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ANDREW REUTER

Retiring radio broadcaster Al Fagerli talks about the one achievement he's most proud of from his long career.

Last call: Janesville sports broadcaster to hang up his microphone



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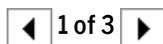
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FRANK SCHULTZ December 10, 2015



ANTHONY WAHL

Al Fagerli interviews Janesville Parker boys basketball coach Keith Miller on Wednesday at Monroe Elementary School. Fagerli announced Wednesday he will retire in January after more than 35 years covering local sports for WCLO Radio.



VIDEO

Hear Al Fagerli talk about the achievement he's most proud of from his long career in radio at gazettextra.com/videos.

JANESVILLE—Al Fagerli remembers it with his hands. He spreads them wide, showing the “wingspan” of Janesville Parker basketball standout Jennah Hartwig.

It was Dec. 30, 1992, when the local school took on Chicago Marshall, which was rated No. 1 in the country.

The game was winding down. Hartwig—now the head coach at the Parker girls program—was preparing to guard Marshall's star point guard.

Fagerli showed how Hartwig spit in her hands, rubbed them together and spread her arms.

“And that girl lost the ball, she was so intimidated. Parker went on to win,” Fagerli recalled.

It's a favorite memory for Fagerli, who has called games for the local high schools for more than 35 years. He announced Wednesday that he will retire at the end of January.

Not just a play-by-play announcer, Fagerli has been a one-man sports department for WCLO/WJVL radio.

But most important, his voice has been the one that kept thousands of local sports fans each year in touch with their teams.

He has done it by working hard for long hours. His current routine is to get up at 2 a.m. so he can prepare for morning broadcasts that

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run from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m., including a sports commentary and all the scores his listeners depend on.

MARATHON MAN

His morning continues with recording broadcasts for WJVL, recording commercials and scheduling the Packers, Badgers, Brewers, Bucks and local sports games the station carries.

He's also the sidekick for morning-show host Tim Beggs, adding appeal with his encyclopedic memory of history and pop culture and his sarcastic wit that's not always politically correct, said Mike O'Brien, the station's general manager.

Years ago, he provided local listeners play-by-play for Badger basketball games when no network was interested. His partner is today's voice of the Badgers, Matt Lepay.

Fagerli goes home for a nap at 10 or 11, and on game days, he is back at work that night, driving to games around the region.

Ten- to 13-hour days are normal during high school sports seasons. Some days never end. Literally.

Craig's state baseball tournament win last June meant getting up at 2 a.m. and returning home at 1:30 a.m., he said.

Fagerli's thoughts about his work ethic are simple: "If it's got to be done, it's got to be done. You take pride in what you do."

Fagerli's run will end with not quite 2,000 games under his belt. His dedication to the job and passion for the work amazes co-workers.

"You can't believe the snowstorms we've gone through," said Gary Rau, a Janesville school official and former referee who sat next to Fagerli for the past 15 years as the color commentator for basketball games. "If there was going to be a game, Al was going to make it."

A fan as well as reporter of the local sports teams, Fagerli's excitement shows during the games.

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“Sometimes he'll come right out of his chair with his fist in the air when they make a key basket or some key play,” Rau said.

Fagerli's dedication to the students was always apparent, Rau said.

Games are now available as podcasts on the WCLO website, but in pre-Internet days, Fagerli would record his game broadcasts and make cassette tape recordings for parents who would call.

“I can't tell you how many tapes he may have made over the years,” Rau said.

Fagerli said he never minded going that extra mile for the student players. For the vast majority, it's their only shot at their proverbial 15 minutes fame, he said.

“Let them have their time. Find out a little bit about them when you can,” he said.

Fagerli's first live sports broadcast was the Lumberjack World Championships in Hayward.

“You try describing log rolling on the radio,” he said with a chuckle, recalling his attempts to describe someone treading on a wet log and falling off.

Fagerli was working for a station in Rice Lake when Bliss Communications, the parent company of WCLO/WJVL, bought it in 1979. The next year, WCLO needed an announcer, and Fagerli and his wife, Mary, moved to Janesville. They never left.

THE BEST

Fagerli was always on top of the technology needed to make remote broadcasts, said John Nevins, who spent more than 30 years color-commentating with Fagerli, mostly for high school football games.

Today, Fagerli exchanges text messages during his games with Gazette reporters who are covering other games.

“He's kind of a quiet guy away from the radio. But he turns on the

on-air sign, and it just flows from him. I'm constantly amazed at his ability to turn it on and start talking about the game and things are about to happen," Nevins said.

"He's just very fluid. He's one of the best sports announcers, and I listen to lot of guys on radio, and he can do it," Nevins said.

O'Brien concurs.

"Al is the best high school play-by-play broadcaster in the state of Wisconsin. I'd put him against anybody," O'Brien said. "We're really fortunate Al made Janesville his home 35 years ago."

THE VOICE, THE MAN

Fagerli said one regret is that he didn't pursue work in bigger markets, but he said the positive tradeoff was job security: Big stations can mean frequent turnover, while working for a family-owned operation meant he knew he would have a place to go in the morning if he did his job, he said.

Fagerli is also in demand for commercials. Advertisers know that people know his voice, so they request him for their ads.

"He can help sell cars like no one else," O'Brien said.

O'Brien is not yet sure how he's going to handle Fagerli's absence, but it's likely going to mean juggling of the station's schedule.

Shar Hermanson, a radio advertising representative, said her contacts in the Madison market all know and respect Fagerli. She likes him for another reason.

"He'll tell you you're full of it, if that's what needs to be said. I think that's the piece I'll miss the most, Hermanson said. "You always know where you stand with Al."

Hermanson said Fagerli and his wife, Mary, have one child, Anna.

"She's a great human being," Hermanson said of Anna. "He's a good parent. They did a great job."

NO MORE ALARM CLOCK

Fagerli, 62, said it's time to step down and take time for himself and his wife.

“It was fun. It was so much fun for so many years,” he said.

The players make him feel young, he said, “but it's getting to the point where I'm getting older, and they stay the same,” he said.

Driving through lousy weather, lugging gear and crawling under bleachers to plug in are duties he will be glad to give up.

Fagerli said he will miss “the kids” the most along with his co-workers.

“They're great, they really are. We have fun, but we work hard,” he said.

Fagerli is looking forward to having time for himself and sleeping in. He uses a wind-up clock with a battery backup and boasts he never missed a broadcast—except when technical problems arose, in his 35 years here.

But 'round about Feb. 1, “that alarm clock is going in the trash,” he said, with obvious relish.

A former partner for broadcasts, WCLO/WJVL sales manager Mel Cushing, said Fagerli is one of a kind.

“It'll be a huge loss,” Cushing said. “He's the voice of WCLO.”

