



How did Benetti get a Sox TV job that fits him perfectly?

Editor's Note: Jason Benetti has had an impressive first year as a Sox TV broadcaster with huge shoes to fill. His south suburban background serves him well for his Sox duties, since he brings an important local historian's perspective that many MLB teams lack. The Chicago Baseball Museum notes the excellent work he did on the Double Duty Classic teaming with the Sox's Kevin Coe. Jason brought an intimate knowledge of the Sox's special connection with the Negro Leagues and the East-West game held each summer at old Comiskey Park from 1933-1960.

By Mark Liptak

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Change often comes slowly for the White Sox organization.

However, sooner or later, change must come as situations evolve.

After the 2015 season, longtime Sox TV broadcaster Hawk Harrelson decided to cut back on his workload in his mid-70s. Harrelson would no longer work most home games to cut out a four-hour daily round trip from his South Bend-area in-season home. That meant the search was on for someone who in the short term would basically be working half the schedule with an eye towards someday taking on Harrelson's role.



Hitting it off over an introductory dinner with partner Steve Stone (right) in Arizona practically clinched the Sox TV job for Jason Benetti.

Bob Grim, the Sox senior director of business development and broadcasting, along with Brooks Boyer, vice president for sales and marketing, were involved in the process to find that replacement. Grim said the team whittled the number of applicants down to around 50 before starting in-person interviews in November. Shortly after the holidays the Sox announced that Chicago south suburban native Jason Benetti had been offered the position.

Benetti, 33, had worked for ESPN, Fox Sports and Westwood One Radio. He was the Triple-A Syracuse Chiefs broadcaster. In short, for a younger individual, he had a wealth of professional broadcasting experience. But he had something else that Grim explained made the difference in Benetti landing the gig.

“We were looking for someone that resonated well with our fan base,” Grim said. “We feel we hit the jackpot with Jason. His style, wit and his way of luring our fans into the telecast really drove us to him. We could not ask for a better candidate.

“A local product who grew up a Sox fan, not to mention being a quality broadcaster, gave us someone that we feel will be with us for a long time. I have never seen a broadcaster become so quickly accepted by our fan base. I’ve received nothing but positive comments regarding Jason and his debut with us.

“A little side story – on Opening Day, Comcast Sports Chicago wanted to interview him along with his parents from the concourse. While bringing him down and making our way to the designated area for the interview, he was stopped numerous times by our fans who expressed their pleasure in hearing him do our games.”

With that as the backdrop I had the chance to speak with Jason from U.S. Cellular Field on an afternoon before he got ready for that evening’s game.

Mark Liptak: Jason, you grew up in the Chicago area as a Sox fan. Any early memories of the Sox?

Jason Benetti: “I don’t have anything specific as far as a particular game, although the Sox teams from around the 1993 era were my guys. I do remember going to a game and my cousin bet me that I couldn’t count the number of lights on one of the tall light towers. That was a challenge since you couldn’t look at it for too long before the brightness just hurt your eyes.

“I also remember being with my parents at a game and coming home the night of the O.J. Simpson chase (1994). The NBA playoffs were going on and we were trying to listen to some games but all we were able to get was coverage of O.J.”

ML: You went to Syracuse for your undergraduate degree following a long line of broadcasters like Bob Costas and Marv Albert. But I was most intrigued by the fact that you then went on to get a law degree at Wake Forest. Was that so you’d have a fallback position if broadcasting didn’t work for you?

JB: “No. Honestly that was never something I considered. I didn’t want to have to consider something like that. Broadcasting was something that I embraced and something I always wanted to do. I was always fascinated by the law and the way lawyers think. My mind works that way, I really like logic games, for example, and I just wanted to examine that more.”

ML: What was the process that brought you to the Sox? When Hawk Harrelson announced he only wanted to do road games did you apply to the Sox, was it your agent? How did this begin?

JB: “On the advice of a friend when I heard that Hawk had decided to cut back, I called Brooks Boyer and left a message. I told him that I was interested in the position. A few hours later that night Brooks called me back and said the Sox would be interested in me and could I come to Chicago for an interview. So I did.



Longtime Sox official Bob Grim was key in the Jason Benetti interview process.

“I met with five people or so from the White Sox and from Comcast Sports Chicago and we talked. I went back to Syracuse and then got a call on a Tuesday night from Bob Grim asking if it would be possible to fly back to Chicago for a Thursday meeting with Jerry Reinsdorf. So I told him I could probably clear my schedule for it, flew back and met with Jerry and again some other people including some from Comcast Sports Chicago. Then the White Sox asked if I could fly out to Arizona and meet with Steve Stone, which I did in December. We met for dinner. Shortly after the holidays I got a call offering me the job, which I took.”

ML: Jason can you tell me about the interview process? What were some of the things discussed, for example, by the Sox and Comcast towards you?

JB: “This was back in December so I can’t recall exact questions but generally they were trying to feel out my style, they wanted to know a little more on my background, how I prepared for a game and my use of analytics in a broadcast.”

ML: Most interviews are usually a two-way street. What questions did you have for the Sox about the job?

JB: “I asked them about a number of things. When I was broadcasting in Triple-A, I had to do all the research and statistical material on my own. I asked the Sox what support they offer the broadcasters. What tools are at my disposal regarding information for a broadcast? I also asked them their thoughts on how they wanted the partners in the booth to work together and I asked them who they enjoy listening to doing baseball and what style appealed to them.”

ML: This is an odd situation in the sense that you're only doing half the games. Is that an issue for you? I mean in the sense of being away from the team on a daily basis and that you may be out of the loop information-wise.

