

Phipps, Longtime Eagles Announcer, Dies

Social Media Outpouring Followed News

With Bridgewater College Sports For 20 Seasons

By PHIL D'ABBRACCIO

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HARRISONBURG — Bill Phipps' voice, Michael Clark said, is one you recognize.

"It's one you heard on the radio. It's one who does commercials on TV," said Clark, entering his 22nd season as Bridgewater College's football coach. "I think Bill Phipps represented one of the voices in the Valley that maybe not everybody knew him, but everybody probably recognized the voice."

The Shenandoah Valley lost that voice Tuesday morning.

Phipps, 65, died at his Harrisonburg home after a two-year battle with brain cancer.

Known throughout the area as "Coach Bill," Willard Phipps was a sportscaster largely known for the 20 years he called Bridgewater games. Throughout his broadcasting career, Phipps also called high school contests, other college games and pro wrestling events, and was a radio host and the longtime public-address announcer for the Rockingham County Baseball League's Clover Hill Bucks.

"I've probably repeated it too much, but at least for me Bill Phipps was a guy that could make you feel big-time in a small-time,"

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Bill Phipps, longtime radio play-by-play announcer for Bridgewater College sports, has succumbed to brain cancer.

Jason Lenhart / DN-R

Phipps FROM PAGE A1

Clark said.

Arrangements with Kyger Funeral Home were incomplete as of Tuesday evening, according to the funeral home.

A social media outpouring of both compliments and sorrow followed the news of Phipps' death.

"When people die, folks throw out all these clichés. 'You'd never meet a nicer guy. You never had a bad word for somebody.' And a lot of times, that stuff's just lip service," said WSVA news director Karl Magenhofer, who knew Phipps since 1999 and called hundreds of games with him. "But that was Bill. Bill was all the cliché things. That's an incredible thing to be able to say about somebody. All of the nice things that people are saying, it's true."

And as well-known as Phipps was throughout the Shenandoah Valley, he had an unassuming and down-to-earth personality, Magenhofer said. Magenhofer also pointed to the various "families" Phipps had. Aside from his biological family, Phipps had "families" at BC, Clover Hill, the radio station and Bridgewater Little League. "Bill was able to integrate himself into so many different things and that's just what he did," Magenhofer said. "He did so many things out in the public, and not standing on a street corner saying, 'I'm Bill Phipps. I'm great.' It was taking part in all these different events and becoming part of some of these events."

Chris Dodson, Spotswood High School's girls basketball coach and a former Bridgewater football player, said Phipps was someone he always looked forward to seeing at games because of his "inviting" and "gracious" personality.

Dodson said Phipps' biggest contribution was relaying the action of games to families of the players. Dodson said players would greet Phipps at games, even years after they graduated, to thank him for his work.

He said Phipps' legacy will be the memories he created calling ballgames.

"That'll last forever in families' memories," Dodson said. "I think sometimes that's a realm that we don't even think of in the athletic world. He's told that story so many times for so many people. He's a storyteller."

The community also demonstrated its support for Phipps with a fundraiser held by Clover Hill in early August to assist Phipps with medical expenses.

In June 2014, he underwent a full-scale craniotomy to remove a brain tumor and returned to work just over two weeks later. He took a turn for the worse this summer.

In both instances, Phipps maintained an optimistic outlook.

Magenhofer said that before the operation in 2014, Phipps matter-of-factly planned his return to work. And when Phipps and Magenhofer last spoke about two weeks ago, Phipps believed he had 12 to 18 months "left in the tank," Magenhofer said. "I don't know if I've ever seen someone take a more positive fight against cancer," he said. "Bill was a best-case scenario kind of guy and that's how he approached this and that's probably why, after his first diagnosis, he was with us two years later."

Phipps was born in Illinois in 1951 and moved to the Atlanta area when he was 7, leading to a lifetime affection for the Atlanta Braves. He attended Georgia State for two years as an undergraduate student, but then left to take a broadcasting job in Tennessee, his first.

His career brought him to various roles in North Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama before his then-wife was transferred to Harrisonburg in 1993. Phipps started calling Eagles games in 1995.

Phipps was a longtime member of WSVA before moving to WSIG in recent years.

Clark described Phipps as an “always professional” broadcaster who wouldn’t hesitate to respectfully deliver his true opinion. And there were plenty of times, Clark said, where Phipps knew an opposing player’s name that Clark didn’t know.

“There’s never a time you felt you were sitting down with somebody who hadn’t done their homework,” he said. “That’s just how he operated.”

And natural ability guided Phipps in the flow of the game, Magenhofer said.

Phipps had a knack for finding little things — be it an exchange at the scorer’s table, or a comical conversation on the bench — that enlightened listeners to more than just “time and score,” Magenhofer said.

“[Broadcaster] Micah [Morris] and I were talking about how many times during a broadcast Bill would just chuckle, and then he would let you in on what he saw,” he said. “To actually broadcast the game and to bring people into it and connect them to it, you have to be able to see all those little things and Bill could see them.”

RCBL Commissioner Mike Bocock said Phipps was simply “a good man” who had a passion for his career.

Magenhofer joked that Clover Hill games were probably where Phipps would be, even if he wasn’t behind the microphone.

“It was fun to come to the ballpark with Bill Phipps,” said Bocock, who also broadcasts high school games. “You liked to have Bill Phipps there announcing your games. He was part of the RCBL and the RCBL will sadly miss him.”

Former Clover Hill star Addison Bowman, who retired after the 2015 season, characterized Phipps as “genuine” and someone the Bucks’ players shared enjoyable conversations with — rarely about baseball — before and after games.

“You could count on him being there more than you could some players,” Bowman said with a laugh. “His voice, to me, was one of a kind. His voice, that was like home to us hearing him on the loudspeaker.”

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— MIKE BOCOCK

RCBL COMMISSIONER

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