

MEDIA BEAT

Long Day's Journey into Nite

A day behind the scenes at Comcast conveys a loose atmosphere.

- BY MATT WOOD -

On July 24, baseball commissioner Bud Selig issued a terse press statement announcing that he would indeed make every effort to witness Barry Bonds breaking the career home run record, finally coming off the fence "...out of respect for the tradition of this game, the magnitude of the record, and the fact that all citizens in this country are innocent until proven guilty." That evening, Comcast SportsNite anchors Pat Boyle and Mark Schanowski discussed Selig's statement during a commercial break while recording the 6:30 p.m. edition of the show.

"Way to be sincere, Bud," said Schanowski.

"Yeah, why even bother," said Boyle. Pretty tough talk from two guys wearing more makeup than a couple of drag queens.

While they didn't continue the discussion on air, it demonstrated the kind of candor the two say they hope to bring to the show. Both feel that its 30- and 60-minute formats give them room to analyze and discuss stories, not just rattle off tightly-scripted highlights.

"We don't pull any punches. It's free-wheeling and it's fun," said Schanowski. "You really get a chance to expand your game. You get a chance to talk about not only the final results of something, but you also get a chance to voice some opinions."

A typical SportsNite broadcast begins first thing in the morning, when news director Joe Riley and producer Doug Brown meet to discuss the top stories of the day. The schedule changes throughout the day as news breaks, but the updates are hard to miss: there are TVs everywhere at CSN's River North studios. They're mounted on the walls, sitting on the corners of desks and stuck in the nooks and crannies of every production room. Changes like this used to wreak havoc on the show when CSN first started broadcasting in the fall of 2004, Brown said. "We might have added a segment to fill



Anchors Pat Boyle and Mark Schanowski (left, above) prepare for the show. (PHOTOS BY OSCAR LOPEZ)



some extra time," he said, "but we wouldn't have any idea what was coming next on tape."

Once the show schedule is relatively set, Boyle and Schanowski start working on their notes, writing their own copy, something in which Boyle takes a great deal of pride.

"That's what I really think is the mark of a sportscaster, their writing style," he says. "You can tell the guys who write their stuff and the guys or gals who don't." He and Schanowski work separately in the interest of time, but it's a luxury Schanowski says is possible because of the level of comfort the two have developed in just two months of working together.

"He might be reading the White Sox highlights, and I might observe something that strikes me either as funny, or have a fact that's pertinent,

and I can throw that in there, and it wouldn't throw Pat off," he says.

Plenty to Talk About

The same day Selig ran up his white flag about Bonds, the White Sox played a day-night doubleheader against the Tigers, and the Cubs opened a series in St. Louis. The proverbial unlucky "fan" got a workout that day as the dogfighting allegations against Michael Vick, more doping charges at the Tour de France and the gambling scandal involving NBA referee Pat Donaghy, all stories the crew intended to run to supplement the local action.

Yet the newsroom was relatively relaxed for such a hectic day in sports. Chuck Garfien came out of the studio after hosting Chicago Tribune Live sporting a suit jacket, tie and jeans, joking about repeatedly mispronouncing Donaghy's last name on the set.

Boyle and Schanowski continued this conversation as they sat down for the 6:30 airing of SportsNite. The studio was freezing—cold enough to chill the mountains of video equipment in the room and forcing the camera men to wear jackets. The SportsNite set looked surprisingly small in the midst of all this gear, sitting opposite the Post Game Live set, where someone's bag and a copy of the latest Harry

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Potter book lay abandoned on the desk. Boyle began the show with highlights of the White Sox victory that afternoon then the two talked to the production crew about changes to upcoming segments while an interview with Ozzie Guillen ran. Schanowski then followed with a preview of the nightcap. During a break, he reviewed his notes while Boyle fixed his tie and checked his hair in a hand-held mirror stashed under the desk.

As Boyle read Selig's statement minutes later, his voice cracks during a particularly strained passage, after-effects of the earlier conversation, and the only mistake emitted from his panicked, dimpled mug that evening. Schanowski says he hopes they can bring more of the casual, conversational style they exhibited with each other off the air to their broadcasts.

"We have the time, as anchors and reporters, to add that context that I think most sports fans are looking for. They don't get that from the local broadcasts. This has been like a breath of fresh air for me," he says.

The best part for Boyle though, is getting to work in the same city where he covers sports. During his previous stint with ESPN, he says he never felt like part of the stories he covered. "Nothing replaces being in a town on a daily basis, with the ebb and flow of the Sox and the Cubs or the Bears," he says. "You feed off the passion...it honestly makes your job that much more interesting and fun because you realize people care."

Matt Wood is a freelance writer based in Chicago, and a regular in CSWeekly.