

## Video: Stephen A. Smith Explains Why He Fired Max Kellerman from 'First Take'



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The shortlist of television analysts who pioneered the sports debate show format as we know it today assuredly includes the likes of two separate pairings: Tony Kornheiser and Michael Wilbon with Skip Bayless and [Stephen A. Smith](#). The first duo revolutionized the genre with playfully contentious shouting matches and an innovative visible sidebar that displayed upcoming debate topics to the viewers in real time. However, in nearly twenty years together, neither of these co-hosts has become as polarizing as their world-renowned fellow ESPN employees over at *First Take*. Much like their colleagues from *Pardon the Interruption*, [Skip Bayless](#) and Stephen A. Smith were friends off-camera. Their fiery demeanors, unapologetically opinionated jabs at high-profile athletes, and unfiltered proclamations on societal matters made for a compelling war of words that often led to them rattling the cages of many throughout the world of sports media and entertainment for four years until Skip ultimately departed for FS1 to form *Undisputed: Skip and Shannon*.

Although they have encountered their share of controversies and turbulence occasionally, Skip Bayless and Shannon Sharpe have developed a rapport with one another that is insightfully entertaining and still going strong after six years. Meanwhile, back at ESPN, Stephen A. Smith did not recapture the magic of *First Take*'s heyday with Skip's replacement, [Max Kellerman](#), although they typically won the head-to-head ratings war with *Undisputed* every morning. Hence, when Max Kellerman was dropped from *First Take* in 2021, Stephen A. Smith went public about his critical role in the highly publicized business decision with a series of interviews about his ex-debate partner. Since then, Stephen A. Smith's shrewd maneuver has resulted in a significant uptick in *First Take*'s ratings, as the show generated a 23% increase in viewership last year. As a matter of fact, *First Take* and *Get Up* on ESPN recorded the network's highest ratings ever for January.

Stephen A. Smith recently appeared as a guest on *The Dan Le Batard Show*, where he openly shared his thought process for firing his former co-host, Max Kellerman. The highest-paid on-air personality at ESPN indicated that unlike his previous debate partner, Skip Bayless, Max's personality did not complement his presentation on the show, to no fault of his own.

"How do you think Max feels about all of this?" Asked Dan LeBatard, a former *ESPN* employee. "About what happened with you two?"

"I have no clue, [but] what I would tell you is I'm kinda sad in this regard; I don't want anybody to assume that Max Kellerman doesn't work hard, Max Kellerman is a bad person, Max Kellerman is not somebody anybody should want to work with, that's not what this was about," Answered Stephen A. Smith. "It was about the fact that a debate show requires certain things that I believed he did not bring to the table when it came to sitting opposite of me. If his brother, [Marcellus Wiley](#), was sitting opposite of Max Kellerman, I'm quite sure not only would they have had a successful show, but they would have had a blast doing it. Because their personalities, their presentation, their deliveries, et cetera, work for them. Just like Skip and I worked for me. Max Kellerman and I did not work for me...it was not a show that I wanted to be a part of for years to come."

Stephen A. Smith joined *ESPN* in 2003, one year after Max Kellerman debuted on the network as the host of *Around the Horn*. Shortly after he departed from *First Take*, Kellerman became the co-host of *Keyshawn, JWill and Max*. He also hosts a show called *This Just In with Max Kellerman*. Both programs are on the ESPN network.

Source: [The Dan LeBatard Show](#)