

Hanny and Harlan: The risk-taking, fun-loving early days of the Wolves legends



By [Jon Krawczynski](#) 7h ago  25 

One of the most recognizable voices in sports is reaching its trademark boisterous crescendo as Kevin Harlan starts to crack up while detailing the very first days of the Minnesota Timberwolves radio broadcast team.

The indelible voice has called Super Bowls, Final Fours and NBA playoff games, but is perhaps most known for the humor and irreverence that permeate his broadcasts, whether Harlan is giving a blow-by-blow of [a streaker on the field](#) in San Francisco, calling [a black cat's touchdown](#) run on Monday Night Football or standing and hollering “[With no regard for human life!](#)” as LeBron James dunked over Kevin Garnett.

He is thinking back to 1989, to an office building next to Prince's First Avenue nightclub and the idle minds of two young radio partners with too much time on their hands. Harlan had just moved to the Twin Cities from Kansas City with his wife and six-month-old baby to be the radio voice of the Timberwolves for their inaugural season. Tom Hanneman had been hired away from powerhouse WCCO-TV to serve as the sideline reporter and host of the pregame show.

Suddenly, just as Harlan is starting to roll in the reminiscing, that big voice catches and can barely manage a whisper.

“And Tom ...”

Thirty-six hours after his Timberwolves broadcasting wing man, his partner-in-crime and one of his closest friends [died unexpectedly at the age of 68](#), Harlan is, for a moment, without words, an unfamiliar feeling for a man who has climbed to the top of the announcing mountain by virtue of his ability to always know exactly what to say. He is sitting in a hotel room in Dallas preparing to call the 49ers-Cowboys game for Westwood One and doing the only thing that can bring him comfort. He is remembering how much fun he and Hanneman had together.

“No one's ever made me laugh more,” Harlan says. “I have a lot of friends in broadcasting and a lot have reached out, but none closer than Tom.”

Harlan and Hanneman are as ingrained in Timberwolves lore as any player outside of Kevin Garnett. They worked together on the radio and on television, teaming with former players including Kevin McHale and Trent Tucker to bring a unique mixture of analysis, color and comedic timing that elevated what otherwise would have been mundane calls of blowout loss after blowout loss. Regular playing of archived calls from Bill Beek, Hanneman's fictitious play-by-play man for the 1946 Toronto Huskies; call-ins during the halftime show from made-up listeners in rural Minnesota with Harlan and Hanneman disguising their voices by holding their hands over their microphones; one-liners on the air, on the team plane, everywhere in what was the wild, wild west of Timberwolves history.

“My wife will bring this up all the time. She will say, ‘It is shocking that you were not fired early on in your days there,’” Harlan says. “I said, ‘I know it. I know it. I cannot believe it.’”

To the contrary, Harlan and Hanneman remain one of the few entities in this franchise’s largely sorry history with a near-unanimous approval rating. And it all started in that office building in downtown Minneapolis. For the first time in Harlan’s broadcasting career, he was being asked to come into the office as new producer Charley Frank got things off the ground. With nothing to really do, Hanneman took to prank-calling Frank from a few desks away, laying the groundwork for a broadcast style peppered with mischief and hijinks aimed at lightening the audience’s mood while the team got bludgeoned on the court.

“They would prank me all the time,” Frank said. “I was trying to get a network built and they would come into the office with nothing to do. It was so much fun. It was so insane.”

The chemistry between Harlan and Hanneman was immediate and it permeated the rest of the production. Harlan was 29 at the time, already calling Kansas City Chiefs and University of Missouri games in addition to getting some network opportunities and considered a star on the rise with an outsized personality and broadcasting style. Hanneman was 37, with strong roots in the Twin Cities from his days at WCCO and the University of Minnesota, and a more sly, understated approach.

“Where Kevin was big and brash, Hanny was just quiet and sneaky and clever,” Frank said. “The two meshed so well.”

The Timberwolves were surprisingly feisty in their first two seasons under coach Bill Musselman, drawing more than 1 million fans at the Metrodome in their inaugural season and then going 21-20 at home and winning 29 games overall in Year 2. The team parted ways with Musselman after that and won just 75 games over the next four seasons before Garnett arrived. Many of the losses were of the decisive variety, which opened the door for Hanneman and Harlan to not have to worry about adhering strictly to the play-by-play obligations.

