

INSIDE RADIO

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A Real Knock Out

by Mike Kinosian, Personality Editor

If you know why Michael Hegstrand & Joe Laurinaitis have pop culture significance, award yourself a gold star - and take the rest of the day off if you know their professional names.

To curtail the suspense, longtime friends (the late) Hegstrand ("Hawk") and Laurinaitis ("Animal") formed The Road Warriors, perhaps pro wrestling's most prolific and dynamic tag-team ever.

Invoking related imagery, Dan Patrick & Keith Olbermann became television's No. 1 "tag-team" partners 13 years ago (1992) as co-hosts of ESPN's definitive news/highlight show, "SportsCenter."

Patrick remains the Mother Ship's signature face/lead anchor and it's been six years (September 1999) since he added a daily three-hour ESPN Radio show to his repertoire; Olbermann also continues to enjoy national prominence, but from multiple platforms.

The umbrella title that Patrick & Olbermann utilized in their SportsCenter pairing was "The Big Show," a phrase "borrowed" by countless radio shows and even the WWE's 7 foot/500 pound Paul Wight.

No Regrets

Fans of the original "Big Show" are positively giddy that Patrick & Olbermann reunited just over two weeks ago (8-5-2005) on ESPN Radio, albeit for one hour a week. "The whole process is a very warm one," remarks the 46-year-old Olbermann, who rejoins ESPN Radio to do this. (He did an approximately 18-month weekend stint in the early-1990s.) "Obviously, the main thing for me is to be able to work with Dan again."

When the peerlessly witty Olbermann exited ESPN to go to NBC in 1997, he admits he did so with some regret. Conversely, though, he didn't leave sports fulltime, as his pact called for him to host the World Series; a Super Bowl pre-game show; and late night Olympics coverage. "It was basically half-news/half-sports," he explains. "My desire to go back to it was a sense of having not completed what I wanted to do, simultaneous with FOX's interest in starting up a rival network to ESPN, and the capacity to go and do more actual work on a baseball 'Game Of The Week' broadcast."

When he segued into news fulltime nearly five years ago, he was at peace with it and remarks, "There were slight regrets the first time - none at all the second time."

Time Is Tight

The modestly-alluded-to news job is flawlessly overseeing MSNBC's nightly (8-9pm, ET) "Countdown With Keith Olbermann."

Based entirely on the host's crisp, unique writing style and his sometimes wonderfully dry/other times perfectly serious delivery, it's prime-time television's most consistently compelling and brilliantly presented hour.

Doing 60 minutes of television each night might not sound terribly taxing, but when ESPN Radio Senior VP Traug Keller originally floated the idea to Olbermann four months ago (April 2005) that he re-join Patrick in some capacity, he learned why that could be difficult. "I figured out I have about 45 free minutes a week," Olbermann muses. "I thought I could steal 15 minutes somewhere and said if he wanted an hour, I could do it, but that's all I have."

Pleasant Surprise

The two negotiated and came up with the weekly one-hour solution, which won't greatly disrupt Olbermann's "Countdown" routine. "I'll get into the office later on Fridays," explains 1995's "Best Sportscaster" Cable Ace Award winner. "I'm generally there no later than 1:45pm and have already had a series of phone meetings before I leave [for MSNBC's Secaucus, NJ studios] to do 'Countdown.' I'm writing like a fiend until 7:30pm and go on the air [at 8pm]."

The later-than-usual-New Jersey arrival time - about 3:30pm each Friday - means Olbermann relies a little more on his staff to prepare those telecasts. "Dan and I had a conversation after he got off the air [Thursday, 8-4]," Olbermann recalls. "That's literally how much preparation we gave this. We talked about structure, rather than particulars. The best way we work is to surprise each other and make each other laugh."

Hall Of Fame Mom

It was when he was eight years old - and through great assistance from his mother (Marie) - that Olbermann discovered baseball.

