

- John Boccacino: Hello, and welcome back to be 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, the communications specialist in Syracuse University's Office of Alumni Engagement. I earned my Bachelors degree in broadcast journalism from the S.I Newhouse School of Public Communications in 2003 and later received my executive Masters degree in public administration from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs in 2020. You can find our podcast on all of your major podcasting platforms, including Apple Podcasts, Google Play, and Spotify. You can also find our podcast at [alumni.syr.edu/cuseconversations 00:00:44] and [anchor.fm/cuseconversations. 00:00:54]
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- John Boccacino: Our guest today is Joe Castiglione. The long-time radio play-by-play voice of the Boston Red Sox. He is the longest tenured member of the broadcasting booth for the Boston Red Sox since 1983, he has been the radio voice. So if you're in the Northeast and you're a Red Sox fan, you've heard Joe's voice. And there's something magical about baseball being called on the radio. And Joe has had the pleasure of doing this longer than any other radio voice in the proud history of the Boston Red Sox. Here in this degree, a Masters degree from Newhouse. in 1970 he also worked on the WAER radio staff at Syracuse. And he's our guest today on the podcast. Joe, I really appreciate you making some time. How are you holding up these days?
- Joe Castiglione: Thank you, John. Very good. We'll have a baseball the way it was last year, at least to start the season. That means we will not be traveling and we'll do the home games live and visiting games, the away games, off of TV monitor at least for the first half of the year.
- John Boccacino: None of us knew this time last year that sports was going to take a hiatus. We've never seen anything in our lifetime like COVID. What kind of challenges did that present to you? First of all, not even knowing what's going to happen with baseball, but when it resumed how did you handle that challenge of trying to call games during this most unusual of years?
- Joe Castiglione: Well, we were just happy to have baseball at all. It started in late July, played 60 games, so happy to get paid too. So that was a big plus. And the challenge is no fans, but they mixed in crowd noise and it did really work. I mean, it's certainly not authentic, but it worked to have some low crowd noise, both for the games that were unfolding in front of us when the team was home and for the road games doing off the TV monitor. The hardest part probably, and the most

disappointing part was no contact with anybody. I mean, I'd get to know players over the years. We had no contact with any player or manager other than Zoom. And that was the way it was. I mean we went to the fifth floor at Fenway Park. Nobody was allowed up there. We weren't allowed on the field or the clubhouse. And that's still the case today. So it may change the way sports is covered too.

John Boccacino: Did you notice any difference in maybe how you were broadcasting a game? I know that the crowd plays such an integral part in both the action itself, the ambiance of being at a game, how did that affect you as a broadcast or not having a live crowd?

Joe Castiglione: Well, it didn't affect the actual play by play of what was happening. It was the aftermath, where you recap a play and the crowd is still screaming because the Red Sox player hit a three Run Homer, you didn't have that. You did have a low crowd noise. So that was certainly an adjustment. You're at the mercy of the TV director too, because the TV director calls the shots. That was really something that we had no control over. And if he doesn't show you or the director didn't show you where the ball is, whether it's fair or foul, home run or whatever, you have to wait and wait for the definitive word.

Boundary calls were especially tough, whether it was a home run or whether it was a foul ball because they take a tight shot of the foul ball, and they don't pull back really quickly to see whether the batter runner was circling the bases are going back to foul ball, they had for more. So those are some of the things that I think were the challenges, but it worked pretty well. And a lot of people told us they didn't know that we weren't live at those road games and it could be the wave of the future as much as we love being on the scene and having personal contact, it could be the wave of the future because the main counters save a lot of money.

John Boccacino: Well, it's a testament show though, to the skill that you bring that a lot of your audience wouldn't be able to tell if you were there. I mean, it's one thing if there was a glaring gap and you're almost waiting for the result to happen, the fact that you could seamlessly pull off these calls and I'm sure there were situations where you just had to rely on your instincts, you've done this for so long it has to be part instinctual to a lot of your broadcast calls.

Joe Castiglione: Oh, sure. Yes. And that's where experience really helps. I mean, if I were a young broadcast that just starting out, that would be extremely difficult, but you can follow patterns and it was not that tough an adjustment. It just wasn't as much fun, really.

