

BILL STERN

Portrait of a Sportscaster

BY TERRY BAKER

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Bill Stern bringing you the 183rd edition of the Colgate Sports Newsreel . . . featuring strange and fantastic stories . . . some legend, some hearsay . . . but all so interesting we'd like to pass them along to you!

During radio's heyday no one in the field of sports broadcasting could match the popularity that Bill Stern enjoyed. While other announcers merely relayed the events to the audience, Stern used his words to paint a vivid picture of the action on the field. Critics did not speak kindly of Bill's flamboyant style but they couldn't argue with its success.

Born July 1, 1907 in Rochester, New York, Bill was the youngest of two sons born to Issac and Lena Stern. His father was a successful clothing manufacturer so there was not a money shortage in the Stern household. If anything the abundance of money became a problem as Bill grew older.

Bill came to rely heavily on his father's, money using it to buy favors or to pull him out of financial scrapes. After several such occasions his father came to the realization that Bill needed a stronger disciplinary hand to guide him. After his freshman year in high school Bill was packed off to a prep school in Tarrytown, New York. It was hoped that the school would instill in Bill a sense of discipline where his parents could not. The school failed as well.

From the time he was a boy Bill desired to "be somebody". He loved the theater and hoped to be a part of it someday. Now, away from his parents, he seized every opportunity to sneak away from school and

attend Broadway shows. A sizeable allowance from his parents made these trips possible. Eventually the school found out about these excursions and Bill spent most of his first year on probation. The next year he was expelled.

Bill's parents enrolled him in another prep school for his senior year. Unfortunately this was a school that was scheduled to close the following year. Since teachers knew they were going to be out of work at the end of the year they demanded little of their students. As a result Stern learned little during that year. The effects showed as Bill flunked his college boards fifteen times in an effort to get into Cornell University.

Even with these failures Mr. and Mrs. Stern were determined that Bill would continue his education. With his parents coaxing Bill entered Pennsylvania Military College in the fall of 1925.

At P.M.C. strict discipline was the rule of thumb. Everyone was treated exactly the same and the fact that Bill's father had money meant nothing here. Hard work was the only way to get ahead and Bill began to apply himself for the first time in his life. His grades improved dramatically and those efforts paid off in other areas as well. Through hard work and dedication Bill earned promotions to the rank of lieutenant and graduated second in his class.

The future should have been bright but the events of October, 1929 changed all that. Bill's father lost everything when the stock market collapsed. A senior at P.M.C. at the time, Bill was now faced with the reality that he would have to make it on his own without any more financial aid from his parents.

Although shaken by the turn of events, Stern handled the situation well. Those

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years at college had installed in him a sense of confidence about himself and his abilities. In the summer of 1930, Bill and a friend set out for Hollywood to pursue his dream of becoming a rich and famous actor. That never developed but the trip was not a total loss.

While in Hollywood, Stern made the acquaintance of Sam Rothafel, better known in the entertainment business as Roxy. Bill had become friends with his son Arthur and more importantly had fallen in love with his daughter Beta. A romance blossomed and when Beta and her mother moved back to New York, Bill followed them.

He returned home to Rochester and through the use of phone calls and letters was able to keep his romance alive. They were engaged soon after, and as a goodwill gesture to his future son-in-law Rothafel offered Bill a job.

Stern started as an usher at the Roxy Theater but his hard work and enthusiasm earned him a promotion to the job of assist-

ant stage manager. Three months later the stage manager resigned and Bill was appointed to fill the post. He performed his job admirably considering the fact that he had but a few months of basic training. Rothafel was quite impressed with Bill's efforts and, later, when he and his staff moved into the new Radio City Music Hall, Bill came along.

It was a challenge developing a new show for a new theater and Stern threw all of his energies into this job. The show took a lot of effort, and dedication which meant that Bill had no free time left for his fiancée. Eventually the lack of time together forced the two to break off their engagement. As the show got established Stern began to find himself with that spare time he had been lacking before. This gave him a chance to pursue other interests, an opportunity he did not waste.

With NBC studios right across the street from the music hall, Bill decided that he wanted to try his hand at radio announcing. The fact that he had no previous experience did not dampen his spirits. He met with John Royal, the vice president in charge of programming at NBC, and began to pester him for a chance to go on the air.

After months of Bill's constant nagging, Royal relented. Stern would get to broadcast two minutes of the Navy-William & Mary football game with the legendary Graham McNamee. His performance pleased Royal enough to earn him two more assignments. Then came the chance to broadcast a full quarter of the Army-Illinois game.