The family's matriarch, who some may remember from a 2000 incident at Yankee Stadium where she was hit in the head by a ball thrown by then-error-prone Yankees second

baseman Chuck Knoblauch, wanted to see the Hall of Fame, so that year's vacation was to Cooperstown, NY. "She was a big fan and I couldn't have cared less," Olbermann admits in his celebrated deadpan delivery. "I know we went there, but I have no memories of it and didn't care one iota about what was going on there."

The next year, however, he fell in love with the Yankees and their broadcasters and came to an important playground experience realization. "I figured out I'd never be a ballplayer. The next part of the equation was that I enjoyed listening to Jerry Coleman, Joe Garagiola and Phil Rizzuto doing the Yankees games."

When the Yankees have staged their annual Old Timers Day in the "Big Ballpark In The Bronx," the tandem privileged to call the action on the P.A. system the past five years has been color analyst Olbermann and former Washington Senators announcer Bob Wolfe, who was behind the radio microphone when Yankees' right-hander Don Larsen hurled a perfect game against the Brooklyn Dodgers in Game Five of the 1956 World Series.

Don't Think It's Playable

Attending this year's event was former Yankees' second baseman Jerry Coleman, who last month (July 2005) was enshrined in the Announcers section of baseball's Hall of Fame and entered with (players) Wade Boggs and Ryne Sandburg and ESPN's Peter Gammons (Writer's wing).

Since Coleman is the voice of the San Diego Padres, it's rare for the former Bronx Bomber (1949-1957) to attend Old Timers celebrations. This was his first since 1970.

In the many years they've been broadcasters, Olbermann somehow never crossed paths with one of his boyhood idols until this year. Known for his frequent on-air malapropisms, Coleman asked Olbermann why a newscaster would do the P.A. announcing. "I told him I used to work for ESPN. He said he doesn't watch sports on television, but is a 'Countdown' fan. I thought this was perfect and had come full circle. My decision to go into broadcasting was made by

listening to Jerry, Phil and Joe in 1967. He joked that I had heard better role models later. It was very nice."

Name Game

When Olbermann was a sophomore at Tarrytown, NY's Hackley School, another young chap named Chris Berman was Sports Director of the school's radio station (WHTR), as well as Sports Editor of the newspaper and yearbook. "I was his deputy and got involved with him at the radio station when I was a freshman and he was a junior," Olbermann notes. "He put a note out that he was looking for a hockey announcer. That was one thing I wanted to do, so I flagged people down and asked who Chris Berman was. I went up to him and he told me that I had the job."

They've known each other since 1972 and it is, indeed, the same "Boomer" Berman, who went on to do the "back-back-back" and name shtick on ESPN. "When he graduated, I succeeded him as the head of sports at the media organizations in our little high school," Olbermann explains. "As it turns out, it was a quite a run for the school."

But his high school chum had nothing to do with being a link to Bristol University (ESPN).

Freely Perspiring Man

At the end of his Brown University career, Berman went into local broadcasting in Connecticut.

Meanwhile, after graduating from Cornell in 1979 with a B.S. in Communications Arts, Olbermann worked as a sports reporter for UPI Radio, RKO Radio and WNEW-AM/New York, before becoming national sports reporter/anchor for CNN in 1981. "ESPN approached me in 1982 about going there," he recounts. "I was living in New York and we had Tele-Prompters. Whenever I saw my poor friend Chris, he was in a studio with no Tele-Prompters and it didn't look like there was any air conditioning, either. He was sweating like a pig. They were literally after me, off and on, from 1982."

The all-sports television network and Olbermann almost reached an agreement in 1988 and he finally wound up going



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there in 1992. "The first connection I had with Chris was going to ESPN to help them launch ESPN Radio," Olbermann points out. "The first time I'd actually talked to him about it was in the parking lot."

