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Broadcaster George Hale still behind the microphone at 83

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Legendary broadcaster George Hale remains involved in the radio and television industry. PHOTO BY RICK MCHALE

BANGOR — Legendary sportscaster George Hale knew at age 6 what he wanted to be when he grew up.

When Hale was a child, his parents would spot him in their front yard, describing the passing cars into a sawed off broomstick. Two decades later, Hale was using a real microphone to broadcast play-by-play action of the University of Maine football games.

“Apparently, I was destined to do this,” Hale says.

Hale has done live commentary on more than 3,000 college and high school sporting events for WABI-Bangor. On Thursday night in Boston, the New England chapter of the National Academy of

Television Arts & Sciences — the same academy that distributes Emmys — will recognize Hale with the Gold Circle Award, honoring iconic television professionals in the industry for more than 50 years.

Dan Cashman, “The Nite Show” host on WABI-Channel 5, nominated the 83-year-old veteran broadcaster for the award.

“He’s a pillar of the broadcast community in Maine,” Cashman says of Hale. “There is no one else here with that kind of track record.”

Hale has been on the air for 62 years, and he has no plans of retiring.

On a Friday morning, after finishing a show for his George Hale/Ric Tyler weekday talk radio program on WVOM, Hale sips on a cup of iced tea inside Hero’s Sports Grill. A patron of the restaurant, his Maine Sports Hall of Fame trophy sparkles on display behind the bar.

When asked how many halls of fame he has been inducted into, Hale shrugs.

“I don’t know. Five or six,” he says. “If you live long enough, they give you something.”

Hale grew up around sports. The Cleveland native moved to New York City in fourth grade after his father, a marine engineer, got a job working on ships in Staten Island. The pair regularly attended Major League ball games to see the Dodgers, Yankees and Giants.

“Sports have always been a huge part of my life,” Hale says. “If I didn’t have sports, I’d be in jail.”

Hale always wanted to be a football player — a long shot for a 117-pound boy in a high school of some 2,500 students. He recalls the day his football coach escorted him down the hall to the cross-country coach’s classroom.

““You’re going to get killed out there,” the football coach told Hale, who ultimately decided that with his lanky frame, he was better suited to be a runner.

After graduation, Hale enlisted in the Navy. He served as a medic at Corpus Christi Naval Air Station in Texas in the early 1950s, treating Marines wounded in the Korean War.

To boost morale, Hale collaborated with an electrician and built a radio station to broadcast music, interviews and the daily menu throughout the hospital.

“Available for lunch today is... Crap,” Hale would joke on air before dedicating a song to a patient or staff member. “To the blonde nurse in Ward 7 who all the guys are in love with — this song is for you.”

“They loved it,” Hale says, grinning. “That’s when I knew I wanted to be a radio announcer.”

Hale returned to New York and began attending the School of Radio Technique with instructors who worked at NBC.

In addition to school and his student-training at Radio City, Hale kept busy with different side jobs. He worked at a grocery store, a publishing house, the Paramount Theatre as an usher and, on Saturday mornings, the zoo, cleaning monkey cages.

Hale’s connections with NBC eventually added some glamour to his life, introducing him to the big shots of that radio era such as Bert Parks and Mike Wallace. Hale says he once bowled with the drummer, Buddy Rich, and even went on a couple dates with some of The Rockettes.

“I had hair then,” Hale says. “I was living the Broadway life, and I was going to be a big star in New York.”

Hale observed in the 1950s that stardom involved appearing on television — still one of technology’s latest innovations. He expressed interest in becoming a TV broadcaster to NBC’s chief announcer, who told Hale he would need some experience if he ever wanted to break into that scene.

Desperate for a shot, Hale learned of a new TV station in a city he’d never heard of before — Bangor, Maine.

“They told me it was pretty far north,” Hale says, to which he

responded with the question: “Hudson Bay-north?”

Not quite Canada-bound, Hale drove his old Chevy some 500 miles to interview for a position at Maine’s first television station — WABI-TV — in 1953. He was hired as a staff announcer for WABI radio with the promise he would eventually get on screen.

“I was fascinated with Bangor,” Hale says of his transition from the Big Apple. “I thought there were bears behind every tree.”

Hale balanced his radio duties with occasional television work, which consisted exclusively of live commercial breaks for the first year. At the time, everything on TV was shot live in black and white with scripts written on cue cards.

