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SPORTS DESK

TV SPORTS; Honesty, Not Salary, Cost Albert His Job

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The clash between Marv Albert and his bosses at MSG Network that led to his departure Tuesday was as much about the attitude he brought to Knicks telecasts as it was about their not wanting to pay him \$2 million a year.

Had Madison Square Garden wanted to retain him, it would have been for much less money. But Albert's frank opinions about the Knicks would still have been a factor, even at a smaller salary.

Albert felt he could report only what he saw; his superiors, going up as high as James L. Dolan, chairman of Madison Square Garden and president of Cablevision, saw an announcer who harped on negatives and did not seem to like the team.

Dolan embraced the belief that MSG announcers should call games with a more positive, upbeat approach than those who have national assignments. In this case, two industry executives said, Albert angered Dolan by providing the same type of objective, somewhat critical call on MSG that he did for his National Basketball Association assignments on TNT and used to do on NBC.

"Jim felt all broadcasters had to be cheerleaders and sell tickets," said one of the executives, who also said that Dolan was also unhappy with Walt Frazier, Albert's former MSG partner, and John Davidson, the Rangers' longtime MSG analyst.

Last season, according to a confidant of Albert's, his superiors conveyed their belief that he was too negative and sought to have him minimize remarks about the Knicks' losses, turnovers and subpar shooting. He was told not to build up opponents and to refrain from speaking extensively about the firings of Don Chaney as coach and Scott Layden as general manager. There was even joking by the Knicks' production crew about not giving the final score if the team lost, the confidant said.

The confidant also said that Dolan reprimanded Albert for saying that management had "tortured and embarrassed" Chaney by dragging out his dismissal.

Albert was also reprimanded for suggesting during a game that a bad call ended up giving Stephon Marbury an extra free throw, the confidant said.

Albert, who declined to discuss the specifics yesterday from Los Angeles, said: "I felt at times like I was in the theater of the absurd, not the MSG Network. I felt like, what's going on here? This is a chapter in journalism about how a broadcast should not be handled."

Garden officials declined to comment.

Albert has not always been embraced by Knicks coaches or players, even during successful seasons. When he

coached the Knicks, Jeff Van Gundy complained to Dave Checketts, then the president of the Garden, about negative comments on the telecasts. Van Gundy's predecessor, Pat Riley, was also critical of Albert. Eventually, Van Gundy became one of Albert's partners on TNT before leaving to coach the Houston Rockets.

"I didn't believe in muzzling, editing or threatening the guys," Checketts said. "The best solution, I told Riley or Jeff, and Ernie Grunfeld and Patrick Ewing, is that if you feel overly criticized, don't be concerned, just go out and win."

He added, "I told Marv, 'I'll never tell you what to say, as I wouldn't tell a coach who to play, but you don't have to go overboard to prove your objectivity.'"

The pressure to present less critical commentary has increased with the decline of the Knicks and the Rangers, whose enormous payrolls have not led to success. Losing seasons have reduced the number of playoff games and revenue at the Garden and diminished the income for the MSG Network, which lost the advertising allure of the Yankees after the 2001 season. In the three months ended March 31, the Garden posted an operating loss of \$34.7 million, compared with a \$1.8 million loss for the same quarter last year.

"An owner has a right to say he doesn't want to pay a guy a zillion dollars to rip me," Checketts said. "This is more about losing than anything else."

Mike Breen, the Knicks' radio voice, is expected to replace Albert. His subtle, low-key demeanor has apparently not offended Garden officials. He has filled in at MSG when Albert called TNT games.