Stop The Presses

In the fall of 1976, 17-year-old college sophomore Olbermann was Sports Director of Cornell's campus radio station and repeated what he observed seniors do, namely rip stories from the canary yellow paper on the UPI Machine; put them in a flowing order; read them aloud; time them to make sure there was five-minutes worth of sports; and go on the air.

The always-astute Olbermann made a momentous discovery one night that would alter his career and noticeably separate him from the rest of the pack. Until then, he was unquestionably efficient and building a promising career, but he'd construct a distinctive style that's been his unique calling card.

Commercial outlet WTKO/Ithaca, NY aired a sports show at 10:30pm and Olbermann delivered his sportscast 45 minutes later. "We'd always [monitor] them to see what they had [particularly] for local stories," he notes. "It was a slow night and I'd already put the UPI copy in order. I was listening to WTKO and noticed [their sports person] also took stories from UPI and had put his stories in exactly the same order I did. A bell went off in my head. You have the ability to write and know how something should be presented. I sat down that night and wrote as much of it as I could. From then on, I've rarely read a word I didn't write. You develop a style the moment you realize the only meaningful reason to be in this business is to, in some way, express yourself."

And Now ... Juggle

Before taking center stage on SportsCenter, Olbermann carved out a six-year cult-like following in Los Angeles on KTLA-TV and KCBS-TV, as well as voicing daily sports commentaries for all-News KNX-AM. "If radio had the influence and paycheck television did, I don't think I'd ever do television again," the 11-time California Radio & TV News Association Golden Mike winner states. "They pay more in television [because] it's essentially doing radio while standing on your hands. They make it as difficult for you as they possibly can."

Celebrity Magnet

Radio exposure in the City of Angels enabled him to meet one of this industry's living legends. "I walked into the press-box at Dodger Stadium [in the late-1980s] and [Hall of Fame broadcaster] Vin Scully came over and introduced himself," Olbermann recounts. "He said he listened to me every afternoon on KNX and wondered where I got that stuff. I said I have a magnet in my hand that attracts it. That was a huge thrill."

Another encounter with an even higher-profile personality took place at Shea Stadium in 1997.

Several ESPN staffers went to the Mets ballpark to take in ceremonies commemorating the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color barrier.

A very cordial President Bill Clinton greeted them, although Olbermann maintains with a huge grin, "It was evident to me he had no idea who most of us were. He was a sports fan, but didn't spend much time watching [SportsCenter]."

Defying Imagination

Advance the story eight years later (June 16, 2005) when the now former-President was at Yankee Stadium to pick up a one million dollar tsunami relief fund check from the Yankees. "I was in the auxiliary part of the press box, which adjoins [Yankees owner] George Steinbrenner's private box on the press level," Olbermann recounts. "My seat was right up against the window between those two boxes. President Clinton sees me, points and waves and asks me to come in and visit with him. It turns out he's a fan of ['Countdown']. You can be surprised by the identity of the people who watch the program or listen to your radio work. Those are the moments where you allow yourself some pride."

Good Night & Good Luck

Virtually everything Olbermann has wanted to achieve professionally can be checked off in the "done" column – and accomplished with unparalleled style and panache. "I don't do this for the money - I do it because I enjoy it," he emphasizes. "The day I do it just for the money is the day I'll retire."

A newscaster who stresses that he now sidelines in sports, Olbermann comments, "We're entering a time in our history where, if you can do one or the other, you should do news. I don't know what that means for the future, but doing this as long as I have, I've learned not to make predictions. I certainly know if my career ended tomorrow, the story would be about my sports broadcasting. I don't have any control over that. That's what's happened in my career and I'm perfectly at ease with that."



WHO: Keith Olbermann

WHAT: Guest Co-Host: "The Dan Patrick Show"

WHERE: ESPN Radio

WHEN: Fridays, 2-3pm (ET)

HOW LONG: Since August 5, 2005

HOW MANY AFFILIATES:

Approximately 340

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