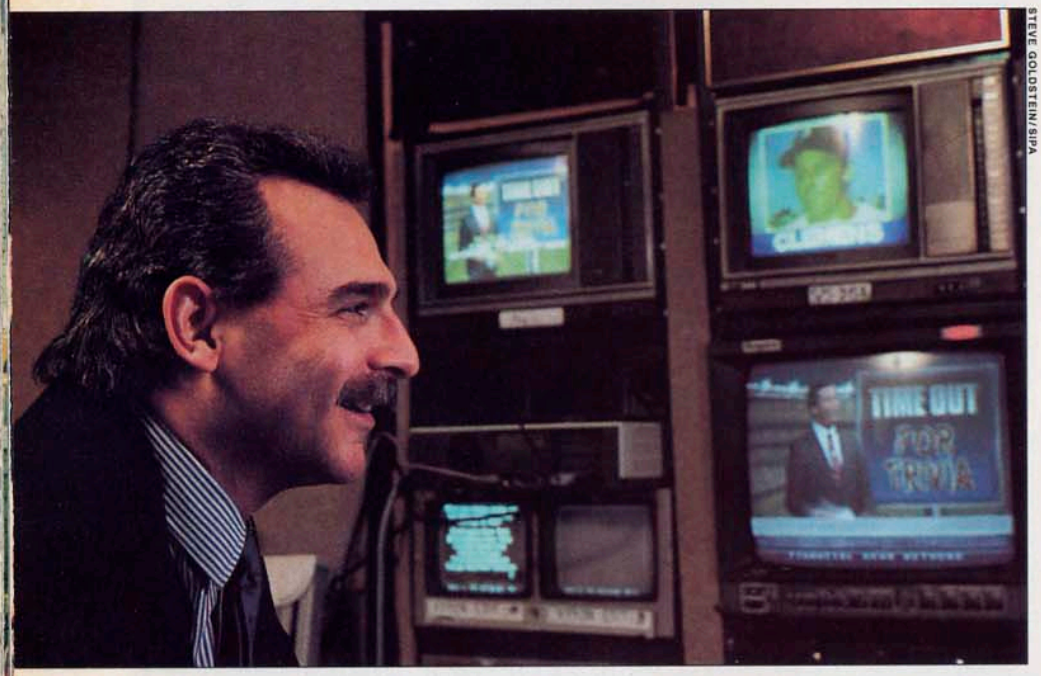
THIS CABLE-TV GAME SHOW IS NO TRIVIAL PURSUIT

BY KATE ROGIN ■

"Hi, everyone. I'm Todd Donoho. And welcome to Time Out For Trivia, *America's only nationwide sports-trivia game show. . . . Who's playing* Time Out For Trivia*?"*

So begins another rapid-fire half hour of sports questions and answers on cable television's hottest game show, *Time Out For Trivia*. Hosted by Todd Donoho, the self-proclaimed commissioner of trivia, *TOFT* can be seen live on weeknights from 11:30 to midnight (EST) and on Sundays for a full hour at 8:00 p.m. The show runs on the SCORE service of the Financial News Network, to which 20 million homes across the U.S. and Canada subscribe .



STEVE GOLDSTEIN/SIPA

Game-show veteran Rosenthal is pleased with the early Nielsen ratings of his creation.

SCORE offers a variety of sports programming, including the Canada Cup hockey series, championship boxing, the Major Indoor Soccer League and NCAA basketball games. But its most popular program is *Time Out For Trivia*.

TOFT works very simply. Donoho asks questions dealing with all kinds of sports and invites viewers to call in the answers. Correct responses are worth prizes ranging from hand-held vacuum cleaners to barbecue grills, VCRs and compact disc players. As the show progresses, a ticker runs the day's closing stock prices and a sports ticker carries up-to-the-minute scores along the bottom of the screen.

