

TV Close-Up: Boomer Esiason

by Eirik_Knutzen

Boomer Esiason has done it all on the football field - except win a Super Bowl. A second team All-America at the University of Maryland, the 6-foot-4, 230-pound quarterback was picked by the Cincinnati Bengals in the second round of the 1984 National Football League draft.

When he retired from the NFL after the 1997 season, the handsome, square-faced ("from the Norwegian side of my family"), blue-eyed and highly articulate Esiason had set every record in professional football for left-handed passers. Esiason completed 2,969 passes in 5,205 attempts for 37,920 yards and 247 touchdowns and was the league's top-rated passer in 1998 and 1989.

BOOMER ESIASON - Former NFL star quarterback Boomer Esiason will analyze the plays for CBS' 'The Super Bowl Today,' the four-hour pre-game show leading up to the coverage of 'Super Bowl XLI' on Feb. 4. CNS Photo courtesy of Craig Blankenhorn. In 14 NFL seasons, Esiason earned a truckload of honors playing for the Bengals, New York Jets and Arizona Cardinals. He was named to four Pro Bowls (1986, 1988, 1989, 1993) and guided the Bengals to the 1988 AFC championship.

During the same year, The Associated Press and the Pro Football Writers of America named Esiason the NFL MVP. He led the Bengals in 1989 to another division title.

After he retired, the smooth and analytical Esiason didn't miss a beat. He was coming off a stellar year, and, at the age of 37, Cincinnati was offering a contract extension. He was inches from signing when ABC made a nice offer to replace the retiring Frank Gifford as an analyst on "Monday Night Football."

Esiason - who earned a bachelor's degree in broadcasting and film at the University of Maryland - interned at WZJ-TV in Baltimore just as Oprah Winfrey was working her way up the ranks there.

"Everyone I touch has gone on to greatness," he joked. "Of course, we didn't know each other. We only said 'Hi' when we passed each other in the hallways."

But by the time Esiason joined the select "MNF" team of broadcasters, he had already called games a couple of years for the World League of American Football and co-hosted the 1998 Miss America pageant. A couple of years later, he was fired from the Monday night gig and replaced by comedian Dennis Miller.

It was a bitter time, caused by several knives expertly inserted between his shoulder blades by friends as well as enemies in the sportscasting field. Since then he has called every Super Bowl as the National Radio correspondent, announced for CBS Radio Sports, is hosting the fifth year of New York-based "The Boomer Esiason Show" and continues a solid relationship with "The NFL Today."

His current assignment is that of a football analyst for CBS Sports' "The Super Bowl Today," the four-hour pre-game studio extravaganza leading up to the coverage of "Super Bowl XLI" by Jim Nantz, Greg Gumbel, Phil Simms and others from Dolphin Stadium in Miami.

"Sports obviously is a big, big part of my life, but ultimately it's just the stuff that pays the bills," says Esiason, 45. "My goal is to save my son, Gunnar, who has cystic fibrosis. Sports and broadcasting allows me to leverage every contact I have to raise money in the fight against CF. My ultimate goal is to see that Gunnar outlives me. All the other stuff is just stuff...."

The Boomer Esiason Foundation has gathered \$50 million so far.

But Norman Julius Esiason ("I kicked a lot in the womb, so they used to refer to be as the Boomer") from West Islip, N.Y., also knows the agony of defeat. As in Super Bowl XXIII (1988), when nine-point underdog Cincinnati Bengals led the San Francisco 49ers 16-13 with 3 minutes and 33 seconds left in the game. "Somehow, Joe Montana took the 49ers 92 yards in three minutes and we lost 20-16 right at the end. Thinking about it, it hurts a little bit more every year."

Between sportscasting gigs, Esiason resides in Plandome, N.Y., with his wife of 20 years, Cheryl, Gunnar and daughter Sydney, 14. On camera, the former highest-paid player in the NFL wants people to see the pride he takes in his work - along with some 60 million other U.S. sports fans.

"I want them to see me as someone who is passionate about the game, yet remains objective," Esiason said. "I think too many ex-athlete sportscasters get into trouble when they try to be friends with everyone.

"A cynical New Yorker by nature, I'm not afraid to make an honest assessment," he said. "Perhaps something like Chicago Bears' Rex Grossman is the Paris Hilton of quarterbacks, more worried about where the next party is than the substance of the game. But I don't hold back my praise either, if warranted."

