Three Views from the Pressbox

Explanatory Text of Honors Project (HONRS 499)

by

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SPECIAL THANKS to......

Marc Champion,
Morry Mannies, and
Ken Double

......without whom this project would
not have been possible  -KDB
Forward: Project, purpose, and content of text

In 1988, I came to Ball State University with the dream of one day becoming a professional sportscaster. By the outset of my senior year, I had nearly completed the requirements for my Bachelor of Arts degree in Telecommunications, and had learned a great deal about the field of broadcasting. But I was somewhat disturbed that I had not been able to further my knowledge a great deal in the specific area of sportscasting...thus was born this project.

I set out to interview three professional sportscasters. Who they are and what they do will be detailed in the main text; it will suffice for now to say that they are all in positions comparable to the one in which I would one day like to find myself. By my standards, they have "made it", and I wanted to be able to ask them how they got there, how it felt, what they thought about their jobs, and what they thought was important to being a "good" sportscaster.

And so I asked them these (and many other) questions, and what follows are excerpts from their answers. Not all of the questions asked were the same for each of the interviewees (since they have different areas of expertise), and not all of their answers are excerpted...I have simply tried to include those comments which seemed (to me) to lend the most insight into the life and work of the sportscaster. At the end of this text, I have added a short epilogue, in which I have attempted to briefly detail what I learned through this experience.
Prologue

I would like to take this opportunity to briefly mention just a few things that would probably seem out of place within the main text which follows, yet are important nonetheless. First of all, I would once again like to openly thank Marc Champion, Morry Mannies and Ken Double for allowing me to make them part of the project. At the outset, I wanted to interview three sportscasters; instead, I wound up having three insightful, elaborate discussions with a trio of gentlemen who are truly a credit to their profession.

Secondly, I would mention that following my talk with Marc Champion, he invited me into his radio booth, where I was allowed to observe as he and his crew broadcasted the Detroit Lions - Indianapolis Colts game. This accounts for why Mr. Champion's portion of the main text is slightly longer than the others; I do not dwell on it for very long, but I felt that it most certainly bore mentioning, because it was quite an exciting "bonus" to my experience.

Next, I would like to thank also Dr. Joe Misiewicz, who served as advisor to the project. In addition to doing those things which are "normal" to the supervision of an honors project, he was able to provide the proper contact people in order for me to initially reach my subjects. He also added a personal insight that I would not have gotten elsewhere.

Finally, I would like to thank the Honors College for making HONRS 499 part of the honors curriculum. The things I learned and the people I met were well worth the time spent.
On Sunday, September 22, 1991, I began my series of interviews by travelling to the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis, where I had arranged to meet Mr. Marc Champion, the play-by-play radio voice of the Detroit Lions of the National Football League. Mr. Champion graduated from Ball State University in 1972, and then went to work in the Tampa Bay, Florida area. In 1979 he became the radio play-by-play voice of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a position which he occupied until 1989, when he moved to the Lions organization. I met with Mr. Champion a few hours before game time, we chatted for a while, and then sat down to conduct the formal interview.

When asked what the most important thing was that he had learned through his years of broadcast work that he hadn't known in his years at Ball State, Mr. Champion was frank. "You would like to think you get a job because of your talent...to an extent that's true, but a lot of times, it's being in the right place at the right time...knowing the right people...a lot of it is who you know to get your foot in the door."

Upon being asked what he believed the most important quality of a good sportscaster was, Champion replied, "Probably knowledge of your sport...play-by-play, I think, is just something you either can do or you can't do...I think to be good at it, you just have to have a kind of knack for doing it, and then you have to do your homework."

One question which I planned to ask all of my subjects
was who they thought was the "best in the business" of sportscasting. Champion said "As far as play-by-play goes... I think Al Michaels. I think he's done his homework... he lets (Frank) Gifford and (Dan) Dierdorf do most of the yutzy stuff... but he concentrates on the game. He can do any sport, and that's impressive, that he can be very flexible. As far as studio host, I think Bob Costas is the best."

I asked Mr. Champion about what type of preparation goes into his broadcasts, and he stressed that it is an ongoing process. "First, with your own team... it actually begins in training camp. You have to be there from day one... you watch practices, you get all the releases and the background information on all the players. Then it's a matter of showing up every day and keeping up with what's going on with the team. (For) the opposing team... I try to work a week ahead of time. You contact the visiting p.r. (public relations department)... you begin to do your homework, you go through the releases... newspaper articles are always good. (For the opposition) it's really a seven or eight day process."

Champion had a very down-to-earth view of himself as the play-by-play man. "People aren't tuning in to hear me... they're tuning in to hear the game, and I'm the vehicle. I'm the person who's painting the picture. So, it's my job to make it as clear as possible."

