

After letting go of Jeff Van Gundy, ESPN's NBA broadcasts worse off

By ANDREW MARCHAND

It was perplexing last summer when ESPN fired NBA Finals game analysts Jeff Van Gundy and Mark Jackson. It was part of the network's layoffs that Disney seemingly goes through every couple of years, sort of like an NFL team pruning the books to provide room for future million-dollar spends.

The Van Gundy salary dump particularly did not make sense, as he was maybe the best game analyst in sports with his gym rat mentality and inside the "GTA" quirkiness.

In the wake of those moves, ESPN is not nearly as good as it was. With the venerable play-by-play Mike Breen, the Hall of Famer Doris Burke and on the rise JJ Redick, in theory, ESPN should provide an excellent listen, but it takes time to develop on NBA Finals-level chemistry.

Breen, Burke and Redick don't have it. With just four months under their belt together, they don't come across like a team that should be advancing past the second round. But they will. Tuesday night, Breen, Burke and Redick were in Boston to call the Eastern Conference finals before the main event next month, the NBA Finals. Sadly, the future of what was a stalwart, steady booth for ESPN is again in doubt, as the current group lacks humor and flow. Hopefully, they will acknowledge the Indiana Pacers in this series.

On Sunday, from start to finish, ESPN turned its production of Game 7 of the Pacers-New York Knicks series into a Knicks love fest, and by showing "First Take" host Stephen A. Smith walking into the arena as if he were a player and then having him deliver a Knicks pregame pep talk. During the game, Breen and company focused too much on the Knicks and not enough on the all-time shooting performance by the Pacers. After ESPN showed the best of Scottie Fryday with its Scottie Schiffer arrest coverage, the contract of Sunday's NBA performance was embarrassing.

How ESPN got here and where it is going next is an intriguing broadcast question. Especially with a network agreement on a new TV deal with the NBA that is expected

to keep the league's biggest event on ESPN's stage for the next dozen years. Breen, who turns 63 on Wednesday, remains the anchor. However, in the playoffs, he is too often left trying to do it all on his own, not fully trusting in his new teammates.

With his familiar voice, Breen might be able to carry the trio late in close games, but he is not raising his partners' levels. Evaluating what he has, he comes across as more of a shoot-first-point-guard, not only providing the play-by-play but often the analysis, too.

Post-Van Gundy and Jackson, ESPN had a seemingly workable plan. Breen's good buddy Doc Rivers was available after being fired as the Philadelphia 76ers head coach. With Breen and Rivers, there would have figured to be some strong built-in chemistry.

With the history-making Burke, who will become the first female TV analyst on one of the traditional big four league's championships (NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL), top ESPN executives Jimmy Pitaro, Burke Magnus and David Roberts had a succession figured out. Roberts even named heirs apparent, as Ryan Ruocco, Rich and Jefferson and Redick were anointed the No. 2 team with an eye on calling the finals one day.

Though the NBA did not like Van Gundy's criticism of its officiating—and complained about it to ESPN—there is no proof that the league ordered his banishment. One concern ESPN had, according to executives briefed on their decision-making, was that Van Gundy would jump back into coaching, which he had flirted with for years.

Van Gundy, though, never left during his 16 seasons with the network, while Rivers' stay at ESPN was almost as short as Bill Belichick's run as "HC" of the NFL.

While on the broadcasting job for ESPN, Rivers first started consulting with the Milwaukee Bucks in December, then left to become the team's head coach in January, embarrassing ESPN after giving it a three-year commitment.

By the All-Star break, Redick, who turns 40 in June, was moved in. He has had an incredible broadcasting run, making many millions as a

podcaster and gambling spokesperson and through his ESPN game and studio work.

But as evidenced by his latest venture, an inside-the-game podcast with LeBron James, Redick's post-playing passion might mirror that of Rivers. His game analysis is more coach-like than conversational.

After a brief flirtation with the Charlotte Hornets' coaching job, he is top candidate to join James' Los Angeles Lakers. Following Van Gundy's departure, ESPN has a second analyst who could go through with the broadcasting crime that Van Gundy was charged with but never committed. Until if and when Redick leaves, he is on the call with Breen and Burke.

It doesn't sound as if Breen, Burke and Redick dislike one another; they just don't finish each other's sentences. Heck, half the time it feels as if Burke and Redick barely start many of their own. It's a lot of Breen.

Breen, Van Gundy and Jackson called 15 NBA Finals, which allowed them to develop a comfort level with one another and the audience. Breen's "Bang!" receives the shine—and it is a strong signature call—but it is his rhythm for the action and his inflection at the right time over 48 minutes, denoting whenever something special happens, that stand out.

If you close your eyes and just listen to Breen's emotion in his calls, you can tell where a play stands in excitement on a 1-to-10 scale. That is why, in crunchtime, ESPN should still be fine.

It's when the booth needs to shine in light moments or blowouts that Van Gundy and Jackson are missed.

Jackson was far from perfect—last year, he inexplicably left Nikola Jokic off his All-Star ballot—but he had his schtick, most notably the phrase "Mama, there goes that man!" He could hit some 3s off the ball from Breen and Van Gundy.

Van Gundy's dismissal, though, was a head-scratcher. With a headset on, he was always in triple-threat position: keen analysis, a looseness to say anything and humor.

Van Gundy has moved on and is now a senior consultant with the Boston Celtics. ESPN is still paying him. Maybe it could ask him to come back for a series or two.

BRIDGE

Phillip Alder



The dummy can guide the defense

This week we are looking at the two styles of defense: active and passive. When the opponents clearly have the values for their contract, you should actively pursue establishing and winning tricks. But when they have struggled, it's best to sit back and await tricks, probably leading a trump.

Sometimes, though, the bidding will not make it obvious which way to turn. Then you must wait for the dummy. Is it the minimum for the bidding? Is it balanced? If you answer "yes" both times, go passive. But if it has extra values or has either a strong side-suit or a short suit that will provide ruffing tricks, you need to be active, trying to win tricks as quickly as possible.

South is in four spades. West leads the diamond two. What should East

		North		05-22-04	
		♠ 9 7 6 3			
		♥ 8 3 4 2			
		♦ A Q			
		♣ J 3 2			
West				East	
♠ 10 1 2				♥ 8 5	
♥ 10 6 3				♦ K 9 7	
♦ J 9 5 2				♣ K 10 7 4	
♣ A 7 8				♦ Q 10 5 4	
		South			
		♠ A K Q J			
		♥ A Q J			
		♦ 8 4 3			
		♣ K 9 8			
Dealer: South					
Vulnerable: Both					
South	West	North	East		
3NT	Pass	3♦	Pass		
3♦	Pass	4♦	All pass		
Opening lead: ♦ 2					

do after taking dummy's queen with his king?

Since North has almost all of his points in his doubleton, I would have raised to three no-trump, not used Stayman. But that contract would have had no chance after a diamond lead (for a spade or low club, for that matter).

Into which category does the North hand fall? Right, it is balanced with no source of establishable tricks. There is no need to be active. After taking the first trick, East should defend passively by returning a diamond or by shifting to a trump.

Yes, declarer can still make his contract if he plays double-dummy, as if he could see all 52 cards. But in the real world, he is almost certain to go down. The curious may work it out. But the main point is that with the relatively flat dummy, do not go active; stay passive.

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