

Keith Kobland:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm Keith Kobland, associate director of media relations. And, on this week's 'Cuse Conversations, one of Syracuse University's best known alums prepares for the Olympics.

Mike Tirico:

When we say the Olympics brings the world together, I don't mean to be too Pollyanna about it because the Olympics are flawed in many ways, they are impacted by politics and corruption and all this stuff that's happened, those stories have been well reported for years. But just the fact that there's somebody in South Sudan who is training the same way somebody is training in South San Francisco for the same event and they get to meet in the middle and figure out who's better, that's still really freaking cool for me.

Keith Kobland:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast really needs no introduction but I must. It's Mike Tirico from our class of 1988 and probably one of the best known in the field of sports broadcasting. Full disclosure, Mike is also a friend who I worked with in local TV many years ago, he's currently preparing for the Olympic Games in Paris hosting coverage as he's done since 2016. During our conversation, we talked about his work with Olympic coverage, his most memorable moments, his sleep schedule and, of course, his love for his alma mater. But first, his upcoming assignment and, of course, I had to ask him about what to expect including the new and unique this summer.

Let's start it off. New sports at the Olympics are always the big story, Mike. What's your favorite break-dance team? How do you see things handicapped for this Olympics?

Mike Tirico:

Yeah, thankfully, there's an age limit or, if there's not, I'm putting one in. That's not happening for me, right? Man, Keith, it's a strange deal. We're of the similar generation that you grew up and break-dancing with something you'd see in New York on a street corner or people would try it in different places and

~~mean that's strange deal it's 50% of the age you were a kid for a 100% of the age you're now. It's a weird thing, Kf the~~

Mike Tirico:

No. Correct.

Keith Kobland:

So, you've been doing Olympic coverage. Obviously, the variety of sports but Olympic specifically since 2016, I believe, if I'm not mistaken.

Mike Tirico:

Right.

Keith Kobland:

Is there a memorable moment? Can you pick one out? Is it possible?

Mike Tirico:

Yeah, there are some that are competition driven. This would be the fifth Olympic Games I cover, the fourth as the primetime host and watching Americans win gold medals in person, for some of the times, we took the studio on the road to host the show, those stick out for me. And I don't mean to be negative about it, one's a positive, one's a negative but it's a little bit of the geopolitical when it comes to the Olympics. One of the negatives was being at the opening ceremony in Beijing in the winter of 2022 and about 25 yards this direction from where I was hosting the opening ceremony was Xi and Putin and they had just done their meeting about this unbreakable bond and all of this and, really, you started to see some of the seeds of pre-Ukraine happening right there. That'll be one of those moments I go, "Wow, that was history."

And then watching the Chinese delegation come in at home and then you see members of the Uyghurs come in, who were part of the human rights conversation with China, they march in the opening ceremony as a, "Hello, we hear what you're saying, world, about our human rights and we're just going to put it right in the middle of the opening ceremony, pretend like it's all good." That was impactful, life-changing for me.

The other one was watching, in Pyeongchang, South Korea, watching North Korea and South Korea walk in as a unified team. Watching people in the same uniforms, in the same group walking in who, if they were seen connecting, conversing together in the name of sport at any other time, not under the flags of the Olympic rings, there would be problems. A North Korean walking in South Korea and vice versa, you're taken away and detained. Here, they were embraced together as one Korea. Sadly, in the six years since, nothing's happened to further that but the Olympics brought it together.

And for me, my other side of the street from Newhouse at Syracuse is Maxwell, I'm a political science

Well, I'm now hip and young so I keep them as PDF files and I annotate on my iPad. So, I am next gen, I am saving the world one binder at a time, we're not printing out all these tree-killing binders for me. No, Keith, if I've learned anything, it's you can't be prepared for everything at the Olympics. The key is to know how to access it and, oftentimes, that is our research team. The unheralded heroes of Olympic coverage for generations have been and continue to be the research teams who work year-round on the details of what are the rules for breaking, breaking competition.

