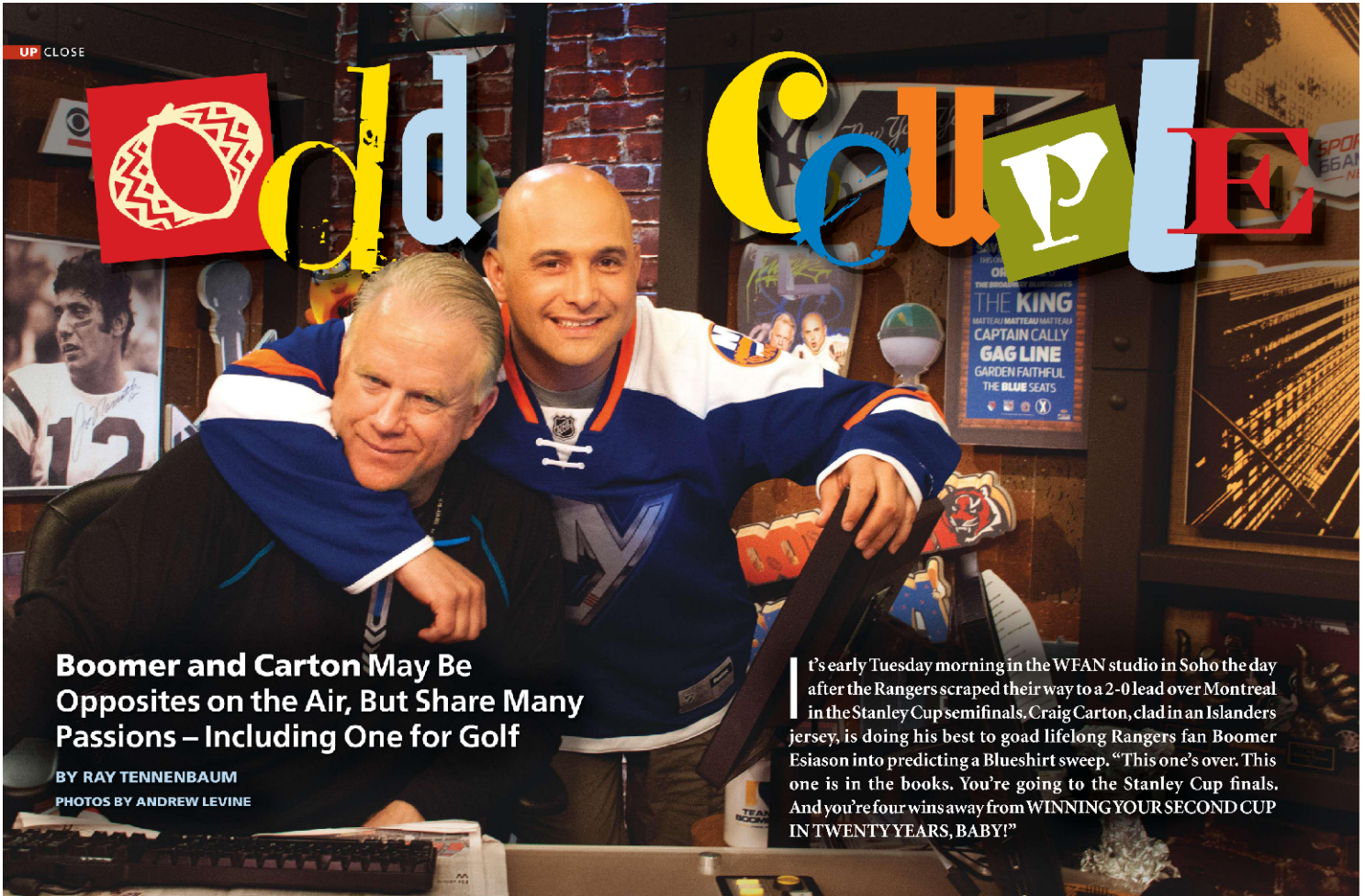


Old Couple

Boomer and Carton May Be Opposites on the Air, But Share Many Passions – Including One for Golf

BY RAY TENNENBAUM
PHOTOS BY ANDREW LEVINE

It's early Tuesday morning in the WFAN studio in Soho the day after the Rangers scraped their way to a 2-0 lead over Montreal in the Stanley Cup semifinals. Craig Carton, clad in an Islanders jersey, is doing his best to goad lifelong Rangers fan Boomer Esiason into predicting a Blueshirt sweep. "This one's over. This one is in the books. You're going to the Stanley Cup finals. And you're four wins away from WINNING YOUR SECOND CUP IN TWENTY YEARS, BABY!"





When Carton isn't baiting, he's jinxing, so he shapes a hunk of tinfoil into a mock Stanley Cup, fills it with water, and pleads for Esiason to "drink from the Cup!"

"You can do what you want with that, now that you're on the bandwagon," says Esiason in disgust.

Later, a plug for the Yankee Pinstripe Bowl's charity golf tournament this afternoon starts Carton bragging about his golf game.

"You're not a golfer," says Esiason.

"I golf with you every week!"

"But you're not a golfer!"

