

Tony Mercurio - Still Firing Away



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By [Bob Molinaro](#)

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Even his harshest critics would have to admit that it's hard to imagine sports talk radio in Hampton Roads without Tony Mercurio.

He has been slouching behind the microphone for 23 years, and while his style might remain an acquired taste, Mercurio's career is a testament to what might be his most remarkable talent: The ability to endure in a volatile business.

Surviving multiple format changes and different station owners, "The Tony Mercurio Show" has lasted this long, he says, because "no other local sports talk show ever took a stand. No other talk show riled people up."

Mercurio was born to rile - on air and off. If you were to characterize the local sports media as an extended family - over here you have your photogenic TV cousins, over

there your ruffled newspaper brothers - Mercurio would be the eccentric uncle who belches in church.

It works for him. His program on ESPN Radio 1310 AM between 3 and 7 weekday afternoons is where listeners turn for sports talk. Where else would they go? For local fare, Mercurio's show dominates a market of one.

"I don't know how many people have tried sports talk in the last 23 years," he said. "Six, seven."

They've come and gone, while the Blastman, Mercurio's on-air appellation, is still standing, swinging from the heels.

Recently, he railed against the use of aluminum bats in college baseball, growling that it was a "communist conspiracy."

Over-the-top Tony yanks chains and kicks over trash cans, if only for effect. If he can't always shed light on a subject, heat will do.

"What I say is my honest opinion," he said.

More important, said John Shomby, operations manager for Max Media, the company that owns ESPN 1310, Mercurio "creates reaction. When Tony goes off on something, that's really good radio."

Can his Blastman persona be obnoxious? Is the Pope Catholic?

"I'm sports entertainment, like wrestling," Mercurio said. "You can't be vanilla, and agree with every caller and kiss their rear ends. I'm never going to do it."

At 60, Mercurio sits in his office in Virginia Beach within arms length of several prescription bottles. He's got pills for his knee, his blood pressure and the Type 2 diabetes he has been fighting for five years. He doesn't smoke or drink, but he's carrying a lot of weight. He never sleeps more than 3 or 4 hours at a stretch because he considers sleep a waste of time.

Just don't give him any guff about his health.

"When they say I'm not healthy, how many sick days have they taken?" he said, not explaining who "they" are. "If I'm not healthy, I wouldn't be here at 6 o'clock in the morning every day."

Mercurio's show began on WGH in 1986 before the station became one of the country's first all-sports stations in 1992. By 1999, WGH was the nation's second ESPN affiliate. ESPN's stable of national talk-show talent fills most of the time on 1310 that isn't taken up with coverage of Old Dominion, the Norfolk Tides and Norfolk Admirals, even James Madison University (more about that later).

All pay rights fees to Max Media to have their games broadcast. The station also carries the NFL, college bowl games, postseason baseball and the NBA.

With so many local teams in the fold - and with Mercurio looking forward to his 19th season as the voice of the ODU women's basketball team - the Blastman pulls his punches more than he once did, to the benefit of the station's bottom line.

"I bring in a ton of money," he said, adding that he doesn't receive a sales commission.

You get a sense that he's pretty much left alone to run the store while Max Media concentrates on its four FM properties, including 97.3 The Eagle, a strong country station. The FMs provide ballast for Mercurio's show.

"He's a hustler," Shomby said. "He does as much as he can to make clients happy."

That includes his road shows, those bewildering productions where Mercurio sets up his mike at businesses to discuss carpets or mortgage rates or what's available at the salad bar.

Clients love it, while each remote earns Mercurio a modest talent fee. He's a hustler, after all, and radio is not for the meek.

As for ratings, Mercurio's show - and 1310 in general - hovers just above radio's Mendoza line.

"Ratings are drastically overrated," Mercurio said, noting that sports talk can make a go of it by attracting a narrowly targeted audience of men ages 25 to 64.

"Just because you don't get huge ratings, it doesn't mean you can't make money," said John Castleberry, whose afternoon talk show on 102.1 FM "The Game" was canceled in October.

Tides and Admirals games are a natural fit for 1310. So is Max Media's cozy relationship with ODU, which has seen its basketball games moved to sister-station 94.1 FM.

But then there's the always-surprising association with JMU. On the surface, it's inexplicable. In addition to its location 3-1/2 hours to the west, JMU is an ODU rival appearing on the "Home of ODU Sports." But 1310 has carried Dukes football and basketball games for eight consecutive years and just signed an extension through 2012. Mercurio explained it very simply: "We're in business to make money."

