

Gordon McLendon: Pioneer Baseball Broadcaster

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The career of Gordon McLendon, a sportscaster and radio network executive from 1947 to 1952, offers considerable insight into the largely unexplored history of sports broadcasting. Born in Paris, Texas in 1921 and educated at Yale, McLendon entered the radio business in 1947. The following year he began regular baseball broadcasts. His broadcasts -both recreated and live - were a stunning success, and he soon created the Liberty Network which grew to 450 stations by 1951.

The key to Liberty's phenomenal growth lay in McLendon's skill as a network executive and sportscaster. He correctly gauged the growing market for regular season baseball on radio, especially in the sunbelt which lacked major league teams. He recognized that sports were an area where radio could check the growing inroads of television. In the booth McLendon was an articulate, dramatic announcer whose literate and lively play-by-play earned him the *Sporling News* Broadcaster of the Year award in 1951. Thirty years later former listeners recall the artistry of his presentations and compare him favorably with sportscasters who have followed. McLendon became best known for his recreations of games from telegraphic accounts, initially used to save expenses. McLendon became so skilled at simulating the sound effects of the game, from crowd noise to the crack of the bat, that many of his fans refused to believe that his recreations were anything but "real."

Although listeners cheered Liberty's success, organized baseball complained that McLendon's radio competition seriously harmed attendance, especially in the minor leagues. In the winter of 1951-1952 the magnates of baseball moved to restrict the number of games Liberty could present, the teams whose games could be carried, and the areas of Liberty's operation. McLendon unsuccessfully fought these restrictions in the courts, but, deprived of its major sports attractions and drained financially by the tight, his Liberty Network collapsed in May 1952.

McLendon remained in broadcasting, pioneering the "Top Forty" and "All News" formats in the 1950s and 1960s. He remains active in a variety of business endeavors. Historically, he played a major role in the development of sports broadcasting. He was perhaps the first to see the potential of network sports, and his success confirmed the growing market for sports broadcasting in modern America. As a sportscaster he ranked with Bill Stem, Curt Gowdy, and Howard Cosell, men who have become a part of American popular culture coloring the attitudes of millions of Americans toward sport.