

GLUED TO THE TUBE

# U.S. Sports Through a British Lens

**N**AKED SPORTS? Not quite. More like naked America.

The Brits who brought "Naked Hollywood" to PBS three years ago have trained their focus on our big-time athletics, and what they see isn't fun and games. If their Hollywood documentaries laid bare the machinations of a company town employing devious politics to peddle glamor, then their new six-hour series, "Power Plays" (next Monday-Wednesday at 9 on WNET / 13), widens the focus to an entire country where sports serve as some sort of national cathartic rituals — not just entertainment, but the quintessence of American society itself.

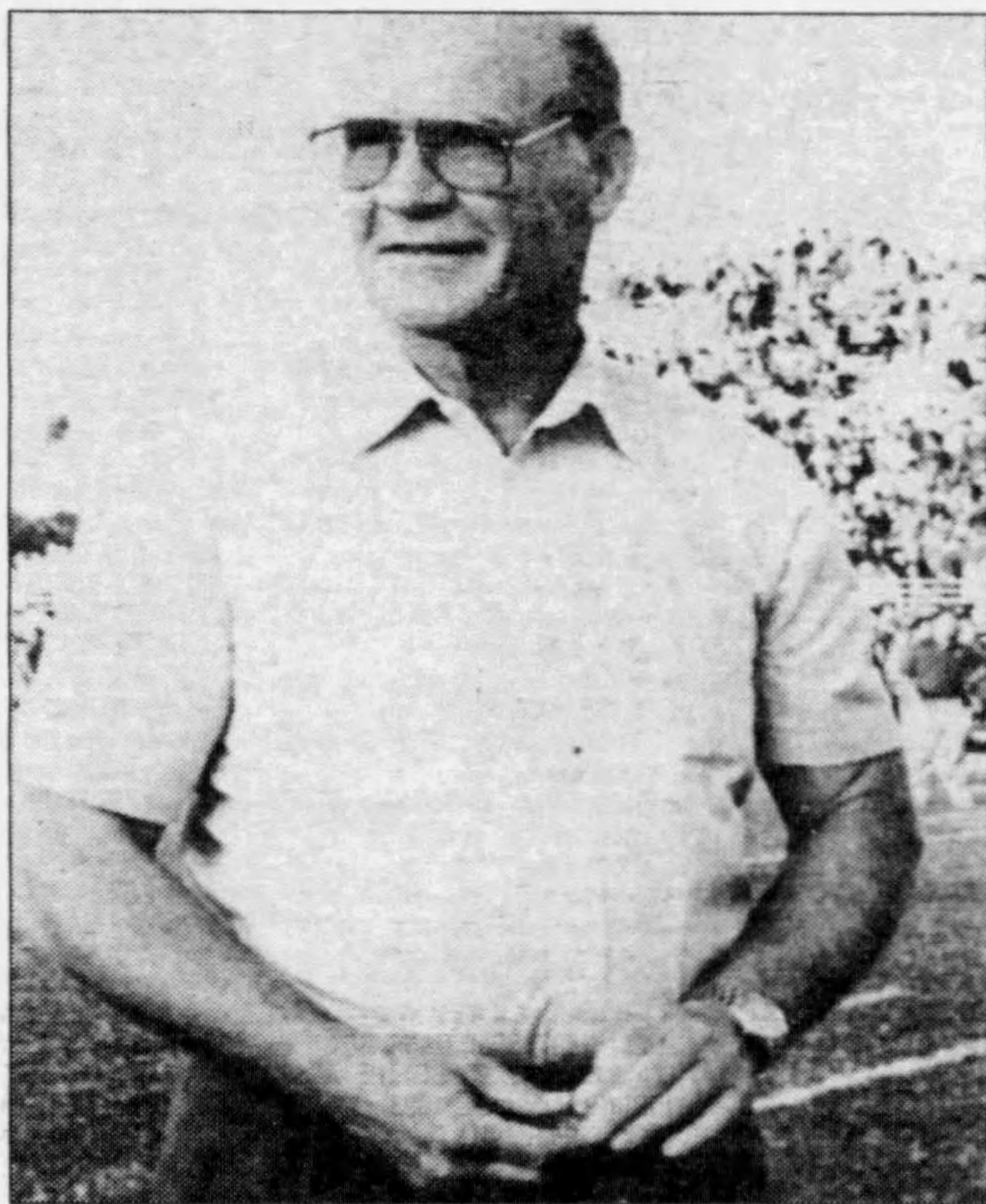
"It's a more ambitious piece of work than 'Naked Hollywood,' because it's dealing with something that has much greater social significance," producer Nicolas Kent was saying by phone from London Sunday evening as he awaited a late-night Super Bowl viewing.

"In 'Naked Hollywood,' we never sort of went into the outside world, to look at the impact movies were having," Kent says. "Whereas in 'Power Plays,' on the one hand we're looking behind the scenes at the way this multimillion-dollar business works, but in a much larger sense we're looking at what one might call the American way of sports, or the American way of life. In the football episode, you really get a sense of the whole universe there, in Texas, of sports as a religion, where the coach is the priest and it really provides a sense of identity, the identity of the community, and even a sense of being American."

Whew. But the big words ring true. Kent's talking about the six-part series' fifth installment, "Fields of Blood," which — timely enough — focuses on the Dallas Cowboys, "America's Team." But this is before their Super Bowl repeat, even before their championship comeback of last season. ("Power Plays" was filmed in 1992.) "Fields of Blood" charts the whole rise, fall and rise of the Dallas franchise, zeroing in on how Tom Landry & Co. created a sort of "God's Team," tying together the area's evangelical Christianity and show biz (ah, yes, those cheerleaders) and corporate myth-making and even Landry's own small-town Texas upbringing. We get a big-gulp taste of high school football mania in that border town of Mission, Texas, where prayer in the huddle takes precedence over any Supreme Court ruling and the coach is the town's king — so long as he wins.