JMU pays to have its games carried in Hampton Roads because, Mercurio said, "there are a ton of alumni."

More important, southeastern Virginia is teeming with prospects. Mercurio said JMU's broadcast fees are paid out of the football program's recruiting budget.

"If this was a terrible area for high school football," Mercurio said, "I doubt they'd be on." As he spoke, he flashed a JMU ring the size of a paper weight. When JMU won the Colonial Athletic Association football title last fall, the coaches had a ring made up for Mercurio. The bling is a companion to the national championship ring he received from the Dukes in 2004.

"Stunned," is how Mercurio describes his reaction to JMU's latest gift.

The trinkets Mercurio makes available to his audience aren't quite as impressive, but by giving away tickets to Tides and Admirals games, he amps up listener response.

"People like freebies," said Mercurio, who claims he has given away 17,000 assorted prizes in the past year - everything from sports tickets to food coupons to concert passes. For guests, he relies on a tight, familiar lineup that includes Tides general manager Dave Rosenfield, boxing historian Burt Sugar, a couple of football and basketball mavens hawking their publications, and curiously enough, former U.S. Sen. George Allen.

Almost every Friday, Mercurio spends 30 minutes on the air with Allen. Along with the JMU coverage, it's the sort of programming that makes critics roll their eyes, but Mercurio said, "He's probably one of the most popular people we have on. I get stopped all the time by people who say they love George Allen."

Scott Cash, sports director at WVEC TV, is another regular who appears by telephone on Mercurio's show each Monday.

"People stop me all the time and tell me they heard me," he said.

That might surprise people who think nobody tunes in to the Blastman. Or claim they don't.

Coincidentally, as this story was being written, the paper received an unsolicited broadside aimed at Mercurio from Michael Shibley of Virginia Beach.

While praising the overall content at ESPN 1310, Shibley wrote in his e-mail, "Once the Blastman hits the airwaves, the sports IQ drops to around Forrest Gump levels. Mercurio has hosted his show for the past 23 years, which is 20 years too long. The Blastman will just leave you banging your head against the wall."

Mercurio can do that to people. But while his ratings aren't great, within the narrow world inhabited by local sports fans, his show resonates more than some are willing to admit. "People never seem to listen to me, but they know exactly what I say," he huffed. "They must have ESP."

Tony Macrini of WNIS AM 790, the king of local news talk, worked with Mercurio at the larval stage of his career. Macrini is responsible for the Blastman moniker, and is one of the voices heard on the opening theme to Mercurio's show, sung to the music of the old "Batman" TV series.

Mercurio, Macrini said, "knows how to fire up the listeners." His on-air persona, he said, "fits a sports station. He rants and raves. That's pretty much his off-air persona."

Macrini meant that as a joke, but there are a lot of people who only recognize Mercurio as a grouchy gasbag.

"You can't take them seriously," Mercurio said. "People will tell you I'm not the big jerk I sometimes sound like on the radio."

Mike Schikman, the JMU announcer who has known Mercurio for almost 30 years, said, "Tony's got the cranky, old-guy personality, but if you give him guff back, he loves it."

Mercurio shows up early to do a 7:10 sports report for the Jimmy Ray and Jen Show on the Eagle before returning to his office, where he'll often spend the rest of the day until his show goes on the air.

"I cannot recall a day I have not been in here," he said recently. "I can't retire. They'll have to fire me or I'll drop dead and that will be that."

Weekends are the worst, once the Lady Monarchs season ends.

"I sit home and go nuts," he said. "I don't hobnob. I watch more TV than I ever have in my life. Thank God Monday rolls around. People say they hate Monday; I love it. You get to go to work."

For Mercurio, missing a turn at the mike is unthinkable. After his mother died several years ago, he returned to Missouri and did his show from there. Asked about it at the time, he said, "Mom would have wanted it that way."

When Mercurio was growing up in St. Louis, he and his father, who died in 1977, listened to Jack Buck and Harry Caray on KMOX radio.

"My dad said, 'Those guys are good,' " Mercurio recalled. " 'They may not please everybody, but there is no way anybody can please everybody.' "

"My dad told me, 'If you ever do a sports talk show, just do what you think is right and don't back down, regardless what people say. Be yourself.' I think I would make my dad proud today."

Twenty-three years and counting. That's a good run in an industry famous for its lack of job security.

"It's pretty cool," Mercurio said. "I got started late, too."

Not that anybody listens to his show.

"Nope, nobody listens," he said with a caustic laugh. "Sure, nobody listens."
Those who do, know that after 23 years of saying whatever is on his mind, Mercurio still
is having a blast, man.

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