The pairing was more improv than sketch, with the two friends springing pranks out of nowhere and trying to catch the other off guard.

“We would stop in the middle of getting our fannies kicked in the third quarter someplace and I would, for whatever reason go, ‘Tom, are you wearing pantyhose tonight or is that my imagination?’” Harlan said.

One season the Wolves were in Boston, home to famed Celtics play-by-play man Johnny Most. As part of the pregame show, the Wolves played Most’s iconic call of a steal by Larry Bird against the Pistons in the 1987 playoffs. Before they segued, Hanneman interjected that they had found another call of the same play from Beek, working the game for the ALPO radio network, who was seated a row behind Most.

“You’re kidding,” Harlan says.

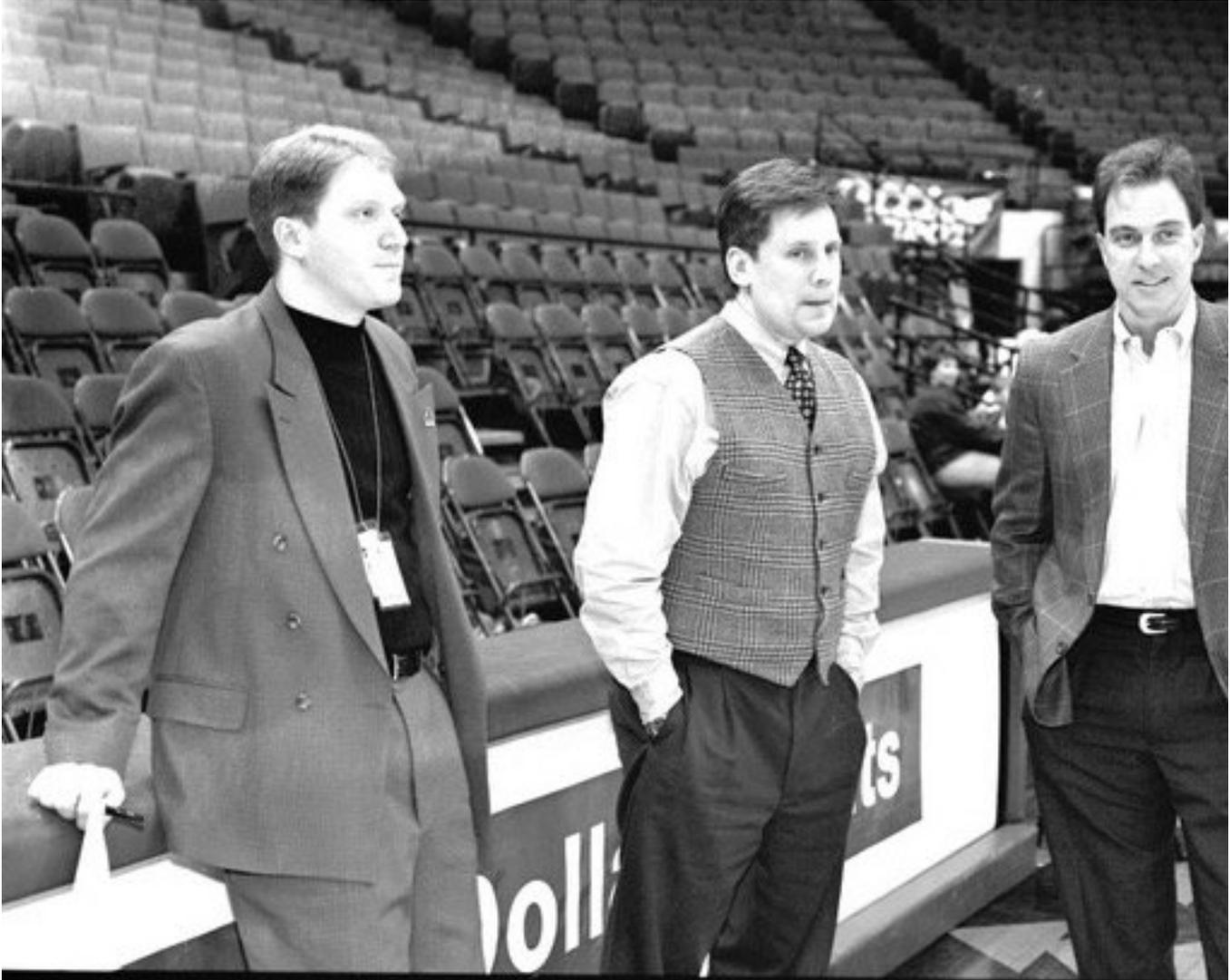
Earlier in the afternoon, Hanneman had recorded the segment unbeknownst to Harlan. Hanneman uses a whiny, nasal-fueled voice for Beek: “And there’s a steal by ... sit down, Johnny Most, I can’t see a thing. Oh noooo. Boston has scored. I think it was Bird. The crowd is so loud. Johnny, you’re a jerk! Timeout. The Celtics are ahead.”