"I go out there and I can take everybody's money. Did I not just win [some money] at Due Process [Stable Golf Course]?"

"But you won it from another non-golfer. He just happened to be a worse non-golfer than you are. You're an amazing person to golf with. Because the first four holes, you're as good as there is, and the last three or four holes, you're about as good as there is. It's the other eleven holes in between that make you just impossible to play with."

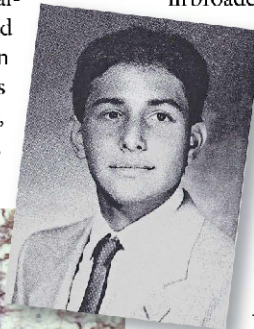
"Which is why I bring my radio with me, so I can at least listen to music while I'm in the woods."

"You should bring a GPS."

They make an odd couple, the two Jocks, Super and Shock. It's definitely an interesting match for Long Island native Esiason, who graduated from East Islip High School before attending the University of Maryland, where he set seventeen school records.

Drafted by Cincinnati, he led the Bengals to an AFC championship in his fifth season, only to lose to the 49ers in the last minute of a thrilling Super Bowl. He spent three years with the Jets, then brief stints in Arizona and back in Cincinnati before retiring.

As an NFL rookie, Esiason didn't so much embrace golf as take it up in self-defense. He had never played before he was drafted, and at his first training camp he realized, "if I wanted to hang around with the players, I'd better learn how to play golf—because Cris Collinsworth, Steve Kreider, Pat McInally, Turk Schonert, Kenny Anderson, Anthony



Munoz, all these guys played golf on their day off. So I had to learn how to play golf, just to hang around with the guys."

Boomer got a head start on his broadcasting career while he was still playing, earning good reviews as a color commentator for telecasts of the NFL-affiliated European league in 1991 and '92. But things were very different when he went directly from the field to the booth of ABC's Monday Night Football. "I started at the top of the food chain as far as sports broadcasting," he says. "That lasted two years, and it was everything that's wrong with this business—personal differences, insecurities, it was wrought with all the dysfunction that this business harbors in so many different ways."

Radio provided a safety net. Dial Global (now Westwood One) wanted him as a color commentator for the Monday Night radio broadcast, and Esiason took the job—one he still holds, fourteen seasons later.

"It was a humbling experience, but like I tell kids all the time: There's a million reasons why you can't do something and there's only one reason why you can, and that's if it's in you. It wasn't until I took the radio job that I recognized just how great and free-flowing radio is and how much fun it can be if you're working with the right guy."

Part of what makes Craig Carton that guy is two decades in the radio drive-time trenches. He grew up in New Rochelle, and right after graduating from Syracuse with a degree in broadcast journalism he went to work at

WGR Radio in Buffalo. Stints in Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Denver followed, and though he had the top morning show in the Rocky Mountain region, he resigned to help his wife with their first child, a girl. They decided to move back to New York, where he started at WNEW late in 2000. In 2002 he teamed with Ray Rossi as "The Jersey Guys" on WKXW, getting consistently high ratings for five years. Carton's name is seldom out of the tabloids for long, whether he's airing a live cockfight, breaking a gossipy locker room story, offending swaths of ethnic or cultural minorities with a casual (or well thought-out) remark, or crossing the Brooklyn Bridge dressed in a Speedo as payoff for a lost wager.

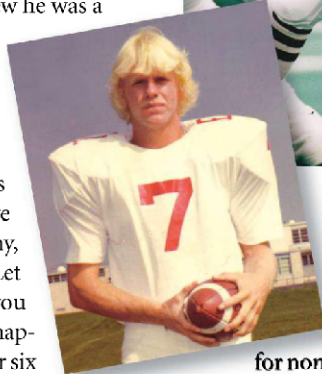
Above: Esiason at Forsgate Country Club. Left: Carton at summer camp, and in his high school yearbook photo.

BOTTOM: WFAN RADIO

Right: Esiason with the Jets, and at East Islip High School. Below: Carton tries a greenside pitch at Forsgate.

This particular uncivil union came about in 2007 when WFAN, needing a replacement for Don Imus in the morning, decided it wanted to pair Esiason with a co-host.

“Boomer really wanted to do mornings after Imus left,” recalls Mark Chernoff, WFAN Program Director and CBS Radio’s Vice President for Sports Programming. “I tried him with a few different partners – Chris Russo; his old teammate and friend Cris Collinsworth; Monica Crowley. I knew Craig from a project called Free FM that we weren’t able to do – I knew he was a talented guy and his contract was coming up. At first Boomer was very leery – he was calling state troopers to check up on him, he thought there was a lot of stuff on the negative end – but I said, ‘He’s funny, he gets it, and he’s quick. Let me try out the two of you together, and let’s see what happens.’ We gave them five or six topics to talk about, and within a few minutes it was clear they had clicked.”



The friendship doesn’t hurt, either. “They do stuff together when they’re off the air, and that comes across,” says Chernoff. “When one guy can finish the other guy’s sentences, that’s great chemistry.”

