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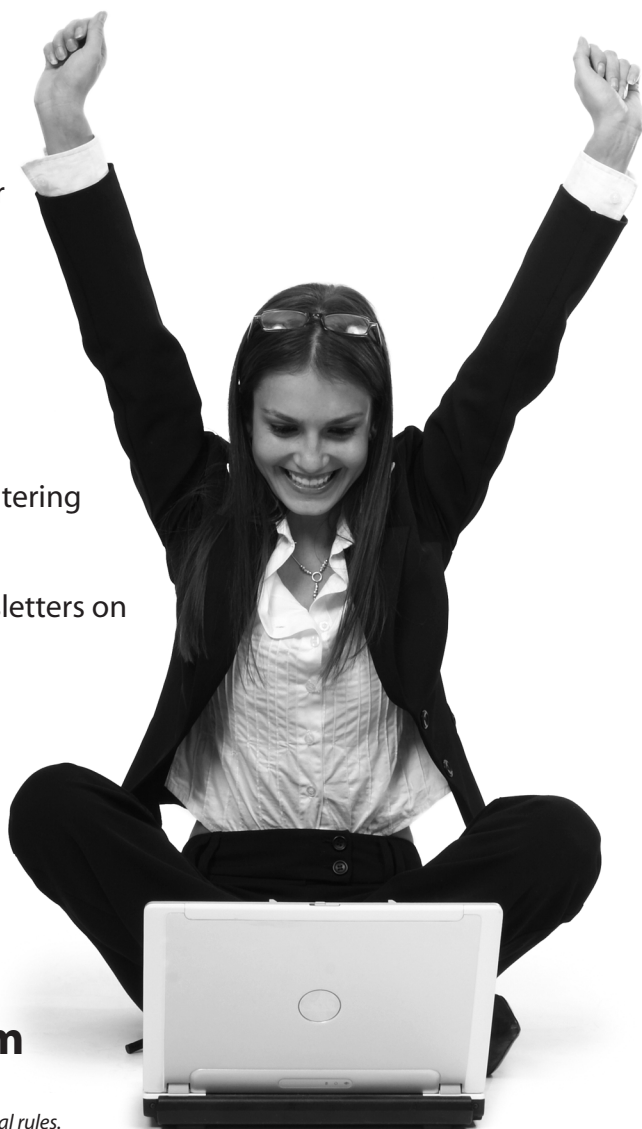
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**by Richard “Digger” Phelps with John Walters
and Tim Bourret**



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Dedication

To those who have been a part of my basketball life.

—Richard “Digger” Phelps

To my mom and dad who taught me to love sports for all the right reasons.

—Tim Bourret

Thanks to Tim B. and the staff at Starbucks and Cosi for the free WiFi.

—John Walters

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Prologue

Digger the Player, to Digger the Coach, to Digger the Fan

I played college basketball at Rider College in New Jersey. (My roommate was Nick Valvano, brother of the late, widely loved coach of North Carolina State, Jimmy Valvano.) When I graduated in 1963, I had no intention of pursuing the sport any further than recreationally. I had planned to enter the Simmons School of Embalming that summer, because that was the family business (hence my nickname). But I was born to coach the American game. Heck, I was even born on the 4th of July in 1941.

At the time, Tom Winterbottom was a high school coach in Beacon, New York. The previous winter, Tom had taken Beacon High to a 20–0 record, and now he wanted to start a summer league. He knew that I had played for Rider, and he asked me to coach one of his teams. Thus my career in embalming was forever sidetracked.

The Early Years

Obviously, that summer changed my life: I returned to Rider for graduate school and volunteered as an assistant coach. (Today, those positions are more coveted on college campuses than iPads and smartphones.) I knew that I would need a master's degree in education as an entree into coaching.

As a graduate assistant coach at Rider that first year, my job was to scout upcoming opponents. The New York University Violets were a hoops power at the time and an away game for us that season. NYU had not lost a home game since 1938. Perhaps because he sensed that our plight was hopeless, Bob Greenwood, the Rider head coach, allowed me to devise a game plan.

We won 66–63. I thought to myself: I can do this.

I got my start as a head coach, as most people do, at the bottom. St. Gabriel's High School in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, took a chance on me in 1964. The team was winless the year before. In my second year as head coach, however, we won the Class C state title.

Shortly before that season began, one day late in October, I sat down and wrote a presumptuous letter, the type of letter that only a 23-year-old with outlandish dreams can write. Seldom, if ever, do these dreams come true. On that day, I wrote a letter to Ara Parseghian, the head *football* coach at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. In the letter, I explained that my big dream was to coach at Notre Dame. (I assume Ara realized that I was not after *his* job.) Then I affixed my 5-cent postage to the envelope and spent the next six years pursuing that dream.

In those days, I had tunnel vision: I applied for ten assistant coaching jobs at the college level and was turned down ten times. I even wrote a letter to Dean Smith, the head coach at the University of North Carolina. He replied that he was going to hire one of his former players — a guy named Larry Brown. All Larry did was take two different schools — UCLA and Kansas — to the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) title game in the 1980s, winning once. Today, he coaches the Philadelphia 76ers. Obviously, Dean had no eye for talent.

