
BILL GONILLO: TO KNOW HIM WAS TO LOVE HIM

Contributed by Steve Consenti, Brian Fitzsimmons and Bob Phillips
Tuesday, 23 October 2007

A fond farewell to a friend, colleague, mentor, and all-around great guy.

Photo courtesy of News Channel 12

Bill Gonillo passed away last month. He was a great sportscaster, certainly, but even more importantly, he was a great person who affected everyone he came into contact with, from the anchor desk at Channel 30 to the pre- and post-game Whaler spots to the radio voice of Yale football to his final gig, the voice and face of Fairfield County sports on News Channel 12.

What follows are personal recollections of three members of the Inside Connecticut Sports staff of their experiences with the big guy.

Bill Gonillo may be gone. But he will never, ever be forgotten. For a living tribute to Bill, please visit [BILL GONILLO VIDEO](#).

Steve Conoscenti:

Last month, Southwestern Connecticut sports lost one of its most profound followers and true lovers of the game, as well as the cornerstone of its media coverage. If you ever attended a high school football game or basketball game, any local college sporting events or pretty much anything at Harbor Yard, you knew Bill Gonillo. That's how I knew him, the big guy with the camera that was literally everywhere.

But I was fortunate enough to get to know Bill on an entirely different level.

I was an intern at News 12 Connecticut for the entire fall 2006 semester. After watching him for so many years, I finally got the chance to work with -- I mean for -- Bill.

At least that's how I thought it would be. Getting coffee, running errands, the usual duties of a college kid at the lowest of entry levels.

Yes, only an intern, but Bill made me feel like I was one of the guys. Three days a week, every week for close to five months I talked with Bill. Whether it was a conversation about how the Knicks screwed up this time or just Bill giving me a friendly shout (yes, shout, down the hallways of a quiet building or outside the studio during a live show), Bill always took time out to acknowledge me.

And what little time he had, driving from school to school, then back to write his script and edit his highlights, doing a live broadcast, then heading up to a few more games, only to be followed by another broadcast at 10 p.m. Toss in a weekend radio show and his schedule was booked.

Now there's a hole in the News 12 newsroom. A place where one of the hardest working men in the business sat, a place where music blared, but not over the laughs of Bill's colleagues as he danced and sang to the music.

But it's the stories that we'll always have, and Bill gave us plenty. Between my time at News 12, sitting in the press box at Harbor Yard and chatting with him during Sacred Heart basketball games, I had new stories for every day of the week to tell my buddies.

- Like how Bill used to wait until the very last second to get on camera before the news anchor tossed over to him, then forgetting to put in his earpiece so he would have no idea what the producers were saying.
- Or how he used to look like a businessman from only the waist up. Anything out of sight by the camera was completely casual. And by casual I don't mean jeans and sneakers, I mean shorts and socks with wires dangling behind him.
- Then the one about how he bit his tongue while eating in his office but didn't tell anyone, so when he slurred his words and nearly drooled on himself in the middle of his segment, the producers nearly had a conniption.

All of the stories, jokes and memorable moments that Bill left with us take a backseat to his hard work that put Southwestern Connecticut sports in the limelight. Bill's dedication and work ethic was second to none. The love and passion Bill showed for his job is a feeling one could only wish for when it came to their own daily workday.

We're always led to believe that work isn't fun, but Bill tried his hardest to debunk that theory.

Bill Gonillo was one of the best co-workers, and friends that a man could possibly ask for. I will never get the chance to thank him for making a college kid feel like he fit right in with the pros.

He will be missed.

Brian Fitzsimmons:

Our friendship started during my freshman year at Sacred Heart University as a work-study student in the SHU Athletic Communications department. It conceivably could've began when Seth Kaplan, the Pitt Center's event staff director, would order pizza for his workers and leave the remains in my boss' office.

The men's basketball team opened the 2004 season against Albany on Nov. 19 and a couple minutes into the game, that's when I saw a jolly man lugging a News-12 camera in one hand. With his free hand, he patted me on the back and said, "Hey kiddo, where do they keep the pizza around here?"

I was a new face trying to break into the Fairfield County sports. I would later learn that he was Fairfield County sports.

Bill Gonillo worked as the sports anchor for News-12 Connecticut for the past 12 years and redefined what most people would perceive to be hard work. He would be at every sporting event imaginable in the News 12 area, which spanned all of lower Fairfield County and extended into New Haven County. Whether it be a Sacred Heart basketball game, Fairfield University soccer game, an Amity high school baseball game or a charity golf tournament, he would be there lugging that blasted camera around and joking with everyone in sight.

