



Mike Saffran

On the **Radio**TM

WHAM Sacked by the Bills Two Years Ago but Still Going Long

Rob Johnson had nothing to do with it. Honest. Though “Johnson sacked” was a familiar refrain during four long seasons in Buffalo, the Bills were on the giving rather than receiving end of the stuff two years ago when the team sacked its long-time home for radio play-by-play in Rochester, WHAM-AM (1180), and made the hand-off to WCMF-FM (96.5).

The call surprised some but the switch to an FM rock station wasn't groundbreaking. Dubbed “rockin’

of the training camp in 2000, cost Infinity more than \$200,000.

“The Bills relationship has been phenomenal,” he says.

Did Losing the Bills Cause WHAM More Than Hurt Feelings?

A news/talk station, WHAM has been Rochester's overall top-rated station most of the past four years.

Last fall, it had a 9.5 share of all lis-

airing San Diego Chargers games featuring ex-Bill and local fan favorite, Doug Flutie. Last fall, WHAM opted for a counter-programming strategy, airing reruns of “The Michael Savage Show” 1 to 4 p.m. Sundays.

“I thought it made sense to offer strong, alternative programming,” says Jeff Howlett, station manager of WHAM and sister-station WHTK-AM (1280), noting that WHAM aired pre- and post-game football shows before and after Savage.

Hello Drew Bledsoe, Goodbye TV Blackouts

football,” the trend began more than a decade earlier when, in 1990, three National Football League teams' games were on FM: the Bills, simulcast on WGR-AM (550) and WGRF-FM (96.9), the Kansas City Chiefs, which ended a 26-year affiliation with an AM station, and the Houston Oilers. Last season, ten NFL teams' flagship stations were FM.

Among 23 stations on the Bills radio network last year, eight were FM, including WGRF, the flagship the past five years. WCMF isn't even the first FM station in Rochester to carry football. In 1993, WRQI-FM (95.1)—a rock station known as “Rocket 95”—aired New York Giants games.

Football and Rock Music: The Perfect Match?

Football on FM rock stations may be a perfect match considering the audience for each: mainly men, as reflected by Arbitron ratings ranking WCMF number one with male listeners Sundays last fall. In the 10 a.m.-to-3 p.m. time slot, WCMF had a 25.7 share of 25-to-54-year-old men compared to WHAM's 4.4 share. Among all Sunday afternoon listeners, WCMF had twice the audience of WHAM. Among 25-to-54-year-old women on Sundays, the two stations were neck-and-neck—for eighth place.

The pairing offers cross-promotional opportunities, including WCMF's sponsorship of Bills summer training camp at St. John Fisher College. Kevin LeGrett, vice president and market manager for Infinity Broadcasting Rochester, parent company of WCMF and sister-stations WPXY-FM (97.9), WRMM-FM (101.3), and WZNE-FM (94.1), says the stations share Bills promotions, such as tailgate parties, and have priority in landing on-air deals with players. The four-year agreement, sparked by WCMF's sponsorship