The real magic in "Power Plays" lies in Kent & Co.'s wide-eyed wonder, in their films' lyrical combination of awe and horror, of majestic myth and cool dissection. Kent admits that "like many people here and in Europe," he's always been "seduced and inspired by America." But as a foreigner, he's also fresh-eyed enough to bring a clarity of perspective that makes for some fascinatingly nonjudgmental storytelling. Again, there's no narration; the subjects are left to testify for (or against) themselves, and the results are galvanizing.

Monday's installments take us to the top and the



The 'Power Plays' series focuses on, among others, former Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry, left, and the one-man industry that is Michael Jordan, right.



sub-basement of the business: "Be Like Mike" explores the mystique of Michael Jordan — the man and the corporation — and also poignantly captures the wanna-be dreams of kids on the streets of Chicago; then "Welcome to the Sewer" exposes the "rotten, scummy" boxing business (with help from experts including this newspaper's Wally Matthews).

Next Tuesday, agents are the subject in "The Big Pitch," which licks into two juicy stories: Norby Walters, the music honcho with Mafia connections whose sports ventures finally brought in the feds, and Darryl Williams, a blue-chip collegian whose odyssey to the draft-day payoff is captured in emotional detail. Next, "Home of the Brave" showcases Kent's Oxford Television crew at its most objective: Focusing on baseball owners, they calmly record the antics of it's-a-business types like Marge Schott (Cincinnati Reds) and Jerry Reinsdorf (Chicago White Sox, Chicago Bulls), then place them without comment in contrast to Van Schley's Salt Lake City Trappers, a truly independent minor-league baseball team where love of the game itself is paramount. What a concept.

Next Wednesday's final two hours provide the deepest understanding of both sports as religion and sports as commerce. Out of the hyper-personal devotion that drives Texas football, "Power Plays" segues to marketing strategies in "That's Entertainment," a comparison of fortunes in the surging National Basketball Association and the stagnating National Hockey League. The NBA has flourished by becoming the most show biz-oriented of leagues, getting the details down — the music, the lighting, staging its draft like a TV special (which, of course, it is) — as well as promoting its stars like Hollywood celebrities.

Yet the NBA also shows its participants the most personal respect of any operation, having brought its players into the business as partners with the owners — and thereby ensuring itself a stability that the NHL

and Major League Baseball still struggle to discover under ownership that is charitably portrayed here as archaic.

The future of sports, the future of America — the future of America? "Power Plays" gets deep without getting Deep. Compared to "Naked Hollywood," there's less giddy exuberance, less pure amusement in the series itself. Pizzazz gives way to passion, as "Power Plays" strikes closer to the heart. These folks aren't just messin' with people's teams — they're messin' with people's dreams. Movies, we watch; sports, we live.

"For me, making 'Power Plays' was a more satisfying and more pleasurable experience," Kent says. "I think that's because we were telling true stories about real life."

Got that right. Slam dunk.

**CHANNEL SURFING:** The real score of Sunday's game? The Super Bowl commercials won in a rout. Chevy Chase intercepted his own demise by getting "canceled" during his Doritos spot. The Pepsi Woodstock ads poked fun at the original Pepsi generation for today's kids, without offending anybody. But the MVP, of course, was Michael Jordan: For McDonald's, he and Larry Bird took their "nothing but net" competition into space, abetted by a surprisingly sweet Charles Barkley; for Nike, Jordan was spied by Steve Martin in his "return(s)" from basketball retirement, incognito in a series of wild wigs. Great stuff.

WNYC kicks off African-American history month tonight at 8 with "The Jackie Robinson Story," followed by the Negro Leagues documentary "Safe at Home Plate" . . . WLIW / 21 celebrates its 25th anniversary with "Cousin Brucie's Rock 'n' Roll Party" Thursday at 8, featuring Lesley Gore, Johnny Maestro & the Brooklyn Bridge, and others . . . British sci-fi alert: Nickelodeon's new 6 p.m. Saturday adventure half-hour "The Tomorrow People" follows four ordinary teens, endowed with the powers of telepathy and teleportation, as they foil diabolical science plots hatched by guest villains like Jean Marsh. ■



Diane Werts

## LETTERMAN WEST AND LENO EAST

VARIETY

**B**OTH "LATE SHOW With David Letterman" and "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" will coast-hop during the May sweeps, with Letterman expected to bring his show to Los Angeles while Leno takes "Tonight" to New York.

NBC, apparently eager to beat CBS to the punch, announced that "To-

## Late-Night Titans to Hop Coasts

night" will originate from New York for a week, marking the first taping of the show there since Johnny Carson moved West in 1972. Production will occur at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in the "Saturday Night Live" studio.

CBS, meanwhile, figures to create an enormous stir with five local tap-

ings of "Late Show," which will emanate from a tailor-made studio adjacent to Television City. Tickets should be a hot item and will doubtless test the show's policy against wholesale allocation of seats to VIPs.

Network officials stated when they landed Letterman, who considered

moving the show to Los Angeles and owns a home in the area, that they hoped the host would occasionally take "Late Show" on the road. While at NBC, Letterman did successful out-of-town stints in Burbank and Chicago.

NBC took "The Tonight Show" east once before under Leno, shooting what turned out to be a high-rated episode in Boston to capitalize on the final installment of "Cheers" last May. ■

TV Spots returns tomorrow.