You see? For Bill Gonillo it wasn't really work. Bill Gonillo wasn't about work. Bill Gonillo was all about life. That's just who Bill Gonillo was.

He taught me how to enjoy work. Last month, Gonillo, a diabetic, was found dead in his Woodbridge home on a Sunday afternoon. News-12 reported the cause of death to be diabetes and cardiovascular disease. But at 44 years young, it was to soon.

It was a tradition for Bill to brighten everyone's day. He sure did that for me for the past three and half years I had the pleasure of knowing him. We worked along side each other at Sacred Heart events, Fairfield University games, Bridgeport Sound Tigers and Bluefish games, last year's MAAC basketball tournaments, and in various other places. During all those times, it became a routine for him to smile at me and call me 'kiddo.'

Two weeks before his untimely death, at the women's soccer game at Campus Field, he approached me and gave me a slap five. We greeted each other and talked about how stoked we were for the college basketball season to come. Bill was always great at making everyone -- no matter who they were -- feel like one of the guys.

Then, walking away with his camera, he patted me on the back and said, "I'll see you soon kiddo."

That was the last time I saw Bill.

As a very animated, not to mention extremely talented, television reporter, he was a true professional. Taking a day off was beyond the realm of possibility and lazy wasn't in his vocabulary. His dedication shined and his personality complemented a rather prestigious trophy shelf of accomplishments. He was a three-time recipient of the Associated Press "Broadcaster of the Year" award, and conducted pre- and post-game shows for the Hartford Whalers once upon a time. He was also the voice of Yale football on WELI, 960-AM in New Haven.

A close friend of mine, and former intern for Bill at News-12, always shares funny stories of Bill and how he would never want anyone to help him with work. Many people have told me how wonderful of a man he is. I didn't need to be told that though.

MSG network's Mike Quick said it best: "Fairfield County sports will never be the same."

A playful kid at heart, Bill sure did make a difference.

We'll miss you kiddo.

Bob Phillips:

How do I remember Bill Gonillo? Goodness, over the past few years there are many stories about the late, great sportscaster. I'll never forget the first time I met Bill. Actually, it was my wife, Kris, who met him first.

We were together, Kris and I, in the press room at the Pilot Pen tournament in New Haven several years ago. Gonillo had walked into the room, and, as usual, a party ensued. Several members of the working press gathered around him, and they proceeded to walk down to the end of the room and sit at one of the tables in the impromptu dining area.

My wife and I followed, sat at a different table, and listened in to the party. In all honesty, I can't remember what was being discussed. It wasn't really important. It was lively, it was gregarious, it was seductive. My wife, being the social butterfly of the family, interjected herself into the conversation/debate, and I was soon drawn into the action.

As we were leaving the press room for the tournament, Gonillo, trusted News Channel 12 camera in hand, extended his hand. I shook it, told him my name, gave him my background (I come from a late, great and noble experiment in sports journalism called Inside Sports back in the early '80s). And from that moment in time, Bill Gonillo was our friend. Not just a colleague of mine. But a friend.

Prior to joining News 12, Gonillo had worked at WELI-AM in New Haven and was Yale football play-by-play announcer in the mid-90s. He had also worked as sports anchor on WVIT-30 and was a pre- and post-game host for Hartford Whalers hockey and Boston Celtics basketball on WTWS-TV26 in New London and WTXN-TV20 in Waterbury.

He was a graduate of Bunker Hill Grammar School, Holy Cross High School, class of 1981 (both in his native Waterbury), and the University of Hartford.

Some people would probably consider Gonillo a workaholic. It would not be unusual for him to cover a New Canaan High boys' soccer game, followed by a Staples field hockey game, followed by a Ludlowe cross-country meet followed by an Amity volleyball game. When that was done, he would likely head over to Harbor Yard in Bridgeport to catch either a Bluefish or Sound Tigers game. He was also a common site at the Pilot Pen tennis tournament in New Haven, the Travelers PGA Championship in Cromwell or any other major sporting event in the state, such as the recent world championship boxing card at the Arena at Harbor Yard. Most recently, he was master of ceremonies at the Nutmeg State Games held in Bridgeport.

But the key for Bill Gonillo is that it wasn't work. A career bachelor, he truly was married to his profession. He was in love with his job, and in love with life. And life loved him right back -- along with everyone else he came into contact with.

