

SPORTS

Broadcasters Jackson, Brunson forge their own paths to Arizona's sports-loving households

Duo part of Fox Sports Arizona's regional Diamondbacks' baseball coverage

By Eric Mungenast
TRIBUNE

It's a little simplistic at this point to call sports — the landscape filled with men playing or covering children's games valued at millions upon millions of dollars, often at the exclusion of women — a boys club, but history has proven that label apt. Go back 46 years to the 1967 Boston Marathon, when Katharine Switzer's race was nearly interrupted when race official Jock Semple tried to pull her off the course (her boyfriend literally body checked him out of the way).

Fall forward another 23 years to the New England Patriots' locker room, where Boston Herald reporter Lisa Olson tried to do her job through ridiculous levels of sexual harassment from players as the team's owner condoned their actions. Move another 13 years forward to a Monday Night Football game in which ESPN's Suzy Kolber endured the drunken advances of a lecherous Joe Namath, the former Super Bowl winner, in the middle of a national broadcast.

Now shift to 2013 and Sunday afternoons and nights in Arizona or Atlanta or Boston, which belong to the Fox Sports Arizona pregame and postgame broadcasting team of Jody Jackson and Cindy Brunson. They aren't necessarily groundbreakers, but their role on Sunday nights — and the paths they've taken to get there — represent a

step in the direction of sports broadcasting parity.

Jackson and Brunson earned their way into Diamondbacks' fans homes through similar means — hard work, talent, conviction — but came together just before the season began in March through different routes. Start with the former, who has worked at Fox Sports Arizona for the last 13 years covering the D-Backs, Coyotes and Cardinals. Before moving to Tempe, Jackson was a sports reporter in Buffalo, N.Y., and worked in a similar capacity in Florida covering teams like the Miami Dolphins and her alma mater, the University of Miami.

This is her dream job, the type of position she wanted as a child while watching "The U" rise in prominence under head coach Jimmy Johnson in the late '80s, and one that has worked out famously for Jackson.

"It's better than I could have ever imagined," she said.

As is the case with many professional women, Jackson's spent much of her career juggling the needs of her family and career to pursue the oft-mystical concept of "having it all." And, for her, the pursuit has proven successful; she has two children — 7-year-old Connor and 5-year-old Caitlyn — a husband who makes for a superb tag-team partner, enough free time to squeeze in a jog on a rare muggy Arizona morn-



Tempe resident Jody Jackson has been with Fox Sports Arizona covering the Valley's college and pro sports scene for 13 years. [Photo courtesy Fox Sports Arizona]

ing and the aforementioned dream job.

It's not easy making everything work — the in-season road trips impede on opportunities to see her kids compete in certain athletic activities — but she has found her way to balance her roles as broadcaster and mom.

"It actually works out pretty well; sometimes I make more of it than it really is," she said.

Flip now to broadcast partner Brunson, whose arrival at Fox Sports Arizona comes after 13 years at ESPN as an anchor for the network's flagship program, "SportsCenter," and on ESPNNews.

Both positions are of a higher pedigree than her current Sunday gig, but they didn't lend themselves to a life of quality time with her husband Steve Berthiaume — an ESPN alumnus himself and the team's play-by-play announcer. Their schedules differed greatly prior to their Arizona arrival, with Brunson taking the morning shift on "SportsCenter" and Berthiaume working evenings on "Baseball Tonight."

That's why she says she feels like she "hit the jackpot" — a variation of a phrase she uses quite often — to describe her current life station. Although she left ESPN in late 2012 with no guarantee of future broadcasting employment and with an arguably higher profile than Berthiaume, she has spent more time with him over the last six months than she had in the six years prior.

"We had wonderful professional lives, but our personal lives were hit or miss," she said. "... The Diamondbacks were so mindful of what I was giving up, and Steve's salary mirrored what we were both making in Bristol."

Benefits of her new role extend to far more free time to spend with family, friends and sorority sisters; time to fundraise for her alma mater, Washington State University;



Cindy Brunson spent years in Bristol, Ct., honing her craft as a sports broadcaster with ESPN. But Arizona already feels like home to Brunson, who moved to the desert this year with husband and fellow broadcaster Steve Berthiaume, the Arizona Diamondbacks' new play-by-play voice. [Photo courtesy Fox Sports Arizona]

and enough leftover time to read a book. Her most recent read was the former Tennessee women's coach Pat Summitt's autobiography "Reach for the Summit" co-written by Sally Jenkins. Plus, Arizona is, as she put it, hand-over-fist better than ESPN's home base in Bristol, Conn., in terms of quality of life and entertainment options.

Moving out of Bristol also removed her from a proverbial boys club of sports broadcasting, as she said the network's upper personnel — think on-air talent, executives and producers — was 95-percent male during her years in Bristol. As Brunson put it, there weren't exactly a lot of people she could go bra shopping with in Connecticut.

"I never had to wait in line to use the bathroom at ESPN," she added. "That's all I've known in the last 13 years."

It's a markedly different experience than the one Jackson — who, like Brunson, did not adopt her husband's name for broadcast — has undergone in her coverage career. Beyond the times when an interview subject is friendlier than usual, the experience working with male athletes on a frequent basis has actually been something of a non-issue.

Then again, she is cognizant of the experiences sustained by predecessors like Olson and her role-model Kolber, as well as reporters in South Africa she said are still treated poorly by athletes and officials. Their struggles, she said, helped provide women like her a higher level of respect in the industry.

"Other women have paved the way to where athletes are more comfortable with women and men covering sports," she said.

Because of their roles in sports media, Jackson and Brunson get advice requests from aspiring female sports journalists looking to advance to where they are now, and their recommendations follow a similar vein. Confidence, Jackson said, is key and something that needs to grow in step with a sports broadcaster's skills. Another trait she said has gotten her to this point in her career is an ability to put the blinders on and ignore outside distractions, as being a little myopic can remove some of the self-consciousness that plagues many broadcasters.

An important piece of the equation for Brunson is knowledge, and it's easy to tell she takes that part of it quite seriously. All it takes is about 120 seconds of a phone call for her to begin talking about recent baseball events, like Braves' pitcher Tim Lincecum's broken ankle or what the Diamondbacks should do before the July 31 trade deadline. Of the latter, Brunson said the team shouldn't sacrifice young players like Tyler Skaggs or Randall Delgado to find a short-term fix to their pitching woes (she also advocated the team keep both as rotation pieces in lieu of moving them to the bullpen).

A depth of knowledge has become more prudent for broadcasters with the contributions the Internet has had on sports — it can take less than a minute to, say, find Paul Goldschmidt's WAR of 4.7 on Baseball Reference — and aspiring female sports journalists need to have more than aesthetics in their favor.

"They think just because they're attractive or photogenic or a former beauty queen, they can succeed," Brunson said.

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