



# Painting the Pitch

Baseball can be simplified into a basic game of throw the ball, hit the ball and catch the ball. Yet pleasant baritones perched above stadium decks call such sequences as if they were poetry in motion. Their artistic dialogue has bridged the gaps between generations much like the game's glorious history does. Fans recognize the voices of Scully, Harwell and Buck telling stories about Koufax, Kaline and Musial better than their relatives. Baseball and its broadcasters blissfully eased Americans into turning the sport into the nation's pastime. Matt Vasgersian is a product of the greats on and off the diamond. Today, he shares a host of stories on MLB Network and FOX as a play-by-play announcer.

Text **Manouk Akopyan** | Photo **Armen Poghosyan**

**T**here are hegemonies in sports broadcasting. The Bucks, Careys, Alberts, Kalases, and Brennemans are just some of the notables among them. Their children were raised on sports, brushing shoulders with legends before learning to brush their hair. Getting a job in the business was a foregone conclusion – they were successors synonymous with the surname. Matt Vasgersian didn't have such luxuries. He was the successor to his Boston Red Sox-loving father, Ed – a former Marine who spent a career in San Francisco's law enforcement. Ed schooled his Oakland Athletics-loving son on baseball. Vasgersian was born in 1967, a year before the A's relocated from Kansas City. After a World Series three-peat from 1972-74, Matt was hooked and spent his formative years at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum as a diehard fan, listening to Bill King. The late King called A's, Golden State Warriors and Oakland Raiders games, all of Matt's favorite teams. "I always knew that I wanted to be in broadcasting, but I never knew if it would actually happen," says Vasgersian, who was also a child actor. Well, it did happen. Today, Matt Vasgersian is 45 years old, looks 25, and has been a baseball announcer for half his life. He estimates calling over three thousand games and has broadcast everything from the Olympics to the NFL and college sports to blackjack and poker programming.

However, there was an unfulfilled benchmark on his credits list – calling a baseball playoff game. Last October, he took care of that by announcing game two of the Divisional Series between the Detroit Tigers and Oakland Athletics. After centerfielder Coco Crisp dropped a fly ball that would have preserved a lead, Vasgersian yelled, "...and he can't make the catch! Two runs will score and the Tigers have taken the lead! Santa Maria!" Santa Maria is the occasional euphemism Vasgersian drops for his "Holy ----!" moments. Fans have known the witty Vasgersian well before his postseason debut; his professional ascent has played out to plenty of satisfying Santa Maria's. He currently calls games and hosts a variety of shows for the MLB Network. He's also the play-by-play guy for FOX's Saturday Baseball Game of the Week and the voice behind Sony Playstation's *MLB The Show* since 2005. He previously worked as the play-by-play man for the Milwaukee Brewers for five years and the San Diego Padres for seven, but before the big leagues and national audiences, he toiled in small-time radio across every stage of the minors. "It's going to sound like false humility, but I've been in the right places at the right time," says Vasgersian. "Even if you're not everyone's cup of tea, at the very least you hope that you are respected. I feel that I've worked hard enough for that and to be deserving of the opportunities that I was given." ▶



### Backdoor Slider

In order to be a play-by-play man, you need to be an artist. It requires methodical consistency while being able to speak with the comfortable rhythm of the ocean at night. And yeah, you also need thick skin. Although Matt was born in Berkeley and raised a half-hour away in Moraga, he did not get into Cal or Stanford, he says, so he moved to Southern California in 1985 to attend USC. By 1989, he graduated as a communications major, and was working at Universal Studios in Hollywood as a tour guide. He then got a PA job, but was nowhere close to getting his foot into broadcasting. At 22, he simply didn't know how to do it.

