

Steve Somers Can't Retire From Talking

Derek Futterman | November 23, 2021 | Barrett Sports Media

Flipping through the pages of your high school yearbook often evokes feelings of nostalgia no matter your high school experience. Looking back at the photos of your fellow classmates from the days where everyone was just trying to find and establish their own identity can make you long for those days of simplistic chaos. As you look at each section of the book, usually the class valedictorian is highlighted, where you can learn more about the person with the highest grade point average considered to be at the top of your class.

The valedictorian of Lowell High School in San Francisco, CA would turn out to be a man who sports fans referred to as “Captain Midnight” on the other side of the country for 34 years. Underneath his yearbook photo, this kid’s ambition was listed as seeking to become a “New York Sportscaster,” and he certainly left no doubt that he achieved his goal, and then some, when he signed off the airwaves for the final time last week.

Indeed, the maxim holds true that if you can make it in New York City, you can make it anywhere. For Steve Somers, that mantra held true starting from the moment his voice was broadcast over the airwaves of WFAN. He’d discuss the latest happenings across the world of New York Sports, and frequently take calls from listeners, giving them a chance to share their opinions.

Somers did not get to the city that never sleeps right away though. He worked in television for roughly 17 years prior to moving to the East Coast with various outlets and in different markets, including his hometown of San Francisco. He also spent time in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Sacramento.

The day Somers finally made it to New York City was emotional for him. At the time, Somers had not held a job for two and a half years, nor had he worked in radio since his foray in television had begun. None of that stopped him though from catalyzing an exciting career on the air in the number one media market in the country.

“I’ve often said to people that if you were to take an airplane flight from the [West] Coast to the [East] Coast, it would take about five and a half to six hours,” said Somers. “It took me 22 years to land in New York. And I cried — I was so happy joining a radio station in New York City that was going to be doing something 24/7.”

Somers, 74, was the last of the original voices from its 1987 launch as the pioneer of the sports talk radio format in New York City to depart the station. Despite being from San Francisco, he helped the station establish its local sound. He did this not only by taking an innumerable amount of calls over his career, but also by being able to understand and relate to the passion and zeal New York sports fans had for their favorite teams: the Devils, Giants, Islanders, Jets, Knicks, Mets, Nets, Rangers, and Yankees.

“You can’t come into somebody else’s house and rearrange the furniture,” said Somers. “Maybe this is old school — and I’m old and I went to school — but it may be old school to be a please and thank you guy [on the phone]... I have a lot of respect for coming into this city and talking to what I consider to be the number one place for media and the number one place for sports.”

While it took several years for the station to find its audience, Somers never had a doubt that “New York’s FAN” would be able to find its sound and appeal to a local cohort of listeners, as well as its group of listeners from abroad.

“I never thought the radio station would not survive,” said Somers. “I had always thought that with nine professional teams in New York City — how could it not survive?”

When Somers was hired prior to the station’s July 1, 1987 launch, management at WFAN had to make decisions regarding the station’s programming lineup, specifically what it would do overnight.

“They weren’t sure whether they would have syndicated programming overnight, or a repeat of daytime programming overnight, or whether or not they would have a live person overnight,” said Somers. “To my good fortune, I was their last hire, and, of course, did a live program overnight for the very first time on the very first all-sports 24-hour station.”

Through his time on the air, Somers brought a unique on-air sound to listeners in the New York-Metropolitan area, with recurring bits, such as the Fearless Forecaster, and other production pieces. It all surrounded his famous monologue, which he notoriously prepared every night on a standard yellow stenography pad. Additionally, Somers would frequently take calls during his show while in the studio, or as he put it — “Me here, and you there.” His most famous caller? None other than comedy and television legend Jerry Seinfeld, who would often talk about his beloved New York Mets on the program *yada, yada, yada*.

“I don’t think I’m anywhere close to his talent, but he grew up listening to me and the radio station at night, and became a fan,” said Somers. “I’m not going to say we were the best of friends, [but] we had a very good radio listenership acquaintance kind of relationship.”

The cast of people Somers worked with “on the other side of the glass” included the likes of Evan Roberts, Sal Licata, Paul Rosenberg, and, of course, Eddie Scozzare, all of whom served in various roles for the program. Somers recognizes the effort they demonstrated in trying to make the program exciting, entertaining and engaging for the listeners.

“Being a producer is a thankless job,” said Somers. “As long as somebody gave an effort; that didn’t mean they were all 100 percent successful any more than anyone on

the air has a brilliant show every time they are on. If you were to give effort, you were succeeding as far as I was concerned.”

Aside from the plethora of on-air talent, including Somers, Mike Francesca, Chris ‘Mad Dog’ Russo and Don Imus, those behind the scenes, such as former WFAN Vice President of Programming Mark Chernoff, helped institute and maintain the station’s upward trajectory throughout most of the years Somers was on the air.

“Chernoff was all-business,” Somers elucidated. “He was very strict. He wanted you to always follow the rules and be your best and go from there. A boss’s job is to boss, and some are easier to get along with than others. Chernoff and I got along okay. If you were honest, candid, direct matter-of-fact with him, you [would get] along.”

WFAN is now led by its new vice president of programming Spike Eskin, who joined the station this year, 34 years to the day of its launch, after he served in a similar role at SportsRadio 94WIP in Philadelphia.

Somers speaks fondly of Eskin and Senior Vice President and New York Market Manager for Audacy, Chris Oliviero, two influential voices at the radio station, the latter who infamously sent Somers a letter asking for an autograph as a high school student in 1993. “The Schmoozer” knows they are up to the task in continuing to lead the original home for sports talk radio further amid an oversaturated 21st-century media landscape.

“Radio is certainly not the same as it was 34 years ago. There are so many other ways that you can get information. Radio, to me, was always personal and intimate, and no matter how it goes into this next century with all the technical advancements and utilizing all the venues, all the platforms and social media, generally speaking what separates radio and really WFAN to this day from other radio stations is [that it’s] personal and intimate, and it can be both of those.”

Somers confirmed that he was offered a midnight to 5 a.m. time slot to stay on the air at WFAN, which he politely declined. While he had his final show Monday and left on good terms, he does not view it as the definitive end of his broadcasting career; indeed, he is leaving the possibility of “Schmoozing” again open for consideration.

“How do you really retire from talking?,” said Somers. “At this moment, I don’t feel like doing a podcast, but if WFAN wants to have me back someday [to fill] in, I would certainly listen and probably do it... The retirement was really going to be the best option for me at this time. Again, down the road, if they were to give [me] a call, I’d be flattered.”

Somers affirms it was the people around him that led him to his success, both in and out of the WFAN Studios, and a significant reason why he was able to stay there for 34 years in the number one media market in the country: New York, NY.

“The people, whether it was management then or management now, and all the calls and all the listeners that I might have had over the years, I owe *everything* to them... because they gave me a chance to realize my dream; to realize my goal; to realize my destination, and they gave me a chance — the audience gave me a chance; gave me a life; gave me a career. And I owe everything to them.”

For now, Somers is retired, and content with his decision.

“If I have to go through a major withdrawal, so far so good. I’m at peace with everything and making whatever adjustment you have to make; just [moving] forward and [looking] forward to any new challenges that may come my way.”