

# INSIDE RADIO

Thursday, April 8, 2004

“Personalities INSIDE RADIO”

## Now “Heard” Nationwide

By Mike Kinosian, Personality Editor

Grayland rests on Washington State’s western most shore.

Bristol, CT is virtually an entire nation away – nearly midway between Boston and New York. Hardly a thriving metropolis, the Connecticut town enjoys a fabled reputation as home base to ESPN Radio, the postmark of those aspiring to reach the pinnacle in sports broadcasting.

With last Monday’s (3-29-2004) launch of ESPN Radio’s “The Herd With Colin Cowherd” (10am–1pm, ET), the Grayland, WA native proved that – through sheer grit, ambition and some good fortune – it’s possible to successfully conclude a long and winding career journey.

His weekday offering laced with topical commentary and perspective on significant sports news replaces “The Tony Kornheiser Show,” allowing Kornheiser to further focus on ESPN’s “Pardon The Interruption” and other network projects.

### Goal – Gilbert

The plum ESPN opening grabbed the attention of morning driver Cowherd, who hosted “The Herd” on Sports KFXX-AM “The Fan”/Portland.

As enticing as it would be to work for the renowned ESPN brand, Cowherd accepted the assignment based on exemplary strength displayed by ESPN Radio’s energetic and peerless GM Bruce Gilbert. “At the end of the day, if I hadn’t have liked the GM, I wouldn’t have taken the job,” Cowherd flatly asserts of Gilbert, who joined ESPN a little more than a year ago. “It was a good job to start with,

but [Bruce] was the sealer. He’s just such a quality human being.”

It was Gilbert’s spotless reputation as a class individual and great coach of on-air talent that persuaded Cowherd to become part of Bristol University. “What I really appreciate about Bruce is that he’s trying to break out of conventional wisdom,” notes Cowherd. “If I do have a style, it’s to be contrary. I take the counter-argument, mostly because I don’t see the world as many other people do.”

It’s a vibe that Gilbert also exudes. As Cowherd remarks, “He’s looking for something different. I’ve always thought that I’ve had talent, but I wasn’t coached until a couple of years ago. I’ve been looking for guidance and thought I had a natural inclination for the business. I talked with two people who know Bruce; I felt he’s the guy I needed to deal with. He can help me, I can help him and we can create a good relationship.”

### Moving Against The Grain

Lem Banker is considered one of the most successful sports gamblers. His philosophy might also help explain Cowherd’s admittedly contrary sports radio approach.

When asked to share his secret, Banker told Cowherd to find what the public is betting on and move in the opposite direction. “I always remember that because it’s the best advice I ever got. The old real estate expression is that ‘10% of the people make 90% of the money.’ It takes a lot of courage to go against the grain and voice an unpopular opinion. Whether it’s with friends or during an interview, I’ve never been afraid to voice an unpopular opinion. It doesn’t bother me – I even find some enjoyment from it. I’m not a yeller and a screamer, but I like the jostling and like to disagree. That’s where all the interesting things come from.”

### **Motivated By Radio's Depth**

In addition to his radio background, Cowherd has also done his share of work in front of a television camera.

Most recently, he anchored weeknight sports and "Sports Sunday" for Portland's KGW-TV. But as he states, "I'm not a guy who wakes up in the morning driven by network jobs. I tired of local television sports. I found it shallow, pithy and unsubstantial. I wanted to get into something where I could express more opinions and have more depth; I thought radio provided that."

Whenever people talk about sports, it's customary that they slant toward their base. In that vein, Cowherd will do a West coast-only hour (6-7am, PT). "During the football season, for example, USC will get talked about," he promises. "Because of where I grew up and how I think, I just naturally lean toward the left coast. Some people in the East may not like that, but that's the way I am and the way I've always done things."