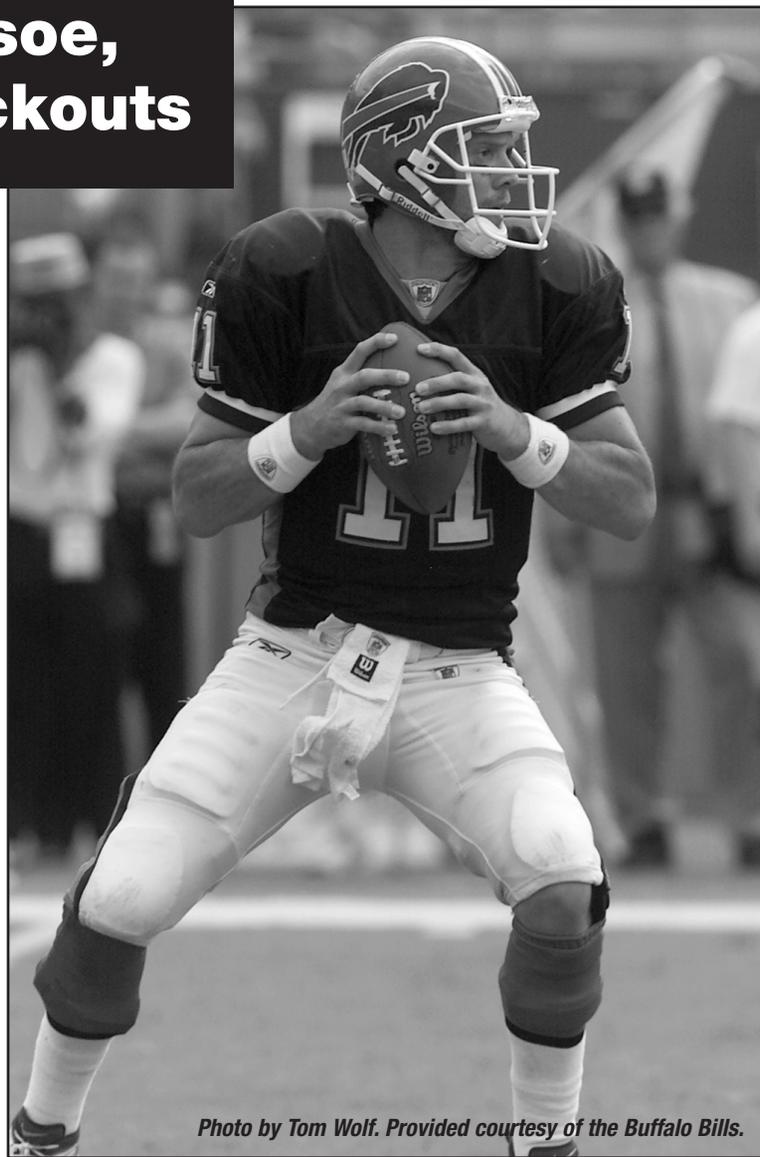


Photo by Tom Wolf. Provided courtesy of the Buffalo Bills.

teners compared to WCMF's 6.4 share and fifth-place rank, according to Arbitron. The last time WHAM finished below first, in spring 2001, it was runner-up to country station WBEE-FM (92.5). That fall, its first without the Bills in 15 years, WHAM had more than twice WCMF's audience. Worth noting, though, the wake of Sept. 11, likely bolstered WHAM's ratings whereas ripples from quarterback sacks of former number 11 probably limited WCMF's gains.

WHAM countered Bills broadcasts in 2001 with NFL coverage on ESPN radio. The station flirted with

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Could the trade for quarterback Drew Bledsoe by the Bills prior to last season, hailed for renewing fan interest, actually have dampened WCMF's Sunday ratings since all but two home games were televised locally?

No, LeGrett says, contending that because of busy lifestyles not all fans stay glued to television Sunday afternoons. “People go on with their lives—we're reaching those active adults,” he says.

Indeed, there's always an audience for Van Miller's play-by-play call—including those who watch with TV sound turned down. Do listeners care which station carries the Bills?

Sans Bills, WHAM's Lineup Replete With Sports

Howlett says WHAM offers strong Bills coverage including talk shows hosted by former player Fred Smerlas and sportswriters Larry Felser, Bob Matthews, and Leo Roth. WHAM and WHTK also carry the NFL playoffs and Super Bowl, the World Series, Yankees, Red Wings, and Amerks games, Syracuse University basketball and football contests, select high school and college basketball matchups, and other sports coverage.

Does Howlett want Miller, the Bills venerable play-by-play announcer for nearly four decades, back in the lineup when the deal with WCMF expires after the 2004 season?

“We would consider bringing the Bills back to WHAM if it were good for the station,” he says.

But LeGrett says WCMF is already discussing a new agreement with the Bills to keep the station rockin' football.

Meanwhile, two years after taking a sack, WHAM's not rockin', but it is rollin' along—and hitting receivers (radio receivers, that is). **BSM**

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