

Introduction for Roger Valdiserri/Jesse Harper Award
Speech given by John Heisler, Notre Dame Senior Associate Athletics Director
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Before I begin, you should know that the Roger Valdiserri family tree in the media relations business is huge, and so I am here tonight representing so many others who have worked with and for Roger – from Bob Best, Tim Bourret, Eddie White, Rick Chryst, John Fineran, Kelly Sullivan, Jim Farrington and the original Karen Croake, who all are here tonight, and more who are not, from Dave Kempton to Mike Enright, Rose Pietrzak, Jim Daves and Bernie Cafarelli and so many more.

You should know that being the sports information director at Notre Dame is the best job in America. Not necessarily the easiest—but the best. One of Roger’s predecessors was Charlie Callahan, a legend in his own time who did the best parts of his business by telegram. Another was J. Walter Kennedy, later to become commissioner of the NBA. And you could make a case that the very first football SID at Notre Dame was really Knute Rockne. Roger was better at what the job required than any of them.

The athletic communication business is run by an organization known as CoSIDA. It holds an annual convention on the last week in June. For years we never missed one—it was the greatest four days of networking ever invented. One year at the convention, I think back in the early 1980s, someone was introduced at one of the awards luncheons as one of the “pillars of the profession.” Well, we were completely enthralled with that phrase. For some numbers of years, we would hold very-late night sessions, once in a while including adult beverages, and we would debate, quite seriously, who was a pillar. Understand we were all assistant SIDs—we were the young turks. We kept a working list, and we would constantly discuss how close this person or that person was to achieving pillar status. What was left unsaid is that the list of pillars absolutely started with Roger Valdiserri--and here’s why:

Let’s set the stage in terms of culture. These days you can work in communications and you don’t ever have to have a real conversation with anyone if you don’t want to, because between web sites and email, texting and Twitter, you can let those platforms do all the work. None of those things existed when Roger was in his hey-dey here. He built his reputation the old-fashioned way, by achieving particularly close relationships with his two most high-profile head coaches, Ara Parseghian and Digger Phelps, and then working his entire life to build connections with the media who covered Notre Dame. He was a pro at doing that. There was no UND.com to go to for background, no South Bend Tribune web site to see what Joe Doyle had written. When you wanted to do something on Notre Dame sports and needed to know what was going on, you called Roger Valdiserri.

He established tremendous credibility by producing the best publications in all of college athletics back when those things were far more important than they are today. His football media guide was essentially a 500-page, sometimes 500-pound, encyclopedia on the history of the sport in South Bend. His media guides and game programs routinely were judged best in the nation. He had the good sense to take advantage of a man named Steve Boda who worked for the NCAA Statistical Service. Boda just happened to be the biggest Notre Dame fan alive and he had football participation records that no one else had. So Roger hired Steve to create valuable all-time lineup and all-time roster sections for his football guide that other schools simply did not have at that time. To make sure he could always find Steve if there was a question about a record in the middle of a game, Roger printed Boda’s home phone number backwards on the inside front cover of the football media guide every year.

Beano Cook of ESPN once said Roger’s media guides were the best in the country, hands down, pro or college. Beano previously had been the SID at the University of Pittsburgh and he said the three books he always had in his reach were the Pitt football media guide, the Notre Dame football guide and the Bible – and Beano made it clear he spent a lot more time with the media guides than he ever did with the Bible.

Most successful programs would be overwhelmed by interview requests from individual radio stations and other outlets. Roger solved that with groundbreaking use of a dicta-phone—he would publish in his press release five logical questions to be fielded by the head football coach – then Ara would stop by the office on Monday, answer the five questions on tape and they'd immediately be available to every media outlet in the country. Simple, but hugely effective.

Roger produced covers for his press releases and on the backside of those covers he included black and white line screen prints that were immediately available for newspapers to use. Again, simple, groundbreaking and effective.

There's a line from the current movie "The Greatest Showman" that goes like this: "No one ever made a difference by being like everyone else." That was Roger. He ran a professional service organization for the media. When the phone rang, you dropped what you were doing and whatever the question was on the other end of the line, you found the answer. People like Malcolm Moran, who is here tonight and covered Notre Dame for years for the New York Times, Chicago Tribune and USA Today, came to depend on that philosophy.

As much as he built relationships with media, Roger also was a trusted adviser to student-athletes—from Jim Lynch and Alan Page, to Joe Theismann and Joe Montana, to Allen Pinkett, Chris Zorich, Raghib Ismail and so many more. He was doing media training on a daily, individual basis before the phrase was ever coined.