### **"Nobody" Becomes Somebody**

Many baseball fans discuss how trades and free agent signings made during that sport's winter meetings could affect their favorite team. The enterprising Cowherd, however, was sharp enough to actually attend those meetings in San Diego and score his first break.

After leaving Eastern Washington University, his ambition was to become the next Vin Scully. "There were about 300 guys looking for two jobs [that year]," he remarks. "All throughout college, I was completely broke. My parents had been divorced and college was more of a maturation process than about classes I took. I remember going to San Diego and not having a penny in my pocket and paging myself [at the meetings] just to get my name out there. I was a `nobody from nowheresville.'"

### **Las Vegas Star Is Born**

With the odds heavily stacked against him, Cowherd managed to land one of the two available baseball jobs.

The opportunity was a rather all-encompassing position with the Las Vegas Stars, the then "Double A" affiliate of the San Diego Padres. "The Las Vegas 51s" are now the Los Angeles Dodgers' AA Pacific Coast League team. "That's about as good as it gets," Cowherd notes. "I was this young kid who went from rural America to showgirls and gambling. It doesn't get more of a drastic change than that. That was a great steppingstone. I gained a lot of confidence and just kind of found myself."

Initially placed in sales, Cowherd was also promised that he could do an inning of radio play-by-play. "Instead of [moving] to Midland, TX or some other [small town], I said I was going to go for it," he recalls. "I had confidence in myself and wanted to live in the big city, do some sales and get myself on the air."

That's exactly how things progressed for the next three years. Cowherd even talked his way into getting a weekend job with KVBC-TV/Las Vegas, eventually becoming the station's Sports Director. "I turned down jobs [elsewhere], because I liked living [in Las Vegas]," explains the five-time Nevada Sportscaster Of The Year. "But after I was there six or seven years, I felt I needed to move on. There were a zillion jobs out there, so I sent out a bunch of tapes."

A morning drive spot on Tampa Bay's "820-The Team" gave Cowherd added radio exposure. "I hadn't done a ton of radio until then," he admits. "Interestingly enough, I found I liked radio a lot."

Despite that endorsement, he couldn't resist television and worked at WTVT-TV/Tampa, where he scored a local Emmy for "Buc Sunday."

### **Portland Pair**

But when he began having misgivings about the overall situation there, he sat down with his fiancée (now wife) and the two ascertained that they'd be happy in Portland. "One week later, Portland's NBC-TV affiliate had an opening," Cowherd recalls. "What are the chances of that?"

After being chosen for the Portland television job, Cowherd also discovered that KFXX was looking to fill an on-air position. "The argument could be made that I've had nothing but breaks," he acknowledges. "So it was kind of full circle. I got my television footing in Las Vegas; radio footing in Tampa; and felt I really grew in Portland. I had success in Portland and was well received by management, the press and the public."

### **No Regrets**

That move also drew Cowherd closer to his Grayland roots.

But as much as he liked the people in his small hometown, Cowherd always recognized that he'd never stay there. "I knew there was something else out there," he stresses. "I was a sportsaholic at an early age and prospered from my tough times. Some people have tough times and can't dig their way out of them, but they've made me better. I wouldn't change my life and my parents for anything. For many guys, if you don't get to the network by the time you're 25, you're not satisfied. I'm glad I did local radio and am glad I lived in Las Vegas. My Vegas life and rural upbringing make me a better host today. Every obstacle I had in my life to this point has made me what I am."

### **Morning Guy**

Like many other radio people, Cowherd favors morning drive because of the lifestyle advantages. "You're on the air for a couple of hours, do some prep and you're off at 1pm; there's nothing better than that," he opines. "My personality is more about the mornings. I'm kind of scatological and go all over the place. I love sports and talk about it 90% of the time, but I'm also entertainment-driven."

