

THE VOICE OF TERPS FOOTBALL GIVES UP HIS MIC

Phil Hochberg retires after 35 years of game days.

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Generations of D.C. sports fans know Phil Hochberg's voice. He's been behind a microphone at area stadiums and arenas for more than a half-century.

This weekend, Hochberg gives up his longest-running speaking gig. He'll work his last game as the press box announcer at Maryland football games.

For 35 years of game days, he's been telling Terps beat reporters and one-off media the who, what, and where of the action that just took place on the field below. After each play, a team of five spotters also sitting in the press box relays, for example, how much yardage was gained, plus the jersey numbers of the ball carrier and tacklers, if any. Hochberg's general charge over the decades has been to translate those jersey numbers into names and set up the down-and-distance situation for the assembled reporters before the next snap.

Hochberg admits a fondness for the good ol' days in college sports—"when games used to last two hours and 20 minutes," he says.

But that's not why he's giving up the Terps job.

Like the athletes playing beneath him all these years, Hochberg, 69, says a good press box announcer needs his physical tools sharp if he's to have a good game. With each passing season lately, Hochberg says, he's noticed slippage.

ATTORNEYS

Philip R. Hochberg

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“My hearing, my eyesight, my memory—they’re all going,” he says. “I need to get details right, and I have my spotters, but I’m struggling each week now to do the kind of job I want to do. Overall, my health is fine, no real issues, but these little things add up and take away from what I do. I’m slowing down. So it’s time.”

His co-workers, however, swear there hasn’t been any fall-off.

“I’ve been in this business for 20 years, and he’s the best I ever worked with,” says Doug Dull, Maryland’s associate athletic director for media relations. “I’m going to miss him.”

Hochberg’s top recollection of his years with the Terps?

“To tell you the truth,” he says, “my most vivid memory from Maryland is never being able to pronounce Eric Ogbogu’s name right,” speaking of the former Terps and Dallas Cowboys linebacker best known for yelling “We must protect this house!” in early Under Armour commercials. Hochberg, however, should feel no shame in having difficulty here. The *New York Times*, in separate August 1998 stories, told readers that Ogbogu’s name was correctly “pronounced ah-BAH-goo” and “pronounced AAH-bah-goo,” while ESPN’s bio says it is “pronounced oh-BOG-oo.”

On a typical workday in the College Park press box, Hochberg had an audience of between 80 and 115 media types. As a kid, growing up in D.C.’s Chevy Chase neighborhood, just off Nebraska Avenue, he knew he wanted to be behind a microphone. But back then he dreamed of calling games to a bigger crowd.

As a schoolboy, he interned at Griffith Stadium with Bob Wolff, the Hall of Fame radio and TV broadcaster who was the longtime voice of the Washington Senators. Hochberg wanted to do what Wolff did.

So during his days as a student at Wilson High School, he was the school’s stadium PA announcer. He’s still not sure if any of his classmates ever heard his stadium calls at football games.

“They put the speakers right in front of the building,” he says. “If you know how the school sits with the field, you know that means you couldn’t hear anything from the PA in the stands. But you’d hear everything fine if you were driving by the stadium on Nebraska Avenue.”

After Wilson, Hochberg went off to Syracuse University, where he hoped to learn how to take his announcing tools, as Wolff had, to radio and TV play-by-play. But Hochberg says he tweaked his goals a bit after being surrounded by so much broadcasting talent in the college studios.

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“Among the guys with me at Syracuse were Dick Stockton, Marv Albert, Andy Musser [the Phillies’ play-by-play man from 1976 to 2001], Hank Greenwald [the longtime San Francisco Giants radio man], and Ted Koppel,” he says. “These guys were great. I said to myself, ‘I don’t have the talent these guys have.’ So I went to law school.”

Hochberg got his law degree at George Washington University and joined a D.C. firm. But he “kept a finger” in announcing by taking jobs working stadium PAs. He started out in 1962 working the stadium PA at Washington Senators games and the press box during Redskins games at what was then called D.C. Stadium.

In his first season as the Senators’ PA announcer, Hochberg got to call the Major League Baseball All-Star Game. (While recalling “My 10 Most Memorable Moments as a Public Address Announcer” for the compilation *The Great Book of Washington, D.C. Sports Lists*, Hochberg confesses that he forgot to say “Elston Howard,” leaving the Yankees catcher in the dugout during introductions.) The Senators left for Texas in 1971. But Hochberg stayed in his hometown and continued his Redskins press box duties from 1962 through 1983.

That’s when he began working the biggest stage of his career, as the Skins’ PA announcer.

Hochberg called games for the 55,000 who showed up to RFK every week throughout the Gibbs I Era, the most prosperous period in D.C. sports history. He cites Darrell Green’s breaking up a Vikings pass in the final seconds of the 1987 NFC Championship game at RFK as the greatest highlight of his Redskins calls.

Hochberg went with the team to Rajon in 1997 and remained the Redskins announcer through the 1999 season. In 2000, Dan Snyder turned off Hochberg’s microphone and decided to go in a newer, younger direction on game days.

Around the time he sold naming rights to his stadium, Snyder traded in Hochberg’s understated, facts-based announcing in favor of a louder, younger voice whose every word was meant to shock and awe the stadium crowd.

Hochberg won’t say it, but PA announcing just doesn’t get more obnoxious than the “Third *dowwwn!*” call fans at FedExField have been bombarded with since Snyder replaced him.

“The Redskins could have been worse to me, so no sour grapes from me,” Hochberg says with a laugh. “I really enjoyed that job.”

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Snyder's not the only high-profile local sportsman to get Hochberg canned. He wasn't even the first. For the 1979–80 season, Hochberg worked games at Cole Field House for Maryland basketball, which was a much higher-profile endeavor in College Park than football.

But after just one season, Hochberg lost his mic. He eventually heard that legendary head coach Lefty Driesell disliked his delivery, particularly his call of a foul after a basket.

"I would say whoever goes to the line has 'a chance for a three-point play,'" Hochberg recalls, still perplexed. "I don't know what the problem with that was."

He's been the PA announcer at George Washington University basketball games since Lefty pulled the plug. He plans on keeping that job for at least a few more years. Hochberg has also been the announcer at the D.C.-based BB&T Classic Basketball Tournament for 15 years. He's the moderator for Smithsonian events whenever sporting panels are brought in. And he worked RFK's PA once again last year during the inaugural EagleBank Bowl between Navy and Wake Forest.

Hochberg doesn't need the announcing work. His law practice, built around representing such big-deal sports clients as the NBA, NHL, and NASCAR, has him comfortable, he says.

But he admits that after losing the Redskins announcing job, the highest-profile gig of his career, he wanted to get back to working a really big room.

And he thought he might get that chance when baseball came back to D.C., and Stan Kasten was put in charge of the new club.

Hochberg had known Kasten since 1977, when the longtime Atlanta Braves official attended a legal seminar organized by Hochberg, and they'd stayed friends through the decades.

So a few years ago, Hochberg asked Kasten for a meeting and made a pitch to have the Nationals hire the old Senators announcer when Nationals Park opened. He thought the new team's management would be looking for links to this town's baseball past. He offered up himself.

Things didn't go as Hochberg hoped. PA announcing, he learned the hard way, is now a whole new ballgame.

"So Stan asks me, 'How would you describe your style?' Hochberg says. "In all my years, nobody had ever asked me that. So I think about it, and I say, 'Low-key, competent, and professional.' Stan doesn't miss a beat: 'That's not what we're looking for,' he tells me. He meant it."

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