

Remembering the life of Jim Zabel



Legendary Iowa play-by-play voice Jim Zabel passed away on Thursday, May 23, 2013. He was 91. (Photo courtesy of the Iowa sports information department.)

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

In the wake of Thursday evening's news regarding the death of Iowa broadcasting legend Jim Zabel, I thought it would be appropriate to reach out to some of those deeply entrenched in the Hawkeye community who knew Zabel well and would perhaps be willing to share with me (and all of you) some memories they have of him.

Of the five people I contacted Friday morning, there was only one person I was unable to speak with – former Iowa football head coach Hayden Fry. I did speak briefly with his wife

Shirley. She informed me that while they were both saddened to hear about Zabel passing away, Hayden didn't want to comment publicly on Friday morning about Zabel or anything else.

However, everyone I contacted with the exception of Fry returned my phone calls. These four names should all be quite familiar to Hawkeye fans – *Phil Haddy (former Iowa sports information director), Gary Dolphin (the current Iowa play-by-play man), Bob Brooks (Zabel's fellow Iowa play-by-play comrade in Eastern Iowa, now currently with KMRY-AM in Cedar Rapids), and former Iowa men's basketball head coach Tom Davis.*

Like many of you, they all loved Zabel and everything he stood for. They loved being around him and the memories he provided them all through the years. With that in mind, here are some of those thoughts and memories of Zabel they shared with me Friday in their words:

On their relationships with Jim Zabel and the impact he had on their lives:

Phil Haddy: *"He had that enthusiasm that was unbelievable. He made everyone believe that Iowa could win every game. Going into every game, he felt that we could win that game. Even the year we were 0-11 in football, I think he picked us to be 11-0 that year. He was so optimistic.*

"His enthusiasm for broadcasting, for the Hawkeyes and life in general was something we all could learn from. He lived life to its fullest and I don't know if I hardly ever saw the man in a depressed or unhappy mood other than when it was something tragic that maybe happened in his family like the loss of his first wife or the loss of his daughter."

Bob Brooks: *"Well, at least in my view and I think Jim's view, too, we had a mutual respect for what each person was trying to do. Consequently, we did have backbiting and that sort of thing. Then since I've known him for over a 70-year period of*

time, we became good friends off the microphone and on the microphone. It was a relationship probably unique to the business, but by the same token one that I hope was for both of us very enjoyable. It certainly was for me and his passing to the state is a great loss of a state treasure.

"I would think you didn't take any story for granted because you knew there would be competition for that particular story or that particular game, so you basically knew Jim was going to do his best in broadcasting and that made you try to do your best."

Tom Davis: "You know, it was an interesting relationship in that not only was he a journalist and a good radio guy, but he was so closely involved with the program because of a couple of things. One was because he MC'ed so many events. The I-Club circuit's a good example. I don't know how many of those he would average a year, but if they did 15 I-Clubs a year, I'd say Zabel did about half of them and would MC them all around the state.

"So in addition to that, that was something not many people would pay a lot of attention to, but then when you consider the pre-game shows and post-game shows on the radio, the call-in show where you did an hour-and-a-half a week in basketball all season long, other media events where he'd call you up and say I need a couple of comments for my sports show, traveling with him because the media traveled with us to away games for the most part all season long, it was pretty intense.

"You know, you're around the media a tremendous amount and the radio guys including Ron Gonder and Bob Brooks, along with Zabel, more than you were the print media. You'd see them after the games or if they might do a pre-game story or at media day. But one of my advantages was he was such a good guy in the sense that he was a real pro. He never tried to make the players look bad. You know, you get some guys and they're trying to dig and make a player look bad or if a player has a

bad game, trying to nip him a little bit. Jim just wasn't that kind of guy. He'd try to describe the game as best he could and he'd try to make the most out of it and not try to take apart any of the players and certainly coaching, too.

"You're going to take your lumps as a coach and you don't object to the criticism as much as you do if it's on behalf of the players. So I always appreciated that in Jim and the other radio guys, too, because Bob Brooks and Ron Gonder were cut from the same cloth. Maybe they took their cues from each other, but that was a real advantage to me being a coach at the University of Iowa and I'm sure I would speak for Hayden Fry and Dan Gable and any other coach. On the women's side or men's side, it didn't matter because Jim pretty much treated all of us the same."

