



Sports-Talk in RADIO America

Its Context and Culture



J. M. Dempsey
Editor

Sports-Talk Radio
in America
Its Context and Culture

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John Mark Dempsey, PhD
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“Sign On”

When the first all sports-talk radio stations hit the air in the late 1980s, the skeptics stood in line to cast doubt on the format’s viability. Who would listen to nothing but talk of back-door sliders, picks-and-rolls, and the cover-two defense day after day? How long before these jock talkers ran out of anything remotely interesting to say? (The notion of sports-talk’s alter ego, “guy talk,” had yet to emerge).

And yet *Birmingham* (Alabama) *News* columnist Bob Carlton admits his hopeless addiction to sports-talk radio. He writes of traveling the backroads of rural Alabama, feverishly scanning the dial for a fix, when he picked up a remote station carrying the syndicated *Jim Rome Show*, also known as “The Jungle”:

“Romey,” as his, uh, “clones,” call him, was talking “smack” [loosely defined: jocular sports banter] with Virginia Tech football coach Frank Beamer. But it didn’t matter who was in “the house.” At that point, I would have listened even if Romey was ranting about synchronized swimming.

Carlton lost the station’s signal, and suffered something close to withdrawal symptoms as he hurtled across the Alabama countryside. As he approached Birmingham, he picked up the show on another station and listened to the entire broadcast again, this time in tape delay.¹

For better or worse—and that is very much a matter for debate—millions of mostly male listeners like Carlton indulge their obsession with sports to the exclusion of virtually all else available on the dial—music, news, and (mostly conservative) political talk.

While some stations and hosts earnestly stick to expert postmortems of the local team’s latest debacle (losing always makes for more animated, passionate talk) or predictions for the next all-important game, the trend is toward attitude, the more attitude the better, as ex-

emplified by the hipper-than-hip Rome. While Rome is often a probing interviewer in the best tradition of broadcast journalism ("It seemed to me if they were going to entrust me with the public airwaves and pay me to do the job, I'd better ask those questions people at home want asked," he said), he made his name by getting into an on-the-air scuffle with oft-injured Los Angeles Rams quarterback Jim Everett, after repeatedly referring to Everett as "Chris," an obvious reference to female tennis star Chris Evert and a taunting slight to Everett's manhood.²

Although Rome and others often are deliberately provocative, some observers, such as Steve Mirsky in *Scientific American*, have criticized sports talk for its general obtuseness. He described listening to a show in which the host argued that the Boston Red Sox payroll had grown so much that the archrival New York Yankees no longer had a significant advantage over the Sox: "A Boston caller disagreed, saying, 'The Red Sox's payroll is only \$120 million, and the Yankees is \$180 million. You know what percentage \$120 million is of \$180 million? Seventy-five percent.' The host did not dissuade the caller."

The article went on to describe a discussion between the two hosts of the same program concerning a Ku Klux Klan initiation ceremony in which a Klansman fired a gun into the air, with the falling bullet critically injuring a spectator. Mirsky described the hosts bickering over the pronunciation of the Klan's infamous name. One of them pronounced the name "Klu" Klux Klan, but repeatedly insisted he didn't mispronounce it. The argument went on for some time, leading Mirsky to proclaim his surprise that two men who made a living at watching baseball trajectories would be astonished at how fast falling objects return to the earth.³

Besides its inclination to inanity, sports talk also has a dark side, a reputation for loutish chatter, not all of it coming from uninformed callers. As *Los Angeles Times* writer Paul Brownfield noted: "Sports talk radio has always been a haven for the lunatic fringe, a low-rated medium for men dominated by trumped-up controversy manufactured daily. But it has also given inconsolable, and triumphant, fans a place to go."⁴

The reputation for crudity is not an entirely undeserved. Brad James, program director of WDAE in Tampa, Florida, said his station bills itself as "locker-room talk." WDAE's hosts, like those of many

sports-talk stations, think nothing of referring to private body parts. When someone calls the station and complains, he asks them:

“When you’re watching TV at home, [is] your child sitting next to you while you’re watching the Playboy Channel?” We’re an adult, male sports radio station. And sometimes, you might hear one of our hosts [use profanity]. If you’ve got your child sitting next to you, then change the channel.