John Boccacino: The fact that the 2021 season is going to be starting come April 1st. I know you've been calling games down in Fort Myers, Florida for the Red Sox, spring training games. And those have been in person, right? You were down there actually calling those games.

Joe Castiglione: Yes we are in person including road games, we play in a pod. We play with the Atlanta Braves nine games there in North about an hour from here. The Minnesota Twins were five miles away in Fort Myers, eight games with them, Tampa Bay about 45 minutes away in Port Charlotte, eight games with them. And there are a couple of games with Baltimore, Sarasota that about an hour and 15 minutes in Pittsburgh and Brayden then, which is about an hour and 20 minutes. So that's pretty much the way they did it they keep teams in pods, close to home.

John Boccacino: What is going to be the plan for this regular season, with your travel, with calling games at Fenway, what is your outlook looking like?

Joe Castiglione: Well, right now we are not going to travel at least the first half of the season. Whether we travel in the second half, depends I think on what's happening with COVID and the new strains and vaccinations and that type of thing. So it's really too early to call, but I think our TV people are already under the understanding that they're not going to travel at all. So I would think it would be doubtful that we do too, unless of course we make post season. And last year, the only ones that the travel for postseason, the Tampa Bay Rays, the Dodger broadcasters did their radio games throughout the world series and throughout the players from their homes. Charlie Steiner was in his home. [Rick Muddy 00:08:00] was in his home.

John Boccacino: I know Fenway Park is going to have, what I think, 12% capacity for games, which is a welcome sign to at least have the trickle back of getting closer to normalcy.

Joe Castiglione: Yeah, it'd be about 4,500. Here it's retraining. It's 20% about 1900.

John Boccacino: I want to go back in time a little bit and talk about baseball in general and your love for radio broadcasting. There's something special. Baseball is such a sensory sport. When you're there in person, you've got the smell of the fresh cut grass, and you've got the crack of the bat. It's an audible sport. There's so many of those senses that really play up to it and radio, you're painting a picture for the people that are listening to the games. When did you yourself become so interested and so involved in a radio broadcasting?

Joe Castiglione: Well, I think when I realized it wasn't good enough to be a player, which I knew at about age 10, most of us are frustrated players. So I think that was a big factor. As a kid growing up in New Haven, Connecticut, I was a Yankee fan. We all learned from our mistakes. I was rooting for the Yankees and Mel Allen was my hero. And actually I probably watch more games on TV than the radio because Yankees did 140 to 150 games. Then, when I went out to work in Youngstown, Ohio cover the Pirates and the Indians in those days, those teams did only about 40 TV games. So that was not a full-time job.

So that's why I really wanted to do radio. My first baseball jobs were television for the Indians games in 1979, the CBS affiliated store broadcasting. And then my next job was the Milwaukee Brewers on a pay TV. We had a little box on top of the TV and had to subscribe. Basically a movie channel was called Select TV. And then I did the first cable games in Cleveland in 1982, before I came to the Red Sox. And in those days, the Red Sox did about 100 games on TV, maybe 110, but I wanted to do radio because it was every game that it was a full-time job.

John Boccacino: What is it about the art of baseball play-by-play that you think is a perfect match for your talents compared to you mentioned you did television work in Cleveland and Youngstown, but you've done this for so long. Why exactly do you think that you're so well suited for doing the baseball play-by-play?

Joe Castiglione: Well, it's the pace of the game. Baseball is a radio game because there's a lot of non-action. People can listen with half an ear. Tune out, tune back in when the announcer raises his voice so you know something exciting is happening. You don't need total concentration. So I think that's a big factor as why it's a radio game and TV doesn't do baseball justice. It's a wide area, very wide area. And a small ball. Basketball is easy, big ball, small area, and same with football, but it's not a great by cocky. It's not a great television game. So that's a big factor I think. And I've heard it said, Ernie Harwell told me this many years ago, the all famed broadcaster from the Tigers, "Television is an analyst game and a director's game, baseball and radio is an announcer's game. Nothing happens till the answer says it does."