Harlan can be heard cracking up in the background, and Beek became a recurring character on the broadcast, including his call of the first outdoor game in NBA history, which unfortunately took place in Moosejaw, Saskatchewan. According to the tape, a rainstorm hit just after the game began.

“This is a mess,” Beek whines. “Crowd scattering like wild ferrets. A quagmire. This was a bad idea.”

Harlan estimated that Beek would make an appearance every three or four games. And after Hanneman got him first, Harlan would spring it on his counterpart out of the blue, asking Hanneman if he had dug up that call of Beek from the 1951 classic between the Huskies and the Knicks.

“He’d do it live, then, at the drop of a hat whenever we would request it,” Harlan said. “It just got to be, ‘Can you believe we’re even doing this?’”



Hanneman and Harlan with Charley Frank (left). “They were taking incredible chances, things you could not get away with today,” Frank said. (Courtesy of Fox Sports North)

While the pair clearly did not take themselves too seriously, they stayed true to the craft. When the games were competitive, they played it straight. But when the score got out of hand, look out. And it didn’t stop when the game was over. Hanneman loved to get anyone in his orbit with one of his favorite tricks. The pair would be getting on to the team plane after a game and shuffling past the players as they found their seats when Hanny would strike.

As they walked past Tony Campbell, Hanneman would say in a voice louder than necessary, “Kevin, I cannot disagree with you more, I thought the basket by Tony in the second quarter was a good shot, not a bad shot.”

“It just became this little sideshow and I’ve always said that I was a gullible culprit, but Tom really was the instigator,” Harlan said. “He was the match. He was the spark. He’d look at somebody funny and his laugh was so contagious. You’d hear him laugh, and we didn’t even know what he was laughing about. And then I’d start laughing.”

Through it all, Harlan never recalled being summoned to the principal’s office. They were employed by the Timberwolves, but the games were so uncompetitive at the time that few were listening. Management would occasionally have conversations with Frank, sending messages to reel them back in a little bit, but Frank said the pair never were in too much trouble.

“Tom and Kevin would literally walk up to the precipice, they’d look over the line and they wouldn’t go over,” Frank said. “But boy, they sure had fun right on that edge.”

When McHale joined the pair, it suddenly became a free-for-all. McHale was Charles Barkley before Barkley became a sensation for TNT. He was a Hall of Fame player and a Minnesota native with a dry wit and a willingness to push the envelope. His inclusion gave the group even more gravitas, and McHale didn’t hesitate to get in on the fun. They would film skits for the pregame show in which McHale would be walking around the arena, open a closet door and find Hanneman and Harlan sitting in there. One time in Boston, McHale took the crew on a tour of the Boston Garden, brought them into the locker room and pointed to the locker he used to inhabit. Another player had moved in, of course, but McHale tore all of the equipment out of the locker and threw it in the middle of the floor and walked out. Frank filmed the whole thing.

“They were taking incredible chances, things you could not get away with today with social media,” Frank said.



Harlan and Hanneman worked together on Timberwolves broadcasts from the team's inception in 1989 until Harlan's departure in 1998. (Courtesy of Fox Sports North)

When McHale became the team's GM, Tucker joined the broadcast team for the 1995-96 season. Hanneman quickly took Tucker under his wing, helping him get comfortable in a new role and feel welcome with the group. Just like McHale, Harlan and Hanneman brought Tucker right along with them on the comedy tour.