Of course, James’ contention, while frequently made by those who push the envelope of good taste, ignores the well-established difference between over-the-air broadcasting, which uses the public airwaves, and cable programming, which travels over privately owned lines. Still, he proudly noted that his station has never been fined by the FCC.⁵

Atlanta Journal-Constitution writer Mike Tierney spoke for those who find sports talk far too “laddish,” as the Brits say: “Sports talk is a guys-night-out concept, intended to capture the atmosphere of men hunkered around a bar, yapping and hoping for a beer-ad catfight between two centerfold prospects to break out.”⁶

Julie Kahn, the general manager of sports-talk station WEEI in Boston—the rare female sports-radio chief executive—takes the sexual talk in stride. She says some listeners take it too literally. “I think it’s part theater, I think it’s part parody,” she said. “A lot of people get up in the air because they don’t realize these guys are acting. . . . They’re going overboard to be entertaining.”⁷

Sometimes the remarks listeners find offensive are not sexual, but racial in nature. A firestorm erupted in Boston when two hosts on WEEI joked that a gorilla that had escaped from a zoo was actually a student in a local racial-desegregation program. The controversy attracted the attention of the city council. “In listening to WEEI . . . I was really concerned this was a pervasive culture within the station,” said City Councilor Michael Ross. “We cannot afford to let this continue in a city like Boston.”⁸ Kahn does not defend the racial comments. “That wasn’t parody. That was just an out-and-out mistake,” she says.⁹

Such complaints are usually directed at stations that flavor their sports-oriented programming with a generous amount of politically incorrect “guy talk.” Other stations take a more purist approach to sports. ESPN Radio general manager Bruce Gilbert said his com-

pany's radio broadcasting is different. With hundreds of affiliates across the country, ESPN has no need to "be in the gutter," according to Gilbert. ESPN even has its own rules for broadcasts.¹⁰

The program director of KFNZ in Salt Lake City, Jeff Rickard, said that although the station engages in "guy talk," the objective is not to appeal to a lowest common denominator. Yet KFNZ has carried segments such as an interview with the winner of a Las Vegas dwarf-tossing contest and its Web page features a link to "Smokin' Hot Babes!!!" "We're not stupid," Rickard explained.¹¹

Even when sports-talk stations keep the focus tightly on sports, critics often condemn it for a lack of fairness and journalistic standards. As *Toronto Star* reporter Chris Zelkovich wrote in an article on sports talk: "In Buffalo, when the Bills lose, talk radio becomes a blood sport."¹²

As early as 1987, the dawn of sports talk, players and coaches were complaining about what they believed was unfair coverage. Future baseball Hall of Famer Eddie Murray, nearing the end of his career with the Baltimore Orioles, became the target of talk-show hosts and fans, quit talking to the media, and finally demanded to be traded (the Orioles obliged his request after the 1988 season). *Washington Post* sportswriter Norman Chad, commenting on Murray's treatment, referred to one Baltimore host, Stan "The Fan" Charles, as "a mountain of out-of-control outrage." Charles explained: "My show is a barometer of what the fans are thinking. . . . My approach is I'm going to be here a lot longer than any of the players."¹³ Indeed, Charles continued as a host on Baltimore sports-talk radio through 2001.

In 1997, the Philadelphia Flyers of the National Hockey League and their star player Eric Lindros sued sports-talk station WIP for defamation after a host reported that Lindros missed a game because of a hangover. As athletes' complaints against sports-talk stations go, the case was not a particularly egregious one. A year earlier, another NHL star considered suing a Pittsburgh sports station whose host "jokingly suggested" that the player pushed his team to acquire another player because the wives of the two players were lesbian lovers. The WIP host actually cited four unnamed sources, including two in the Flyers organization. Still, Fordham University sports-law professor Mark Conrad reflected on the reckless reputation of sports-talk radio, and asked if WIP's minimal adherence to journalistic standards helped the station's defense. "Probably, because if the standard of

sports talk stations is not to do any checking, one can argue that WIP acted more responsibly in this situation than is the norm," Conrad argued.¹⁴

The bitter criticism of sports-talk hosts and callers is sometimes directed not at professionals, but college athletes. In university towns without pro teams, fans focus as intensely on the college teams as the followers of big-league teams obsess about the pros.

University of Arkansas head football coach Houston Nutt warned his players:

I tell our players you've got to be careful and selective on what you read, what you hear. A lot of times people may try to bring you down and they don't mean to. A lot of times it's just misinformation or information that's not totally true.