John Boccacino: People rely on you so much to be that chief storyteller when they're listening to those games and they trust you that what you're saying is accurately painting the picture. How do you go about building that trust with your audience?

Joe Castiglione: Well, you have to be consistent and trust is the biggest that we're John. I think you captured that very well. You have the audience believe in what you say. I mean, you can't chill for the club. You have to be accurate in your descriptions. There's too many checks and balances. So I think you have to be honest and earn the trust of the listener. And it's just by describing what you see as it happens and not there covering up for mistakes of players, or management's poor decisions. It's really something that you really have to be honest about.

John Boccacino: A lot of broadcasters, nowadays, the younger generation, it seems they want to use stats and they want to cram stats down a listener when they're doing their broadcast. And I'm sure that there's a time and a place for stats, but your style seems to be more down-home storytelling weaving in anecdotes in between the lulls and action. Where did you learn the art of storytelling and how do you try to weave in and fill those silent moments where there's not action?

Joe Castiglione: Well, I think by studying the greats like Mel Allen and the Ernie Harwell, that it's a storytelling game, baseball is all about stories. If you overdo statistics, it becomes too much like work for the audience. I mean, analytics are fine. They

tell you a lot, but people don't want to hear in great detail about spin rates and all that kind of thing. They'd much rather have a story. A story tells the picture's entertainment. You're trying to entertain as well as informed. And if you get too heavily into statistics, for the listener, it's like an extension of their workday. This should be relaxation.

John Boccacino: I know you've mentioned Ernie Harwell a couple of times, and of course we still pleased to have Vin Scully. I know he retired, but a weird fact, he's on Twitter and he's sharing his love of baseball on social media. What are some lessons that Ernie, the legendary Ernie Harwell imparted upon you and Vin Scully and all those other great baseball voices?

Joe Castiglione: Well, to be honest, to describe what you see as it's happening and to make sure that you call the play in great detail so that the fans have a good idea of what's going on. And to use a story, a story tells a thousand words. I mean, if your story relates to the point you're trying to make it's well worth it and it's entertainment too, which I think we have to realize that we're trying to entertain as well as inform our audience to keep them with us.

John Boccacino: So how did you go Joe, from being someone who grew up loving, listening to Mel Allen, being a Yankee fan, was it a tough adjustment to go to being the radio voice of the Red Sox?

Joe Castiglione: No, not at all because it was a full-time job and I'm from New England from the Haven. And I had been familiar, I'd already done Cleveland and Milwaukee Brewer games. So where's the signature franchise, the Boston Red Sox. So it was not difficult at all. You go where the opportunity happens to be. And I had a lot of people who helped me along the way. One of my great mentors is [Bill O'Donell 00:15:11] a long time voice of Syracuse sports and WSYR radio. And also on channel three, he was the anchor. He did Syracuse scans national championship team in 1959 and football, did their basketball. I met him at Colgate when I was an undergrad. We did the same triple overtime game with the Colgate Raiders, Red Raiders then, now just Raiders, almost knocking off they bang. So [Jim Bay Haim 00:15:38] then went to triple overtime.

So Bill was a great mentor. I met him that night in our little Huntington gym, which was, I don't know, built around the turn of the 20th century, probably seated about four or 500 people. And I was doing the game on the college station and there were about maybe 50 people in the stands expecting a blowout. But as word got out, that Colgate was right in the game and threatening to pull an upset, people started coming because everybody was in walking distance and we had a full house. And that's how I met Bill O'Donell who would be a mentor later, when I had to do the Baltimore Orioles, my TV and radio and NBC football for many years after his time in Syracuse, where he was really the voice of SU sports.

John Boccacino: You've been behind the mic for some of the highest highs and the lowest lows of being a Red Sox fan. What has it been like for you to be the standard bear. It's 38 years. You're the longest tenured broadcaster that they've had in their private history. What does that mean to you to get to carry that?

Joe Castiglione: Well, it's an honor, John. It's a responsibility again, to keep your credibility and to have your audience trust you. So I think I've been very privileged to be in that role. And again, consistency and trust are the two biggest keys.

