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## THE ARTS/CULTURAL DESK

# A TV Sports Show That's More About Chuckles Than Cheers

By DAN CRANE (NYT) 1006 words

Published: March 12, 2005

Aside from the occasional gaffe or clever halftime commercial, televised sports are rarely laugh-out-loud events. But the twin brothers Randy and Jason Sklar have made it their mission to change that. Their show, "Cheap Seats," which will broadcast the first original episode of its second season on ESPN Classic on Monday night, features the brothers as tour guides to some of the most ridiculous sports ever captured on camera. Picture Beavis and Butt-head as sarcastic twins riffing on competitive lumberjacking, and you have "Cheap Seats." Culling from ESPN's vaults and those of "ABC's Wide World of Sports," the Sklars, 33-year-old identical twins, highlight the sports that time (thankfully) forgot. Some segments -- like "Creative Breaking Championships," featured on Monday night, in which men use karate chops and kicks to break cinderblocks, wood and other materials, competitively -- provide obvious invitation for ridicule. "It's like karate with choreography," Jason Sklar said. "We like to say that if the high school from 'Fame' had a martial arts program, this would be the result."

A typical episode features fringe events like spelling bees, dog shows and miniature golf, bull-riding and cliff-diving competitions, with the brothers offering running commentary throughout. In a clip from last season, a nervous 13-year-old spelling bee participant, prone to cupping her hands over her mouth as she spells aloud, painstakingly makes her way through the word hippogriff. It's during these moments that the Sklars insert whispered voice-overs like, "I see dead people!" and, "The password is: crazy."

The format of the show -- broadcast weeknights at 10, Eastern and Pacific times; 9, Central time (new episodes are shown on Mondays and repeated on Thursdays) -- is not entirely original, which the brothers gladly concede. From Woody Allen's "What's Up Tiger Lily?" to "Beavis and Butt-head" to the Sci Fi Channel's cult series "Mystery Science Theater 3000" (known to fans as "MST3K"), this style of running-commentary humor has been used to poke fun at low production values, bad acting, obscure music videos and now, sports that are just a little off.

The debt is acknowledged in Monday night's episode, in which Mike Nelson, Kevin Murphy and Bill Corbett (the voices of Mike, Tom Servo and Crow T. Robot from "MST3K") make special cameos, lobbing barbs at the Sklars like, "These guys are Smurfs, right?" and "Domo arigato, Mr. Sklarboto!" It starts to resemble a hall of mirrors, as Randy Sklar recognizes. "Yeah, it's like a giant M.C. Escher painting of commentary," he said.

The Sklars' observations, seemingly improvised, are actually the result of repeated viewings by the brothers, a small in-house writing staff and several "very talented friends of ours who love sports and want to do us favors," Randy Sklar said. Other friends make regular guest appearances, like Ed Helms ("The Daily Show"), Kerri Kenney ("The State," "Reno 911"), Matt Walsh ("Upright Citizens Brigade") and H. Jon Benjamin ("Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist"), who has played Gene Stapleton, a "wrestling sound enhancer" who claims to have based the sound effect heard during a wrestling body slam on his experience of getting hit on the head with a piece of aluminum siding.

In person, the twins are fast-talking pop-culture enthusiasts who tend to finish each other's sentences -- perhaps a result of doing stand-up together for nearly 20 years. They grew up in suburban St. Louis, loving absurdist comic films like "Airplane!," and share obsessions with television series like "MST3K," "Mr. Show" and "Arrested Development." Their musical tastes, on the other hand, diverge slightly, as Jason Sklar noted. "Randy loved Wilco's 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot,'" he said, "and I liked Wilco's 'A Ghost Is Born.'"

The brothers spent their first season of "Cheap Seats" fine-tuning the format of the show (it was reduced from an hour to a half-hour) and shaping its sardonic sensibility. Having it broadcast on ESPN Classic -- not exactly a cable ratings powerhouse -- has been a boon, the brothers said. "It's half the number of viewers as ESPN, but I still think it has been great for us because we've been able to hone it," Randy Sklar said.

Jason Sklar then interrupted, "We've been able to develop it, and that's such a rare thing in TV, where, if it's not an instant hit, then it's gone."

Part of the challenge has been identifying their audience. As Randy Sklar self-deprecatingly joked last week in a hilarious send-up of ESPN's Emmy Award-winning biography show "Sports Century," "We thought we had our audience pegged -- we were convinced it was going to be senior women and honorably discharged marines."

Jokes aside, the Sklars said their audience was potentially rather broad. They're adamant that the show is not just for sports people; it's for anyone who likes a good laugh at the expense of, say, a competitive lawn mower. As Jason Sklar said, "We want to do a show that comedy people say is a great comedy show, and sports people say is a great comedy show."

Last season they became so hungry for a larger audience that they almost spent their own money to buy a promotional ad in the satirical newspaper The Onion. There was no need: the paper gave the show a glowing review that week.

Where does "Cheap Seats" go from here? Randy Sklar tried to answer that in an episode last week. "I don't know where we're going to be tomorrow -- actually I do know where we're going to be tomorrow," he said, "but in an abstract sense I don't know -- so don't press me. But I do know this: If there are Germans riding on bikes playing soccer, 'Cheap Seats' will be there to make fun of it."

Photos: Jason, left, and Randy Sklar, twin hosts of ESPN Classic's "Cheap Seats," perhaps the only sports show to cover spelling bees. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times); Coming next month: incisive commentary on the 1988 National Finals Rodeo. (Photo by ESPN)

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