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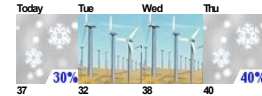
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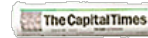
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Mike Lucas: Saturday's game is big, but Vitale's the mustard

By Mike Lucas

During an unusually cathartic postgame news conference, an emotionally drained and distraught Al McGuire shouldered full responsibility for his team's disappointing loss and claimed that he had "blown the season" for his players and any chance of competing in the NCAA basketball tournament.

"It's been a nice year, but now we've become spoilers. It's over," McGuire conceded after Marquette suffered its third loss in five games and fourth home loss of the season at the Milwaukee Arena (where the Warriors hadn't lost more than two games in any one year for more than a decade).

"I'm a little depressed about not going to the tournament," added McGuire, who had previously announced that he would be retiring at the end of the season. "But it's not their fault (the players) as much as it is mine. We didn't have enough discipline in practice. It means I've done a terrible job."

In the end, Marquette had no defense for Dennis Boyd, who sank a cold-blooded shot from the top of the key to give the University of Detroit a 64-63 victory over the sixth-ranked Warriors. In a twist of irony, Marquette's Lloyd Walton had beaten Detroit with a buzzer-beater the year before.



File photo

ESPN's Dick Vitale will be back at the Kohl Center Saturday to call Wisconsin's game against Pitt and likely mingle with Badger fans again.

Boyd's game-winning basket had been set up by a steal - Terry Tyler taking the ball away from Bo Ellis - and that allowed Detroit to milk the clock for the final shot, a strategy McGuire had perfected.

According to the United Press International wire story, the Detroit head coach "went wild at game's end - jumping up and down and screaming with players and fans on the (Milwaukee) Arena court. But later he was thoughtful about the game and what it meant."

In light of his team's 21st consecutive victory (upping the record to 22-1), the Detroit coach talked about how much of a thrill it was for him to be competing in such big games.

"Al McGuire has always been an idol of mine," the coach said. "This is by far the highest moment of my career. Never did I think we could come here and beat Marquette. All I can say is the kids are beautiful."

The Detroit coach didn't say "the kids are beautiful, and it's just awesome, baby." And he didn't say Mr. Boyd and Mr. Tyler "are PTPers."

But the Detroit coach did say that Marquette would still win 20 games and make the NCAA tournament, despite McGuire's impassioned concession speech on Feb. 16, 1977.

"Al McGuire put his arm around me last year and said it was cold in Detroit but that the sun is shining in Milwaukee," he reflected. "But it's about 95 degrees in Detroit right now."

As it turned out, Marquette went on to win the national championship to put a fitting exclamation point on McGuire's illustrious career.

As it turned out, Detroit made the NCAA field, too, and advanced to the Sweet 16 before losing to Michigan.

As it turned out, the Detroit coach, Dick Vitale, had no idea how hot it could get in Detroit until he became the head coach of the local NBA franchise.

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In the bitter end, the Pistons had no answer for Atlanta's John Drew, who scored 10 of his 28 points in the final 3 minutes and 41 seconds of the Hawks' 115-107 win in Detroit. Bob Lanier had 27 points, but it wasn't enough to prevent the Pistons from falling into the cellar of the NBA's Central Division with a 4-8 record.

On Nov. 9, 1979, the Sports Digest in the Madison newspaper carried the following items:

- ** Former major league pitcher Jim Bunning won a seat as a Kentucky state senator.
- ** An Arizona State football prospect told a reporter that an assistant gave him money to make bets at a dog track.
- ** A newly discovered stress fracture in his foot will sideline San Diego Clippers center Bill Walton for six weeks.
- ** The Detroit Pistons fired Dick Vitale a little more than a year after they hired him.

Regarding the last item, the Associated Press reported that the Pistons and Vitale "had mutually agreed to relieve Dick of his duties." One of Vitale's assistants, Rich Adubato, was named the interim head coach.

It was cold in Detroit that day and Vitale was on the brink of become an MIAer: a basketball coach who disappears, for better or worse. As it turned out, it was for the better.

The sun is now forever shining on Vitale and wherever he treads with ESPN during the college basketball season largely because his mere presence at courtside magnifies whatever is taking place.

That would include his appearance at Saturday's showdown between Pittsburgh and the University of Wisconsin at the Kohl Center. Not that a centerpiece game matching the No. 2 Panthers and the No. 7 Badgers needs any additional packaging.

Just the same ...

A year ago, Vitale and the ESPN crew showed up for the UCLA-Michigan game in Ann Arbor, Mich., which prompted this observation from Wolverines coach Tommy Amaker, "Obviously, if he (Vitale) is in the house, it's a big game."

And a far cry from the first time Vitale uttered these words about DePaul point guard Clyde Bradshaw, "It's beautiful to have a Cadillac but if you have no engine, you're going nowhere. Bradshaw is the engine, baby. He's the greatest sleeper since Rip Van Winkle."

The Madison television listings for Dec. 5, 1979, highlighted "Charlie's Angels," "Diff'rent Strokes" and a CBS movie starring Jean Stapleton. Running opposite Farah Fawcett, Gary Coleman and Edith Bunker was Dick Vitale in his debut as a color analyst.

Back then, the cable options were limited to WTBS (Atlanta), WGN (Chicago), WVTM (Milwaukee) and something called ESPN East Band. There was no "Sports on the Air" box in the local sport sections publicizing the broadcast teams.

Vitale was paired with play-by-play announcer Joe Boyle for the ESPN telecast of the Wisconsin-DePaul game from Alumni Hall in Chicago. This marked the dawning of a new era for viewers, the fledging sports network and Vitale.

Mark Aguirre scored 26 points to spark an unbelievably loaded DePaul team to a 90-77 victory over the overmatched Badgers, who were led by Wes Matthews and his game-high 27 points.

"There's no question there was a matchup problem," said Wisconsin coach Bill Cofield, whose staff included William "Bo" Ryan, a confident young assistant with Philly roots.

That was Vitale's first exposure to Ryan, albeit indirect and fleeting. More importantly, though, that game was Vitale's lifeline to fame and fortune.

"I felt important, felt I'd gotten my self-esteem back," Vitale wrote in his autobiography, "Living a Dream," as told to Hoops Weiss. "I just fell in love with the gig. It changed my life."

Keep in mind this came shortly after he had been rejected, fired by the Pistons.

"I felt uplifted," he wrote. "I became high-spirited; I became excited again. I'd found something I really loved."

Still does.

Still is.

That is, Vitale is Vitale.

A self-promoter. A shill for all coaches. A name-dropper. But he's an integral component of what makes college basketball such a marketing success and viewer magnet.

Vitale is the equivalent of the marching band in college football. The game would not be nearly as much fun or entertaining without the music. Or his loud accompaniment.

"Let's face it, I'm a hot dog," he wrote. "I'm mustard. I'm all that jazz. And I always liked to be everybody's friend.

"I was looking at my high school yearbook the other day," he went on. "And the label underneath my picture reads, 'Everybody's buddy.' "

Still is.

And the game here Saturday will be a little bit bigger because he's in the house.

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