assorted electronic gadgetry, they do their work. There are about 80 of them all together, plugging things in, turning knobs, throwing switches, creating in the end, a web of wires and lenses throughout Beaver Stadium. They do their work quickly. Technicians dash in and out, preparing every detail and double checking to make sure everything is done fast and done right.

That was the scene when ABC rolled into Happy Valley three weeks ago along with the Crimson Tide. Alabama left with a disappointing loss under their belts, but the network was considerably more successful.

As a result of their work, millions watched Penn State nip Alabama 19-17 with Keith Jackson and Frank Broyles bringing it to the eyes and ears of a grateful nation.

But football fans weren't the only ones thankful for ABC's coverage. Penn State athletics picked up \$280,000 for allowing the network carry the Alabama game, and another \$200,000 when West Virginia came to town, Assistant Athletic Director Fran Fisher said. A former announcer for the Penn State Football Radio Network, Fisher added that since the University's athletic teams are self-supporting, the money is an important source of revenue.

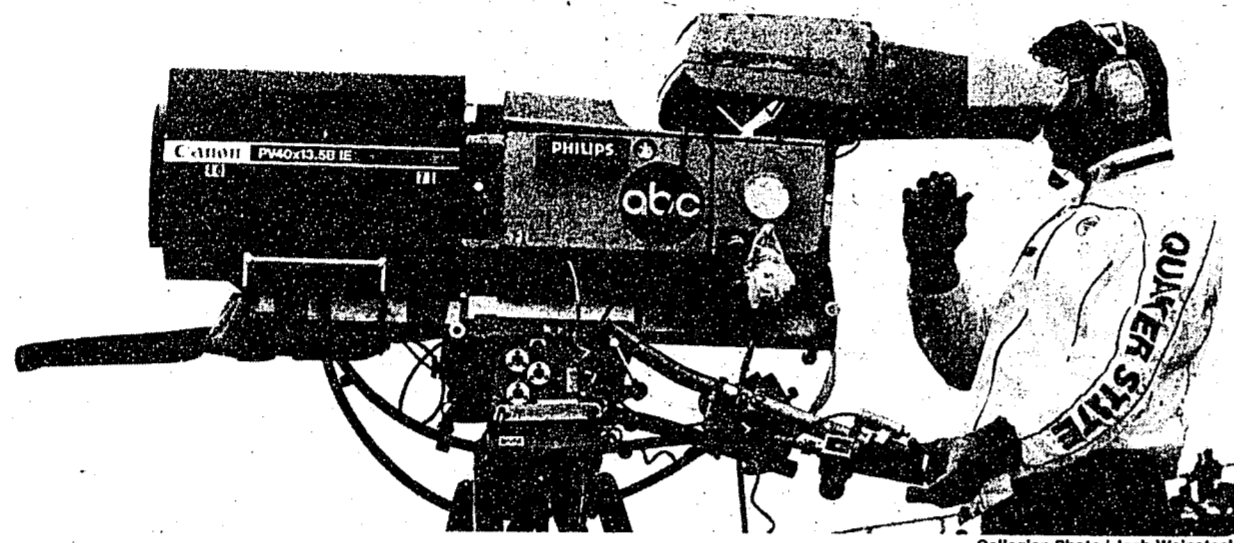
For nearly twenty years, the NCAA and ABC have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. One of the reasons for the network's success in broadcasting college football has been the experienced hand of Donn Bernstein, ABC's director of college athletics.

There probably aren't many ABC higher-ups who perform their jobs with the same flair as Bernstein. While many of his colleagues spend their days wearing three-piece suits, working 9-to-5 desk jobs in the network's Manhattan offices, Bernstein roams the nation in a purple ABC Sports baseball jacket, corduroy pants, and worn docksiders. But despite his casual appearance, he is one of the network's most knowledgeable people when it comes to putting together a college football broadcast.

"What seems to be monumental to an outsider is relatively routine to our crew," Bernstein said. "To anybody outside you see eight zillion miles of cable and three trailers and all that stuff, but it's really quite routine."

But on the Friday before the game, it seems anything but the orderly, well-oiled machine that Bernstein described. Technicians scramble in and out of the three cramped trailer trucks parked along the outer rim of the west side stands. Telephones ring off their hooks, dozens of video screens display everything from panoramic shots of the stadium's interior, to All My Children to MTV.

Inside the tape truck — an entire tractor trailer devoted



ABC seems to have a camera everywhere when covering a game, but in reality the camera shown here, mounted on a truck, is responsible for most of the coverage shown on television.

to video replays — one of the crew speaks frantically into a phone in a language vaguely resembling Spanish. To whom, or for what purpose is unknown, and Bernstein passes by him with a baffled grin on his face.

No matter. Bernstein seems to thrive on the chaos all around him. He fires jokes at anybody within earshot ("they call me Jaws because I talk a lot"), stopping only occasionally to take a quick phone call.

"We have to get it passed out that we are people," Bernstein said. "We're more than a building. We like to have a little fun and not take life so seriously."

