



Sports fan gives a voice to his dream

Radio host, 18, livens up St. Louis airwaves

(CNN) -- The walls of Graham Bensinger's bedroom are plastered with pictures of famous sports stars - a layout shared by tens of thousands of other teenage males across the United States.

Beyond the standard bed, desk and computer, one can spy the smiling faces of athletic legends young -- like NBA phenom LeBron James -- and old -- like retired baseball player "Iron Man" Cal Ripken Jr.

But what makes these images unique -- and what makes Bensinger different -- is that he is right there, side-by-side with these professional athletes.

For the celebrities in the pictures adorning his bedroom walls aren't just icons to the 18-year-old Bensinger, they are interview subjects for the budding sports radio host.

A sports fan since he was a child, Bensinger recalls running down to the edge of the field to get players' autographs when his father took him to baseball games.

"It was meeting the players that I liked. So I wanted to figure out a way to continue meeting the players and have an opportunity to talk to them," Bensinger says.

Now, fresh out of high school, Bensinger is asking athletes questions and getting their opinions on the record. Every week, he hosts "The Graham Bensinger Show," a sports radio show carried Saturday on ESPN Radio 1380-AM in sports-mad St. Louis, Missouri.

A love of the game

He was in the eighth grade when he figured out a way to talk to athletes, launching his own Internet radio show and working on getting guests.

Bensinger scored his first interviews by using the power of the pen, drafting 50 letters and sending them to former professional athletes, many of them baseball Hall of Famers. He got responses from legendary baseball players Ernie Banks, Bob Feller, Will Clark and Tim McCarver, all national names that he interviewed on his first show.

From there, Bensinger started contacting current and former athletes' agents and publicists of possible interviewees and "worked my way up the ladder interview-wise."

The Internet radio show was a great training ground for his show today and a way for him to work on his trade, says Bensinger.

Two years ago, Sporting News Radio in St. Louis contacted Bensinger and asked him to host a show on their station. A year later, he was picked up by the local ESPN Radio station.



18-year-old Graham Bensinger hosts a weekly sports interview show on ESPN Radio.

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Bensinger says his age can be both a help and a hindrance when going after interviews, noting that when he started, some athletes did not want to have anything to do with him, while others appreciated his ambition.

"I think as I've continued to get interviews," he says, "people see that I'm working hard, that I'm doing my homework, [and] the age doesn't have as much of an effect. People are real receptive to me for the most part."

A different kind of homework

Bensinger says that much of the work that goes into his show happens outside of the studio.

While other teens may spend their free time hanging out with friends, Bensinger devotes hours to research, arranging and confirming guests, preparing questions and reading the latest sports headlines.

Bensinger admits that show preparation does intrude on his social life, but he adds that it's worth it to carry out his dream.

"Sure, you sacrifice some valuable time with friends," he says. "But on the same note, I love what I'm doing, and I know where I want to be in life and know where I want to get in life. So I'm happy."

In the fall, Bensinger will head to Syracuse University to study broadcast journalism.

Though his first love is radio, Bensinger says he is considering other options after graduation including TV and non-sports broadcasting.

"I'm hoping with four years at Syracuse, I'll have more of an answer when I come out," he says.

As Bensinger looks towards college, he advises fellow teens to identify their dream and go for it.

"I think the difference between those who are successful in life and those who aren't is whether or not you have the drive and motivation and follow [your dream]," Bensinger says.

"Sure, people are going to say 'No,' and say, 'You can't do this' and 'You can't do that.' ... But if you work hard, in the end you will succeed."