Former Auburn University head football coach Terry Bowden—himself now a sports-talk host in Orlando—said he avoided listening to sports-talk radio when he coached the Tigers from 1993-1998. "I wouldn't dare listen because it can be so negative," he said.¹⁵

Women's college basketball is rarely a hot topic on sports-talk radio, but many hosts took umbrage when a Manhattanville (Westchester, New York) College player, Toni Smith, turned her back on the flag in protest of the coming war in Iraq in early 2003. Tony Bruno of Fox Sports Network and others called for the athlete's scholarship to be taken away. *St. Petersburg Times* columnist John C. Cotey blasted sports-talk radio hosts for not respecting the player's First Amendment rights: "In the testosterone-filled world of sports talk radio, history has shown us we should expect nothing more than knee-jerk, screaming voices calling for Smith to be stripped of her scholarship, beaten up, ridiculed and thrown out of the country."¹⁶

A 1994 ESPN television *Outside the Lines* program on sports-talk radio contained a segment on the topic of fairness, including comments from a sports-talk host, Andy Furman on WLW in Cincinnati. Furman accused a former Reds pitcher of having an extramarital affair, and based the allegation on the call of an anonymous woman who claimed to have had sexual relations with the pitcher. When asked why he hadn't asked the pitcher about the story, Furman seemed genuinely puzzled by the question. "Good point, I don't know. Just to con[firm]...? I mean, I don't know why. I just knew in my heart that I had the story and that was it. You mean to ask him

what he thought of it, would he want to comment on it? Why would I call him?"¹⁷

* * *

The relationship between sports-talk radio and local newspapers is decidedly conflicted. On one hand, many sportswriters double as sports-talk hosts, arguably bringing a greater sense of journalistic propriety to radio. On the other hand, sportswriters (and other newspaper reporters) are among the sharpest critics of sports-talk radio.

Salt Lake Tribune writer Linda Fantin noted: "Traditional rivals in print and broadcast media openly promote one another and downplay their divided loyalties." (However, one Salt Lake sports-talk station, KFNZ, has dropped sportswriters as hosts. General manager Rickard said he wants employees whose first loyalty is to the station, not part-timers who are "indentured to other masters.") University of Utah mass communications professor Jim Fisher worries that sportswriters serving as sports-talk hosts reduces the diversity of opinions being heard. Defenders of sportswriters as radio hosts argue that their presence on the air gives readers a "direct line" to journalists, increasing the sportswriters' accessibility to the public.¹⁸

When venerable *Boston Globe* sportswriter Bob Ryan found himself in hot water for suggesting that the wife of New Jersey Nets basketball star Jason Kidd deserved to be "smacked" for allegedly drawing media attention to herself, Tierney noted: "A possible contributing factor to the faux pas is Ryan spreading himself too thin. He so permeates the airways that his main job, full-time, is easily overlooked: Sportswriter for the *Boston Globe*." While Ryan's careless remark came on local television, Tierney noted: "The smaller the audience, the more slanderous the yakkers tend to become. And radio tends to trump TV for offensiveness."¹⁹

St. Louis Post-Dispatch sports-media columnist Dan Caesar ventured these guidelines for sports-talk hosts, some of whom would do well to heed Caesar's words:

- Be as informed as your listeners: . . . Too often, guys sound like they pulled into the parking lot five minutes before air time and jumped behind the microphone with absolutely no preparation. There is a word for this: unprofessional.

- Put the listeners first: When a local team is playing on the West Coast, it is of utmost importance that hosts of morning drive-time shows watch the telecast. . . .
- Go to events, develop sources: Is it too much to ask for hosts to go to games, talk to players and team officials, do interviews in the locker rooms and develop sources so all-sports stations can actually break stories once in a while? . . .
- Listen to your station: This sounds as basic as it gets, but it’s amazing how often a host has no knowledge of what was on the air on his station earlier in the day. . . .
- Don’t promote other stations: Taking shots at shows and individuals on other stations not only doesn’t serve the listeners—who cares about personal feuds—it gives free advertising to the competition. . . .²⁰

