

## **Matt Fishman and ESPN Cleveland are creating content everywhere**

Derek Futterman | August 25, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

You get the news that you have been cut from the high school baseball team. Sure, there's disappointment, but that innate love of the game never genuinely wavers. For Matt Fishman, he was able to revitalize his aspirations between the foul lines with a RadioShack tape recorder just outside of them as his team's play-by-play announcer.

"I'm sure my voice hadn't changed yet," reminisced Fishman, "so [it] was probably nice and high-pitched to go along with the ping of the aluminum bats."

Since his junior year of high school, Fishman's radio journey has taken him from Chicago to Cleveland, terrestrial to digital and from inside the batter's box to out on the racetrack. Throughout his journey, Fishman has seen sports radio evolve from an avant-garde sector of talk to a well-established radio format and has observed existential similarities in programming across different markets.

"It's the ability to take some of the things that are the same everywhere, which is having a great team that's motivated, interested in having a great product and interested in doing the work that goes into that," said Fishman. "The actual programming part of it is different in each place because of different fanbases, and what they're interested in. It's common for programmers to go into a market and want to change a lot of things, but I think they should really understand the audience in the market before making any changes."

After spending nearly a decade at 670 The Score Chicago, Fishman spent a year as the program director of 610 KCSP Kansas City, where he oversaw day-to-day operations and hired CBS Sports Radio personality Damon Amendolara from a nationwide talent search. Then in 2005, Fishman was hired to oversee the MLB Channel, part of the SiriusXM satellite radio network, with a completely different business model than that of 850 ESPN Cleveland, where he works today.

"SiriusXM didn't have ratings when I was there, so you really weren't ever concerned about the current rating book, the next rating book, etc.," explained Fishman. "You really were interested in maintaining the subscriber. The primary source of money for SiriusXM is in the subscriptions, while for us [at 850 ESPN Cleveland], if we don't have advertising partners, we don't have jobs."

The ratings are something that 850 ESPN Cleveland currently forbears utilizing to guide it in making programming decisions, a decision that Fishman explains is due to the established system's inability to depict the entire story.

"There are a million stories about every radio station, and the question is if the value of the Nielsen ratings, which have become extremely expensive, [are] worth the cost you are putting in to it, or [if you] would rather put that money in making your content better

by adding different staff, technology, shows, etc.,” said Fishman. “I think for Good Karma Brands as a company, we’re not overly interested in what the ratings are in the sense that we do everything for fans, for our partners and for our teammates. If it doesn’t fit into one or multiple of those buckets, it’s not important to us and we’re not going to do it.”

Based on this triumvirate of stakeholders, Fishman has operated with several principles at the forefront, indicative of what is in their best interests. These include the development of a strategy, ensuring everyone on the team understands and has the ability to execute that strategy and to steadily improve in all areas of sports radio. By adhering to these core principles, he hopes to position the station to realize sustained levels of success.

“[Success] is sustained by the ability to develop younger, less-experienced talent on your team so you don’t end up with a radio station where, on any day, all of your main hosts could retire and you’re stuck building it back up from scratch,” said Fishman. “I think it’s two-fold; number one — it’s supporting the team and the shows we have now and making them as strong as possible; and also knowing that the less-experienced on-air people need to continuously get reps and be developed so that when their day comes, they’ll be ready.”

In finding talent, Fishman serves in a role akin to a baseball scout in that he seeks and helps to develop budding broadcasters into sustainable, on-air personalities. While he does not see distinct differences in on-air talent from when he began in radio in the mid-90s to today, he realizes the value that lies in versatility, and the ability to perform multiple roles at a high level. However, he also warns of the precarious mistakes younger, naïve broadcasters have and continue to make by not thinking about what they post on social media, ultimately costing some their jobs.

“Being digitally savvy is probably the biggest difference [in talent] between [from when I started] to now,” expressed Fishman. “The other issue is people having to be careful about what they say because it doesn’t just go out on the radio and go away forever — someone can pick it up on social media where they live forever. With a microphone in front of them, hosts know not to say stupid or offensive things, but on Twitter, I’m not sure everyone has learned that yet.”

The digital space is a place Fishman has continued to pioneer, as the Twitter account for 850 ESPN Cleveland currently holds the most followers among all local sports radio stations on the platform. It’s a whole lot more than just the 206,000-strong that follow the station on Twitter constituting the digital space for sports on the radio in Cleveland though; they also own and operate their own on-demand subscription platform.