Champion closed our discussion with words of encouragement for an aspiring sportscaster. "I went seven years before I got (the Tampa Bay Buccaneers') play-by-play job. Never
got discouraged...just kind of kept at it, and that's what you've got to do."

For me, the end of the interview was not nearly the end of the day's experience. We then proceeded to the upper level of the Hoosier Dome's pressbox, where I was given an opportunity which I would guess that few sportscasting hopefuls have ever been afforded. I met the rest of the broadcast crew, was fitted with a set of headphones, and then given a front-row seat to observe Champion and his crew do the broadcast of the Lions - Colts game, which aired back in Detroit on WWJ-radio.

Among the things that surprised me the most about the broadcast was the great amount of activity that went on in such a small booth. Inside what could not have been more than a ten foot by ten foot alcove were squeezed Mr. Champion, his color analyst (Jim Brandstatter), his engineer (Tony Ortiz), one statistician, one spotter, myself, and half a boatload of equipment, most of it stacked around Tony. But the vantage point was perfect for calling the game, so I "kicked back" and prepared to take in as much as possible of what was about to unfold.

I soon discovered that I wasn't the only one who liked to "kick back" during the game. Truth be told, the atmosphere in the booth was much more relaxed than I had expected it would be, especially when the broadcast went to commercial. Marc and Jim seemed to do their best while on the air not to come across as "homers" (broadcasters who
openly root for their teams on the air). But when there was a break for commercial, they quickly removed their headsets and discussed the game as any two avid Lions fans would, registering their own approval or disapproval with how the game was going for Detroit, talking about missed opportunities, and even occasionally conjecturing as to what play they would have called in a certain situation if they were Lions Head Coach Wayne Fontes. They were suddenly just two guys talking about a football game, with additional comments thrown in by the statistician and the spotter. Then, after a minute or so, Tony would say, "Five seconds", and the headsets would go back on, and they re-entered their "sportscaster mode".

Overall, Marc seemed to thoroughly enjoy himself during the broadcast. For him, it seemed that it was more fun than it was a job. I was both happy and relieved to see this, because this is the way that I have always thought that it should be. Sure, it was hard work; he had to constantly be aware of every single thing that was going on down on the field, and this requires a level of concentration which can, over the course of a three to four hour broadcast, leave a person mentally fatigued. But I left the Hoosier Dome that afternoon with the impression that there is nothing in the world that Marc Champion would rather be doing than play-by-play sportscasting.

On the morning of Wednesday, October 2, I went to the WLBC-FM offices here in Muncie to meet with Mr. Morry Mannies,
the radio play-by-play voice of the Ball State University football and basketball squads. Mr. Mannies came to work at WLBC during his years as a student at Ball State, and has been doing play-by-play for the basketball games continuously since 1958. In 1985, he was inducted into the Ball State Men's Athletic Hall of Fame. Today, in addition to his play-by-play work, he is also a part owner of WLBC, and does the station's morning sports reporting.

Mr. Mannies was quick to point to traits which have helped him in his years as a sportscaster: "Durability and staying healthy...a lot of people in sports don't realize that 'the show must go on'...the other thing is to accept the good with the bad." Mannies noted that it was great to be able to broadcast the Ball State NCAA Tournament games against Louisville and Nevada-Las Vegas, but said also that he remembers "the losing seasons", estimating that 25 of the 35 seasons of Ball State basketball which he has been a part of were less than memorable. He said, "I've been on the short end of a lot of 20 and 30 point losses...it's easy to broadcast a winner."

When asked how important he believed preparation was to a good sportscast, Mannies stated that it was only a small part of the formula. "You put preparation with being conscientious...and then if you have skills, those three mesh pretty well. I think that the other thing that I have done over the years is I've not been above criticism; I've tried to improve. I still listen to myself from time to time...I think it's important."
When I asked Morry who he thought the "best in the business" was, he simply turned around and pointed to a picture behind his desk, one of many which graced his office walls. It was a photograph of a younger Mannies with a younger Dick Enberg. Morry said that Enberg is "at home" no matter what sport he is doing (much like Champion had cited Al Michaels for his "flexibility"). Mannies also said that he and Enberg belong to the "same school" when it comes to how they perform their work.

During the interview, I commented to Mannies that he had invested virtually his entire sportscasting career in Ball State and Muncie area high school athletics, and asked him if there had ever been a time when he had higher aspirations. He said that there had been, but that he had "never really pursued it...it would have been good, maybe, to have been in 'the big pond', as a 'little fish'; but in Muncie, Indiana, I'm a 'big fish' in a 'little pond', and I guess I prefer that."

