

The Endless Summer Of Bob Uecker

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A brewers radio broadcast isn't just about the game (thank God).

It's a trip inside the beautiful mind of Milwaukee's first fan.

By Luke Winn

••• INNING 1 •••

Understand this about the Bob Uecker Experience: Even if you're observing him in his natural habitat, matching his radio voice with his vantage point, you're not sharing the same view. Here he is in the bottom of the first inning of the 53rd game of his 43rd season calling the Brewers on WTMJ, sitting in the visitors' booth at Citizens Bank Park, peering out into a hot haze at dusk. "Looking out at downtown Philadelphia here in the background," Uecker says to listeners on 36 stations in Wisconsin and one on Michigan's Upper Peninsula, as well as on MLB.com and Sirius XM. "Looking alllll the way up the shoreline. Atlantic City, people in the water up there. Boy, what a sight." Uecker's pitch recognition skills were such that he batted .200 in six seasons as a major league catcher, but at 78 he apparently is telescopic, able to spot details more than 60 miles away—or decades back in time. "500 Club in the background," Uecker says, name-checking the classic A.C. nightspot that burned down in 1973. "Boats. Sailfish.... Octopus."

Gonna have to take your word for it, Uke. "The pitch, swing and a bouncer hit to first. There's Betancourt. Yuni B. takes care of Ben Revere." I can confirm, from

over Uecker's shoulder, that Milwaukee's Yuniesky Betancourt, undistracted by mollusks, logs the out 3-unassisted.

"Amazing," Uecker says, "what you can see when you want to."

Sometimes Uke makes you see things you'd prefer not to, such as on April 2, shortly after Rockies catcher Yorvit Torrealba required a repair tool for his busted mitt: "I think it's called an awl. It's a pointed tool with a hole at the top. And you can stick the leather thong in there. I wear a thong once in a while. Leather kinda gets—swing and a fly ball, foul—little testy sometimes." Uke can also pretend not to see what displeases him. On April 19, when shortstop Jean Segura committed one of the greater baserunning gaffes of all time—he went backward to first base in a rundown after thinking he had been picked off second, then was thrown out trying to steal the base he had just been occupying—Uecker, who does not as a rule make jokes at the expense of his employer's ballplayers, sighed and said, "And this one will be talked about for a long time. Not by me."

It's a shame that you can't see him talk, can't watch the ripple effect words have on his face, the creases and folds and that bulbous schnozz, the whole cartoony lot of it framed by a swept-back, polar-white mane. In the Philly booth Uecker is a festival of facial animation, while the rest of him is placid. His head stays level. His back and disproportionately broad shoulders stay tilted toward his tabletop microphone. He taps his black loafers slowly, soundlessly, as he speaks. Uecker wears an earpiece in his right ear, attached to a clear cord that curlicues behind his neck. He sits on the right side of the booth, with highlighted game notes and a scorebook. His 36-year-old broadcast partner, Joe Block, is on the left, a modern straight man juxtaposed with an irreverent treasure.

Block wears headphones with a wraparound mike, and the screen on his laptop rotates between Microsoft OneNote, a Twitter interface and browser windows with MLB GameCast, FanGraphs and Baseball Reference. Fact-checking is an occasional requirement of his job. Uecker has remarkable recall, particularly about the peculiarities of great ballparks, but will concoct alternate histories if he desires. On April 30, 2012, in Block's first regular-season month on the job, Brewers slugger Ryan Braun hit three home runs at the Padres' Petco Park, the second one reaching the upper balcony of the Western Metal Supply Co. warehouse beyond the leftfield wall. Uecker served listeners this backstory:

"They used to furnish rifles to the Union Army back in the 1800s. And automobile rims to the Henry Ford company for the first automobiles that were ever made. Western Metal Supply. None of that is true."

