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Application for the Texas Program in Sports and Media Research Fellowship

Project Summary

In April, 2011, one of the archivists at the Home Box Office headquarters in New York sent an impassioned message to the Association of Moving Image Archivists list-serv. The archivist’s email requested that members of the professional association contact him should they be aware of any extant sports programming produced by HBO in the 1970s. As he explained, HBO had re-used videotape and/or disposed of obsolete recording formats leaving them without the vast majority of their productions from the era. Missing from HBO’s collection, and now needed for current productions as well as the celebration of the network’s fortieth anniversary, were materials related to the National Basketball Association, the short-lived American Basketball Association, Major League Baseball, professional bowling, professional wrestling and many more.

HBO’s experience is not unique. Media producers across the United States have lost significant portions of their programming libraries due to short-term decisions in a pre-cable and internet era in which older media simply appeared a financial liability. Over the last several decades, the motion picture preservation community has succeeded in raising millions of dollars and public support for the preservation of American cinema. Big budget features such as Vertigo and The Big Sleep have been restored to great fanfare alongside more ephemeral works such as educational films, industrials and even home movies. Sports media, however, have remained notably absent from these high profile preservation projects and policy discussions.

A recently completed University of Indiana dissertation focused upon the creation and evolution of the National Football League film collection appears to be the first of its kind within the archival community. The NFL research, not to mention HBO’s plea for information related to its lost sports media, helps illustrate what I perceive as a growing interest in sports and “the archive.” And like similar investigations that have emanated from within the arts and humanities, such initial investigations appear to be taking place at the national level, with major broadcasting entities, nationally influential sports teams and leagues. Less obvious, although equally important, are the issues and questions related to sub-national sports collections.

I am applying for a TPSM Research Fellowship to further my initial work looking at local sports coverage as a component of my ongoing research related to Texas media preservation and policy. Much of my research on Texas media history and preservation can be seen in the digital repository of the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI), an organization I founded in 2002. A simple search of “football” in the TAMI library yields an eclectic array of material: a Dr. Pepper commercial featuring Don Meredith, kodachrome home movies of backyard games, and high school football footage kept by a Giddings high school quarterback. These media artifacts appear as pure ephemera, material that exists by virtue of haphazard collection and preservation on the part of individuals. The TPSM Fellowship would allow travel to two key Texas communities to interview individuals and organizations about the value of football related archival product, to collect (if possible) media from those areas, and to digitize pertinent material for future analysis.
**Proposed Research**

With the TPSM Fellowship funding, I would undertake research trips to El Paso and to Dallas. In each location, I would meet with a variety of organizations that have produced (and, in some cases, continue to produce) football film and video. Preliminary research would be undertaken prior to the trips to determine the exact organizations, but initial work has been done in locating key groups already. Examples include local high schools, universities (in particular, University of Texas El Paso, Texas Christian University and Southern Methodist University – all of which have notable media collections) and historical societies.

El Paso serves as a crucial location due to my work with the Sun Bowl Association over the last year. Having already assisted the Sun Bowl Association with the preservation and transfer of their promotional films, El Paso will prove an important test case in examining the various levels of collection and preservation practice within a community setting. Dallas’ role as the state’s leader in commercial and industrial filmmaking underlies why it proves an important area in which to conduct preliminary research on extant football footage. Universities there appear to hold both university-produced footage as well as local affiliate material (although it likely remains inaccessible to scholars.) The Dallas-Fort Worth area is also home to one of the two NFL teams in Texas and, thus, provides a good case study for collecting sub-national material in the shadow of the more familiar and renowned national teams.

In each location, film and video material will be sought for digitization. Obsolete video formats will likely prove a challenge, but it is likely that high schools and universities will also have significant amounts of VHS tapes. Already in my research, I have found that the archival community is in a crisis over how to cope with the amount of amateur video, and this proposed TPSM funded field research will help quantify this for the archival and scholarly community. (Please see below for a budget breakdown of some computer equipment to enable expedited transfer work.)

The final product from the research afforded by the TPSM will be a component of my presentation at the upcoming Association of Moving Image Archivists and will comprise the initial stage of an article on the preservation, use and meaning of small-gauge sports media.

**Additional Funding Opportunities**

I have pursued and received a variety of funding to support the Texas Archive collection and its related activities including state government support (ie., grants from the Texas Commission for the Arts, Humanities Texas and the Office of the Governor), private donations and revenue generated through related service projects. The TPSM Fellowship offers me the opportunity to focus research on football films specifically which I have wanted to do for several years. I believe that the area of sports media preservation is an untapped area for locally based archival fundraising and licensing in Texas, as demonstrated by the interest in football materials donated already to the TAMI collection. The TPSM funding would offer an opportunity to determine both the use and possible financial value of this type of footage.