

The Station That Created The Sports Radio Format

{By Editor in Chief Ed Ryan}

Twenty-five years ago,

WHN-AM sat in 20th place in the ratings in New York City. The station was playing country music and carrying New York Mets baseball, a dreadful programming combination. Jeff Smulyan, who owned the station at the time, was sitting in a coffee shop, contemplating what to do to improve his position in the market.

"I always wondered what a Sports station would sound like," Smulyan says. He was in the minority. Sports as a radio format didn't exist in the late '80s, and Smulyan found little support for his off-the-wall idea. Because it hadn't been done before, there was no research on a Sports format, and that worried just about everyone at the station. And when Smulyan made the decision and put the first-ever all-sports radio station on the air — it was terrible. As they say, the pioneers take the arrows.

The station struggled mightily in its first 18 months. It didn't sound good, and it wasn't going over well with advertisers. Smulyan says sports broadcaster Jim Lampley called it "The Vietnam of Emmis." Emmis Programming President Rick Cummings and then-Emmis Radio President Doyle Rose would walk into Smulyan's office and say, "Well, we lost another \$43,000 today." In fact, WFAN lost \$4 million in its first year.

Rose says he and Cummings thought Smulyan was nuts when he came up with the idea of an all-sports format. And for that entire first year, they believed changing from Country to Sports was a mistake. Cummings says, "We doubted the original idea, which was to make all-sports like all-news — repeating the scores, previews, and wraps every 20 minutes, with a few sports talk shows. Secondly, it was very expensive to run and advertisers had indicated that they were not



confident in the idea and not eager to come on board."

Losing millions of dollars because you think you're right on a format is something that could never happen in radio today (see: Merlin Media in Chicago). But that's what Smulyan did, and things started to change for the better when the station changed its focus from providing only sports updates and national sports information. Cummings says the hook was entertainment: "When we put the right entertaining hosts on, it took off."

That stronger programming was coupled with a much better signal. When Smulyan purchased the NBC stations and moved "The Fan"

down to 660 on the dial, everything was in place, including the biggest hook: Don Imus. While Imus wasn't a huge sports fan, he was wildly popular in New York, especially in the 25-54 male demo.

Smulyan says Imus was the perfect match for the Fan — even though he didn't spend much time talking about sports. "He still had the greatest sign-off I've ever heard in radio," says Smulyan. "At the end of the show, at 10 o'clock, he'd say, 'This concludes the entertainment portion of today's programming. For the next 24 hours you will hear mindless drivel about sports from people who know nothing about sports.' It was great."

In addition to Imus handling morning drive, Mike & The Mad Dog — Mike Francesa and Chris Russo — was added in the afternoons, and WFAN never looked back. Imus says the switch to 660 on the dial, going from the worst signal in the market to the best, was a big part of the radio station's success, adding that he was part of the package when Emmis took over. Although he says he doesn't miss working at WFAN, Imus says he loved everybody there.

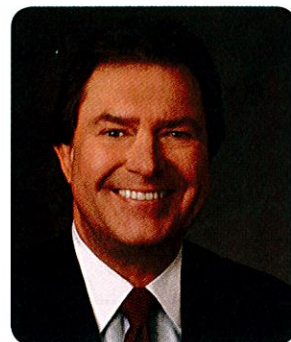


DIGITAL SUBSCRIBERS: Listen to our audio interview with Jeff Smulyan and Rick Cummings [HERE](http://www.radioink.com/WFAN), or go to www.radioink.com/WFAN.

Cummings notes that, once the talent was in place, the station went from a pretty significant failure to a quick success. He says, "It was just remarkable to sit in a meeting and hear people talk about having every decisionmaker in the Tri-State area listening to Don Imus in the morning and, in fact, influencing advertising buys in some cases."

