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Many Subjects On Dean's List

A Sports Talk Innovator - Just Don't Call Him Soft

By BOB SUDYK / Special To The Courant

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Arnold D'Angelo, son of an Italian immigrant, fidgeted in his chair in front of Leonard J. Patricelli, vice president-general manager of WTIC radio, the prestigious 50,000-watt voice of Connecticut that could be heard as far away as Canada, Europe and the Midwest.

On D'Angelo's lap sat a briefcase containing his resume. He was dressed in a button-down, tailor-made dark suit, starched white shirt, red tie and black shoes, the uniform of the day for anyone drawing a paycheck from ownership - Travelers Insurance Company, hence WTIC.

"We like your voice, your presence and your versatility," Patricelli said. "But we have a problem with ethnocentrism here - your surname. Our policy is to have no ethnic names for people we put on the air."

Since his first radio gig at WKRT in Cortland, N.Y., as a teenager, many had misspelled or mispronounced his name. Why not simplify it once and for all?

"How about plain old Arnold Dean?" he asked.

The two men shook hands on it. He phoned his wife, Helen, with the news of his hiring. She refused to take the collect call from some stranger named Arnold Dean.

That was 1965. And now, just plain old Arnold Dean, in semi-retirement, looks back on nearly 60 years in television and radio broadcasting.

This multitalented Dean, who turned 77 today, has served as reporter, newscaster, cooking show host, talk show host, play-by-play sports announcer and sportscaster. He was the scholarly master of ceremonies of big band shows: "Meet Me on the Plaza," "One Night Stand with the Big Bands" and "Sunday Showcase," featuring music from Broadway.

He wrote articles about the big band era. The Library of Congress has requested tapes of his many interviews, including such jazz music giants as Artie Shaw, Stan Kenton, Count Basie, Harry James, Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa.

But more than all that, he is recognized as the innovator of sports talk radio. He was the first to give voice to

a once-muted listening audience on sports topics of the day.

In 1976, WTIC had become a daytime music station with evening talk.

"I saw a 40-minute spot for me in the evening format," said Dean. "For years, I had had an idea for a sports call-in show. It would be in prime time before the traditional 8 p.m. starting times for most sports like basketball, hockey and baseball."

The station agreed to give it a try.

He will never forget his first-night jitters on Oct. 11, 1976.

"I signed on the air and gave the call-in phone numbers. Sitting before the mike, it hit me: 'Oh, my God. What do I do if nobody calls in?' I was totally unprepared for a show if the phones didn't ring.

"Suddenly, all four lines lit up at once and my engineer began screening calls. And, thank God, the phones never stopped ringing."

Within weeks, "SportsTalk" was extended by an hour. A Saturday morning slot was added.

A newly hired producer from Boston coined the catchy phrase, "Arnold Dean ... Dean of Sports." It caught on immediately, much to the dismay of Dean, who considered it "far too presumptuous." He says, "I was always totally uncomfortable with it. I have never once referred to myself that way."

Too Nice A Guy?

Dean began inviting prominent guests for interviews on the air.

"When I started, there were no sports talk shows. I had no trouble tracking down the biggest names in sports. I remember calling baseball manager Sparky Anderson at his home in California. He picked up the phone. I had him on the air for a half-hour. He loved it and so did our listeners."

The show's reputation grew.

"It was easy lining up big-name celebrities in the days before million-dollar players and their agents came along," said Dean. "Now, sports talk is a huge cottage industry. You need a producer to line up guests and fit them into time slots. Some celebrities began asking for money. We never paid anybody a dime."

Dean did his own recruiting of guests. He attended every sporting event he could find from Boston to New York. His disarming charm connected with athletes. His folksy approach and genuine nice guy persona caught the fancy of his listeners. If he didn't know the answer to a caller's question, he never guessed at one or berated a caller.

Instead, Dean would ask, "Hey? Anybody out there in the listening audience know the answer? Please call in and share it with us."

But as other sports talk shows began to sprout, some suggested that Dean's calm, erudite demeanor worked

against him. Critics said he was too gentlemanly, too much a softy to survive the competition of a growing market of shout shows.

He leapt to his own defense.

"I totally disagree that I was too nice a guy, too gentle on the air. Some say I never took a stand on anything," he said, his voice rising to a level hardly common for him.

"Don't tell me I never took an unpopular stand on controversial issues. I supported the baseball players' strike in 1994 when others didn't.

"From the beginning, I said Pete Rose absolutely doesn't belong in the Baseball Hall of Fame because of his gambling. I spoke out against greenies [amphetamines] in the 1970s that were being devoured by Major League Baseball players like M&Ms under the very noses of the baseball owners and commissioner's office.

"I scoffed at phony home run hitting contests during the All-Star Game when it was obvious to me the strength to hit dozens of balls into the seats came from something more than timing a swing.

"Misjudged? Yes, I think I was misjudged by some during my 30 years on 'SportsTalk.' Comparing me to a talk show station like WFAN is unfair. That's a bum rap. I never was an argumentative guy. I worked for a radio station with far different standards than some others. My station was and still is sensitive to the listeners' point of view. You can disagree with a listener, but you had to be gentlemanly at all times.