* * *

Sports talk is part of a trend called “narrowcasting.” No longer do radio stations attempt to reach the broadest possible audience, as in the original concept of “broadcasting.” Instead, they attempt to dominate a particular niche of the overall audience, by appealing to factors of age, income, gender, and culture.²¹ Craig Hanson, president of Simmons Media, the owner of sports-talk station KZN in Salt Lake City, referred to sports-talk as “the niche of the niche.”²²

By the year 2000, the *Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook* noted seventy distinct radio formats in use.²³ The number of stations using the sports-talk format went from virtually none (save WFAN) in 1988 to more than 600 in 2000.²⁴

The explosion of the sports-talk format accompanied the evolution of the AM radio band. Until 1941, all U.S. commercial radio stations were heard on AM channels. In that year, the FCC established the FM band. For a variety of reasons (including World War II and the emergence of television), FM radio did not rise as a serious competitor to AM until the 1970s. Because of its superior fidelity, FM gradually became the choice of music listeners.²⁵

Of course, all-sports never would have seen the light of day had all-news and all-talk formats not blazed a trail. Gordon McLendon, better known as a pioneer of Top 40, launched the first commercially successful all-news station, XTRA, in 1961. Actually a Mexican sta-

tion located in Tijuana, XTRA blasted its robust signal into Southern California (not entirely coincidentally, XTRA is now a sports-talk station). By 1966, *Broadcasting* magazine declared all-news to be a viable format choice.²⁶

Throughout the 1950s, free-standing talk shows became increasingly familiar to radio listeners. In 1959, KLIQ in Portland, Oregon, introduced the all-talk format, followed quickly in 1960 by KABC in Los Angeles. By 1965, interest in the new format was great enough for the National Association of Broadcasters to host a well-attended talk-radio clinic in Chicago.²⁷

The roots of sports talk go back at least to 1964 when Bill Mazer hosted the first telephone call-in sports-talk show on WNBC-AM, 660 kHz., in New York. At the time, the station had just adopted the all-talk format. Known for an encyclopedic knowledge of sports, Mazer accepted challenges from callers asking questions on everything from lacrosse to weightlifting.²⁸

An abortive attempt to launch the all-sports format came in 1981, when the Enterprise Radio Network started a national sports radio network. New York's WWRL was one of the affiliates, but as New York Daily News writer David Hinckley cracked, "Few sports fanatics were fishing up around 1600 on the AM dial to hear a chat about Alabama's football prospects." The network collapsed in less than a year.²⁹

Not until July 1, 1987, did the first station adopt the all-sports talk format. Emmis Broadcasting, bought country-music station WHN-AM in New York and broadcast at 1050 kHz.³⁰ Later, the company bought WNBC (which began in 1922 as historic WEAf and became the flagship station for the National Broadcasting Company in 1926) and changed the station's call letters to WFAN.³¹ "Friends in the industry thought I was stark-raving crazy," said Emmis founder Jeff Smulyan. The plan to change formats wasn't well received within his own company. "Nobody wanted to do it," Smulyan said.³²

WFAN had something that WWRL did not: legendary radio personality Don Imus. "The I Man" was not known as a sports expert, but he had a vast and loyal fan base. WFAN also took over WNBC's strong and well-established frequency and acquired the rights to the NHL's Rangers and the NBA's Knicks.³³ So successful was WFAN that in 1996, Emmis sold the station to Infinity Broadcasting for \$70 million, what was then a record price for a standalone AM station.

Industry sources recently estimated that WFAN is now worth at least four times that amount.³⁴ WFAN, despite a relatively small share of the twelve-plus audience in New York, became the top-billing radio station in history in 1997, crossing the \$50 million dollar barrier.³⁵ As of early 2004, more than a dozen major-market stations were each generating more than \$10 million per year in advertising revenue.³⁶

WIP in Philadelphia soon followed WFAN in adopting the sports-talk format, and by the early 1990s, with AM radio's move to talk programming well established, stations all over the U.S. were adopting the all-sports format.³⁷

While major-market stations may be able to afford a staff of “live” local hosts, medium- and small-market stations generally cannot. And so the introduction of ESPN Radio in 1992 was a crucial development in the emergence of sports talk. An extension of the iconic ESPN cable-television sports channel, ESPN Radio started with an impressive 147 affiliates in forty-three states and grew from there. In the beginning, the network offered limited programming of about sixteen hours per week.³⁸ Today, ESPN Radio claims 700 affiliates, with more than 200 carrying its programming twenty-four hours per day.³⁹