Esiason has no down gear. In addition to the show weekday mornings from 6-10 AM, in the fall he does *The NFL Today* for CBS every Sunday (with rehearsal every Saturday); fourteen games a year, plus recorded soundbites, for the Monday Night radio broadcast; twice-weekly commentary for *Sports Illustrated’s* website; a call-in show for a Boston sports radio station; a weekly *Behind the Mic* feature for Bleacher Report, and a full schedule of appearances at events for the Boomer Esiason Foundation.

As *B&C* producer Eddie Scozzare observes, “I really believe the Boomer Esiason Foundation is the driving force behind his crazy workload.” He started the Foundation shortly after his son Gunnar was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis in 1993. Since then, he has worked tirelessly to fund the search for a cure and raise awareness about the disease. The results have been remarkable by any standard: over \$100 million raised, and



in an industry where giving out 65% of raised revenue is considered acceptable, the Esiason Foundation’s near-90% makes it a benchmark for non-profit efficacy.

Esiason makes no bones about his priorities. Recalls Carton, “We were having a meeting about the show, and after Boomer made a joke, one of our bosses tried to get him to be serious, and Boomer said, ‘Let me explain what’s important to me: The single

most important goal in my life is to make sure my son outlives me.’”

Gunnar is a vital part of not just his father’s motivation but also the Foundation’s efforts. “Within the world of cystic fibrosis, Gunnar happens to be the flag-bearer, whether he likes it or not,” says Boomer. “[He has] embraced that and taken an active role – not just being the face any more, but being a decision-maker, a part of the process, talking with families, talking with doctors. And he’s on the drug trial himself, so he’s put himself out there, and as a father I couldn’t be any more proud of him for what he is doing and what he has turned into. Because that’s a big burden for a young man who really had no choice at a young age but to be put out and thrust in front of cameras.”

A couple hours later at Forsgate Country Club, Craig Carton talks about his own struggles. Carton has Tourette’s syndrome and has two sons diagnosed with the disorder. He looked to his radio partner when he decided to establish his foundation, Tic Toc Stop, dedicated to fighting and coping with Tourette’s. “Boomer’s foundation’s been around a long time and I think it’s the gold standard of how to do it,” he says. “So when I started mine, only about a year ago, I tried to follow his example of how to do it the right way.” Carton eagerly lists Tic Toc’s accomplishments: favorable clinical tests of an orthotic device designed to eliminate a likely cause; a week-long summer sleepaway



camp for kids with Tourette's; providing information to parents who are struggling with decisions about medicating their kids. "Obviously, the goal is to help my son stop having the tics that come with Tourette's. But when you meet families and moms and dads who are literally crying because we've helped improve their kid's life even a little bit—that's the reward of it. It's not about the money, it's that these people's lives are improved because of what you started."

either Baltusrol or Bayonne will be the fourth course."

Says Esiason, "Behind the microphone, I don't feel sorry for him, that's him on steroids, he loves that. On the golf course though, I do feel a little bit sorry for him, I know he wants to be good, I know he really wants to shoot 80, and I know that he can't because he fights himself. It's so obvious to me—he hits out of turn, he puts out of turn, because his brain is going a hundred miles

member of Atlantic and Estancia, he lists his Met Area favorites as Friar's Head, Atlantic, National, Garden City GC, Sebonack, Shinnecock, and Maidstone. "I could play those six courses and you could put me in a six-foot hole after that.

"Bethpage Black is another one—I had a bet with the superintendent there, Craig Currier, before the 2009 Open. He said, 'I know what kind of golfer you are, Boomer. You play the tips, you won't break 93.'" He didn't, shooting 95 "with a double-bogey on 18. I hit into the trap off the tee and I skulled it out of the trap." He's also a fan of Timber Point ("the first hole is really hard, and I think the 5th on the Blue Course is the toughest par 3 in the Met Area").

"What I've learned over the years is, it's now how far you hit it, it's how straight you hit it," Esiason adds. "My son Gunnar plays and he's 23 years old, he's tall and skinny, and he swings as hard as he can—but I learned about ten years ago, if I want to lower my score, I can't swing as hard. And something else I've learned: It's more the club doing the work than you swinging it. Something I'm trying to get Craig to learn!"

Isn't that what friends are for? ■

"The single **most important goal in my life** is to make sure my son outlives me." —Boomer Esiason

Country clubs are not Carton's natural habitat. He didn't take up golf until his thirties, and he's not a follow-the-rules kind of guy in general. "When I play with Boomer, I have to play by the book—there's no gimmes, no 'pick it up.' We have this wager where it's four courses, he picks 'em, he gives me 440 total strokes. So he picks Atlantic, Shinnecock, Winged Foot. On Winged Foot I think I shot 101, so I'm ahead of the curve right now. He says I have no shot at the Southampton courses whatsoever, and

an hour and he can never stop."

Boomer has an unusually graceful and rhythmic swing for a six-foot-five fifty-three-year-old, one that gives him a smooth left-handed draw. "In the last ten years I can say I consistently shoot between 78 and 84, I'm always in there. My best round was at the Huntington Crescent Club, I shot a 72 there.... One of the things I love about this area is it's got the greatest golf in the world. From Montauk Downs all the way to Pine Valley, I don't think you can find better." A