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## The Sound and the Fury

The fall and rise of the first all-sports talk station, WFAN

By Alex French and Howie Kahn on July 10, 2012 [PRINT](#)

Your insomnia's buzzing. It's June 30, 1987. 3 a.m. No shot at sleep, no shot at sex. You're up, awake, obsessing over the sudden dip in Wally Backman's batting average or what the Yankees are going to do about their third starter. Normal, nightly stuff for a New York sports fan. Then you get pensive. About why the Knicks suck; and why the Rangers suck; and why the Jets and the Giants suck even if it's the wrong season to think about their suckitude. You want to talk it all out. No, you *need* to talk it all out. But there's no one there to listen. You can fix this. HoJo's stroke, Rasmussen's slider — well, OK, maybe not the Knicks. You're alone in the world with all this knowledge until, suddenly, you are not.

On July 1, 1987, WFAN, a 24-hour sports talk radio station, broadcasting out of a sub-basement in Queens, hit the air. It didn't come out of nowhere, exactly. The format had been evolving. Marty Glickman, long-ago voice of the Knicks and Giants, first took questions on air in the 1940s at New York's WHN. He listened to calls and relayed them to his audience since the technology didn't yet exist to patch in a caller. Howard Cosell advanced the genre in the '50s by openly chastising coaches during broadcasts. In the '60s, Bill Mazer pioneered the current sports talk template, bantering with callers, letting their voices be heard, and then, in the '70s, John Sterling crystallized it by lambasting them. Enterprise Radio attempted all-sports programming in 1981. They went out of business after nine months.

Half a decade later, an Indianapolis-based media mogul in the making named Jeff Smulyan purchased WHN for 10 million

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bucks, turning a failing country music station — 1050 on your AM dial, the same place where Glickman first answered caller questions on air — into a mess of a 24-hour sports station. At first WFAN bombed. The hosts, for the most part, were the wrong hosts; the business couldn't sustain itself. The callers, though — they were there from the beginning. In a couple years' time, WFAN changed its management, its programming (one word: Imus), and eventually its owner. Smulyan sold WFAN to Mel Karmazin's Infinity Broadcasting in 1992 for \$70 million. And it's all legacy from there.

Died  
*Friday Night Lights: Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Couldn't Lose*  
Disputed: Hagler vs. Leonard  
*The Malice at the Palace*

On July 1, 1987, there was one all-sports station in this country. Today, there are nearly 700. CBS, which already owns WFAN, just announced it will launch CBS Sports Radio in January. They'll be tapping into a market where 27.5 million people tune in every week.<sup>1</sup> Talking and talking and talking about last night's game, next Tuesday's lineup, Kobe's postseason surgery schedule for 2015, the potential host city for the Super Bowl in 2056, a possible stigmata sighting on Mariano Rivera's pitching hand, and, sometimes, hockey. Point blank: This is our most enduring national debate. And it's voiceless without the FAN.

1. Source: Arbitron Inc.

## I. "This Is an Incredibly Stupid Idea. Let's Try It."

**Howie Rose (host, "Mets Extra"):** From the moment Jeff Smulyan got hold of WHN in New York, 1050 AM, it was rumored he might be going all sports.

**Jeff Smulyan (founder and CEO, Emmis Broadcasting):** Emmis was a company that was betting on the rise of FM.

**Phil Mushnick (columnist, *New York Post*):** Emmis means "the truth" in Yiddish.

**Smulyan:** In 1986, the theory was that AM was only going to survive for information. When we bought the Doubleday stations in 1986, we did it to buy their FM position in New York. Along with it came WHN, which was on the AM dial. We agreed to launch what became Hot 97 FM and figured we'd deal with the AM later.

**Joel Hollander (sales director, Emmis Broadcasting):** We didn't know what to do with WHN; it was a dying AM country station.

**Smulyan:** We weren't going all news because you had WINS. We weren't going to do all talk because you had WWOR and WABC. And WHN seemed like the best place to do it because you start with an anchor tenant: the [world-champion] Mets. They were perfect because they were on-air 180 nights a year.

**Rick Cummings (vice-president of programming, Emmis Communications):** Jeff's proposal was, "We'll build it around constant updates. Every 15 minutes we'll be updating the sports scores. Look at how much business **Sports Phone** does in New York City." At the time Sports Phone was a big deal for gamblers, for people who wanted to get up-to-the-minute sports scores, and they made a lot of money.

**Howie Rose:** What makes New York totally unique is that we have two of everything: two baseball teams, two football teams, two basketball teams, and three hockey teams. If you're a Rangers fan, you're not only rooting for the Rangers, you're fending off friends and neighbors who are rooting for the Islanders and the Devils. If you're a Mets fan, you've got your strong constituency but just as strong is that group of Yankee fans who want to give you the business. You can never really feel that you're in total control of your own city. That's what sets it apart from Boston and Pittsburgh and every other place. The intramural squabbles that we have are enough to fuel a radio station all by itself.

**Hollander:** Seventy percent of us were against the idea. We wanted to sell the station.

**Smulyan:** Joel Hollander and Steve Crane were the only two who wanted to do it. Steve asked me what I wanted to do and I said, "You can never lead where others won't follow. The deal is dead." The next day, Rick Cummings and Doyle Rose came up to me and said, "We feel bad. We feel like we owe you one and even though this is an incredibly stupid idea, let's try it." We don't have hostility at Emmis, we have needling rights.

**Cummings:** We weren't convinced that constant updates would make all the difference. So we went out and did a research study and the study said, "Yes, this is what people want. You deliver it and they will come." So that's what we built. It was a very expensive proposition.

**Doyle Rose (President, Emmis Communications Group):** We were used to running radio stations where you pay your music rights, you hire some disc jockeys, you play songs. The cost to run those was one-third [the cost of running WFAN] because we didn't have to staff it 24 hours. We knew that stations like WINS in New York did well, but they didn't make anywhere near the kind of profit that FM stations made.

**Cummings:** We hired this guy named John Chanin <sup>2</sup> to head this thing up.

**Howie Rose:** They had a press conference at Toots Shor's Restaurant down by Penn Station in May of 1987. Chanin stood up and announced, "We're launching a nationwide talent search." Once I heard the word *nationwide*, I knew we were screwed. We [had to] sound like New York.

**Scott Meier (general manager, WFAN):** Chanin didn't know how to do local radio. He came from ABC. He was taking a car service back and forth to Queens. And I'm like, "Take the subway." He wanted to have a chef at the facility. And I'm like, "That's not going to happen." He hired a guy to train the kids in our newsroom on how to cut tape. He wanted to pay the guy, like, \$100,000 a year. I said, "Why do we want to hire somebody to teach these kids how to do something that [everyone] in radio knows how to do?"

**Doyle Rose:** It was hard to find people who were sports guys who could carry a show. There weren't many of them around. We found sports reporters who were doing it for the news stations or sports guys who we converted into radio guys. Even newspaper people — anybody who focused on sports.

**Smulyan:** When we went on the air, I was on vacation with my family for Fourth of July weekend and I spent five days listening to the radio. The lead-in was a replay of Bobby Thomson's home run in 1951 — "The Giants win the pennant!" — and then we had the tagline, "For all the great moments in sports, then and now, WFAN New York City." I remember writing that and loving it. The first time I heard it on-air, I got chills.

**Eric Spitz (desk assistant):** This is at Kaufman Astoria Studios, in Queens.

**Bob Gelb (executive producer, "The Pete Franklin Show"):** It's been around for a gazillion years. The Marx Brothers did *The Cocoanuts* there. We were in the sub-basement; we actually had to walk upstairs to get to the basement. That's how far underground we were.

**Smulyan:** Then Suzyn came on.

**Suzyn Waldman (update anchor):** It was 3 p.m. on July 1, 1987. We were in this tiny studio and the station was about to change hands. I knew as soon as I opened my mouth

<sup>2</sup> Chanin died in 2006.

all those people would be gone — WHN would cease to exist. I remember looking through the glass from the studio, out into the newsroom. All these people were holding hands and crying.

**Smulyan:** Waldman was our first update person; I remember listening and thinking, *Oh my god is she horrible. What is she doing on the air?*

**Jim Lampley (host, "The Jim Lampley Show," 10 a.m.-1 p.m.):** I picked it up from there.

**Spitz:** Lampley was filling in for Pete Franklin.

**Howie Rose:** The karma was bad from the beginning. Pete had a heart attack before he even left Cleveland to come to New York. When the station signed on, the guy they were supposedly building the station around was fighting for his life in Ohio. There was no guarantee he was ever going to come to us.

**Lampley:** I scripted an introductory segment, which was completely and totally facetious in intent. It was a litany of things that I foresaw changing in the culture, and in the sports world, as a result of the genesis of the 24-hour-a-day sport-talk radio station. I forecast a variety of absurdities: People would bend their schedules and neglect their work and their marriages and their children to sit on the phone and wait to be involved in discussions about nothing.

**Russ Mollohan (producer, "The Jim Lampley Show"):** I think it was Mike Lupica at the *Daily News* who wrote in one of his columns that warranties lasted less time than the open to Lampley's show.

**Gelb:** I told Lampley one thing: "Let's make sure the first call is a good one, maybe something about the format, not a basic question like, 'How are the Mets gonna do this year?'" The first call was a kid saying, "Hey, Jim, how are the Mets gonna do this year?"

**Mike Breen (updates, "Imus in the Morning"):** I was working at WNBC radio when FAN came on. We turned it on and listened for a while, like, "Oh, we got nothing to worry about, this thing will never last."

