

The Gifts of Jimmy V

A Coach's Legacy

by Bob Valvano

[Fertig Notes]

- Jim Valvano's ability to motivate, inspire, excite, and move people was simply extraordinary. It's a gift.
- Jim always said that our father, Rocco Valvano, gave him the greatest gift any one person can give to another – the gift of believing in yourself because the other person believes in you. Whatever success anyone enjoys, can at some point be traced to a person who simply said, "I believe in you. I believe you can do this."
- Jim Valvano was a man of contradictions. He often appeared cocky, but was frequently insecure. He could be flamboyant one moment and remarkably reserved the next. He loved his family, yet spent a great deal of time away from home; believed in academics, yet recruited subpar students; wanted a shot clock, yet played a game where neither team scored 40 points. Critics will say, "See, he stood for nothing!"
- A man's life is measured not only by a span of years. There is also its impact on the lives of others.
- The four words that came to define Jim Valvano's life were, "I believe in you."
- Jim had to - just *had* to – have fun in whatever he did. He had a tremendous desire to make other people laugh, and to make himself laugh. He liked to tease anybody and everybody, as long as it was in the spirit of fun.
- A more significant part of understanding Jim is his sensitivity. He worked hard to hide it but despite his sometimes coarse language and aggressive behavior, he never forgot the little boy who was constantly teased. It gave him a connection with those people who were underdogs, or who at least felt they were. It was a large part of who Jim was, and a large part of how he was able to pass the gift of believing in others on. You have to first really connect with someone before you can inspire them, move them and motivate them, and Jim had that unique ability to relate to "the little guy," since he felt like was one of them.
- One of my father's key tenets as a coach was that his players needed him more after a loss than they did after a win. He believed that when you lost, the most important thing you could do was figure out what the game had taught you that could make you better.
- Jim got two things he loved out of the experience – attention and a good laugh.
- He liked to clown around, but it didn't take long to see that he was interested in a lot of different things, and was just a very smart guy. He was tremendously competitive. Jim always believed that he was going to win. Always.
- A great many basketball players who go into coaching give it up after a year or two for one simple reason: they expect coaching to be like playing.
- Bill Foster taught Jim to take what you *do* very seriously, but not to take *yourself* very seriously. This helped him connect with people. We all want to feel that what we are doing is valuable and worthwhile, but we also enjoy finding humor in those things that we all can relate to, which reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously.

- When I brought Jim here, I fell in love with him. He had an insatiable passion for the game and for life. Everything about him was magic, and I could see he was very special early on. Dee Rowe, former coach at the University of Connecticut
- He realized that winning isn't everything, but *trying* to win, and doing your best, very nearly is.
- (Jeff) Ruland and Jimmy could be the ones to *make* that happen; he didn't need to jump on board an existing powerhouse. They could *create* a powerhouse and win it all! A National Championship! At Iona! This is instructive, and represents a key element in Jim's personality. He aimed as high as he could possibly aim – the national championship – even at a small school like Iona, and as a result he was successful. And he didn't just *aim* high. He really believed in his heart, and got all his players to believe, that they *could* win it all, even at tiny Iona College.
- He would ask your opinion on just about any topic. If you gave a good, intelligent answer, he would listen and it would help shape his opinion of you, and the topic in discussion. But, whatever you did, you didn't want to sound stupid! That would open you up to incredible ridicule, and he really didn't want to hear what you had to say, maybe ever. For V, the bottom line was always intelligence. He couldn't care less what you did, or what your station in life was, but if you were intelligent, you were in his inner circle. That inner circle was something that people definitely wanted to be included in. People wanted to hang around V; there's no question about that. And V would be happy to accommodate them. He would just take over a room or a situation, and to me, those were the funniest moments.
- Remember this: every time you step between the lines, someone will be watching you. They don't know if you're goofing around, or trying, or sick, or tired, or hurt. All they know is what they see. When you are between those lines, assume somebody important is watching and ask yourself, "What are they thinking of how I'm playing? *Today. Right now.*" People asked Joe DiMaggio why he always seemed so intense no matter who the opposition was, and his response was similar to Jim's advise: "There might be somebody in the stands who's seeing me play for the first time that day, maybe the only time. I owe it to that guy to do my best."
- Down by a point with only seconds remaining, Glenn Vickers missed a jump shot that would have given Iona the lead, and Georgetown closed them out, 74-71. After the game, a number of reporters were impressed by the poise of the Iona players, especially Vickers, who, when asked about the emotion and pressure of taking the last shot and what must have gone through his mind, calmly said he was not intimidated for one reason. "I was recruited to take that shot." When Vickers was recruited, the thought that Iona would be *in* the tournament was laughable. But he and all his teammates believed it, because the guy in charge believed it and more important, believed in *them*.
- Whether he could have achieved as much as he did without Jeff Ruland is a question no one can answer. With his motivational skills and his ability to connect with people, he may have found another route to accomplish the things he did. But it's certainly fair to say that Ruland gave Jim's career a big boost. I always felt that if Jim could get on a big stage, people would notice that this guy was funny, smart, talented and a great coach. Jim was smart enough to know that a coach is nothing without good players and Rules was simply the best he ever coached.

