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For radio's oldest loose cannon, this is hardly the first misfire

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BY CLAUDIA PERRY
Star-Ledger Staff

Don Imus' career as a morning radio host ended much as it began.

This time, the coarse and controversial comments that were his bread and butter proved to be his undoing. The fact that his racist remarks were televised nationwide made the incident more potent.

Alex DeMers, head of DeMers Programming, a Philadelphia-based radio consulting firm, said that in this age of TiVo, YouTube and the Internet, "your words never die. Don Imus found that out."

Imus, 66, was born in Riverside, Calif. His alcoholic father moved the family around the Southwest for most of his childhood. The younger Imus served in the Marines from 1957 to 1959.

He began his radio career at KXOA outside Sacramento. He talked trash and pulled stunts such as ordering 1,200 hamburgers from a fast-food restaurant, an incident that prompted the Federal Communications Commission to institute a ruling that radio personalities identify themselves when phoning listeners.

Imus further honed his style of insult humor and jokes at WGAR in Cleveland. There he gained a reputation as a loose cannon, but he was picked up by WNBC in New York in 1971.

"Imus in the Morning" made its debut on WNBC that year, and the show was rife with insult humor. Imus poked fun at station management and co-workers, and earned the undying enmity of then-colleague Howard Stern. During this time, Imus battled cocaine and alcohol addiction, even saying he drank warm vodka in the morning to keep his hands from shaking.

"I have air checks (recordings) of Imus from back in the '70s where he said things much worse than (the Rutgers) comments," said Robert Unmacht, founder of Nashville-based radio consulting group iN3 Partners.

Imus was fired in 1977 and returned to Cleveland, but he was back in the Big Apple two years later. The show thrived, but with the addictions taking a toll, Imus entered rehab in 1987.

A sober Imus returned to the airwaves and, two years later, was inducted in the Radio Hall of Fame.

Imus was popular with male listeners, who make up a desirable demographic for corporate America, said Walter Guarino, an advertising professor at Seton Hall University.

"Men, in general, cost more to reach as a mass audience," he said. "WFAN-AM was one of the more expensive radio buys in New York."

Still, advertisers began leaving "Imus in the Morning" in droves in

recent days, as the uproar grew over his remarks about the Rutgers women's basketball team.

David Fields, managing director of Ascendant Consulting, a Ridgefield, Conn., marketing firm, said CBS waited too long.

"The right move, but it looks like they succumbed to public outrage rather than having the marketing and moral sense to excise the liability immediately," he said.

As with Stern, advertisers who signed on with Imus fully knew the risks, DeMers said. He had weathered numerous storms, including one that followed his reference to former New York Times White House reporter Gwen Ifill as "a cleaning lady."

In 1996, the show started being simulcast on MSNBC. Once that happened, Imus began to blend his "shock jock" humor with political commentary, and began hosting guests from the political, media and entertainment fields. The show was favored by some because of its relaxed atmosphere and Imus' surprisingly low-key interviewing style.

Its television audience averaged about 300,000 viewers. The radio show reached an audience of 2.25 million, according to Talkers magazine. Imus earned approximately \$10 million annually, and had homes in New York and Connecticut and a ranch in New Mexico, where he hosted kids with cancer, never missing a chance to promote his own good works.

Steven Miller, a professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, said Imus "was trying to straddle a barbed-wire fence."

"One moment he's a talk show host using ridicule to go after people, and then he's interviewing kings, queens, presidential candidates and senators. He's Tim Russert one minute and Howard Stern the next."

Miller predicted that Imus' downfall doesn't signal the end of offensive public speech.

"We'll still see sensationalistic, tabloid radio," Miller said. "Given all the outlets out there that are encompassing us with endless information, people need to be over the edge or out on a limb to get heard."

Staff writer Joseph R. Perone contributed to this report