John Boccacino: Well, look, the Red Sox had a tormented history. From facing Bob Gibson in the world series that impossible summer in '67, '86, Bill Buckner, the ball goes through his legs and the med storm back to win the world series. But in 2004, you're one year remove from the pain of losing in the NLCS. You get down three nothing to the Yankees and they come storming back, WIN the greatest comeback in baseball history, the only team, the first team to come back from a three nothing deficit. What was that season like? Can you summarize just, when you realize it was a special team and what it was like calling games during that magical October run?

Joe Castiglione: Well, I can't say I predicted it would happen down three games to none and losing game three, 19 to eight to the Yankees at Fenway Park. It was an interesting season in that there was a lot of animosity between the two teams. Late July there was a game at Fenway where the management was going to rain it out. It was a national TV game at four o'clock Saturday afternoon. And they were going to rain it out because the field was pretty well soaked, but the players petitioned the owners to play the game. And Yankees led most of the game. They did play and late in the game, Arod and Jason Varitek got into it. Varitek gave him the leather sandwich, when Arod was complaining about being hit by a pitch. And then Red Sox still trailily won the game on a walk-off home run by Bill Miller off Mariano Rivera.

The greatest closer of all time, he owned Rivera. Something that 455 nobody did in his career against the Mariano Rivera. So there were signs that could happen. Another thing that we noticed, the Red Sox did not have a starter, miss a startER all year because of injury. The starting five started every game they were scheduled to start, and that doesn't happen very often. So that's a pretty good pitching. And you thought you had a chance, you had a veteran team, most of whom were not homegrown and they had traded Nomar Garciaparra. You had some hope, but down three to none, there wasn't a lot of hope.

John Boccacino: And it almost seemed like anti-climactic that it goes to a four game sweep of the Rockies to bring home the world series title Sox fans would have taken no drama, just get it over with, get the championship. But I want to take you back to that world series because you were the first Red Sox radio broadcaster to ever get to proclaim the Boston Red Sox are the world champions since radio didn't broadcast world series games until 1921, three years after Boston's last world series victory. How much thought went into your call of the final out? And

did you allow yourself to even think about that moment, given the cursed history of the Red Sox?

Joe Castiglione: Oh, I did John. I've thought about it for years. How would I draw the last out of the world championship? The first one since 1918. And I went back and forth in my mind and finally came to the conclusion, I can't script it. I don't know how it's going to end. So I'll just react to what happens. I've known broadcasters that try to script it and they might mess it up. Something might throw a monkey wrench into it, and it just doesn't work that way. And I was just hoping for something definitive. I didn't want a diving catch, did he catch it or didn't he catch it? Check swing. We have to wait for the first base umpire on the appeal. I wanted a definitive play and we got a simple ground ball to the pitcher. Round ball stabbed by a folky under hands, the first and the Red Sox are the world champions for the first time at 86 years, that was, I think, the best way it could have ever happened.

John Boccacino: What was that moment like when you see something that again, generations waited for and never got a chance to see their beloved Sox to win the title?

Joe Castiglione: Well, they say an athletes sometimes gets in a zone. I thought I was in a zone too. I was in our booth, my partner Jerry took me on and going down to the clubhouse for the celebration because we were up three games to none and Red Sox fans still don't count on that for sure. But we had a pretty good idea. So, I was pretty much alone and I just was so focused on what happened and I wanted to let the crowd play. And can you believe it was the call, which I think fans identify with because there've been so many tough moments over the years.

John Boccacino: Yeah. The Red Sox fans really put their time in between the Curse of the Bambino and winning that world series in 2004. I wanted to ask you that question because it hit me I was watching a replay of the baseball documentary by Ken Burns and Bob Costas is talking about that moment too, back in '86 when there was no radio around in 1918 to call. So you got a chance to make history. And that's just so special that a Syracuse alum got to be behind the mic for that.

Joe Castiglione: Right place at the right time. The lungs of an Iran, a lot of great moments in sports, but that was particularly satisfying. And then to have it three more times, four world championships in 15 years.

