Alumni

Podcast Kickoff

By
Paul Hond
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To boost their profile, the Lions now practice on South Lawn. Photo: Columbia Athletics / Bruce Gilbert

One day last summer, Jim Schachter ’80CC, vice president for news at public-radio station WNYC, was eating Korean barbeque in SoHo with Dave Smith ’75CC, a friend from his days at the *New York Times*. Talk turned to the success of the public-radio podcast *Serial*, and Schachter mentioned that WNYC had been kicking around ideas for a serialized show that could be done in New York. The conversation led to a half-joking idea: might there be a story in Columbia football?

Lunch ended, but the football idea stayed with Schachter. At his next staff meeting he made the pitch.

Here was a team, the Lions, with a long history of underachievement. Though nothing could really compare to The Streak, that period in the 1980s when the team lost forty-four consecutive games, the current squad was coming off two 0–10 seasons. Last October, the quarterback quit. Two months later, the head coach resigned after players accused him of physical and verbal abuse. Then, in February 2015, Columbia stunned the college-football world by hiring one of the Ivy League's most successful coaches, Al Bagnoli, who had just retired from the University of Pennsylvania. In his twenty-two years with the Quakers, Bagnoli had compiled a 148–80 record, with three undefeated seasons. Over that same period, the Lions went 66–151.

After the staff meeting, Ilya Marritz, a WNYC business reporter, approached Schachter. Marritz had been looking to do a big, in-depth, multi-part project, and the football idea grabbed him. Just one catch: Marritz knew nothing about football.

Schachter didn't flinch. To him, the Lions were no different than a struggling company that brings on a new boss, a miracle worker, to turn things around. For Schachter, this wasn't a football story. This was a story about creating change.

Once the project was greenlighted and Marritz named the show's host, Marritz brought on producer Matt Collette '14JRN. Collette, too, was a football novice — he covered the public schools for WNYC — yet next to Marritz he was Dick Enberg. The duo jumped into *The Season*, as they called it, with open minds, a hunger for multiple storylines and characters, and the charm of two smart, curious reporters happy to solicit gridiron analysis from connoisseurs like Lions blogger Jake Novak '92GS and *Spectator* sports editor Kyle Perrotti, while pursuing their own lines of inquiry.

"It's very liberating to go in and say to players, 'I don't know about your world,'" says Collette. "You ask questions that a sports reporter isn't going to ask: 'Why'd you decide to do that play? What are you thinking when you go out on the field? Did you have fun?'"

The Lions' season began with three losses, which helpfully established *The Season*'s premise of a team in serious distress. (Marritz admits to getting nervous in the opener against Fordham when the Lions looked as if they had a chance to win.)

When victory finally came on October 10 — a 26–3 win over Wagner College at Robert K. Kraft Field at Lawrence A. Wien Stadium on the northern tip of Manhattan — Collette and Marritz took in the raucous scene: three thousand red-throated fans, the marching band honking and pounding, and players mobbing the field, some with tears in their eyes — seniors who hadn't won a game since they were freshmen.

"The victory happened right in the sweet spot," Marritz said a few days later. "There are only so many shows you can do on the lessons of losing. Winning creates a broader palette." But, he added, "this could be the only win or the first of many."

Such are the narrative exigencies of a real-life, real-time podcast. The big question now was whether the team could win two in a row. Because next week wasn't just any game: it was Homecoming. The opponent? The University of Pennsylvania Quakers, Al Bagnoli's former team.

Victory can be an emotional game changer. "My wife is a behaviorist, and she talks about the power of intermittent reinforcement," says Schachter. "If you occasionally tell a child he's loved, even if you're a bad parent, he will constantly seek your affection. In the same way, the rare win in a sea of losses creates hope."

Hope. The big Homecoming crowd milling outside Kraft Field on October 17 was intoxicated with it. The afternoon sky itself seemed in league: white fluffed pillows of clouds were heaped upon a fresh sheet of Columbia blue, in pure empathy with fans' blue-and-white sweatshirts and face paint (a king's crown on the cheek). Groups of undergrads, alumni with their families, and former Lions players packed the stands.

Now, to marching-band huzzahs, the Lions poured into the arena, and when they drew first blood on a six-yard touchdown pass late in the first quarter, the crowd erupted, the cheerleaders rustled their blue pompoms ("F-I-G-H-T, fight, fight, fight!") and Roar-ee the Lion, glassy-eyed and rigid of tail, gamboled and punched the air. As play resumed, Bagnoli, in his silver-needled crew cut and wraparound sunglasses, prowled the sideline.

Penn answered with two touchdowns. Then, with the Lions punting from deep in their own territory, the kicker fumbled the snap, pounced on the wobbling ball, and was quickly smothered by a horde of Quakers. Moments later the score was 21–7, and you didn't need a weatherman, or the red fluttering streamers atop the yellow goalposts, to know which way the wind was blowing.

By the second half, the score was 28–7. The temperature had fallen, the crowd had thinned, and up in the press box, a dozen reporters sat quietly elbow to elbow, looking out through the plate-glass windows like medical students watching an operation.

Final score: 42–7. The clouds above the New Jersey Palisades had gone oblong and purple in the twilight, the stadium floodlights blared atop their towers. Marritz and Collette lugged their audio equipment to the A train, and among the many questions left on the field was how *The Season* would handle the rout on Thursday's podcast.

The answer was a lesson straight out of the Core Curriculum.

"There's this thing that happens in legends," Marritz says at the start of Episode 6. "The hero leaves his home, goes out into the world, fights his dragons; but eventually he has a reckoning with his own origins." Marritz could invoke Odysseus but goes instead with Steve Jobs, who was booted from Apple, the company he cofounded, only to return twelve years later as its savior. But, as Marritz notes, Bagnoli doesn't have twelve years.

"The difference between winning and losing is very fragile," a pensive Bagnoli tells Marritz and Collette postgame. "It's a constant battle mentally as well as physically to get kids to understand how fragile success really is."

But it's Bagnoli's wife, Maryellen, the family optimist, who gets the last word. "Like I say to him, it's not an overnight change," she says. "You knew you weren't going to have an Ivy League championship the first year. That's unrealistic." Rather, "it's going to be little baby steps." And as long as those steps are going in the right direction, she adds, "I feel that is a win."

Two weeks later, the Lions beat the Yale Bulldogs 17–7. It was their first Ivy League triumph since 2012, and their first in the Yale Bowl in almost twenty years.

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