

Chris King's Side of the Radio Keeps Hockey Fans Listening

Derek Futterman | May 27, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

Chris King has been on the radio for New York Islanders broadcasts since 1998. In that time, King has brought thrilling moments for fans of the orange and blue to life. However, it wasn't until 2020 that the man they call "Kinger" had to transition to calling home games in an arena without a crowd, and road games in a small studio in Hempstead, NY. While the Islanders radio voice is finally back on the road for the 2021 Stanley Cup Playoffs, albeit independently (due to NHL COVID-19 protocols), he hopes that next season will be a restoration of normalcy in terms of fans being in arenas and broadcasters traveling with the team.

"Just from an emotional and energy standpoint as a broadcaster, I do hockey and baseball, and the crowd is a big part of [the game]," said King. "The difficulty of calling the game off of a monitor [is that] you are limited to what the [television] director shows you, as opposed to being at the event. In hockey, things happen away from the puck all the time, and I need to look there to see what plays are being set up, especially late in close games."

With the Islanders making a run to the Eastern Conference Finals last season, and securing another playoff trip this year, King's preparatory process centers around learning about the opponent. He says it's something that can be especially difficult during a regular season filled with traveling.

"During the regular season, it's a little more difficult than the playoffs," described King. "Let's say the Islanders are playing the Rangers on Tuesday. All the way leading up to that, I'm trying to learn about the Rangers for 48 hours leading up to the game. As soon as that game ends, I have to learn the next visiting team."

King said preparing for the playoffs is less strenuous than doing so in the regular season, comparing it to baseball, a sport he has called for the Atlantic League's Long Island Ducks over the last 20 seasons, where teams play series against one another.

"[In the playoffs], you ramp-up [and learn the opponent], then you get 3-4 broadcasts out of it," said King. "I had a tremendous ramp-up to get up to speed on the Penguins, but once [the series] begins, it's that same opponent [for the whole series]. In that aspect, it's much easier than the regular season where you're constantly changing opponents and, during a normal regular season, location as well."

Another part of King's job that he credits as being an integral part of the broadcast is his collection of sound from the coaching staff and the players to intersperse throughout the broadcast. Using a device for audio playback, King provides the listener with insight from the team on their matchup, and what they need to do to win the game.

“A large portion [of my job] is recording and editing audio,” King explained. “On our broadcasts, I drop in a ton of sound because I think it adds to the broadcast. Instead of hearing just myself and my broadcast partner Greg Picker, you’re also hearing 5-6 players, head coach Barry Trotz, etc..”

88.7 WRHU-FM Radio Hofstra University has been the flagship station of the New York Islanders since 2010. The station produces and distributes the radio broadcast to several other prominent commercial stations which comprise the New York Islanders Radio Network, including 98.7 WEPN-FM and 1050 WEPN-AM and 103.9 WRCN-FM. While WRHU-FM is in fact a non-commercial, student-run college radio station, it operates as a professional outlet worthy of airing NHL games, winning numerous prestigious awards from the National Association of Broadcasters and the Academy of Radio Arts and Sciences of America. King says the large quantity of aspiring media professionals working on the broadcast throughout the season has helped augment its quality, aligning more with the law of increasing returns than its polar opposite; that is, with the key cogs in the system remaining constant.

“At WRHU, we have a producer, an engineer, someone cutting highlights and someone doing updates,” said King. “On any given night, I’d say our team [consists of] between 6-10 people. I’ve done so many broadcasts where it’s one person operating the board back at the radio station, and you can’t get that much more help. The fact that we’ve been on [WRHU] for 11 years now is one of the reasons we have one of the best broadcasts in the NHL.”

The National Hockey League recently agreed to broadcast deals with both ESPN and TNT that gives both networks rights to air league games through the 2028-29 season. Both deals are centered around distribution of hockey onto various multimedia platforms, and aspire to further grow the game of hockey around the world, something King is enthusiastic about.

“I think [the deal] will be great for the league because ESPN is the number one brand name in the world as far as sports are concerned,” said King. “For all the students doing broadcasts on WRHU, being broadcast on ESPN Radio lets them know that their work is worthy of being carried on a monstrous sports radio station with the name behind it.”

As sports broadcasts evolve with changing consumption trends, King sees the impact sports betting has had over the airwaves. The voice of the Islanders doesn’t enjoy its implementation into the broadcast, but he recognizes the foothold it has rapidly taken before, during and after the game.

“I tape every game and watch it back the next day... and MSG Networks is taking a pretty good portion of their pregame show talking about sports betting,” said King. “It’s not my favorite thing, but the bottom line is money, and if the money is coming from those companies, they’ll [talk about it].”

King, a seasoned broadcaster in his own right, says that radio, however it is disseminated, is a unique platform for sports broadcasting because of its absence of video, requiring the announcers to provide that feed to the mind of the listener.

“The broadcast can be whatever I want it to be because I’m the one in charge — and I hardly ever get recognized because they don’t see my face,” explained King. “The broadcast is what I want it to be every single night. On television, it is good to be a part of a team, [but] because you are a small pawn of a larger operation... the broadcaster is being told what to do from the director and producer [based on their vision].”

With commanding the broadcast comes criticism, and for King, most of it is derived from listening back to how he did his job each game, another part of his preparation that keeps him ready and helps him improve his on-air skills every time the Islanders are on the ice. For himself, he says, though, the act of judging his performance is difficult to quantify or qualify; he just “kind of knows.”

“My philosophy is that it has to be fun on our side of the radio for it to be fun on the other side of the radio,” said King. “I judge it more on if we brought the excitement and the energy, and if we conveyed what was going on in the building. The people who are not there need to be able to follow the game based on my words. The other side of the game is letting them know how crazy the building is.”

As the New York Islanders look to advance far into the 2021 Stanley Cup Playoffs, King is excited to be back in the arena with the roar of the crowd behind his signature goal calls. As for his takeaways from calling the game from a remote site away from the team, his answer, much like the Islanders fans’ signature chant, came in the form of “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“Was it difficult at first? Yes. Did it get better? Yes. Do I hope to never do it again? Yes.”