Radio talk legend Neil Rogers takes buyout, says he’s through with broadcasting

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Neil Rogers, for three decades one of South Florida’s most popular radio voices as well as one of its most controversial, walked away from his job Monday with a fat buyout check and a declaration that his broadcasting days are over.

Rogers, 66, and WQAM-AM 560 jointly announced that he is leaving the station and that his 10 a.m.-to-2 p.m. slot will be filled with a sports-talk show. His last show aired Friday.

"WQAM decided they wanted to go with an all-sports format all the time," said Norm Kent, Rogers' attorney. ``They made an attractive offer on the balance of his contract, and Neil took it.''

Though Rogers technically remains employed as a WQAM consultant, his website, www.neilrogers.com, declared the buyout an "early retirement," and Kent said his client has no intention of returning to the air.

"It's well known how much money he's made on radio over the years, and he's talked on the air for years about retiring," Kent said. 'When WQAM made its offer, he decided, 'Why not?' If he wants to come back, there's no non-compete clause in the contract. I could get him a deal at [radio chain] Clear Channel tomorrow. But he's not interested.'

Rogers had more than five years left on his deal with WQAM, which was renewed -- at an undisclosed cut from his previous $1.5 million annual salary -- in April 2008. His show was the only non-sports program on WQAM.

Officials at neither WQAM nor corporate parent Beasley Broadcast Group were available for comment Monday.
In a press release, though, Beasley vice president Joe Bell noted that "Rogers was a ratings leader in Miami for years and we're happy that we could reach a new accord that works well for both parties."

**DELAY FAILED**

Rogers was pulled off the air for a day last month after WQAM's seven-second delay failed while he was reading aloud a listener's e-mail that included a deadly four-letter word. But Kent said the incident had nothing to do with Rogers' departure from the station.

The more likely trigger is a change in the technology that the radio-ratings company Arbitron uses to track audiences.

Arbitron has always compiled its ratings from written diaries kept by listeners, who often write down the names of familiar shows rather than keeping careful track of whom they actually listen to.

But now Arbitron is equipping its South Florida sample listeners with devices it calls "portable people meters" that clip onto a belt or pocket and -- using computer codes embedded in the broadcast -- record exactly what station or show is being listened to. The meters have jolted the radio world wherever they have been introduced.

"There are personalities all across the country, major names in major markets, who've lost jobs because the meters showed something the stations didn't want to see," said Perry Michael Simon, the news-talk-sports editor of allaccess.com, a website that reports on the radio industry. "And South Florida stations are starting to see results from the meters."

Kent acknowledged that WQAM executives mentioned the meters during the talks over Rogers' future that began about three weeks ago.

"They said they needed to juice up the station's ratings as the meters started," he said. "They said they wanted a five-day-a-week host this summer."

But Rogers, whose contract requires him to work only two days a week during the summer months, refused, Kent said.
COLORFUL CAREER

If Rogers is really retired, it ends one of the longest and most colorful careers in the history of South Florida radio. In its heyday, Rogers' show spared no one -- politically, religiously, ethnically or age-wise. Sexual double entendres and obnoxious bodily function sound effects were a staple of his shtick, as were the Yiddish-isms that laced his rants.

His show roamed sexual boundaries long before it was fashionable. In 1976, at a time when the Rock Hudsons and Lily Tomlins of the world were still deeply closeted, Rogers declared himself gay on the air.

No one much seemed to care, except Coral Gables attorney Jack Thompson, who wrangled endlessly with Rogers in court over the subject matter of his show, with little success.

There was far more official rancor over the vitriol Rogers freely dispensed, particularly in the city of Hallandale Beach, a favorite target during the 1980s: He called the residents "wrinkled, miserable cheapskates" who stole packets of artificial sweetener while dining at early-bird specials.

"He would say, 'If you see an old man on the street in Hallandale Beach, hit 'em,'" said former Mayor Arthur "Sonny" Rosenberg, who verbally sparred with Rogers during the period.

``What the hell is this? He should have retired 30 years ago. I don't think he deserves any praise about anything."

HUNG UP ON HIM

Rosenberg frequently called the show to complain. But, he said, Rogers would always hang up on him. Rosenberg even said he pressured Gulfstream Race Track to withdraw sponsorship from the show because of all the attacks.

Rogers -- real name Nelson Behelfer -- grew up in Rochester, N.Y., and attended Michigan State University. An ice hockey and harness racing fan, he spent five years announcing University of Miami Hurricanes baseball games.
In South Florida, he worked at WIOD, WKAT, WNWS, WINZ and WZTA, in addition to WQAM.

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