"If the station got one call or letter from a listener who felt he or she was insulted, a staff meeting would be called. The broadcast tape in question would be listened to and discussed. It was considered a very serious offense. If I would have worked at a station that was antagonistic to the callers, obviously, I would have had to play that game."

When WTIC radio was sold in 1974 to David Chase, however, Dean admitted that the new ownership tried to mold him into a more confrontational style.

"Once, they called in a consultant. He asked me, 'What's this being so nice to people on the air? I want you to tell them off, raise a ruckus. That's what gets listeners.'

"I said to him, 'Consider my reputation. Am I supposed to start yelling at people on the air? If you want somebody who is going to be argumentative, you have got the wrong guy.' I figured he was going to say that if I was the wrong guy, I was out of there! I wasn't let go. I'd rather that had happened than work under those demands."

New York Callers

Dean said he had opportunities in New York. One offer was a Saturday and Sunday gig at WMCA that would have paid him more than his five-night stint at WTIC. But he was already committed to leave for baseball spring training. It was agreed that upon his return he would make his weekend debut at WMCA. But when he returned, the manager at WMCA had left for another station.

A short time later, a headhunter from New York called.

"All he would tell me was that the job would be in a major Eastern city. He asked if I would be interested and what would be my salary requirements. I told him if you have a job for me, be more specific. Where is it located? What is the salary? I am not interested in playing games."

Dean would later learn that the headhunter's mysterious job offer was for a sports talk show at a station in New York - WFAN.

The late Pete Franklin, who had a successful sports talk show in Cleveland, took the job.

"[Pete's] shtick was to insult listeners," Dean said. "Frankly, I don't think my laid-back style would have worked there."

Dean admires WFAN's Mike Francesa in tandem with Chris "Mad Dog" Russo.

"Mike is as good as they get in talk radio. He is really knowledgeable with an incredible memory for detail," Dean said. "Mad Dog is more theatrical and off-the-wall. The show loses something when both aren't on the air together."

After nearly 30 years doing "SportsTalk" at WTIC, Dean decided to cut back on his appearances on the show a few years ago.

"I figured it was time for somebody else to come along," he said.

Professional sports had lost some of its glamour for Dean.

"Multimillion-dollar contracts have spoiled too many of today's athletes. It's clear to me that many of them, even bench warmers, are still taking illegal chemicals to enhance their performance," he said. "Players today are far less team-oriented and more look-at-me oriented."

It has been reported that more than 50 NFL players have been arrested for various crimes since the 2006 season began.

"All professional athletes should have to face suspensions without pay when they break any rules of conduct," Dean said. "Players carrying guns and beating up their wives or girlfriends is everyday news."

"I've had my fill of big-time professional sports. I now love watching high school sporting events in Rocky Hill [where he lives]. There's a pure innocence and fun in it that I remember growing up."

At Home And Abroad

Sipping coffee in his snug two-bedroom condo with Helen, serenity surrounds them. They have three adult children (two living in Connecticut) and five grandchildren.

The Dean of Sports (pardon the slip) wore a jogging suit in the blue and white colors of the University of Connecticut.

"I have to admit my life was better structured before when I was working full time," he said. "Now, I don't have to be anyplace I don't want to be."

He runs and lifts weights 90 minutes every day at the West Side Athletic Club in Rocky Hill. He shops at West Side Market. He is a two-time president of the local PTA. He likes being recognized and swapping town gossip with his neighbors.

He and Helen have traveled the world, hosting Your Man Tours. They regularly visit Hawaii, Greece and Italy, and have journeyed to Australia, New Zealand, Alaska and Russia.

He watches UConn and his alma mater, Syracuse, play basketball and football - but only on tape.

"Now, it's hard for me to watch my teams play poorly and lose," Dean said. "It gets me too upset. So if they lose, I don't watch the game tape. If they win, I know I can watch the tape with some degree of sanity and enjoy it."

He reads books he never had time for. He embraces computer games, and works The Courant daily crossword puzzle. He's an avid skier and golfer who scores 100 and rarely below.

His small domicile is overflowing with packing crates containing awards and memorabilia from his career. It is being sorted out perhaps to provide the fodder for a memoir he hopes to write.

Dean's prized clarinet, however, remains locked away. As a teenager, he became enthralled with the clarinet sound of Artie Shaw, who grew up in New Haven. Dean once was an all-state band clarinetist in New York. At Syracuse, he played in the marching band.

"If not for radio, the clarinet would have been my career," he said.

Now, the "licorice stick" remains silent. Dean explained, "After you reach a certain level of proficiency on an instrument and then give it up for a period of time, it squawks when you play it. It's intolerable to listen to." He figures he'll donate it to some high school band one day.

Although he has no contractual commitment with WTIC, he continues to work the station's special events. He was perched high atop the 18th hole during the Travelers Championship golf tournament, his 43rd time covering the state's PGA event. This fall, you'll hear him doing the "Tailgate Show" before UConn football games.

As for missing other sporting events," he said, "No, I've been there and done that. But I'm available to fill in whenever and wherever I'm needed, even if it's nothing more than coming in and heating fresh pots of coffee for the staff."

Just don't ask him to play his clarinet.

Bob Sudyk is a former Courant reporter who worked in the Sports department and Northeast magazine.

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