

# BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

## ***Hawk the anti-Harry in welcoming new voice Benetti***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
Posted Tuesday, February 9, 2016*

Maybe they were tough on rookies and newcomers in Hawk Harrelson's playing prime in the 1960s.

So will Harrelson haze or throw speed-bumps in Jason Benetti's way as the latter succeeds Hawk on White Sox home-game telecasts this season?

On the contrary. Emphatically.

"I told him, the most important thing, you have to be your own guy," Harrelson said of south suburban native Benetti, who will team with Steve Stone in the U.S. Cellular Field TV booth while Hawk handles road games.

"I've listened to a couple of his tapes," Harrelson said. "It was a terrific choice by the White Sox. He's going to be really good. It'll be good for him, it'll be good for me. I'll be able to spend time with my grandkids and I won't have that 200-mile a day drive."

If Benetti did not get enough motivation broadcasting his childhood heroes, he certainly went over the top with the enthusiastic endorsement, if not outright mentorship, of Harrelson.

"I was in first grade doing a Hawk impersonation, You can put it on the board...", said Benetti. "Talking to Hawk and having him say to me, 'Be yourself,' that comes from the heart. He is that passionate."

Benetti in turn will not consciously channel Hawk's broadcast style on the air. But, philosophically, they are close.

"As an inspiration, maybe not sound-wise, maybe not vocally and catch-phrase, but passionately and being yourself, Hawk has always been a part of me, absolutely," he said.



**Hawk Harrelson has welcomed Jason Benetti with open arms to the Sox broadcast booth. Photo credit [billymax85](#).**

“Hawk has been a dear person to me since this whole thing started and he has gotten nicer and nicer, which is not even possible. He’s been very heartfelt and warm.”

### **Caray gave Lewin the brushoff**

The smooth handoff of duties in the Harrelson-Benetti relationship is a 180-degree turn from the cold shoulder young announcer Josh Lewin received from Harry Caray on Cubs broadcasts in 1997. Interestingly, the common factor in both events was Steve Stone’s role as color analyst. Stone was all smiles in meeting Benetti at SoxFest recently.

In his last year on the air – Caray collapsed on Valentine’s Day 1998 and died soon afterward at 83 – the Cubs demi-god only did home games due to age and a heart condition. Lewin was hired to fill in on the road after Bears radio announcer Wayne Larrivee had done double duty on away games the previous season.

Rather than mentoring Lewin and welcoming him to the WGN family, Caray froze him out as if Lewin was after his job. Caray definitely had a dark side, a mean streak, this writer and others witnessed, but was not shown to his adoring public. He obviously carried insecurities from his young manhood deep into old age. Fortunately, Lewin departed after that one lost year to forge a good career with several teams.



**Jason Benetti (left) and new partner Steve Stone got acquainted at the recent SoxFest.**

In another century, there has been talk about cool relations between Harrelson and Stone. But that has nothing to do with breaking in Benetti, who will bring a heavy Homewood-Flossmoor High School influence to Comcast SportsNet Chicago’s Sox telecasts. Fellow H-F alum Chuck Garfein handles host chores for most pre- and post-game programming with analyst Bill Melton.

Benetti’s Chicago-area roots are welcome in the media landscape. Too often executives in broadcast and print will go outside the market to hire a big name with a big reputation, or someone who was a colleague/chum elsewhere. Home-grown talent is thus overlooked. The carpetbaggers’ lack of Windy City institutional memory can’t be hidden. That won’t be a problem with Benetti.

### **Hawk sees Benetti as finished product**

Harrelson’s welcoming persona goes even further. He has listened to Benetti’s tapes. He has no advice to give what he considers a finished product.

“I don’t need to tell him anything about his broadcasting. It’s there,” Harrelson said. “He’s right on track. The only thing I wanted to fill him in on is he’s going to catch

some criticism. Any announcer in a two-team city is going to catch criticism. I was told that when I first broke in. It's immensely more difficult to break in than in a two-team town. You're going to have a thick skin.

"He sounds like himself. He's got a terrific voice. He's got nice projection. He knows when to lay out, which is important. He knows sometimes less is better. He knows sometimes also silence is a great communicator, on television. On television, (a survey of baseball announcers) stated I said fewer words than anyone on television."

Fans will have to wait until road games to hear an authentic home-run call. Benetti knows he cannot duplicate the uniqueness of the generation before him on both sides of town.

"The home-run call is part of the game...and is not part of the game," Benetti said. "It's a characteristic that's fantastic. I don't think I'm going to go and do that. How can you top someone (Harrelson) who's changed the baseball dictionary in this town? That's not the way I call a game."

### **No down-the-middle style**

One other characteristic Benetti shares with Harrelson is a pro-Sox tilt to his style. Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf once said he was surprised to hear, moving to Chicago for law school in the late 1950s, that its announcers rooted for the teams. He had grown up in Brooklyn with the supposedly down-the-middle Red Barber, then Vin Scully broadcasting Reinsdorf's beloved Dodgers.

Here's the dirty secret, according to Benetti: Scully is pro-Dodgers, but projected on the air in a non-blatant fashion.

"Vin, you can hear it, he cares for the Dodgers," he said. "Everything is viewed through a Dodgers lens in some small way. That's where law school helped me be an advocate for a team without necessarily yelling. A good attorney doesn't stand up and say you're not being fair to my client. I'm the Sox announcer in this case and will see things from the Sox lens."

Similarly, Benetti will not use his new bully pulpit to advocate for those stricken with cerebral palsy, an affliction he has largely overcome. He is simply setting an example by going to work and performing a normal job.

"By walking around, I do that," he said of being a role model. "It's truly amazing and something I never set out to do. I never was an activist-type. I've come through some of the non-profits in this community, the people who care about kids with a disability. I encourage people to be inquisitive. You never know where you're going to end up with someone in terms of your understanding of who they are."

Respectful of seniority and impact, Benetti will always let Harrelson have the final word about his hiring.

"They had a ton of guys who applied," said Hawk. "They made a good choice."