## II. "We've Got the No. 22 Tennis Player in the World Here This Morning"

**Hollander:** In the beginning we tried to be everything to everybody. We had the horse racing report and the auto racing report and the Islanders report.

**Bruce Murray (overnight desk assistant):** We did a fishing segment on the morning show. I think it was called "Ken Kephart's Focus on Fishing."

**Howie Rose:** The unfortunate reality was that John Chanin's background was in network radio. His mind-set was creating something that would have national relevance, not local relevance. I was really scared this was going to be a very short-term proposition.

**Cummings:** John was an out-of-the-box thinker, an imaginer of possibilities, which is great, but you also need somebody who can get a damn program on every day that sounds good. Somebody who can come in and say, "OK, here's the weekend lineup — by the way, I want to sit down with the afternoon guy because he went way too long on this topic. And why did we even discuss ice skating? Nobody gives a shit."

**Doyle Rose:** I'll give John Chanin credit — his wife came up with the call letters WFAN.

**Meier:** Three months in we fired, I want to say, 25 to 30 people.

**Doyle Rose:** We were trying to get names. We weren't as successful as we'd hoped.

**Smulyan:** Our first morning guy was Greg Gumbel. Greg is one of my favorite people, one of the most talented people, but there were probably fewer people in his audience than there are on this call right now.

**Mark Boyle (updates, weekend host):** Greg Gumbel might have been the worst morning man I ever heard in my life.

**Lampley:** My producer was a kid named Russ Mollohan. He never produced anything. He was brand-new in radio. On my third day I showed up to go on the air and he gave me a handwritten list of all the things that we were going to talk about, including a note that says, "Mikael Pernfors. 10:20 a.m. He is the no. 22 tennis player in the world." Upon seeing this I instantly tell the audience, "We've got the no. 22 tennis player in the world here this morning. I have to assume that Russ called each of the other 21 before we wound up booking Mikael Pernfors. Russ, what was it like trying to get to the other 21?"

**Mollohan:** We just thought it would be kind of funny to have, like, an official tennis player for the show. He became the official tennis player of "The Jim Lampley Show." It wouldn't have been any fun to pick Stefan Edberg or Jim Courier, any of the big names. We had to find somebody unique.

**Lampley:** I start making up stories about trying to book John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors. Eventually, Pernfors comes on the air, and now, of course, I have trashed him to the audience with all of this stuff about, "How does Russ keep a job if he can't get any of the top 21 players in the world?" And then we start talking to Mikael and he was terrific. He went to the University of Georgia and I'm thinking about a Swede in Georgia and off the cuff I say to him, "Can you translate for us? What would 'How 'bout them Dogs' sound like in Swedish?" And it was something like, *Hur 'bout de hundar?* That became the official slogan of the show, and then 30 times a day we would play Mikael Pernfors teaching us all how to say "How 'bout them Dogs?" in Swedish. Now all sports talk radio shows have that stuff.

**Ed Coleman (host, "Coleman and the Soul Man"):** I did updates for Lampley. He had to go on the air at 1:05 and he'd get to the studio at 1 after having lunch somewhere. Jim had a lot of things going on in his life, probably a lot of liquid lunches. Sometimes he'd be a little bit late. Anyway, once Lampley had to go on the air at 1:05, or whatever, and he raced into the studio with no time to go to the bathroom. He's signaling to give him a cup. And we give him a large cup and he proceeds to take a leak right there while he's doing the monologue. I thought it was one of the greatest broadcasting feats I've ever seen.

**Steve Somers (host, "Captain Midnight," midnight-6 a.m.):** Gumbel and Lampley were TV people looking for TV gigs. I'm sure radio was a port in the storm.

**Lampley:** The callers carried me. If I missed the Knicks game, the callers would tell me about it in my first 20 minutes on the show. Same with the Rangers and Yankees. Anything I missed, a caller would call up and give me a version of it, "Here's what happened," and then the next guy would call and say, "No, no, no. He's all wrong. This is what happened." We were not yet in the period of *SportsCenter* and YouTube. There was still a fair amount of oral history that was going into this.

### III. "Fire Me! Fire Me! Fire Me!"

**Howie Rose:** I don't even remember who the hell did our afternoon drive show on day



one because they were rotating people in and out weekly.

**Gelb:** New York got 25 different talk show hosts or sports celebrities to fill in for Pete Franklin.

**Spitz:** There were a lot of ESPN people. Chris Berman would do a day. Bob Ley would do a day. Tom Mees. Pete eventually started in September.

**Smulyan:** When we got Pete, everybody said, "These guys are serious." He was Mr. Cleveland.

**Cummings:** He was very caustic, very argumentative, very confrontational. We said, "He fits New York perfectly; everybody in New York's like this, so he ought to be great on a New York sports station." Nothing could have been further from the truth. He was universally rejected by New York sports fans.

**Gelb:** Bob Raissman called Pete "Old Acid Breath."

**Bob Raissman (columnist, *New York Daily News*):** I think FAN management thought Franklin could succeed because he was a big name.

**Gelb:** Pete would have said he sounded like either Patton or Churchill. He really reminded me of a mix of Howard Caine — who played Major Hochstetter in *Hogan's Heroes* — and Don Rickles.

**Howie Rose:** There were really two Pete Franklins. There was the maniac on the air, but off the air he was unassuming. He wore old-fashioned checkered shirts and cheap mail-order pants pulled up to his midsection.

One of his favorite words was schmuck. You guys are schmucks for this, and you're a schmuck, and if you go to the Mets games you're a schmuck, and if you're not a schmuck you're a schmuck.

**Gelb:** He was a kitten. His wife controlled his life. He was a very kind, nice guy, who would never, ever want anyone to know that because his on-air persona was so, so mean and anti-everything.

**Howie Rose:** Pete had all this pent-up adrenaline. He was going to come on and make a splash right away, and he called George Steinbrenner a scumbag on the air — there it was. The first shot had been fired.

**Somers:** He had that attitude toward New Yorkers that a lot of outsiders do. He started getting on the Yankees right off. I mean, when you go into somebody's house for the first time, I think you want to pay a little respect before you start saying the place looks like a dump and you're a jerk for living in it.

**Mark Mason (program director):** He was full of anger. One of his favorite words was schmuck. You guys are schmucks for this, and you're a schmuck, and if you go to the Mets games you're a schmuck, and if you're not a schmuck you're a schmuck.

**Boyle:** Management put too much stock in Pete. In New York you better know what you are talking about when it comes to the local teams. You can't fool the New York fan about the Knicks or the Mets or the Rangers because they most likely know more than you do.

**Gelb:** Pete was known for his tirades. One of them involved Chris Russo and a bell. Pete liked a lot of elements on his program. So I gave him a bell that he started to ring for first-

time callers. He loved that. So Russo brought the bell into the studio and started to ring it, just to goof around with Pete. Pete didn't take kindly to that and told Christopher, "Ring that bell and I'll stick that bell up your ass." Little did Pete know that Mike and Dog would become the best talk show in the history of the freakin' medium.

**Chris "Mad Dog" Russo (co-host, "Mike and the Mad Dog"):** Pete was a bitter guy at that point. He made believe he was kidding at the conclusion of his little rant, but I didn't take it that way.

**Gelb:** He had this dinky little office right across from the bathroom. The bathroom used to overflow and the water would run into his office. He had one of the funniest tirades of all time when he started screaming about, "Last week there was urine outside my office, now it's leaking under my office, fix the place." And then he goes into this thing about, "Fire me, fire me."

**Pete "Old Acid Breath" Franklin:** [*Screaming.*] Do I offend anyone? I'm not here to offend you, damn it! You suckas out there, I ain't there to offend ya! Screw you! Screw you all! What the hell are you calling for? WHY are you calling for? If you don't like what the hell you hear, dammit, don't call! DON'T CALL! DOOOOON'T CALL!! ... HAAAAAAAAA HAAAAA! [*No longer screaming.*] Unbelievable. Unbelievable. In fact, I'm not mad at anyone today. I'm not. Even the people who put this building together, two weeks ago they had a flood in the bathroom and it flooded my room. You think I'm kidding. Today they got holes in the building where it's leaking because there was rain and they took my ash can out of the office [*screaming again, but from the toes*] and I GOT A FLOOD OUTSIDE THE DOOR! WHAT ARE THEY DOING TO ME HERE!?! GIVE ME AN OFFICE THAT DON'T LEAK! THAT DOESN'T HAVE URINE IN IT! GIVE ME SOMETHING DECENT! Crying out loud. STOP APOLOGIZING FOR ME! SET ME FREE IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT! FIRE ME! FIRE ME! FIRE ME! FIRE ME! FIRE ME! FIRE ME! FIRE ME!

**Howie Rose:** Pete was supposed to be the savior, but wound up taking us even deeper into the morass.

**Spitz:** We had bizarre people coming in from all different places. You had John Minko coming in from Indianapolis; John ~~Klosse~~ Cloghessy from Iowa; John O'Reilly from Houston; a guy named Lou Palmer came in from Florida to do weekend shows. This was not a great formula. They were spending a lot of money, flying them in and putting them up in hotels.

**Cummings:** The whole premise was wrong. Even if they'd been the right hosts, this constant interruption for updated scores totally screwed up the continuity. You'd just be listening to something interesting that one of the hosts was getting into with a guest or

with a caller and you had to stop and go do another goddamn sports update.

