

Berman to relive olden days with stint behind anchor desk

The lovable SportsCenter anchor has been a staple of the sports channel since its inception 25 years ago

By John Howell
The Hartford Courant (KRT)

HARTFORD, Conn. — When a rookie comes along at ESPN, Chris Berman wants to know one thing first: "Could they have played in the '80s?"

Those were the years, after all, when ESPN was a scrappy young network underdog. Berman's focus was "SportsCenter," where he broke in on the graveyard shift, pretty much writing his own job specs and probably wondering at 4 a.m. why he ever left his weekend seat at WVIT, Ch. 30.

"We had less people doing a lot more back then," Berman said Wednesday. "We shared a lot of good times, a lot of late nights, a lot of hard work and a lot of years of being underpaid."

For Berman, those years are long gone. ESPN will turn 25 on Sept. 7 and it's not going to be a quiet little party. It starts when Berman returns to the "SportsCenter" chair for the next three Sundays at 11 p.m. EDT.

"It's like being a proud parent and see-

ing what 'SportsCenter' has become," Berman said on a conference call.

Some think the child has lost its way. Although ESPN's signature show won another three Emmy Awards recently, "SportsCenter" lately is no dream job for some (ask Rich Eisen). Guys like Berman, Bob Ley and the late Tom Mees created the "SportsCenter" PIN by not letting personality become the product. But few have figured out the code.

"With those guys back then, you did share something," said Berman, who turns 49 next week.

Viewers will share the nostalgia, too. On May 30, Berman will begin counting down ESPN's top 100 "Moments" in 30-second nightly installments on "SportsCenter," including:

Danny Ainge's full-court weave to lift BYU over Notre Dame in the NCAA East Regional semifinals in 1981.

Ley's live coverage from San Francisco after an earthquake jolted the World Series in 1989.

The NHL's longest game on TV when the Flyers beat the Penguins 2-1 in five OTs in 2000.

Said Berman: "The things that bring the biggest smile to my face over 25 years, in no particular order, are NFL

Sundays with the emphasis on 'Prime-Time,' West Coast baseball games I did in the early '90s (and) 'SportsCenters' with Tom Mees."

Mees, who died Aug. 14, 1996, in a drowning accident at a neighbor's pool in Southington, and Berman were partners on wee-hour "SportCenters" from 1979-84 and close friends off the set. Their last "SportsCenter" was Dec. 2, 1988, when they reunited for the 10,000th show.

"We were the two kids who weren't ready for, quote, prime time," Berman said. "We were the B team. And every backup quarterback thinks he should play. Tommy and I shared that. We were in the same boat. For assignments, salary, stage of life. All the way along."

ESPN will roll 32 hours of programming in the next four months to celebrate its silver anniversary.

"It doesn't seem like 23 years ago that I was on the 5-yard line at Candlestick Park when Joe Montana rolled wide right and hit Dwight Clark," Berman said. "I can't believe it's been 23 years. ... It's a business that keeps you young or wears you out."

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this reporter's questions has never been a bother, even if it means a long distance phone call from Texas or speaking through chattering teeth while sitting waist-deep in a garbage can full of ice water after a hard workout.

Derby is the comedian of the group, always ready to make a teammate or a reporter laugh. The redshirt sophomore from North Bend is one of the hardest workers on the team and

doesn't let a bad day get him down. Despite not having his best stuff at the Oregon Twilight (fifth, 15-11 3/4), he was focused on the success of his teammates and even had the time to ask this reporter how he was doing.

Woods is the eldest of the group and epitomizes consistency and hard work. He garnered All-American status each of the last two years and is always trying to improve on his shortcomings as a vaulter.

Woods' knowledge is likely one of his greatest assets to the team. After no more than 20 seconds of conversation with the 2000 Marshfield High School valedictorian, you realize you're in the

presence of a smart man.

With the regular season having come to a close, the next available chance to see this quartet of pole vaulters together is at the Pacific-10 Conference Championships in Tucson, Ariz. on May 14-15.

If you have the chance to see these Ducks in action, you better watch close.

Or you'll never be able to tell who's having a good day.

Contact the sports reporter at jonroetman@dailyemerald.com. His opinions do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

SPORTS BRIEF

MLB promotion goes far, far away

SEATTLE — Thwap!

Just like that Friday, Major League Baseball reversed its decision to put "Spider-Man 2" ads on bases for all games in the majors during three-game weekend series next month.

"Good," said 41-year-old pitcher Terry Mulholland, the longest tenured big-leaguer in the Twins' clubhouse. "What's next, Chico's Bail Bonds?"

That was the kind of outcry from fans and media that prompted baseball to eliminate that intrusive part of its \$3.6 million marketing deal with Sony Inc., the parent company of the studio that produced the movie sequel.

"Part of the marketing of the game has been the tradition, old school, reverence for the past," Mulholland said. "But as long as you slap General Mills or Budweiser or whatever on that tradition, it takes a little bit of the shine off of it, I think."

"The argument is always going to be the players' salaries are out of control and this is an evil necessity and things like that. But you'd think there are a few things left that are sacred."

"It isn't worth, frankly, having a debate about," Commissioner Bud Selig told The Associated Press.

"I'm a traditionalist," he said. "The problem in sports marketing, particularly in baseball, is you're always walking a very sensitive line. Nobody loves tradition and history as much as I do."

"The bases were an extremely small part of this program," said Bob DuPuy, baseball's chief operating officer. "However, we understand that a segment of our fans was uncomfortable with this particular component, and we do not want to detract from the fan's experience in any way."

"I didn't think it was a big

deal," said Twins center fielder Torii Hunter, who was portrayed by ESPN as Spider-Man for a feature in 2002 and who said he would have participated in this promotion if asked. "It's fun for the kids. They should have kept it in there. Baseball is a kids sport and Spider-Man's for kids."

A common fear about ads on the bases was that it would lead to even more intrusive promotions later.

"It seems like there might be a line that's being crossed there," Twins pitcher Kyle Lohse said. "It's part of the field. On the fences is one thing, but on the actual bases, it seems like something is wrong with that."

Said Hunter: "It can open doors for a few other things, other promotions. But at the same time, we're entertainers. This is America's game. People want to be part of it. There shouldn't be a controversy. I think it's cool. It's fun for the kids."

Patrick Klinger, the Twins' vice president for marketing, worked closely with MLB on the promotion, which would have included red and yellow adds on the three bases during the Twins' three-game series against Philadelphia from June 11-13 at the Metrodome.

"Honestly, it doesn't bother me a whole lot," said Klinger, one of several Twins officials who were wary of the initial proposal a few months ago. "I understand what Major League Baseball is trying to do, work to promote the game. One of the things baseball has been criticized for in recent years is that it doesn't do enough to market to the kids, that it's not as hip as it could be, doesn't take advantage of pop culture. They've forged what I think is a creative and fun agreement."

— Gordon Wittenmeyer

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