Hale chuckles while recalling his first on-air assignment — a commercial for Viner’s Music Company — in which he unknowingly held an album cover upside-down.

“In the old days, what you put on the air was what you put on the air,” Hale says. “There was no taking it back.”

Hale’s chance at redemption came when he was selected for the Harvard beer commercials. He would pour himself a glass of the beer and hold it up, as if he were about to take a drink. Hale says this lasted about a week until the Women’s Christian Temperance Union arrived at WABI with picket signs, threatening to boycott the station over “that young boy on television selling beer.”

“I was 21,
but I
looked 16,”
Hale says.

He mimics
his boss’s
reaction to
the



George Hale began working for WABI-Bangor in 1953. PHOTO
COURTESY OF RICK MCHALE

controversy: “Good God, can’t you grow a beard?” he asked Hale before reassigning him to commercials selling public finance loans.

Hale planned to stay in Maine for two years and then return to the city. That changed in 1957 when he convinced WABI to start broadcasting University of Maine football games.

“All of the sudden, with no great planning or effort, I became ‘the sports guy,’” Hale says.

Hale’s roots in Maine deepened when he married a Brewer native and started raising children. He was absorbed in his work, arriving at the station at 5 a.m. and staying until 11 p.m., despite his boss’s pleas for him to leave.

Eventually, Hale was traveling regularly across the country to broadcast play-by-play commentary of UMaine football, basketball and baseball games on the radio and television. Sometimes, he traveled by plane. Other times, he caught a ride on the team bus.

“The most exciting thing was having the kids invite me out to pizza,” Hale says. “It was the little things that were special.”

Most notably, Hale covered seven College World Series in Omaha, Neb., and the 1965 Tangerine Bowl in Orlando — UMaine’s only invitation to a national bowl.

In October, UMaine celebrated the 50th anniversary of that Black Bears football team by hosting a reunion for those players. Hale was invited as a surprise guest speaker.

“They were all excited I was still alive,” Hale says. “We all remembered each other.”

Hale says he called out a few familiar faces during his speech: “Ronnie,” he said, “the campus police are still looking for you.”

Hale smiles. “The room just erupted,” he says.

Hale also mentored aspiring sports announcers who graduated

from UMaine and have since climbed into national prominence, including Bill Patrick of ESPN and the USA Network, Gary Thorne — ESPN's lead NHL play-by-play announcer — and Steve Martin — the voice of the NBA's Charlotte Hornets.

"George had opportunities to jump into higher markets," Cashman says. "His loyalty to WABI and Bangor is unparalleled."

Hale still appears on WABI-Channel 5 every Friday night to discuss sports at the professional, college and high school levels.

While Hale has become synonymous with Maine sports, he resents the label "sportscaster." He also worked as a disc jockey and a political reporter, interviewing politicians such as Margaret Chase Smith and Sen. Joseph McCarthy as well as musicians such as Little Richard.

"I'm a broadcaster," Hale says. "I did it all. Back then, you had to."

Cashman, 37, says that, like countless others, he grew up listening to Hale.

"People who are twice my age can also say they've grown up with George," Cashman says. "It's a comforting feeling to turn on the TV and still see him there."

While Hale never became a football player or a star in New York City, he has achieved celebrity status across Maine. He says strangers still stop him on the street, wanting to discuss politics or a high school tournament from decades ago.

"You don't realize how much you touch people," Hale says. "I still like when people come up and say hello."

Hale is the only Maine media representative who has won the Eastern College Athletic Conference Media Award, and he is the only non-graduate of the University of Maine to receive the Black Bear Award. He has been named Maine's Sportscaster of the Year multiple times and is in numerous halls of fame, including the Maine Broadcasting Hall of Fame and the New England Basketball Hall of Fame.


But fame has not gone to Hale’s head.


“I’m really not very talented, I’m just focused,” Hale says. “The only difference between you and me is that I have a microphone.”

Hale walks out of the restaurant, appearing unfazed by the stares he attracts. When the door closes behind him, several diners lean in over their tables and whisper:

“Was that George Hale?”

 Bio

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Taylor Vortherms covers sports in Hancock County. The St. Louis, Missouri native recently graduated from the Missouri School of Journalism and joined *The Ellsworth American* in 2013.

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