John Boccacino: Well, speaking of that Syracuse connection, let's go a little bit down memory lane with the orange. You mentioned doing your undergraduate work at Colgate. And actually I do want to go back to that game, that triple overtime, [Jim Bay Haim 00:22:52], our hall of fame coach has a rebound shot at the buzzer to four set third over time and [Dave Bangen 00:22:58] and behind pull out the win. If you could think back to it, what were your thoughts on Bee Hime and Bangen and that Syracuse basketball tradition, what kind of struck you about that?

Joe Castiglione: Well, I still think they've been the best player in Syracuse history. They might get an argument on that. And certainly we had nobody like that at Colgate. And we had been blown out by 40 points two or three weeks before at the Manley Fieldhouse. So we weren't expecting a competitive game by any means, but there were so many different aspects of that game. Our coach was Bob Duffy, 24 years old. He was a Colgate grad six class of '62, I think the last time Colgate would be Syracuse and basketball. Very young guy. And he had been just released by the Detroit Pistons and Colgate coach quit the first week of the season. So he was available and they gave him the job. And his brother Richie Duffy was the point guard for Syracuse. He was a man that handle the ball and they had, of course, besides being Jim Bay Haim, they had a [Sam Penn 00:24:16] seal.

We've got a rebound, I think, in the first overtime, but send it to the second overtime. And then Bay Haim got the miss shot. You can still see it in the back of the remedy, gets the rebound and ties the game. And then in the third overtime, our best player, George Dalzell filed out. And I think Syracuse won by 10, but it was a exhilarating game. And I did a story for the 50th anniversary of that game for the Circus Newspaper. And it was still the most unforgettable basketball game I've ever done. We still haven't beaten Syracuse, but it was great. And then we played Syracuse usually twice in a season. And I think I know 1962 was the last win and one of my real great friends, a dear friend, the late Pat Greenwald did the game. Syracuse grad. He was, I believe lose class of '57. He was a Jim Brown's class, but he was still in Syracuse sports and he did the game.

John Boccacino: Listen, you're not going to get an argument from me over who was the greatest Syracuse basketball player. Dave Bing is so highly regarded and respected. I wish the current generation could appreciate just how much of a talent he was.

Joe Castiglione: What a great guy. I mean he went on to become mayor of Detroit as a civic duty, not because of any ego or any financial reasons. Very much a model citizen, no question about Syracuse coaches afraid of Lewis who always had an orange towel with terrible towels, which was actually before the Pittsburgh Steelers had the terrible towels in the 70s, but he had the big orange towel that he wave around. And I think Syracuse had been pretty bad in the early 60s. And then Bing being put them on the map, but it was a tremendous game that we relive every year. It really was my introduction sports broadcasting. I mean, working on the student station, there was nobody to instruct. There was nobody to critique because nobody really wanted to do that. I got to do the games as a freshmen for football and basketball because nobody else, the seniors didn't want to do it.

I guess they wanted to be heard. And for me, it was a tremendous opportunity. I was very blessed to have that opportunity at Colgate. We never did baseball games because we didn't have battery powered equipment. And there was no electrical outlet by the baseball field, if you can believe that. But then I went on

to grad school after I graduated from Colgate. I knew my career. I didn't really think of TV. I thought of radio and I really wanted a career there. And I actually worked in Connecticut for six months doing high school sports in Merredin and news in New Haven. And I had done this jockey work in Ansonia, but I went to grad school because I wasn't making any money and I didn't see a bright future. So I thought maybe that would help me. And so in the January of '69, I went to SU to the sequence.

They called it then. The graduate program 11 months. I came in the middle of, usually it went from September through August, I went January or February 1st and through January. And it worked out well because I got to work at channel three in Syracuse, my first television experience, I started as a booth announcer. We did station IDs basically. This is channel three, WSYR TV Syracuse, NBC and Syracuse. And there were tags to do with commercials, on Sunday morning with the movies. And it was a great opportunity because I could do everything. After I had some little more experience, I would sign on the station, especially in vacation time in the summer. On television, I would be anchoring the Today's Show News cut-ins at 7:25 and 8:25 from the channel three studios and then I would go to class up on the Hill and then I'd come back.