"We're often perceived that way, but we are quite human." One quick look into the main control trailer reveals just how human the ABC crew is. On the far wall of the cramped control booth is pinned a snapshot of Jackson, America's best known college football announcer, with Hollywood's favorite horror movie hostess, Elvira. Glued to the same wall are a few bumper stickers boasting the network's initials followed by the legend unprintable in a family newspaper.

An adjacent wall, though, with its banks of TV screens and computerized rows of colored lights, is a reminder of the real purpose of their presence outside the stadium.

Stepping from the wide open spaces of the hills and valleys surrounding the east end of campus into the control trailer, is to experience instant culture shock. The

interior of the control booth resembles nothing so much as the bridge of the Starship Enterprise.

"It's a zoo," Bernstein said. "You see \$5 million worth of equipment, all of the wires and all of that kind of stuff."

The man who understands the inner workings of all that electronic spaghetti is producer Chuck Howard. Having worked on ABC's coverage of the Indy 500, the Kentucky Derby, the World Series, and the Olympic Games, as well as college football, Howard brings nearly 20 years of experience into the control room. He uses every bit of it to scan several of the 34 screens used to decide which of seven possible camera shots home viewers will see.

In addition, Howard is in contact with the announcers, cueing them for commercials, describing upcoming instant replays, and providing general information during the course of the game.

Below the TV screens sits the control board, about a three foot by five foot slab of laminated hardwood, covered with rows of flashing buttons, levers, knobs and monitors. The board is mostly the domain of director Andy Sidaris, who carries out the producer's instructions. From the control board, the buttons that cue shots, instant replays, and commercials are pushed. It is also where special effects are inserted into the broadcast.

To demonstrate the special effects, Sidaris pulls back a lever, and a shot of the field on the screen above splits into two views of opposite ends of the stands. He pulls another lever and a pair of jagged edges slide from either side of the screen, converging in the middle as they engulf the shot of Beaver Stadium.

Whatever happens on the field, ABC is ready to bring it to millions of viewers with reverse angle replays, 15 color graphics and more special effects than George Lucas would know what to do with. Even a self-described "old, old broadcaster" like Fisher, appreciates the job ABC has been doing on their coverage of Penn State football.

"I don't think you get to be where those people get to be without having done a pretty exceptional job somewhere down along the line," Fisher said. "Keith Jackson and Frank Broyles are doing a different game every week and it's a different university under a different environment, and talking to different people, and I think they do an exceptional job."

Howard, Broyles and Jackson study films, read scouting reports and familiarize themselves with numbers and statistics in preparation for each game. One gets the impression that virtually nothing could happen during the broadcast that the crew wouldn't be ready for.

"We're covered for everything short of the world caving in," Bernstein said. "We have contingencies on top of contingencies on top of contingencies. We have stand-by shows for the stand-by shows."

"What about a nuclear war," a wondering technician asks.

Bernstein laughs. Somewhere deep in the ABC production manual there probably is a contingency plan for nuclear war. And whatever it is, it will no doubt include reverse angle replays and 15 color graphics.



Before, during and after the game, the control room in the ABC truck is never dull. With 34 television monitors at his disposal, producer Chuck Howard has plenty of shots to choose from before we see his selections on television.

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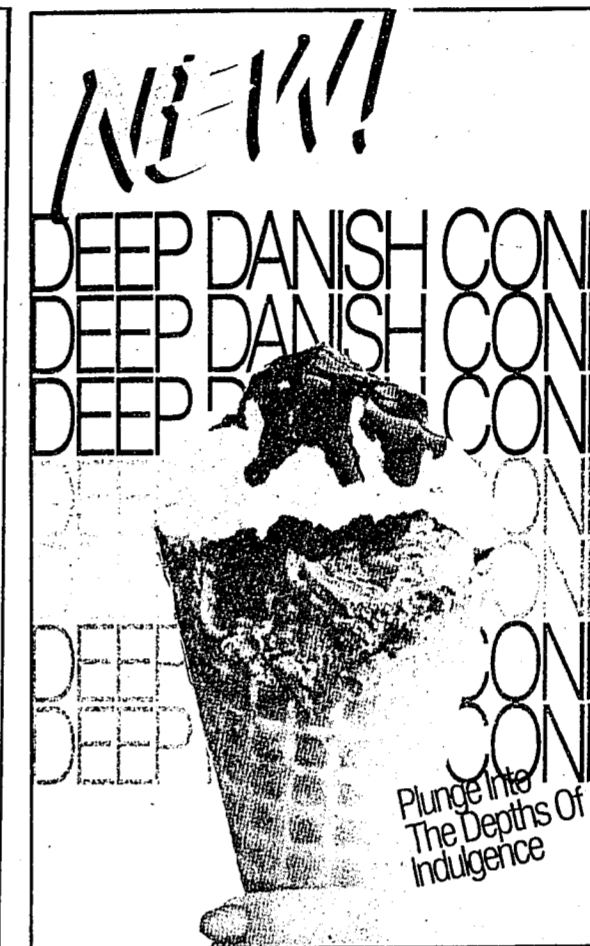
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