Still wanting to impress his boss, Stern came up with what he thought was a brilliant plan. The Thursday before the game Bill called as many friends and relatives as he could and asked them to send telegrams to Mr. Royal praising his performance on the broadcast.

It was a good idea and probably would have worked except for one thing. Bill forgot to have them wait until the game was over before sending those telegrams.

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The next day all those telegrams were on John Royal's desk praising Bill's performance on a broadcast that hadn't taken place yet. Royal was not amused at this ploy and fired Bill on the spot.

Stern still had his job at Radio City but he knew that his future would lie in radio. Stern quit the music hall in the spring of 1935 and began making plans to return to the broadcast booth.

He heard through the grapevine that a chain of clothing stores was planning to sponsor some football games in the South. Stern asked for and got the broadcasting job. The only condition was that Bill agreed to work in one of the stores until sponsorship was set. Since the job would not start until August, Bill decided to take his mother's advice and visit some of their relatives in Michigan. It was a trip Bill would not regret.

It was now that Stern met his cousin Harriet May for the first time. Harriet was a beautiful, intelligent young girl of nineteen and they were immediately taken with each other. By the time Bill was set to leave they had already discussed their wedding plans. Bill was ready to tie the knot now but Harriet convinced him that they should wait until she had finished college first.

Stern returned home to his new job and waited anxiously for his chance to broadcast again. Finally word arrived in late September that the store had bought the rights to the Centenary football games in Shreveport, Louisiana. Bill would be covering all their games and was told to drive down immediately. His first two games went well but then fate stepped in and dealt Bill a severe blow.

While returning from his second game in Austin, Texas, Bill and his partner Jack Gelzer were involved in a terrible car wreck. Jack came out unhurt but Stern's left leg was broken. He was taken to the nearest hospital where the leg was set and

placed in a cast. It should have been a routine recovery but after a week Bill was still in tremendous pain. The doctors realized something was wrong and quickly shipped Bill back to New York City. Doctors there removed the cast and discovered that the cuts Bill's leg had suffered had not been cleansed properly. Gangrene had set in and there was no other choice but to remove the leg.

The recovery was a long and slow process. Harriet wrote him letters everyday urging him to keep up his spirits and get well. Her words of love and encouragement kept Bill going through some rough times. Then Stern received some encouraging words from a former employer.

John Royal had been informed of Bill's accident and went to visit him. He told Bill to hurry up and get well because there was a job waiting for him at NBC when he was ready. This was the only other incentive Stern needed to work his way back to good health.

By August of 1936, Bill had recovered enough to make the trek to NBC. True to his word, Royal had a job waiting for him. Bill would be doing football games on an assignment basis. It wasn't a full-time job but Bill was just happy to be working again.

In April of the following year Bill and Harriet were married. Since they wanted to settle down, Bill made another all-out effort to get a full-time job. He found one in Des Moines, Iowa that would pay him \$75 a week. When informed of Stern's plans, Royal asked him to stay and offered him the same money to do so. After receiving permission from the Iowa station Bill agreed to stay at NBC. It was a wise move because within a few months Stern became the number one sports announcer at the network.

The top spot meant more responsibilities and also more recognition. Bill found himself announcing not only football but track and boxing as well. In 1938 Bill began his long relationship with Metro Goldwyn Mayer pictures, filming seg-



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ments for their "News of the Day" newsreels. He also made cameo appearances in a half-dozen motion pictures, most notably "Pride of the Yankees". Stern's popularity began to grow as was evidenced by a poll conducted by Radio Daily. The 1938 poll had him as the second most popular sportscaster in America behind only Ted Husing of CBS.

Stern always tried to give his audience a smooth description of the game. Bill made mistakes like everyone else but he preferred to cover them up rather than draw attention to them. He felt that making light of these errors would only distract the audience by making them wonder what other mistakes were being made.

The most widely known example of this occurred during an Army football broadcast. Stern had Army running back Doc Blanchard running for a touchdown when in reality it was Glenn Davis. When he realized his error Bill merely had Blanchard lateral the ball to Davis who then scored. Although this was a major mistake, the audience never knew of it and had still heard the correct result.

