

Johnny Manziel As A Performance Artist

Johnny Manziel is 20 years old. He's from a family of four and grew up in Tyler, Texas, a town of 100,000 people.

It would take Johnny about two minutes and a few taps of his thumbs to communicate directly with 613,095 individuals and change the next 24 hours of television programming on networks that broadcast worldwide.

Let me say that again: he's 20.

In, "How Big-Time Sports Ate College Life," Laura Pappano wrote, "For good or ill, big-time sports has become the public face of the university, the brand that admissions offices sell, a public-relations machine thanks to ESPN exposure," and she is correct, but Manziel has transcended even this phenomenon. "Johnny Football," as he is known, has become his own brand, a product sold to viewers on ESPN and similar networks. While this has long been the case with Heisman winners and other big-name college athletes, the ways in which sports coverage has incorporated social media has fundamentally changed the relationship between media, athlete, and consumer. Athletes are now receiving more exposure than ever, and this exposure itself is changing the way we look at athletes and issues in sports today.

If you've followed Manziel, which is to say, if you've ever turned on ESPN, you'll know he has had some issues this offseason. His actions, tweets, and general conduct have been documented and examined to unbelievable depths, and he has been widely criticized for his behavior in many situations. ESPN, often responsible for this coverage, has been involved from the beginning, "As a freshman, Mr. Manziel was barred by Texas A&M from giving interviews. But ESPN and the university found a way to leverage his silence, and the anticipation it had created. The Aggies did not have a game during the final week of the regular season, meaning he would be off the radar at a pivotal moment in the Heisman race. But the university granted ESPN's Scott Van Pelt an interview that became a lead story on

'GameDay' that Saturday,” (“College Football's Most Dominant Player? It's ESPN” James Andrew Miller, Steve Eder, Richard Sandomir). The network's intense interest in Manziel (and his notable Twitter presence) makes him a useful litmus test for the nature of the relationship between the media, the fan, and the vocal athlete. As an exercise, however, I say we might as well give Johnny Manziel a little credit for all of his scrutiny. It's easy to miss the true interaction between athlete and media amid the sheer absurdity involved with analyzing a teenager's thoughts as best expressed in 140 characters, so, for the sake of argument, I'll pretend Johnny Manziel's actions have been some form of intentional performance art. From here on, consider every one of his off the field actions a carefully orchestrated performance, if nothing else, because it's fairly amusing to do so.

It was on Twitter that the young artist began his campaign on June 16. Johnny Football shocked his followers with a Tweet that claimed he, “Could not wait to leave College Station,” a move that eventually provoked the (obviously prearranged) defense that implored his critics to “walk a day in [his] shoes.” And thus the opening act commenced. ESPN pounced on the opportunity to fill its broadcasts with endless coverage of Heisman winner's “vitriolic diatribe against his mother institution,” before it was eventually revealed that the tweet was the result of Johnny's anger over a parking ticket.

In other words, the move was a masterful success. Manziel's tweet clearly demonstrated the trend in sports media toward instant information, even in cases for which not all of the facts had been confirmed. Quantity of coverage was taking precedent over quality, driven by the behavioral need to report first, speculate second, and eventually confirm at a later time. It had taken only eighteen words for Johnny Football to prove that the media, his fans, his detractors, and the sporting community as a whole hung on his every syllable, eager to believe any amount of hearsay or otherwise.

While this first incident was a wonderful invocation to the hilarity that was to come, it also elevated Manziel to a status in the media I'm not sure even he expected. Johnny Football quickly found his media alter-ego mired in the same debate-style coverage that had arisen during his redshirt year with the NFL's Tebowmania. Talking heads would spend hours arguing over any graspable detail about

the person in question (Tebow's name was mentioned 160 times in one hour-long Sportscenter broadcast), and the debates were marketed to viewers as a new form of sports entertainment. Gone were the days of “Mean” Joe Green and “Nutty” Joe Kapp, when the media could, more or less, assign an identity to a player. Now, with 600,000 opinions at ESPN's fingertips, the network could actually debate what narrative it should attribute to the athlete, then let the fans decide.

In his masterful artistic clairvoyance, I believe Johnny Manziel must have understood this phenomenon and used it to motivate his legacy-defining move of leaving the Manning Passing Academy due to, as the media speculated, a massive hangover. This wasn't just any standard media debacle; Johnny Football insulted *The Mannings*. In one brilliant stroke, Manziel took the name synonymous with quarterback and tossed it aside like it was an empty beer can. Why? Because he represented a new era in the relationship between athlete and media. The sons of Football's First Family would never have to deal with a Tebowish level of controversy because their narrative had been set in stone as part of their birthright. The Mannings, among many of the football faithful, represent something pure. They are, in some sense, an undefinable platonic ideal of what football players *should* be. In toppling the sacred pedestal of *Manning*, Manziel must have meant to demonstrate that their seeming absolute integrity, their fortitude, is an unsustainable model for the era of debate and instant documentation. When an athlete's each and every move is recorded and questioned, it is impossible to avoid significant criticism and thus impossible to achieve the level of perceived perfection that defines the Manning family. When Eli Manning refused to play for the San Diego Chargers in 2004, the move was criticized, but more or less understood. If today's Johnny Football were to attempt the same maneuver, the media firestorm would be nearly uncontrollable. Sure enough, within an hour of Manziel leaving the camp, ESPN was speculating about the reasons for his exit, a type of treatment a Manning never had to endure.

Johnny Manziel didn't stop at challenging what it meant to be a modern football player but instead decided to challenge the NCAA itself. In his seminal work of the summer, he leaked to Twitter

evidence that he may have been accepting money for autographs, an NCAA-suspendable offense. Even a year before, a reasonable punishment would have been invoked, but the debate channeled through the medium of Johnny Football soon found many who would support compensation for college athletes, a thought that would be considered heresy a decade ago. Manziel walked away from the affair with a half-game suspension.

For a long time in college sports, there has been a sort of sense of an ideal collegiate athlete, and with him, an ideal athletic system, but Manziel serves as evidence to the absurdity of this notion. It becomes increasingly clear that nobody actually has much of an idea of what a perfect college football would *look* like. As more opinions with varying conceptions of this ideal enter the conversation, concepts of “good for the game” and “bad for the game” or even “right” and “wrong” gradually become more meaningless. By allowing more voices to enter the mix, media outlets like ESPN, intentionally or not, actually lend a voice to viewpoints that would otherwise go unheard, so when a controversial athlete like Manziel does something controversial, there is, well, *controversy*. The difference now is that more “fringe” opinions are actually being heard.

Johnny Manziel, or at least the Johnny Manziel we've created, is everything that's wrong with college football, perpetuated by the notion that there is a platonic ideal of something *right* with college football, annotated by people who have no rigid conceptualization of either. If there is some confluence of ethics and athletics, some Manningish standard to which a human being on a playing field may be held, it has long since been lost to the era of unprecedented coverage. I believe Manziel shows us that, as a star player in the modern era, your life is now your opus, broadcast to the world in high definition at every instant for a nation of 300 million to scrutinize. Like any work of art, it is in the public forum, free to be interpreted as we will.

To us, these athletes play characters. They are two-dimensional people animated by the media sphere or Twitterverse or whatever, and Johnny Football, at least for now, performs at center stage. He exists not to show us what is wrong, but what is, and what undoubtedly will be. In all our efforts to

define him, we have created something undefinable. He is not just a Twitter handle or a face on the television, but an unwitting amalgamation of player, media, and consumer. The Johnny Football we perceive is a dark combination of narratives and opinions and emotions. He is a singular, impenetrable mind. He is human.

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