- They had a complicated relationship, less like a player and his coach and more like a simple friendship.
- His philosophy throughout his career had always been that the *second* contract you received was the most important one. If you proved that you could *do* the job at a certain place, you were in a stronger position and had a lot more to offer than just the prospect of what you could do there.
- Sidney Lowe: What set V apart was that he understood what you were capable of and simply asked you to do that, letting you know that he *believed* you could and would do it. Other coaches try to tell you what you can't do, and steer you away from those things. V did the opposite, encouraging us to do what we did well, and telling us that if each of us focused on those things, our team had no limits. It made us feel, as a group, there was nothing we couldn't accomplish.
- Derek Whittenburg: He had charisma right from the start, and he was easy for us to like. I felt close to him right away, but he was definitely different, no question about that.
- In his second year at State, Jim became an outspoken advocate for the shot clock. "Ours is the only game around where you can choose simply not to play. That's ridiculous."
- If you ever try to be "just good enough," you never are. Close doesn't count. You have to be better.
- That evening he had reread the words of one of his heroes, Vince Lombardi, who said, "A leader does not have the luxury of self-pity. He must be the first believer." From then on, he became just that. Because he believed, others did also.
- It's funny, looking back on a championship run, how the smallest of details can decide the outcome. That goes a long way toward explaining a coach's paranoia.
- Sidney Lowe: V's pre-game talk was pretty short actually, but he did some great things in it. It wasn't a lot of X's and O's...the best thing he did was simply remind us of one thing: we *deserved* to be there.
- John Feinstein: He just had to have fun, and while that's true of many people, what made him special is that he insisted – *demand*ed even – that you have fun too! And he would often be the one to provide that fun if there were no other way...My philosophy has always been to stay around people smarter than you. When you leave them, you'll be smarter too...He really had a presence on a lot of personal levels with me. One time I was moping around and he said, "Are you kidding me? You have the best #@!\$\$@#% life! What are you upset about? It's a great job, you're good at it, you love doing it. What's to be upset about? John, always remember, don't mess with happy." That about summed it up for Jim.
- Bob Costas: He had a passion for life that was just so appealing. And the passion was genuine.
- It was a glorious run filled with success, laughs, experiences, and, for the ultimate "fun monkey," more fun than you could imagine. Still, Jim had trouble following his own advice. He "messed with happy," and things slowly started to turn, finally building to a crescendo of negative feelings and ill will.
- Most people know that Jim was fired from his job at N.C. State, and vaguely remember that there were some allegations of corruption, an investigation, and something to do with a book. *Personal Fouls* by Peter Golenbock, did not get Jim fired, nor did the NCAA investigation. How did the book come about? There were three main reasons. First, a manager named John Simonds became dissatisfied with his experience at State. Second, after winning the NCAA title, Jim and his staff, perhaps a bit overenthusiastically, went about getting

absolutely the best players they could. They had an embarrassment of riches in talent, but not a great fit in terms of team chemistry. They also had some players who were, shall we say, “high maintenance,” and Jim wasn’t around as much as he should have been to watch over them. The third reason answers the question as to why Golenbock focused on N.C. State. Because Jim was such an easy target.

- At that time, college basketball was undergoing a transformation and becoming a big business, and as such had some very real and legitimate issues that needed to be addressed. The only significant violations found (at N.C. State) were that some of the players sold complimentary game tickets and their basketball shoes.
- Vin Scully: People use statistics the way a drunk uses a lamppost: for support, not illumination.
- Mike Krzyzewski: I think after he won the title, in all honesty, he got a little bored. He was looking for challenges, and he believed he could do so many different things – which he could – that he got involved with many of them, maybe too many of them. He was like an army fighting a war on too many fronts. Any of them individually he could win, but not all at once.
- Jim did get involved in too many things, but coaching was always his first love. He said, “You know why I don’t leave? Because I’ve tried them all – TV, speeches, radio, businesses, books, - but none of them, not one, gives me the same feeling as being on the sideline, coaching a basketball game. Nothing can take the place of that.
- The two things that bothered Jim the most were the accusations that he needed to cheat to win and that he really was not interested in the academic performance of his players.
- Mike Krzyzewski: If he could have just been a little understated, just a little bit, I don’t think any of this would have happened...The way his success in a way jumped up and bit him made me aware it could happen to any of us. If you are successful and high profile, there will always be someone out there looking to take you down.
- Kay Yow: I think people made assumptions about Jim that hurt him. For example, he was always so “on,” with such a wellspring of energy about him, that people thought there couldn’t be much depth there. His ability to be clever could be misconstrued. To some, clever has a bad connotation.
- John Feinstein: Probably 95 percent of the time people write or comment about a public figure, they don’t know them.
- When Jim was fired at N.C. State, people were almost universally critical of him and his program. He was regarded as selfish, ambitious, unconcerned with academics, and in charge of a program rampant with NCAA violations, a program that typified all that was wrong with college athletics. Much of this was either greatly exaggerated or simply not true. During those difficult days, he became a convenient whipping boy for all that was perceived to be wrong with college athletics.
- ABC Sports producer Geoff Mason: From the moment I started working with Jim, getting to know him, and going on the road with him, there was never any doubt in my mind he was going to be very good. Not one doubt...Once Jim decided to be just himself on the air, he was great. He has one of those rare – and I do mean rare – personas where just by being yourself you’re going to be successful. There are only two other guys besides Jim that I worked with that are like that: Howard Cosell and Bud Collins. I think John Madden is like that too. These are people who were interesting people themselves, and once they were able to bring that to the air, they were great.