* * *

The nature of narrowcasting and broadcasting on the AM band mean that sports-talk stations typically draw less than 3 percent of the listening audience in major markets. Ratings for the highest-rated sports-talk stations in the top ten U.S. markets in spring 2004 bear this out (see [Table I.1](#)).⁴⁰

Why would so many stations adopt a format that wins such a small slice of the pie? The answer is that the target for sports-talk radio is not the largest possible share of the overall, age-twelve-and-older market. Rather, it is the affluent twenty-five to fifty-four male market that sports radio seeks (and finds).⁴¹ Indeed, the Simmons Market Research Bureau finds that listeners to sports talk are 74 percent more likely to earn \$100,000 or more per year than members of the general population.⁴² This often translates into clout with advertisers. “Most sports radio stations are not big ratings stories,” said the president and general manager of sports-talker WQXI in Atlanta. “But if they’re good, they can sell much, much higher than their ratings suggest.”⁴³

TABLE I.1. Ratings: Sports-talk stations in the top U.S. markets, 2004.

Market	Station	12+ rating	Rank in market
1. New York	WFAN	2.4	17
2. Los Angeles	KSPN	0.5	27
3. Chicago	WSCR	1.3	21
4. San Francisco	KNBR	3.1	9
5. Dallas-Fort Worth	KTCK	3.1	11
6. Philadelphia	WIP	2.8	17
7. Houston	KILT	1.5	18 ^a
8. Washington, DC	WTEM	1.2	16
9. Boston	WEEI	5.8	3
10. Detroit	WXYZ	1.7	16

Source: RadioandRecords.com

^aRatings for winter 2004.

Since 1999, listening to sports-talk radio has increased 25 percent, according to Arbitron, from about 2 percent of the overall share of the audience to about 2.5 percent. Only urban (hip-hop, R&B) and religious stations have shown faster growth. Meanwhile, traditional formats such as adult contemporary, country, oldies and album rock have all declined. George Hyde, the executive director of the Radio Advertising Bureau, said sports talk has an advantage over other formats. While music on radio largely serves as background ambience, sports talk provides “foreground” programming that demands the listener’s attention.⁴⁴

The general manager of all-sports KTCK in Dallas-Fort Worth, Dan Bennett, said sports talk has much broader appeal to advertisers than many think. “The misunderstanding about this format is that there are some people who think it’s all sports bars and gentlemen’s clubs,” he said. “That couldn’t be further from the truth. We have captured the mainstream advertisers in a big way.”⁴⁵

* * *

This book, the first known work devoted to the all-sports radio format, provides a close-up look at individual sports-talk stations around the country, including major-market, medium-market and small-market stations.

The differences between these stations are nearly as numerous as the similarities. Some are ratings successes; some are struggling. Some focus on sports in a relatively straightforward, traditional way; others trend more toward irreverent guy talk. Some are in "major-league" towns; some in college towns. Some are in cities that are wild about sports; some are in cities that are mostly indifferent toward sports. The more successful stations tend to have a strong local foundation and their programming is deeply rooted in the traditions of their communities.

Although sports-talk radio definitely has its detractors, who criticize it on the basis of its content, the format has found a solid niche in the increasingly fragmented world of radio among often difficult-to-reach young men. The sports-talk format has the advantage of an audience that is passionate about sports and their teams. That loyalty is often transferred to the local sports-talk stations, leading to higher-than-average time-spent-listening numbers, and so the format is attractive to advertisers.⁴⁶

In many ways, the "guy talk" tag is more accurate than sports talk. Rick Scott, president of RSA Sports International, a Washington, DC, sports-radio consulting firm, said it's actually men's entertainment. "It's been referred to as a sports bar on the radio or a Tupperware party for guys. Good sports radio is way beyond that. It's about entertaining personalities that are fun to listen to."⁴⁷

In the end, the success of the sports-talk format can best be explained by the unusual bond between the hosts and their niche audience. Close to 10,000 fans turned out for an appearance by Jim Rome in Madison, Wisconsin. "I think one of the reasons the show works is because I'm one of them and they recognize one of them," said Rome. "The only difference between me and them is that I have a radio show and somebody pays me to express my opinions. They're my people. These are my people."⁴⁸