THEY SAID IT COULD NEVER WORK

Joel Hollander, who was also part of WFAN from the beginning, started out as the sales manager. "Everyone said it would never work," he says. "It was an unmitigated disaster when it first launched. Part of the challenge from the start was that the station had 145 employees and less than a 1 share. That makes it hard to pay the bills. When you couple that with country music and sports that nobody seemed to care about, you can understand why people had their doubts that this thing would ever work. We were airing the



"THE PROGRAMMING STAFF AT WFAN HAS BEEN SINGULARLY FOCUSED ON BRINGING UP-TO-THE-MINUTE SPORTS INFORMATION AND COMMENTARY TO THE NEW YORK LISTENING AREA FOR 25 YEARS. THEIR GOAL TODAY IS THE SAME AS IT WAS WHEN THEY STARTED IN 1987. AS THE TALENT LINEUP CHANGED, THE GOALS OF THE STATION HAVE NOT."

— CBS Radio President/CEO Dan Mason

horse racing report, the tennis report, and the New York Islanders report." Hollander says all that changed when the station brought in the legendary team of Jack Trout and Al Ries, who told them what the Fan needed to focus on.

The marketing gurus told the WFAN team that the station needed to emphasize the daily headlines; Ries says, "We told them to keep a narrow focus and have patience." Hollander took that to mean that if Daryl Strawberry of the New York Mets was taking drugs, that needed to be discussed on the air. If Don Mattingly of the Yankees was on a long hitting streak, that needed to be discussed on the air. The station had to become the Top 40 of sports — New York sports. And by 1986, carrying the New York Mets turned out to be a blessing for WFAN: The team won the World Series that year.

Hollander would eventually become the general manager and run the station from 1991 to 1998, and his success at WFAN would help propel him to the CEO spot at Westwood One. Imus, who still works with Hollander through the CJ Foundation for SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) says Hollander was only "half a radio weasel." We think he was kidding.

Imus tells this story about Mike Breen, who worked on the *Imus in the Morning Show* before moving on to ESPN. Breen wanted a raise, according to Imus, so he told him to go see the boss. "Hollander told him he gave all the money to me, and Breen should come ask me for the money," Imus says. "So, other than that, Hollander's a good guy — but he's a typical radio weasel." In 1991, Smulyan sold the station to Infinity Broadcasting for \$75 million, and the '90s were very, very good to WFAN. Hollander says then-Infinity CEO Mel Karmazin was responsible for giving WFAN

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the infusion of cash it really needed, and Imus says, "Mel is the reason I am rich today: Mel is one of the greatest media guys ever. He was great to work for." Hollander also enjoyed his tenure working with Karmazin. "It was the most fun I've ever had in the radio business," he says. "It lifted my career. It spawned many other careers. And the station has done more for charity than any other station in the United States." And, as most everyone in the industry knows, WFAN would make it all the way to the top where it counts most in the revenue column: WFAN was the top-billing station in the U.S. for a period in the mid-'90s; according to Hollander, it billed \$70 million in 1998 while cash-flowing \$34 million.

DIGITAL SUBSCRIBERS: Listen to our audio interview with former WFAN PD Eric Spitz [HERE](http://www.radioink.com/WFAN), or at www.radioink.com/WFAN.



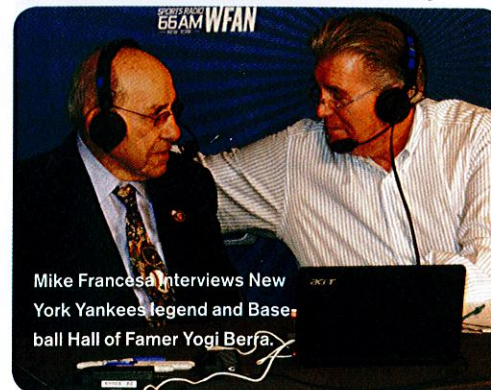
On August 27, 2012 Spitz was named Director of Operations for the new CBS Radio Sports Network.

In addition to the visit by Trout and Ries, Hollander credits the addition of Imus and Mike & The Mad Dog for the change in WFAN's fortunes, and he calls Mike Francesa the "Godfather of Sports Radio." "People either love him or hate him, but he's stayed number one all the way through," says Hollander. "He's very good at what he does." Imus agrees: "Francesca, despite a rep for being arrogant, is one of the great people in this business. This business is filled with a bunch of weasels. Mike Francesa is not one of them."

Hollander also gives high praise to OM Mark Chernoff for what he's done behind the scenes at WFAN. Chernoff, who's also VP for sports programming at CBS Radio, will celebrate his 20th anniversary at WFAN on March 1 of next year. CBS Radio SVP/Programming Chris Oliviero says Chernoff is without a doubt the most successful Sports radio program director of all time.

