

Calling the Blues:
Kansas City's Walt Lochman

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In 1940 Walt Lochman, as announcer for the Kansas City Blues baseball team, received 65,000 votes in a *Sporting News* popularity contest seeking the best radio baseball announcer in the nation. This total was enough for first place in the minor league class; WGN's Bob Elson, a future member of the Baseball Hall of Fame and long-time White Sox announcer, won first place amongst major league announcers. The New York Yankees-affiliated Kansas City Blues were a AA franchise with roots stretching back to the 1880s and the closest the city got to big-time ball until the arrival of the Athletics in the 1950s. Lochman wasn't just popular with listeners; management loved him. Yearly paid attendance had reached 300,000 that year, three times the paid attendance just five years earlier. That summer of 1940 his daily radio show on KMBC drew 51% of listeners compared to WDAF's second place showing of 10%. The legendary juvenile adventure show *Little Orphan Annie* may have done well against nefarious evil doers but only managed a 5% rating against Lochman. With such ratings, the money followed him on the air, too. General Mills' Wheaties cereal and Socony-Vacuum Oil Company signed on for another year of sponsorship, eager to have their products attached to this charismatic play caller.

Such success, however, hadn't come over night. Born in Kansas City, Missouri, on November 4, 1906, Lochman's full given name was Walton but he would be known as Walt throughout his professional career. Like many boys he loved playing various sports and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Blues, but an unfortunate injury kept him from participating in any sports at a competitive level. Unable to perform on the athletic field, Lochman turned his competitive drive toward singing and as a high school senior in 1925 won first place in a state-wide vocal contest.

Lochman developed his vocal talents through musical endeavors and in 1927 he started on radio. According to one written account he joined the fledgling KMBC which had recently become a

commercial station under the leadership of Arthur B. Church. The story passed down through the family indicates Lochman's first radio work was a singing job on a musical variety show over WDAF, an early affiliate of the NBC Red network. If surviving accounts are to be trusted, this vocal prowess earned him spots alongside the wildly popular Kansas City jazz band Coon Sanders Nighthawks on some of their WDAF broadcasts.

His first sportscasting opportunity came about by happenstance when the feed for the 1929 World Series was lost and Lochman recreated the game from the incoming Western Union ticker. Despite receiving glowing reviews for the effort, there were few chances for further sports announcing on the airwaves at the time so he pursued other opportunities at other stations. He left KMBC or WDAF (or both) in 1929 and over the next six years worked at WIBW (Topeka), KGBX (Springfield, MO), and KCKN (Kansas City, KS). Most of his work during this time was talk shows and programs of recorded music. The period also included a short stint as station manager, program director, and general announcer at W9XBY, an experimental high fidelity station in the early 1930s owned by First National Television, one of Arthur Church's broadcasting ventures.

An apocryphal story claims that while working in Springfield, Lochman spent 13 weeks broadcasting with Red Grange out of Winnipeg over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Grange retired from football in 1933 and did not get into sports announcing so the tale is possible if not provable.

It was at KCKN in 1935 where his sportscasting really began to take off. An uncle of Lochman's unexpectedly lost his sight and was very vocal to Walt in expressing his disappointment at the poor play-by-play provided by local announcers who made it difficult to follow his beloved Blues. Remembering the accolades he'd received years before, Walt took it upon himself to create more vivid and colorful descriptions for his uncle.

In the spring of 1935 Lochman approached Blues owner Johnny Kling. He requested to be allowed to cover a ten-game home stand to test the power of live minor league baseball broadcasts. Kling was hesitant, afraid the broadcasts would cut into attendance. Finally Kling agreed on the

condition that if attendance decreased Lochman would stop his broadcasts. During that home stand attendance increased five-fold, from 2,000 to 10,000 per game over that span. Season-long attendance doubled for the franchise, from 100,000 total paid attendance in 1934 to 200,000 in 1935. A few short years later it hit 300,000. Whether, upon further research, this growth in attendance was due to Lochman's broadcasts or at least in part to the on-field talent that came with being a Yankees farm club of the time will be left for others to decide.

The General Mills and Socony-Vacuum sponsorship of Lochman through the Knox-Reeves advertising agency was a part of the companies' \$1.5 million investment in national baseball advertising during the 1938 season. The year after receiving this contract, in 1939, Lochman returned to KMBC as a general staff member, a decade after leaving the station originally. Based on Lochman's growing reputation in sportscasting KMBC won the rights to air the Blues' games and began to originate many of them though some continued to be fed to KCKN. Kansas City fans appreciated Lochman enough to boost his ratings well past the competition which included such musical luminaries as Kay Kyser and Bing Crosby.

The following year KCKN reclaimed primary rights to the Blues broadcasts via the Wheaties contract and they also acquired Lochman's services though he continued to be employed by KMBC. A little known aspect of the business dealings of KMBC's Arthur Church was his role as agent for a number of radio personalities, foremost among them Caroline Ellis (discussed two years ago) and Ace Goodman, the writer of *Easy Aces* and eventually the highest paid writer in television by the late 1960s. Church acted in this capacity for Walt Lochman, arranging work for him on competing stations while paying him a bi-weekly salary of \$200. Even while broadcasting games over other stations he continued to air daily sports reports over KMBC.

For the next few years Walt Lochman was the king of Kansas City sports, announcing not only baseball but Big 7 football, the Greyhound's minor league team of the American Hockey Association (but only the final periods), boxing, and Naismith League basketball over KMBC.

His programs were never short of sponsors, earning the advertising dollars of Ford, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the Pla-Mor entertainment center in addition to previously mentioned General Mills and Socony-Vacuum Oil. Lochman's popularity was such that he was credited with calling the play-by-play for over 900 Kansas City Blues baseball games during the six seasons from 1935 to 1940.

As Lochman's agent Arthur Church worked diligently to get him a job announcing in the Major Leagues. In February, 1943, Lochman got that chance and he moved his family to Chicago where he announced for the White Sox over WIND. This opportunity to announce the big leagues was relatively short lived, however, and came to an end after the 1944 season.

Walt Lochman returned quietly to Kansas City with his family where he found work at KCMO doing a sports wrap-up program at 6:00 and 9:00 p.m. He also did some Big 6 play by play for the station as well as weekend variety shows. This job lasted from 1945 until 1949 after which Lochman again moved his family, this time to Topeka where he started on KJAY in 1950. His main work for the station was a morning talk show on which he had a variety of guests including local sports figures and elected officials. The program was a bit unusual as it was actually broadcast from the Lochman's kitchen table. He returned to sportscasting minor league ball with the Topeka Owls, a job he shared – according to Bill Lochman – with Merle Harmon who was just beginning his illustrious broadcasting career. By 1952 he had worked his way up to the role of sports director for the station.

Walt Lochman passed away March 16, 1954, at the age of 47, already a 27-year veteran of radio. Lochman had four children, Walton, Jr. born in 1930, Curtis, born in 1933, Connie, born in 1934, and William (Bill), born in 1941. His love of radio was passed on to two of his sons, Walt, Jr. and Bill. Walt, Jr. worked as a salesman for both KCKN and WHB then as sales manager and a general manager for 18 years at KMBZ. Bill, too, was a salesman at stations KCKN and WDAF. He worked as a sales manager at KMBC-TV during the 1970s and in the 1980s as general manager of KCFM. Bill's son and daughter also started in radio but, according to Bill, as the industry changed they eventually got out and

moved on to other endeavors.

Though Walton Lochman ended his two decades of radio work in relative anonymity, fans of sports radio should not forget the tremendous impact he had on creating a high quality sports broadcasting tradition in Kansas City.

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