

Radiolnsight Tech:

WBZ's Big Move Part 3 – Beasley Builds Big in Boston for Sports Hub

By Lance Venta on September 26, 2018

In the earlier installments of this series, I visited both the heritage (70 years!) and brand new studios of Boston's WBZ(AM). But going to Boston and "visiting WBZ" has become a more complicated task these days. When CBS Radio sold its stations to Entercom, the Justice Department's antitrust lawyers forced several stations to be sold off to maintain competitive parity. In particular, there was no way Entercom was going to be able to keep both its own sports station, 93.7 WEEI-FM, and CBS Radio's "98.5 The Sports Hub," WBZ-FM.

So Entercom negotiated side deals, selling some of its new stations (including WBZ AM) to iHeart and – much to the market's surprise – swapping the "Sports Hub" to Beasley in exchange for what had been one of Beasley's biggest billers in town, AC "Magic 106.7" WMJX.

But a sports talk station in Boston needs much more studio space than an AC music station, and that meant a more complex transition for the Sports Hub. Even after the swap to Beasley closed, the Sports Hub stayed put for a few weeks in its old CBS Radio space, two floors down from WMJX's new home upstairs, while Dennis Knudsen and the Beasley engineering team got to work building a new home for the station in another part of Beasley's Dorchester building.

And oh, what a home! Instead of putting the Sports Hub along the long row of existing studios on the back wall of the building (where WMJX had been and where Beasley's other four FM's still are), they carved out two production rooms along the front of the building, in a high-visibility spot right at the top of the stairs (or elevator) that bring visitors up from the lobby.



Beasley's Boston studios

That set the stage for another round of studio moves – and a complicated one at that. As a music station, WMJX was relatively easy to move. Once 100.7 WZLX had left the top floor of the former CBS Radio building in Allston for its new iHeart digs up north in Medford, that freed up a complex of air and production studios. Over the summer, WMJX quietly moved from a back corner of the Beasley building in Dorchester (on Boston Harbor south of downtown) to one of WZLX's former production studios, leaving behind a space that Beasley could repurpose for production.



Welcome to the Sports Hub studios!

That matters, because these are more than just radio studios. There's a constant stream of guests cycling through here, unlike on the music stations down the hall. As with so many sports talkers, several of the Sports Hub shows are TV shows, too, simulcasting on NBC Sports Boston. Beasley inherited an afternoon drive simulcast from CBS and quickly added a midday simulcast as well, meaning there's live TV coming from here up to seven hours a day on weekdays.



The Sports Hub control room, hard at work

All of that makes for an unusual studio setup. There are two control rooms here, one on each end of the long air studio, each equipped with a pair of Wheatstone consoles. The main console in each, a big LX-24, handles the actual broadcast and all the moving pieces that go along with it, automatically ensuring that mix-minuses and talkbacks are configured properly and outputs sent where they need to go, both to radio air on the Sports Hub and to the TV control room up in suburban Burlington. Off to the right in each room, there's a smaller L-8 console at a separate producer work area. Need to pull some sound out of a live show for a later web highlight or social media post? Grab something for a post-game show? Edit down a live show for a podcast or for the HD2 channel, which replays a "best of" loop? There's space here for that.



Control room racks at the Sports Hub

Behind the operators in the main control room, Dennis and his crew built out a separate rack area from the main rack room directly downstairs. Full of IP audio and ISDN connectivity, this rack gives the producers immediate access to everything coming in and going out, which is especially important because of all the live sports rights Beasley holds. The Sports Hub carries – and originates the radio networks for – Patriots football, Celtics basketball, Bruins hockey and Revolution soccer. That's where that second control room

on the other side of the studio comes in: if the Pats and the Celtics conflict, for instance, one network can originate from the main control room while the other uses the second control room, feeding another station in the Beasley cluster. (And if all three are playing at once? That's happening several times this winter, requiring a production room to be pressed into service for the third team.)

The custom control buttons in the WBZ-FM production room



Here's where IP networking works so well, too: either control room – or the production room in back – can use a special row of custom buttons on the right side of the console. Press the "ON AIR WBZ" button and that board seizes control of the Sports Hub's air, routing all the appropriate talkbacks and delays to that room until another room takes the station back.

The air studio that sits between the control rooms is equally impressive. It's lined with video screens and color-changing lighting, all controlled from the NBC Sports Boston control room up in suburban Burlington. (They also control the multiple cameras in the room, of course.)

And at the end of the long row of mic positions, what's that? Another Wheatstone LXE console, here at the specific request of morning co-host Fred Toucher, who likes to have control over his cast's mic levels. With IP networking, that's easy: both Toucher and his producer can control the same mics from both of their boards, with motorized faders keeping the levels the same in both places.



Fred Toucher in control in the Sports Hub studio

The moving isn't done yet, either. Now that Sports Hub is out of its old home in the former CBS Radio building, Entercom is getting ready to move sports competitor WEEI into that same ground floor space. And no sooner did we visit the Beasley building than news broke that a developer was in the process of buying the property, meaning Sports Hub and its sisters will likely be on the move again in a few years.