

What's It Like

BACK TO YOU, RYAN

Blade reporter avoids serious fumbles as TV sportscaster for a day

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This is the eleventh in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.

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It's a day later and I'm watching myself on television.

Next to me, my girlfriend is laughing hysterically.

Not a good sign.

She's laughing because I'm there on TV, blinking uncontrollably in the rain and talking about a high school football game that I've just helped broadcast as a color commentator. And I've just said this:

"I think both teams did a good job down the stretch of getting the ball to their playmakers. Sanzenbacher had a good, uh, good time down there at the end, and Patterson with his legs really did some damage."

A good time down there at the end?

Maybe not the most eloquent, insightful comment in the history of sports journalism.

At least that was as embarrassing as it got.

(If you don't count the head bob I did on camera a couple of times, swept up in enthusiasm. And the uncharacteristically quiet, nasally voice that came out of me.)

I was part of a three-man crew covering the Oct. 27 game between St. John's Jesuit and Central Catholic high schools at the University of Toledo Glass Bowl. It was a big game: St. John's needed a win to clinch a playoff berth and Central Catholic had a 22-game win streak on the line.

It was broadcast on BCSN, a sports channel operated by Buckeye CableSystem, which is owned by the parent company of *The Blade*, Block Communications, Inc.

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I'm a big football fan, but I realized I had a long way to go before stepping into the booth. I knew absolutely nothing about either team and had only 24 hours to prepare.

The only real advice I received about broadcasting was "just have fun with it" from a couple of people at BCSN. Is it really that easy when you know that people are going to be watching and judging you?

My strategy was to be observant and interesting but concise. So I studied past articles in *The Blade* and checked out online fan forums. I talked to colleagues here and at BCSN and typed up a two-page cheat sheet with some of the more interesting tidbits. I did a lot of talking to myself.



Chedehga Harris, left, Todd Hostetler, and Ryan E. Smith do post-game wrap-up after the St. John's-Central game. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

When I arrived at the stadium 1 1/2 hours before kickoff, it was rainy and I was nervous.

My spirits were boosted, though, when people started referring to me and my BCSN colleagues as "the talent." (I have since proposed that my editors take up this practice, to no avail.)

I took to the field with play-by-play man Todd Hostetler, a Christian radio station manager by day, to chat with the coaches, get the starting line-ups, and double-check name pronunciations.

Then it was time to do a pre-game show with him and Chedehga Harris, a former UT walk-on wide receiver turned color commentator. This included more TV-star treatment, as a little kid we grabbed off the sideline did his best to stretch and hold an umbrella above my head to keep the rain off.

At this point, I had no idea - and no control - of where things were going.

The other two were right at home, welcoming the audience to the game and going through their expectations off the cuff. I wasn't sure what they would ask me and resorted to a quick, "Happy to be here!" and another line or two about how I was looking forward to a great game.

In the press box afterward, I went through my notes one last time before kickoff. The three of us sat in a row looking out onto the field, a little TV monitor next to us showing video of the game and instant replays.

Up here, there were no cameras on us, just headphones to pick up our voices and allow us to hear instructions - like when to go to a commercial break - from the producer in the truck outside the stadium.

Still, there was something missing. I didn't have a catchphrase. What kind of sportscaster doesn't have a catchphrase?

Play-by-play man Keith Jackson had, "Whoa Nelly!" Howard Cosell (and later ESPN's Chris Berman) relied on, "He could go all the way!"

Worried, I asked Todd, 46, about it as he scribbled down the names and numbers of the most important players. He advised me against it, saying it seems too premeditated.

"I think it's kind of hokey," he said.

He's been doing this since he was a kid, practicing his play-by-play at hockey games with a tape recorder.

I went into the game with modest goals: Do not look like a complete idiot. Try not to use cliches. Keep comments brief. And never - ever - talk over the play-by-play guy.

At first, I was very unsure of myself, both in what to say and in trying to find room to say it. I forced words to come out of my mouth, but it was against their will. Maybe that explains the soft, slightly quivering quality of my comments.

It wasn't as simple as sitting at home watching the game with a couple of buddies. It's one thing to yell at the TV from the couch, and quite another to be speaking into a microphone, thinking that you'd better come up with something halfway thoughtful to say.

The good news is that I didn't have to fill a lot of dead air. Todd called all the plays and Chedehga followed up with opinions or explanations based on his experience playing ball. They made it seem so effortless, throwing out players' names and numbers with ease.

I chimed in every few plays, commenting on the wet playing conditions - Toledoans love to talk about the weather, right? - or offering some background on a player or coach noted on my crib sheet.

By halftime, I had used up all my notes.

That was probably the most liberating moment of the evening. It forced me to realize that I actually had opinions about things - it was the right call for them to go for it on fourth down, they need to pass the ball more, whatever.

So when Chedehga stepped away from the booth for a few minutes during halftime and I found myself having to fill some time with Todd, I did OK. No longer was I terrified that I would have no answer for one of his questions.

Todd worked me into the game, asking me questions if I hadn't said anything in a while. In the process he made me a bit of a fortune teller, putting me on the spot several times to make predictions about whether a team would score or get a first down. To my amazement, I kept getting them right.

As the end of the game approached - an exciting St. John's victory - I had one final Nostradamus moment.

St. John's had the ball with under two minutes left. All they had to do was run out the clock.

Playing the weather card again, I reminded viewers that all it would take is one botched snap in the rain and ...

And it happened.

The team botched the snap and fumbled the ball.

They recovered, only to fumble again on the next play. None of this affected the outcome of the game, but for one delicious moment, I felt like I knew what I was talking about.

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