
Honoring and Preserving the Sports History of Chautauqua County

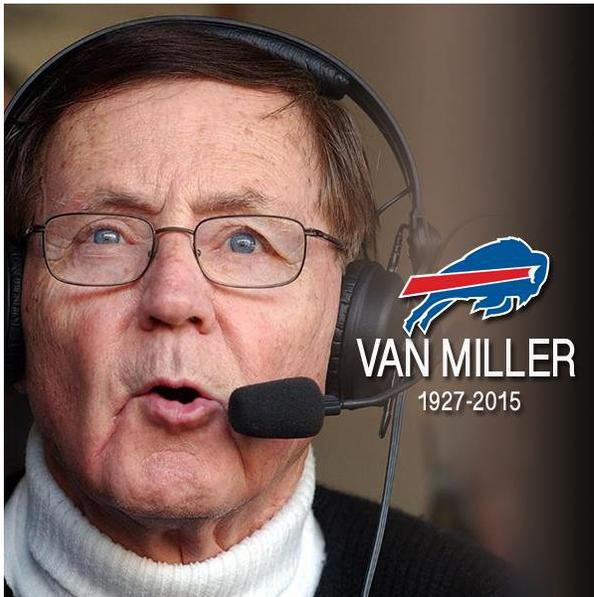


Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

15 West Third Street - Jamestown, NY 14701

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VAN WAS THE MAN



Van Miller, legendary Buffalo broadcaster and 2002 inductee of the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame, died July 17th. To honor Van, a December 26, 2003 *Dunkirk Observer* article by David C. Ibach III is reprinted below. Sincere condolences to Van's wife, Gloria, daughter, Cathy, and son, Van Jr.

VAN-DEMONIUM

Career Spanned Five Decades

For the past 55 years, sports fans throughout Western New York have experienced the crack of a bat, the squeak of a basketball shoe and the elation of a

Buffalo Bills victory through the jocund words and inviting timbres of Dunkirk's native son, Van Miller.

Miller, whose 37 years as play-by-play man with the Bills is the longest-tenured radio-broadcaster-team relationship in the NFL, will call the final game of his illustrious career Saturday at New England.

It will be there, in a chilly football stadium outside of Boston, that Van will take his last ride.

It's a fitting farewell for a man who has truly come full circle since the first time he stepped up to the mike as Bills radio broadcaster, 751 games ago on July 30, 1960, in where else, Boston, Mass.

But Van's days as a sports reporter began well before then.



In the back yard of his mother's West Sixth Street home, Van, an only child with no father to speak of, found solace in the games he loved. Whether he was giving the play-by-play of a Joe Louis fight through a garden hose and funnel, or calling his own buzzer-beating basket into the twisted spirals of an old egg beater, Van constantly surrounded himself with what he knew best: sports.

Van was a starting guard for the St. Mary's basketball team during his freshman and sophomore years before transferring to Dunkirk High.

As a junior at DHS, Van played for the football team under coach Karl Hoepfner, as well as baseball before a work-related shoulder injury forced him out. As a senior, Van was thrown from a truck and suffered leg injuries worthy of 10 weeks in Brooks Memorial Hospital.

In 1947, two years after his graduation from Dunkirk, Miller was traveling in a bus that spilled down an embankment east of Dunkirk on Route 5. Two passengers were killed and Van spent another nine weeks in the hospital.

"I really wanted to be a coach and athletic director, but the injuries took a lot out of me," Miller said in a 1982 interview with the OBSERVER.

After an injury-shortened stint in the Army, Miller studied for two years at Fredonia State, where he met his baton-twirling future wife, Gloria, and in 1950 earned a job at Dunkirk WFCB - now known as WDOE and the harbinger to Van's life-duty.

"I went to the station owner, Allie Schmidt, and I told him he needed me because his play-by-play guy was terrible," Miller once said. After a quickly improvised play-by-play, Van landed his first radio job.

Having fully realized what he wanted to do with his life, Van transferred from Fredonia to Syracuse, which had a communications curriculum more to his liking.

On June 13, 1953, Van and Gloria were married and in 1955, after a quick stint at a Niagara Falls station, Miller moved on to WBEN radio in Buffalo. That same year, their daughter, Cathryn, was born and in 1960, Van Jr. entered their lives.

Even with a new family and home of his own in Kenmore, Van always kept Dunkirk on his radar.

On air, Van frequently paid homage to his hometown with descriptions of the 138-foot world's largest one-piece wooden flagpole, which formerly stood in Memorial Park.

