

## Sports Media's Present & Future Has the Attention of New York Broadcasters

Derek Futterman | August 9, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

Sports talk radio has considerably evolved since its inception as a bona fide programming format in the late-1980s. The unique, live, intimate connection the host is able to foster with their listening audience at a dedicated time during each broadcast had been something that no other distribution mediums could initially compete with.

As time progressed, though, the media industry caught up to the once-incipient format – and fast. Thus, the consumer gained, and still holds to this day, freedom over what program they wish to consume; when they want to consume it; and where they wish to do so. With television, radio, print, streaming, podcasting, social media and the plethora of blogs and websites available on the internet, the sports talk format, and all media in general, has had to evolve to meet the demand of the consumer, and stand out among the pack while doing so.

Deep in a potpourri of content within a disquieted marketplace, I asked several personalities across sports media to gather their thoughts on how they see the evolution in the business of sports commentary, and what concerns may lie ahead for the traditional, sports talk format.

### **Q1: What is the biggest misconception people have about sports radio?**

**Robin Lundberg (Senior Host, Sports Illustrated):** “The biggest misconception people have is that it’s easy and lazy. I think there’s a lot more care and energy put into it than the average person would know. Doing a show of any length, particularly solo, is a challenge in and of itself, as is standing out now-a-days. There are so many different outlets through [which] people can hear things, and distinguishing yourself with a voice or characteristics is a challenge.”

**Zach Gelb (Host, CBS Sports Radio):** “I would say the biggest misconception is that it’s a dying medium. I just think there’s ways that people need to improve heading into the future, but doing radio locally and nationally, I still think it’s very successful, but there just has to be alterations that are made; you can’t really [hold] an antiquated belief and only do things on the radio. I think you need to have more of a digital presence. The best part about radio is the connection and how personable... it can be from the host to the listener, and also how immediate [it is]. If there is a news story... people [can] voice their opinions right away.”

**Jon Rothstein (Host, College Hoops Today):** “I think the one thing that a lot of people don’t understand about radio and podcasts is how intimate the connection can be between the host and the audience. It’s a much different medium than television and being a columnist or a reporter and connecting with someone via the written word. It’s

just not how it was years ago when the majority of people listening to talk radio were in their cars commuting.”

**John Jastremski (Host, The Ringer/SNY):** “I think the biggest misconception about sports radio is that your caller [does not] add intellect to a show. I think there are a lot of people out there who honestly believe the callers add nothing. I think that’s so outrageous. Just like anything else... you have good callers and bad callers. By having the [live call] element in there, it shows off their creativity and their wealth of knowledge. No matter how a call may be going, it sets the stage and tone to what you, [as a host], are bringing to the table.”

**Alan Hahn (Host, ESPN Radio/MSG Networks):** “That it’s all hot takes. I don’t think it’s all that, at least it shouldn’t be. I still think it’s storytelling and interaction with callers.”

## **Q2: Where do you see sports radio’s biggest opportunity for future growth?**

**Lundberg:** “The media industry right now is the wild west. Everyone is trying to figure out what’s going on, where it’s headed and how to monetize it. When I did an early morning show on ESPN, the one opportunity I saw at the time was to be the first podcast out. As a result, I was second in podcast downloads to the Michael Kay Show — because I was one of the first podcasts of the day. Then, I was told we had to focus on the ‘pizza’ before we made the ‘cannolis.’ I said that’s not a good analogy because [a podcast] is the same product [as a radio show except] with a different delivery method. I would say the biggest opportunity remains expanding [to] other mediums and flexing that presence in that way. In order for a radio show to truly succeed, you’re going to have the base, but if you want to get beyond that, the digital presence has to be there as well.”

**Gelb:** “I would say in the digital space. I think that there’s a lot of stations that obviously need to make those changes. You still use your content on the air, but once a segment airs or a show ends, there are other ways you can put your content out there, [such as in] certain digital content features that you can put out.”