**Howie Rose:** We were making it up as we went along. I went to P.S. 205 in Bayside, Queens, and at any hour of the day or night you could go down to 205 and there were guys there and everything revolved around sports. That's kind of what I wanted to bring to the air. I wanted to bring the schoolyard to life on the radio. But I'm not sure anybody who worked at that station even knew what a schoolyard was in New York, and it sounded brutal.

**Hollander:** It was a huge failure the first year. Nine months in, everybody was ready to throw in the towel.

**Spitz:** You didn't know if this thing was going to last another week, another month. You had people coming in from all over the country that were wondering, *Did I just make the biggest mistake of my career?*

**Joel Hollander:** We lost \$8 million in the first year of operation.

**Randy Bongarten (president, NBC Radio; senior regional VP, WFAN):** They could never have sustained \$8 million. I think it was about a million and a half.

**Smulyan:** It was a big loss. ... We did some research and discovered that nine months into it, 85 percent of sports fans in New York were still going to WINS or WCBS for their sports news. It was like we didn't exist.

**Doyle Rose:** We brought in a consultant, a guy named Jack Trout — he and his partner, Al Ries, wrote what was at the time the most definitive marketing book ever: *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*. I used that book in almost everything I did. We had an all-day brainstorming session where we explored our level of commitment to being a news station that only presented sports scores and stories. That meeting, for me, crystallized the idea that sports is not news — it's entertainment. You don't have to listen to the radio to find out scores. What really makes it work are the stories behind the stories, the characters, the discontent from fans, and contracts that haven't been negotiated properly. All the kinds of things people sit around and bullshit about at the bar.

[CLICK HERE FOR PART TWO](#)

## IV. "How Do You Feel, Fuckhead? I Just Doubled Your Revenue."

**Hollander:** One of the big issues at the beginning was that the signal on 1050 was really inferior.

**Don Imus (host, "Imus in the Morning"):** It's the worst signal on the dial. You have to park next to the transmitter to hear the station.<sup>3</sup>

**Raissman:** It's like two Dixie cups and a string.

**Bongarten:** Jeff considered dumping the experiment; 1050, where they were, and 660, where we were at WNBC, could have both been sold to religious broadcasters.

**Smulyan:** In February of '88, instead of selling, we bought five stations from NBC, including 660 AM, because the signal was better.

**Hollander:** 660 is one of the best non-directional signals in the United States. I'm at my home in Florida right now and on a clear night, you can hear 660 down here. It's crackly,

<sup>3</sup> Imus initially refused our interview requests. That's when we turned to ESPN executive vice president and executive editor John A. Walsh for a considerable assist.



but you can hear it.

**Bongarten:** WNBC was not performing very well. It was a station that had been built not only around Imus, but around Howard Stern. And when Howard left, the fortunes of the station fell rapidly.

**Smulyan:** When you're in business, you can't be irrational. We said, "Look, let's see how it goes. If it doesn't go any better, then we'll dump it."

**Bongarten:** Emmis paid NBC around \$120 million. It might have been higher. The value attributed to 660 alone was between 20 and 25 million [dollars]. When we put the two stations together — the old FAN and the old WNBC — they each had \$350,000 in ads booked on it a month. And the advertisers didn't cancel; they said, "What the hell? We'll just keep it together." So it became \$700,000 worth of advertising at the station. I thought that'd be fine for a month or two and then it would go down. It never went down; it only went up. It was the most amazing thing I ever saw.

**Hollander:** The station did not take off until October 9 of '88. There was a Dodgers-Mets playoff game and we switched the signal that night at 5:30 in the Mets parking lot. Imus went on the next morning.

**Smulyan:** When we purchased the station we also got the contracts for all of the talent at the station. That's how we got Imus.

**Imus:** I don't know if there was any discussion at all. We just continued to do the same show we were doing.

Imus was just getting out of rehab when we bought the station. We laughed because we had a bad radio station and a bad personality who's probably going to be a drug addict for the rest of his life and a baseball team [the Mets] with rumors about drugs. It was kind of like the grand slam.

**Smulyan:** Imus was the perfect guy because he had a male 35-to-54 audience. He could talk about sports, but he talked about a lot of stuff. In those days, the theory in the morning was you didn't want to rehash sports that much. If there was any research at all, it was, look, they know the score of the game last night, they've already talked about it, they don't want to hear any more about it.

**Doyle Rose:** His contract was up with NBC, so we had to make a decision. Do we keep Don Imus? Do we renew his contract? At the time, for a radio contract, it was huge: \$2 million a year.

**Bongarten:** He's still a fairly popular and influential guy, but at the time, he was an icon.

**Smulyan:** Imus was just getting out of rehab when we bought the station. His agent was a friend of mine; we laughed because we had a bad radio station and a bad personality who's probably going to be a drug addict for the rest of his life and a baseball team [the Mets] with rumors about drugs. It was kind of like the grand slam.

**Breen:** He was a bad drunk and a drug addict. You didn't know what you were gonna get. The first day I started working with Imus at NBC, I asked the program director to bring me back to meet him; it was two o'clock in the afternoon and he was drunk. So the program

director says, "Can this kid fill in on sports for Don Criqui tomorrow?" And Imus was like, "Sure, now get out of my office." He didn't even look up. When I went in the next day, I sat down and he had no idea who I was. So he shuts his mic off and he looks at me and he says, "Who the f--- are you?" I said, "I'm filling in for Criqui." He turns his mic back on and he says to Charles McCord, "Charles, do you know this kid? He claims he's fillin' in for Criqui." Now this is on the air, this part. So he spent the next 10 minutes interviewing me, asking me how I got to work on his show.

**Bongarten:** I had a wonderful office at 30 Rock; I was the president of NBC Radio; I had my private bathroom; I had the office next to Grant Tinker. If I needed to go to the airport, I got a limousine ride. It was terrific. At WFAN I was in this basement of this pit; it was awful. Horrible. I hated it. I remember standing at FAN thinking, *What the hell happened to my career?*

**Ian Eagle (producer, 7-11 p.m. shift; board operator, "Mike and the Mad Dog"; host):** The place was a complete shithole. There were urine stains on the ceiling. I'm still convinced there was asbestos in there. It wasn't until I stopped working at FAN that I started feeling better physically. I always felt like I was on the verge of getting the flu. I teetered on flu-like symptoms for 12 years.

**Bernard McGuirk (producer, "Imus in the Morning"):** You would think that going from these beautiful, plush studios at 30 Rock to this roach-infested, dirty, filthy basement would demoralize you. But it seemed to energize Mr. Imus.

**Hollander:** I met him the day before we switched the signal. He was in the radio station commissary, wearing his bicycle shorts, and the first thing he ever said to me was, "How do you feel, fuckhead? I just doubled your revenue."

**Meier:** My children hated him because he used to call me Pizza Face on the air, "that pizza-faced general manager." I'd had some acne when I was younger. He could make fun of me on-air all he wanted. He was making me a lot of money.

**Smulyan:** He used to refer to me as the hillbilly with the Rolex. I used to have people come up to me in Seattle<sup>4</sup> and say, "I know more about your life than you do. I know who you're dating."

**Breen:** Imus was tough to be around. He used to kid — and it was half-kidding — that you weren't allowed to make eye contact with him if you saw him in the hallway.

**McGuirk:** I've been the target of his wrath many, many times, as a lot of people have. But I still work for him; I don't want to be that target any longer, or as little as possible in the future. Let's put it that way.

**Breen:** I had a tough time with the Marv Albert story.<sup>5</sup> Marv Albert has probably influenced what I do on the air more than anybody else. Then I became his backup and got to know him really well. I considered him a friend. Then this whole thing goes off — and it was horrible, obviously — and Imus and the crew just went nuts on him. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't take part in it because he was somebody I was friends with and admired. Imus told me if I couldn't do it with him then I couldn't be on the show. He says, "You can't pick and choose who we make fun of, it's all for one." He actually fired me. Fortunately, Joel Hollander, who was the general manager at the time, went to Imus and said, "What are you doing? Do you expect the kid to make fun of his broadcasting idol? Come on. You love him otherwise." I can't remember if it was a day or two days that I was out of work, but Imus brought me back in.

<sup>4</sup> Smulyan bought the Seattle Mariners in October 1989.

<sup>5</sup> In September 1997, Albert pleaded guilty to misdemeanor assault and battery charges. The trial aired many lurid, unforgettable, and really embarrassing details about Albert's sex life.

**Coleman:** The worst thing that can happen with Imus is if he ignores you. If he pays no attention to you whatsoever he either doesn't like you or doesn't consider you worthy of anything. If he kills you, that means you're at least worth something.

**Breen:** As much as he could be hard on the people he worked with, he wanted the station to succeed.

**Howie Rose:** He began to weave sports into the format of his show, and in doing so would talk about all of us. He would rip the shit out of any given one of us on any given day, and it was great because he was creating an awareness. He knew what he was doing.

**McGuirk:** FAN had Ed Coleman with Dave Sims in the middays — Dave Sims, an African American, and Ed Coleman, an Irish guy who liked to drink a lot. So Imus called them "Funk and the Drunk." And in the afternoons, for Francesa and Russo, it was "Jerk and the Fat Man." But he was the one that had the ratings, so he had the ability to shine a light on them and give them a little publicity, and it was those types of exchanges that made the station sound like one big dysfunctional family.