Gary Dolphin: "It was a very good relationship. Jim and I developed a relationship long before 1996 or 1997, whenever I took over as the play-by-play voice. I did Iowa football and basketball back in the early '70s for six years and I did all the football games home and away out of Dubuque. We were one of about half a dozen stations to do all the games in those days, so I traveled with Jim and with [Ed] Podolak, Randy Duncan and others before Eddie and got to know Jim socially very well and of course, Ron Gonder and Bob Brooks, Gene Clausen and Frosty Mitchell, all of those guys. So I knew Jim very well long before this gig came up.

"With this as a backdrop, when that announcement came down, the university had decided to go with an exclusive rights-holder. Jim was not happy about it and neither was Ron Gonder or Bob Brooks and I don't blame them one bit. But they also understood that that was not my decision. That was not my call. It was the university's call and I just happened to be next in line and fortunate enough to get the job. There were some uneasy moments, but it was never vicious or contentious in the broadcast booth because as you know, Jim and Ron and Bob hosted the pre-game show, halftime and post-game coverage

for about five years after we started this transition.

"In the end, it worked out fine. We let them have their moment on the air in a new deal and eventually they all retired, or at least partially retired. I don't think Z ever retired. He and I actually became closer once he retired because I'd host an I-Club event with him here or there and we'd do a couple of social events and fundraisers together. We got to be very good friends. Podolak and I had a conference call with him about three weeks ago and he always liked to run new material by me for the I-Club circuit. He was always great with one-liners. The reputation Jim had for having alligator arms and never buying a round of beverages more than balanced out in the material he'd give me for after-dinner speaking, so it was all good."

Their favorite Zabel stories:

Davis: "Jim was the kind of guy that he wasn't afraid to be the butt of the joke. He wasn't afraid to make fun of himself. The joke was that Jim Zabel would never pick up a check. We would always kid him about it.

"I remember one time I was with him and it was pretty good sized group of people and I think some of my coaching staff. When the check came, Jim Zabel reached over and grabbed the check. I said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'Look, I'm going to get this check, but I don't want you to tell anybody because if you tell them, I'll lose my amateur standing.' So he understood that he would take some heat for not picking up checks and things, but he was a good-hearted man.

"He was considerate. He was fun to be around and he helped me get through a lot of winter nights, especially after losses when I really needed him to help carry me through a post-game show or taping a television show. He was always there for us as coaches and believe me, we'll miss him and we appreciate everything he did for the University of Iowa."

Haddy: "He was known throughout history for his tightness with the dollar. He always said that's why he was able to afford the big house that he lived in in Scottsdale, Ariz. But Jim would have a tendency to go to the bathroom and probably stay in the restroom for about a half-hour when the bill came. He had what we call now the 'Alligator arms.' He had them tucked in quite a bit when the bill came for meal-time.

"One story was he was out with some people and he said, 'I'll get it.' He gave them the credit card. He knew it obviously, but the people came back and said, 'Mr. Zabel, apparently this credit card's not working.' So naturally, the people he was with said, 'Don't worry, Jim. We'll take care of it.' But his wife came in and said, 'Jim, knock it off. Give them the correct credit card.'

"That was 'The Z.' We all knew him as 'The Z.' He was pretty tight with the dollar, but as much as he was that and as much as people shook their heads when he was so cheap, he was a person you couldn't help but love and respect for all he did. It's a gigantic loss for Iowa athletics – just losing him, his knowledge and all he did for the Hawkeyes."

Brooks: "Well, every time we gather around the campfire of Iowa football or basketball without Jim, his name comes up as to something that had happened in the past and something that was funny. Jim had a great wit about him, a great mind. Very quick and precise, and he was an entertainer, plus a great broadcaster.

"Of course, he was quite frugal, too, and as time went on, he kind of took an honor in being that. So we would try and trap him into picking up the check from time to time and we never really got it done over a period of time. Usually, if we were in a cab – the press corps – we would try and get Jim in the middle seat in the back so that the other people could get out and get away from the cab and he would have to pick up the check. Since he was a track man, he usually got away from us

with that.

"He had the ability of narcolepsy, where he would doze off for a minute or short period of time during a meal. One night, we were at the Edgewater Hotel in Madison before an Iowa-Wisconsin game and the meal was coming to an end. Jim was going into one of those sleepy moods, so all of us said at the table, 'This is the time we get him.' The check was left at his plate and we all left the room. Low and behold, the next morning, we were informed that he had signed the name of the president of the University of Iowa, Sandy Boyd, on the check. Well, we weren't going to let that happen, so we all had to divvy up and again, Jim did not pick up the check."

