

Smart, sincere, but never had to be the star: 97.1's Jamie Samuelsen dies of cancer at age 48

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As several employees of 97.1 The Ticket gathered Saturday afternoon for the annual company golf outing in Clarkston, their friend and colleague, Jamie Samuelsen, was on their minds.

After play was done at Oakhurst Golf & Country Club, Mike Stone, Samuelsen's most recent on-air co-host, stood up and toasted Samuelsen. Dan Leach, a 97.1 on-air personality, then spoke to his coworkers.



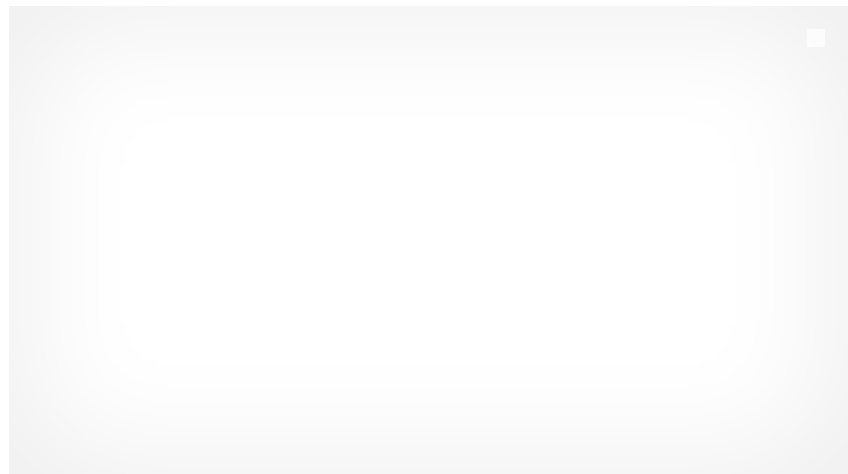
Jamie Samuelsen (Photo: Special to Detroit News)

"I just said, 'Let's not forget how lucky we are to have each other,'" Leach said. "This was the first time a lot of us saw each in five months.

"And Jamie, he was just the best. He was as good as it gets."

Samuelsen, just five days after announcing on the air (<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/sports/2020/07/27/97-1-tickets-jamie-samuelsen-reveals-he-has-colon-cancer/5517288002/>), during his weekday morning show that he had been battling colon cancer for 19 months, died Saturday night at his home, surrounded by family. He was 48, and leaves behind wife, Christy McDonald, an anchor and reporter for Detroit PBS, and their three children, Caroline, 16, Josh, 14, and Catherine, 11.

ADVERTISING



Samuelsen spent more than a quarter-century in Detroit's sports-media scene, and it was a career that spanned all the mediums — radio, television and print.

It was radio, though, for which he was most known, working since 2016 alongside Stone on 97.1's morning drive show, after previously co-hosting a weekday night show with Detroit News columnist Bob Wojnowski. He joined 97.1 in 2012.

The work was never about Samuelsen — he never felt any desire to be the star, he wasn't the one to yell and grandstand and try to go viral. He preferred sarcasm to screaming. He liked to call sports-talk radio a "fake job." When he was moved to the morning show in 2016 — and that was a significant career bump, going from a night-time show with Wojnowski that sometimes lasted less than a hour on Tigers, Red Wings or Pistons game nights, to a four-hour block with Stone, with Heather Park, during the prime morning commute — he was hesitant to even do an interview with The News, because he was sensitive to the feelings of the man he was replacing, Bill McAllister. And it's that low-key approach that he also used with his cancer diagnosis and revelation, choosing to keep the whole ordeal almost entirely private.

Even Stone didn't know until the last two weeks just how serious the situation had become. Monday morning, on the air, it became devastatingly clear. His many friends in the business got the sense he was saying his goodbyes, even though he insisted during his announcement that he wasn't. Bombarded by texts and calls — many from stunned colleagues who had no prior knowledge of his situation — Samuelsen returned as many as he could Monday, but few after that.

Samuelsen didn't appear on the show again. Between vacations and Samuelsen's health situation, Stone and Samuelsen only did two shows together over the last month.

"I just can't say enough," said Stone, noting that off-air, Samuelsen was a doting husband and father, rarely missing a child's sporting event or extracurricular activity, while on air, the two shared a mutual love of so-called dark humor. "He was critical (of the local sports teams), but without being an a----- unlike other people can be, including myself.

"It was never about him.

"And I loved him."

If there was anything good to come out of the whole COVID-19 situation, it was that Samuelsen — who also had stints as the sports director for the "Mike in the Morning Show" at WRIF 101-FM and a co-host with Ken Calvert on WCSX 94.7-FM — got to work from his home, when he was able to work, for the last several months, surrounded by his family.

Tributes poured in all over social media Saturday night and early Sunday morning, with Wojnowski calling Samuelsen "all goodness and kindness." Fox 2's Jennifer Hammond posted on Twitter and Facebook, simply "Speechless," with a broken-heart emoji. Fox 2's Woody Woodruffe posted, on Twitter, "There's no words that fit right now. I'm thankful for the times we shared. I'm heartbroken that there won't be any more." By early Sunday, "Jamie" was trending on Twitter.

The Tigers, Red Wings, Pistons and Lions all paid tribute to Samuelsen on Twitter on Saturday night.

Samuelsen grew up in Lafayette, California, outside of San Francisco — he was a huge Giants fan, making the 2012 World Series a conflicting one for him (OK, he wasn't *that* conflicted) — and he graduated from Northwestern, where he was a friend and fraternity brother of late-night talk-show host Seth Meyers. Samuelsen earned a degree in communications.

Funeral arrangements were pending as of Saturday night.

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Leach first met Samuelsen when he was an intern at Fox 2, and Samuelsen was doing one of his weekly "SportsWorks" segments.

