

Thursday, August 19th, 2004
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

No, we are not talking about the Olympic inaugural challenge taking place in Athens this week. Labor Day is just around the corner. Political insiders will tell you the Louisiana Congressional campaigns have been going on for months. But until you go up on TV, it's just a warm-up. The 30 second spot is your ticket to the big leagues.

One of the country's most successful political consultants once told me: "When a major campaign gets under way, if it didn't happen in a 30-second paid commercial, it just didn't happen." Louisiana has a reputation of producing some of the best television spots in America. National awards are given each year for the most effective campaign ads. They are the Oscars of the political business, called Tellys. Louisiana consultants often receive this major honor for their work. In 1995, a TV spot was done for my re-election campaign that was dubbed the nation's best. I have the Telly at home if you want to see one up close.

Quality TV will be all the more important this go around, because of the high undecided vote in a number of major Louisiana races. In the U.S. Senate race to replace retiring incumbent John Breaux, recent polls by both Vern Kennedy (Pensacola, Fla.) and Penn, Schoen and Berland (Washington, D.C.) indicate that almost one third of Louisiana voters are undecided. Similar large number of uncertain voters can be found in the Third District (the Tauzin seat in South Louisiana) and the Seventh District (Chris John's seat in Southwest Louisiana).

A wild mayor's race is developing in Baton Rouge, where the incumbent is running for re-election, but where most recent figures show 37 % of potential voters unsure of their choice. Television will play a major roll in this and other high profile regional races in the coming weeks.

The first candidate to hit the screen in the Third Congressional District is Charmaine Caccioppi. Her spots began throughout south Louisiana on various cable stations last night, where the former aide to Sen. Bennett Johnston effectively talks about how South Louisiana has for years helped to "feed and fuel the nation" yet has been shortchanged in the process. Her spot of having to borrow a suitcase when she represented her home at the Washington Mardi Gras Ball may be in line for a Telly whether she wins or loses. (Produced by Marmillion-Gray who handled Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu's media).

Her TV follows a radio blitz in the same Third District by Sen. Craig Romero, questioning the wisdom of state and national GOP leaders to lend their support to Billy Tauzin, son of the retiring incumbent. Romero is telling voters: "Washington wants to tell the people of the 3rd District who their next congressman should be. The people in the 3rd District have a choice." Romero leads the field in fund raising, so he no doubt will have much to say about "Washington interference" in the weeks to come.

In the U. S. Senate race, there seems to be a “cat and mouse” game going on as to guessing when the other candidates will start the TV war. Congressman David Vitter has raised the most money (over \$3 million) and feels he is sure of a runoff spot. Look for Treasurer John Kennedy to go up on the screen just after Labor Day, with Congressman Chris John to follow shortly. John has more money banked than Kennedy, but the Crowley native can’t afford to let Kennedy to get too much of a jump.

There’s a lot at stake in early TV here. John needs to show he is an independent who can work with either party. Kennedy needs to lump the two Congressmen together and ask what they each have done for the state so far. And Vitter will make a big mistake if he does nothing more than rap himself around the war effort and the President. There’s a lot of competition on the tube. The winner will have solid, confrontational, eye-catching spots that can set him apart. A real Telly effort. We’ll see.

What about radio? After all, Mike Foster in the ‘95 Governor’s race and Bobby Jindal in last year’s race effectively used radio. (Remember “This is Bobby Jindal on the conservative radio network”?) Right! But each of these fellows was trying to differentiate themselves from other Republicans. They were playing to a crowd that was already philosophically in their corner. They basically “closed the deal” for support with a solid conservative message. No competition from the Democrats.

One of the problems with Louisiana radio is the difficulty of saturation in a statewide race. In most surrounding states, six or seven large stations cover the state. Not so here. Unless a candidate buys spots on the Louisiana Network, which feeds news, sports and a talk format to a number of smaller markets, a candidate is required to spend proportionately much more than it costs to reach voters in many other states. There still will be a strong need for radio in regional and local races

Newspapers, particularly in rural areas, are coming back as effective tools for regional candidates. A number of papers are carrying new political columns (like this one) and are drawing younger and more informed readers. The best column that appears, week in and week out, year in and year out, is written by Sam Hanna out of my old home town of Ferriday. Sam owns several north Louisiana papers, but his column is picked up by numerous weeklies throughout the state. He covers it all, from the President and the Washington scene to the Louisiana Legislature, issues that affect rural America and the best column ever written on a young boy quail hunting, which he reproduces every Christmas.

Look for many more ads on cable stations. In past elections, media buyers (yes, there are folks who do nothing but make TV buys for candidates) had a hard time determining just who was watching many programs on cable. But more research is available now, so it’s possible to pinpoint viewers by age, race, sex, even income levels.

So get ready for a two month blitz of national, state and local ads. We’ll place our bets at who is getting the voters’ attention, and who is in line for a Telly next month.

SCALISE OUT, JINDAL A LOCK

There never was going to be much doubt about the outcome of the First District Congressional race. Former Gubernatorial runoff candidate Bobby Jindal led from the get go, and has maintained poll numbers exceeding 60%. With the endorsement of most of the major Democratic elected officials in Jefferson Parish, it would have taken a real twist of fate for Jindal not to win in the first.

State Representative Steve Scalise from Jefferson Parish, the only other candidate to raise any serious money, dropped out in dramatic fashion last night at a candidate forum sponsored by the Alliance for Good Government in New Orleans. He didn't say right off that he was supporting Jindal. But he will be making a major political mistake if he doesn't, and right away. First, Jindal is a sure victor. Scalise is fairly young and ambitious. So is Jindal. It's not in the cards for Jindal to stay a Congressman for a number of years. He leads all candidates in the U.S. Senate race as we speak. A cabinet position down the line? If Kerry wins and Sen. Mary Landrieu is offered a place in the cabinet, would she take it? (Her father did.) If she did, Jindal would certainly run for the vacant Senate seat giving Scalise a much better shot to go to Washington.

So don't tally Steve. If you want a shot to win your own Telly (like me), make your peace and join the team. It's your future, not just his, on the line.

(By the way, Charmaine Caccioppi won the Alliance endorsement over all the other 3rd District Congressional candidates at the same forum.)

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE PAST WEEK

Did you watch the U.S. Men's basketball team got shellacked by Puerto Rico? They were all big shot NBA players. A bunch of prima donnas who shared little team work, and were a real embarrassment. It was the first USA loss in many years, and the first ever when we played our pros.

I felt sorry for team coach Larry Brown, who took the Detroit Pistons to the NBA championship just a few months ago. Larry and I were seatmates at the athletic dorm dining hall in the 60's at Chapel Hill. He's always been a class guy, but couldn't get these "big shots" to play as a team and work together.

Nineteen year old NBA superstar LeBron James (of the Cleveland Cavaliers) reacted to the loss this way: "It's not the end of the world. People are making such a big deal, but it's really not." You're wrong, kid. You and your NBA cohorts looked like you were

just going through the motions. You were an embarrassment to your country. And your attitude and those of your teammates in failing to work a team effort is why attendance at pro games is dropping off considerably.

Quote of the week

Words from Kenneth L. Lay, the former chairman of Enron now under indictment:

“God is stronger than all of the federal prosecutors and the F.B.I.”

Well, maybe in the long run, Ken. But you better be careful as to what these people can do to you in the here and now. If you have any doubts, give me a call.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown