

## Ryan Hurley is trying to build New York's Greatest Radio Station

Derek Futterman | July 19, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

Crafting a unique, on-air sound is something Ryan Hurley has aspired to do since starting his career at 98.7 ESPN New York. A Hofstra University graduate, Hurley was interested in radio from the time he was young, and now is an integral part of the industry that helped shape his interests.

"I grew up a control-room rat," said Hurley. "I loved the content and creative side of radio; it's still the most intimate form of broadcasting there is. The relationship you create with the audience keeps me motivated."

Hurley was initially offered an entry-level marketing and promotion position at 1050 ESPN-AM out of college in 2004, something that, while it was radio-related, he had no interest in. The niche areas of sports radio programming and production were where Hurley's interests truly lied, and after declining the initial job offer, he was afforded a second opportunity.

"After I hung up the phone, I was immediately kind of kicking myself because everyone tells you to say yes to everything no matter what the position is," said Hurley. "I got another call a couple of days later, and they took my résumé at programming. I spoke with someone there, and got an entry level production/board operations position."

Upon starting at 1050 ESPN New York, Hurley produced various talk shows and worked directly with on-air personalities and commentators. Eventually his responsibilities grew as he became the lead producer of *The Michael Kay Show*. Since his first days at the station in 2004, sports talk radio has drastically changed, something that Hurley had to embrace in order to be successful.

"The platforms have changed especially the way it's consumed from terrestrially to streaming and digital platforms," said Hurley. "[Smart devices] are used by many people, especially over this last year-and-a-half, and over the pandemic, we saw that usage increase a ton."

These changes in consumption habits and platform distribution have had a consequential impact on the ratings system, a primary measurement to determine the profitability and popularity of radio stations. As a program director, Hurley has had to alter the way he qualitatively analyzes the numbers, since they are not currently reflective on all of the methods by which people immerse themselves in sports radio.

"[The] measurement [of ratings] has certainly been questioned over the last years about accuracy in how many people have meters and how much of the audience is represented," said Hurley. "[Additionally], there is not a way to measure... [consumption] through their phones and devices... so there's an adjustment made to how that is

measured. Ratings still play a big part in our business and how we plan in terms of strategizing with the shows and our sales teams. It's the same for everyone for now, whether or not people believe it is necessarily measuring [them] properly."

Hurley acknowledges that sports talk radio has become based more on entertainment than it has on reporting and analyzing the latest scores, stats and news. Targeting the content to the listening audience keeps people engaged and ostensibly-indebted to the shows, institutionalizing it as an essential part of listeners' days.

"We are here to entertain people and provide content that will keep them coming back," affirmed Hurley. "When trying to get an audience and develop programming, you want those shows to be like hanging out with your friends every day; you don't want to miss out on what everyone is saying."

As a program director, one of Hurley's jobs is to scout and cultivate air talent, a task that is done both externally and internally. In an age where the demand for quality content is higher than ever before and where people have a plethora of choices as to what to listen to, finding on-air talent that is impressionable and entertaining remains a challenge.

"I have a great deal of people who reach out to me and... send me examples of their work," said Hurley. "We have also had people on our staff internally come up through the production side, or [do] some part-time hosting that have ended up being on our staff and doing full-time work. Entertaining people is the number one thing I look for, as well as different, unique takes and angles, and the potential to have some inside knowledge and information on things that other people can't bring to the table."

Some of these changes occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, but many were catalyzed by the sudden shift in lifestyle and need for adaptation which occurred after it was declared a national emergency, causing sports, entertainment and much of the industrial world to completely shut down.

"People needed an escape or some sort of outlet from all of the reality of what was going on in the world," reminisced Hurley. "We had to get creative in the way we programmed in what content we created and what we discussed. On the other end of that, the way we operate also changed drastically; we had to figure out a way to get everyone on-the-air basically from their homes."

98.7 ESPN New York placed its focus on working together as a team during the pandemic in order to withstand a seminal moment in modern history altogether. It's something that Hurley is especially appreciative of his staff for being able to do.

"It was all hands on deck during the last year and a half between engineering, production, figuring out ways to make everything work," said Hurley. "With all that has occurred and changed, it's been pretty impressive to see what we were able to pull off and keep together for our audience, staff and programs."

As a result of the widespread financial hardship endured by radio stations through the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of content driven by sports betting platforms, such as FanDuel, Bet365 and DraftKings became distinctly more prevalent through advertising.

“It’s a huge opportunity to work with different sports-betting companies and clients, as well as for on-air content,” said Hurley. “All around, it’s a big part of what’s going on in the landscape of our industry in not just radio, but television as well.”

During the extended period without sports in the early stages of the pandemic, Hurley and ESPN New York had to work to maintain relationships with professional sports teams they broadcast. Once they resumed play, they had to adapt to new guidelines mandating broadcasts.

“Relationships are key... and working with not only the P.R. staff, but as a team at the station,” said Hurley. “You have to coordinate with programming, team interviews with coaches and players, setting up potential shows, getting liners from players in the pre-season, etc.”

ESPN Radio New York is unique among its competitors, as it has both FM and AM frequencies to which it can broadcast its programming. Those assets allow them to air multiple games at a time. The station currently has relationships with the New York Jets, the New York Knicks, the New York Islanders and the New York Rangers.

“Certain broadcasts will take priority over others,” explained Hurley, “and the good thing is that we have 1050 ESPN that we can use as a place for people to listen if there’s a conflict. It’s crucial to have relationships with teams and people behind the scenes; it’s not just the games that air, it’s a lot of the ancillary stuff as well.”

Another unique aspect of ESPN Radio New York is that it is a part of the ESPN parent brand, something Hurley says helps the radio station attract talent and guests. Moreover, the conglomeration of distribution platforms helps the station facilely produce other sports-related content and air national games, including enticing contests throughout the M.L.B. postseason and N.B.A. playoffs.