

Opinion: Evaluating Jim Boeheim's move from the bench to the broadcast booth

Color commentating is an interesting realm of broadcasting. In theory, no sporting event requires there be a color commentator. Play-by-play evaluation is the bare bones of the broadcast, providing the viewer with the in-game events and action.

Play-by-play sketches out the drawing, and a color commentator colors it in. They play a part that will either enhance or impair the viewer's experience.

If you sit in the chair— the expectation is that you provide fans with breaks in the action. Telling a story here, a statistic there — anything that can make a broadcast more vivid and exciting.

Hypothetically, if someone were to have spent 47 years coaching for one team, and in that time, solidified their name amongst the greatest ever to do it — their knowledge and understanding could lend nicely to becoming a TV personality.

I am, of course, talking about Jim Boeheim — who made his color commentating debut on Dec. 2 with the ACC Network in their broadcast of North Carolina v. Florida State.

Falling on the opening day of ACC Conference play, Boeheim worked alongside Wes Durham's play-by-play, and former Virginia guard/color analyst Corey Alexander.

A guy like Jim Boeheim can't step away from basketball. At least not yet. It is too ingrained in his life, and he has too much left to give to it.

When I first heard that would be delving into the realm of broadcasting, I didn't quite know what to think.

In press conferences, he developed somewhat of a reputation as a head coach, being blunt and even at times abrasive. So how would that translate into playing a role in the media?

In watching the game, I decided to take an approach different from any I had taken before. Instead of focusing on the game, I focused on the analysis.

I wrote down just about every word Boeheim said on air, and the following quotes are the ones that I found to be the most thought-provoking.

Boeheim: “I couldn’t be happier to be sitting right here, and not over there (points over to the bench).”

These were Boeheim's first words on the broadcast, and they were perfect.

The way it came to light last season that Boeheim would not return as head coach was the cause of a lot of speculation. But in his first on-air sentence, he told viewers anything and everything they needed to know. He's not coaching, and he is happy about it—end of story.

Boeheim: “If you get down inside, he’s (Bacot) a tremendous rebounder. That’s what he does best. He gets in there, gets a mismatch, and he’s got a bucket.”

Alexander: “Hey, wait a minute, you're forecasting stuff already? You just started this! You can’t be better at this job than I am early!”

Boeheim: “Lucky guess.”

This is the moment in the broadcast, about 5 minutes in, where I sat back and said, “he's got this.”

Alexander was no doubt there to act as training wheels for Boeheim, show him the tricks of the trade, and tee him up with questions when he saw fit, but this was the first

instance of Boeheim acting off pure basketball instinct, and by providing context for the viewer, he called the play as it happened live.

And Boeheim was sure to display some confidence through sarcasm to cap off the exchange.

Boeheim: “You know, John Wooden’s the greatest coach I ever knew, but he said whoever takes the first time out is going to lose the game, and he never took the first time out. Dean Smith never took the first time out. And Roy didn’t, you know they wanted their team to play out of it, but it works and it certainly worked this time, because it's 9-2 since that timeout.”

Alexander: “And coach, when you think about that does that change for you when you are on the road versus when you are at home?”

Boeheim: “I don’t think so. I think that was a bad stretch, I think that was the right timeout, they don’t always work, but when it works obviously it's pretty good.”



08 Dec 2001: John R. Wooden walks off the court after the championship game of the Wooden Classic tournament between the UCLA Bruins and the Alabama Crimson Tide at the Arrowhead Pond in Anaheim, California. UCLA defeated Alabama 79-57. Mandatory Credit: Adam Pretty/Allsport

This is where experience comes into play.

Not many people can relive stories and lessons from the greatest coaches in the history of college basketball, and if they can, they are likely already broadcasting or long retired.

Jim Boeheim has forgotten more about basketball than many of us could learn in several lifetimes. The wealth of knowledge that must live in his head is incomprehensible. Those are the kinds of people that I find most compelling as commentators. They draw content from relationships, conversations, observation, and instinct. And that's a huge part of why I think he will be successful.