Morry offered his view of his job as "A labor of love, and I think so much of that has been an asset because I like sports, I've enjoyed the association, and after all these years, as long as I'm healthy, I kind of feel a responsibility to do it now...I'm 53, and I would hate to give it all up now."

Mannies said that there was one very important goal that he wants to accomplish with each broadcast. "The nicest compliment I have received over all the years is by people
who have said, 'Hearing you do the game was just like being there'. And I guess that's the greatest tribute that I think we can have).

As a parting question, I asked Mannies if he had any advice for an aspiring sportscaster. The one thing that he stressed was to be "well rounded"...to not only be involved (in college) with radio and television, but also to get into speech, debate, etc. (things which Mannies himself had taken part in during his younger years). I took this to be sound advice, and left the WLBC offices glad that I had been able to include Muncie's "big fish" as part of my project.

On the evening of Thursday, October 31, I travelled to Fort Wayne, Indiana, where the Fort Wayne Komets of the International Hockey League were hosting their in-state rivals, the Indianapolis Ice. I proceeded to the pressbox, where I met with Mr. Ken Double, who is in his third season as radio voice of the Ice. Double graduated from Butler University in 1975 with a degree in Radio and Television Broadcasting. In addition to his work in hockey, he also does play-by-play for the Raycom sports network, including Purdue University basketball games.

When I asked Double what important lessons he had learned through his years of broadcasting, he was adamant. "Do your homework...be prepared...know your people. Even to the point where I write out my pre-game show (at least the start of it) so that I'm prepared, the broadcast gets on the air smoothly. Home work and preparation, by far, are the most important things".
Because of a great personal interest in ice hockey, I wanted to know what special challenges the sport presented. Double responded that "One of the things that is consistently a challenge, particularly with hockey...(is that) because the puck moves so quickly around the rink...in trying to paint pictures with words for your audience, varying your delivery is key. So that you're not saying the same phrases to describe the same places on the rink all the time".

As I had with my other subjects, I asked Double for his thoughts on who the "best in the business" was, and he gave an answer in line with that which Morry Mannies had given. "You don't see as much of Dick Enberg as you used to, but in my opinion, he's the best there is. For a number of reasons...he's never unprepared...he gets excited, and generates that genuine excitement over the air. No matter who he's working with, he makes the color commentator sound good. I've never heard him do an event that he didn't handle well".

When asked what he thought was important to becoming a "good" sportscaster, Ken said that "You can never get too good with the language...the most basic things are to be able to communicate properly, both in diction and in grammar. Nobody sounds worse than when they misuse the language".

Double's parting advice to an aspiring sportscaster was simple: "Don't pass on any opportunity to do anything. I was a broadcaster for almost fifteen years before I ever did a hockey game. You might have to take a detour before you get where you want to go". He also stressed that "If
you're good, if you're confident of yourself, and can get your material to the right people, you've got as good a chance as anybody of getting hired".
Epilogue

To put into words all that I have learned from having done this project would be an impossible task. My entire view of the field of sportscasting has been reshaped over the course of the semester, and I would confidently say that I have learned more about the profession over the past three months than I had in my previous 21 years. Much of what I learned cannot be expressed in writing; nonetheless, there are some tangible lessons which I can relate, and they come as direct conclusions from my subjects' answers.

First of all, I learned that there is no single, clear-cut path to becoming a professional sportscaster. Each of my interviewees took different routes (Champion's led him as far away as Tampa, Florida; Mannies', on the other hand, never led him out of Muncie). When opportunities are presented, they must be seized; each of my subjects has made the "big time" because they were all once willing to be "small time".

I also learned that a great deal of work goes into the preparation of a "good" sportscast. All of my subjects stressed the importance of doing one's "homework"...knowing as much as possible about those involved in a contest. For every situation, there is usually a tidbit of background information which could make for a more interesting broadcast. An adequately prepared sportscaster will conclude a broadcast with material to spare...items which he could have used, had the need arisen.

I learned that a sportscaster must never "lose sight of"
the listeners. With radio in particular, the audience is entirely dependent on the descriptions offered by the sportscaster. The listeners have tuned in to hear the game, not the announcer. If a sportscaster paints an accurate, vivid picture of the contest, then he is doing what will please any audience the most; if he forgets about the listeners, then they won't feel like they are part of the action, and will find something better to do.

But perhaps the most important thing I learned from this experience is that I can make it as a sportscaster. It will take patience (nobody gets there overnight); it will take determination (to make the most of available opportunities); and it will take hard work (to separate myself from the rest). It's been said that "If you want something bad enough, you'll find a way to get it". Because I had the chance to do this project, I can safely say that I know a great deal more than I previously did about "what I want"; hopefully, I also know at least a little bit more about "how to get it".