

DICKIE

V

*By
Dick
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How a High School Basketball Coach Became a **National Sports Icon**

ESPN men's college basketball analyst
Dick Vitale in 2010 in Sarasota, Fla.



From left: ESPN's Dick Vitale during the pre-game broadcast of the 2013 NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Final Four Championship game in the Georgia Dome in Atlanta; Crowd surfing before a North Carolina-Duke game at Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, N.C., March 3, 2012; During a Louisville University Cardinals basketball game at the KFC Yum! Center in Louisville, K.Y. in 2015

The interview had hardly begun, when “That’s awesome, baby!” rang out from the telephone earpiece. It was a heartfelt explosion, one that conveyed the laughter from the person at the other end of the line, and one that can hardly be mistaken by any true fan of college basketball.

“That’s been me forever,” he said, the smile coming through the telephone, “not manufactured for TV.”

The caller was Dick Vitale, Hall of Fame announcer and fan favorite. I had requested an interview with this giant personality, the one who is right now on your television, broadcasting the most critical college basketball games of the season.

For those who know Dick Vitale, no introduction is necessary. For those who don’t, it may not be too great an exaggeration to say that college basketball would not be the huge entertainment success that it is today if he had simply retired in 1979 when his coaching career ended.

Laudatory stints at New Jersey’s Garfield High School and East Rutherford High School led predictably to a chance at college coaching, which led to the pros, coaching the Detroit Pistons for two seasons. But after compiling a record of 78-30 at the University of Detroit, his stint in the National Basketball Association didn’t go as well.

Vitale — let’s dispense with journalistic style and just call him “Dickie V” like the rest of the adoring world

does — struggled with the Pistons and posted a less impressive record than he was used to. That was when the college game on television got its biggest gift in a century.

Pistons’ owner Bill Davidson decided to make a coaching change and Dickie V was out of a job. ESPN saw an opportunity and quickly hired the effervescent former Pistons’ coach to broadcast games from the booth.

“Absolutely no way,” was Dickie V’s initial response. “I know nothing about TV.” But his wife, Lorraine, encouraged him to take the job and just have fun with it, a fill-in position until another coaching job came up.

Initially he was reluctant, but that quickly reversed. In a very short while, Dickie V’s ebullient style of reporting caught on. Sports nuts who were fanatical about college basketball soon fell in love with the coach-turned-sports-caster and crowned Dickie V the sport’s grandest celebrity. He became a larger-than-life commentator who ensured that the athletic superiority on the court would be matched by insightful commentary, rounds of humor, and memorable witticisms coming from the edge of it. ➤

Peter Lockley/NCAA Photos

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Phil Ellsworth / ESPN Images

Dick Vitale during a regular season Louisiana State University game at the Pete Maravich Assembly Center in Baton Rouge, La., in 2016

So who is he? Richard John Vitale was born in 1939 into an Italian American family in Passaic, N.J.

“I was just kid chasing a dream, came from a blue collar family,” he says. “My mother had nine siblings, my father had nine siblings.”

By his own admission, he was an “average high school player” — although one article quoted him as saying he was a “bald, one-eyed, Italian from back in Jersey who couldn’t run or jump or play a lick.”

“But my mother always told me, ‘Even with one eye, you can be what you want to be.’”

Despite his lack of prowess with the ball, he knew how to coach others who held it in their hands. “To get ahead in football at the college or pro levels,” he told me, “you have to have played it. I loved the game of basketball and saw that it was the best sport for me to climb the ladder.”

His record in high school and college is proof enough of that wager. And, truth be told, his modest success at the pro level may have led to his dismissal, but it also led to the initiation of the college game’s favorite announcer.

And just like another Italian American in sports, Yogi Berra, Dickie V became known for his signature phrases. “That’s awesome, baby!” isn’t trademarked, but he doesn’t have to take that step. Everyone knows who it belongs to.

Where did you get these, I asked him. “Talking to athletes,” he replied, “locker-room kidding around, things I carried from watching the games.”

“Diaper Dandy” is his favorite phrase for young stars. “PTPer” refers to a prime-time player. “All Mystique” means a player that’s inconsistent

in his play. The “rock” is the ball, so “dishing the rock” means passing it. “Mr. Pac Man” is a player who will eat you alive on defense, “Space Eater” is a big man, and “All Windex Team” is one that can out-rebound the opponent and clean the glass.

There are many more memorable phrases from Dickie V, but none are so eagerly awaited than his signature outburst, “That’s awesome, Baby!”

I asked him what were among his fondest memories of coaching and he was quick to recall the times at the high school level. “Winning back-to-back state championships,” came first, but he quickly added how much he loved watching the kids play with enthusiasm.

And what about the rest of life, I asked. A serious subject deserves pause and reflection, but Dickie V didn’t have time for that luxury. “Cancer, flat out, sucks,” he said. “Quote me on that.”

True to that passion, Dickie V has dedicated himself for many years to fighting childhood cancer. The annual Dick Vitale Gala draws millions of dollars to cancer research, and Dickie V’s tireless efforts to draw dollars and attention has earned a loyal following among those committed to solving this medical challenge.

Richard John “Dickie V” Vitale pours passion into everything he does, whether calling plays from the sideline or calling out society’s responsibility to stop the ravaging effects of cancer on young people.

“I learned more about life and love at the family dinner table: ‘Richie,’ my Dad used to say, ‘be good to people, and people will be good to you.’”

The best way we can honor the man we know on the sportscast is to

enlist in his mission to cure cancer. Visit <http://www.dickvitaleonline.com/v-foundation.html> and offer your services. I, for one, will donate the pay I receive from this article to that cause. ▲

Dick Rosano is a wine, food and travel writer whose columns have appeared here in Ambassador magazine, as well as The Washington Post, Wine Enthusiast, and other national magazines. He is the author of the three mysteries set in Italy: “The Secret of Altamura: Nazi Crimes, Italian Treasures,” “Tuscan Blood” and “Hunting Truffles,” as well as a history book “Wine Heritage” on the influence of Italian-Americans on wine.

Jim Valvano,

another basketball coach and fellow Italian American, died of cancer at an early age. His North Carolina State team won the national college basketball championship in 1983, but he was diagnosed with metastatic cancer several years later and died in 1993.

In an emotional speech at the ESPY awards shortly before his death, “Jimmy V” announced the V Foundation for Cancer Research. His closing words drew a standing ovation: “Cancer can take away all my physical abilities. It cannot touch my mind, it cannot touch my heart, and it cannot touch my soul.” To connect and contribute to the V Foundation, visit: www.jimmyv.org.