



## Committing a Chortle Sin

By Chris Ballard

We are a nation of lonely football fans, bereft of mirth. Fortunately, the people on the NFL pregame shows understand this. From Howie and Terry to Cris and Jerome to Shannon and Boomer, they all know that what we crave most is not analysis, but levity. You find it everywhere. Shoulders heaving, diaphragm contracting, NFL commentators cannot stop giggling. ESPN's Steve Young: "What does that mean to the NFL if a kid plays six games and we have him in the top five?"

Michael Irvin: "It means he's playing great!"

Chris Berman: "Ho-ho -- ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Tom Jackson: "Ca-ha-ha-ha!"

One sports anchor refers to this apparently crucial job skill as "the chortle, chortle, chortle," though there is also much cackling and snorting and the occasional power guffaw. On a recent Sunday, CBS's Dan Marino laughed 17 times during a one-hour show, a tally made more impressive by the fact that he was on air for only 16 minutes. Here's a sample of what Marino found so funny.

Boomer Esiason: "I will go on the record right now and say they will not make the playoffs...."

Shannon Sharpe: "You ain't no rap artist. You don't need your records!"

Fox's Howie Long and Terry Bradshaw each squeezed off 24 chuckles in 20 minutes that same day, more than a laugh a minute. One gets the feeling that if FCC standards allowed, Bradshaw would slug a Budweiser on camera, then alight from his chair to crush the can on Long's forehead. It's enough to make a guy wish he could travel at all times with a pack of pregame commentators. Every visit to the bar would come with its own laugh track, every utterance hailed as comic genius.

Joe Buck: "Cold coffee really gives you bad breath, doesn't it?"

Bradshaw: "Is that what it is? Ha-ha-ha-ha. Tee-hee-hee. Bless your heart."

As with any art form, there are those who just don't get it. Football is a complex and often brutal sport, these humor-haters say. Randy Minkoff, a media coach who's worked with more than 1,000 athletes, says of the studio analysts, "They have to realize that the reason they're there is because they're experts, not because they're Jerry Seinfeld."