JB: "I can see where someone would believe that but I can only tell you that again when I was doing Triple-A baseball I had to miss some games at times, once for a wedding of a good friend and when I came back I felt refreshed, I felt like a new man. Even though I'm not doing every game, I still fill out my scorebook at home and keep track of every play, every pitch like I was doing it. I also click around and I'll listen to Ed Farmer and Darrin Jackson, then turn to Hawk and Steve Stone. I'll even listen to opposing broadcasters to try to get a little more information.

"When you have to do the number of games that most broadcasters in baseball do, it really tests your focus because of that sheer number. When you're losing 10-1 in the seventh inning, that's when you see if you can keep the broadcast entertaining and keep the viewers around. Honestly, I think only doing half the games is a good thing at this point."

ML: Speaking of which, some folks still think this is the type of job where you can show up an hour before game time, broadcast it and go home. You and I know better, but roughly how much preparation do you have to put in for a broadcast?

JB: "Well I take the time to fill in my scorebook completely for each game and you've got the time around the batting cage, watching players, talking with them to get information. As far as every series, I'll put in about a half hour researching and reviewing every player on the other team. So that's 25 guys' times 30 minutes. It does take some work."

ML: I know you had the chance to do the exhibition games in Arizona. But be honest, were you a little nervous before you did that Saturday game against the Indians in April, the first broadcast for you of a regular-season game?

JB: "Mark, no, and I'm leveling with you. I got up early that Saturday and my attitude was, 'Let's get this game in so that we can get to game two.' It turned out game two didn't happen for a while because of the rainout. The other thing was that because of all the snow and ice, the fans weren't let in until shortly before the game started. The ramps and walks were all icy. That meant that instead of a gigantic crowd at the start the fans were slow to come in, and that Steve (Stone) and I kind of eased into the game. It wasn't until Garcia hit that home run that I really noticed a lot of people in the stands."

ML: Chemistry is such a huge part of a broadcast and the fans can sense almost immediately if a crew has it. Harry Caray and Jimmy Piersall did, Don Drysdale and Harrel-

son had it as did Harrelson and Tom Paciorek. How is the chemistry developing between you and Steve Stone, a guy who I think is the best analyst in the game?

JB: “I agree with you on Steve. I think we connected within 10 minutes of that dinner meeting back in December. He’s an easy partner to work with. We dovetailed nicely because we both have the same kind of sense of humor. Steve was very welcoming towards me and he’s a great storyteller and has the ability to bring out a lot of esoteric stuff to the broadcast.”

ML: Analytics are a big part of baseball now. Some people swear by them, some people swear at them and say they are ruining the game. How do you strike the balance between those two worlds in your broadcast?

JB: “I think Cole Hamels said it best when I read where he said that he’s a better pitcher because of the things he’s able to find out before the game and he was talking about statistics on the opponent. I appreciate sabermetrics and will use it in the broadcast, but only if they are relevant to the situation.

“I’m not going to throw out a stat, say a UZR rating over a seven-day span on a guy because that’s such a small number to go by. Again it’s not relevant. If it’s used right, it can be a real help in a broadcast and help the fans. If I can find out what percentage of first pitches a hitter swings at, that’s something I can use in a broadcast and it would apply, say, in a crucial situation. We have better ways today to evaluate players and some of them like WAR and OPS are important. That being said, as a fan we’ll always appreciate and embrace the basic numbers on a player, how many home runs, how many RBIs...that’s also part of the game.”

ML: Another balancing act is understanding the needs of the team during a broadcast, the folks who are signing your paycheck and the responsibility a broadcaster has to the audience as far as giving an honest account of what is going on, on the field or with the team. Again how do you strike the balance or walk that fine line between the two?

JB: “I learned economics in school and I look at things as a zero-sum game a lot of times. With baseball I can’t spend more time criticizing players and belaboring points than I do giving credit or looking at things positively. I’d much rather give credit, but if a



When Jason Benetti is not actually working a game, he'll tune to part of the radio broadcast with Darrin Jackson (pictured here) and Ed Farmer.

guy blows one I'll be the first to say, 'That's an E-6...he should have had that one.' Then we'll show the video of the player looking at his glove or expressing a reaction. We'll have the video of it; I don't need to say anything more.

"I'll also go to players, talk with them and ask questions, 'Why are you in a slump?' Then I'll take that information he gave me, say it during the broadcast and the viewers can make up their own minds."

ML: Can you summarize your broadcasting style?

JB: "I don't know how to summarize it. I like to make connections during a game based on what's happening. I try to let baseball be a jumping-off point in the broadcast to also be able to get into other things. Let's have a little fun. I try to enjoy myself during a broadcast and get better the next day."

ML: You've overcome some disabilities to get to where you are and also are a spokesperson for the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, 'Just Say Hi' campaign. What is the program about and what is your role?

JB: "I'm happy to be a part of it. It was started by a guy named Richard Ellerson. He's an advertising man best known for the slogan, 'It's not TV...it's HBO.' Just a fantastic guy. He contacted me and wrote a script for this and asked if I'd participate. So I recorded the spot and try to promote the campaign. Some folks have criticized it because they think just saying hi isn't enough. They think you should engage the person in a real conversation and sure you hope that happens but this is a way to start things, just say hi! It's an entry and I think that can help people understand each other more."

ML: Bob Grim said the reaction of Sox fans to you, especially in person, has been positive and welcoming. What do you have to say in return about Sox fans?

JB: "(laughs) They are simply amazing. I'll tell you a story, the Sox released the news that I was hired at midnight Chicago time. It was 1 a.m. on the East Coast where I was. I woke up around five in the morning and just checked twitter and found that overnight I had gained like a thousand new followers! My first thought was, 'Don't White Sox fans ever sleep?'"

"The amount of appreciation, care, interest, love that they have shown me has been overwhelming. I've never met a fan base like them, they are a first-place fan base...no one can surpass them. I appreciate it and will work hard for them."