**Len Berman (sports anchor):** I agreed to do a show for the station with Mike Lupica, but I immediately had remorse and I called up the general manager and said, "I just don't know if I can do this." And, of course, news was — and still is — a leaky sieve coming out of WFAN, so Bob Raissman broke the story in the *New York Daily News*. Raissman started calling me Achy-Breaky Contract in the paper and Imus, on his morning show, had one of his characters in a German accent calling me Lenny the Jew. Afterward, when I was on with Lupica, I said on the air — on Imus's radio station — that I thought it was anti-Semitic, and then it just blew up. It became the front and back page of the *Daily News* and Imus claimed he wanted to punch me, and, you know, Lupica hardly talks to me now to this day, and on and on it goes.

**Hollander:** He called Len a "boner-nosed Jew."

**Smulyan:** I'm obviously a pretty well-identified Jew and I never felt that Don was ever anti-Semitic or anti-anything. He just liked to poke fun at everybody.

**McGuirk:** We had regular guests, a priest-and-rabbi comedy team: the God Squad.

**Rabbi Marc Gellman:** We were catastrophologists. Whenever there was some catastrophe, Imus would have us on and say, "How could this all happen with God around?"

**McGuirk:** We granted them a window of purity during which they gave us the Jeep-Eagle Prayer of the Week. The prayer was sponsored.

**Rabbi Gellman:** We quit several times during our tenure when he would introduce us with some vulgar piece about stuffing a turkey, for example. I think it reflected a deep uncertainty, I wouldn't say anxiety, but uncertainty in him. He had made his reputation as a shock jock, and I think when he felt we were getting too intellectual or too mainstream, he would go back to that — to his high hard one.

**McGuirk:** We used to have a Nixon and a Ted Kennedy and an Andy Rooney and a George Patton and a Mike Tyson and all kinds of characters. The Cardinal was something I came up with. I used to do an Irish voice, as a priest, an angry Irish priest. And at some point the New York State Lottery was advertising and they wanted Imus to read the lottery numbers on the radio, which was fairly tedious. So he came up with the brilliant idea of having the Cardinal do it the way priests read bingo numbers at a bingo game. Eventually

the lottery numbers went by the wayside and the Cardinal remained.

**Hollander:** Imus's ratings were very good, but they were nowhere near Howard Stern's. But Imus had the most influential people listening. He had the Fortune 500 CEOs. When we wouldn't get ad buys we would go straight to the clients, because he was talking about the heads of Merrill Lynch, NBC, Poland Spring, or North Fork Bank. We had a relationship with Dick Grasso at the stock exchange. We used to get a lot of advertising dollars from blue-chip accounts like that.

**Rabbi Gellman:** Imus was curious, extremely curious about things, big issues.

**Hollander:** When the first Iraq war happened, he covered it and he started getting on these politicians and journalists, and you heard them laugh at themselves. You name 'em and they were all on it. Tim Russert, Anna Quindlen, Jeff Greenfield, Dan Rather.

**McGuirk:** During the New York State Democratic primary, 1992, Bill Clinton was running against Jerry Brown and some other people and he was struggling.

**Imus:** I think that was either Paul Begala or Carville that called and said [Clinton] was coming into New York. He had some controversy surrounding him. He had finished second in New Hampshire and he called himself the Comeback Kid. And he had the Gennifer Flowers controversy surrounding him. And this is before he did the *Arsenio Hall* saxophone deal. So I just simply thought they needed to humanize him a little bit. So we arranged this interview and it just happened.

*IMUS: Well, here now on a phone with us, the governor of Arkansas who, as you probably know, is running for the presidency of the United States. Good morning, Governor Clinton.*

*CLINTON: Good morning, Don.*

*IMUS: How are you?*

*CLINTON: Well, I'm all right. I'm disappointed you didn't call me "Bubba."*

*IMUS: [Laughing vigorously.] Well —*

*CLINTON: It's an honorable term where I come from. It's just Southern for mensch.*

*IMUS: I'd actually read in the New York Times that that was a derisive term, but then, that was the New York Times .... So how are you? Do you want to go back to Arkansas? It's like you've been mugged here in New York, isn't it?*

*CLINTON: Well, I'm having a good time, you know. I'm trying to mug back.*

*IMUS: At what point yesterday when you were on that simple-minded, nitwit Donahue Show<sup>6</sup> did you realize that this might not be the right thing to do?*

*CLINTON: Oh, I think it was all right.*

*IMUS: Have you had a chance to read the papers this morning?*

*CLINTON: No.*

*IMUS: I've got some good news: There's nothing awful in them. At least you haven't been accused of having any kind of relationship with unattractive women. I mean, what if Roseanne Arnold were calling Ted Koppel, saying, "Yeah, I been sleeping with Governor Clinton"? I mean, that would be a problem.*

*CLINTON: Listen, if she did that, I'd file a palimony suit against her. She's got the no. 1 TV show in America, and I could finance the rest of this presidential campaign. It'd be better than Jerry Brown's 800 number.*

**McGuirk:** Everybody was laughing. And this guy, this Southern governor, was actually human with a sense of humor. Clinton eventually won New York State even though he'd been down in the polls before the interview. Imus was credited with turning around his

<sup>6</sup> The afternoon before appearing on "Imus in the Morning," then-Governor Clinton appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show*. Clinton and his advisers believed that Donahue would pitch Clinton softballs. Instead, the white-haired talk show host hammered the candidate with questions about his alleged extramarital activities.

fortunes in the primary, which turned around his fortunes in the general primary itself. ... But [the Clinton interview] impressed in people's minds that the I-Man was a kingmaker and that he had some juice. After that, everybody wanted on the show — Giuliani, David Dinkins, you name it. Imus has a great BS antenna. He gets right to the heart of things and gets people to say things that they would otherwise not say. The hope always was that we have somebody say something that they end up apologizing for the rest of the week.

**Don Criqui (updates, "Imus in the Morning"):** The guy is very smart. He can read people as well as anybody you'll meet. He makes an awful lot of calls about people in the news that might seem a little outrageous at first, but he tends to be right about them.

**Imus:** I remember telling Charles the day John Edwards came into the studio, "That's the phoniest son of a bitch I've ever met in my life." Edwards is even a bigger piece of shit than Newt Gingrich, if you can even fathom that.

**Meier:** We went down to Nashville to shoot some commercials featuring Don and Pete. It was tongue-in-cheek: Don would poke fun at Pete, Pete would poke fun at Don. But it would try to create celebrity with both of them. And Don's the greatest guy in the world to work with. He honest to god is. His ego on the air is nothing like his ego in person. Pete, on the other hand, wasn't easy. Pete was an ass. And he was nervous and couldn't get the shot down. He didn't understand the concept. He was incredibly difficult. And I think that shoot was very telling. That was really the beginning of the end.

## V. "Fatso and Froot Loops"

**Spitz:** Mike Francesa and Chris Russo replaced Franklin.

**Sean Grande (sports director, WEEI, Boston in the 1990s; native New**

**Yorker):**<sup>7</sup> The problem with Pete Franklin or Jim Lampley was you didn't get the feeling they'd lived through the Ranger-Islander series of 1984. They didn't have that experience. They weren't there when the Knicks won the lottery and Patrick Ewing was drafted. They weren't there for the World Series when Reggie Jackson was hitting those home runs in '77. They hadn't been through all of the horrendous years with the Mets that a lot of us suffered through in the '70s. That special kind of torture is a huge part of the FAN culture.

**Meier:** We had a meeting with Jeff Smulyan and we said, "We don't want Pete anymore." At the end of the day, we said we could make more money with these two guys than we'll ever make with Pete.

**Raissman:** Before FAN, Chris was working at a station called WMCA, way down the dial, doing sports on their morning drive, basically doing scores. He also did a Saturday show where he would cut it loose and go crazy. So I coined the name "Mad Dog" for him.

**Hollander:** Mike was working at CBS doing stats and research for Brent Musburger.

Mike sounded like a truck driver from Brooklyn. Most of the hosts they'd hired initially sounded very sterile. They were network guys. This is local radio. You ought to sound like the

**Raissman:** I remember meeting Chris. I went to the studio over at WMCA. It was about the size of a closet. I figured with his gruff voice he'd be older. It was almost like when the guy in *American Graffiti* went to see Wolfman Jack. I walked in there and there's this little, skinny kid with an Izod shirt on, very preppy-looking, with his crazy voice. I remember him telling me that he couldn't get guests. The Mets, the Yankees wouldn't give him anybody.

<sup>7</sup> In 1991, Boston's WEEI, 850 AM, was one of the first stations to switch to an all-sports format. It's the on-air home of the Boston Red Sox, the Boston Celtics, and Boston College's football and basketball teams.

city.

**Smulyan:** I don't know how many times Mike called. I know the perception was that

he was over at CBS sort of languishing.

**Meier:** Mike sounded like a truck driver from Brooklyn. We liked that sound because most of the hosts they'd hired initially sounded very sterile. They were network guys. This is local radio. You ought to sound like the city.

**Imus:** We liked Mike Francesa, I thought he was great, and I liked Chris "Mad Dog" Russo, I thought he was fabulous. Notice I said fabulous for Mad Dog and great for Francesa, but I like them equally, I should say.

**Russo:** I had nicknames my whole life. My nickname in high school was "Gucci," 'cause I used to wear black patent leather shoes. Raissman giving me "Mad Dog" was very significant. But the nickname wouldn't have meant anything unless Imus got ahold of it.

**Smulyan:** Imus said, you've got to listen to this guy Russo, he sounds like Donald Duck on steroids.

**Russo:** I think Imus had a lot to do with putting me and Mike together. Imus got there in October '88. I started doing updates with Imus in April of '89. Then Mike and I started in September of '89, right after Labor Day. So, you do the math.

