

**IT'S MAY 11**, a few minutes before 3 p.m. and Rachel Baribeau and Max Howell, co-hosts of the afternoon sports talk show "The 4th Quarter" on 97.3 The Zone, have settled in behind their microphones. Unlike what you see in television shows such as "Frasier," Baribeau and Howell sit directly across from each other, making eye contact as they discuss the line-up of guests and make a few last-minute adjustments to the pecking order.

After asking her producer to hunt down a potential guest for later in the program, Baribeau and her co-host get quiet, almost contemplative, like they're catching their mental and emotional breath before the On Air light turns red. And when it does, the last show of their second full week on the air together gets started.

"The 4th Quarter" is Baribeau's second show on WZNN 97.3, a Cox Broadcasting station that reformatted to sports talk in August 2011. Baribeau was there from the beginning, hosting a 3 to 7 p.m. show with The Birmingham News sports columnist Kevin Scarbinsky, who was reassigned to the morning with Scott Griffin in April.



# The Magic City's New Voice On Sports

Rachel Baribeau is in the zone with her new sports talk show.



Baribeau says the change was difficult emotionally, but she remained confident that she had something to offer Birmingham radio. "I used to make his skin crawl and embarrass him because I'd say we were radio married," she adds. "There is a certain truthfulness to that. You get to know their facial expressions and the way they do things and their tendencies and all those things."

Any worries she had about who she would share the airwaves with quickly dissipated when she heard the name Max Howell. A former assistant coach in the SEC and ACC, Howell has quite a resumé, having coached Emmitt Smith in high school and Deion Sanders at Florida State. He's also been in the radio business for 20 years, getting his start at Atlanta 680 The Fan. The two became friends shortly after Baribeau took her first job in Columbus, Ga.

However, their first introduction actually came over the air a couple of years earlier.

While studying at Auburn, Baribeau started working as a sideline reporter with Eagle Eye TV but was struggling to make a name for herself as a serious sports journalist when she was hit with a lightning bolt of inspiration. She placed an audio recorder next to her radio and called into Howell's radio show, making an immediate impression. "I called in and asked about the nickel package at Mississippi State. I think he was a little bit more composed than his co-host, but I could hear their chins hitting the floor," Baribeau says with a laugh. Although the recording never made it onto her official resume tape, it was validation to Baribeau that she had talent and something offer the world of sports media.

"The 4th Quarter" airs opposite the Paul Finebaum show on WJOX. Stealing some ratings from one of the most powerful sports figures in the Southeast is a tough task, but Baribeau says the early response has been positive. "The feedback we're getting is tremendous," Baribeau says. "I have the utmost respect for Paul, but I've never been one to back down from a challenge. I've never been one to say 'it just can't be done.'"

She's not bluffing. She launched her own sports talk show at Eagle Eye while at Auburn, broke into the business in Columbus before moving on to Fox Sports' Scout.com, eventu-

ally becoming only the second woman to host a sports talk show in Birmingham and the first to have a show started from the ground up. One of her biggest accomplishments, however, came in 2008 when she became the first woman to participate in pre-season training with a professional football team, the Columbus Lions indoor team.

"It was one of the most exhilarating and terrifying experiences of my entire life," she says. "I lasted for five days of two-a-days with full contact. It was brutal, but an accomplishment I revisit often when I need inspiration."

While it will be a Herculean task to unseat the ratings juggernaut across town, the challenge is nothing compared to what she faced early in her career. Walking through the office one day she happened across a memo about her written by her supervisor. "It said 'she is not talented, she is unlistenable on the radio, and she doesn't know her sports,'" she says.

"I went to the bathroom and I just bawled," she admits. "It was before my shift on the air and I thought 'OK, what am I going to do here? I can let this break me, or I can let this make me better.' I decided right then and there to pull myself up by my bootstraps. I just chose to let it be a defining moment in my life." ■

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

TOP PHOTO BY CURTIS B, MAKEUP BY ANGELIA DARTY; LEFT PHOTO BY BERNARD TRONCALE