

Learfield Sports

Many ask me: "So, how'd you get from farm broadcasting to sports?" The answer is simple: we had full-time leased lines and the University of Missouri network wanted to use them on Saturday afternoons. They were paying about \$12,000 a year, I told them I'd charge them \$6,000. All of my stations were carrying the games anyway; so it was a win-win deal. Now a little history.

The Missouri Sports Network had been around since 1948 growing to 33 affiliates through the 50s. It was surely one of the earliest college radio networks in the nation. Coach Dan Devine's successes in 1960 with an undefeated season and a national ranking and continued success through the decade helped the network reach 56 affiliates. Only eight stations carried basketball. Until 1973 the "flagship" of the network was Columbia's KFRU, and its owner, Mahlon Aldredge, did the play-by-play with "Sparky" Stalcup on color. In 1973, after encouragement by Athletic Director, Mel Sheehan, KMOX took over as flagship. Nothing was exclusive as KCMO in Kansas City also carried its own description of the home games and KSD, St. Louis, provided play-by-play some years.

Judd Wyatt was the colorful, elderly, Director of Advertising, for MFA, Inc., the corporate sponsor of the network broadcasts. He contacted me in 1974 and asked if I'd be interested in subleasing my lines on Saturdays and that's how the deal was struck. By the fall, we'd moved studios from our offices on Dunklin Street to "the farm." But because the telephone company couldn't run the game broadcast "back-haul" loop to Centertown, I sat up shop in an old house on Dunklin for those games. I'd go in each Saturday and make the connection--between the backhaul and the network's "head end". We didn't have anything to do with the broadcast other than this connection--no commercials, no programming.

But it was the beginning of something really big. And, as you'll see over the next several weeks on this blog, it was fun and competitive.

Exclusive Rights

Mizzou AD, Mel Sheehan, must have attended an AD meeting somewhere in 1976 and learned how some schools were offering exclusive radio rights for their broadcasts, and making huge bucks in the process from the exclusive rights-holder. Because in 1977 Sheehan sent out a formal RFP (Request for Proposal), seeking a vendor to handle his radio rights. I recall being dismayed at the idea of paying the University for something they should be paying me for! Heck, we were providing a great service and not making all that much.

Recall that in 1974 we began subleasing our lines to the network. In 1975 I sweetened the deal by asking for the 60-second commercial avail between quarters (which I sold to Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer). In 1976 I asked for more inventory--and a pregame show, a half-time show and a post game broadcast. The RFP asked how much I'd be willing to pay the University for these exclusive broadcast rights. I replied: "nothing"; I put zeros in each blank. Goose eggs; Nada. And, since we were the only company to submit, we won! (I shouldn't have been so cocky.) However, in 1978 things came under scrutiny. We had a new athletic director, Dave Hart, who canceled our contract and rebid. He'd been "around the block" and was shocked at how little

Missouri was getting for their statewide radio network contract. So there was a new RFP issued early in 1979 to begin that fall.

There were three bidders: Us; KSD Radio, St. Louis and an outfit called Sports Network, Inc. (SNI) comprised of three individuals: Frank Bick of Suburban Newspapers, Greg Maracek, a sports columnist for Bick's papers, and St. Louis Football Cardinals kicker, Jim Baakken. We teamed with KSD so that effectively took them out of play. SNI said their flagship was KMOX and offered the University \$143,000. We offered \$145,200 per year for the two-year deal. In spite of our larger cash bid, Hart awarded the exclusive rights to SNI primarily because of their association with KMOX and the play-by-play of Dan Kelly.

I was dejected. But I went to SNI hat-in-hand and sold them our lines on Saturday afternoons. And, I told myself, we'd win next time.

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