MANAGING TOP TALENT

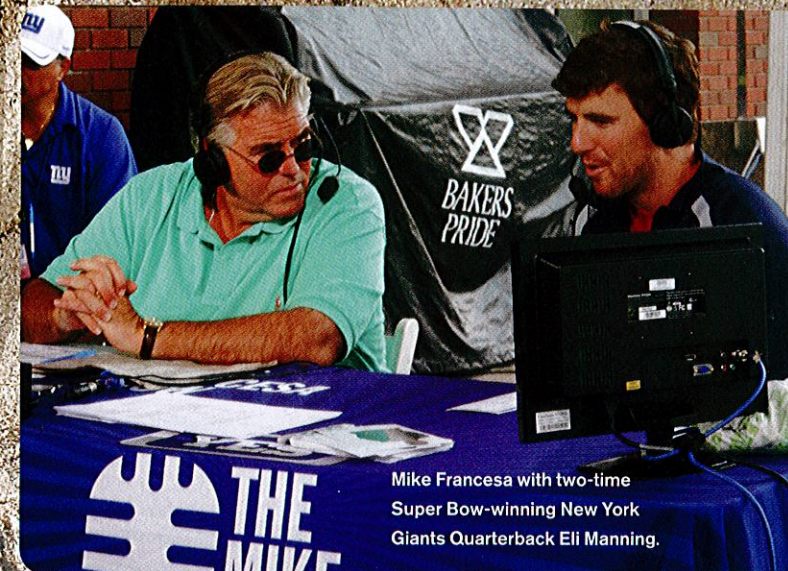
About managing high-profile, opinionated talent in the largest market in the country, Chernoff says, "The key is to understand that the hosts are talented, or they wouldn't be here. They may have needed to understand the difference in ratings from a diary-based world to a PPM world, but I look at myself as the person to help them when needed. If they didn't have egos, I don't believe they



Mike Francesa interviews New York Yankees legend and Baseball Hall of Famer Yogi Berra.

"THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE THAT DON'T GET THE ATTENTION THAT I GET, OR THAT SOMEONE ELSE MAY GET, WHO DESERVE A LOT OF CREDIT FOR WHAT'S GONE ON AT WFAN. A LOT OF PEOPLE SHOULD BE VERY PROUD."

— Mike Francesa



Mike Francesa with two-time Super Bowl-winning New York Giants Quarterback Eli Manning.

would be as good as they are. In addition, I enjoy the talent. I'm not here to fight with them. That makes it so they respect my opinion when there are on- or off-air issues."

And there's no doubt there's mutual respect between Chernoff and Mike Francesa, who have worked together for nearly two decades at WFAN. "Mike has been with WFAN since 1987, just a few months after the birth of the station," says Chernoff. "His amazing track record includes 19 years as one half of the amazingly successful Mike & The Mad Dog Show, which set the standard for two-person Sports Talk radio, to Mike's continued on-air dominance as a solo host the last four years."

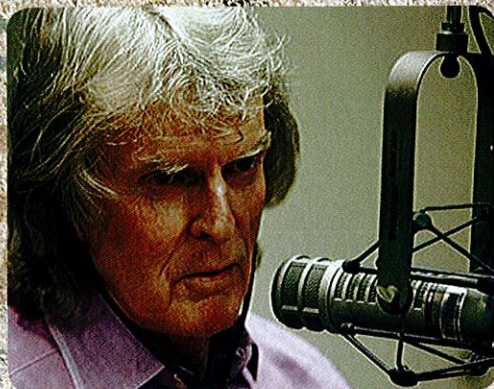
Francesa, who was a behind-the-scenes guy with CBS when he first heard WFAN, recalls listening to the Mets playing the Houston Astros back in 1986 and knowing right then where he wanted to work. "From the beginning," he says, "I thought they had it wrong. They brought in a lot of the national guys — some who had a lot of success, some who hadn't. They did it like it was almost an ESPN on the radio, and I thought it would never work. I thought it was a disaster, but I wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to get involved, and I did. I knew they weren't connecting and I thought I knew why. I thought they needed to talk New York."