Then as fate would have it, he caught a break through the Western Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church's summer camp. Vasgersian, an ordained sub-deacon at Oakland's St. Vartan's Church, attended the annual camp both as a child and young adult, where he took on such roles as campfire coordinator and counselor. That's when Vasgersian met Dr. Jim Amerian, who

could be a part of it. He's always been thankful, but he doesn't have to be." Vasgersian's rise through the minors between 1991-96 covered a stop at every level, where he successfully doubled as an advertising agent, a common occurrence in the minors. Being a dual threat asset allowed him to climb through the ranks. "Organizations had to justify having a broadcaster on payroll. I had to sell outfield fence signs and radio commercials. I didn't enjoy it, but I was successful at it." Thanks to Michael Jordan's midlife crisis that was minor league baseball and the eventual craze that ensued, ESPN launched game-of-the-week programming. It was a low-paying gig that established guys didn't want and a perfect opportunity for Vasgersian to have time away from radio and build a TV tape reel. With that, on April 1, 1997, the 29-year-old Matt Vasgersian was called up to the majors. He was now the play-by-play man for the Milwaukee Brewers.

"There isn't a moment where I don't expect him to say something funny. I have to be very careful that I am not eating something that could come out. He had me choking on a pretzel once," says John Smoltz, Vasgersian's game analyst at MLB Network.

owned a 20% share of a minor league team in West Virginia. After night-long conversations about baseball, the two became fast friends. A few months later, Amerian called with a promising opportunity – the team's announcer was leaving, and he asked Vasgersian to send in his reel. Matt went to the third deck of Dodger Stadium, recorded a demo-tape and sent it to Amerian, who shared it with his partners. Soon Vasgersian was headed to Huntington, West Virginia to call short-season Single-A ballgames for the Chicago Cubs affiliate. "It was a low-risk move. Even though I made \$500 a month, I would have worked for free," remembers Vasgersian. "At that point, I knew what I wanted to do. But I like to tell everyone how I had to backdoor the start of my career through Armenian camp." "I don't want to overdo my role because he is superbly talented," says Amerian, the conduit who currently is a gastroenterologist in Los Angeles. "It was a fortuitous situation, and I feel great that I

### The Natural

Whether it's video gamers incessantly playing to the sound of his voice, baseball die-hards watching him year-round, or his 98-year-old grandmother who follows him without understanding baseball, Matt Vasgersian has a legion of fans. What gives him the *it* factor is his charismatic personality, the moments where he pushes the envelope by not resisting the temptations of innocuous humor. In today's DVR culture, every broadcaster's blunder is magnified. Viewers wait to point out mistakes just as much as they anticipate the final outcome of a game. A garden variety of Vasgersian's gaffes have landed him on watchdog websites in the past. Vasgersian – who's still waiting for a shot as a head writer on *Saturday Night Live* – says his missteps are always intended to be playful. "There are so many inflated egos in broadcasting who believe they are just as big as the game. I see that around me a lot, and I've made it a point to not emulate that. It's not organic to who I am. I am a

### Matt Vasgersian

Matt Vasgersian is currently an MLB Network play-by-play announcer, anchor and studio host. Since the network's launch in 2009, he's regularly appeared on *MLB Network Showcase*, *MLB Tonight*, *Hot Stove*, *Quick Pitch* as well as other feature programming. He also serves as the play-by-play announcer for MLB on FOX. Baseball has always been at the center of his career, but he's worked across other sports.

► **Major Leagues:** Milwaukee Brewers (1997-2001), San Diego Padres (2002-2008), FOX Sports Net's Baseball Thursday, FX's Baseball Saturday Night  
► **Minor Leagues:** Single-A (Cubs, 1991), Single-A (Padres, 1992), Double-A El Paso (Brewers, 1993-1994), Triple-A Syracuse (Blue Jays, 1995), Triple-A Tucson (Astros, 1996), ESPN2's *Baseball Across America* (1995)

► **Football**  
FOX NFL Sunday (2005-2008), Toyota Gator Bowl (2001), FedEx Orange Bowl (2007), Tostitos Fiesta Bowl (2008, 2009)  
► **Olympics**  
2004 Athens Games (baseball and softball), 2006 Torino Games (ski-jumping), 2008 Beijing Games (daily studio coverage), 2010 Vancouver Games (ski-jumping)

► **Other Credits**  
USC Trojans basketball (2004-2006), Sony Playstation's *MLB The Show* (2005-Present), UFC 56 (2005), FX's *Toughman World Championship Series* (three-seasons) *The National Heads-Up Poker Championship*, *Poker Superstars*, *Celebrity Blackjack* on GSN