In 1966, I landed a position as the freshman coach at the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school. One of my duties was to recruit, and I found that a few players did not know the difference between Penn and Penn State, the football powerhouse. “Are you going to a bowl?” they’d ask. Who was I to tell them no?

For two years, we were horrible. In Philadelphia, there are five area Division I colleges — LaSalle, Penn, St. Joe's, Temple, and Villanova — who form an unofficial league known as the Big Five. One night, I noticed a sign hanging in our gym, the Palestra, that read, “The Big Four and Penn.”

But I managed to develop as a recruiter. (“Of course we’re going to a bowl!”) In my third season, the freshman team went undefeated. It was time to move on.

The next stop, in 1970, was Fordham, which is located in the Bronx. We were a small team that pressed and ran and kept the heat on for 40 minutes. At a time when New York City was all abuzz

with the Miracle Mets, Joe Namath of the Jets, and the Knicks — a hat trick of pro sports championships within a 16-month period — we took our own bite out of the Big Apple by going 26–3. The highlight of the season was when our little Catholic school from the Bronx stole into Madison Square Garden and defeated mighty Notre Dame. Three weeks earlier, the Fighting Irish had handed eventual national champion UCLA their only loss of the season.

Little did I know at the time that I would be coaching Notre Dame the next season.

Tunnel Vision: Notre Dame

In 1968, I was in Illinois recruiting for Penn when I decided to drive over the state line into Indiana and see Notre Dame for myself. Notre Dame, especially for a Catholic kid raised on its football games via the radio, never seemed to be bound by such a trivial thing as geography. Notre Dame had always seemed to exist more so in my mind, sort of like Oz.

Even though basketball is my passion, when I arrived at Notre Dame that day, I proceeded directly to the football stadium. As I entered the stadium tunnel, with the light from the field gleaming in, I started to cry. This was where I wanted to be.

I understand that many a cynic is eager to dismiss the aura of the school, but I never have questioned the effect that it had on me. Besides, Notre Dame had just built a new basketball arena — the Athletic & Convocation Center (ACC) — and Austin Carr was the National Player of the Year. And, as anyone who ever survived a winter in South Bend will tell you, students need someone to cheer for in January and February, when football begins its hibernation.

To this day, the serendipity of my twenties boggles my mind. I wrote a letter to Ara Parseghian when I was 23, and six years later, my dream came to pass. As Bob Costas once said regarding his own meteoric rise to the top, “I would have been happy to pay my dues, but nobody ever made me.”

Building a Program

You don't get tougher by picking fights with your little brother; you toughen up by taking on your *big* brother. (Although it helps if you and your little brother team up against big bro, but now I'm in

the realm of child psychology.) So when I arrived at Notre Dame, I resolved to build one of the nation's premier basketball programs. To do so, I believed that we needed to challenge the best.

At that time, the best was spelled U-C-L-A.

We scheduled a home-and-home series with the Bruins so that each year we played them twice (once at Notre Dame, once at UCLA). I'll not deny that Notre Dame's football reputation allowed us to make such a series attractive to UCLA. Besides, I knew that John Wooden, UCLA's coach, grew up in South Bend and would look forward to an annual homecoming. Finally, it never hurt recruiting to have a game in sunny LA on the schedule.

A rivalry blossomed between Wooden, the game's reserved elder statesman, and myself. This rivalry was good for the game and definitely good for our program. The first year (1971) we played UCLA, the Bruins beat us by 58 points. Wooden still had his defense pressing us with four minutes remaining. During the 1973 season, UCLA entered the ACC with an NCAA-record 88-game winning streak. We ended it. That one game did more for our program than any 20-win season could have.

Digger the Fan

After more than 20 years in coaching, I am now simply a fan of basketball. When I left Notre Dame in 1991, I figured that basketball was behind me. I went to work for then-President George Bush, helping to apprise him on issues such as drugs and education in inner cities. Had Bush been reelected the following November, I thought that I might possibly become the Drug Czar. From Notre Dame to the White House. Some alums of that school would consider this a demotion.

My first year away from the game, I doubted that I would become a big fan. I've always enjoyed other interests, such as painting, and believed that I'd devote myself to these pursuits. But then, even in my coaching days, I had moonlighted as a broadcaster. Back in December 1973, UCLA faced Indiana in a dream matchup. I was given the opportunity to be a part of the broadcast. (Of course, Notre Dame was not playing that day.)

Ten years after that game, I shared the microphone with Marv Albert for the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) in New York. Tulsa was playing Syracuse, and I made an innocent observation — which was true, I might add — that probably caused a few beer cans to be tossed at TV sets back in Oklahoma. The game was a tight one. In the final moments, a Tulsa player went to the free throw line to shoot a one-and-one. In a *one-and-one* situation, the player must make the first free throw in order to attempt a second. If the player misses the first shot, the ball is in play. Noting that the Tulsa player's body language suggested a lack of confidence, I said, "He's not going to make the shot." And he didn't. Tulsa fans thought that I was rooting for Syracuse. I wasn't.

In April 1994, Jimmy Valvano, the charismatic former North Carolina State coach who won the 1983 NCAA title and who later worked as an ESPN commentator, died of cancer. I knew Jimmy very well and, like all basketball fans, was saddened by his loss. After Valvano died, ESPN offered me the position that he had held. I've had the job ever since, and I love it. It's a college hoops fan's paradise.