Donoho: "Benito Santiago . . . he did it, that's right. What'd he do? He's the catcher for the San Diego Padres, and he had such a good season this year that he was named National League Rookie of the Year. . . . Who was the last catcher to win the NL Rookie of the Year before Santiago? That's the question. Who's playing Time Out For Trivia*?"*

Caller: "Richard from Chicago. Earl Williams."

Donoho: "There you go; 1971 with the Atlanta Braves."

This simple format has developed a cult following. Gary Nuhn, a columnist for the *Dayton Daily News*, has called *TOFT* "cable TV at its best," and Wendell Barnhouse, radio/TV columnist for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, says it is "one of life's joys."

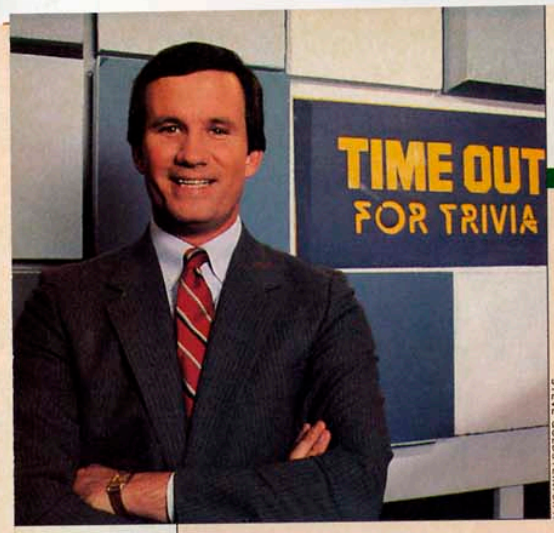
Since SCORE has only recently subscribed to the Nielsen rating service, its audience count cannot be released until the spring, but executive vice-president–general manager Arnie Rosenthal has seen the early numbers, and he's pleased. "I can tell you that they are higher than we expected and incredibly encouraging," he says. Rosenthal got his start in the cable-TV trivia business in 1976, creating a game show called *The Big Giveaway*, which was aired in New York City. In June 1985 Rosenthal, then with FNN, helped start SCORE to fill the postbusiness hours and, in September of that year, launched *Time Out For Trivia* from a studio in Santa Monica, Calif.

Producer Eric Corwin writes the show's questions, which are often preceded by a related sports history lesson or tied in with the events of the day. Humor is almost always an ingredient, particularly in the multiple-choice questions, which often include an obvious nonsports figure as one of the possible answers.

Donoho says his favorite questions have answers that are "ironic, or have twists of fate." For example: "The first college football All-America team was named back in 1899. Who was the quarterback: Ernest Hemingway, Damon Runyon, Henry Thoreau or Edgar Allan Poe?" Answer: "Edgar Allan Poe. He was a grandnephew of the famous writer and played at Princeton."

Offbeat questions feed the sports fans' appetite for more, but it is the commissioner's self-parodying wackiness that makes *TOFT* different. Donoho, in his blazer, tie and mid-America haircut, looks like a car salesman. His running spiel on sports and life, along with the obviously canned laughter and stadium applause, livens up the flat, minimal set.

Donoho, 32, first hit the airwaves as a teenager, doing color commentary of high school basketball games on WJOB radio in Hammond, Ind. As a broadcast journalism major at the University of Missouri, he held the weekend sports



STEVE GOLDSTEIN/SIPA

Donoho's wackiness sets the "Trivia" tone.

TOFT'S TOP TEASERS

1. Willie Mays was the youngest player in major league history to hit 50 home runs in a season. Who was the oldest?

2. Who is the only boxer to win a heavyweight championship and also graduate from college?

3. Terry Puhl holds the record for the best career fielding percentage by a National League outfielder. The modern-day record for most errors by an outfielder in a career is 271. What Hall of Famer holds this dubious record?

4. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers were winless in 1976, going 0–14. Name the only team in the 1960s to go through an entire regular season without winning a game.