**Mason:** I was a big fan of duos. The difficulty with any kind of talk radio is getting that dynamic working right. I wanted to build more ensembles because there are plenty of slow days — plenty of slow weeks — and just having one guy sitting there taking calls in a slow period can make for a tough listen.

**Mushnick:** Mark Mason is a good guy, but he wouldn't know a baseball from a dingleberry. I was the advocate for putting those guys together. And he'd say, "Nah, split 'em up." Other times he'd say, "Nah, put 'em together." I kept those guys alive. I did. I know it sounds self-absorbed.

**Mike Francesca (co-host, "Mike and the Mad Dog," in an interview with Mediabistro's FishbowlNY):** It was a shotgun marriage. They call me in on a Friday and said, "You're going to get your wish. But it's not a one-man show." I fought it like crazy.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Francesca turned down repeated requests to be interviewed for this oral history. Grantland editor-in-chief Bill Simmons even spent 20 minutes on the phone with Francesca to no avail, explaining afterward, "Since ESPN doesn't allow its talent to be interviewed on Mike's radio show, Mike simply didn't want to be interviewed for a piece that would appear on a site owned by ESPN. He kept saying it was a 'matter of principle' for him." Simmons couldn't change his mind even though Francesca admitted that he couldn't wait to read the piece.

**Imus, from an "Imus in the Morning" broadcast:** Francesa's such a jerk. He is. He has this attitude. This know-it-all attitude. This is a guy, by the way, who, in five years, will



not be in this business. Guaranteed. Take that to the bank. This is a guy who couldn't get arrested at another radio station in this country ... The thing about Francesa is he cops an attitude with me. So, you know, that fat bastard can drop dead as far as I'm concerned. I've had it with both of them. We're sick of 'em. And by the way, where's Chernoff? Get Chernoff in here ... What is he? Afraid to sit down with these two fat loads? ... I was talking to Russo and Francesa independently yesterday and I was saying their show had the potential to be terrific except they both talk at once. Don't you think that's the case?

**Russo:** I think Brandon Steiner brought us both sweaters on our opening day as gifts. It may have been the second or third day. Nice sweaters — like cashmere.

**Mason:** You don't want to pair two guys who are just like each other. You want lightning. You want the sparks, you want friction.

**Nick Paumgarten (from a 2004 *New Yorker* story):** Though their faces may be made for radio, their voices, by most measures, are not. Francesa, who is from East Atlantic Beach, on Long Island, speaks with a thick Long Island accent, in a deep-timbred head-cold tone that makes words like "Giambi" and "Isiah" sound as though they'd been dunked in onion dip. His is the voice of authority, of donnish pronouncement. Russo, the Mad Dog, is also from Long Island — Syosset — but his voice is otherworldly: loud, shrill, high-pitched, a little hoarse, suggestive of after-school tutoring sessions and Benzedrine. He talks fast and has a savant's memory for pitching sequences, third-down conversions, and obscure statistics from seasons long past. Russo is the ranter.

**Raissman:** Here were two guys who thought they should be alone in that seat from the get-go. I remember their first show. Mike went out of his way, almost, to ignore Russo. They weren't clicking. It was uncomfortable to listen to. They were doing a two-man show, but with a one-man mentality.

**Russo:** We were doing 3 to 7 at that time. You put us in that situation, afternoon drive, it's gonna take a little time to develop chemistry. It's not gonna happen overnight.

**Raissman:** They hit their stride when they realized they needed each other. At first, it was almost like Francesa didn't take Russo seriously. Francesa thinks he knows more than everybody. So it was like, "What the fuck do you know, Chris?"

**Gelb:** I would call Mike every night and call Chris. I'd talk to Mike for 30 minutes and Chris for 30 minutes and then I would call Mike back and pretty much lie to Mike about what Chris was saying about him and then I'd call Chris back and lie to him about what Mike was saying about him.

**Eddie Scozzare (producer, "Captain Midnight"):** It was like being a kid and just knowing that your mom and dad hated each other.

**Russo:** I think the first big thing that broke the ice was "Dog Date Afternoon." We had people send in postcards about why they wanted to have a date with me and then we'd see the play *Cats* on Broadway. The gag was we read the postcards on the air. What made "Dog Date Afternoon" special is it evolved our roles. Mike is a lot wittier than people think. That Mike could make a bit by using my personality and that I was smart enough to realize what he was doing and to play along was very, very significant for the show. Mike realized, I can use Dog in certain scenarios here which will add to the fun element. And I realized that I could play that role.

**Francesa (from *FishbowlNY* interview):** I always felt he was more pliable than I was. Maybe because I was older, maybe because it's just my personality. He gave more

than I did, probably. We had different things that we were each in charge of. I was really in charge of the business of the program. That was my job. The decisions were usually made by me. And he usually was OK with that .... I think there would have been success for Mike Francesa and there would have been success for Chris Russo. I just don't think it would have been the same kind of meteoric success that we had together.

**Mason:** Imus's promotion of the show was so visceral and so funny and so constant. You couldn't have bought that kind of advertising. That really got the word of mouth going.

**Russo:** Imus called us "Fatso" and "Froot Loops." I was Froot Loops. He was being endearing with that phrase.

**Mason:** You couldn't buy that kind of publicity. Nobody told Don to do that, nobody needed to tell Don to do that, and nor could you have told Don to do that. If he didn't wanna do it, he wouldn't have done it.

**Russo:** It really took seven to eight months before we kinda felt that we were good for each other. It took some time for me to realize that Mike just wasn't a sports encyclopedia and it took Mike a little time to realize that I knew a lot about sports.

**Doyle Rose:** They basically argued about who's right, what should have been done, and what should have happened in a game. To me, that's what turned sports radio into a huge success.

**Russo:** There can't be two Mike Wallaces on the air five hours a day — nobody's gonna listen. They'd be bored stiff. And you can't be two laughing hyenas on the air every day for five hours, either, because you've gotta have some sports credibility.

**Spitz:** It was true raw emotion about their feelings about sports, nothing personal, just Mike having a certain opinion on something and Chris having a completely opposite take on it, and they would go at it on the air. Then they would go to a commercial break and then they would go back on the air and pick it up again.

**Russo:** I remember the first rating books.

**Mason:** Back then we got quarterly ratings. They were winter, spring, summer, and fall. So you don't get instant gratification. You don't get to see those metrics right away the way you do now.

**Russo:** I believe it was spring of '90. I'm sure we had ratings in the fall, but that was too soon. We had just started. I do remember a spring of '90 rating book that was really unbelievable.

**Spitz:** Mike and Chris were no. 1 with men 25-54 in afternoon drive.

**Russo:** Mike and I very rarely would ever, ever have a half-hour discussion of what we're gonna do on any given day. Never. We go in there and just do it. We might discuss a lead. What do you think we lead with? The Giants and Jets both won. Which team? If the Jets and Giants both lost, which team? We might do a little of that just so we knew where we were going first, but as far as the actual daily day-in, day-out discussion of how we were going to approach a particular topic, never ever did we do that. Never. Because we kinda both knew where each other was coming from. We both just knew how to do it.

**Scozzare:** Mike and Chris were firmly entrenched at no. 1 very quickly.

**Francesa (from FishbowlNY interview):** They knew they had something right away.

They knew probably before we knew, because the public just grabbed onto the show like crazy. We became celebrities overnight.

**Gelb:** We did something like an 8.4, which was unheard of at the time. It made the sales department very, very happy.

**Cummings:** We stopped interrupting them all the time, doing sports updates, and just let them go.

**George Vecsey (sports columnist, *New York Times*):** They were both so unusual as individuals. I once did a column about Mad Dog's dirty little secret, that he was a preppy. I wrote more about Chris. Mike was cut from more of the traditional cloth of being an expert. Chris was the new thing — the goofball persona. The squawking, the ranting at the top of his lungs. But both had instincts to call someone — "Let's get Wilpon on the phone," "Let's get David Stern on the phone," whomever. On radio, you'd never heard that before. We'd grown used to these guys who put no effort into it. These guys had all of the shtick in the world. They had shtick overflowing out over the sides, but they also spent the time needed to track down the person that they wanted to get — somebody had made a controversial call or a great play or something extraordinary. They could get these guys.

**Grande:** When Mike and the Mad Dog got going, you felt bonded with them. In addition to the radio fundamentals, they were one of us. When the Rangers were in the playoffs in '94, and they were arguing about it, you knew they remembered the playoff series from '84; that they had the same experiences that you had. That was the critical element that made New York audiences bond to them. The first time you heard Mike and the Mad Dog together, you were like, "OK. Now this sounds like when my friends and I talk about sports. This sounds like what it's supposed to sound like."

**Eagle:** They used breath and silence as tools. When you're doing five hours a day, five hours a week, which is what they were doing, even for your own sanity there has to be some dead air, some breaths, some pauses — just to get through the day, just to get through the week. Week after week. I think that's where it initially started. Ultimately it became a really good tool in their show. It told you that one of the hosts might be exasperated a bit. It told you that they might be really thinking hard about something. Also, this was a time of transition in radio. Before Mike and Chris there was still a mentality in our business that you had to be polished, you had to have an incredible vocabulary, you had to have a deep, rich voice, and these guys were being themselves — and that included pauses and verbal tics and a lot of things that people had never really heard on the radio.