Dolphin: "When we first started this in '97, he would come into the booth after making the drive over from Des Moines and just to give you an idea of how good an ad-libber he was and how he could just take whatever happened in the moment and turn it into a 10-minute dissertation, he would walk into the booth every Saturday morning with the Des Moines Register sports section and hand-written notes all around the margin of each pages, notes that he just jotted down on his drive over from Des Moines. That was his pre-game show. He just was so good at sensing the moment and keys to the game that day, so he would just take little 1-2 word notes and from there we drew a chapter.

"But my favorite Zabel story involved Bob Brooks. It was either the first or second year, we were at Northwestern and it was a brutally cold, icy, windy football day. Brooksie and Z never saw eye-to-eye totally, either. There was a sort of professional confrontation going on between those two as to who was going to have the mic the longest. On this Saturday, it was the segment where we were going around the Big Ten and talking about other match-ups.

"Purdue was at Penn State and Purdue had Billy Dicken at quarterback, who was a tremendous quarterback. He could roll

out, throw on the run, etc. And then Curtis Enis was the all-American tailback. A bruising 230-pound back from Penn State. Zabel asked the question, 'Well on a day like today, Brooksie, with howling winds and icy conditions, who would you rather have in that game?' Well Bob Brooks said without hesitating, 'I'd rather have Curtis Enis. You know, you got to grind it out on the ground.' Zabel said, 'Well, I'd rather have Billy Dicken because he's great at the short passes and can get you quicker scores.'

"Back and forth they went arguing their points and then finally, Brooksie had enough and after about two minutes, he just cut Jim off and he goes, 'Well, all I know is on a day like today, I'd rather have an Enis than a Dicken.' With that, we're all standing in the booth, Podolak and I look at each other and we just start roaring. Gonder couldn't contain himself, he was just yucking it up. Then Zabel, true to his form, always got the last word. He goes, 'Well, I wish you would've told me that last night.' From there, it started to get R-rated, then I jumped in and Gonder jumped in and said, 'O.K., guys. We got to take a break.' But Brooksie's classic 'I'd rather have an Enis than a Dicken' has probably drawn more comments from Hawkeye listeners over the years than any other single moment on the Hawkeye Radio Network. That's just one of many classic stories about Jim Zabel."

On Zabel's influence on those all over the state of Iowa:

Brooks: "Well, we had these different broadcasts of Iowa football and the fans could take their choice. That was the thing that sold Iowa football. It was the fact that fans, if they disliked one, could go to another or if they thought, 'Maybe we could change the luck of the Hawks that day,' they could switch, and so on.

"Also, all of the stations that were either on Jim's network or my network or Ron's network or Frosty's network or Gene Clausen's network in the state, during the week all of the

stations would talk about Iowa football and the upcoming game and when their particular broadcast was going to be on. So it was really Iowa football 24 hours a day. It was a bunch of what you would want in play-by-play of Iowa football.”

Davis: “You know, you go back in history and some of your younger fans in the state of Iowa might not realize that back in the late '70s and certainly during the '80s and the late '80s and '90s when I was the coach then, every Iowa basketball game then was televised statewide as well as those radio stations. As well as those call-in shows – I don't know how many of those stations had those call-in shows for both football and basketball. But a lot of stations around this state.

“The state of Iowa was so immersed in the Hawkeyes and developed this fan thing. And then you add on what the university was doing with I-Clubs and going out into the communities and having the coaches meet the fans and say hello to them and talk to them in the offseason, it was a tremendous way of developing fan support and it's one of the reasons why Iowa is where it is today. It was because of guys like Jim Zabel that played a role in it that you don't always see in some other programs and some other states.”

Dolphin: “He had an advantage, of course, with WHO. There aren't many 50,000-watt Clear Channel radio stations left in the country and WHO reaches 42 states a night. In a changing face of radio with the Internet and social media and all of this, Jim was smart enough to understand it was here to stay and he changed with the times. He was very versatile, very flexible. But his command of the state-wide audience had a lot to do with the WHO signal because they got into every corner, nook and cranny of the state.

“But you still have to have a good product to sell and this is what I've tried to tell people over the years, Jim was so good. When you think of him, here's a young guy who grew up in

The Depression and wanted to be a broadcaster, a journalism major at the University of Iowa. When you think of all of his storefronts, the generational links that he was able to broadcast from the Great Depression to Nile Kinnick to World War II to the Baby Boom generation of the '50s and the great Iowa Rose Bowl runs of [Forest] Evashevski of the '50s and the drought of the '60s and '70s and then to the Hayden Fry run, during all of that, he had a morning variety show on WHO. He had a cooking show, a recipe show. Then he'd jump over to television and do 'Beat the Bear,' a bowling show. I know he anchored the news one night when the news anchor was sick on Channel 13 and he could do the weather. Not very well, but he could get through the weather map.