As odd as his on-air material can be, Uecker's off-air material is a source of greater intrigue, in part due to a story comedian Artie Lange spilled in 2009 on Letterman about a visit he and Norm Macdonald made to the Brewers' booth during spring training. With deep reverence, Lange described Uecker as a "jazz musician" alternating between game commentary and, with his cough button (a muting device for his mike) depressed, fantastically dirty subcommentary. Uecker, a staunch believer in the separation of public fun and private filth, was not pleased that it leaked. Block says that at least 10 broadcasters have prodded him for cough-button stories, assuming that a Dirtier Harry Doyle—the loutish Indians announcer Uecker played in the Major League movies—lurks beneath the surface.

"There's a lot of Uke in Harry Doyle, but that's clearly a character," Block says. "If Uke is being playful about something, Harry Doyle is bombastic about it. If Uke enjoys one Miller Lite, say six times a year before a game, Harry Doyle is drinking

an entire bottle of Jack Daniels. Is Uke an everyman? Absolutely, but is he this crass drunk like Harry Doyle? Not from what I've seen."

I don't receive the Artie Lange treatment either, but Uecker also knows I'm there to write about him. I do hear him, between innings, express genuine excitement over Milwaukee bullpen catcher Marcus Hanel's having eaten seven cheesesteaks that day. ("The record," Uke says to Block, "is 15 for a three-game trip.") Uecker messes with his producer of 28 years, Kent Sommerfeld, by no-look chucking advertising script cards in his direction. Suspecting that he's been excluded from a pregame ice cream run, Uecker stands up and yells, in the loving way that men who've been working in close quarters together for decades are wont to address each other, "Kent, you had some, didn't you, you c-----!" Uke then stomps out of the booth, returns with his own cup of ice cream and sits eating it while Block finishes a pregame spiel of lineups and out-of-town scores, building up to his big handoff: "Once again with you on the call, HERE'S BOB UECKER!"

••• INNING 2 •••

Lately, I listen to get lost. It's preferable to just listening to the losing, something my Brewers, 31--43 through Sunday and tied for last place in the National League Central, have done often enough to make Uecker turn water-park ads into suicidal ramblings. "Enjoy Mt. Olympus in Wisconsin Dells," he says on April 14, while Milwaukee is in the midst of a 32-inning scoreless streak. "That's where I'm going—to jump off."

This is my 33rd year of existence and 27th of Uecker immersion, so I am familiar with his primary law of broadcasting: If the game merits locking in, he locks in. You hear every bender down low for ball one and bouncer wide of third and fastball right down Wisconsin Avenue. You get a golden-age baseball call with a

few dollops of nonsense—an aside, perhaps, about sunscreen's potential as a condiment (on June 10: "It's good on chicken sausage—use the 30") or guidance on Mother's Day (May 4: "Give mom a gift that's brewed for her—a 24-pack of Miller").

If the cause is lost, Uke tries to get you lost in something else. Sometimes he starts early, such as on July 4, 2007, after Uecker stumbled upon a convention of animal-costume fetishists at the Pittsburgh Westin, where the Brewers were staying. Uecker, his then partner Jim Powell recalls, "was like a kid on Christmas morning." The game had barely begun when they went on a 15-minute digression:

"Furrier Society, I believe it is," Uecker said. After putting the topic on hold to call a Braun home run, he resumed: "That's no big deal, that's what they feel. They wear animal costumes because they feel a little animalish. And I've felt that way myself a couple of times. I haven't dressed up for it. I've worn a fig leaf or two." Later Uecker emitted a sort of bird whoop and directed Powell to provide listeners with a website for more information on the Furry movement. Presumably this is the first time "alt dot lifestyle dot furry" was said during a major league broadcast.