**Mark Chernoff (operations manager):** Listeners just couldn't get enough of them. You have to realize this was the first two-person sports talk show of any note. I mean, the two of them really made radio history.

[CLICK HERE FOR PART THREE](#)

## VI. "It Was All Happening Live"

**Smulyan:** Remember when I told you that nine months in we did research that revealed that 85 percent of sports fans still went to WINS and WCBS for their sports news and updates? Well, a year later, that number was flipped. It was 90-10 in our favor.

**Spitz:** Very rarely do you have a night like we did on Christmas night of 1989. Nights like that help define the radio station.

**Howie Rose:** Every Jew in broadcasting is on the air on Christmas night. I always kind of

got a kick out of working that night because the traffic was light and the subject matter generally was, too.

**Spitz:** Howie had the seven-to-midnight that night. We were calling the show "A Very Rosy Christmas," because there was nothing else going on. For those couple of days the sports world really used to shut down.

**Howie Rose:** The Jets had just played and lost. Joe Walton was the coach and was on the way out. The fans were throwing snowballs at him and I thought that would be one of the main topics of conversation.

**Spitz:** Shortly after we went on the air I get a call from a guy named Doug White, who had been an original WFAN desk assistant. He was working for a television station up in Binghamton, New York. He called to give me a heads-up that they were about to report that Billy Martin had died. I was 24 or 25 years old and had graduated from school up in that area. So I had some contacts. I started calling and talking to people and about half an hour after Doug's call we got confirmation that Billy had died.

**Howie Rose:** You could feel the adrenaline coursing through your body because you realized people are tuning in to hear you and you'd better be responsible in what you say and how you say it.

**Eagle:** Billy Martin was a New York sports icon. Serious world events had unfolded on the air, but not really in sports. This was pre-Twitter, pre-Facebook, pre-Internet. It was very gripping radio. There was nobody else at the station at that time who could have handled it the way Howie did.

**Spitz:** Back then we had a Rolodex. All of the hosts, producers, and talent pooled their resources and had this Rolodex.

**Rose:** Spitz did a great job in lining up some of Billy's former players and teammates. And I know he broke the news to more than one person he was close to.

**Spitz:** I was able to reach Whitey Ford and Lou Piniella at their homes. They were shocked. Here I am, a young kid calling up Lou Piniella and Whitey Ford, telling them that Billy Martin is dead. It was scary. I spoke with some writers and broadcasters, too. They didn't believe me at first. Their first reaction at the news was shock and denial. "Are you sure?" "Where did you hear this from?" I had to give them a minute or two to collect themselves. The fact that it happened on Christmas night was just shocking.

**Rose:** It was very, very emotional, but I give Eric an enormous amount of credit for seizing the information and, at the same time, finding people who would be able to reflect on Billy's life and career, which, as you know, was rather volatile. It made for a very sad but memorable five hours. I'd known Billy a little bit. He met the kind of sad, violent ending that a lot of people might have forecast for him, and that became a little part of the underlying theme of the show.

**Spitz:** As the news spread, we opened up the phone lines and we were also able to take calls from people who didn't know Billy but to whom he'd meant a lot. It was just incredibly emotional. And I think this really galvanized, for me, what this station was becoming. This is what we were learning to do best — covering breaking sports news. On nights like that, when you're done with them, you say, "Wow, that was the greatest radio I've ever been involved with. That's sort of why I'm part of this and why I wanted to get into radio." And yet, you're saddened by the tragedy that took place and led to such a great show.

## VII. "The Lunatic Fringe"

**Lampley:** The callers. I can still hear their voices.

**Gelb:** John from Sandy Hook, Doris in Rego Park, Benny from Brooklyn.

**Jody McDonald (weekend overnight host):** Doris from Rego Park — she had a gruff, raspy voice as recognizable as a Led Zeppelin tune coming on the radio.

**Ann Liguori (host, "Hey Liguori, What's the Story?"):** Short Al.

**Lampley:** Sam from Bayonne.

**Howie Rose:** Vinny from Queens, Miriam from Forest Hills.

**Len Weiner (weekend producer):** Eli from Westchester.

**Jim Burns (Jim from Long Island):** Chuck from Hartsdale. King George from the Bronx. Jack from Bethel. Jerome from Manhattan. The two Bruces: Bruce from Flushing, Bruce from Bayside.

**Bruce Lindner (Bruce from Bayside):** Bruce from Flushing! He had to invoke his religion every time he called!

**Chernoff:** Mike from Montclair, Al from White Plains, Ira from Staten Island.

**Lindner:** Rob from Lake Success, who's called Rob from "Lake Failure."

**Chernoff:** We had one guy, Vinny from Queens, who called. He got hit by a bus or a truck about four or five years ago on Queens Boulevard.

**Lindner:** Artie from Manahawkin.

**Somers:** Jerry Seinfeld called in — "Jerry from Queens." Steven Wright — "Steven from Your Neck of the Woods" — called in. Andrew Dice Clay called when he was popular.

**Lampley:** I had celeb callers who wouldn't use their real names. I knew who they were. Roy Firestone created a character for my show called Coach Monty Pudge Larabee. I believe he coached at a fictitious university and he was the classic hard-bitten, country-boy, redneck football coach. I would bring him on the air and we would talk about the fictitious last game and the fictitious next upcoming game and how they were getting ready to play Baghdad Central Technical and Vocational College and the name of that team was the Sandworms. It was horribly tasteless stuff. Nobody ever knew it was him.

**Russo:** The callers were very knowledgeable. They go back 40-50 years with their certain teams. You had to treat the call with some decorum, make sure that you kinda made 'em part of the family.

**Raissman:** Joe from Saddle River, he ends up employed by the station. He becomes a host — Joe Benigno.

**Joe Benigno (Joe from Saddle River):** I was a food salesman working for a company called Melba Foods out of Brooklyn. I never thought too much about calling. I just wound up getting into it. I never thought I was anything important. All I know is Francesa and Russo used to drive me crazy, so I would have to get in there and just go at it with those guys.

**Lampley:** Jeff explained that the callers are the lunatic fringe, that I should never think for a second that the callers represent the general audience — they're different, and therefore it's OK to use them as cannon fodder and make them characters on the show. You could even bully them and mistreat them and they don't mind it. They like it. They will come back for more.

**Benigno:** It was around Christmas '94 and I'm reading the *Post*. Phil Mushnick telling me how this caller, this famous caller who now is passed away, Eli in Westchester, that he was getting to get his show. So I'm reading this in Phil Mushnick's column one morning and I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" Eli is getting a show? Anyway, that day on "Mike and the Mad Dog," all they're talking about is how there's all these other callers that deserved a show more than Eli, and they mentioned me. So I'm hearing this and I'm going, "Are you kidding me?" So I get home and I get on the air with them and I'm talking about how I deserve a shot. Next thing I know I'm talking to Mark Chernoff and they set up this day where they had myself and three other callers, including Eli, doing a show.

**Russ Salzberg (host, "The Sweater and the Schmoozer," 10 a.m.-1 p.m.):** Eli, I just didn't like him. It was the same stupid agenda all the time — race-baiting. It was always the same thing. It was like, if I said good morning, you'd say good night just to be different.

**Benigno:** So I get an hour. Al in White Plains gets an hour. Eli had two hours. And who was the other one? Dick in Corona. I don't know if he's still alive even, Dick. He was blind, but he did the show too. I guess it went from there. Let me put it this way: As soon as I got off the air there's a call in the newsroom for me from Suzyn Waldman. All right? And I didn't know Suzyn. I mean, obviously I know who she is. I'd never talked to her in my life before. And now she's telling me how great I was. "You were terrific, you were this, you were that." Whatever. So I leave. Now I'm in the car and I'm listening to Eli do his show. He. Is. Bombing. Here was this guy, he always brought race into everything and now you had callers calling him out on stuff and he was backing down. He couldn't handle it. He wilted like a cheap suit, basically. So, for five years I worked at this Melba Foods and that's where I went from there — to go to work for WFAN.

**Howie Rose:** I remember being told many years ago, "Always remember, the show is not about the caller, it's about the listener." I would much rather lose one caller than 1,000 listeners, so if I felt somebody was bringing nothing to the table, I would shorten the call up. If the guy was being a jerk, I might be a jerk back at him because I knew there was entertainment value there.



**Burns:** I think about Jerome from Manhattan. No one knows what happened to him, which is very sad. He was a very famous Yankees fan. He literally disappeared about a year or two ago. I tried contacting some of the family and they don't want to have any involvement with anyone who knows him from sports talk radio. My fear is that Jerome's in an institution someplace.

**Howie Rose:** I didn't always like my persona as a talk show host. I certainly could have crossed the line, and I'm sure I did cross the line several times — yelling at a caller or mocking a caller. But sometimes you have to do that because you have to enhance the entertainment value.

**Burns:** I used to send Jerome care packages. I would just send him some books and stuff. Or he loves *The Three Stooges* so I'd send him *Three Stooges* stuff. And also he's not a bad guy, and also he meant a lot to sports talk radio. Jerome kept a lot of people tuned to their radio dial. And I liked him. I just thought he deserved some respect for what he had done.

**Howie Rose:** I remember one of the first "Mets Extra" [shows] I ever did in 1987, they were in Philadelphia very early in the season and Gary Carter was a base runner and the Phillies pulled the hidden-ball trick on him. He was tagged out, might have been to end the game, and ironically, it was on his birthday. Some woman calls after the game and she says, "You know, I don't think that was very nice of the Phillies to embarrass Gary Carter like that on his birthday." And my temper was rising, like you could see the mercury level in a thermometer rising from 20 degrees to 40 degrees to about 240, and I started very slowly and in a very low voice I said, "Not nice? Not nice? You think it wasn't nice that they embarrassed him? On his *birthday*?"