"As soon as they started to realize that was the case — it took them a while, and it almost shut them down, because they lost a lot of money early on — the light went on and they realized they needed local hosts. At that same time, they moved the signal down to 660 and inherited Don Imus, which was incredibly important to the growth and to the vibrancy of WFAN. Within a couple of months of that, they created Mike & The Mad Dog. Those were the moments that

really changed everything from being another disaster to being something that could be successful. Then it became wildly successful. It was the move to local hosts, that move to 66, the inheriting of Don Imus, and the coupling of Mike and the Mad Dog."

STARS OF NEW YORK

Francesa says that within nine months, Mike & The Mad Dog was number one. In one book alone, the show went from 11th to third, proving New Yorkers were ready



"MIKE FRANCESA IS ONE OF THE GREAT PEOPLE IN THIS BUSINESS. THIS BUSINESS IS FILLED WITH A BUNCH OF WEASELS. MIKE FRANCESA IS NOT ONE OF THEM."

— Don Imus

for an all-Sports format. "My whole life changed," Francesa says. "We became big stars in New York. We had appearances, headlines, and a lot of money. In the spring of 1990, everything just exploded." And for Francesa, that's led to a rarity in radio: a career that includes one, and only one, radio station. He says, "I think that sometimes you are in the right place at the right time, and you find something that you have a good capacity for, you connect with an audience, you connect with a city. I understand that the audience can be fickle. The public can be fickle. For some reason, my following has been extremely loyal, both through the Mike & The Mad Dog years and in the years since. In that regard, I've been very, very fortunate. I understand that it is ratings-driven. I understand that we still to this day have to perform every month and every quarter. I think it's just good fortune and a capacity to connect to the audience." Francesa and Russo worked together from 1998 to 2008; Russo has since moved on to take the lead on his own show on Sirius XM.

Chernoff says WFAN has evolved into an amazing brand. "The station is part of the fabric of the New York market," he says. "I'm humbled to be working with some of the greatest talent on the planet, both now and throughout the past 19 years. I believe that by being local all the time and allowing our listeners to get on the radio and express their opinions, along with our hosts being topical and opinionated, we bring people to the station. And so many of our listeners are bonded to the station. Some love our hosts, some don't, but I love the fact that our listeners want to hear what Mike Francesa has to say, or Boomer and Carton — really, all of our hosts. Without our listeners and the interaction we have on the air and off the air, we wouldn't be who we are."



Craig Carton and Boomer Esiason at Connolly's Pub & Restaurant in New York.

a great difference between the audience and a caller. Ninety-eight percent of your audience never calls. I have incredible affection and love for my audience, because my audience put me here and has kept me here for 25 years. I adore them. They have made me.

"The callers are people who want to perform. They want to enter the production. They want to walk on to the stage. When you walk on to the stage, you have to bring something with you, or don't be here. You have asked to enter. You have asked to perform. Fine. We want you to perform. But bring something to the table, or goodbye. That is my edict to the show. I'll listen to you, but if you are annoying me, that means you are most likely annoying my audience, and you are not going to be there very long. That's my job. If a host doesn't control that, he's not doing a very good job."

BOOMER & CARTON

Boomer Esiason and Chris Carton have been holding down mornings on WFAN for five years now, taking over from Imus, who left in 1997. Esiason, a successful NFL quarterback and highly visible TV sportscaster, loves working at WFAN. "As an athlete, growing up here in New York, playing for the Jets and being a contributor with both Mike & The Mad Dog during my career and Imus after my career was over, I was very aware of the radio station," he says. "I knew the personnel. I knew Chernoff and [former PD] Mark Spitz. When the opportunity came to do what we are doing now, I can't say it was like a dream come true, because I thought working at 6 a.m. was going to be a nightmare, but the fact of the matter is it has really been a blessing to be here and be part of this — one of the great radio stations, if not the greatest Sports radio station in the country."

Chris Carton started at WFAN as an intern in 1988. He says, "To come all the way from there, 25 years later, and actually get to host the morning show with Boomer is something I never thought would happen. It was surreal, the first day we were on the air. Every day we both get to say, 'Hey, you're on the Fan,' is another good day."