In the fifth inning on May 5 against St. Louis, the occasion of the Brewers' wearing throwback uniforms to honor their 1913 American Association predecessors led to a deep exploration of farm clubs in the Cream City: how Uecker, who grew up near the old Milwaukee Zoo in the '40s, would hound a first baseman named Heinz Becker for autographs, hanging on the bumper of his car, and how those Double A Brewers had a manager, Nick Cullop, who was known as Tomato Face, even in the newspapers. Then Uke was off to the Hollywood Stars and the Pacific Coast League in the '40s. He informed Block:

"They wore shorts, did you know that? They did. They wore like Bermuda shorts, knee-high. One ball, two strikes. Check 'em out. Some guys with some decent-looking legs." (Block: "I'll work on that.") "Yeah, take care of that, will ya?"

In the ninth, as part of the "Ask Uke" segment for which listeners submit questions, he told a story about rooming with Eddie Mathews on the Milwaukee Braves in the 1950s. He then dipped into the Uecker Self-Deprecation Collection, which accounts for about 75% of his shtick: "I think we led all roommates, in the National League only, in home runs. As a room. [Mathews] had like 430, and I had two." When the Ukeship landed and listeners were reacquainted with inning, score and reality, the Cardinals were up 10--1, about to complete a four-game sweep. It was rock bottom for the Brewers. It was my favorite Uecker game of the season.

••• INNINGS 3, 4 & 7 •••

Uecker passes off every third, fourth and seventh inning to Block, and is rarely heard during those periods.* I ask Uke how he kills the time. "By changing my diaper," he says.

His wit remains sharp, but lines about getting old have been seeping into broadcasts. Uecker, twice divorced and a father of four, is still calling a full schedule, despite having endured three major heart surgeries (the most recent in 2010), the removal of three quarters of his pancreas, and three knee replacements. His first joke of spring training this year, in the bottom of the first on March 1, was about his prostate: "I spent most of my winter just following Joe Theismann's advice—easy flow." When Uecker addresses his own mortality, it's almost always with the phrase, "If I take a Dixie...."

*I would learn that Uecker mostly stays in the booth. He texts during off-innings in the Phillies game. His tweeting potential is immense, but he seeks privacy when he's not at the mike. "I don't Twitter, tweet, t---," he says. "I don't do none of that stuff."

••• INNING 5 •••

I'd always take a radio with me any place I went. I remember when I was taking a bath my sisters always used to throw a radio in the tub for me. [Block: "Wanted to make sure you didn't miss a pitch. How kind of them."] [They] hooked it up to a truck battery. —UECKER, May 2, Brewers vs. Cardinals

That segment was notable less for the image of a nude, electrocuted Uecker than for the reminder to Milwaukee fans that baseball on the radio predated Bob. (He joined Merle Harmon and Tom Collins in the Brewers' booth in 1971 after spending '70, the team's first season in Milwaukee, as what then owner Bud Selig called "the worst scout I ever had.") The first king of Dairyland radio was Earl Gillespie, who called the 1950s Braves, the dynastic Packers and Wisconsin football, did TV sports news and even had his own fishing show. "You turned on anything in Milwaukee," Uecker says, "and there was Earl."

After the bathtub story, Block asks about the late Gillespie and his partner, Blaine Walsh: "Did they call games different back then? Was it a quicker pace, or—"

"No, I don't think so," Uecker says. "I think those guys were pretty relaxed. Earl Gillespie used to sit up in the broadcast booth with a big fishing net and try to catch foul balls." Gillespie was an unhurried former player—just a minor league first baseman, but that still lent him some cred—with a Miller High Life flag hanging outside his booth. When he called Uecker's lone homer as a Brave, in

1962, he began with, "Swung on and a drive INTO DEEP LEFT...." When Uecker sees a ball like that now, he tends to start with, "Swing and a driiiiive to left and DEEP!"

Gillespie was a "Holy Cow" guy—he claimed he said it before Harry Caray became synonymous with the phrase as the Cardinals' play-by-play man in the 1950s and '60s. Uecker is no Holy Cow guy. But when he slipped one into his call of Dale Sveum's walk-off homer on Easter Sunday 1987, a shot that lifted the Brewers' record to 12--0—"GET UP! GET UP AND GET OUT OF HERE, gawwwwwne for Sveum, and they've done it again! Twelve in a row on a two-run blast by Sveum to win it. Oh, my goodness. Holy Cow! Do you believe it?"—it seemed like an ode to Earl and Harry.

