

MONICA COLLINS

When the weatherman plays dumb

By Monica Collins | January 9, 2007

THE ANCHORMAN was in a dither. "The weather is downright weird," exclaimed Ed Harding of WCVB-TV (Channel 5) on a night when high temperatures broke records up and down the East Coast. Harding reported more heavy snow in Denver, no traditional lake effect snow in Syracuse where golfers teed up on greens, and a record 63 degrees in Boston. "What in the name of weather is going on?"

Harvey Leonard, the station's weatherman, could offer little insight, except to blame an errant jet stream and promise there will be a "price to pay later on." He also cracked a joke about Harding golfing in Syracuse. Actually, he made two golf jokes. The tone turned serious during an unsettling story about dolphins stranding themselves inexplicably along the Cape Cod shoreline.

Down the dial at WHDH-TV (Channel 7), Pete Bouchard, resident meteorologist, showed a pretty picture of a flowering plum tree in Jamaica Plain. On CBS4, anchor Lisa Hughes declared, "Oh my gosh, this is unbelievable," about the record high temperature, but she presented the pleasant prospect of a "beautiful" Patriots playoff forecast while Ken Barlow, station weather guy, referred to the immediate outdoor conditions as "mind-boggling."

Spot on. The weather has been weird, unbelievable, mind-boggling, or whatever adjectives you want to toss around. This winter has been an endless hybrid of October and March, with occasional reminders of November and May. In the Boston Public Garden, the willows weep new green and trees bud and flower. On local TV, don't expect an explanation beyond the astonishing qualifiers.

By design, the weathercast is a temperate zone, a bastion of prognosticative bromides without any controversy. Weatherpeople tell you to watch out for drizzle during the morning commute. This has been the extent of their cautionary role. They are promotional tools, teasing their forecasts throughout prime time. They are encouraged to chat chummily with the anchorpeople in calm periods and go into full froth during blizzards, thunderstorms, and other disturbances. Each local TV meteorologist presents the image of a weather jockey who loves the ride in severe conditions. Perhaps that explains why Kevin Lemanowicz of WFXT-TV (Channel 25) sneered about all this "boring" weather.

Boring only if you don't want to contemplate the freaky plum blossoms in Jamaica Plain in January. Something's going on. Even while rollerblading or picnicking on the Feast of the Epiphany, outdoor enthusiasts had to worry about global warming or climate change. Just don't expect to hear those fears spoken aloud by the local TV weathercasters.

Only Channel 4's Barlow has reported on global warming, but he does not integrate the theme into his daily weathercasts. Barlow presented a hard-hitting story last fall in which he put the environmental crisis in context. "Global warming is happening," he said in a story still posted on the station's website.

"Consider these two recent findings: the planet is the hottest it has been in at least 400 years; and this past summer was the warmest in a generation. By historic standards the earth is in fact getting hotter. Readings were up one full degree in the past century. Although that might not sound like much, it really is significant." Barlow also offered some practical things you can do to stem greenhouse emissions, including turning off appliances. Since these include TVs, Barlow's admonition seemed all the more brave.

Still, education about global warming need not be an anomaly for a TV forecaster. It should become part of the routine, when the weather is strange, to remind us that our fragile planet is in peril. To neglect to do so and fall back on the over-the-top adjectives and pictures of plum blossoms seems a foolish disservice. To acknowledge global warming is not an act of treason, or a kiss-up to Al Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth" -- despite what right-wing pundits would have us believe.

In these times, you do need a weatherman to tell which way the wind is blowing. TV meteorologists are uniquely positioned to make sense of what's happening outside our windows. They have the tools to put the weather into climatic context. With global warming an omnipresent threat, their role becomes more crucial. Playing Mickey or Minnie the Dunce with the anchorman doesn't cut it for an audience whose nagging fear has become the change in the weather.

Monica Collins is a former television critic.