

Hall of Fame

Amateur radio

From the local fields to Yale and ESPN, Dick Gaiette covered Connecticut sports

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

As a student, Dick Gaiette penned stories about the Blue Knights in his high school paper and as a sports writer for *The Southington News*. After graduation he found the radio, and his voice traced Yale's offense as they journeyed across the football field. Gaiette tried his hand at TV and explored new ways to cover high school and college athletics.

If there was a way to trumpet amateur sports, Dick Gaiette found it and excelled. Few journalists have enjoyed more notice or acclaim at the local, state, and national press, but even fewer have stretched as far beyond the world of media.

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The former Southington High School quarterback broke boundaries, advanced young athletes, and helped forge new directions for amateur sports. Gaiette's big break came in 1963 when his voice crackled across the airwaves on WELI 960 AM as 'The Voice of Yale Football,' and his success carried him to Channel 8 and ESPN.

"He was a wonderful guy and a great talent—a pro's pro as far as I'm concerned," said Jim Senich, a sports writer for *The Southington Observer* from 1975-88. "He was a wonderful guy. He didn't walk around with his chest pumped out, saying, 'I'm Dick Gaiette.' He had every reason to be proud of what he did because he had some great years at Channel 8 or covering Yale, but there was no pretense."

Gaiette roamed the sidelines in New Haven for 33 seasons with just one short break from 1988-96. With a mind like an encyclopedia, he'd weave names and statistics through his broadcasts as if he had a team of researchers at his fingertips.

"The amount of time he put in to do a Yale football radio broadcast is pretty amazing," Former Yale coach Jack Siedlecki said when Gaiette passed away in 2005. "You would have thought he was doing a network production every week. He knew our depth chart, he knew our players, he came to our press conference, and he'd ask questions about the other team."

When Ron Vaccaro became Gaiette's on-air successor in 2004, the Yale announcer asked Gaiette if he had any favorite players from his decades of coverage. Gaiette replied, "[There are] too many to mention, but they all wore the uniform and gave it their all."

Steve Conn, Yale's assistant athletic director and sports publicity director said that Gaiette brought a dignity to his coverage



Southington Sports Hall of Fame

Dick Gaiette (1933-2005)

- 1951 Southington High School graduate.
- 1968 recipient of the Walter Camp Football Foundation All-America Award.
- Executive Director of the National HS Coaches Association, 1999-2005.
- First media member inducted into the CT High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame, 2005.
- National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame's 2008 Schenkel Award recipient.

Newspaper

- Southington News sports writer, 1950s and 60s.
- Southington Observer columnist, 1980-2005.

Radio

- "The Voice of Yale Football" Play-by-play commentator on WELI 960 AM, 1963-87, 1997-2005.

Television

- Sports anchor at WTNH Channel 8 from 1964-81.
- Anchored ESPN SportsCenter in the early 1980s.



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Jim Senich,
Former sports writer
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and a sense of class to the program. His legacy of excellence raised the bar for Ivy League athletics.

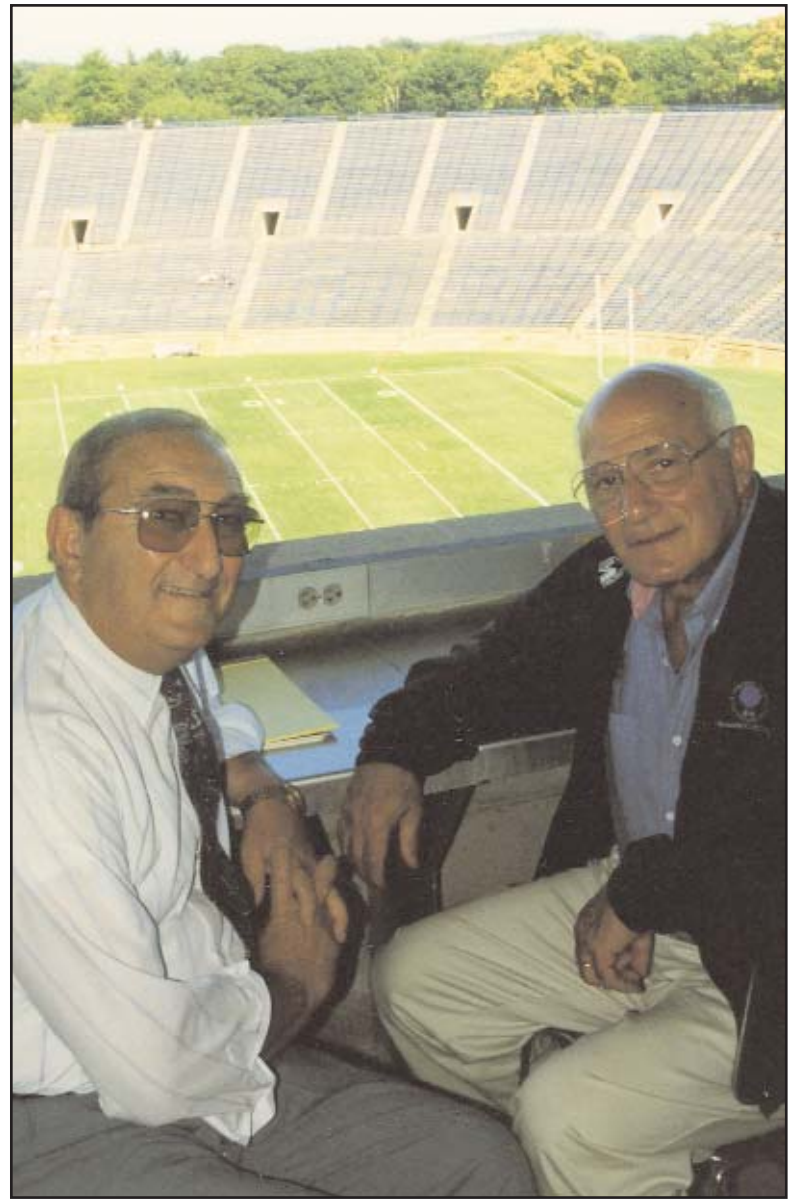
"To me, Dick was the consummate professional, the guy who was always dressed to a T," Conn told reporters in 2005. "He wore a shirt and tie to games no matter the weather conditions. He felt that was the way he should represent the radio station and the football program and he never deviated from that in the way he acted. There are not many people around who, when they think of Connecticut sports media or broadcasters, wouldn't think of Dick Gaiette."