Uecker broke in with the Braves in 1962, then was traded to St. Louis in April '64, falling into a world championship as a backup to Tim McCarver and getting exposed to the KMOX radio team of precaricature Caray and Jack Buck. Uecker told me about an LP that KMOX put out after that season. It includes Caray's clubhouse interviews after the Cardinals clinched the pennant, and when he puts the mike in front of Uecker ("Hey, Uke! Uke!"), all Caray gets back is an imitation of himself: "Here we are in the Cardinal clubhouse, along with Jack Buck...."

Caray spawned a million mimics. But the earliest recording of Uecker's voice that I could find also happens to be the earliest recording of a Caray impression that I could find. Uecker can still do the voice that he honed as a Cardinals scrub. Sitting in the Brewers' dugout in Philly, he's listing announcers he reveres—including Vin Scully, the Dodgers' 85-year-old treasure and the poetic opposite of Uke's stand-up act; Bert Wilson and Milo Hamilton in Chicago; and Buck and Caray—when he slips into gravelly Harry: "I don't believe it. Here's Boyer, he struck out three times tonight, and the Cardinals still without a run"

... INNING 6 ...

Uecker imitators must perfect a complex repertoire: his drawn-out vowels ("heeeeeeee struck him out"), his talent for sausage-ad improvs, his deftness at weaving balls and strikes into story time, his propensity for breaking into his home run call on balls that lack the sauerkraut to get over the fence. This sequence, from the bottom of the sixth on April 29 against the Pirates, is a fine template:

"Baseball being brought to you in part by Usinger's. People here in Wisconsin, and everywhere else for that matter, know fresh is best, like fresh crisp kraut, stacked high on a tasty Usinger's brat hot off the grill. And the pitch by Sanchez rides high and outside. All into a local-made Pretzilla soft pretzel bun, and you've got the perfect meal, folks. And if you're looking for tailgating par excellence, that's the way to do it. Outside on Segura, two and oh. Baseball season and Usinger's sausage: doesn't get much better than that, nope. I probably eat Usinger's sausage at least twice a day. And maybe five to six pounds. There's a strike on the outside corner."

(Block: "And now we know what you're doing during the third, fourth and seventh.")

"Two balls and a strike. I pack it and stack it. That's low on Segura, 3 and 1 now. Woodman's Food Market home run inning. Jenna Speltz from Independence. Woodman's gift card jackpot, 1,200 bucks now. Whoo. And the pitch to Segura, a drive to right, DEEP! GET UP, GET OUT OF HERE—OFF THE WALL! Just missed, Jenna. He's going for three now and he's going to be in there with a sliding triple."

••• INNING 8 •••

Here's a true story about Uecker and sausage. He's friends with the Brewers' clubhouse guys—he appears in TV sausage ads with the director of clubhouse operations, Tony Migliaccio, and is the godfather to Migliaccio's son—and every year around Christmas, they get together for lunch in Milwaukee. Another regular attendee is Johnny Logan, who played shortstop for the Braves in the 1950s and likes to bring gag gifts to the lunch. Before they met up in 2005, when Logan was 78, he informed Migliaccio, "I got somethin' for Bobby. I'm gonna give him a big sausage." When Uecker, then 70, tore open the wrapping paper on a four-foot salami, he asked why he, of all people, would need more meat.

Later, while Logan was distracted in conversation at the other end of the table, Uecker asked a waiter for a big knife, cut the sausage in half and disappeared for a few minutes. When the lunch ended and the guests were wishing one another a Merry Christmas, Uecker encouraged Migliaccio and the other clubbies to hang back and watch Logan start his car. It sputtered and sputtered, and finally—boom!—two feet of salami rocketed out of the tailpipe and into the street. No one beats Uke in a septuagenarian prank war.

Here's a measure of Uecker's status as a Milwaukee icon. On June 6, Logan was inducted into the Miller Park Walk of Fame, which meant he got a granite plaque with his name on it outside the ballpark. Logan was a four-time All-Star and started on the Braves' 1957 championship team. Uecker played just two seasons with the Braves, appearing in 46 games, with that one home run. But due to his broadcasting prowess Uecker has been in the Walk of Fame since 2003 ... and last year he was honored with a statue outside Miller Park. The stadium's other statues are of Henry Aaron, Robin Yount and Bud Selig. The first two are Hall of Famers; the last brought baseball back to Milwaukee in 1970, hired Uecker,

helped push through public funding for Miller Park in '95, and for the last 21 years has been commissioner of MLB. Yet when Selig dropped by the booth on March 1, Uecker got away with alluding to the used-car-dealer-turned-commish's being too cheap to serve liquor at a recent in-home medical school benefit.

"With your medical background," Selig said, "I thought that it was important that you be there, Bob."

"You know I found, that the drugs that I was looking for—and not in the sense of drugs, and drugs are drugs, I'm talking about things that could help me, cocktails—"

"Well, there's a question about what could help you."

"Cocktails, which you didn't have...."

When Uecker bid Bud adieu at the end of the inning, it was with these words: "CREAM PUFF! Allan H. Selig. AL!"

... INNING 9 ...

I've only felt sorry for Uecker once, and it was in the midst of a grand celebration. On Sept. 23, 2011, the Brewers clinched their first and only NL Central title at home. Uecker was locked in for their 4--1 win over the Marlins. His full-throated call of Braun's eighth-inning homer induced goose bumps. As nearly the entire crowd and all of the Brewers stuck around to watch the Cubs close out the second-place Cardinals on the jumbotron, sealing the division for Milwaukee, Uke called the conclusion of that game too. When the Brewers bolted for their clubhouse to pop corks, Uecker's four-decades-younger partner, Cory Provus, pulled the duty of chasing them down for interviews. Uecker fraternizes with the team as if he's still a player and has spent his life

as the life of the party, so it seemed to be killing him that they were partying and he was stuck in the booth. I agonized for him right up until he cut away to a last batch of commercials by saying:

"And we'll come back with more here from Miller Park, but we'll take a break. How long we goin', Kent? Two-minute break. O.K., that's good enough for me. Change clothes, and get ready to go downstairs and get ... annihilated."

That is the voice of a city where the baseball has fluctuated in quality, more bad than good, but the drinking has always been prodigious. Uke's act was polished on bigger stages; in the 1970s and '80s he took breaks for The Tonight Show, the WWF, Mr. Belvedere, Saturday Night Live, Major League, national Miller Lite ads and baseball broadcasts on ABC—enough projects that he considered, at times, leaving the WTMJ booth altogether. He is beloved for many reasons, but chief among them is his choice to always come home. "I don't think he ever wanted to do anything more," Powell says, "than be the voice of the Brewers."

On April 19, Uecker told Block a story about the constraints of going national: "When I first started doing color on network [TV] stuff, you know the guys in the truck are telling you—Rickie [Weeks] bluffed a move to second, back he goes headfirst—they would show something they wanted you to talk about, and I didn't think it was interesting, so I wouldn't say anything. And then they're all over you in the truck: 'Look, when we show something up there, start talking about it.' Well, I don't think it's interesting. 'It's not up to you, it's up to us.'"

With the Brewers, it's all up to Uke. Every ad is an improv opportunity, every laggard inning a launching pad. The material is his, and he can spin hours upon hours of it out into the night, stitching together the gaps between benders and drives, distracting a fan base from the misery of last place. It's amazing what you can see when you want to. It's amazing what you can do, when you decide what is interesting and what is true.

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1207938/1/index.htm>