

KGYM launching 3-hour talk show Tuesday

Written by Jim Ecker

Thursday, 30 June 2011 22:04 - Last Updated Saturday, 02 July 2011 22:44

Rob Norton believes strongly in local programming on his radio stations in Cedar Rapids. Now he's taking a bold new step to prove it.

Starting this Tuesday, KGYM will feature a three-hour talk show with sports journalists Brent Balbinot and Todd Brommelkamp that will run from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday.

The show will focus heavily on the Iowa Hawkeyes, but also plans to feature Iowa State, Northern Iowa, high school sports, the local scene and topics of national interest.

Norton is the president of KGYM (ESPN 1600) and KZIA (Z 102.9), the locally owned stations that are housed in southwest Cedar Rapids. The additional hours of sports talk is his idea and he's confident the community reaction will be favorable.

"I think it will be good, or I wouldn't have done it," he said Thursday.

The Dan Patrick Show, which has been running on KGYM from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. during the week, will be broadcast from noon until 3 p.m. starting this Tuesday. The Scott Van Pelt Show, which has been running from noon to 2 p.m., will be bumped to make room for Patrick.

As part of the new schedule, the Gym Class featuring Scott Unash and Mark Dukes will be broadcast from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m., giving KGYM four straight hours of local sports talk. The Gym Class has been running from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m.

"That's going to be four solid hours of local sports programming, and that's unheard of in this market," said Brommelkamp. "It's something that has been a long time coming, and I think people are really going to take to it."

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Brommelkamp, 31, will continue to serve as editor/general manager of the Voice of the Hawkeyes website and magazine. Balbinot, 43, will continue as the play-by-play voice of the UI women's basketball team and baseball team for the Learfield radio network.

Brommelkamp and Balbinot both attended the University of Iowa and have been covering Hawkeye sports since their college days. Norton likes their experience, expertise and personality.

"I consider Balbinot the radio host," Norton deadpanned, "and Brommelkamp the goofy sidekick."

JoAnn Hamlin, a former UI basketball player, also will be a member of the Balbinot and Brommelkamp show, serving as producer, screening calls and offering comments.

Norton wants the show to be fun, but also wants Balbinot and Brommelkamp to pursue serious topics and has given them permission to criticize the Hawkeyes when warranted.

"We can be critical," Norton said. "I don't want to be critical, and if we are going to be critical, it better be right on the mark and correct, and not a theory."

"I'm a Hawkeye," Norton said. "I like the Hawks as much as anyone. I don't want to be critical of them, but if it needs to happen, it happens."

"I don't want to hide it, either, and I don't want to be just a cheerleader like you have to be in the Learfield group (the company that owns the radio rights to Iowa games). So I think it can be a lot more objective than the other stations."

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Brommelkamp said KGYM wants the show to be "a little bit serious, and a little bit irreverent."

"It's not always going to be sunshine and rainbows with the Hawkeyes, the Cyclones, the Panthers," he said. "We welcome both sides of the argument."

"We're looking forward to spirited involvement with the listeners. If they listen and disagree, we want them to pick up the phone and share their opinion with us."

"If something controversial happens, we're not going to sweep it under the rug and pretend it didn't happen. When something happens, we're going to talk about it."

Balbinot and Brommelkamp will feature guests, interviews, commentary and clips from press conferences, and the hosts will encourage phone calls from their listeners.

"We're hoping that the things we talk about will resonate with listeners and that they will pick up the phone and call in, or tweet or interact with us on facebook," Brommelkamp said. "We really want to make this show as much about the listeners as it is ourselves and the guests."

Balbinot was the sports director at KXIC in Iowa City for 10 years, but Clear Channel (the parent company) cut his job this past March, a victim of budget cuts. "I never saw it coming," he said.

Balbinot pursued other jobs, but nothing materialized until he was contacted by KGYM. "In all honesty, I was thinking I was probably going to get out of the industry, at least full-time," he said.

Now he's excited about tackling a new opportunity and fulfilling the trust of his new bosses at KGYM.

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"I feel extremely fortunate, extremely blessed," he said. "And like I said, very motivated to make sure that several years from now they think it was a good idea to make that phone call."

Norton thinks Balbinot and Brommelkamp are the perfect on-air personalities to cover the Hawkeyes and handle the other topics of local interest. They both live in Johnson County and are veterans at UI sports events.

"They're local, and they're local, and they're local," Norton said. "I think local shows sell people. I think local shows do better in ratings, per se, although we're not a ratings-driven company by any imagination."

Norton wanted to expand what KGYM covers, and he especially wanted to expand coverage of the Hawkeyes. Research shows that the Hawkeyes are the favorite team in the area, college or pro.

"The Hawks are the No.1 deal, and we don't do a good enough job covering it," he said. "We're very good with high school sports. That's Unash's wheelhouse. We're not good with the Hawkeyes. We're very bad with the Hawkeyes."

Unash, the sports director at KGYM, specializes in covering high school sports and has won numerous broadcasting awards.

Norton wants the Balbinot and Brommelkamp show to be entertaining and informative. "I would like it a little bit faster-paced, a little bit more arrogant, a little bit goofy, a little bit more pzazz to it to match the network (ESPN) a little bit more," he said.

KGYM is a member of the ESPN network, but Norton said his station has the right to pick and choose which ESPN shows to run and which shows to preempt. Dan Patrick formerly worked for ESPN, but he left the network and his show is not part of the ESPN lineup anymore. Norton purchased the rights to the Patrick show separately.

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Norton does not consider the Balbinot and Brommelkamp show a gamble.

"It's what we do," he said. "We try to build the business the old-fashioned way: Have a product. Our goal to make money is to build a product as best we can and charge money for it.

"Other operations in this country seem to think the way to profitability is just to cut, cut, cut. We go the other way. We build, build, build and charge more for it - charge what's appropriate for it."

Balbinot has seen the other side of the business and appreciates Norton's approach. "What he's doing - what this place is doing - it's basically unheard of right now in the industry, especially with corporate ownership," Balbinot said.

Norton said this is not an experiment. "No. It's a permanent thing," he declared. "I know it will work."

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Metro Sports Report co-owners Mike Koolbeck and Jim Ecker have a daily two-minute show on KGYM and have a business relationship with the radio station).