Surfing is happening in Tahiti at the Olympics, I put up my hand to volunteer to be the surfing correspondent, for some reason, they went with Colin Jost from Saturday Night Live. I don't know what I should read into that but it's fine. I don't know the surfing details of, "Well, wait, what does that mean in terms of the big competition?" but our research team has done that work. So, for me, in the lead up to it, it's go over all the stuff so you know where it is but don't memorize it because you can't. You can't know anything about each of the 10,000 plus athletes or every sport, all the 200 plus countries or delegations that will come down the river, in this case, the opening ceremony in France.

So, it is learn how to prepare for it and really focus in on the stuff we cover the most, that's swimming, gymnastics, track and field, basketball, volleyball, beach volleyball, women's soccer, the men's team made it for the US. Know that and then know the big athletes, the 50 or so that will become somewhat familiar names to households around America and the global ones too like Leon Marchand who's a swimmer from France who goes to Arizona State who could be the home nation star of the games or, Summer McIntosh, a teenager from Canada who's a swimmer who was motivated to become a great swimmer because of Katie Ledecky's success and now could very well beat Katie Ledecky in a freestyle race in these Olympics.

So, that's where you try to learn the stories that you know are going to matter and, when the ones come up that are the wows that make sports exciting, you know how to scramble and get there.

Keith Kobland:

Exactly. And having that background that you have too, I'm sure you dip into that background knowledge, it's not as if ... You're gaining new knowledge, obviously, but having done this for a while, you have the experience.

Mike Tirico:

Great point and it's a big help, you know where ... You're not starting from zero, you're starting from, "Okay, I remember this in Tokyo and let's just build on that." And I think, Keith, during the years now as well, maybe I wouldn't have been paying attention to the world swimming championships that were on, but now that I know this is my job and I'm getting ready for this Olympics which gets you ready for the next one, you pay more attention. So, the Marchands or the McIntoshes who I just mentioned, global athletes, international athletes are on my radar way before I open up a book and say, "Okay, today is swimming day, let's start cramming for swimming." It helps significantly to have some gray hair in the chair, I would say.

Keith Kobland:

Not a lot, just a little.

Mike Tirico:

None, but that's okay.

Keith Kobland:

You still look wonderful, come on. Now, what is it ... You mentioned a day, I think I just saw, am I mistaken, where you and Snoop Dogg are going to be something primetime too, primetime Paris which is, what, 2:00 AM their time?

Mike Tirico:

Yeah, I'll be hanging with Snoop at 2:00 AM in Paris, what could go wrong, right?

Keith Kobland:

[inaudible 00:09:40] other.

Mike Tirico:

Yeah, good luck. Good luck. Yeah, there's a whole ... No. So, it was interesting. We tried to figure out how do you boost the Olympics? Look, our world is very complicated in terms of entertainment options, there are a lot of them out there. So, we see, when we show up every four years with the Olympics, you don't have the same carryover you used to in the three-channel world of the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s when we became familiar in household names with Olympic stars and they were on boxes of Wheaties and all that stuff. Now, the marketing, really, sports marketing has a lot of roots in the Olympics. Sports marketing happens everywhere at every level, high school players, all the collegiate players, pro players' proliferation, growth of women's leagues, popularity of all these sports so you don't have a place for those Olympians to stay on the radar.

So, I think a lot of people have lost touch with what makes the Olympics unique, special and captivating. So, we're trying to reach out to different demographics, Snoop is a great connector of that, he's brilliant, he's a terrific communicator, he's super talented, well-known, connects with athletes, athletes' families so we're going to put him to ... Is known globally so we're going to put him to use. He's going to be a little bit of our tour guide for Paris, he's going to spend time with some athletes, he's going to get to do some fun things with Olympians who you know and love that'll give you a little bit of reason to laugh. So, the reason it has a place, Keith, without getting too in the weeds here for our Olympic coverage, we're going to be live across America during the day.