Arguments can sometimes drive numbers in afternoon drive and "East coast" sports hosts, Cowherd contends, can be angry. "I wouldn't be happy doing that, because I wouldn't feel good when I got off the air. My style isn't yelling at people. In the mornings, it's interviews, a bit and a rant. You're opening someone's sports page and are deciding what is – and what isn't – important. That's my

strength. I can carry topics for hours, but I get bored doing it. You can hit a bunch of different stuff in the morning."

### **Give Me 30 Minutes**

Attempting to give his listeners a little bit of everything, Cowherd maintains, "Short attention spans reign today and that's good for me. I have 30 minutes with a person who is driving to work. That's two segments. I want to give them opinions, a laugh, information, three or four stories and what happened last night after they fell asleep. They didn't get to see [ESPN-TV's] SportsCenter, so I'll give them my opinion, energy and sense of humor. I'll give as much as I can in the time I've got you."

In addition to "Spanning The Globe" and "Rants Of The Day," listener phone calls will be an important element during Cowherd's ESPN show. "They were never really Tony Kornheiser's thing, but I think it's lazy to take four hours of them. But – at some point – you should take calls. When something happens like the Latrell Sprewell incident [where the then Golden State Warrior player choked his coach, P.J. Carlesimo, during a practice], you can take phone calls for hours. But generally, there's not a topic like that that everyone has an opinion on. But some of the best stuff that I've heard or done on radio came from a good phone call. I like talking with people and am that annoying guy who sits next to you on the plane and wants to talk."

### **Fantasy Tip**

A few things that don't interest him, though, are fantasy leagues and those who memorize endless reams of statistics. "I'm a Vegas guy," he proudly asserts. "I like gamblers over fantasy leaguers, because gamblers pick up a check – fantasy leaguers argue about the tip. I have a lot of fantasies and [newly-acquired Anaheim Angels starting pitcher] Bartolo Colon isn't in one of them. I love sports and the arguments in sports, but I don't get too weighted down with the minutiae."

### **Serious Business**

Given his past television credentials, it would be logical to assume that Cowherd would salivate at

seeing the ESPN-TV studios in such close proximity to his ESPN Radio digs. But he claims, "I have no aspirations [to do SportsCenter. I've done television and it was fine. I'd rather stay and do radio. Radio is a serious business and is what I want to do the rest of my life. I gave up a good television job for radio. I find great enjoyment and great challenges with it. Too often, radio is used as a supplement to a career, but it's a career [by itself]."

One aspect of a radio career that had next to zero appeal to him was hosting a music-oriented show. "I'd be an absolutely awful [on-air talent]," jokes Cowherd, who enjoys Eric Clapton, Sheryl Crow, Doors, Rolling Stones and U2. "[Music radio personalities] have to hit marks and say things in 17 seconds; I can't do that."

#### Of Name And Attitude Changes

Extremely cognizant that some people are reluctant to accept change, Cowherd realistically comments, "I'll get beaten up in the first six weeks I'm on the air. At that point, people will turn me off or quit sending e-mails. I'm going into this with my eyes wide open. I'm replacing a popular, funny guy who was there for six years."

The first thing Cowherd addressed on the show was the matter of his distinctive – and real - name. Several people have tried to have him change it, but as he emphasizes, "I'm not a guy who wears a hairpiece or fakes his name. That's just not my thing. For better or worse, my strength is my honesty. If I'm angry, I sound like it; if I'm giggly, I sound like that, too."

#### You Saw It Here First

The rapid-fire answer regarding a World Series forecast is that we'll see a Boston Red Sox/Houston Astros match-up.

Reminded that ESPN GM Gilbert is a diehard Chicago Cubs fan, Cowherd simply retorted, "My question about the Cubs is the health of [starting pitchers] Kerry Wood and Mark Prior."



WHO: Colin Cowherd

WHAT: *"The Herd With Colin Cowherd"*

WHERE: ESPN Radio

WHEN: Monday – Friday, 10am – 1pm (ET);

a West Coast-only hour airs daily from 9-10am (ET)

HOW MANY AFFILIATES: Approximately 265

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