

A DREAM COME TRUE – A DELTA SIG MAKES IT TO THE BIG LEAGUES

► MARK NEELY, MISSOURI '84

Kids across the country grow up dreaming of the chance to make it to the big leagues of America's Pastime. They play games in the sandlot in their neighborhood trying to be the next Albert Pujols or Alex Rodriguez.

When most of them watch the games on television, they are enamored by the players who smack 500 foot homeruns and steal bases left and right. But not Mark Neely, *Missouri '84*. Growing up in Ballwin, Missouri, a St. Louis suburb, Neely was more enamored by the voice of long-time Cardinals play by play announcer Jack Buck, as he wanted to become a major league play by play announcer.

His dreams came true earlier this year, when he was hired to be the lead television play by play announcer for the San Diego Padres. Although it's his first year in the big leagues, Neely is no rookie in broadcasting.

His interest in working as a play by play announcer began in high school, when he began doing high school basketball play by play on a local YMCA's 10 watt radio station in his hometown. He would call the games, and eventually became the station's manager as a senior in high school, leading him to the University of Missouri's prestigious journalism school.

However, he still wasn't totally sure that he wanted to do play by play

sports work. That quickly became clear to him however when he got to Mizzou. "I thought that perhaps news would be what I wanted to do," he said. "It just took a few city council meetings, and I was sure that sports really was where I wanted to go."

After five semesters of working on campus at Missouri, a school that did not offer play by play-specific curriculum at the time, he decided that he needed to transfer somewhere that did offer it. He chose Missouri's arch rival, the University of Kansas, to continue his academic career.

"At the time, I looked at different schools who offered play by play, and Kansas allowed me to come in and do the men's basketball games on the student station right away, as well as one half of all of the football games. It was just something I didn't regret, even though it was tough to leave Mizzou and the house," he said.

After graduating from Kansas, Neely began his rise to his current position at a small radio station in Carthage, Missouri, a town in southwestern Missouri near Joplin. That station was a carrier of the Kansas City Royals radio network, and that allowed its employees to get press passes to cover Royals games. While at one of the games, Neely inquired about how to get into play by play in

baseball, to which he was told to go to the Winter Baseball Meetings.

A year later, he attended the Winter Meetings, and landed his first job in baseball as the play by play announcer for the Class A team in Boise, Idaho, a part of the Angels system at the time. After that assignment, he began climbing the ladder all the way to AAA, making stops in Springfield, Illinois (A), Louisville, Kentucky (AAA), Salem, Virginia (A), and finally in Tulsa, Oklahoma (AA), where he led the broadcasts for the Tulsa Drillers team. While in Tulsa, Neely got another big break, meeting ESPN announcer Bob Carpenter.

"Bob Carpenter lives in Tulsa, was doing ESPN baseball at the time, and helped me send my tape to a guy named Tim Scanlan at ESPN in Bristol, Connecticut," Neely said. "Tim gave me the opportunity to do the 2000 AA All Star Game on ESPN." From there, Neely began doing major league games on ESPN in 2001, as well as some college basketball and college football for the ESPN family of networks, all while still doing his work with the Drillers.

In 2007, Neely once again moved on, this time to the new Big Ten Network, where he began doing college football and basketball games, as well as other sports, all the while still



The San Diego Padres' television announcing team from left, former Major League player Mark Grant, Baseball Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn, and Mark Neely, *Missouri* '84.

keeping the dream of doing full-time major league baseball in the back of his mind.

His chance to accomplish his dream came in early 2009, when he was hired to serve as the lead television play by play announcer for the Padres, a position in which he works with baseball greats Mark Grant and Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn as his analysts. While Gwynn only does 30-40 games per year with the broadcast team, he brings a lot to the telecasts according to Neely.

"Tony Gwynn is baseball in San Diego. Everything that you've probably ever heard about him is true," he said. "He's a gentleman, he's humble, and the interesting dynamic now is with his son Tony Jr. on the team. He obviously is a big fan and wants to see his son do well, but he's also objective about it. When Tony Jr. does well he says so, and when doesn't do well, he says so."

So what is life like for a major league play by play announcer?

According to Neely it's essentially showing up at the stadium four hours before game time, where he talks to players, coaches, the managers of both teams, his producer and director. Then, it's time to do the telecast. The next day, he gets up and does it again. There's also the travel, which is with the team from city to city.

Neely says that it is amazing to be able to do what he does on a daily basis, but the fact that baseball is essentially played every day for six months makes it mentally demanding. "It's fun, and it definitely beats working an actual job for a living, that's for sure," he said. "But it's a very demanding job time-wise six months out of the year, and you certainly have to be able to handle that grind. It's not like once a week with football or a couple times a week with basketball. You're doing it everyday, which is one of the reasons it's my favorite sport to do."

Now living in San Diego with his wife of 14 years and young son,

Neely has a long career ahead of him. He spent over a decade in the minor leagues honing his craft, and now is a lead play by play announcer in the big leagues, probably influencing young children who want to go into the line of work later in life, much like Jack Buck did for him.

Interestingly, he was able to meet Buck a number of years back, who he listened to as a youngster in St. Louis. Perhaps two decades from now he'll meet a young up and coming announcer trying to make his dreams come true, who listened to him while growing up in San Diego.

It would be a nice finish to what has already been a magical trip to the top of his profession.

Mark Neely resides in San Diego with his wife of 14 years, Christine, and their seven year old son, Trevor. Neely can be seen on Cox Channel 4 in San Diego, and some of his clips can be found on mlb.com.