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Dan Rea takes on the DA's office

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young conservative activist, he disassociated himself from a rally at which, without his knowledge, former Georgia Gov. Lester Maddox was invited to speak. Rea said at the time — this was 1977 — that was a racist and he wanted nothing to do with him. Rea went so far as to challenge Maddox to a debate on racial issues, which took place in the studios of WJZ radio.

On the air, Rea has a credible record. He looks the story of how Lyndon LaRouche forces used a credit card scam in which unsuspecting people were bilked of thousands of dollars.

'A pit bull'

After 17 years in the news business in Boston, Rea has pleased his share of people and stepped on his share of toes. He is known for being aggressive, sometimes abrasive. He is described by those who know him and his work as dogged, stubborn.

"If I were in jail I'd want Dan to be my lawyer because he doesn't give up," says Walker. "I advise him for that, quite frankly. He just doesn't give up. He's like a pit bull."

There is an in-your-face quality about Rea, an edge to him that puts some people off. But that intensity is also what sets him apart.

A rival reporter at another station who finds Rea personally abrasive says he is nonetheless professional and competent. Says the rival: "If I were making a list of the problems at '92, Dan's name would not be on that list."

Before Sabati, Rea had never been involved in a story where he was staked out such a strong point of view. With the Sabati case, Rea is engaged in a classic form of advocacy journalism: He has found what he believes to be an egregious wrong and he is fighting mightily to right it.

Rea concedes some of his stories about Sabati have been flimsy, soft features intended "to keep the story alive."

Among those stories have been coverage of a North End rally for Sabati and a live-in-studio interview with his wife while the screen displayed a photo of the four Sabati children when their father was jailed. That same studio session included a phone interview with Sabati and heartfelt declarations of love by the Sabatis.

Rea says he doesn't want to jeopardize his objectivity and will let the viewer speak for themselves.

"As a reporter I'm open," he says. "I'm open if someone wants to give me ... Then he pauses and referring to the prosecution's brief opposing a new trial for Sabati, he says, "Did you read that horsehit?"



Joe Sabati, right, with lawyer Victor Giars, who says his client was framed to protect another man.

During a subsequent conversation, Rea says, "I know — I know — this guy is innocent."

Commutation denied

Rea's stories have noted that Sabati completed more than 200 furloughs successfully and that his request for a commutation was unanimously approved by the state board of pardons. That recommendation and on the desk of two governors, first Dukakis and then Weld, for 2½ years before Weld denied it.

Oswald, Rea has presented Sabati as a good family man, an innocent victim of a horrendous injustice. Before presenting this portrait to viewers, Rea obtained a copy of Sabati's police record. It includes a conviction for breaking and entering in 1956, a charge of receiving stolen goods that had been dismissed, the murder conviction, of course, and an accusation, which was dropped in the early 1980s, that he had run a gambling operation at Framingham prison.

"I made a judgment early on that everything I know and had learned about Sabati was that his brother with the law were minor," says Rea. In the course of his reporting, Rea learned some things about Sabati that he chose not to share with his audience. Rea discovered that Sabati had been known to police who specialized in organized crime that he worked as a doorman or bouncer at a now defunct restaurant called the Coliseum, a mob hangout. Rea also found out that Sabati had been known as Joe "The Flame." At the time he was charged with the

murder, newspaper accounts described Sabati as an underworld figure. Rea reported none of this to the air.

Reporter or advocate?

Rea says that with the Sabati case "my credibility is on the line." Carmen Fields, spokeswoman for the DA's office, says Rea has not been fair. "Without question," says Fields, Rea was pushing his stories as a fever pitch as a way to pressure Martin into supporting Sabati's motion for a new trial.

Fields complains that Rea made a claim from the start that he believed Sabati was innocent and left no room for a contrary viewpoint. Fields also says that it was "way out of line" for Rea to go on the David Bradley radio program with attorney Giars and make the case that Sabati was innocent and then to turn around and do a news story on Giars' appearance on the program for WJZ-TV.

And recently, Martin went so far as to write a letter to Channel 4 news director Peter Breun, complaining that at a press conference Rea had been confrontational and combative "and intent on furthering his own personal opinion," says Fields. Breun was not to discuss the letter.

Some of Rea's peers think Fields has a point. Journalists are paid to criticize one another publicly, but some say privately that they believe Rea has gotten carried away with the Sabati story. They believe he went too far in pressuring Martin's office on the Sabati motion for a new

trial, that he should have revealed details unflattering to Sabati in his stories, such as his nickname and his job at the Coliseum, and that he should have stuck to reporting the story and not written the state's editorial on the subject.

For his part, Rea says he has "been over backwards" to be fair.

Faith is unshaken

Judge Banks' ruling came last month, and it was a painful blow to Rea and the Sabati forces. Not only did Banks not grant Sabati a new trial, but on virtually every issue under debate Banks ruled for the prosecution.

When Rea did his first Sabati story last May, he was convinced that Sabati would be free by now, and he is discouraged that Banks dropped the appeal under so firm. The reporter has high hopes that the state Supreme Judicial Court will overturn Banks.

Banks' faith in Sabati remains unshaken. In spite of the prosecution's case, in spite of Banks' ruling, Rea presses on.

It has become personal for him now. He talks about the case incessantly with those involved, with other reporters. People on the street ask him about it. He even talks about the case with his 6-year-old son, Daniel. Daniel, in fact, sent a card to Sabati around Thanksgiving and Sabati sent Daniel a Christmas card.

"My son asks it," says Rea. "My son knows Joe Harlow framed Joe Sabati. Daniel keeps saying to me, 'When's Joe Sabati going to get out of jail?'"

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