



# This is Bobby Hartin

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You know his voice.

The high pitch, the familiar Midlands drawl, the occasional stutter and the mischievous, rapid-fire laugh. Spend any time listening to radio in Charleston and eventually you'll run across Bobby Hartin, known to his fans as "The Big Kahuna."

For the last nine years, the 49-year-old Orangeburg native has hosted "Fan Talk," Charleston's only locally generated sports radio talk show. Every weekday from 4 to 6 p.m. you can find him on WQSC 1340 AM, debating the day's hot sports story with any number of his loyal listeners.

And in truth, at times, the show sounds more like a barroom argument than a polished radio program. But perhaps that has something to do with its origin.

In 1994, Hartin was running a sports bar in Mount Pleasant when one of his regulars, Gil Kirkman, approached him with an idea.

Kirkman, owner of Kirkman Broadcasting, recently had purchased 1340 AM. He believed the station needed a local sports show and thought Hartin was the man to host it.

"His first reaction was, 'Are you crazy?'" Kirkman says. "But I told him he'd be a natural. All he had to do was go on the radio and be himself. And for nine years, that's exactly what he's done."

It's true, when it comes to Hartin there are few secrets. Everyone knows he loves the University of South Carolina and the Dallas Cowboys. They also know he hates Clemson University and the Washington Redskins. They know he follows baseball and football but couldn't care less about hockey or the NBA. And they know that despite his love for golf, he may have the worst handicap in the Lowcountry.

But what most don't know, what they couldn't know by listening to his program, is that Hartin is a man familiar with hardship and loss, a man who worked his whole life only to see everything disappear in a hellish two-month period, a man who, despite life's challenges, has learned to persevere.

## THE WORKAHOLIC

Bobby Hartin's Sports Grill and Raw Bar sits in a strip mall off Sam Rittenberg Boulevard in West Ashley.

The restaurant, a 5,000-square-foot, 40-TV, sports-lovers' paradise, is Hartin's home away from home. When he's not on the radio he's there, helping out in the kitchen, answering the phone or holding court at the end of the bar. There is even a sign hanging over his normal seat that reads "Owner's Box."

Ask anyone who knows the tall, gray-haired Hartin, and they will tell you he is the prototypical, chain-smoking, type-A personality. He can't sit still and doesn't want to.

"It's true, he's a workaholic," says Hartin's second wife, Karla. "He opened that bar four years ago, and I haven't seen him since."

But to be fair, Hartin came by such a work ethic naturally. He was raised by two hardworking, middle-class parents in Orangeburg.

His father, Cecil, was a door-to-door salesman. His mother, Joan, was a nurse.

The couple adopted Hartin when he was 3 months old. And since his parents had no brothers or sisters, the family was especially tight, relying upon one another for everything.

"Daddy never had any money," Hartin says. "So I had to work from an early age. I had a paper route as a kid. And then when I was older, I worked at the Red & White."

The family's money troubles were exacerbated by Joan Hartin's medical condition. She suffered from a debilitating form of diabetes and couldn't work.

"I spent a lot of time in hospitals," Hartin says. "She was always in and out of them."

His father was often on the road, which left a young Hartin in charge of his mother's care. He remembers giving her insulin shots.

"And that was back when you boiled the needles," he says.

Taking on these responsibilities at such a young age created within Hartin a sense of independence that stuck with him. It enabled him to strike out on his own and face challenges. And when hard times came, it gave him the strength to fight.

## THE GAMECOCK CHEERLEADER

Life in Orangeburg was not all work. Some of Hartin's fondest memories are of the times he spent playing baseball and football with friends.

"I always compare it to the movie 'Sandlot,'" he says. "We played all day long, from the early morning until it was dark outside."

Many "Fan Talk" listeners would be amazed to discover that early on Hartin, a rabid Gamecock fan, was loyal to the orange and purple of Clemson.

"I had a friend who liked Clemson," he says. "I would go with his family to watch games up there."

And then laughing, he adds, "I probably shouldn't let that out."

Hartin's loyalties changed after high school. He applied to both Clemson and USC. Clemson turned him down.