During his tenure as sports director of News 12, Gonillo built a legendary resume, including being named "Sportscaster of the Year" three times by The Associated Press. In fact, he was the only sportscaster to earn this accolade in both radio and television. But in the end, awards weren't what Bill Gonillo was all about.

A diehard Cowboys and Yankees fan and an avid golfer, I have never met a person who didn't hold Bill Gonillo with the utmost of affection. In that regard, he was much like another recently deceased broadcasting icon, Phil Rizzuto. Gonillo was the consummate professional, but also a human magnet. As I said earlier, whenever Bill walked into a room, it was as if some sort of energy field had entered, and suddenly there was a crowd. And, as always, it was an ebullient crowd.

Three instances immediately come to mind when I remember my friend and colleague Bill Gonillo.

First, Bill Gonillo, the friend: A few years ago, Kris and I were dining at Hometown Buffet in Milford early one Saturday evening, when he passed by our table. He did a double-take realizing it was us, and we never expected to run into him as it was Saturday, a day off, and for Bill that meant virtual hibernation. It turns out he was dining with his parents, Judy and Vito, to whom he was gracious enough to introduce to my wife and I. After seating his parents, he came tip-toeing back to our table and said sheepishly, "I never come here, but it's their favorite place. What can I do?" Truth be known, Bill Gonillo never met an all-you-can-eat buffet he didn't love.

Until he died, I suspected that Bill was somewhat embarrassed at being "caught" at such a plebian place as Hometown Buffet -- that it was really his favorite spot. But at his wake, speaking with his wonderful mom and dad, both of whom recalled the incident, they concurred that it was, indeed, their favorite eatery.

Then comes Bill Gonillo, the colleague. Part of what made the man a legend in his own time was the fact that he knew so many people, and would often air inside jokes on his nightly sportscasts. Chris Elsberry of the Connecticut Post has spoken of how Bill would constantly shoot footage of Chris interviewing someone or another, taking notes and nodding. Before he would head back to the News 12 office in Norwalk he'd advise Elsberry to look for himself on the evening sportscast. Sure enough, there would be a fleeting glimpse of Chris in the report. Gonillo called the game "Where's Elsberry?" a play on words with "Where's Waldo?"

For my wife and me, the in-joke came in his coverage of high school sports. Our daughter, Carrie Fenn-Phillips, pitches for the Bunnell High softball team in Stratford. One night, he referred to her as "Carrie Phillips-Fenn" -- intentionally, of course. Another time, he cut away to shots of my wife, nervously calling me on the phone with updates during a big game with Laurelton Hall while I was in New York on business. No one knew that Kris would be part of the sportscast until we saw it that evening with our own two eyes.

It was something that meant nothing to anyone in the entire universe except for my wife and I. And, of course, Gonillo. But that was part what made Bill Gonillo such a wonderful, special human being. He not only had an outgoing personality and got to know all his colleagues in the sports media, but that warmth extended to our family and friends by association.

Finally, there's Bill Gonillo, the special person. While covering the Simms/Alcine championship bout in Bridgeport his past summer, my Inside Connecticut Sports colleague, Pat Pickens, went looking for a bite to eat. In the press area, where we expected a lavish buffet (this was a Don King production, after all), we found nothing but some very slim pickens... the remnants of a few crusty sandwiches and chips. As a result, Pat, a student at Sacred Heart, went to the mezzanine to buy some chicken fingers and fries for dinner.

In walks Gonillo (I never called him Bill) shortly before the main event, trusty News Channel 12 camera in tow. But he has a plateful of chicken wraps and chips. "Did you pay for them?" I asked. He shook his head. "Where'd you get them from?" I asked, explaining that Pat tried to find something for dinner to no avail. He nodded his head toward the media room in the bowels of the arena, where members of the media had been served dinner by the Sound Tigers (until they stopped the practice this year, although I'm sure that were he still with us, Bill Gonillo would have managed a way to get fed for free). "How did you get them to do that?" I asked. "I dunno," he responded, again with that sheepish look. "I must just be special."

The other night, Kris and I were out to dinner. She was scrolling through the phonebook stored in her cell phone. There, she found Bill Gonillo's cell phone number. It hasn't rung lately, nor do we expect it to anytime soon. But it won't be deleted, either. In some strange way, it keeps us connected to a very special human being.

Contributions in the memory of William F. Gonillo may be made to the American Diabetes Association, P.O. Box 11454, Alexandria, VA 22312. For more information, visit www.chaseparkwaymemorial.com.