By the fall of 1939 Stern had firmly

entrenched himself as the nation's number one sportscaster. It was because of this that Bill was approached by representatives of Colgate in September of that year. Colgate wanted to sponsor a fifteen minute weekly sports show and they wanted Bill as the host provided that he could come up with a good format for the program. Stern was very interested and immediately began working on ideas.

After going through many concepts, Bill finally came up with a winner. The show would consist of two sports related stories told by Bill in his unique dramatic style. Some stories were true, others merely fiction and they only needed to be remotely connected to sports for Stern to use them on the show. There would even be time each week for a noted celebrity to appear and tell his or her favorite sports story.

Colgate loved the idea and the "Colgate Sports Newsreel" first went on the air over the NBC network on October 8, 1939. Audiences loved it too and the show became an immediate hit. Listeners were fascinated at how Bill could weave a story, linking unrelated incidents together through twists of fate or mere coincidence.

The show was always well done. Colgate spared no expense in seeing that the production was first rate. In fact, it was the most expensive fifteen minute program on the air, at one point costing \$4,300 a week to produce.

There were many costs involved besides Bill's salary. Actors were employed to dramatize key moments in the stories. Stern also used an organ and special effects to enhance the dramatic feel of the program. Then of course there were the celebrities who had to be paid for their appearances. All this was costly but it did provide for some entertaining radio.

It was never difficult to find a celebrity who was willing to go on the program. Performers such as Jack Benny, Frank Sinatra and Mickey Rooney were all anxious to appear on Bill's show. Finding two good stories a week was a different matter. Stern often found himself spicing up

or altering the facts entirely to give a story the dramatic effect it needed. However, Bill never changed a story without permission of the principals involved if they were living.

Stern worked long and hard to make the show the success it was. He researched and wrote many of the stories himself and spent at least eight hours a week in rehearsal.

The hard work paid off though as the "Colgate Sports Newsreel" remained on the air until June 29, 1951. For the first two years the show appeared on Sunday night. It then moved to Saturday night in 1941 before settling into its Friday night home in 1943. Stern's program was consistently one of the top-rated fifteen minute shows on the air, usually trailing only Walter Winchell. It wasn't until radio began losing its audience to television that Colgate decided to pull its sponsorship.

Colgate had made Bill a wealthy man (he earned \$2,500 a week at one point) but there were other important events happening during those years. In 1939 Stern was the announcer on the first televised baseball game. In later years he would work as a regular on NBC's college football telecasts. In 1940 he became sports director at NBC and also passed Ted Hus- ing in the Radio Daily poll to become the top sportscaster in the country. Last, but not least, it was during these years that Bill became the proud father of two daughters and a son.

Stern continued to work for NBC after the Colgate show was canceled but in 1952 the network decided to relieve him of his sports directors duties. It was strictly a business decision and did not reflect any displeasure with the job Bill had done. Whatever the reason, Bill saw it as an insult. After helping select his successor, Bill left NBC and in 1953 signed a three-year contract with ABC for \$55,000 a year. The deal with ABC called for Bill to host a daily radio sports show as well

as an evening television program. Bill also worked on the network's boxing and foot- ball telecasts.

When that contract expired, Bill found himself at one of the most critical points in his life. His health had been declining throughout the 50's and by 1956 he was in no condition to work anywhere.

He couldn't sleep without the aid of sleeping pills and since he lost his leg Bill required regular injections of morphine to help ease the pain. The doses became larger through the years and by the mid-fifties Bill depended on these medications for his daily survival. It would take pro- fessional help to cure Stern of these addictions.

Bill entered a Hartford, Connecticut hospital in June of 1956. It took six long months of treatment but with the support of his wife and the hospital staff he made it through. Now, feeling better than he had in years, Stern was anxious to resume his career.

Work was not easy to come by though. The networks knew of Bill's past problems and shied away from hiring him. Eventu- ally Bill found work as a disc jockey on a local station in New York City.

In September of 1957 Stern got his chance to go back into sports announcing. The Mutual Broadcasting System hired Bill to do a nightly sports show. The follow- ing January Colgate showed their faith in him by sponsoring a sports report two times each morning over the Mutual net- work. Bill's return was made complete by a 1959 TV Radio Mirror magazine poll that showed him as the nation's top sports- caster once again.

Bill continued his radio and television work throughout the 1960's until his death on November 19, 1971. Stern provided entertainment for millions of Americans during his 37 years behind the mike. In addition, his unique style earned him a spot as one of the most popular sports announc- ers of all-time.

And that's the three-o mark for tonight.