He started at USC in 1971. Two weeks after Hartin arrived in Columbia, his mother died. It was a tough time, but the young freshman focused on school and work.

Since his father had very little money, Hartin paid for school with a combination of grants, loans and odd jobs. Sometimes his workload became too much, forcing him to take a semester off. This lengthened his stay in Columbia considerably.

"People ask me when I went to Carolina," he says. "I tell them the '70s -- the whole decade."

He graduated from USC in 1979 and accepted a job driving a beer truck for Pearlstine Distributors in Charleston.

It would be some time before Hartin stumbled onto the job that would ultimately bring him notoriety in the Lowcountry. But one job he had in college hinted at the direction his life would one day take.

In 1976, five years into his time at USC, Hartin accepted a dare to try out for the Gamecocks cheerleading squad.

"We had been drinking all day and it seemed like a good idea," he says.

He won the job of microphone man for the Gamecocks, which meant he was responsible for revving up the crowd at games.

"Thank God I didn't have to do any of the flips," he says.

## SPORTS

Hartin worked as a truck driver for Pearlstine for 10 years. Of that time he says simply, "Hard work; damn good money."

But in 1988 he realized a dream born out of his years as a bartender. He opened a bar, Charleston's first official sports bar.

"Back then everyone went to Gene's Haufbrau to watch the games," Hartin says. "There really wasn't any place dedicated solely to sports around here."

The bar, simply called Sports, opened in Mt. Pleasant and featured what was at the time a novelty -- games piped in by satellite.

It was a hit from the start, and within the first year Hartin expanded the bar. He also began construction of a second place, an 8,000-square-foot facility called Sports of Summerville.

Then came Hurricane Hugo.

"It destroyed the bar in Mt. Pleasant and did a lot of damage to the one under construction in Summerville," he says.

Hartin was forced to move the Mt. Pleasant bar to a new location while he rushed to get the Summerville bar open on schedule.

At the same time, downtown Charleston re-emerged as a legitimate nightspot, the first Gulf War was on everyone's minds and the entire area was still reeling from the damage done by Hugo. It was not an ideal time for business troubles.

The problem was Hartin had spread himself too thin. And it was too late for him to do anything about it.

"Opening that place in Summerville may have been my worst mistake ever," he says. "You can't be in two places at once. And running a bar takes all of your attention. It was a mess."

Sports of Summerville was short lived. It soon began losing money and Hartin was forced to sell it. He then turned all of his attention back to the Mt. Pleasant bar.

But business was not as good as it had once been, and the stress was getting to him. It was also affecting his marriage to Donna Hartin, whom he had wed after moving to Charleston. The couple soon split up.

But the worst was yet to come.

## FAN TALK

Kirkman was one of Hartin's regular customers at Sports. The two had met in 1988, when the bar first opened. They quickly became friends.

In 1994 Kirkman purchased 1340 AM with the idea of changing the station's format to sports. He had spent many hours in Hartin's bar, watching people gather around Hartin, arguing about sports. He liked how Hartin handled himself.

"It just hit me," he says. "Bobby would make a great host for a call-in show."

It took some work, but finally Kirkman convinced Hartin to do it.

"I'll never forget that first day," Kirkman says. "Bobby turned about three shades of green. I thought he was going to throw up for two straight hours. We had to keep a trash can beside him the whole time."

As for Hartin, the idea seemed doomed to failure. He did not have a radio voice and never claimed to be an expert on anything.

"I was just a fan," he says. "That's all. But I figured, what the heck, I'll try it."

Kirkman says Hartin grew into his role as host. He became more comfortable and soon developed a loyal following in the area.

The station parlayed his popularity into several advertising ventures, including "The Big Kahuna Fishing Tournament," which has run for the last eight years and "The Big Kahuna Golf Tour," which has run for the last five years.

"Those are the most successful things we do," Kirkman says. "The amazing thing about Bobby is that he appeals to wide variety of people. His fans are doctors, lawyers and car dealers. They come from every walk of life. And that's a real gift."

#### BOBBY HARTIN'S SPORTS GRILL AND RAW BAR

The year 1996 was not a good one for Hartin. The radio show was going well, but the rest of his life was falling apart.

