

# JOHN MADDEN STARS ON THE TUBE

By ELLYN ISAACS

*I coached football for twenty years and even won the Super Bowl, and nobody knew me from Adam. I do a beer commercial or say a few words as a television analyst, and I suddenly become a celebrity. Like it? I love it.*

John Madden



A swinger in tight quarters: John Madden, with Gary Bender.



Madden cuts a familiar figure in Miller Lite commercial.

Leave it to John Madden to enjoy the humor. Sitting in the CBS booth each week doing football commentary, Madden freely pokes fun at the players, the fans, and the game. On the air he has been known to attribute a poorly-executed play to the quarterback forgetting the play on the way from the huddle to the line of scrimmage. He has called Pittsburgh fans "All-League in booing." He has mentioned how he figures Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt's young son is learning how to count: "One million, two million . . ."

But mostly he makes fun of himself.

Madden, 45, is a burly, restless man. At 6-4, and 240 pounds, Madden feels cramped in the announcers' booth because it does not allow him to pace, and swing his arms in grand gestures as is his custom. This habit has on occasion caused him to bump the headset off his play-by-play colleague, Gary Bender. "I get to standing up and I forget where I am," Madden says. "I hit Gary

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and knocked his headset off and he was still calling the play while bending over to pick it up.”

He also mentions the time his director, as a cue for him to identify 49er coach Bill Walsh on the screen, said “Coach.” Without a thought, Madden responded, “Yeah? What do you want?”

He never used headsets as a coach, he said, “because I probably wasn’t smart enough to talk and listen at the same time.”

He said of Kansas City linebacker Frank Manumaleuga, “That guy’s never going to get a mention unless he changes his name. No way I can pronounce it.”

Not one for pep talks, Madden once created this inspirational epigram for his players: “Don’t worry about the horse being blind. Just load up the wagon.” The funny thing, says Madden, was that the Raiders’ John Matuszak understood it.

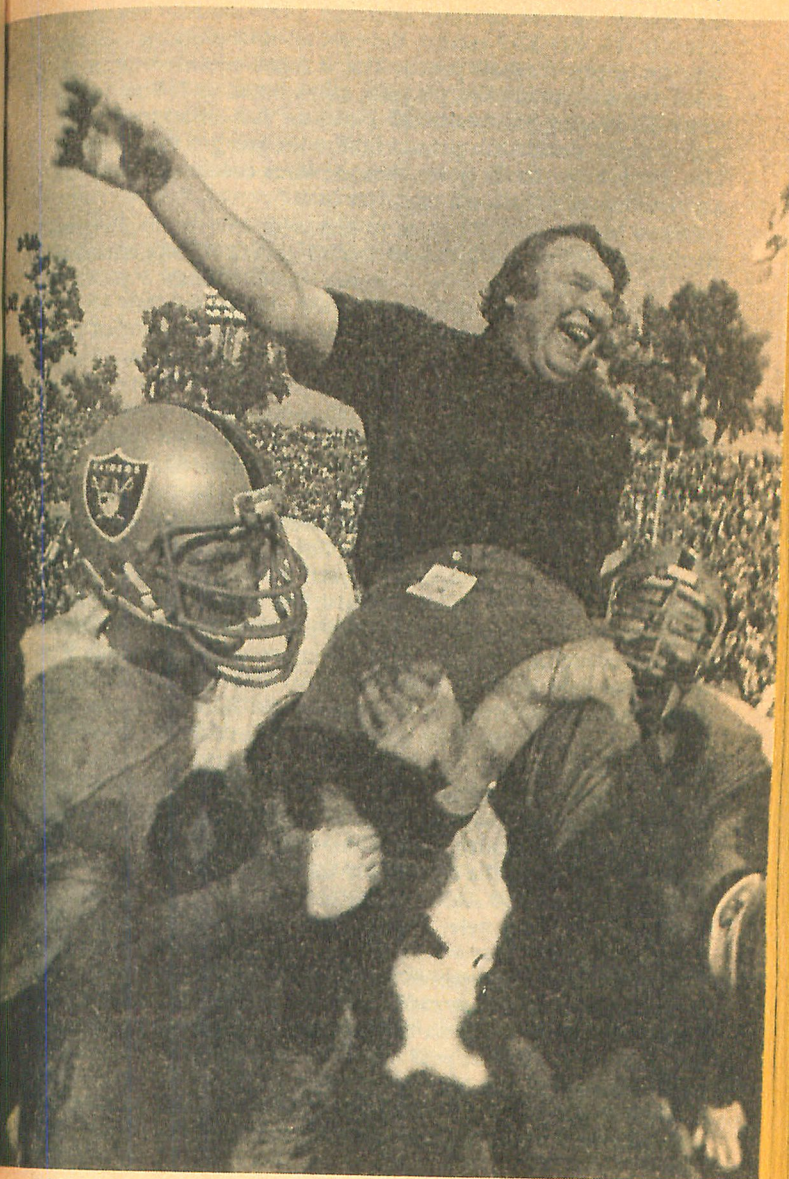
Humor and all, Madden is a disciplined man who works each game with the same meticulous routine week after week. Days before the game he takes notes from both teams’ releases, newspaper clips, press guides, and tapes of previous games. Arriving at the game city every Friday, he and Bender meet with the public relations people and discuss background material and strategies over dinner. Every Saturday he visits the home team at practice, chatting with the players and coaches in the locker room, picking up a sense of the team.