And Roger was nothing if he wasn't passionate. He loved everything about this University, and he lived and died with every athletic success. Keep in mind that the athletic department back in those days was minute. These days we get emails telling us someone in athletics has left to take another job and I'm not sure I've even met the person. But in those days with athletic directors Moose Krause and Gene Corrigan, the entire administration consisted of Col. Jack Stephens, Roger in charge of publicity, Joe O'Brien in charge of the business end of things, Tom Kelly overseeing RecSports and Mike Busick handling tickets. There was no one else—no compliance as yet, no student welfare and development, no game management, no promotions or marketing. So you can see how the relationships day to day became so intimate—and Roger was the very best of friends in and out of the office with his closest colleagues--Ara, Digger, Johnny Dee, George Kelly, Mike DeCicco and Jim Gibbons.

In their later years that group established their own Wednesday lunch group – they called themselves ROMEO, retired old men eating out. I was privileged to spend a couple of lunch hours with them for a story I was writing, and I was blown away by their passion for Notre Dame sports. These individuals, including Art Decio who is here tonight, were 10 if not 20 years away from being on the firing line at Notre Dame, and yet you would have thought they were executing a game plan the next afternoon to try to win a national title.

But don't think Roger was without a sense of humor. In 1977 Notre Dame's third football game of the season was at Purdue. The Irish had lost the week before and keep in mind that Joe Montana had yet to establish himself as the starting quarterback. In fact, the press release that week didn't even have his name on the two deep. So the game does not start well for Notre Dame—Rusty Lisch struggles at quarterback, Gary Forystek comes in and suffers a neck injury that kept him from ever playing again and then Lisch comes back in again with little success. Finally, Dan Devine decides to go with the guy whose name would have been third on the depth chart. Meanwhile a fair number of people on the Notre Dame sideline are now jumping up and down. Roger's counterpart from Purdue is sitting next to him and looks at him and asks Roger what the hubbub is all about – and Roger says, "Joe Montana is coming in the game, and you're in trouble."

Roger probably never realized he was doing this, but his success and professionalism made life better for everyone in this business. These days titles are thrown around like man-hole covers, but that didn't use to be the case. So when someone like Roger earned the titles of assistant and then associate athletic director at a time when sports information staffers seldom made that leap, he opened career doors for everyone else. He was a true champion for women and other minorities in the athletics communication world. And long

before the BIG EAST and the ACC, Roger was a giant for Notre Dame athletics when it came to negotiating television, radio and scheduling agreements that were critical for the visibility of independent football and basketball programs. For nearly two decades he was a member of the NCAA Communications Committee that ran the media operations for the NCAA men's basketball Final Four and arguably was the most powerful and influential media relations unit of its time. His closest contemporaries were the late Don Bryant from Nebraska, David Housel who eventually became the athletic director at Auburn and Donn Bernstein of ABC Sports—all of them giant names in our profession. In his later years there was nothing Roger was more proud of than his work with Father Hesburgh with the Knight Commission. This wasn't just another football or basketball game, this was the heart and soul of what college athletics were all about.

I was so fortunate to come to work for Roger in 1978. I very quickly learned that if you attached yourself to Roger's coattails, you would meet everyone of any importance in college athletics. It was like following the Pied Piper. When it came to athletics there wasn't anyone he didn't know. He was a Notre Dame student when Frank Leahy was coaching and his first full-time job was as an administrative assistant for Terry Brennan. Mention any name from the history of sports at Notre Dame, and Roger will give you two great stories about that individual.

As Ara once, said, "No one understood and represented Notre Dame better."

He very well qualified as the best known sports public relations person of his time. He's received every award and been named to every hall of fame in the business. And with all due respect to Ara and Digger, to Moose and Gene and to Fathers Hesburgh and Joyce, you can make a case that Roger over the course of his career wielded as much if not more of an influence on the perception of the department, its reputation and what Notre Dame athletics stood for than anyone at the University. That's saying something, but that's how effective he was.

The coin of the realm in the new world of communications is all about analytics and click-throughs. But all of those will never replace integrity, professionalism and the absolute passion for his institution that Roger brought to work every single day.

I don't attend the CoSIDA Convention like I used to, but I'm guessing there are still some sort of late-night sessions debating the names of the best individuals in the business. And just to set the record straight, the name at the top of the list is still Roger Valdiserri.

Roger, on behalf of your family—Rick, Kathy, Kenny, Tommy and Susan--and everyone else who is here tonight to celebrate with you . . . congratulations.

And on behalf of everyone you've touched here at the University . . . a sincere thank you. Notre Dame is a far better place because of you.