



Tom Stage has signed off for the last time

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The face of the Lady Griz? That was, is and will forever be Robin Selvig, who took a club team housed in the PE department in the late 70s and turned it into one of the most consistently successful women's basketball programs in the nation over his 38 years on the sideline.

The voice of the Lady Griz? That's a designation, and now honorific, that belongs to Tom Stage, who retired over the weekend after calling Montana women's basketball games for 25 seasons, split between a four-year run in the 80s and the last 21.

"I loved it. You can't believe the people you get the chance to meet doing this thing over the

years. That's the part I'm going to miss. But age doesn't take a timeout," said Stage, who was joined on the Montana broadcasts the last two decades by friend Dick Slater, who also is bowing out.

"The nostalgia gets to you when it's over. What a great run. What a great bunch of memories."

For all but four of those years -- the most recent, when longtime assistant coach Shannon Schweyen had taken over -- Stage had a courtside seat that leaves a person wondering how he ever concentrated on the play on the court, with Selvig getting up and down and pacing right in front of him.

He didn't just see it every night. He was right in the path of the hurricane. "That was worth the price of admission. You didn't even have to watch the game to know what was going on," said Stage. "He was right in my headset half the time."

It can be a fickle relationship, that between coach and broadcaster. The former typically prefers to keep the wagons circled tight, the information to a minimum, media as outsider. The latter has a story to tell his or her audience. Their needs can be at odds.

So it's their relationship that set Selvig and Stage apart. They weren't adversaries, one eyeing the other with suspicion. And it went way beyond just professional. They were and are best friends.

They had shared passions -- basketball, of course, baseball, history (Selvig studies it, Stage taught it for 25 years). What made things really click, really made it symbiotic, was their understanding of the coaching profession.

Before he started his second run with the Lady Griz, Stage was a championship basketball coach. He led Sentinel High to a state title in 1985. His team in 1986 was undefeated going into the state championship game, which the Spartans would lose to C.M. Russell.

"I've never forgotten that one," says Stage. So he knew how to handle the emotional Selvig, after wins, after losses, and how to guide him down the right path on postgame interviews.

A questionable call by a referee had a big impact on the outcome? He knew better than to go there. "That was part of being a coach, I'm sure of that," Stage says. "You can't ask stupid questions."

He'd keep it positive, keep it vague, keep it about the players. There would be time to break down the specifics later on, when the microphones had been put away.

"He was a heck of a basketball coach, and he became very good at his job," said Selvig. "He understands basketball, so he was really good with me."

"He knew me well enough to know what to ask or not ask after a game. That's valuable for a coach. We'd save the other things for when we got back to the hotel."

Stage was born and raised in Missoula and never needed to venture far from home to live a full life. After graduating from Missoula County High School in 1961, he attended Montana-Western, then returned home to teach U.S. history for the next 25 years.

He coached the girls' basketball team at Sentinel for 10 years, from 1980 to '89, then spent the next six coaching at Loyola.

Because girls' basketball was a fall sport at the time, the season done and wrapped up by the end of October or early November, he doubled his pleasure by joining the Lady Griz over the winter as one of its first radio announcers in the early 80s, early in Selvig's tenure.

"The reason I couldn't do it anymore, and the district was right, was they said we hired you to teach, not go on all these road trips, so I had to back off," says Stage.

So, yes, he and Selvig go back a ways.

"I don't remember not knowing him," says Stage. "I remember when he came out of Outlook and played through the Jud (Heathcote) era. I can't pinpoint it when I didn't know him."

After he retired from teaching and coaching in the 90s, the radio position opened up again. His second gig giving voice to the Lady Griz started with the 1999-2000 season, the team's first in a remodeled Dahlberg Arena.

He would miss just three games over the next 21 years, those at the 2014 Big Sky tournament in Grand Forks after suffering a stroke late that season.

The kid from Missoula would broadcast games from 26 states and four times traveled with the Lady Griz to early-season tournaments in Mexico. The pay never amounted to much, but it was never about the money.

He called eight NCAA tournament games, including the epic battle between Montana and Louisiana Tech at a sold-out Dahlberg Arena in 2004, but ask him about specific games that will stick with him, and he says they just blend together.

Instead he remembers the players and the relationships that came so easily and grew so deep over a Lady Griz' four or five seasons in the program, few broadcasters ever having enjoyed such an integral role in a program.

"It's the camaraderie with the kids. Always has been. It was amazing. You get so involved with it," Stage says.

But that should surprise no one. Even when he was coaching, the relationships were more important than the wins and losses. Which is probably why he was a championship coach and why he and Selvig were in such lockstep.

It was the players first. Always.

"He loved being around the kids. That was the coach in him," says Selvig. "His presence will be

missed. I owe him a great deal. He made my job more enjoyable."

Stage asked Slater to sit with him courtside at home games early on. Then he asked him to try on a headset. Then he got him to talk a little bit. It wasn't always perfect -- grammarians beware -- but that's what made it so fun.

"Dick's been with me the whole time. I didn't have to have him. I just asked him to sit with me. That's how it all started. He panicked when he first had to say a few words," says Stage.

"We worked it pretty well, then with the stroke I certainly had to have him. My mobility slowed me down. He was a godsend. I couldn't have done this the last few years without him."

It's a shrinking group, the women's basketball radio announcers of the Big Sky. Schools that did not have radio used to be in the minority. Now it's the other way around, with only four traveling a broadcaster this past season.

"It's a fraternity, and I've always considered it that way," says Idaho State's Mark Liptak, who is now the remaining gang's elder statesman. "Players have a fraternity, coaches have a fraternity, broadcasters have a fraternity."

Whether the games between the Lady Griz and Bengals were at Reed Gym or Dahlberg Arena or at another site in the postseason, both sides would meet up and willingly share information that would improve both broadcasts.

It's just what the best do.

"Tom and Dick were very conscientious. We'd visit before the game and they'd always ask about things like pronunciations, what I've noticed about the team lately, things that helped you do a better broadcast," says Liptak.

"They did a professional job, and that's the highest compliment you can give someone in this business."

Stage always said that when Selvig retired, he had unplugged his headset for the final time. But when Schweyen moved up a seat on the bench, from assistant to head coach, Stage couldn't resist the urge to stay on.

After all, it wasn't just Stage and Selvig going it alone on all those hundreds of road trips over the years, shutting everyone else out while they enjoyed their own revelry. It was a traveling family, from coaches to players to support personnel. Selvig made it so. And now family was asking a favor.

"I enjoyed working with Shannon the last four years," said Stage. "Without Shannon, I would have retired with Robin, but she came to us and said, I really want you guys. So we stuck it out. I have no regrets at all."

He means about the last four years, but he also could be talking about his 25-season run with the Lady Griz, of which he'll forever be the voice, even long after others take over