

The Mixmaster” Dan Morrell has a message for all those DJs who think they are in the same class as him: Get your stuff together, because he is ready to hand the top-dog billing off six years from now when he retires at age 35. “You heard it right; once I reach the age of 35, I am retiring from the tables,” Morrell says. “To all of the up-and-coming DJs, you have six years to get your game up and you can have my spot.”

It isn't like Morrell is hurting for work and ready to transition to a day job any time soon. He is plenty busy as a resident DJ for B96, co-owner of promotions company Mixmaster Throwdown and a producer of mixes for some of Chicago's professional sports teams. But he also has his hands involved in producing Mixtour Vol. 5 album, real estate ventures and the day-to-day business that is involved with launching his own record label, which he expects to establish in the next year.

But until that retirement date gets here, Morrell is going to keep enjoying the success he currently has.

“I thank God for allowing me to make a full-time career out of things I am passionate about,” Morrell says. “Be it mixing all over the country, running Chicago's top nightclub marketing and promotions company, music production, artist management or even real estate. This has all been made possible because of my success as a DJ.”

While doing his thing in Las Vegas, Morrell took some time answer questions for Clubline Chicago.

Clubline Chicago: How did you first get into the DJ scene?

Dan Morrell: Since birth, I've always had passion for entertaining. It's like my path was already chosen for me. The way I reached the DJ chapter of my journey came out of what I thought at the time was the worst part of my life. Early in my college days at Illinois State University, I made the common rookie mistake of continuing a relationship with my high school girlfriend. Eventually, because of the long distance, things weren't the same and she ended up finding another guy, but forgot to tell me about it. To help get me out of a funk, the guy in the dorm next door, who was a DJ, told me about the DJ lifestyle. He was 100 percent right; it would help me get over any girl problem I could imagine. After a few short months, I was well on my way to a great future in the DJ realm.

CC: What do you spin? What equipment are you using?

DM: I spin the music that your girlfriend wants to hear. On the radio or in the clubs, I won't be pigeonholed into one genre of music, because that leads to limiting creativity. However, you are most likely to hear me mixing a blend of hip hop, house, rock/mash-ups when I'm mixing. For equipment, I was an early adapter of the Serato Scratch Live system and have not looked back ever since. When on the decks, I prefer the Pioneer CDJ-800 MK1 because of the simplicity of the unit. Mixers are a different story; I swapped out all of my Pioneer mixers for the Rane TTM57, which is made specifically to be used with the Serato system. It has all of the features of a Pioneer mixer, but allows me to navigate through the Serato without needing to touch a laptop. Not having to spend the majority of my set scrolling through a laptop top allows for a better visual experience. No one wants to pay to see a DJ typing on a computer; they came to see a performance and dance to it.

CC: How did you get involved with the Chicago sports teams? Are you a sports fan in general?

DM: One of the many perks of being with Chicago's best radio station [B96] is being tied in with some of the city's greatest organizations. My bosses, Todd Cavanah and Erik Bradley, do the music in between plays for the Bears and the Bulls. So when the teams need mixes, an MC, or a DJ, I get the call. I have to say I'm one of the biggest Bears fans that exists and definitely am ready to help celebrate another Superbowl win for Chicago!

CC: How does music fit in with sports, in your opinion?

DM: Music is one of the most powerful forces in the world. Since the first drum beat of our caveman ancestors to the soundtrack of your favorite movie, it has always had a natural way of evoking emotion. When a particular song comes on, people are instantly transferred back to a certain

time period, emotion or mental state that they associate with that track.

I think music and sports go hand in hand. For the players, music is motivational, like “Eye of the Tiger,” and makes them want to box like Rocky. For the fans, songs like “Superbowl Shuffle” or “Don't Stop Believing” by Journey takes you back to a special time, when all was right in the world and your team was the champion.

CC: Tell us about the Super DJ Spinoff competition in Las Vegas. How did it feel to win such a prestigious competition?

DM: The Vegas battle was of the most memorable nights of my DJ career. Bobby D, came with me, and I promised him if I won I'd cover his trip. After winning the \$5,000, we definitely partied like rock stars that night! There were mixers from all over the country there to compete, but being from Chicago I already had a leg up. I think Chicago DJs as a whole are the best DJs in the world because of the standards set by the pioneers of the Chicago house scene 25 years ago. Getting back to the point, because of my Chicago roots, with ease, I was able to combine great programming, solid technical skills and seamless transitions to rock the crowd as well as many of the other DJs. Winning the battle opened a lot of doors for me in Las Vegas and Chicago. I'd recommend entering as many competitions as possible to any up-and-coming DJ.

CC: How concerned were you when you had to drop the DJ Smurf moniker? Did you have to reestablish yourself in the industry under your real name? Did you consider taking on a new DJ name, and what were some of the options you thought up?

DM: As I mentioned earlier, I won't allow myself to be pigeonholed into one type of music. Early in my career I was a leader on the Progressive and Euro scene, but when I put out hip-hop CDs I had to use fake names, like DJ Mack, in efforts to not hurt the DJ Smurf CD sales. So, I was actually thinking about changing it before the cease and desist letter came in order to re-brand myself, but that definitely sped up the process. Since I established credibility as DJ Smurf before I was on the radio, I didn't think it would be a hard transition with Chicago's Most Listened to Radio station behind me. Thankfully, B96 stood by me through out the process, which was instrumental in making the transition a success. I had to give up my space at the front of the line and start from scratch. Most DJs are unable to make it to the top once. I've been blessed to do it two times. The whole process was a great confidence builder and taught me a lot about trademark law, which has come in handy with some of my other ventures.

CC: What was the motivation behind founding Mixmaster Throwdown?

DM: The key to my success early in my career was not only music programming, but being able to market myself to the college audience all across the Midwest. Eventually the crowd graduated college with the majority of the students moving back to the Chicagoland area. I thought even though they were not in college any longer they most likely are going to be club-goers for a number of years to follow and making a lot more money than they did in college. Enter Mixmaster Throwdown, which has been operating in Chicago for over five years and on college campuses for almost 10 years now.

CC: You have a number of interests outside of the DJ scene. What can you take from your career as a DJ to your other interests, specifically running a business or real estate investing?

DM: Because of my DJ career experiences, I am able to save a lot of time starting and running other businesses outside of B96, deejaying and Mixmaster Throwdown. Dealing nightly with people in a range of states, I can handle any situation that arises. Also, I've honed my instincts for reading people and how to treat people, if you can get those two traits down pat the sky is the limit.