5. William (the Refrigerator) Perry is the most recent player to appear on both the offensive and defensive units in a Super Bowl game. Who is the only player in Super Bowl history to start one Super Bowl game on offense and another Super Bowl game on defense?

6. Jim Brown played nine seasons in the NFL and led the league in rushing eight times. Name the only running back to win a rushing title over Brown during this nine-year stretch.

7. Who is the only player in college basketball history to win a scoring title and play on an NCAA championship team in the same season?

slot on the university-owned NBC-TV affiliate, KOMU. After college he got a job as a sportscaster at both WOTV television in Grand Rapids, Mich., and WLWT-TV in Cincinnati, where he picked up three regional Emmys. He moved to the Sports Time cable-TV network in 1984, and when that went under in 1985, Donoho joined SCORE. He anchors a number of programs in addition to *Time Out For Trivia*. It is on *TOFT* that Donoho really shines, even though he says, "I never thought I would be a game-show host."

The commissioner never feels just good, he feels "tremendous." *TOFT*, says Donoho, is not just a show, it is "America's most technologically advanced game show." It is also "America's most patriotic game show" and "the program that has brought American families together."

When Donoho praises a caller for answering a question correctly he might say, "You are a sports stud" or "You are of slightly-above-average intelligence." But Donoho brings out the needle when a caller answers incorrectly: "Bonehead" callers are likely to be invited to "take a hike." Callers who hem and haw while trying to come up with answers are told to "Be bold. Be brave. Be brash. Because you're an American," and are asked to heed the official timer, which consists of Donoho's fingers counting off five seconds before he goes on to the next caller.

Donoho: "There is only one player to win the Heisman Trophy who was not on a winning team. Who's that player?"

Caller: "Paul Hornung."

Donoho: "1956 . . . played for Notre Dame. Do you know what the record was? Two and eight."

Rosenthal says Donoho gets as many as 1,000 letters a week, almost all of them positive. "For the most part, people enjoy his shtick," says Rosenthal. "It's all part of a game they play together." George Glenn, a Chicago stockbroker who has won several *TOFT* prizes, says, "Donoho is refreshing. He's totally honest with his emotions. Often when he says 'take a hike' or 'bonehead,' he mirrors my feelings."

Donoho: "Who is the only player in NBA history to accumulate over 200 steals and 100 blocked shots in a season? I'll give you a hint. It happened last season. Who's playing Time Out For Trivia*?"*

Caller: "Randy from West Virginia. . . . Michael Jordan."

Donoho: "That's it. Way to go, Randy."

Whether Donoho is sending out praise or imploring his callers to speak up and stop mumbling, it's the give-and-take that makes *TOFT* exciting. And as far as Donoho is concerned, the callers are the program. "We have nights when the questions are great, I'm well-prepared, our entire staff is well-prepared, and if we get deadhead, bonehead callers, the show doesn't come off. If we get great callers—enthusiastic, smart, intelligent, funny, glib—then the program reflects that. I can play off that, too. That's the key." Donoho may be the commissioner, but he knows that without players his toll-free playing field would be empty.

So with TAKE A HIKE bumper stickers on cars all over the land, how is Todd Donoho feeling?

"That does it for Time Out For Trivia. *I'm Todd Donoho—feeling tremendous, I might add."* ■

Kate Rogin, who has never phoned "TOFT," is a free-lance writer in New York City.

ANSWERS:

1. *Willie Mays*
2. *James (Bonecrusher) Smith. He graduated from Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C.*
3. *Ty Cobb. He also played 2,938 games in the outfield, a major league record.*
4. *The Dallas Cowboys. In 1960 they were 0-11-1.*
5. *E.J. Holub of the Kansas City Chiefs. In Super Bowl I he started at linebacker, and in Super Bowl IV he started at center.*
6. *Jim Taylor of the Green Bay Packers in 1962.*
7. *Clyde Lovellette of Kansas in the 1951–52 season. The Jayhawks beat St. John's 80–63 for the title, and Lovellette led the nation with 28.4 ppg.*