"I was raised there as a boy and swam in Lake Erie and it was a great, great town to grow up in and I'm very proud of Dunkirk," Miller said before the Bills loss on Sunday. "You can't beat Chautauqua County. God was born there, you know. Dunkirk is my favorite town."

It was five years into his career at WBEN that the opportunity of a life-time presented itself to Van. Well, more like fell into his lap.



Ralph Wilson decided Buffalo would be the location for his professional football endeavor, and a short time later the Bills were born. WBEN had the broadcasting contract, so Van convinced the station head that he was the raconteur for the job that would eventually make him an area icon.

Miller broadcasted Bills games from the "Rockpile" and the infant Rich Stadium for a total of 11 years before WKBW bought the broadcasting rights in 1972. Channel 7 hired Al Meltzer from Philadelphia to fill the spot until 1979.

In the meantime, Van kept himself busy by becoming the voice of the NBA's Buffalo Braves, for whom Miller called games until they left town for San Diego in 1978.

On April 8 of that year, Buffalo Mayor Jimmy Griffin proclaimed "Van Miller Day" in the city and Miller was honored during halftime of a game against the Knicks.

Van had a plethora of opportunities to leave the area, yet leaving his mother Esther alone in Dunkirk wasn't an option.

He was offered jobs by all three major networks in the '60s and '70s, but leaving for a job in New York City wasn't as appealing as staying in an area he's always admired.

"It was the best decision I ever made, staying here and getting back eventually with the Bills," he later said.

Along with the Braves, Miller has also called games for Niagara University, University at Buffalo football and basketball, the Bisons and the Stallions. Miller also hosted Saturday night's "It's Academic" quiz show on Channel 4 for 16 years.

The 1980s brought Van back to the mike for the Bills, who had their share of bad seasons in that decade, especially in the earlier half.

"When the team is playing well, the fans love the players, the owner and the announcers. When they're losing, nobody wants to listen to a lousy, lopsided football game. They can go to a bad movie instead," Miller told the OBSERVER in 1990.

And although Van won the New York State Sportscaster of the Year award in 1969, he was always yearning to get better at what he did for a living. Listening to and responding positively to criticism was one of Van's greatest attributes.

"Unlike newspaper reporters, radio guys don't have the benefit of going back and starting over when they make a mistake. But criticism is inevitable in my business. It's better to have them talking about you than not," he said.

In 1984, Van teamed up with comrade and WKBW sports director John Murphy for Bills games, in which they worked together until 1989. Ed Rutkowski and Pete Weber did the color duties at Van's side until 1994, when Murphy came back to the booth and has stayed ever since.

Van worked for WBEN and WIVB-TV, where he was sports director, until his "retirement" in 1996.



Through the years, Van has repeatedly made trips back to his old stomping grounds, emceeding and speaking at countless chamber banquets, charity events, historical society expos, round-tables and disquisitions at the college.

As Miller's career comes to an end and the final whistle blows in New England on Saturday, the countless memories of that man - that voice, surely will flow for everyone listening.

For Van, it won't be any different.

He might relive the time in New York in the '60s when he was positioned between the goal posts in the end zone, but all the points were scored on the opposite side of the field, or the unforgettable four straight trips to the Super Bowl, or the miraculous comeback against Houston in the Wild Card game of '92. Or maybe he'll look back on the boy in the backyard of his mother's home on West Sixth Street. The same kid who hosted "Van Your Morning Man" on WFCB for \$30 a week.

Only he'll know for sure.

"It's going to be tough," Miller said. "I've had a love affair with the Buffalo Bills and it's not going to stop."

Seldomly does a man, a voice, a legend, stir up so many memories as does Van Miller.

When Van was knowingly filling our ears with his knowledge and understanding, he was inadvertently filling our hearts with memories and compassion for our beloved Bills.

And the feeling is mutual.

"You can't beat the fans here," Van said in a recent interview. "I don't know if there's another city in the league where there's a greater percentage of the people having a love affair with the team than (with) the Buffalo Bills."

Van has said that next year he will still be involved at home Bills games in some fashion, so if you are ever taking in a Bills game from the stands, take a second and look to Van's booth. It will be there, looking over the shoulder of the Buffalo sideline, holding its stance where it has always been, right at the 28 yard line. You just might spot the little guy from Dunkirk in all his glory, cheering his favorite team to victory.

Irreplaceable, undeniable, the echoes of Van Miller will be heard in our memories forever.