That'd be in the booth doing station IDs or whatever they had me do. I filled in for everybody. I was a DJ, a booth announcer, did news, did sports. Joe Marinas was my mentor. I did Syracuse basketball with Joe longtime voice of orange sports and the Syracuse as well. And we did the basketball games in '69, '70 on WSYR radio until I left to go to Youngstown, Ohio. That turned out to be a good move too, because I got to anchor 6:00 and 11:00 every night to do radio play-by-play of Youngstown state sports with Ron Jaworski as our quarterback, even though we roll in nine and basketball high school basketball, and I met my wife there.

John Boccacino: What more could you ask for? When you look back on it, what's the biggest way you can say Syracuse University impacted your broadcasting style in your broadcasting career?

Joe Castiglione: Well, I think it was the opportunity to do it. To get experienced to be on the air and to learn by doing. I think that was the biggest thing. We had a good news course. I remember there was very good that taught me a lot about TV news. And if you do any sports, you're still news man. So I think that was very helpful. I don't know if I was a student first or an announcer first. Probably in my mind, I was an announcer first, but I did get the Masters degree and it really helped me in later years because it was the biggest factor in me getting a teaching job. I taught 29 years, the self-designed broadcast course at Northeastern University in Boston, 12 years at Franklin Pierce University in Ringe, New Hampshire. And when you're at Emerson College in Boston.

So having that sheepskin really helped me get those jobs and how academia works. I may want to see the degrees, but it was great. And I think that helped

me because I was able to give back to a lot of youngsters, a lot of students along the way, and some of my Northeastern skits students went on to what big things. [Don Asolo 00:30:43] was a TV announcer for many years now, the TV voice of the San Diego Padres. We've had others who have gone places in hockey, including the NHL. And Michael Haynes was a young man in my first class. Who went on to be Colorado Avalanche, I guess it is the Avalanche. And there were others too in minor league hockey and baseball. So I think that Syracuse experience with academia helped me get that teaching job. And quite frankly, I did it for extra income, although it wasn't very much, but it was great because in later years I was giving back. I did it, as I say at Northeastern for 29 years.

John Boccacino: I don't have to tell you this, but sports broadcasting is such a competitive industry. And there's so many students that want to follow in your footsteps. What's the biggest piece of advice you would give to someone who's listening to our podcast who wants to get into sports broadcasting?

Joe Castiglione: Learn how to prepare. I mean, most of your work is done before they say play ball, but you have to be ready to capitalize on the moment. You have to be on top of it. Being prepared is I think the number one aspect you have to have. You have to be credible. You have to be honest and you have to be descriptive. I think it does take ability. Not everybody can do it, but I think being prepared makes everything so much easier. People ask me in baseball, how do you prepare? How many hours do you prepare? Well, I think in baseball, you prepare a lifetime. Now it's different than other sports because the action carries it. In baseball the action doesn't carry it. So having that background, I think is critical.

John Boccacino: I'm always impressed when it comes to sports broadcasters, how quickly you guys can recall. And we're talking vividly 1965 Colgate Syracuse. And I feel like it's just as fresh in your mind now as it was all those years ago. Do you ever find yourself forgetting other things and still having great recall for sports? Has a part of your memory suffered?

Joe Castiglione: Yeah, it's compartmentalize. Don't ask me. It's in my checking account. I'm pretty good with things like birthdays and dates, but there are a lot of things I don't recall. What I do about baseball because in sports, because that's where my interest lies and my wife doesn't quite understand that sometimes. "How can you remember what happened in 1965 and you can't remember what I told you last night?"

John Boccacino: Well, Joe, it's really been a privilege and a pleasure having your story here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I want to thank you for your time. Wish you nothing but the best. Again, Joe has been the legendary voice since 1983 for the Boston Red Sox. Best of luck Joe into and keep in touch.

Joe Castiglione: Thank you very much, John, go Orange. Except when you play Colgate.

This transcript was exported on Mar 30, 2021 - view latest version [here](#).

John Boccacino: Thanks for checking the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.
My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.