

Friday, October 17, 2006

The call comes to my office at 1 p.m. A producer from MSNBC'S "Hardball with Chris Matthews" invites me to appear on the show at 3 p.m. The topic: Democratic Leadership elections and the war in Iraq.

Appearing on Hardball is like volunteering to show up at your own firing squad – without a blindfold. In front of a live national television audience, Matthews aims and fires. Then fires again. And keeps firing. If your answer is too long, he cuts you off. If it is too political, he pounces on you. The only spinning in this real "no spin zone" is the reeling of your head when the interview is finally over. Chris Matthews is considered the toughest interview in town. In fact, when I told one colleague I had agreed to go on, she said: "Why would you do that to yourself?"

The segment is initially set for five minutes to be conducted in the Cannon House Office Building rotunda. The narrow, third floor balcony that encircles the rotunda is like a nest for cable news networks. They perch their equipment there – cameras, lights, audio equipment, producers, reporters – and conduct on-the-spot interviews. You have to navigate your way around different networks and find the appropriate crew. Then they nudge you up against the belt-high balcony railing (if the interview isn't going well, the only option is to jump, which gives new meaning to the phrase, "I really took a dive on Fox today"), a microphone is pinned to your tie, an earpiece is deposited in your ear, and the next thing you know, you're commenting to a national audience about a topic...while ten feet away from you a colleague may be discussing the same topic on a different network.

Hardball has a slightly more elaborate – but much more crowded – set up. Wedged into a tiny space on the balcony are three cameras, their operators, various technicians, a producer, a make-up artist and enough people frantically scurrying around Chris Matthews for him to say as I sit with him, "There are lots of people running around here! Let's be quiet."

I am placed on a wobbly director's chair, and now I am conscious of two things. First, it is entirely possible that the chair could tip and I would find myself hurling three stories to the marble rotunda floor. Second, MSNBC would have exclusive footage of the whole thing. Talk about keeping your guests off-guard.

As we await the other guest – Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA) – Matthews and I have a polite conversation about our shared passion for cigars (he likes to use distilled water in his humidor, I think it's a pain in the neck), my predecessors in Congress (Reps. Lazio and Downey), and a few other topics. Meanwhile, he studies his notes and exchanges snippets of conversation with whomever is speaking into his earphone. Finally, Rep. Moran joins us, and the interview begins.

Hardball is exactly what it is billed to be. Before I can finish the first question, a curve-ball is fired my way. When Matthews doesn't like the answer, he gives me a brush-back pitch. No lobs here. No slow-hanging curve balls. Only when he says "dynamite" to one of my answers do I feel a sense of relief. But he is just lulling me into a false sense of comfort.

Still, I love every second of it. I enjoy the challenge and the brisk interplay. At one point I look off to the side, and see my press secretary smiling. A smiling press secretary is a good sign. You never want to be on national television and get a glimpse of your press secretary crying, scowling, or with a dropped jaw and eyes bulging in absolute horror. That's a bad sign. That's a cue to begin thinking about the "falling off the balcony" option.

At the end of the segment, Matthews tells me he'd like me on again. But it happens sooner than I think. As Rep. Moran and I stand to remove our earpieces, we are told by a director: "Stay where you are, they want to do another segment."

Just when I thought it was safe. So we reclaim our seats. But now I am a "Hardball veteran." An old pro. Like Mike Piazza against Roger Clemens, I have faced Chris Matthews before. I've studied his pitches. I know how he thinks and what he'll throw. I know how he'll finger the ball and adjust his pitches. I can read him. After all, I'm a wizened "Hardball" pro. I've had all of ten minutes under my belt.

Wrong. The next segment is just as tough as the first. An occasional "why won't you answer the question?" even though I thought I answered it, one "dynamite," a few sparks. But still enjoyable – the way sky-diving and car-racing are enjoyable. Frankly, I prefer to watch sky-diving and NASCAR from the ground, or even better, from my living room couch with a clicker in one hand and a snack in the other. But adrenaline is adrenaline.

"Come back again," Matthews says to me when we are off the air. "Let's do that again!" my daughters used to chant after getting off a roller-coaster with their wobbly-footed, green-faced, nauseated father.

A few hours after the segment was over, I fly to New York. Many of the day's flights have been cancelled because of severe weather between Washington and New York. Wedged into a center seat in a back row, I feel every turbulent bounce and every dip of the wing as our crew fight to slice through heavy clouds, steady rain, and harsh winds as land at LaGuardia.

Many of the people around me look up from their newspapers, disconcertedly; they grip their fingers around their arm rests and seatbelts, and comment on the rough landing. Me? I had a rougher seat. On Chris Matthews "Hardball." This is nothing.

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