"The guy, he was like a vaudevillian. He could change personalities and change roles in an era where you had to do that. You know, you could not be hired as a sports play-by-play broadcaster in the '30s. It just didn't happen. You had to be able to do other things and that's what made Jim so entertaining on Saturdays. All those other part-time jobs or gigs that he had always blended very well with his broadcasts on Saturday afternoon at Kinnick Stadium.

"He always told me – and if I took one thing, I would take 100 things away from Jim to use in my career – he said, 'If I could give you one thing to take with you, be prepared to inject a little humor, a little of your personality, into every broadcast, because you're not going to win every Saturday. You're not going to win every Big Ten basketball game on a cold, chilly January night in the winter. So you've got to be prepared. When the games aren't going well, you still have to entertain.' He was the supreme entertainer."

Haddy: "Well, he had that Hawkeye Radio Network there in Des Moines with WHO and as he used to say, it was 'border to border, coast to coast, and then some' on WHO. There were people throughout the country that used to say we'd listen to the re-broadcast of Iowa football games in the fall because

they used to – and maybe they still do – re-broadcast them at 10:30 on Saturday night. Jim used to do that and people in Florida, California, everywhere could hear that with that clear-band signal of WHO.

“So you’d always hear from people in all kinds of outreaching places in the country that say, ‘Yeah, we listen to that Zabel guy out there in Iowa and we listen to this and that.’ So I guess you could say he truly was, even though we had the Ron Gonders, the Bob Brookses, the Gene Clausens, Frosty Mitchells and all of them, Jim Zabel was probably the voice of Iowa athletics for well over 50 years.”

On what they’ll remember about Zabel the most:

Dolphin: “The thing I’ll remember about Jim the most obviously was his sheer, comedic style that he used broadcasting a football game or a basketball game. You know, he really was a dinosaur in that he would do an Iowa game on Saturday afternoon, then race over to Ames and do an Iowa State game Saturday night, or do Drake and Iowa State on the same day. The guy was amazing.

“But through it all, he had a great sense of humor. He always slid in a plug for his favorite nighters or watering holes, which was hilarious. But he was always a professional. He was always well-prepared. But the obvious comedy style was just his absolute passion to radio. I mean, the guy – and he would tell you, ‘I don’t have many hobbies. I like to play tennis;’” In his younger days, he was a pretty good tennis player and obviously he was a great runner in high school, a great track athlete – but he really didn’t have any other hobbies other than broadcasting Iowa football and basketball and just broadcasting in general. So his passion for this industry is what I’ll always remember Jim for.”

Davis: “I have two thoughts. One is what a real, true professional he was. He loved journalism. He loved being a

broadcaster. He loved doing what he did. When he said, 'I love it! I love it! I love it!' he could have been talking about what he was doing in reality, not just the game he was reporting on because he always loved what he did and I think fans understood that. So I think that's an awfully key thing.

"The other point I'd make is if you go back in history, he did Drake games. He did Iowa State games. He did high school games. You know, he did anything that they asked him to do that would help benefit the sport or station or whatever the case may be. I know when I went over to Drake and would talk to Jim about the Drake job, he would have such great memories of Maurice John coaching there and their great teams and Dolph Pulliam and what he did.

"I think he helped me a lot understand the history of Drake. As we tried to build the Drake program, he was somebody I went to and he cared about all of the programs. The Hawkeye fans and other fans in the later years probably thought he was an Iowa homer, but he really wasn't. He was someone who really cared about the state of Iowa, even though he broadcasted mostly Iowa games late in his career. Early in his career, he worked for a lot of the different venues."

Haddy: "I think I'll remember the most about him how vibrant he was, how much of a Hawkeye fan he was, how biased he was. I mean, you talk about now you want to have broadcasters and journalists be unbiased. There was no qualm about it with him. He was 100 percent Hawkeye, and if we lost a game, it was probably at the fault of the officials or somebody like that. But he was 100 percent and he was not going to veer from that one bit.

"You know, through the years, starting in the 1940s, there was probably no greater ambassador for Iowa football and basketball and Iowa athletics in general than Jim Zabel. He was close to the athletic directors, he was close to the coaches and one of the reasons he was so close to them was

because they knew they could count on his undying support and loyalty through thick and thin."

Brooks: *"Well, I think I would put it in a line that he used in 1994 when he was quoted as saying, 'If you want to know what to put on my tombstone, three words: I had fun.' And what a great ride he had with that fun."*