During one two-month stretch, he sold his Mt. Pleasant bar, filed for bankruptcy, finalized his divorce and buried his father.

"That was a tough time," he says. "I was really, truly, by myself. I didn't have any family to help me with my dad. I lost my business and my wife. It was not fun."

No longer in business for himself, Hartin went to work for Kirkman, selling ads for the radio station. At night he managed a bar. In between he hosted the radio show and tried to put his life back together.

During this time, Hartin met and courted the woman who would become his current wife, Karla.

"I'd heard him on the radio and thought he was arrogant and cocky," she says. "But then I met him, and he was nothing like that. He was sweet and shy and very funny. He asked me to marry him that first night and I jokingly said 'yes.'"

The couple shared a love of sports, specifically a love of USC sports. They dated for a year before Hartin proposed a second time, this time for real.

Around this time Kirkman, approached Hartin with another idea. He would stake Hartin in a new bar, one that would capitalize on his popularity in the area.

"He would be the financial backer and I would be the sweat equity," Hartin says.

Bobby Hartin's Sports Grill and Raw Bar opened in April 1999. And so far it has been a rousing success.

"He really packs them in there," Kirkman says. "During football season, especially on Saturdays, it's hard to find a seat."

Later this month, according to Kirkman, ownership of the bar will transfer completely to Hartin. The move will signify Hartin's return from seven years of hardship. And according to those who know him best, no one deserves it more.

"Bobby is just one of those guys who would do anything for you," says Everett German, Hartin's producer and co-host. "He would give you the shirt off his back and people sense that in him."

On air German and Hartin argue back and forth. German is a Clemson and Redskins fan. Hartin is a Gamecock and Cowboys fan. About the only thing they do agree on is their hatred of Georgia.

Still, despite their divided loyalties, they get along well.

"He's like my best friend," German says. "We're almost like brothers."

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BOBBY HARTIN

AGE: 49

FAMILY: wife, Karla

EDUCATION: Graduate, the University of South Carolina

THIS MAY COME AS A SURPRISE TO SOME LISTENERS, BUT FRIENDS SAY YOU'RE SHY. IS THAT TRUE?: "I am sometimes. I mean, I'm not shy at the bar or on the radio, but I can be shy around people I don't know."

HOW DO YOU MANAGE TO DO A RADIO SHOW THEN?: "It's easy in the studio. But sometimes I have a hard time when we go on remotes and I'm surrounded by people."

YOU TALK OFTEN ON THE RADIO ABOUT GROWING UP IN ORANGEBURG. WHAT IS "CUTTING THE PIG"?: "On Friday nights in Orangeburg, all we did was drive up and

down Highway 301. We would turn around in Piggy Park, a restaurant, and we called that 'Cutting the Pig.' "

IF YOU DID NOT WORK IN SPORTS, ON THE RADIO AND AT THE BAR, WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING NOW?: "I have no idea. I've never really thought about it, to be honest with you. I wouldn't want to sell anything, I can tell you that."

LATER THIS MONTH, YOUR BAR WILL BE SOLELY IN YOUR NAME. THIS WILL COMPLETE A TOUGH SEVEN YEARS FOR YOU. WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THE EXPERIENCE?: "If there was a mistake to be made, I guess I've made it. But I have learned from them. Now I'm a better business owner and a better husband."

WHO IS YOUR FAVORITE FOOTBALL PLAYER OF ALL TIME?: "Roger Staubach. I grew up watching him. He's my favorite."

WHAT IS YOUR PREDICTION FOR THE GAMECOCKS THIS YEAR?: "I think they will go 8-4. I'm always an optimist when it comes to that."

WILL THIS BE LOU HOLTZ'S LAST YEAR?: "I think so. I think he will retire no matter what they do. But if they have a good year, his son, Skip, may take his place. If not, then they will probably bring a whole new staff in."

WHO WILL WIN THE NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP?: "I'd have to say Miami."

THE ACC?: "Florida State."

THE SEC?: "I think Tennessee will win the east and Auburn will win the west. Tennessee will take it all."

AND WHICH TEAMS WILL BE IN THE SUPER BOWL?: "It's way too early to say. But if I have to pick, I'll say the Eagles and the Dolphins."