

Does Marv Albert love sports? Yesssss!

By Bill Glovin
Staff Writer

The phone never stops ringing in Marv Albert's Rockefeller Center office.

"Bye Dan, take care, Dan, I know, Dan, yes Dan, bye Dan, bye," Albert says. "I'm trying to get World Series tickets for this friend from the old days, and I've talked on the phone with him seven times already today."

Next it's a call from someone asking Albert if he can work a boxing telecast Sunday because NBC has decided to do away with Canadian football. "There goes the weekend," he says. "My wife's going to love that."

Suddenly Albert's young producer appears to ask about a "man on the street" sequence for the six o'clock news. The phone rings again. It's almost time to edit the sports highlights. Demands for his attention are coming from six directions at once.

"It's not usually this hectic," he says, looking frazzled. The visitor senses that Albert has learned to live with the pace.

Somehow, he even thrives on it.

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Marv Albert seems destined to go down as a legend in sportscasting history. Broadcasting is all he ever wanted to do, he says, although he never thought that playing sports announcer as a 9-year-old in Brooklyn would someday earn him almost \$1.6 million a year.

At 41, an age when most broadcasters are thrilled to be finally breaking into a tough New York market, Albert is a broadcasting institution. Since his early twenties, he has been the play-by-play man for the Knicks' and Rangers' radio broadcasts. Today he brings the sports news to millions of homes each night for WNBC-TV and is featured on NBC football telecasts, college basketball, Knick TV games, and closed-circuit and network boxing. Although Albert is affiliated with several stations, one comes away with the feeling that he essentially works for himself.

Albert's career is at the point where he can afford to turn down \$3,000 to \$5,000 fees on the college lecture tour, up from

you'd want to get rid of him. Players just don't care for him. He's a menace, not a nice person."

● Warner Wolf: "I don't agree with certain concepts of what he does. I think we're real opposites the way we approach what we do, but I think he's enjoyable and I respect his work. We're very aware of each other, and I think there's room for both of us. And I like him personally."

● Hubie Brown: "I think he's terrific. But with Hubie, if you don't work and don't do certain things, he sours. Once he labels a guy a dog, he's gone."

● Brothers Alan and Steve: "It was a real circus atmosphere growing up. We've always been close and still are. In fact, they've both worked for me as writers and producers at different points." [The Alberts' parents live in Fort Lee].

● Ranger fans: "I can get down on players who make foolish moves, or whose heads aren't in the game, but I could never be that vocal. I realize that many people bet and drink, and that makes them upset, but this to me is bordering on outpatient, that someone could get so revved up. I'm ashamed to have my kids around sometimes."

● Drugs: "Obviously, it's a terrible problem. I don't even flinch when I read things now. It's nonsense that the pressure is an excuse for an athlete turning to drugs. They're paid to rise to the occasion, like anyone else who works."

● College sports: "The whole setup is hypocritical. They're constantly trying to set

time to time, but it all runs in cycles and it comes right back to what it is. Is there any way of controlling all the escalating television money? I think we'll still be asking that question years from now."

● Boxing: "I think it's on a surge and the major levels are very exciting, but something has to be done with the rating system and the murky WBA-WBC system. There are still too many shady things and no control between states."

● Broadcasting baseball: "It would take me out of everything, and it doesn't pay what the other stuff does. If it's a bad season, you die. Someday, when I'm really ready to cut down, baseball might be the sport to do."

Albert also says he thinks football players deserve more money, but not as much as they're asking. He thinks the New Jersey Devils will be a smash, that soccer is a great sport but won't last on the professional level because of low scoring, and that the best sports book he has ever read is "The Breaks of the Game," by David Halberstam.

His favorite local athletes to watch day in and day out are Otis Birdsong, Bryan Trotter, and Chico Resch. The first basketball players he mentions on a long list of favorites are Walt Frazier and Julius Erving. He thinks the Islanders will repeat as Stanley Cup champions. He picks Boston in the NBA and plays it safe with Virginia or Georgetown to emerge as the NCAA champion.

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Marv Albert

Staff photo by Steve Auchard

\$1,500 in 1977. He says he books speaking engagements now only as a personal favor.

Albert has learned to work his family into a frantic schedule that accelerates in the fall. He met his wife, Benita, in college. She was a diehard Met fan working as an usher at Shea Stadium. Benita and their children, Kenny, 14; Jackie, 9; and twins Denise and Brian, 8, travel from their Sands Point, N.Y., home to attend many of the games he broadcasts, sometimes on the road. He says his sons often can be found in the rafters at Madison Square Garden, where they talk into their tape recorders undisturbed. "I wanted children but I got clones," he jokes.

The thrill of working as an office boy for the Brooklyn Dodgers and as a ballboy for the Knicks is still very much a part of him, he says. Albert attended Syracuse University for three years before transferring to New York University in 1963 so he could work for Marty Glickman as a statistician, writer, and producer.

Glickman, then the Knicks' announcer, eventually used Albert as a fill-in. "I can remember doing my first Knick game," he says. "It was like I was waiting for someone to come along, ask what's going on, and pull the plug. It was like a dream come true."

To the New York sports fan, Albert became the vehicle that would help bring them a long overdue Knick championship and a Ranger Stanley Cup final on radio. Without hesitating, he says: "My biggest thrill was that first Knick championship in 1969-70. It

was such an intelligent team with lots of personality."

Other thrills include the closed-circuit Sugar Ray Leonard-Thomas Hearns fight last year, the Rangers' Stanley Cup final against Montreal in 1979, and the NCAA college basketball tournament game two seasons ago when U.S. Reed of Arkansas hit a halfcourt shot at the buzzer to defeat defending champ Louisville.

Sports fans have come to identify Albert with his trademark, "Yessss," which he uses to describe a basketball falling through a hoop. Boston kids use Celtic announcer Johnny Most's "bang," and Los Angeles kids "tickle the twine." But on New York and New Jersey playgrounds, it has always been cool to say "Yessss."

Albert says Yessss came about by accident. A Brooklyn schoolyard friend shortened NBA referee Sid Borgia's "Yes, and it counts" — for a basket and a foul — to the all-purpose Yessss.

In 1968, Dick Barnett threw up a desperation halfcourt hook to end the quarter of a Knick playoff game, and Albert blurted "Yesss."

"Kids who hung around all the time told me how great it sounded," Albert says. "I listened to it on tape and began to use it more and more."

Never regarded as a controversial figure, Albert says he makes an effort to remain objective. He says there have been few problems with players over an appraisal of a performance. "Maybe they respected the opinion, maybe they were mad but kept it within," he says. "I don't see myself as a

hatchet guy, but I try to say what I think with a degree of fairness and honesty."

The years have taught him the nuances of phrasing and the importance of a timely twinkle. One-on-one in his modest office, he is candid, relaxed, and willing to go on record about everything but politics.

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● Howard Cosell: "I have a lot of respect for him on certain events and certain type shows, like 'Sportsbeat.' I think he does certain things extremely well and was a pacesetter. Other things I don't care for."

● George Steinbrenner: "On a personal level he's really a nice guy, a charming guy. But he's so wrong in his ways; the way he treats athletes in such a sensitive game and employees in the corporation. In a long season, you have to pull back, relax, and stay away."

● Reggie Jackson: "I'm not a great fan of Jackson, and I understand that move [not resigning Jackson for 1982] on the Yankees' part. He was psyched and had a great year. But if you're around him on a personal basis,