

Bryant Gumbel on being young, gifted (with gab) and black

By MARK LORANDO

Bryant Gumbel talks for a living.

He gets paid nearly a million dollars a year to do it.

As the host of NBC's wake-up news program "Today," Gumbel punches his clock around 5:30 every morning at NBC studios in New York, punches out around 3:30 p.m. He's held the job for five-and-a-half months, one he defines as "communicator . . . to be there every morning and make people feel at ease."

Gumbel may prefer the more commanding term "communicator," but speaking is his trade — and oh, how he has mastered it.

Gumbel's salary, reportedly, is \$300,000 per year.

To talk.

"I could come in here and say that I'm overpaid," Gumbel said during a recent trip to the Crescent City, "and everyone would say, 'Here, here!' Our value system in this country is crazy. I know that. But is Burt Reynolds worth \$7 million a movie? Is Dave Winfield worth \$2 million a season? Is the guy on the bench worth more than \$40,000 a year, or the public school teacher worth more than \$15,000? You just work within the system. I'm not going to try to say whether it's justified or not."

In other words, if Dan Rather is worth a million dollars, Gumbel's worth at least \$800,000; and if they're not worth it, but the loot's available, why shouldn't they take it? You don't question the system when it works in your favor. And it couldn't have worked any more in Bryant Gumbel's favor if he'd created it himself.

Gumbel has risen to the top of his profession because he is good at what he does. He has risen so quickly because he is good and he is black. It began when an admiring acquaintance recommended an articulate young black man for a sportscasting job in Los Angeles and grew into something gigantic when then-president of NBC sports Chet Simmons stumbled across a Gumbel commentary and asked, "Who the hell is this kid?"

In a nutshell you had Bryant Gumbel, 22 years old, a college degree in Russian history, a former folding carton salesman, a former sportswriter, no experience whatsoever in television, hired as weekend sports anchor at KNBC in Los Angeles, the second largest TV market in the country.

"I'd have to be very naive to think that I, a 22 year-old who'd never stepped foot in a TV studio in his life, would be hired as a sportscaster in Los Angeles simply because I was good," Gumbel says. "Yes, I have some talent. But KNBC was looking for a black sportscaster for the weekends. That I was the best black sportscaster I will take credit for."

The Gumbel Express hasn't slowed since, hasn't had the time. After being promoted to sports director at KNBC, the network hired him to do some spot reporting (while still keeping his job at KNBC), then to host "Grandstand," the NFL football pre-game/post-game show. Soon thereafter he came to the network full-time to host an expanded version of "Grandstand," along with a baseball pre-game show, sports reports for the "Today" show, and a short-lived prime time series called "Games People Play."

By that time, Gumbel says, it was talent, as opposed to skin tone, that jettisoned his career.

"It (the color of his skin) helped me to my first sportscasting job, but I don't think it's helped me since then," he said. "Reagan wouldn't appoint a black Vice President just so he could have a black in his cabinet. You just don't have 'tokens' that high up."

"I've been on television long enough to have become colorless to most people. They've long since dropped the adjective black. That's what I hope . . . what I honestly believe."

He deserves as much. Gumbel is a natural. As a sportscaster he combined the spine of Cosell with the grace of Enberg, seasoned Whitaker's eloquence with Musberger's jocularity. He'll be missed as a sportscaster simply because he was such an enigma to the profession — tough but not intimidating, literate but not a ham.

Gumbel's special talent, one on display from the moment he welcomed his first "Today" show audience, is his uncanny coolness. He is savvy manifested: confident but amiable, if not well-informed always seeming to be, and always, always relaxed.

"That's just the way I am," he says. "I'm not the nervous type. If you were to invite me over to your house . . . I'd probably walk in, go straight into the kitchen and help myself to a beer."

And you'd probably think nothing of it. Gumbel seems to leave all who meet him with the same parting thought:

What a nice guy.