So, 8:00 to 11:00 Paris time is 2:00 to 5:00 East Coast time, we're going to be live on NBC on the broadcast network showing the biggest events of the day live in the middle of the afternoon. So, we're going to come back and reprise those at night and we're not just going to put the VCR tape in and go, "Okay, here's the VHS, let's hit play and here's what we did three hours ago," we're going to dress it up a little bit. And in addition to having behind the scenes with athletes and their parents, deeper analysis of stuff, we give you a little sprinkling of things around Paris because it's such a great city. So, that's where a Snoop will come into play and other celebrities who are going to be a part of our coverage.

We won't take away from delivering the meat and potatoes of competition and the athletes but, when we come back and show it at night, it's going to feel like a primetime show a little bit more. So, that's why you start adding people who may help widen the net of the folks who are consuming the Olympics.

Keith Kobland:

Oh, are you kidding me? Tirico and Snoop Dogg, I love it.

Mike Tirico:

We hanging, man. He's called me Mikey, he's called me ... He said, "Mikey, I'm the Robin to you. I'm your Robin, you're Batman." I'm like, "Okay, in what universe did this happen?" but it's cool. So, I've got it on tape forever and I'm going to live with it.

Keith Kobland:

These are the ... I love this, by the way. I would be excited and get too far off. These are long days though, Mike, it seems like these are going to be long-

Mike Tirico:

Yeah.

Keith Kobland:

It's not that you're not used to it but these are up early, work until 2:00 AM in some cases.

Mike Tirico:

Yeah. It should be the end of our show is 5:00 AM US time, East Coast time so you'd be working a graveyard shift for two and a half weeks. Look, I'm talking to a guy who I know did a lot of morning radio and morning TV in your life and you know that ... Bryant Gumbel had the best line, Keith, the legendary Today show host. And to clean it up as much as possible, he said, "Hey, it really stinks," used a different word, "For the first 15 minutes you wake up no matter what time it is. So, you just have to get used to it and then you move on," and that's exactly the way I'm looking at it. It'll be fine, get good five, six hours of sleep at night. You don't sleep much in the Olympics and then you just get back up and rinse, repeat for 17 straight days.

Keith Kobland:

That's it. Once you're awake, you're awake.

Mike Tirico:

You're up, let's go.

Keith Kobland:

That's it. Look, okay, we've covered break dancing, I think you've mentioned some of the other big storylines. Is there anything that we should be, as we wrap up the Olympic part of this, anything else that we should be keeping an eye out for?

Mike Tirico:

Keith, I'm excited to see in general is how many athletes come back from 2021 and succeed in 2024. Remember, Tokyo, last summer games, 2020, delayed by COVID, pushed a year. I think a lot of athletes looked ahead at that next Olympic quad as we call it, the four years between games, and said, "Well, it's three, maybe I'll hang around." So, I think we may see a lot of Olympians with experience come back and contend for medals and that Olympic experience is so important, I think that'll be a big storyline. I think the USA-Australia swimming rivalry will be a big storyline right out of the gate in the first full day of competition on Saturday. I think Simone Biles's return, greatest of all time disappointment in Tokyo as she openly dealt with mental health issues that impacted her ability to perform at the elite level she established for many years, she can come back and perform at a high level, she's been sensational in the run up to it.

So, all those things, I think, are those headlines and the last one I'll say is US Track and Field could be an exceptionally strong team and there is a chance that America could have the fastest man and woman winners of the hundred meters in both disciplines and that hasn't happened since the '80s. So, some great storylines out there that I think will play out over the games. And of course, there's all the typical political story, Russia not there, China accused of doping in the swimming space last time around. Obviously,



Keith Kobland:

... this is a Syracuse University podcast.

Mike Tirico:

Yes.