**Burns:** I could totally see a doctor saying, "Well, Jerome could have no contact with sports talk radio. It's bad for his heart." Part of whatever he has is he can't be happy. The famous story about Jerome is the Yankees had just won the World Series in '96 and the next day he's yelling about who Bob Watson should trade for.

**Howie Rose:** I got so condescending I said, "Sweetheart, this is Major League Baseball. This isn't your Wednesday-night mah-jongg game. This is big league baseball." If I had said that today, I would have been suspended or fired, but back then, all I could think of is, *You've got to be entertaining. You've got to be entertaining. This is a great chance here.*

**Burns:** I know Jerome's personality. He would call me and he'd be depressed and I'd say, "Jerome, do you know how many, not hundreds, but tens of thousands of people love you in radio land?" He says, "Oh, what does that mean? That doesn't matter, Jim." I go, "It's people who care about you. It's no one to hug at night, but there are people who care about you, Jerome. You mean a lot to New York."

## **VIII. "Overnight, Under the Covers, Schmoozing S-P-O-R-T-S"**

**Lindner:** Steve Somers, the overnight. When he first started out I used to call him. I don't sleep that great at night, so I'd wake up at three in the morning. It's also easier to get through then.

**Boyle:** The station during the overnight shift — the midnight-to-7 — was like being in a parallel world. There weren't that many people there. It was Steve Somers and myself, and we had a producer and an overnight executive. The energy was different, the feel was different.

**Eagle:** Somers has been the same guy from day one. As the world has changed, as sports has changed, as the broadcasting business has changed, he amazingly has stayed the same. I think that's why his popularity has never waned. When you turn on the radio to Steve Somers, you know what you're getting. There's comfort in that.

**Murray:** Steve came to work in the same outfit every single day. It was a brown Members Only jacket buttoned or zipped maybe a third of the way up, brown corduroys, and a beret. But I mean it *never* changed.

**Mason:** Somers is a wordsmith, a great storyteller. He's a very unique personality. You never in a million years will hear another Steve Somers.

**Bongarten:** If you were a night owl or had trouble sleeping at night, Steve was a great place to go.

**Vecsey:** Tuning in to the Steve Somers show is like being invited to a bar mitzvah every day.

**Murray:** He was the first guy that I'd ever heard that really injected humor into doing something that's supposed to be news-oriented. He realized that to maintain sanity there was no way you were gonna get through this for six hours every single day just doing straight sports.

**Somers:** Imus once told me it was the best overnight show he ever heard.

**Murray:** Every day he came in, you almost wanted to throw some change his way. He looked like he was walking in off the street.

**Somers:** I had been out of work for two and a half years. I was doing part-time work — a little bit of TV and a little bit of radio. I wasn't unhappy. I mean, if you had told me that I was going to be out of work for two and a half years, then I might have gotten a little bit depressed, but you are always thinking a job is around the corner. My mother was telling me maybe real estate, and I said, "Real estate can't pay my rent." My father was telling me, "Maybe you want to be a shoe salesman." And I would tell him, "I don't have a foot fetish."

**Spitz:** Steve was the best host we had on the radio station.

**Scozzare:** The show is his life. He's always been that way.

**Somers:** My agent called me in '85 or '86 telling me that he heard about the idea for an all-sports radio station, the first of its kind, in New York, and would I be interested? And, of course, "Yes! By all means!" Plus, I needed to work. So I was their last hire.

**Boyle:** I'd go in there about 10:30. There was no management around, no suits, just a bunch of young guys like myself.

**Murray:** The routine never changed. Somers would walk in, he would wave, he would say hello, he'd go upstairs, and he would start writing.

**Scozzare:** You'd go upstairs to the little cafeteria area we had and he'd be sitting there with a yellow legal pad and just writing out longhand. On the nights when he wasn't feeling it, there would be crumpled papers all around. He would write out this whole script. Sometimes the evening host would say, "Hey, won't you come in for a second and we'll sort of do a little cross-promotion." And he goes, "Well, no, I have to go write my ad libs," which makes no sense. But that's what he was doing; he was writing his ad libs.

**Somers (responding via e-mail to a request to read some of his old notes):** I do have handwritten notes and monologues, with coffee and mustard stains, written on legal size, 8½-by-11 canary-colored paper all over the place — a page 1 from this monologue and a page 3 from that monologue, and somewhere, page 2, if you catch my drift here ... my apartment is decorated in legal-lined paper ... most of them have "cross-outs" and stuff written in the margins, but I can look for some you might be able to read ... because the writing is more for the ear than the eye ... with me, more than half of it is in the delivery of what's scribbled on the page ...

**Scozzare:** He was supposed to be on right at 12:05, but it became almost standard that he was late in coming down. And at 12:05, we would play the two-minute-long WFAN contest rules to give him time. And then he would come down, and we'd do the "Captain Midnight" open.

**Murray:** He doesn't have your traditional broadcaster's voice. A little high-pitched and a little singsong-y. It was a little bizarre, and yet there was something very attractive about it, something very soothing.

**Somers:** In the very beginning I wanted to call the show "Midnight Madness," and they didn't like that. And there was a producer at WFAN at the time who had given me an old Captain Midnight radio album. And he said, "Why don't you try this as the open to that show, make it the open to yours since you're going to be fooling around anyway." That's what we did.

**Scozzare:** It would start off, "Captain Midnight!" And then there was this sort of sound effect of a plane, and Somers goes, "Now boarding Flight 66, overnight journey till Imus in the morning at 5:30." And then the rest of the "Captain Midnight" intro would come on and we'd seg in our regular show open and he would do this whole routine of, you know, "Overnight, under the covers, schmoozing S-P-O-R-T-S with me here, you there." And also incorporating whoever he was working with, he would say, "The Eddie Scozzare on the other side of the glass."

**Somers:** I remember the very first night, July 1, 1987; I had Darryl Strawberry and Warner Wolf on that night, and Ken O'Brien, who was the quarterback of the Jets. We did the guests and we did the calls and all of these other bits. It was taking sports not so seriously, not as a matter of life and death. We didn't know if it was going to work or not. You just hoped that once the audience figured out what you're doing, they'd like it and come along for the ride.

**Burns:** Steve's monologues were really, really funny. A friend of mine almost drove off the road once because Steve had a monologue about Marge Schott having dinner with Himmler. It was "My Dinner With Himmler" or something like that.

**Mason:** If you've ever been driving along, you can't turn that thing off. Who wants to turn the car off in the middle of a Somers monologue?

**Scozzare:** If it was a night when there wasn't a topic that would sort of write its own story or if he was struggling with his ad libs or if he wasn't in the right mind-set, then it could be a long night. He was on like 85 percent of the time.

**Murray:** One of our first update guys was a guy named Mark Boyle, he's the longtime voice of the Indiana Pacers. Boyle had this uncanny ability to come in and do an update without a script. We were separated by the glass and we always thought it was like *The Exorcist* because he'd give this evil stare or grin as he's doing the update, going through detail after detail without a script. We would just sit there and crack up about it. It was so bizarre that at 1:45 in the morning, we were (a) doing live updates, and (b) he would do it without a script. It was incredible.

**Somers:** Yes, there were beer cans. I mean, we're not talking like a frat party, but you would occasionally see some beer cans there overnight.

**Boyle:** There were nights where [Somers] would get a little bit edgy. His behavior was a little bit erratic on occasion. He had it in a cup. I think there might have been coffee in there. It wasn't like he was sitting back there throwing shots.

**Scozzare:** It was bourbon.

**Spitz:** It was a much more innocent age, where you could call a hotel and ask for a player and they were going to answer the phone, so we played a lot of what we called "hotel room bingo." Brown would pitch a no-hitter for the Phillies in Atlanta and then you would wait a couple of hours and try to get that guy on in his hotel room. Or the Mets would be on the West Coast, let's say, and the game would end at eleven o'clock. We would wait a couple hours until one in the morning and you would try to get Darryl Strawberry.

**Murray:** I would go on-air, toward the wee hours of the morning, and we would make fun of a fishing segment we had called "Ken Kephart's Focus on Fishing." I'd pretend to be Kephart and mock how the surf was and what's biting. Sometimes he would set me up as a guest. I'd be Suzyn Waldman. Sometimes I'd be Wayne Gretzky. But I never changed my voice, I was just always me. And I would answer questions in that person's light. Just little

ways to get us through the night. He would crack up and some of the callers would crack up.

**Scozzare:** Steve's relationship with the callers was paramount. He really loved that whole family atmosphere and just wanted to be loved by them. He was loved by them.

**Burns:** There is a famous caller named King George from the Bronx, who is a corrections officer. And Somers and him have been doing the same phone call now for 15 years. Somers says, "George, I'll never forget when I took you out to dinner and you inhaled a chicken." George answers, "I did not, Steve, I did not" — Oh this is a very sad talent I have. I can imitate some of the callers — "I did not, don't say it again, Steve, do not say it." Then Steve says, "You inhaled a chicken and then you were flirting with the 80-year-old cashier." To which George finally replies, "You swore you wouldn't say that again, Steve."

**Murray:** There was a uniquely loyal audience. They called at the same time every night. We'd think, *Boy, it must be a bizarre audience out there*, but they were *our* bizarre audience.

