

TV Sunday

THE

ULTIMATE

FAN

Bob Costas is getting ready to host his third Olympics, gearing up to produce a sports version of 'Nightline' for HBO, and — oh, yeah — trying to save baseball.

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Bob Costas just dropped a friend off at the airport. Her flight was unfortunately delayed and she keeps calling to put him on the phone with airline officials — assuming his fame, coupled with that boyish earnestness, will convince them to reroute 747s.

"She wants me to change the course of mighty rivers," jokes Costas. "To bend steel with my bare hands."

That's only slightly more demanding than the tasks the 48-year-old Costas already faces.

He wound up his coverage of the NBA by passing the baton back to Marv Albert, just published a book "Fair Ball" describing — in detail — how and why baseball must change, is prepping a sports show for HBO and getting ready to host the Sydney Olympics in September.

Last Tuesday, he covered baseball's All-Star Game — appropriate since Costas is the conscience, the Jiminy Cricket of America's pastime.

He noted how the specialness of the All-Star game has been diminished by interleague play, suggested that players who claimed

"injury" to avoid appearing should have to sit out a game or two this week, and yet still managed to celebrate the best of the sport.

It was the latest accomplishment for the Queens native whose career is filled with them.

Costas first made a name for himself covering the old ABA basketball league and then the Chicago Bulls.

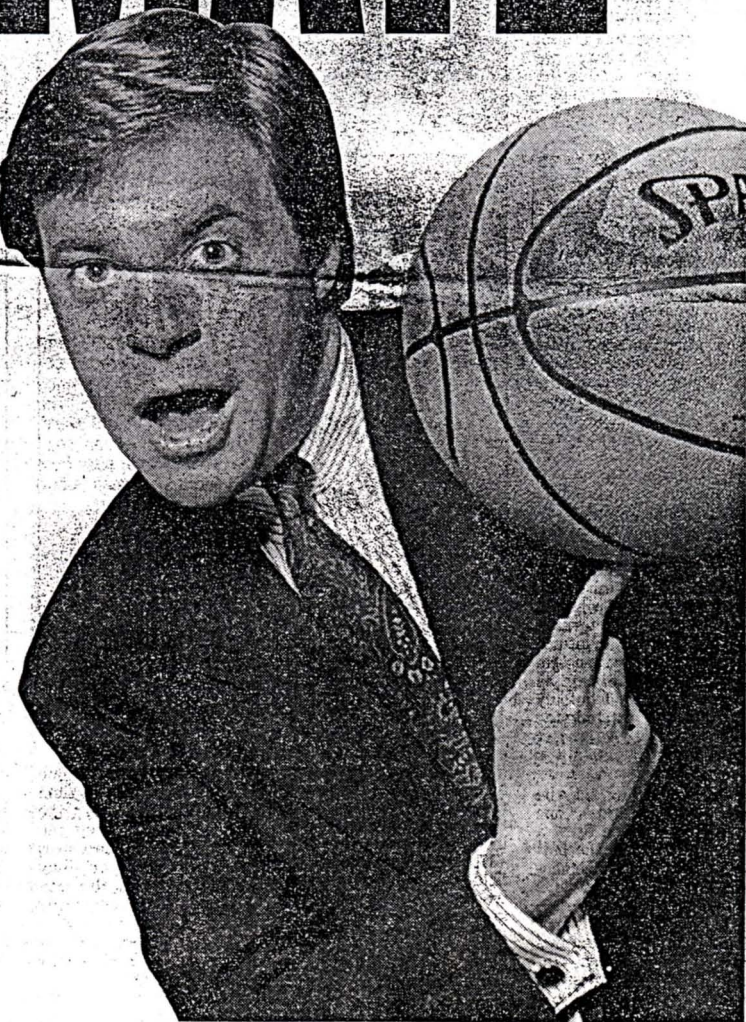
But he made his reputation, hosting baseball's "Game of the Week" with Tony Kubek during the '80s.

A flurry of activity followed: NFL pregame shows, a nationally syndicated radio show, the Olympics in Seoul, and the interview show "Later," where Costas' excellent interviews with Bruce Springsteen and other pop cultural figures showed people he didn't just follow sports.

Accolades followed, including 11 Sports Emmys and being named Sportscaster of the Year by his peers a record seven times.

Perhaps best of all for this die-hard baseball fan, Costas has become linked with that sport as indelibly as any player.

His eulogy at Mickey Mantle's funeral was pitch-perfect, his commentary on Ken Burns' "Baseball"



series was stirring and his thoughts about how to rescue the sport are taken seriously at, as they say, the highest levels.

"I've gotten reaction from a number of owners and a number of managers —

some small markets, some middle and some large," says Costas about his best-seller "Fair Ball" which argues for salary caps, profit sharing and re-aligning divisions.

"One large-market owner

al manager said to me, 'You know what? If I had my druthers, I'd do what you suggest or substantially what you suggest tomorrow. Even though in the short term it won't help my team, I know it's best for baseball.'

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"I've been so gratified by the response to it," Costas says. "The purpose wasn't to say, 'This is the only way.' Let's get a debate going." Joel Sherman in *The Post* had a story about realignment and schedule proposal "some of which was similar to what I suggested and some of which was different and I thought it was very interesting and there might be merit in that," Costas says.

"In general, I think I'm in the right place on these issues. But there might be better particular devices to get the job done. And the more thoughtful the debate, the better."

Debate is exactly what he hopes to stir up on HBO in February.

Costas was the first choice to host HBO's acclaimed "Real Sports," but his contract with NBC at the time handcuffed him and the gig went to Bryant Gumbel.

Now Costas — who is married with two children and lives in St. Louis — gets his chance with a one-hour show, a sports version of "Nightline."

"We'll take some issue or topic and examine it in depth. One hour, once a week. Some of them might be in the 'Nightline' for-

mat, with a setup piece by a correspondent and then I interview several people. We'll maybe have a town meeting once in a while.

"And if someone is available — a Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Mark McGuire, the commissioner of the NFL — and they want to do an in-depth interview, maybe that's what it is. The format's flexible enough to fit whatever's of interest."



And of course you don't have any commercials. So if you have an hour, you've really got about 58 minutes, which is a luxury you never

get on network television."

One luxury cable can't afford is the billions of dollars it takes to lock up the Olympics for the foreseeable future. But that's what Dick Ebersol and NBC did four years ago.

That gives Costas the chance to host his third Olympics, in Sydney this September, and his first winter Olympics in 2002. Perhaps only baseball inspires more passion from Costas than the Olympics.

He enthuses about the inherent drama when someone's entire life leads up to a few brief seconds in

competition while — literally — the whole world is watching.

He candidly espouses his reservations about maudlin excess in coverage of the athletes. And — true to his reputation for instant insight — pinpoints the reason why having professional athletes competing in basketball, baseball, hockey and other sports simply isn't as compelling.

"It changes the Olympics not so much because they're professionals," explains Costas, "but because the Olympics is not their crowning moment."

"Nobody thinks they care as much about winning an Olympic medal as they do about winning the NBA title or the Stanley Cup."

"Many Olympic athletes in the premiere sports either are or will be professional athletes."

"But no one doubts the Olympics are their proving ground and their greatest and most significant stage. The Olympics are still everything to [runner] Michael Johnson."

And as much as Costas misses "Later" and would love to do another non-sports interview show once a week or once a month, (any cable channels out there ready to take him up in it?), it's clear that following sports is his life.

"It beats having a real job," says Costas.

"There's more work than people might realize in the preparation. And the travel and time away from home can be a little difficult."

"But still 99.9 percent of the people watching would swap places with you, so you should never forget that."