**Rothstein:** “You have to always be ready to evolve. We live in a day and age that’s much different than it was many years ago. We’re in a time where people are clicking links off of Twitter if they want to consume written or editorial content; it was not like that 20 years ago. As far as sports radio and podcasts go, constantly being aware of the changing trends are what is going to lead to its long-term growth stability.”

**Jastremski:** “On-demand content. [The consumer] being able to listen when they want, [and] whenever they want, [along with] the ability of the host to be timely when things are happening. If there’s a trade, you don’t have to wait until your time slot [to talk about it]. It’s the idea of getting your voice out there immediately so that the audience hears from you. Some stories will warrant that more so than others, but I think that’s the biggest change now. When there’s something big going on in your market, you have to be able to react instantaneously.”

**Hahn:** “The on-demand world. I’ve been all over the place. A lot of people are just looking for your content, so I do think on-demand is going to matter the most. A schedule is still a schedule, but sports radio is also about personalities, and people will find those personalities. Sometimes a podcast isn’t the whole show; you just take bits and pieces. The consumption of a show on-demand needs to be more available in a car just as much as it’s available on a phone.”

### **Q3: How do you measure your effectiveness as talent and the aggregate success of your show?**

**Lundberg:** “Sometimes it can feel like a popularity contest where you are constantly checking for downloads, views, clicks, listens, etc. I think, in radio in particular, one of the things that’s great about it is that it’s a very intimate medium, so you get that immediate feedback from the audience. The first thing you need is self-belief, and belief within your team that you’re putting out a good product. One person in charge might not like it, and the next person in charge might think it’s the coolest thing ever. The second thing comes from the audience response and the feedback you hear. The third is that you can’t ignore the raw numbers; you have to bring in either revenue or ratings, ideally both. If you’re getting big money, it doesn’t matter what the ratings are; if you’re getting high ratings, the money will eventually come.”

**Gelb:** “The POKE Scale. Passion; Opinion; Knowledge; Entertainment. For me, if you do a show that’s passionate, that gives opinions, that’s knowledgeable, and that’s entertainment, those are the best shows. Ratings determine that, and being able to make a lot of news. I think it’s establishing that connection with the listening audience and then also behind the scenes, developing good chemistry with co-workers and also just really giving 110% each and every day. There are ways to measure it in terms of ratings, and there’s also ways in terms of a healthy work environment.”

**Rothstein:** “Consistency, having a plan and sticking to it. The biggest thing I learned from my time at WFAN was the consistency Mark Chernoff had at the station. He wasn’t going to alter the lineup if a big event happened or if there was a big story. He had confidence in the product he was putting on the air and their shows. I think when it comes to my podcast, it’s a certain length each and every week. Over time, that consistency has led to great growth, and I’m proud to say that last year was our best year ever. I’m trying to keep building on that without sacrificing the model that works.”

**Jastremski:** “The idea of generating reaction. In the radio world, ratings tell the story. I can give you the cliché numbers that we want to have good podcast metrics and we want to have as many listeners as possible — that goes without saying. Getting the interaction; the feedback; the needle moving that way — that’s what I’m looking for more than anything. We recently hopped on a Spotify green room after a Mets game [where] we had 200 people in a room [within] five minutes of starting, and I [took] 15 calls. Generating that reaction within your base is how I’m judging whether or not we are doing what we need to do, whether it’s momentum or traffic. I understand that, from an

old-school mentality, it's all about ratings. Obviously, podcast numbers, downloads and subscribers are gigantic, but I don't want an inactive listener base; I want an active listener base that's dialed in, engaged and participating in what I'm looking to do."

**Hahn:** "I used to measure it with ratings [when] I was local. That seemed to be the be-all, end-all [and] how you bragged about your success. Feedback has become the more important one. It's not just feedback from listeners, but also the people at your business and, to be honest with you, I [had] never really considered it before. Being on a national platform, I think what athletes think of the show is [also] important because that also drives the idea [of if you] are talking about what matters. I feel like ratings are so antiquated of a system that there's no way that's the [sole] indicator."