**Somers:** I always wanted to be a sports broadcaster. As a kid, I used to turn the sound down on the TV broadcast games and narrate into a light bulb. Sometimes if a light bulb wasn't handy, I would use a ruler, maybe a fork or a knife. It was something that I felt. You know, you aren't thinking about money. You're not thinking about the politics of the business. You are just thinking about doing it because you feel it.

**Murray:** The show was over at 5:30 a.m., when Don Imus would come in and always make fun of the fact that there was a fungus on the microphone

**Somers:** I would introduce Charles McCord and the "Imus in the Morning" show. Imus hated the fact that I was always late. I never got off on time. I'd always say, "I'm not through talking."

## **IX. "Is This the End?"**

**Eagle:** The phenomenon of WFAN really hit in 1992. They made me the board operator for "Mike and the Mad Dog," and I can tell you from firsthand experience that they became rock stars. Everywhere that they showed up, it would elicit a reaction. To me that was the breakthrough year, when the station just exploded. As their success grew, their problems grew. They were both making great livings. Their Q ratings were high. But then the petty stuff started creeping in. Contract disputes. Who's getting more money? Who's gaining more popularity? It just brought a separate set of problems. They were on the air together five hours a day, five days a week.

**Chernoff:** There were times that they didn't talk to each other off the air because they got so mad about stuff. I would say to myself, "Oh my god, is this going to last? Is this the end?" And there were a couple almost breaking points.

**Russo:** Mike is a huge Yankees fan. I was born here, but I'm not.

**Scozzare:** One of the biggest things was Dog's hatred of the Yankees. Dog just hated the Yankees, which I think comes from some messed-up situation with his dad ages ago. The hatred was real. Dog would get extremely frustrated that the Yankees could get whatever they wanted. That whole argument was part of the underlying tension between the two. There were many times when it was playful and they got what was going on and it was fine. When they were fighting and mad at each other, those arguments got a little more heated. They could get ugly. Dog just hated teams because Mike liked them.

**Russo:** You mean when I picked the Bills to beat the Giants 49-3 in the Super Bowl?

**Scozzare:** Super Bowl XXV, when the Giants played the Bills in Tampa — Dog predicted that the Giants would lose 49-3 because Mike was very friendly with Coach Parcells. Dog needed to root against them because it was rooting against Mike. Whether or not he really believed that or was hoping for it or really just wanted to annoy Mike, take your pick.

**Russo:** I embellished a score, but I definitely loved the Bills to win the game. Loved them. And Pete King had 35-14, by the way. Loved them to win the game. Loved 'em. But I embellished it.

**Hollander:** When they first became no. 1, Mike went on vacation and Chris changed the jingle, taking out Mike's name.

**Gelb:** That almost led to blows.

**Russo:** That has always been a little overplayed. I did that more as a gag than anything else. I probably was half-serious. I think that Mike got the message from people at the station that I was more serious than I really was. It was really a gag situation that went haywire, and I probably should've not done that.

**Scozzare:** It always came down to Chris maybe wanting more respect from Mike. But they had many more days when they were on, and clicking. When they were totally in sync, both in good moods, and not fighting about anything, it was awesome.

**Russo:** The quarters were tight. It wasn't state-of-the-art. There was no room to escape when you had an issue, when you're not getting along. It wasn't like Mike had his little room and I had my little room. You're on top of each other on a day-in, day-out basis. It probably helped us deal with the fights that we had a little better because they probably didn't linger. We had no choice but to face up with each other. I only had three or four bad ones. But again, you're gonna have three or four bad ones in 19 years of a relationship.

**Scozzare:** They were not just a sports show. They were more than that. They would talk during breaks and laugh and flip through movie listings on-air, in a weird way, kind of like an old married couple. That's what made the show transcend. That's what brought in the non-sports fan. The wife who was in the car with her husband, rolling her eyes at these two idiots who were talking about whatever, just being engaging and funny.

**Eagle:** It's easier when you have all of these incredible story lines in New York happening at once. Turn on the mic, pop up the phone lines, and away we go. It's much more challenging when you have to create something out of nothing, and Mike and Chris were the best ever at doing that. I can tell you this from experience, from having seen them do it firsthand, it was something that would really just form on the air. It wasn't contrived, and usually that makes for the best television and radio. What seemed mundane, what seemed rudimentary, often became some of the more entertaining stuff.

**Grande:** One of my fondest memories was driving home to New York [from Boston] for Christmas in 1997, and their whole show was about how Chris was going to get to a movie theater. He lived in Westchester, but this was New York and there was the whole complication of navigating the route to and from the theater. They were so dynamic that they could get away with that kind of stuff. They could get away with talking about *Titanic*. "Sports radio" is really an acronym for "guy radio." Sports are comfort. When you go to a party and your wife introduces you to some guy you've never met, but he's married to one of her friends, it's like this sort of grown-man playdate that you're forced to be on: I don't know you, you don't know me. What do we do? We talk about sports. Eventually, once I

9. From the May 24, 1991, letter: "When a pitcher is having trouble getting players out, when a hitter is having trouble hitting, or when a player makes an error, I try to support them in whatever way I can. I don't run to the media to belittle them or to draw more attention to their difficult times. I can only hope that one day those teammates who have found it convenient to criticize me will realize that we are all in this together. If only we can concentrate more on the games than complaining and bickering and pointing fingers, we would all be better off."



know you better, we're going to talk about taking our wives to see *Titanic*. We're going to talk about *Seinfeld*. Women can talk about anything. Guys have to start with sports. It's the bond we have since the time we're 5.

**Scozzare:** They would talk to Jeffrey Lyons a few times a year about the big movies that were out and what movies they liked growing up and Mike would talk about when he used to watch *The Rifleman* and Errol Flynn. Dog was slightly younger, and that made the difference in what they were watching. Dog was more myopic. More focused on sports. He enjoyed movies and playing tennis. And it was comic when they'd try to talk about politics, but it was still entertaining. It wasn't what they were saying, it was them. People bought what they were selling for 20 years. There was nothing better, nothing better at all. It was magical.

**Howie Rose:** And, eventually, powerful.

**Grande:** Everybody was listening. Even players in the clubhouse. Gregg Jefferies was this huge prospect when he came up [with the Mets] in '88 and '89. He had some colossal struggles later on. His teammates were getting on him. He wrote an open letter<sup>9</sup> pleading his case to his teammates and the media that he sent to FAN and had read over the air. I remember thinking at the time, *Wow, FAN is that significant that a player would think to go there first.*

**Eagle:** I remember very clearly the Jefferies open letter. That was a big moment in the station's history because of the reaction and the impact that the station had. The Jefferies letter was ahead of its time. It was long-form Twitter. We never really heard from athletes in that manner. That just wasn't done. He and the other athletes in New York were beginning to realize that this radio station had a lot of power. He and his people must have thought that this was a really good idea, but it completely backfired on him. The reaction was so completely lopsided. The call volume was huge. He was looking for understanding, support, maybe even some pity, and it went the other way and fast.

**Spitz:** That spring of '94 was a great spring for the radio station. Everybody played everybody. The Knicks played the Nets in the first round of the playoffs, the Rangers played the Islanders in the first round of the playoffs, and obviously played the Devils in the conference final to win the Cup. It was an incredible time — we were all over the place. Every night from April through June, you had a different game going on. I think the divorce rate among sports fans was probably pretty high after that spring. It was just an amazing run with the Rangers winning and the Knicks falling just a little short, and O.J. right in the middle of an NBA Final.

**Gelb:** In '94, these guys rode in the Rangers' parade after they won the Stanley Cup. These were two guys who really didn't even love hockey and they were riding in the parade. It was like, shit, what are we doing here? But they rode anyway, like heroes. They were huge that summer. They were everywhere. They rode in the parade and people went nuts.

**Russo:** In the spring of '94, we had unbelievable ratings. And when you have unbelievable ratings, you can't hate each other.

**Howie Rose:** Mike and Chris were godsend to the radio station because they were New York in every respect.

**Vecsey:** They truly were Martin and Lewis, Sonny and Cher. They were Simon and Garfunkel. Even if you can play a solo show in Central Park once a year, it'll never be the same as when the two of you were doing it together.

**Scozzare:** They broke up, finally, in 2008. Then, in 2009, during the playoffs, Dog was gonna be at the stadium doing his Sirius show and Mike was gonna be there doing his show. And they did one hour together, one o'clock to two o'clock. I was sitting in the studio listening to the whole thing. I'm even welling up right now. I almost cried, it was so special. It was like, damn, you guys, you fucked this up, how could you do that?

**Howie Rose:** I'm jumping ahead years now, but Mike and Chris had long since established themselves as the preeminent guys in the market, and they hit the Mets really hard. Steve Phillips, the GM, had gone on record saying the Mets were not interested in making a deal to get Mike Piazza because the Mets had Todd Hundley, who was rehabbing an injury, but whom they felt they owed that job to. But then fans called in and said, "Hey, the Mets really ought to make a play for Piazza, he's exactly what they need to take them to a different level." Mike and Chris both stayed on the subject of the Mets needing to make a deal for Piazza, and lo and behold they did it. They did it. If you don't think that was in part a reaction to their fans and to reading the emotions and the desires of their fans, you would be mistaken. It absolutely had something to do with it. That's the power of WFAN.

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*July 11, 2012: This article has been revised to reflect the following corrections:*

*At publication, footnote 7 incorrectly stated that WEEI was the second station to switch to an all-sports format, and that it did so in 1994. The correct year was 1991.*

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