"It was like I had known him for 10 years, he was so nice," Leach said.

Then, they would go on to work together at 97.1, occasionally hosting shows together.

Leach recalled one time when they did the morning show together, with Stone off. That particular morning, Samuelsen was ribbing Leach pretty good, which Leach thought nothing of. But shortly after they got off the air, Samuelsen called to apologize. Apparently, three people in the building had suggested maybe Samuelsen was a little hard on Leach.

"No one else would've done that. In a business where there's a lot of egos, he was a genuinely kind and beautiful soul. He rooted you on," Leach said of Samuelsen, a man who, even recently as his cancer progressed, was texting 97.1's Mike Sullivan (leaving) and Rico Beard (arriving) congrats on their new jobs.

"That is such a rarity."



Longtime 97.1 The Ticket host Jamie Samuelsen, right, wife and PBS Detroit anchor Christy McDonald, right, and their three children. Samuelsen died on Aug. 1 after a 19-month fight with colon cancer. He was 48. (Photo: Christy McDonald (@ChristyTV) on Twitter)

Stone, likewise, called Samuelsen "egoless."

Samuelsen first burst onto the Detroit sports-media landscape in July 1994 WDFN The Fan, 1130-AM, as an update reporter — and part of the city's first all-sports station's original cast and crew. A year later, he was co-hosting middays with Gregg Henson; they moved to morning drive in 1999, and Greg Brady became Samuelsen's co-host in 2002.

Samuelsen arrived in Detroit from Chicago. Art Regner interviewed him for that first job and said, "I am pretty sure Detroit was not part of his long-term plan, but he took the job and never left, much to all of ours benefit."

"Jamie was an amazing partner. We had a lot of fun and he kept me in check," said Henson, who's now in Richmond, Virginia. "We fought like brothers, but we always ended up at a movie together — with a buffer seat and shared some amazing times as young men.

"He was the most honest, loving soul you could ever know and my family is devastated for his family."

Said Brady, now working in Toronto: "The co-host relationship that you have to have and develop is unlike practically any other work relationship I can think of, outside of being in a rock band. It's why bands break up and it's why some radio shows just can't last. But of all the partners I've ever had, there wasn't one moment I came home to my wife and complained about Jamie. Not a single moment."



Samuelsen left The Fan in 2007; he eventually joined The Ticket in 2012.

At 97.1, he first worked alongside Wojnowski at nights, and then Stone in the mornings — two giant-sized personalities with whom Samuelsen meshed with perfectly.


Samuelsen and Stone had been friends for years, but had gotten a show together for the first time.



"He was the straight man, but he played it perfectly," Fox 2's Dan Miller said. "He was Dean Martin to Jerry Lewis, or Desi Arnaz to Lucille Ball. Wojo is Wojo, and Jamie just knew how to play off him perfectly. The role was so beautifully executed that it just worked, whether it was on the radio together or on TV with us. ... And, anybody that knows Jamie will tell you he was their smartest friend."



Khang Huynh, a producer at 97.1, tweeted, "The collective IQ at 97.1 just dropped by about a million."

 **Bob Wojnowski**
@bobwojnowski 


I am so sad and sorry to pass this along, at the family's request. Jamie Samuelsen, the best damn friend you could ever have, a tremendous broadcaster on @971theticketxyt passed away tonight at 48. He was surrounded by his wonderful family, and he went peacefully.



6:42 PM · Aug 1, 2020 

 6.4K  1.8K people are Tweeting about this

 **Bob Wojnowski**
@bobwojnowski 

2 - Jamie was all goodness and kindness, the sharpest wit and the greatest laugh. He did radio for 25 years in Detroit, and he kept adding friends along the way, as he built a fantastic reputation. He'll be forever missed and forever remembered.

6:45 PM · Aug 1, 2020 

 1.9K  157 people are Tweeting about this



Bob Wojnowski
@bobwojnowski



You want to know how tough Jamie Samuelsen was? He was diagnosed with colon cancer 19 months ago, and he never got one damn break. He fought like hell and the cancer wouldn't let up. Not for one minute. But he never wanted people to know until the end. Incredible strength.

6:51 PM · Aug 1, 2020



2.9K 293 people are Tweeting about this

Miller came to Detroit in 1997, joining Fox 2 as sports director. He has known Samuelsen pretty much ever since, first when Samuelsen and Henson would regularly have him on their show on The Fan. Miller was always appreciative of those invitations, because it allowed Miller to showcase himself as more than just a stiff television man reading off a teleprompter. The segments were loose, and they had fun.

They also worked together on Fox 2's Sunday "SportsWorks" roundtable-format show since the 1990s, with Samuelsen making regular appearances, often alongside whoever was his radio partner at the time.

Samuelsen also was a part of Fox 2's weekly "Lions Game Night" show since 2011.

But his job, or jobs rather, hardly were Samuelsen's defining characteristics.

"He was such a great husband and great father, you could see that," Miller said. "He would bring his kids to a taping or to the football show. The love in that family is really what is just gutting me tonight, to know the void they have losing their father. Anything I feel is just for them.

"He used to bring Josh with him to tapings, and the way he looked at his dad was the way every son is supposed to look at his dad. It was just such a beautiful thing.

"My heart just breaks for that entire family."

Samuelsen, who also wrote for the Detroit Free Press and freep.com, made his public announcement about the cancer Monday morning, explaining to the audience why he had missed some recent time because of some infections. He used the platform to urge listeners to get a colonoscopy, which long has been recommended only for those over 50. He was diagnosed at age 46, already in stage 4.

Samuelsen and his 97.1 colleagues and family received an outpouring of support after he went public, particularly from callers into the radio station.



Dan Miller, Bob Wojnowski and Jamie Samuelsen. (Photo: Twitter)