

‘Life Goes on’ for NBC Sports’s Tour Team Following Sherwen’s Tragic Death

When the Tour de France coverage kicks off on NBC Sports Network this weekend, it will mark the first time in 33 years that an English speaking audience will not hear the voice and sage insights of Paul Sherwen, who [passed away in December, 2018](#).

Long-time insider and supporting desk presenter Bob Roll will join the venerable Phil Liggett in front of the live commentary box cameras when coverage starts from Brussels, Belgium, Saturday, July 6. The transition would appear natural in light of Roll’s veteran experience in the booth and rapport with both personalities, and his deep historical cycling knowledge. Behind the scenes, NBC faces a daunting task to elevate its production game due to the expected impacts of Sherwen’s absence.

“Bob knows he can never fill Paul’s shoes. Bob will simply have to cobble together a new pair,” said NBC’s Producer David Michaels, who has helmed the Tour’s American telecast since 2011. “Bob’s had a bit of experience working mano à mano with Phil. He brings a different energy and perspective. Bob grows with each broadcast. Can’t think of anyone out there who could go hour upon hour alongside Phil except Bob.”

Michaels has an unprecedented perspective on his side. He began his storytelling of the Tour de France in the mid-1980s with CBS (his brother, Al, is widely known for his work in rival network ABC) and helped bring Greg LeMond’s famous 1985 and 1986 duels with teammate Bernard Hinault to the American audience. Michaels’ sharpened his video-storytelling acumen over many years, also covering multiple Olympic Games, and has a keen understanding of broadcast announcer chemistry.

“I think Bob’s future is unlimited. It’s just like when he was a bike rider – knowledge is his most powerful weapon,” Michaels added. “The more he learns, the more experience he gains, the finer his work will be. We will miss Bob on the desk but the addition of Chris Horner gives us tremendous flexibility in making great Tour TV.”

Horner, the 2013 Vuelta a España champion, coupled with 2008 4th place Tour de France finisher Christian Vande Velde, helps usher into the broadcast booth a new era of recently retired American professionals with Grand Tour experience. Horner finished 9th overall in the 2010 Tour de France and placed in the top 20 four times.

“Christian is super solid with good insights,” said NBC’s coordinating producer Joel Felicio, a veteran of more than 15 Tours de France. “We’re super excited to welcome Chris onto the desk. He’s a good fit. He’s someone we’ve been talking about for a couple years and we kept waiting for him to retire. He’s an animated personality who isn’t afraid to provide an opinion.”

No one in the broadcast team is expecting Vande Velde, Roll, or Horner to completely fill the void. Each ‘personality’ contributes unique insights and presenter style into the announcing flow, and it will take time for the chemistry to gel. The Grand Canyon-like absence of Sherwen will be most felt by Liggett, who helped break Sherwen into the business in 1986. Liggett was quick to praise Roll.

“Bob will make it and you will see his style change as he progresses,” Liggett said. “Life of course goes on and my new partner is a very different character who I think is flattered to have been chosen to sit in Paul’s seat. Bob and Paul were great friends and Bob has also been hit hard by the loss. Paul would have approved of the choice made by NBC.”

Sherwen was legendary among the NBC crew as much for what he brought into the commentary box as

for what he did off-set and behind the scenes, and those quirks will be deeply missed. He would often call back to the producers and remind them of a restaurant he and Phil were eating at while driving to the next day's venue, often times holding the kitchen open till the staff arrived.

Sherwen's abundant energy over the veritable month-long Tour marathon was well known among crew members and other announcers.

Vande Velde befriended Sherwen as a 13 year-old, when then-Motorola Team press liaison Sherwen would visit his father John while on trips to the sponsor's corporate headquarters in Chicago.

"Paul was always a leader by action more than words, and whether it was a 2 am. call after going to bed at 11, or a post-race voice over, he had this boundless energy," said Vande Velde "The Tour takes a physical and mental toll on you. Being a rider, I knew that. It's equal or greater as part of a broadcast team. Paul was this enigmatic leader that was always more awake than anyone on the set, no matter what time. He was a like a tornado coming through. Everyone fed off his energy. Maybe that will be the biggest hole to fill."

Liggett said Sherwen's annoying side was he never stopped fiddling with things from the TV monitors, to his chair, to his notes – and was fueled by endless cups of coffee.

"We developed innocently as a team," said Liggett. "Our objective was to entertain and not bore the audience, which was only a small percentage of the pure understanding cyclists. Our shows were viewed by hundreds of millions of people over the years. I always reminded Paul that if he could stop the little old lady from making tea until the commercials, then we had succeeded. So, we started talking about the chateaus as a joke. Then, Paul in many ways became the historical expert."

Known as the voice of topographical and landmark reference during broadcasts, Sherwen's curiosity drove his life inside and outside the commentary box. "One of Paul's greatest attributes was his curiosity – of everything," said Vande Velde. "He spoke like seven languages. Who does that?"

Vande Velde went on to tell the story of he and Sherwen getting into a taxi in Atlanta when Sherwen began to talk to the driver in Swahili. "The guy almost crashed the car," Vande Velde said, laughing. "He had a lust for information and it drove him no matter who he talked to. He loved to talk to people and learn their story."

From bike racer to journalist, Sherwen consumed vast amounts of information to sate his intellectual curiosity. "Paul had this uncanny knack to recall information," Felicio said. "That is a great asset as a broadcaster."

Vande Velde said Sherwen meticulously prepared his daily approach with a lot of little details. He credits Sherwen with teaching him the professional side of announcing and worked closely with him on such projects as the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

"In many ways, Paul set the bar," said Felicio. "He would drive every kilometer of the stage after each day. He'd have this unbelievable recall of the course or a landmark that he would work into the next day's stage."

Michaels noted a more personal side of Sherwen's infallible memory. "Paul knew every crew member's name and remembered details of their lives," he said. "No cable puller or utility person was ever left out. He had boundless energy and knew how to stir up a magical moment."

In a day when big-time announcers shun roommates, Liggett said Sherwen insisted they room together

and they would laugh themselves to sleep on most nights. He added that the times outside the commentary box may be the memories he savors the most.

It is well known the duo both had a love for Africa, with Sherwen residing in Uganda and Liggett part-time in South Africa. It was a sidebar to a lifelong relationship that brought each other happiness and boundless discussion on everything from animal conservation to clean water to economic development on the dark continent.

“It was impossible to get mad at Paul,” said Liggett, recanting one story from the Tour de France. “Paul loved his music. He knew I wasn’t a big music fan. One day I walked into the commentary box and said: ‘Anyway you could turn that music down?’ He replied: ‘I can’t hear you, the music’s too loud.’”

From ground zero in the commentary box, to English-speaking audiences around the globe, and all corners inside the sport, there will be a constant reminder of the changes and a new direction.

“To so many people, Phil and Paul have been the sound of summer, their voices freshening up the morning as people sipped their coffee or tea,” said Michaels. “Paul will be missed; from his passion and knowledge of the French countryside to his funny summations like ‘the rider has to unpack a suitcase of courage to survive.’”

The Tour will go on and the voices will change, but Sherwen’s imprint will be indelible.

By Steve Brunner, July 5th, 2019.

Steve Brunner, currently the President of KOM Sports Marketing, either worked with or alongside Paul Sherwen in the production of almost every top U.S. race from the Tour du Trump to the Tour of California.