Then he watches films and more films. (“I just love to watch films. It’s recreation to me.”) If the visiting team does not have practice, he catches up with it at the hotel, using this time to ask about particulars and oddments he noticed in the tapes and films. Then it’s on to the pre-dinner production meeting with Bender, the producer, director, and PR people, where they organize information and finalize their lead story and general approach to the game.

After Sunday breakfast with Bender, Madden heads to the stadium. “Every team has its early birds,” he said. “I like to go and talk to those guys early when they’re more relaxed. They haven’t gotten into the football frame of mind yet so I don’t get in the way.” After that it’s up to the booth to prepare for the kickoff.

“I wouldn’t say John’s superstitious,” said Bender. “But he certainly has a routine that he can’t do any other way. When he was coaching, too, he was thrown out of kilter if something broke his routine.”

This repetitiveness helped him achieve remarkable success after being named the youngest coach in pro football when he succeeded Johnny Rauch at Oakland in 1969 at the age of 36. In



Madden's Raiders reached the ultimate in Super Bowl XI.

ten seasons before retiring after the 1978 season, Madden's teams had a 103-32-2 record, the best all-time winning percentage for a pro football coach. The Raiders achieved six first-place finishes, made the playoffs eight times and won Super Bowl XI, beating Minnesota, 32-14. In the face of a growing ulcer, Madden decided to get out before the job got the better of him. "I never got to the point, though, when coaching wasn't fun and I didn't look forward to it," he said.

When he retired, CBS came to him with an offer to do commentary. After an initial no, he started getting fidgety and realized he needed a schedule, a season again. "That's a problem that athletes and coaches have. I started playing football when I was 10 or 11 years old, and ever since then I had a football season. Your whole life revolves around a season calendar, not around the regular calendar." He accepted the CBS offer which enabled him "to fill that void. Doing commentary, I have a season again. I still get ready for the game. I have the game, and then a day or two later, I get ready for the next game."

On his first few flights on commercial planes again—after having experienced the relative ease and freedom of team charters—Madden felt cramped and anxious. So much so that he decided to ride trains to his assignments each week from his home in Pleasonton, Calif., a touchdown's throw across San Francisco Bay from his childhood town of Daly City outside San Francisco.

After coaching from the field his entire career, Madden had trouble at first working from the press box. He felt detached from the action. "It's not the same," he said. "Players look smaller, you can't hear the contacts, you can't see their eyes. It was tough."

His partner also had to get used to his boogieing in the booth. "When I was told I was going to work with him I didn't know what to think," Bender said. "I saw him as everyone else: as a ranting maniac on the sidelines. I thought he was crazy."

During his second season on the air Madden eased up and developed a working style. Mostly, he is simple and original. He gets into nuances that would interest anyone from the hardened aficionado to the occasional sampler of pro football.

For example, he has explained that a field-goal kicker will look at the hash marks on the field when kicking rather than at the goal posts which appear narrower from the player's perspective.

He will not interject his own coaching strategies, however, because he does not believe people want to know what John Madden would do in a situation when two other teams with two other coaches are running the show. "I think it's wrong when players

and coaches talk about what they would do," he said. "Who cares? You're boring."