Keith Kobland:

You, obviously, Mike, class '88, big part of the Orange Family Board of Trustee, you mentioned taking

who is very valuable with your time, not a person who seems to have a lot of it but, still, you give of it so freely.

Mike Tirico:

I wish I had more time for more students. And maybe, as I get older, older and retired someday down the line, I'll follow in your footsteps and do some more of that. I love the curiosity of students. I find students will ask you better questions than journalists sometimes, there's an unfiltered boldness and carefree approach to life that is refreshing when you're 18, 19 or 20. And I have a couple of kids who just finished their college education and so to see people who look a lot like the kids who grew up under your roof just recently and watch them in these settings is fun. I love being on campus, love being in the classroom and that's something, as I come up to campus at least once a quarter or semester, I get disappointed in some ways that I spend so much time with our business as trustees in our meetings, which are hugely important to the future of the university, but I'd like to grab an hour or two more to be in the class just listening and be a resource.

I think, any of us who are alums, can we be a resource to the people who are following us? At the end of the day, it makes our degree more valuable. I think we all have an intense pride in Syracuse, we all have a



Mike Tirico:

No, I did not.

Keith Kobland:

But you did know at an early age this was something you wanted to do, how did you know? How did young Mike Tirico know this is what he wanted to do?

Mike Tirico:

I wish I knew the answer to why but my mom will tell you, even as a little kid, I was walking around pretending to be a sportscaster and this is what I wanted to do in life. Maybe it was because I realized that, an early age, I was not going to be the athlete that I hoped to be and the next natural connection to sports was going to be a team trainer or doctor and I didn't have the science background or love of science to have that acumen so maybe this was the next best thing. And even on campus, I started working, my first assignment for The Daily Orange as a freshman was the field hockey beat and I learned field hockey and I found that, while very enjoyable and around some great women who were very helpful in learning the sport, I enjoyed the challenge of talk about it as it's happening as opposed to watch it, do the interviews and go back and write the story. I was very much pulled to the live microphone, the radio, eventually, television part of the job.

So, I was able to find all those challenges and, Keith, it makes a difference because, we're 50 some odd years removed from me indicating to my mom I want to be a sportscaster someday, and I'm still doing the job and it still wakes me up every day excited for the next assignment or the next challenge or the next day on the air. It doesn't get stale, it doesn't get boring. Does the travel factor? Yes. Does it get a bit overwhelming at times the volume of stuff? Yeah, sure. But the joy doesn't change and I still have as much joy for the job now as I did when I was sharing a newsroom with you back in Syracuse.

Keith Kobland:

And that brings me to my final question and thank you for that segue. It's been a while, Mike, you and I worked together, the CBS affiliate in town, it was a number of years ago. I guess, if there was one thing that the Mike back then ... And by the way, I should mention, Mike Tirico who had come into the newsroom and read news, copy the news card, the A-block stuff and critique it and correct it, that should be noted. Mike, you were always a student of news first.

Mike Tirico:

Oh, god.

Keith Kobland:

What would that Mike Tirico from back in the late '80s, early '90s have told Mike Tirico now? If you had that chance, what would young Mike tell an established Mike?

Mike Tirico:

Yeah, I was a news nerd back then, I still am now. I'll have news on more often than I'll have sports on in my office at home, I just love the energy that a newsroom provides when there's breaking news going on and was lucky enough to watch people like yourself produce, get on air, become a great anchor, a great reporter and watch so many of our friends do that along the way. What a team we had. Sidebar, we did the big anniversary for channel five station that no longer has its own independent newsroom or individual newsroom, shares it with channel three, but, man, we had 75 years of memories and talent and just great

stories and a whole bunch of people showed up and it felt like it was a family reunion which says everything you need to know about that place, it was a hell of a place, hell of a place.

To answer your question, I wish I could tell younger Mike to have a little broader view and be adventurous more. I think being adventurous as a journalist is impactful and I think, over time, we start to feel that a bit more. I think you know you've done the job, you've established yourself. It's so hard to fake