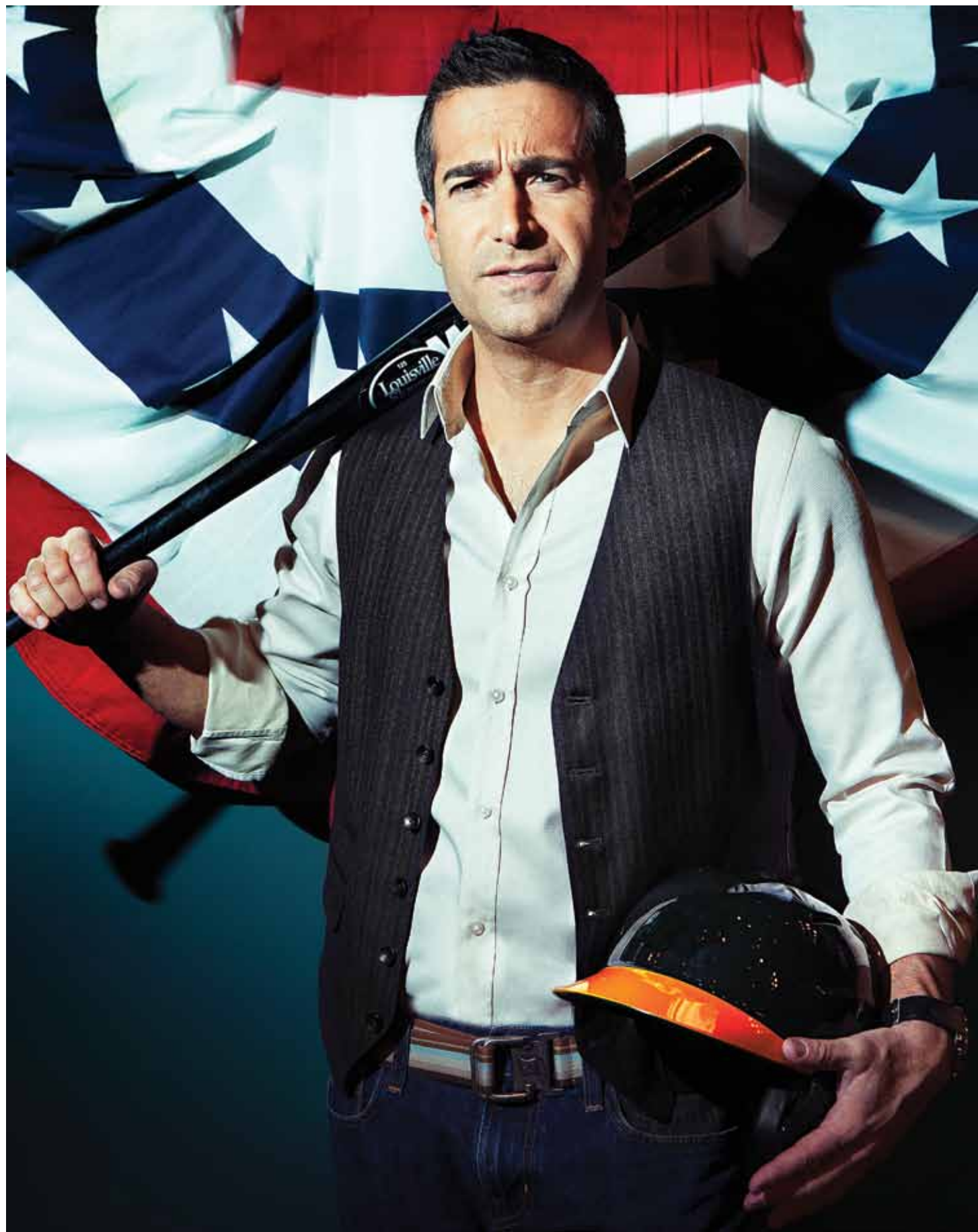


← Matt Vasgersian alongside analyst Harold Reynolds

smartass by nature. But being honest with myself, there are moments where I should be straighter." Analyst John Smoltz tells *Yerevan Magazine* that Vasgersian's unique ability to balance a broadcast with his humor has made the former eight-time National League All-Star's transition into TV much smoother. "There isn't a moment where I don't expect him to say something funny. I have to be very careful that I am not eating something that could come out. He had me choking on a pretzel once," says Smoltz. "He knows how to make situations work, and it's not even a struggle. He cares about making a team effort. It's right up my alley, and I couldn't be more comfortable. If you're not having fun, I don't see how you can stay in this business."