#### **Q4: What do you consider to be sports radio's biggest area of concern now and moving forward?**

**Lundberg:** "Is hosting a sports radio show enough? As things do change with platforms, we've seen podcasts, Sirius XM and digital platforms emerge. The way people get their media has changed rapidly over the last few years. Luckily, sports radio's steady base has been able to help it survive through it, but if you're going to be a true crossover star right now, can you do that primarily through radio?"

**Gelb:** "I would say it would be improvements in the digital space. I think that's something people really need to focus on. I think companies need to be careful in understanding that Twitter does not reflect [whether you've had] a successful show or not. Sure, if you have a host with a bunch of followers, or [put] out a viral video, great — but a lot of the comments on any social media are going to be negative. I think it's important that radio stations do as much as they can digitally, but I would not let the comments make the program director's decisions if a show is successful or not."

**Rothstein:** "There are so many ways for people to get information. People are not really in the business anymore of consuming things for longer periods of time. People have interest in watching videos on their phone instead of listening to the radio or watching a long-term show. When people are driving, there are so many different options."

**Jastremski:** "I think the biggest challenge for any of these sports radio or podcast markets is [determining] how you stand out. There's so much out there; what makes you unique; what makes you special; what makes you different from a host standpoint, a brand standpoint, a market standpoint. That to me is what I'm kind of looking at down the road as to what might be an obstacle for sports radio; there's so much out there now. When sports radio started in the late-80s and 90s, they were the only game in town. Now, that's no longer the case. I think for each talent and or each platform, what makes you different, what makes you unique, what do you bring to the table that somebody else doesn't. Not just from a program director's standpoint, I think that has to be the focus for hosts. It's not that you want to reinvent the wheel and be crazy different, but you want to stand out. If you stick to that, you can have a ton of success."

**Hahn:** “Podcasts. Everyone has one now. There’s also a million sports talk radio stations and a lot of shows. Everyone is trying to become the ‘next something’ of this realm. It’s so easy to get lost in that sea; it’s very hard. The oversaturation of sports talk; anyone can do it because the technology is there. That’s a great thing, but the oversaturation just starts to become white noise. There isn’t a delineation of who are the professionals [that] are doing this for a living, who put the time in and who is just regurgitating what they saw on SportsCenter or FirstTake. The saturation of this type of media in the last five years has created a feeling of white noise among content.”

**Q5: If there’s one thing upcoming hosts should be prioritizing in order to be successful in the future, what would that be and why?**

**Lundberg:** “I think that comes with knowing what the audience wants. The one thing that doesn’t go away is the instinct of what people care about. The Jordan vs. LeBron debate is the bread-and-butter of what sports talk is: two people arguing about it on barstools. Stories aren’t going anywhere; sports aren’t going anywhere. Knowing how to read what the audience wants and then spin it in a way that is unique to your program is most important.”

**Gelb:** “You have to have the work ethic. You have to have the reps. And you have to find a way to develop a connection with the audience that makes you stand out differently from the others. Everyone can give an opinion about sports, but can you give an opinion, and can people believe that opinion is authentic, and does it make the person want to come back and stay throughout the show?”

**Rothstein:** “Authenticity. You hear so much that people want to be the next this person or that person. You have to be the first and version of yourself because there’s only one of us.”

**Jastremski:** “Watch the damn games — simple as that. I think there’s way too many folks out there who don’t know what they’re talking about. I think it comes across, and it’s easy to point out if you’re a listener. You don’t need to be drooling over the box score of every game that’s played, but in order to formulate the best possible opinions that you can, you have to be dialed in and you have to have a sense of what’s going on around the teams that you covered. That might sound like a real simple answer but in order to have those opinions, you have to watch the games.”

**Hahn:** “Compelling conversation. You’ve got to be able to not just have a guest, but make it a listenable conversation. I think the most successful people in this business are great at that. Everyone just wants to be the first one to say something or have a crazy reaction to something. To get an athlete or a former player to relax to a point where they can tell you something that can take you into the world that regular people are not privy to makes it a compelling listen. Relaxing the guest and making them feel like they are in a room hanging out is a great conversation. If the guest is boring, it’s your fault [as the host] that they are boring.”