

A full-page photograph of Rachel Baribeau, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a maroon long-sleeved top and a black skirt. She is standing in front of a weathered, rusty metal wall. Her hands are clasped in front of her, and she has a slight smile.

IT STARTED WITH A
PHONE CALL. NOW
HER PASSION FOR
COLLEGE FOOTBALL
HAS BECOME A
BURGEONING
BROADCAST
CAREER.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

RACHEL BARIBEAU

THE CHANGING
NARRATIVE

In

a media landscape chock full of sports commentators, Rachel Baribeau is breaking through the noise. Currently a cohost on SiriusXM's College Sports Nation—its first female host—and a contributing writer on Tony Barnhart's college football website Gridiron Now (gridironnow.com), Baribeau is more than just a knowledgeable college football fan. She is driven by a passion for college football that she says never seems to get old.

"To me, there is just something about the college game that is intoxicating and alluring," she says. "Even all these ten-plus years later of covering college football, I like to call it the old siren that calls to me."

"There are so many lessons that we can learn from football," adds Baribeau. "The camaraderie, the sportsmanship, the relationships that come out of it. It's just beautiful."

Baribeau's star began rising about a decade ago when she first broke into the male-dominated world of sports journalism. She is known as an SEC-ologist and is also in demand as an announcer, writer, and sideline reporter covering college football, NFL, and NASCAR. While she may make it look easy, Baribeau's career was built on making her own breaks.

While studying at Auburn, Baribeau started working as a sideline reporter with Eagle Eye TV but struggled early in her career to make a name for herself as a serious sports journalist. Looking to jumpstart her career, she was hit with a lightning bolt of inspiration. She decided to call into a sports

radio show based in Columbus, Georgia, then hosted by former SEC and ACC assistant football coach Max Howell.

Placing an audio recorder next to her radio, Baribeau called into Howell's radio show and, armed with a command of the intricacies of college football, made an immediate impression. "I called in and asked about the nickel package at Mississippi State. I think (Howell) was a little bit more composed than his cohost, but I could hear their chins hitting the floor," she says.

Another milestone came in 2008 when she became the first woman to participate in preseason training with a professional football team, the Columbus Lions, a semipro indoor team now competing in the National Arena League (NAL).

Baribeau spent five days in full pads training with the team at full contact, earning the respect of the players while giving herself a new appreciation for the men who suit up week after week. "It was one of the most exhilarating and terrifying experiences of my entire life," she says. "It was brutal, but an accomplishment I revisit often when I need inspiration."

Inspiration is a theme that practically defines Baribeau these days as she adds one more role to her busy schedule—motivational speaker. As a woman and a football fan, Baribeau was troubled by the spate of domestic abuse arrests in recent years and the Baylor sexual abuse disgrace that set a pall over the entire 2016 college football season. At times, Baribeau found it difficult to

focus on her work over the scandals that she believes were damaging the sport and pinning wraps on its players whether they deserved it or not.

“I would be doing shows on Sirius, and I would have to take a break and cry between segments because of what was happening, not just at Baylor but all across the country,” she says. “Not only was the violence against women breaking my heart, but the people that were painting with a broad brush and generalizing all football players. Man, that just tore me up.”

Baribeau decided to take matters into her own hands, creating the theme “Changing the Narrative.” For over a year now, Baribeau has received invitations to speak to college football players across the country delivering a message focusing on respecting women, making good choices off the field, and avoiding the pitfalls common in big-time sports. She also makes a point to let the players know she cares about them as people, and they have more to offer the world beyond the excitement of fall Saturdays.

“I talk to these guys about passion and platform and purpose and using your life for something greater. But we also talk about domestic violence and how we treat women and chivalry,” she says.

Enthusiastically received, Baribeau says she’s had many conversations with players who have been inspired to be better people off the field and want to make a positive impact in their communities. “I had two players specifically come up with tears in their eyes and tell me ‘thank you. No one has ever told me I had a purpose outside of football,’” she recalls.

“I encourage them to tell me their dreams and hopes and they’re, like, ‘I want to start a homeless shelter’ or ‘I want to start an at-risk youth center in my hometown,’” she adds. “I tell them, ‘You can do it. Football is just a platform for you to be able to do these things.’”

Baribeau’s purpose is to leave the game healthier and in better shape than when she first got into sports journalism over a decade ago. She is, after all, a fan.

Although she visits many campuses each year, the demands of her career keep her from enjoying the tailgating scene on a regular basis. However, she had the opportunity to visit a handful of tailgates recently and, while Baribeau will always be an Auburn fan at heart, she did throw down at LSU last year and says the experience lived up to the hype.

“I took time to get to the tailgates and whatnot with some people, and they do it right,” she says. “LSU just holds a special place in my heart for the food, the warmth, and the Cajun spirit.”

Baribeau also enjoys Alabama for the fervor and passion that head coach Nick Saban has unleashed in Tuscaloosa. She is also excited about revisiting Texas A&M now that the renovations to Kyle Field are complete.

One school, however, she fell in love with is Virginia Tech. “I was a sideline reporter, and I promised myself I wasn’t going to jump when they played ‘Enter Sandman,’” Baribeau says. “I said, ‘I’m going to be cool and professional.’ It came on, and I started jumping. I couldn’t help it.”

Professionally speaking, Baribeau’s career is hitting a high point. She was awarded a Heisman Trophy vote in 2015 and, in 2016, sat in a mock selection with College Football Playoff committee member Condoleezza Rice. Not bad for a fan who got noticed calling into a sports show.

“I like to tell people if you live in a constant sense of amazement and wonder, you’ll never have a day where you’re not grateful,” she says. “And that’s what I do.” ■



Left: courtesy of Rachel Baribeau/Eric Adkins