"There were nights when Kevin and I would be on the air after we had gone through the pregame with Hanny and I had no idea what Kevin was going to say," Tucker said. "We just kind of played off each other. We let the atmosphere just flow. It was some of the best times I've ever had being around basketball."

Like Harlan, Tucker would occasionally freelance for other events, including Big Ten basketball. Harlan had one piece of advice for

Tucker every time he left the friendly confines of the Timberwolves operation.

“We’d tell him, ‘Trent, you can’t do this stuff on those other broadcasts,’” Harlan said. “You can do that here, but you can’t do that on ESPN regional or whatever other side jobs he had.”

“Anytime I went to do something with someone else, I had to be a little bit more buttoned-up,” Tucker said, laughing. “And that can be hard to adjust to.”

Harlan knew the feeling. The longer he was with the Wolves, the more prime network assignments he started to get. Every time he called an NFL game or any other non-Timberwolves event, he couldn’t go full Timberwolves. There was no standing up in the middle of a Thanksgiving game after a Wolves dunk and yelling, “You had your turkey, and there’s the stuffing! Gobble gobble gobble!”

“I’m sure that people would listen and say, ‘That’s not the same guy that does our Timberwolves games.’” Harlan said. “I was pretty buttoned down. It’s only actually been recently in the last five to six years that I’ve felt that comfort level again with some of the things I’ve done on Westwood One and TNT.”

Now when Frank hears Harlan let loose a little bit on a national broadcast, he smiles. It is all so familiar to him, and it all started in Minnesota. Now Harlan is celebrated for his candor and his excitable style. Whether it is on a broadcast or the NBA 2K video games Frank plays with his son, he knows he was there when it all began.

“The comedy team where Kevin was just so fearless and ambitious with what he was putting out there in terms of his sense of humor and Tom was able to put it in a local context and help Kevin frame it,” Frank said. “Tom gave him the grounding and credibility to do it.”

Harlan is the first to say that he found his voice in the Twin Cities, and that he wouldn’t have done it without Hanneman by his side and in his ear, steering him down a path that was unlike anything anyone had heard before.

“Every time I do it,” Harlan said, “I think of Tom and it goes back to my days with the Wolves.”

The Timberwolves open their 32nd season on Wednesday night when they host the Detroit Pistons. Harlan has been gone since 1998. Hanneman transitioned from TV play-by-play to a studio host role for Fox Sports North in 2012. The Wolves have employed some talented broadcasters, including Chad Hartman, who now hosts an afternoon talk show on WCCO-AM; Brian Sieman, now the TV voice for the Los Angeles Clippers; and current radio play-by-play man Alan Horton. On the TV side, the team of Dave Benz and Jim Petersen is a League Pass favorite.

But Harlan and Hanneman hold a special place in the hearts of long-suffering Timberwolves fans. They were the first through the door, bringing a fearlessness to the job in the no-holds-barred days of the early 1990s.

“Of all the times I’ve been around basketball, as a player and a broadcaster, during those times between 1995 and 2000, those are some of the best times I had,” Tucker said.

Harlan has come a long way since those days sitting in the office and watching Hanneman prank call Frank. He has broadcast 10 consecutive Super Bowls, has done five Final Fours and has become one of the most popular announcers of his generation. But around here, he will always be known as one half of the Hanny and Harlan tag team, and that is just the way he likes it.

“Those nine years were, without a doubt, the most enjoyable and free-wheeling of my entire career, and Tom was the reason why,” Harlan said. “His humor was great to be around. His friendship was something that I cherish. His personality was captivating and the association with him during those years was something I would not trade or replace for anything in the world.”

(Top photo of Tom Hanneman and Kevin Harlan: Courtesy of Fox Sports North)



[Jon Krawczynski](#) is a senior writer for The Athletic covering the Minnesota Timberwolves, the NBA and the Minnesota Vikings. Jon joined The Athletic after 16 years at The Associated Press, where he covered three Olympics, three NBA Finals, two Ryder Cups and the 2009 NFC championship game. Follow Jon on Twitter [@JonKrawczynski](#).

25 COMMENTS

Matt S.

7h ago

9 likes

Thanks for doing this. I loved falling asleep listening to Timberwolves radio broadcast in their early years.

Nicholas C.