Outspoken and clever by nature, it's exactly the reason why Vasgersian can't be found on the loaded gun known as Twitter, a platform where fan feedback is either flattering or borderline susceptible to filing a police report. "I don't trust myself on Twitter," says Vasgersian, frankly. "I'm not particularly comfortable with people having that kind of access to me. So many of my baseball friends and colleagues are on there, and they have to put up with such vitriol. I don't need that. I like to keep the happiness in my life in check. I don't need everyone to tweet at me every time I misspeak. That's what my bosses are for." The most incredible supporter Matt has had was Ringo Starr, who in 1997, sent a compliment his way,





thanking him for an in-depth in-game interview he did with Peter Frampton. Vasgersian can count similar “wow moments” on one hand. There was also the time he called his first game at Dodgers Stadium. “It was the second inning and still quiet, and all of a sudden, next to our booth, I hear Vin’s voice, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘Wow! I’m calling the same game as Vin Scully. I have no business even being here right now. Who screwed up to allow this to happen?’” Then there was the 2001 Gator Bowl, a game he called with Pat Haden, the former USC quarterback he grew up watching. “We were rehearsing our on-camera open, and I looked at Pat and told him, ‘when I was a kid living and dying USC football, if someone had told me that I would be broadcasting a game with Pat Haden, I would have considered myself lucky.’ Pat understood that I was being sincere about it, and that moment sticks with me.”

“Looking back on it, I regret piling on my work schedule because my personal life suffered. If I had to do it all over again, I can honestly say I would have not tried to tackle as much as I did when I was younger. You feel like you have to accept everything that’s offered because at some point, the phone might stop ringing. That was a mistake on my part, but it’s okay – I’ve made my peace with it.” Vasgersian received the balance and year-round stability he was looking for on New Years Day of 2009 when the next great opportunity came knocking. He became the centerpiece face and voice of the newly launched MLB Network. Headed by President and CEO Tony Petitti, MLB Network has given Vasgersian the creative latitude he’s longed for. Former baseball All-Star Harold Reynolds, Vasgersian’s on-screen partner and analyst, tells *Yerevan* that the “smartest person in the building” has been allowed to utilize his talent and charisma.

“He knows what it takes to be a great broadcaster. He has a huge upside in this business with the future ahead of him, and he’ll be around for a long time. At the end of the day, he’ll go down as one of the great broadcasters of all time,” says Pat Haden.

Haden, now the Athletic Director at USC, tells *Yerevan* that Vasgersian has all the tools one in the business needs – professionalism, listening skills, work ethic and of course, a great voice. “He knows what it takes to be a great broadcaster. He has a huge upside in this business with the future ahead of him, and he’ll be around for a long time. At the end of the day, he’ll go down as one of the great broadcasters of all time.”

#### Flirting with Perfection

The Bay-Area-born USC alum had it perfect for a while when he returned to California in 2002 and called games for the San Diego Padres. He purchased a home, was working the dream gig, and had a career that supported his lifestyle. But the accomplishments were bittersweet: there was no one he could share it with. In hindsight, he admits that his arduous travel-based profession has been the reason why he’s not married or has children. The heavy workloads he created for himself created disconnects in his relationships.

“He’s got a great personality and unbelievable wit. I think he’s missing his calling in Hollywood. He’s that type of a sharp-witted mind. He’s a pleasure to be around everyday and I’ve enjoyed it,” says Reynolds. “It’s been amazing to watch him grow. For him to make the transition from being a play-by-play guy to being able to host any show speaks volumes about his talent. He’s a backbone to the network, and we wouldn’t be able to accomplish a lot of things without Matt in the middle of it.” Vasgersian says joining the MLB Network is the best professional decision he’s ever made. “I did a lot of random stuff between baseball seasons back in the day, and I feel that I don’t have to do that anymore.” With respect from his peers, Vasgersian can now kick his feet up a bit and wait to entertain an offer from *Saturday Night Live* whenever it comes. His plan until that happens? “I want to have a family,” he says. “And I want to write the next great American novel and learn how to play the piano.” ■