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Sports

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Dick Vitale just can't say no

BY JEMELE HILL
The Orlando Sentinel

SIESTA KEY, Fla. - When Dick Vitale arrived at his favorite breakfast spot near Sarasota, he received the usual reception.

"Hey, Dick, who's going to win the national championship?"

"Hey, Dick, who's going to be the next coach at Indiana?"

"Hey, Dick, my son's on the cell phone and is a huge fan. Can you talk to him for a few minutes?"

While his tuna melt melted even more, Vitale kissed a baby, dozens of girls and women (on the cheek, of course), signed hats, books, basketballs and T-shirts, and appeared in more photos than a supermodel on a Friday night.

It's a daily routine for the most recognizable voice in college basketball. For another superstar, it would be a pain. But not to a son of a factory worker and security guard who never dreamed such fame, fortune and fans were possible

"I vowed I would not change my lifestyle because of celebrity-hood," Vitale said. "I wasn't going to lock myself in a room. You can embrace it, or you can have a chip on your shoulder. I never could understand how some of the people I meet have a chip on their shoulder about it. Why? Take 10 minutes. People are happy; you're happy."

Vitale couldn't tell a fan no if he tried, but he remains one of the most polarizing television personalities on air. He has been called everything from a homer to a honk. And most notably, a Duke apologist, which he denies fervently.

But no matter what you think of him, Vitale should be voted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, which announces its 2006 class Monday in Indianapolis.

Think about it: What would college basketball be without Vitale? Not the same, for sure.

"It's just an incredible feeling to know that people out there think enough of what you've done to nominate you," Vitale said. "From that standpoint, I'm ecstatic."

Vitale is the college basketball version of Howard Cosell_passionate, annoying and opinionated.

Nobody sells the game like Vitale. Nobody calls the game like Vitale. "Awesome baby!" and "PTP'er" (Prime Time Player) are popular cultural phrases. Every college kid in America wants to have his picture taken with Vitale.

Fans are enamored with Vitale, regardless of what some in the media might think of him.

At the Broken Egg, Vitale's favorite haunt, it is not unusual for a line that is 20 or 30 deep to form at his corner patio table.

"Can you say it for me, Dick?" one elderly woman asked him, batting her eyelashes.

"Who loves ya, baby?!" Vitale exclaimed.

That woman may never wash her ears again.

"Like I said, I pinch myself," Vitale said. "I would have never, ever believed it."

Vitale isn't a fake. The way he is on air is the way he is in life. He does everything full

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It broke Vitale's heart when his coaching career failed. He went 78-30 at the University of Detroit, but he was fired after one-plus season as coach of the Detroit Pistons.

He went 34-60 with the Pistons, and then owner Bill Davidson came to Vitale's doorstep and canned him. Now you know why he rarely calls for the head of any coach.

"I was down," Vitale recalled. "I just became a soap-opera guy. My wife couldn't believe it. I was watching Luke and Laura on General Hospital. I was so crushed. I was sitting home moping. My wife said I was violating everything that I teach about having pride, doing your best. She said you're sitting here feeling sorry for yourself, and you're not the first guy to get fired and you're not the last guy. You've got to get up and do something."

ESPN came calling shortly after Vitale was fired, and the relationship has lasted nearly 30 years. He never imagined he'd give more to the game of basketball as a talking head than a coach.

Broadcasting gave Vitale the good life he always wanted. He plays tennis every day and loves going to concerts. The walls in his 15,000-square-foot home are covered with pictures of him and any celebrity you can name - John Travolta, Tiger Woods and Denzel Washington, to name a few.

Vitale reportedly earns more than \$1 million a year at ESPN. That, combined with his movie roles, commercials and merchandising, has made Vitale a wealthy man. He has come a long way from being the sixth-grade teacher that barely got by.

"I will never forget my mother's words," Vitale said, his eyes moist. "She put her arms around me, and she said, 'Richie - everybody called me Richie then - you listen to me. Don't ever believe in can't. You're going to make it some day. You've got something they can't hold back. You've got spirit.'"

Vitale says he's in the "last chapter" of his life, and he wants it to be the perfect read.

That's why he makes sure that his family - his wife, Lorraine, of 34 years, four grandchildren and two daughters - know they mean everything.

That's why he is using his fame and money to aggressively fight cancer, which robbed him of his good friend and former coach, Jim Valvano.

Vitale has helped raise \$51 million for the V Foundation. He can call any coach in the country and get a \$50,000 contribution pronto. No one tells him they can't. Vitale doesn't believe in that word.



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