- You only had to tell him once; he was a quick study. And curious! Perhaps the most curious individual I have ever met. Truly interested in just about anything, but it served him well in learning broadcasting.
- The phone rang and it was Jim. I knew something was very wrong. He was having trouble talking, and then he was simply sobbing. He said, “I just got back from the hospital. They told me I have cancer...and I’m gonna die.”
- After the initial feeling of despair, Jim’s natural buoyancy took over and his mood improved quickly. He was going to fight in every way possible.
- We were all part of Jim’s “team.” He had cards printed up that read:

Victories

I, _____ am a member of Valvano’s Incredible Cancer Team of
Really Important Extraordinary Stars.

The rules, printed on the back, said:

EVERY DAY I WILL:

1. Say to myself, “Jimmy V, you will make it.”
2. Say out loud, “Jimmy V, hang in there.”
3. Ask God to help Jimmy V.
4. Do something to strengthen myself mentally, physically, and spiritually.

WELCOME TO THE TEAM!

- Jim began treatment and continued to work on TV as if nothing had changed. He said, “I really feel good. I just can’t believe I’m as sick as they say I am, feeling this way.” People who saw him on TV during this period would say to me, “I thought your brother was sick, but he looks great on TV.” And he did. He had lost a little weight, he was tanned, and he looked, well, healthy. His public persona didn’t do much to change that impression. He was glib about his situation, made jokes about it, and was still quick-witted and sharp.
- It was uplifting to be around him, even in this state. I asked him how he was able to keep going, and he said it was simple. He said when you get sick, you have a choice. You can either wait to die or you can choose to live, and he was choosing to live. He also said he felt a sense of obligation to other cancer patients, that when he missed being on a show at ESPN the switchboard would be flooded with calls from cancer patients wanting to know if he was OK. He said many patients were getting inspiration and encouragement in their own battles against the disease by watching him in his struggle, and he couldn’t let those people down.
- Those two simple thoughts, “choose life” and “inspire others,” were at the core of all Jim did for the rest of his life, and in a sense were really what defined him *all* of his life.
- Mike Krzyzewski: He was dumbfounded that people wouldn’t try *anything* to try to beat it, and I came to agree with him. He felt, hey, it’s my life...just give me something. Let’s try anything. If you’re telling me I am going to die, I should have the right to try anything I choose. And he was amazed those things couldn’t happen. I think it pissed him off so much that he came up with the idea for his foundation. You know how coaches are when we get mad. We say, Damn it, we’re gonna win! We’re gonna find some way to get this done.” And I’m sure that was the way the “V” Foundation started, at least for Jim. It was anger and frustration about not being able to try things to make a difference, and the coach in him that wanted to organize something to find a way to win.
- Several of Jim’s closest friends were asked what specific words they would use to describe him. The words chosen most often, in descending order of frequency, were: *passionate, charismatic, funny, intelligent, complex, compassionate, fun, creative, loyal, egotistical,*

brilliant, emotional, driven, enigmatic, inspiring, analytical, competitive, tormented, insecure, disciplined, disciplined, naïve, high-strung, curious, brave and unforgettable.

- Brother Nick: I don't think there is any question that Jim was insecure. He felt that at any moment, all of it could go away, and he would regret not having done some things when he had the chance.
- Bob Costas: He had a certain life force, where you felt more alive just to be around him. He was filled with vitality and charisma, but also a certain vulnerability that made him more appealing. There was something lovable about him, and it was because he always had that human quality.
- When Jim was in your life, you looked at this guy touching and changing people from all walks of life, achieving and striving and growing, and through it all you got the feeling he was saying, "You should be doing all this too! You can do all of this. You can do whatever you choose to. I believe in that and I am walking proof."
- All of us work in different communities, but Jim's message would be a simple one: make a difference in *yours*. You can, we all can, and we all should.