In fact, few broadcasters enjoyed such a celebrated career. Gaiette moved seamlessly between media outlets, shifting

his roles from radio announcer to sports columnist and sports director at Channel 8 as if he were changing hats. On the radio, he championed the college athlete. On the television, he broke new ground with his coverage of high school sports.

"He was a trail blazer," said Senich. "Later on, Tony Terzi did a lot of high school games, but Dick was the first one to do it. He didn't just pay lip service to high school sports. He would actually go out to the games. He would do video interviews at the end of each game. He'd do a big buildup to a big game. To me, he was a pioneer."

Senich credits Gaiette as a mentor in his own career. Senich followed in Gaiette's footsteps in 1988 with a shift from newspaper



COURTESY OF YALE UNIVERSITY

Dick Gaiette, at left with former Yale Coach Carm Cozza, broadcasted the Yale Bulldogs over 33 football seasons.

to the radio—a career that has spanned over three decades.

"He told me that a lot of guys doing games today get really excited early in the game about one play," said Senich. "They don't realize that the excitement should build. Otherwise, at the end when you get excited about a big play, it won't mean that much. I always thought about that when I was doing games on the radio through the years."

Gaiette treated each story with the same passion and energy. His efforts earned him a position with ESPN as an early anchor for "SportsCenter" broadcasts. Gaiette never seemed to let the celebrity go to his head. He continued to stay involved with local sports organizations, serving whatever role was needed. In fact, Gaiette continued to provide columns to the local media with a regular column in *The Southington Observer* that continued until shortly before his death in 2005.

"He always came back to town," said former Blue Knight baseball coach John Fontana. "When there were banquets in town, they would want him to emcee. He would shoot out of the 6 o'clock broadcast, host the event, and go back for the 11 pm show. He never said no, whether it was little league or high school."

Gaiette never seemed to be afraid to step out of his comfort zone. In 1999, he accepted the Executive Director position with the National High School Coaches Association.

"Back then, the national association was nothing like it is

now. If there was a clinic or a convention that they put on, there would be about 1800 people fighting to get in. Now, you're lucky if you get a few hundred," said Fontana, who also serves as Executive Director of the CT High School Coaches Association. "He needed to run multiple things during the week. He'd have to organize meetings, clinics, and press conferences. The organization had nobody who could stand behind the podium to introduce people like Lou Holtz. He had that poise behind the microphone, and it worked really well."

His efforts earned him the wide-spread respect of national coaches. In 2005, Gaiette became the first media member to be inducted into the CT High School Coaches Association Hall of Fame. In 2008, he received the Schenkel Award posthumously from the National Football Foundation & College Hall of Fame.

This fall, Gaiette will become the first media member to be inducted into Southington's Sports Hall of Fame. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, Gaiette will join a celebrated list of athletes and coaches during an induction ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"A media person that goes into the hall of fame has to be someone that has really done something good for high school sports, and that was Dick Gaiette," said Fontana. "He did so much for sports, and he came from our town. The hall of fame isn't just for people that do things in Southington, but he did that, too."