

# Sports loses in news game

**Local TV stations devote less time, fewer resources to covering sporting events as audiences decline**

By [Pete Dougherty](#)

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"News, weather and sports" was a phrase as common in the early days of television as "Kukla, Fran and Ollie." As the TV landscape has changed, so have the local newscasts, squeezing sports out of that equation.

Most businesses these days are trying to do more with less, and when it comes to local newscasts, sports seems to be the hardest hit.

Three long-time sports anchors, all Capital Region natives, have left their respective local stations in the past six months. Another station went more than four years with one sportscaster, leaving it to news anchors to read sports on her day off.

"In this era where resources are tight and people are trying to find the new formula with how to pay for traditional media, sports is one of the victims," said [Paul Conti](#), a former WNYT (Newschannel 13) news director and now assistant professor of communications at The [College of Saint Rose](#). "When they look at 30 percent of the audience that says they care (about sportscasts) and 70 percent says they're not that committed to it, the people that process money say, 'Why are we putting this much energy and money to sports coverage if only 30 percent of the audience cares?' That's been a bad thing for local sports."

WXXA (Fox-23) lost its sports director, [Rich Becker](#), a Rotterdam native who took a job at [Albany Medical Center](#), and weekend anchor [Scott Morlock](#), raised in Scotia. Becker and Morlock, who couldn't come to terms on contract extensions, had a combined 27 years at the station.

[Joe Calderone](#), who grew up in Broadablin, resigned from YNN in May after 8 1/2 years at the cable news station.

When [Brian Sinkoff](#) was caught in a series of layoffs at WTEN (ABC-10) in 2008, the station did not fill his sports director's position, leaving just a one-person department. The station finally hired a second full-time sports anchor, [Josh Sims](#), over the summer.

"The entire industry has changed," said Sinkoff, who worked in radio for three years and is now a real estate broker with Coldwell Banker. "When I first started in the '90s, you waited until the 6 and 11 o'clock news to get the scores and highlights. You were pretty much planted by your TV at 6:20 and 11:20. With the boom of the Internet and 24-hour cable outlets, now everyone is able to get their scores virtually instantly. It has made the traditional television sportscaster to have to change the game a little."

Most stations have tried to adapt by changing the focus of their sportscasts. Highlights of a half-dozen [Major League Baseball](#) or [National Football League](#) games have given way to local coverage, particularly of high schools.

"There's a lot of news outlets in Albany and maybe even around the country, they don't see sports as important," said Calderone, who has formed his own company, "InIt II WinIt" Productions. "Some news directors don't even like sports, where I feel like, on a Friday night, anywhere in America, football shouldn't even be your lead story in sports, it should be your lead story in news, unless, God forbid, something catastrophic happens."

"The news business is trying to do more with less people and less equipment," said Morlock, who is still seeking TV work, "and that's where things are different. I don't think it has anything to do with the sportscast at all."

Conti, who worked at WNYT for 28 years before taking his current position at St. Rose, said he isn't convinced that covering high schools is the right direction.

"There's a real local element of that that is service-worthy," he said, "but it is hard to say that it's going to attract an audience. How many times have organizations in this market tried to make something out of high school football because it's really popular in Pennsylvania and Texas and Florida? It doesn't ever reach that level of popularity here."

"I can remember what we used to spend on the photographers to try and cover every local sporting event on some weekends. Usually you

couldn't staff for that, so you'd end up asking people to come in on overtime. You'd get the overtime bill and say, 'Wow! This is an awful lot of money for three minutes of highlights.' It does get tough to figure all that out."

The station with the most stability in its sports department, WNYT, also happens to be the current ratings leader in the market.

Sports Director [Rodger Wyland](#) arrived in 1986 and gained his current position in 2001. Weekend anchor [Andrew Catalon](#), who has worked the Olympics and other major events for NBC and CBS, has been on the staff for nine years. The station also carries a third, part-time sports anchor/reporter, [Chris Onorato](#), who has been there three years.

Coincidence or happenstance?

"For the most part, my boss lets me run my station here, and that's something that's less and less true around the country nowadays," said [Steve Baboulis](#), WNYT's general manager whose station is owned by Hubbard Broadcasting. "When you get to that point where you can run the station locally — look, I have to make sure I hit my projects and make my budgets and all that sort of thing — it allows me to keep people in place more than ever.

"I've been here a long time myself (since 1977, in various capacities), and people who work here have invested a lot in bringing us where we are today. They're an important part of maintaining what we do, and they're an important part of keeping strong in the future."

That seems to be rare in a time marked by frequent transition and younger hires.

After losing both its full-time anchors, WXXA had the opportunity over the summer to review its sports posture.

"The easy thing would have been to re-evaluate it and say, 'OK, we're just not going to continue that commitment, this would be a good crossroads, so to speak, to use for changing our commitment,'" said WXXA General Manager [Bill Sally](#), who worked as a sportscaster early in his career. "We haven't at all.

"I'm not sure what we do with our sports is ratings-driven. The way we're trying to do the sports and make it interesting to everyone, it

just becomes more part of our newscast than a segment of our news. Before there was always the separating, there was news, weather, sports. Sports has woven itself into a part of the actual newscast."

The universal theme seems to be that the audience and the resources for all aspects of newscasts have been reduced.

That's a trend troubling to those who remember the earlier days of television.

"I'm not a big fan of the continued erosion of that area," Conti said, "but unfortunately the staff that's required to collect it all is an easy target because there's only so much paper and gasoline you can cut out of the budget. The amount of money that (station) owners are willing to invest on talent nationwide is not what it used to be. They don't want to pay as much money to the main anchors; they don't want to pay as much money on sports anchors. They don't want to spend as much money to generate product because they can't generate the kind of revenue they used to be able to generate. They're hoping to find the magic formula again that will get them back to the kind of revenue that they used to get. I don't know that the day is ever going to return."

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