And Carton never forgets that he started as an intern. "I tell every intern that comes through the door the same thing," he says. "Nothing is going to be handed to you. You have to be willing to pay your dues. A lot of kids come out of college or the Connecticut School of Broadcasting and they hear guys on the radio and think, 'I can do that. I am better than that guy.' I tell them all the time, I made \$12,000 a year and lived in a retirement home for my first job. A lot of these kids are unwilling to do that. Half of them won't have the ability to do that successfully, and the other half aren't willing to do that. I just tell the kids to be prepared to work and not make a lot of money early on, but have a great life experience of moving to another city and working and

The relationship is critical. If a less-than-perfect mix with the audience makes a difference of a single ratings point, that's potentially millions of dollars in lost revenue. Francesa, for his part, has something of a love/hate relationship with callers. "One of the things that I get criticized for is that people say I'm tough on callers," he says. "I put them off. I get rid of them. I fight with them. I yell at them. All true. My theory on that is that people have to understand — and I don't think they make this distinction — that there is

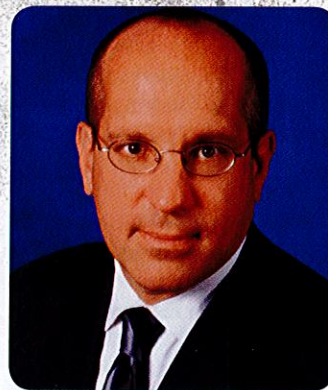
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trying to figure out what you want to be on the radio. And a lot of kids don't want to do that anymore."

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Esiason says that, despite his TV fame and NFL cred, it's radio that makes him famous. "I thought people knew who I was because I was a quarterback in the NFL and I do a TV show on CBS every Sunday during football season," he says. "But it's this radio station, especially in this area, that has propelled both of our likenesses and popularity in a way I never thought would be possible. I didn't realize how many people actually listen to this station and how a day never goes by without someone saying, 'I can't believe what you guys are talking about and how funny that was,' or how great we are together, or, 'Get a new partner,' or, 'You rubbed me the wrong way.' It's amazing how many people actually pay attention from 6 to 10 every morning."

And Esiason also recognizes the importance of telling it like it is to anyone who thinks they can talk sports and be successful at it. He says, "Since I have two kids that are of college age and are doing internships now as we speak, I tell the other kids the same thing that I would tell my own kids. Number one, be prepared about what you



"WORKING AT WFAN WAS THE MOST FUN I'VE EVER HAD IN THE RADIO BUSINESS. IT LIFTED MY CAREER."

— Joel Hollander

are about to get yourself into. Number two, be passionate about what you are getting yourself into. Number three, carry yourself with great confidence. It's not cockiness. It is a confidence that when you meet somebody, you shake their hand, you look them in the eye, you basically introduce yourself professionally.

When you get asked to speak and when you get asked for your opinion about something, give it confidently. Don't always give an opinion if you don't have one. If you don't know what you're talking about, no opinion is better than a stupid one. And the other aspect for us in the radio industry, I tell them if they want to get behind the mic, they can't be soft. They have to have an opinion and they have to be confident, and they have to be knowledgeable on what they are giving their opinions about."

Carton says WFAN has become an iconic New York brand. "It's like the Paul Revere of sports," he says. "Every executive listens. Every player listens. It's as much of the fabric of the New York sports landscape as checking out the back page of the New York Post. It's synonymous with New York sports."

WFAN is no longer the top-billing radio station in America; BIA/Kelsey had the station ranked 10th overall in 2011, at \$40.5 million. It was, however, the number one-billing Sports radio station. And in addition to its legendary status in the industry, WFAN will always be recognized as the station that gave birth to what is quickly becoming one of the most popular formats in radio today, and by far the most exciting. In cities where not long ago there were no stations carrying Sports Talk, we see two or three stations in the format, and some are using FM signals to compete.

Francesa says, "There are a lot of people who, through the years, have really cared deeply about this station becoming something that would be remembered and be very special. There are a lot of people behind the scenes. There are a lot of people that don't get the attention that I get, or that someone else may get, who deserve a lot of credit for what's gone on at WFAN. A lot of people should be very proud. They have worked very hard, they have been major contributors, and they have had a lot to do with the success of WFAN." **INK**

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