Known as “The Land on Demand,” patrons can subscribe to the website to receive not just aural, but also visual and written content pertaining to Cleveland sports. In fact, Tony Grossi, a multi-faceted radio personality and on-air host covering the Cleveland

Browns for the last 35 years, writes exclusive columns and frequently contributes his knowledge and expertise to various podcasts within the medium.

“It’s great to have Twitter followers, but I don’t know what that means financially,” said Fishman. “If I have ‘X’ numbers of subscribers at \$85 a year, I can tell you what that amounts to [in terms of] return on investment. From a digital [perspective], that’s where we are.”

Prior to joining 850 ESPN Cleveland, Fishman wrote a weekly column for Barrett Sports Media containing insights and advice into sports radio, an emancipatory period in his professional career that he fondly looks back upon and uses to help guide him in his present role.

“It was the only time in my career that I wasn’t working in radio,” said Fishman, “so it gave me freedom to write about anything and not worry [if I was] going to piss my bosses off. [Writing] allowed me to take on different subjects and tackle them by myself or through interviews with people in the business. I built some relationships with people just by having conversations with them about different topics, ideas or things that I was writing about.”

While reminiscing about his time with Barrett Sports Media, Fishman remembered conversations he had with various sports radio personnel, including Paul Finebaum, Dan Bernstein, Terry Boers, and one of his favorites, Matt Packer, radio host on SiriusXM and television host on the ACC Network.

“Mark is the best storyteller that I’ve ever heard in sports radio,” said Fishman. “He can tell any story about anything and make it entertaining and interesting, and it always has a little twist to it at some point. I loved everyone I talked to and really enjoyed getting to know a lot of people who I’d maybe heard of or knew things about; how they are unique is what makes them successful.”

Cleveland sports, undoubtedly, is full of stories with twists and turns that would surely captivate any willing listener. “The Decision,” when LeBron James left Cleveland to play for the Miami Heat; Kyrie Irving’s debut in 2011; the infamous Johnny Manziel pick by the Browns in 2014; the Cleveland Indians’ game seven World Series loss to the Chicago Cubs; the Cleveland Cavaliers, led by LeBron James, Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love, bringing a championship to the city for the first time in 52 years; the Indians’ 22-game winning streak in 2017; the Cleveland Browns’ winless 2017 season and 19-game overall losing streak; Baker Mayfield being drafted by the Browns; LeBron James’ departure of Cleveland again for the Los Angeles Lakers.

Now though, with the Cleveland Browns snapping an 18-year playoff drought in 2020-21 and winning a first-round game against the rival Pittsburgh Steelers, professional football is once again on the rise in the Forest City. Conversely, the Cavaliers and Indians (soon to be renamed “Cleveland Guardians”) are in a rebuilding period, developing young talent in a quest to reign as champions. So, after one protracted trip

down memory lane, how does sports radio in Cleveland continue to draw an audience despite the differing status of these teams? Just like a professional baseball scout, it lies in empirical observation.

“You reflect what the audience’s interest is,” answered Fishman. “Most of the interest is around the Browns right now because there are high expectations. We think the Cavaliers and Indians both have very bright futures ahead of them [but] the Browns’ time is now.”

Despite teams in different stages of their championship trajectories, Fishman has always remembered that what makes the sports talk radio format distinct from other formats and other platforms is in its nascent spirit of conviviality.

“I think the one thing that gets lost on some sports radio stations is that our job is to have fun and make people laugh and smile,” said Fishman. “The ability to tie in the sports with fun interesting topics, guests, bits, contests, etc. is just a great way to keep people engaged.”

Remember, Matt Fishman’s radio journey began as a result of being cut from his high school baseball team. In a crowded media landscape with new, contemporary platforms for the purposes of gathering information and being entertained, Fishman says that sports radio needs to stay true to itself in order to continue to stand out, while also finding ways to stay ahead of the pack. Namely, he is helping to prevent it, as a format, from being cut away from the consumer’s metaphorical sports media ‘field of dreams.’

“Sports radio has so many advantages that it shouldn’t run away from: embracing play-by-play; embracing unique talent; embracing live; embracing local,” opined Fishman. “Podcasts may get all the headlines, but live radio drives all the revenue. [By being] true to itself and true to its fans, sports radio can be just fine.”