



LIFETIME
ACHIEVEMENT
HONOREE

BRYANT
GUMBEL

AN UNCONVENTIONAL LIFE

By Farrell Evans

Bryant Gumbel has never been a conventional sportscaster. As a Chicago native growing up in the 1950s and '60s, he watched Cubs teams led by Ernie Banks, Ron Santo and Billy Williams fall short of the World Series one summer after another and he could recall generations of the team's batting statistics, box scores and missed opportunities as he and most Cubs fans mourned yet another year of disappointment.

When the Chicago Cubs won the 2016 World Series in their first appearance in the Fall Classic since 1908, Gumbel was ecstatic.

Yet when he sat down for a *Real Sports* interview with Cubs manager, Joe Maddon, a few months after that World Series victory, he went far deeper than anything the box scores or big data could ever show about the success of that team. To get inside the mind of Maddon and some of his unconventional methods, Gumbel took a ride with the manager inside his

luxury RV and probed Maddon about his decisions and let him explain the mantras inscribed on his lineup sheet. He was never going to just ask him how it felt to wait 108 years to finally win a World Series.

Since 1995, *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* has been the 60 Minutes of sports, earning 36 Sports Emmys® and a perch for Gumbel to explore the soul of sports with biting commentaries that often expose the complexity and failures of the games and athletes that we love.

"The athlete's impact on the game has always been less important to me than the game's impact on the athlete," he said. "The people that are playing the games, and the struggles they face and the obstacles they encounter — societal obstacles, economic obstacles, educational obstacles, and the extent to which they can either overcome them or work within them — has always been fascinating to me."



BRYANT GUMBEL AND DEREK JETER

A Russian history major at Bates College, Gumbel never held dreams of becoming a famous television journalist. In his first job after graduation, he worked as a salesman for a pulp and paper company in Manhattan. At 22 years old, he had all the trappings of success — a Park Avenue office with

an expense account and an assistant — but he hated the job. By 1971, he was the editor of *Black Sports*, a small monthly magazine, where he caught the attention of someone who thought he spoke well and should audition to become the weekend sports anchor at KNBC in Los Angeles. Gumbel wowed KNBC producers during his audition and within a couple of years he was called up to NBC Sports, where he became a regular host for the NFL, Major League Baseball and college basketball.

"It never occurred to me, quite frankly, that I would be on TV," he said. "I grew up in an era where you'd never saw somebody who looked like me on television. It was really just a kind of happenstance and being in position to understand that there was an opportunity."

In 1982, Gumbel left NBC Sports to host the *Today* show. He was reluctant to make the move because he had what he thought was his dream job. But Joe Garagiolo, a friend and colleague at the network, convinced him to take the role because he would see things and go places and meet people that he never dreamed possible. "It was a pretty big leap," Gumbel said. "I was 32 years old and there was



BRYANT GUMBEL AND LEWIS HAMILTON

enormous resentment, both in NBC and outside of NBC. One critic said, 'I've never talked to anybody weightier than a linebacker.'"

It would take Gumbel a couple of years into the job to shake the label as a sports guy. In 1984, he anchored a series of unprecedented live *Today* broadcasts from Moscow during the Cold War. "All those people who had formerly thought me too lightweight to be a host of *Today* viewed me, thankfully, as someone able to sit opposite Kremlin and military leaders and hold intelligent discussions."

For NBC, Gumbel hosted the prime time coverage of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. "It's kinda funny how things have turned," he said at the time. "Some people didn't understand how I got the news job and now that I'm in news, they don't understand why I got a job perceived as a sports job."

Near the end of his 15-year run on *Today*, Gumbel helped launch *Real Sports* in '95. Now in its 28th season, the show has a team of very talented journalists and storytellers, but it's Gumbel who sets the temperature of the monthly program with his dogged determination to illuminate society through sport and raw commentaries at the end of every show.

In the summer of 2020 when much of the world was



BRYANT GUMBEL IN EUROPE

ensnared by the Covid-19 pandemic and the racial unrest over the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police officers, Gumbel used his closing commentary to address what he called the "Black Tax."

"It's the added burden that comes with being Black in America, and it's routinely paid, no matter how much education you have, how much money you make or how much success you've earned," he said on *Real Sports*. "It's paid daily by me and every person of color in this country and, frankly,



BRYANT GUMBEL AND DEAN MILLER, MARINE BIOLOGIST



BRYANT GUMBEL AND FRANK MARSH, FORMER NEGRO LEAGUER

it is exhausting. I've been paying the Black Tax in America for almost 72 years now, long enough that I shouldn't have to ask others to simply accept one very basic reality: that our Black lives matter."

The sports world was right in the middle of this global racial crisis. And with his wise and elder voice, Gumbel was there to place the moment in historical perspective for both sports fans and the broader society. "For better or worse, I'm a truth teller and the only opinion that ever guided me was what would my father think," Gumbel said. "If that offended some people so be it. I was never there to curry favor. I was there to try to serve the interests of the viewer. And really that's all I've ever really cared about doing in television."

"Believe it or not, I've never really cared much about various awards and honors that have come my way, but I confess that this one feels special," Gumbel said in regard to receiving this year's Sports Lifetime Achievement Award. "To be on a list with Jim McKay, Vin Scully and Howard Cosell is heady stuff for a guy who has long revered all three of those men. Beyond that, to be the first person of color to be honored with the lifetime achievement award is humbling indeed.

That I won't be the last is a certainty...and I'd like to believe I've had something to do with that." ●



BRYANT GUMBEL IN CAIRO