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Behind the Scenes: Vartan Kupelian and Mike O'Hara

Tigers broadcaster Price can sympathize with Els



Jim Price knows what Ernie Els is going through these days.

Price has been there. He has cried those tears, spent those sleepless nights and endured the stares.

Price, the former Tigers catcher who now is a radio voice for the team, has a son, Jackson, 13, who is autistic. Price and his wife have been avid fundraisers for autism and are constantly attempting to make people aware of the condition.

Els recently spoke publicly for the first time about his autistic son, 5-year-old Ben. And based on Price's experiences, it's not hard to see why Els, one of the world's best, has struggled with inconsistency the past several years.

"First of all, you cry," Price said. "You don't understand and you say, 'Why?' You wonder, 'Is my child going to die?' Those are the kinds of things that go through your mind.

"The sad part is not much is known about autism. There are so many different degrees of autism." How people look at autistic children and their parents in public places, not realizing what's actually happening, is difficult to cope with, Price said.

"I'm kind of an easygoing guy, but it's tough when people make comments about not controlling your kids and give you dirty looks," he said. "They look at our children and think we're bad parents. We can handle that. I wish people would be more understanding. I'm sure Ernie and his wife will go through that.

"The thing you can't do, you don't hide (the autistic children). We have a normal life with Jack. He goes everywhere with us. You keep them in the forefront."

There's another point Price made that hits to the heart of the matter for Els, who plays a game that requires intense concentration.

"You mourn every day," Price said. "I have told people on (the Tigers') team plane, if I drift off, it's not because I don't like the conversation. It could be that your mind is taken over by the personal problems. It's a very difficult thing to bear down, concentrate. That is your blood."

Price, an avid golfer, knows "concentration is the name of the game.

"If Ernie has had problems, I can understand 100 percent," he said. "You look at your child, he looks normal, and you think, 'Why did this happen?' "

It hasn't been easy for Els, the man affectionately known as The Big Easy, who finally broke through for a victory at the Honda Classic two weeks ago. At the PODS Championship last week, Els had an "Autism Speaks" logo on his bag.

"I feel comfortable talking about it now," Els told The Associated Press. "I've got a bit of a profile where it will grab attention. That's what this problem needs. And with that, hopefully, more people will get involved and we can start getting to what causes it and what can be done to help it.

"Like any family will tell you, it's not easy. And it's a change of life, a change of priorities. You've got to be ready for it. And it's happening more often. I never knew about it, never thought about it, until it's in your lap."

No return for Vitale

Dick Vitale 's voice roared through the telephone line loud and clear from his home in Florida. Vitale is recovered from surgery on his vocal cords that knocked him off his job as ESPN's top basketball analyst for two months.

We were making a proposal -- for Vitale to return to coaching in Detroit -- and he cut it off after about a half sentence.

"No!" he said, his voice booming -- good-naturedly as ever.

The University of Detroit Mercy has an opening for a basketball coach. **Perry Watson** , who took a leave of absence Jan. 7, announced his retirement Monday after 15 seasons.

Interim coach **Kevin Mondro** finished out a dreary season that left the Titans with a 7-23 record.

The Titans need a young Dick Vitale to put a spark in their program. Failing that, an old Dick Vitale -- he's 67 -- will do fine. That would make Vitale's career come full circle. He coached at U of D from 1973-77 and made Calihan Hall rock.

"My days in coaching are in TV," Vitale said. "I'm undefeated. On Monday, I go to North Carolina. On Wednesday, I'm at Duke. On Saturday, I'm at Kentucky. I leave with a 'W' every night."

Earlier in the week, Vitale cut a tape for a tribute banquet for Watson on Monday. Vitale gave his advice to athletic director **Keri Gaither** on what to look for in the next coach.

"What I told her was, 'Look, I don't know who you're going to hire, but the first thing to look for is somebody who has personality, who can get the community excited,' " Vitale said.

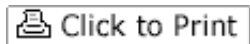
"The X's and O's -- you can find people. They'd better find somebody like Al McGuire was at Marquette, or like Lou Carnesecca was at St. John's. That should be the first criteria."

Or like Dick Vitale was at U of D.

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