Another of his rules is to try not to state the obvious. At times he takes this so far that he picks out things even the officials miss. During this year's Atlanta-Philadelphia game, Philadelphia had brought in guard Ron Baker and made him an eligible tight end. After one play another guard, Petey Perot, went down with injury, and Baker returned as a guard. He had not, however, heeded the rule requiring him to leave the field before returning to his original position. Madden caught the violation, but it went unnoticed by the officials.

"I think it puts the officials on their toes when he's in the booth," Bender said. In fact, Madden draws attention from the players and coaches of the teams he is covering. They frequently ask his advice on game strategy, personnel or future direction.

His biggest problem in broadcasting is the technical bread-and-butter stuff. The size of the TV booth, the director talking in his ear, and the distance from the action cramp his style. Once, in Detroit, when the headsets failed, Madden had to hold the microphone instead. Bender noticed he seemed out of sorts. "I asked him what the problem was and he said, 'I can't talk holding a mike. I need both hands free.' It stymied him."

"I try to give him room to operate, literally and figuratively," Bender said. "I take the technical aspects away so he can develop and grow."

Madden also runs up against the frustration of commercials. The ads always follow a punt, kickoff, or extra-point attempt, preventing Madden from describing what he says is a lost part of football. For example, he would like to illustrate the waves of motion up the field during a punt return resulting from rules which allow the ends to leave their position on the snap, while the rest of the lineup has to wait until the ball is kicked.

"We have the punt, the return and then the countdown to the commercial. Now if I talk about the punt afterward, it's out of context," he said.

His ability to provide fresh details has made a hit with critics and viewers. By the end of the season was receiving 20 to 30 letters a week, many from women who said they appreciate the game more because he has explained things they had never understood. CBS producer Jim Silman says, "John has added a new dimension to broadcasting. He bridges the gap between the too-technical and the too-entertaining."

Beyond his knowledge, the audiences respond to his humor, his flair for pointing out the flubs and the goofs.

In Madden's mind the human element is as much a part of

football as the touchdowns. "We see all the funny things that happen. The coaches laugh, the players laugh. I think the fans should know. I'm not manufacturing things for the sake of entertainment."

That's because he does not have to. He cannot help revealing his colorful idiosyncracies which have come to be known around CBS as "Maddenisms."

A flowering Maddenism is his preoccupation with numbers. He has this theory that every person is meant to wear a particular number. He claims that players wearing the wrong number just do not play as well. He will assign numbers on request, to anyone from Winston Churchill (61) to Katharine Hepburn (88) to Snoopy (2). The Pope is a 73, "because he's a stocky guy, sort of a Rock of Gibraltar type." Santa Claus is a 78 because "he's big and blocky, and 78 is an offensive number, which would be more passive and happy than a defensive number like 74." Madden wore 74 (as did NBC analyst Merlin Olsen when he played football).

Madden also has an eye for colors. A handful of teams, he says, draw their character from a certain color and if they play in their alternate uniform their performance suffers.

"The Dallas Cowboys are white," he said. "When they wear another color they don't look like the Dallas Cowboys and they don't play like the Dallas Cowboys. But they wouldn't admit that. Minnesota is cold and they're purple. That's good because when you get out in the cold you start to turn purple."

Pittsburgh has to be black and gold. Oakland should wear black and Miami must be white. The Rams, he says, cannot be the Rams without the curlicue horns on their helmets.

He's even got the officials figured out with his "left-foot-right-foot" Maddenism. "When an official measures for a first down, if he spots the ball with his right foot it is sure to be a first down. If he does it with his left foot they haven't got a shot."

Beyond Maddenisms, his eminence stems from his blustery performance on the Miller beer commercial. He is instantly recognizable almost anywhere he goes as that angry bull of a man bellowing commands for Lite beer. In the off-season, when Madden goes to nightly boxing matches, he said the kids yell to him, "Hey John, don't get mad. Here's your beer."

"There are kids who know the lines better than I do," he said. Madden will be seen on more Miller Lite commercials, you can be sure, but there is good reason to believe that his imprint will be more lasting as an announcer than as a huckster. Hopeful of staying with broadcasting, he is smart enough to know he has to work at it as hard as he did at being a football coach, a realiza-

tion that has escaped many a graduate of the playing and coaching ranks who can't cut it as announcers.

All CBS has to do is figure out how to provide Madden with broadcast booths large enough to allow him to operate the way he did on the sidelines, arms windmilling, hands gesturing, Maddenisms flowing.



Everything you always wanted in a color man . . . and more.