

SIUE alum John Kelly talks Blues hockey



Blues play-by-play broadcaster John Kelly.

Posted: Friday, September 23, 2016 11:56 am

If you enjoy St. Louis Blues hockey, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and WSIE 88.7 FM have a treat for you this Sunday at 9 a.m. Upcoming on Segue, College of Arts and Sciences Dean Greg Budzban, PhD, hosts the show's first guest from the sports entertainment industry – long-time St. Louis Blues play-by-play broadcaster John Kelly. An SIUE Department of Mass Communications alumnus, Kelly ('82) discusses his career preparation and experiences at SIUE, as well as his exciting tenure in the National Hockey League (NHL).

A St. Louis native, Kelly transferred to SIUE from a local community college with deep ambition to pursue a career in broadcasting. To most, Kelly's profession choice came as no surprise – his father was legendary St. Louis Blues announcer Dan Kelly, a member of the NHL Hall of Fame. Complementing his classroom studies at SIUE, John Kelly received enriching experiences as a sportscaster on SIUE's campus radio station, WSIE, and as a play-by-play broadcaster for numerous SIUE and Edwardsville High School basketball games. Kelly attributes much of his sports broadcasting success to the quality opportunities for education and practice afforded to him as an SIUE student.

Throughout the interview, Kelly shares the vast array of career experiences he's had, ranging from working as a sports reporter in Pratt, Kan., to manning a broadcast booth in the NHL with his father. Kelly spent six years working for the St. Catharines Saints, the American Hockey League affiliate of the Toronto Maple Leafs, before moving up to the NHL in 1988 to service the likes of the New York Rangers, St. Louis Blues, Tampa Bay Lightning and Colorado Avalanche. Since returning to St. Louis in 2004, Kelly has proudly continued his father's legacy and represented his hometown team on-air.

But Kelly's career has not come without hardships. He explains, "I look back at those days in the American Hockey League, and it was tough work, at times. It was a 'bus league,' so there were a lot of weekends where we'd have a home game on a Friday night, then would get on a bus 6 to 10 hours after the game, do a game Saturday night, get back on the bus, and do another game Sunday night before coming home."

Kelly further explains the sorrow and bittersweet progression of his career after tragedy struck his family in his father's death.

Despite struggles, Kelly's career has been filled with numerous successes, including being the Tampa Bay Lightning's first broadcaster and providing coverage for several Stanley Cup playoffs and championships.

The interview continues with Kelly describing the changes and irregularities(?) that have occurred as the hockey broadcasting profession evolves.

"From my perception, things that don't change are how you go about your job and preparing for your job," he says. "Obviously, over time, you find shortcuts and things you can do better, but I still prepare the same way. There's no recipe for hard work."

"You do as much preparation as you can, but it's done a different way now. To watch a lot of games back then in the early 80s, you really couldn't. Satellite TV was new, and you certainly couldn't stream it on your iPhone."

We didn't have 250 channels of DirecTV. Now, before I have a game, I can watch the team we're playing as many times as I want, on demand.

"The other thing that hasn't really changed is how you deal with the players, coaches and general managers. If you're respectful, honest and try to do a good job, that carries a lot of weight.

"Someone gave me advice a long time ago on dealing with people. Whether it's in a one-on-one environment or as a broadcaster calling the game: If you're going to say something, say it like you would to their face. Nowadays, so many people say things – especially through social media – anonymously, and they don't have to back it up. If you can say it to someone's face, then you should feel comfortable saying it – even if it's semi-critical. If you do that and treat people the right way, it's going to help you really do well in this business."

The duo further discusses the evolution of media and its impact on the NHL over time, as the sport continues to rapidly grow.

"The game has become so popular now in the United States," Kelly shares. "In the last NHL draft, five St. Louis kids were drafted in the first round. Five of the first 30 picks were from St. Louis! There were 12 Americans selected in the first round – an NHL record. Last season, no Canadian teams made the NHL playoffs for the first time since the 1970s. It's quite amazing. The game has grown so much.

"But the players are more guarded than they used to be. When I first started covering the Blues, you'd go to the locker room after practice or a game and there might be a couple of reporters on-hand. Now, if you just go to a random Blues practice, there could be 15 to 25 journalists there. Everybody has a webpage or a blog, plus radio stations and TV stations. There's so much more demand on the players, and they don't know a lot of people, so the trust factor isn't what it used to be. That is a big change in the coverage of an athlete.

"And social media wasn't even on the horizon 30 years ago. Nowadays, not that I have to tweet or go on Facebook, but I know the Blues and Fox Sports Midwest want John Kelly, Darren Pang, Chris Kerber and everybody else covering the team to do it as often as they can, because they want the publicity and want our names associated with the team and the station.

"At the same time, I learn a lot by following a lot of people on Twitter and Facebook. Now, I don't need to go to a TV set or turn the radio on to find out what's happening. The other day, in a span of just 30 minutes, there were two blockbuster trades and a huge contract signing in the NHL. I was not near a TV but I had my iPhone, so I could follow along and read all of the comments and updates. It's amazing, the technology and the world we live in today."

Budzban agrees with Kelly, commenting on the constant interaction between athletes and the media, and how this tireless demand gives the hockey industry a new form of popularity and relentlessness.

The friends conclude conversation by discussing last season's Blues playoff magic, this season's offseason activities, and high expectations for the young, gritty St. Louis Blues as they continue to prosper in the NHL's Western Conference.

Tune in to WSIE 88.7 FM every Sunday at 9 a.m. as weekly guests discuss issues on SIUE's campus.

By Logan Cameron, SIUE Marketing & Communications.