Plus, the trip to Chapel Hill created an opportunity for Boeheim to catch up with one of those previously mentioned greatest coaches of all time.

Boeheim: “I would say that that would be a five-second call but I'm not sure that the officials can count that high, so I'm not sure.”

Alexander: “Hey coach, there is so much love between you and the officials with you over on this side, they are coming over, talking to you in every timeout.”

Boeheim: “That’s because they got me so mad the last few years, that they are trying to feel bad, feel sorry for me.”



NEW YORK - MARCH 10: Head coach Jim Boeheim of the Syracuse Orange argues with a referee during the semifinals of the Big East Men's Basketball Championships against the Georgetown Hoyas at Madison Square Garden on March 10, 2006 in New York City. (Photo by Jim McIsaac/Getty Images)

Snarky, quick, and authentic. The three adjectives I would use to encapsulate Boeheim's persona throughout the entire broadcast.

Nagging on the refs was perhaps his primary bit of the game, and solidified his place amongst the few people on the planet that can get away with ripping on the guys in stripes while coming across as enduring. They are people he knows personally, having worked simultaneously with and against them over the years. It was apparent the respect each party had for each other, but he didn't let them off easy.

It was like a weight was lifted off his shoulders, knowing that they couldn't throw a technical back in his face.

With that being said, as a color commentator, so much relies on the viewer's perception. Color commentators are the ones showing their personality, inserting themselves into the game action when they see fit.

What is compelling to one person, could be distasteful to the next. I think this is something Boenheim will face while broadcasting.

But he's not new to criticism, and it's not going to impact how he carries himself.

How's this for a transition?

Boenheim: "You know you want to take time off, but with 12 minutes to go, it's dangerous to take that time and not get the shot. I like to do that, a lot of people criticize that, in coaching."

Alexander: "Wait, you're saying that you were criticized?"

Boenheim: "Just by, you know, just by twenty thousand or so people some days."

Alexander: "Twenty, try thirty, that place always had thirty when you were on the sidelines."

Boeheim: "Yeah but they didn't know I couldn't hear them."

I often like to say that basketball is my favorite kind of poetry. Usually, I say that about the fluidity and beauty of the actual sport, but this interaction proves that it goes beyond what happens on the court.

It's easy to say Jim Boeheim means a lot to Syracuse. However, it's harder to successfully describe just how much he means to Syracuse, to someone who hasn't experienced it firsthand.

Two months ago, I did my best to convey that message in a portion of an article dedicated to Adrian Autry taking the helm of the program Boeheim held for 47 years.

He has made his name synonymous with Syracuse, one cannot exist without the other.

When I said this, my thought process was directly tied to the subject matter in this back-and-forth.

Boeheim and his teams drew some of the biggest crowds the sport had ever seen. A feat in and of itself. But he did it for decades.

Perhaps even more impressive, is that he did it, often when the product on the court didn't deserve that kind of love. But that was the culture he built. To be a Syracuse Fan developed into an addiction. To be a Syracuse Fan was to love and respect him as a coach, but be the first to criticize. Trust me, I would know.

When it comes to the last line, the writer in me jumps to a couple of different storylines.

The first being, he coached for 47 years and retired at 78. His hearing was quite simple, probably just not what it used to be in his last few seasons.

The second, and my favorite interpretation, is that he just simply did not care what anyone had to say. He was gonna run the program, his way.

Which leads perfectly to my final takeaway.

Boeheim: "I won today, I'm not losing any games sitting over here. Whether I win or not, that's okay. I got enough wins."

This was one of the final things he said on the broadcast, as the clock winded down. And I think it can act as a lesson for us all.

Wins come in all shapes and sizes. Only a fraction of the time do they get added to something as intangible as a record.

But I think Jim Boeheim has a lot of winning left to do, and it will be my pleasure to see some of it come in the form of his evolution as a broadcaster.