7h ago

16 likes

Harlan, Tucker and Hanneman are a massive part of my childhood. When I think of the Minnesota Timberwolves, I think in order

Kevin Garnett

Kevin Harlan

And then it just gets sad

Bobby E.

7h ago

7 likes

Jon - this story was incredible. Downright incredible, and you continue to never make me doubt my athletic subscription. Rest In Peace to Hanny, one of the greatest dudes in the industry and an all time legend

Zach A.

7h ago

4 likes

Great story and great writing like usual. I know this has to be tough to write but the positivity and the kindness of hanny will live on. As you said one of the only unanimously approved things for this franchise was hanny and there's a reason for that and it sucks he's gone

Eric W.

7h ago

9 likes

"He went up high, he came down hard! They call that the high, hard one!"

Luke H.

6h ago

3 likes

Those were some of the my favorite memories when the Timberwolves were young and on the verge of making the playoffs for the first time. 1996-1998...Garnett, Marbury, Gugliotta, beating Jordan and the Bulls in 1997. First playoff appearance in franchise history.

Joe S.

6h ago

6 likes

I loved every word of this story. Beautiful storytelling Jon..

Matthew S.

6h ago

6 likes

"Googli, oogli oogli baby!"

Andrew G.

2h ago

1 like

@Matthew S. I still get shivers down my back when I hear that. What a voice!

Kyle W.

5h ago

2 likes

Epic story. Content like this keeps me a subscriber to the athletic

John B.

5h ago

6 likes

"Sam I am, green eggs and ham, sending them home with a two handed jam!"

Great read, Jon.

Scott O.

5h ago

1 like

Kevin Harlan is awesome. I still remember listening when Mark Aguirre got a technical and slapped a bag or tub of popcorn from a fan in the stands. Harlan's call was super funny and definitely not PC in today's world, but I still remember it to this day.

Adam F.

5h ago

1 like

Another reminder why I subscribe to the Athletic. Thanks Jon!

Patrick H.

3h ago

4 likes

Hanny had some great dead pan moments doing the pre and post game shows. He would get Kevin Lynch to crack all the time.

Marion D.

3h ago

1 like

Whoever wrote this, isn't from here. First Ave wasn't Prince's club, and that "No Regard For Human Life" moment wasn't LeBron dunking on KG. LeBron was in Middle School when that phrase was uttered.

Jim C.

3h ago

2 likes

Jon is a Blaine boy, i believe. And like Yankee Stadium, the House Ruth built, Prince is why 1st Avenue is so famous. And he used that line about no regard for human life many times.



Jon Krawczynski

STAFF

2h ago

2 likes

You're saying First Ave isn't considered the House that Prince Built? Yeah he didn't own the club, but he OWNED the club.

And click the hyperlink on "with no regard for human life." It takes you to him using it when ... LeBron dunked on KG. While he did use it before then, that's the most well-known one from a national perspective.

And yes, I'm from Blaine, Marion. I have a little understanding how things work around here.

Jim C.

1h ago

Jon, i hope you know i was defending you.

Eric J.

1h ago

Even Jonny K has to defend himself from "one of us" claims, insanity



Jon Krawczynski

STAFF

52m ago

For sure, Jim. Was directed at Marion. Thank you

Jim C.

3h ago

1 like

Jon, thank you. Honestly, this made my day. I cried when i heard Hanny passed. Had no idea he was dealing with health issues. I immediately thought of those early days with Harlan and Hanny. For what has been a tough ride with the Wolves those years listening to those two made it worthwhile. Great piece

Patrick C.

3h ago

3 likes

I had the distinct joy as a young broadcaster of sitting in at Timberwolves radio central in the winter of 1992-93, a glorified unpaid intern cutting tape and watching how everything operated behind the scenes and loved the off-air banter even more than the stuff on-air.

This is more about Harlan, but the control room would give him a word that he had to work into his call of the game, and that was hilarious to hear how that would come out.

Beth D.

2h ago

1 like

Ahh, brings a tear to my eye! Thanks, Jon.

Mike R.

2h ago



Grew up listening to hanny, and now a professional basketball player overseas. Definitely some of my best times were hearing his calls, with the Malik Sealy dagger being one of them.

That man will be missed, sending love to his family.

David F.

1h ago

The Alpo Radio Network....greatest bit of all time they did.....