He came to town to address the graduating class at Xavier University, where his father received a degree in 1951. On this particular Friday afternoon, he patiently sat through six takes while WDSU, the local NBC affiliate, taped a "Breakfast Edition" promo at the Royal Sonesta Hotel, traded quips with passing admirers, summoned shy autograph hounds forward, locked a smile firmly in place as two elderly passers-by asked him to sign their copies of "A Confederacy of Dunces" — five copies, each requiring inscriptions to different members of the family.

Being a native himself, perhaps it's easier for Gumbel to accept the local fanfare. He was born in New Orleans 34 years ago, but only lived here until he was three. He received all his schooling in Chicago before heading east to further his education.

As a 21 year-old Russian history major at Bates College in Maine, Bryant Gumbel was a typically aimless young adult. Life was little more than a series of keg parties followed by a string of term papers and exams. He was contentedly vegetating in an institute of higher learning when suddenly, like a lightning bolt, tragedy struck.

The Real World.

"I was sitting in my college commencement exercises with a 2.5 grade point average," Gumbel recalled. "I was known more for hard driving fun than for hard driving ambition. My thoughts of the future never extended farther than that night. Then all of a sudden I think, 'My God, I'm graduating tomorrow.'"

"What do I do now?"

After a series of odd jobs, Gumbel turned some heads by becoming the editor of "Black Sports Magazine" in New York when he was



—Staff Photo by Lee Crum

The 'Today' show's Bryant Gumbel

only 22. His responsibilities required a lot of traveling and a lot of talking on both coasts. When KNBC-TV in Los Angeles announced that they were looking for a new weekend sports anchor, one of Gumbel's contacts casually dropped his name in the hat. The rest is history.

Nowadays, home is New York. That's where the "Today" show originates, where his wife of eight years (she's from Baton Rouge) tends house. He never thought he'd end up there; never wanted to. Gumbel discarded any notions of taking over the "Today" seat from Tom Brokaw when he was first approached about the idea last June. He didn't want the hassle, didn't want to leave sports, didn't need the money.

"It'll sound trite, I know . . . but it really wasn't the money. I already had enough of that." He claims he had other reasons. "One, I had done everything there was to do in sports. Two, I think that everyone who has ever coveted sports has wanted a chance to prove that they know something else. Three, I just thought the 'Today' show was the best showcase for Bryant Gumbel."

And Bryant Gumbel may be exactly what the "Today" show needed. Waking up to Tom Brokaw was akin to waking up with a Great Dane barking in your ear. Gumbel may be the same beast — few people, after all, cherish life at 7 a.m. — but this Dane is more likely to get the same results licking your face and thumping his tail against the mattress.

"I think it's important to define between

newsman and host," Gumbel says. "It's a difficult perception for the audience — when do you stop being a newscaster and become a host again? How good a host can you be if the first thing people hear you say in the morning is that unemployment is up to ten percent?"

"Today" show producer Steve Friedman hired Chris Wallace to give America the bad news, though Gumbel candidly admits that, "If I wanted to do news I could probably get that changed." He speaks highly of Jane Pauley, whom he feels has gotten the short end of the stick from those shoveling praise his way. He likens his on-air supporting cast to a "national family sitting around the table every morning."

It's a prototype family, at least. For those who hadn't noticed, this two-hour long network news program, steeped in tradition and plowing forward for the 30th consecutive year, is co-hosted by a woman and a black.

"I think it's at once a tribute to NBC News, to the talents of Bryant Gumbel and Jane Pauley, and to the American populus," Gumbel says. "They've finally grown up."

How much can Bryant Gumbel know about growing up? At 34, he's still an infant in his field. With the years he still has ahead of him, it's anybody's guess — including his own — as to how far he'll go.

"I don't set goals," he claims. "Usually if you're looking down there you trip right here. I don't have blinders on. I know what's down there. I just plan to make a lot of stops along the way."