

The Man Behind the Mic

In an era where steroid investigations and controversy overlook the beauty, history and poetic nature of the National Pastime, there are few individuals that play the game as if it were its glory years, the 1960s and 70s.

However, one man has never thrown a perfect game, never has stolen a base, nor has he ever sent a 3-2 pitch over the left field wall. He has never made an error nor has he ever been on the disabled list. You can count on him for 162 games a season, though his offensive production may be lacking and his defense isn't any better.

This man is Vincent Edward Scully, now in his 56th year as the play-by-play man for the Los Angeles Dodgers. "Vin" demonstrates every reason why athletics at every level are so special – passion, trust, perseverance and the stories that supplement the games.

Scully was born to Irish immigrant parents on Nov. 29, 1927 in Bronx, New York. His father, a silk salesman, died when Vin was a boy. The family lived in Washington Heights, where they lived in a fifth-floor walk-up. He has described his family's living situation as "not poverty-stricken, just poor." Childhood means more to Vin than anything, evident by the legends and stories that he poetically shares on the air about the "youngster days," as he says. As an eight year old boy, Vin knew where his career was headed. "I was about 8 years old and we had an old radio on four legs with crossed bars between the legs and I would come home to listen to a football game -- there weren't other sports on -- and I would get a pillow and I would crawl under the radio, so

that the loudspeaker and the roar of the crowd would wash all over me, and I would just get goose bumps like you can't believe. And I knew that of all the things in this world that I wanted, I wanted to be that fella saying, whatever, home run, or touchdown. It just really got to me." ¹ Little did he know that one day he would be the one sending those goose bumps throughout America, nor did he imagine that he would someday propel waves of solace and joy to so many people.

Vin attended Fordham University, where he was involved in music, played centerfield on the baseball team, and also helped form the school's FM radio station. Upon realization that his future would not yield to playing in the big leagues, he pursued the next best thing, driven by a simple love for the game. After graduation he attempted to pursue a career in broadcast journalism and sent 150 letters to a variety of stations on the east coast. However, he only heard back from one, a CBS radio affiliate in Washington D.C. There he was trained by legend Red Barber, who was the Brooklyn Dodgers main commentator. Eventually, Scully joined Barber as a fill-in. It was Barber who conveyed to Vin the role of the broadcaster – to simply convey what happens on the ball field and not to bring personal opinion into the booth.¹

In an era where baseball commentators act as cheerleaders, using “we” to describe the team they cover, Vin remains neutral in his calls. In fact, in 56 years, there has been only one time in which he used “we” instead of “the Dodgers” on the air², when the Dodgers won the pennant in 1959. “We go to Chicago!” Scully exclaimed, speaking

¹ Gary, Kaufman. "Brilliant Careers: Vin Scully." Salon. 19 Oct. 1999. 18 Apr. 2006 <<http://www.salon.com/people/bc/1999/10/12/scully/>>

² "Quotations from Vin Scully." Baseball Almanac. 18 Apr. 2006 <http://www.baseballalmanac.com/quotes/vin_scully_quotes.shtml>

clearly and enthused, but in control, as his voice transmitted along radio waves all across America.

The neutrality for Vin is a result of his simple adoration for the game of baseball, an idea that often goes by the wayside in an era where salaries have become a larger focus than playing hard on the ball field. “I remember when I first got the job,” Scully recalled. “I was just a kid, a street kid. And here I was broadcasting the Brooklyn Dodgers!” After 55 years complete, his enthusiasm is still propelled every single night. The relationship doesn’t simply rely on the fact that Vin loves baseball the way his listeners typically do. It is more than this – the sound of a genuine gentleman, full of joy and comfort.³

As a society, we turn to sports as a vehicle to escape the predicaments of life, perhaps after a death in the family or in the midst of relationship struggles. Vin always has had a certain touch, a special way of conveying to his listeners that baseball could provide an escape from life’s struggles. You could always *trust* Vin. Never would a listener be weary of the happenings on the field. You are by all means *there*. Every time Vin exclaims, “It’s playable!”⁴ we know that that ball is not leaving the ballpark. His welcoming, warm voice feels as though he is speaking directly to you. He begins every Dodger broadcast begins with, “Hi again, everybody, and a very pleasant good evening to you, wherever you may be.” How can you not feel better after hearing that?

And then there is the storyteller in Vin. Not only is his voice so inviting, warm and full of passion, but it is the way he portrays what is happening on the ball field.

³ Neel, Eric. "Growing Up With Vin Scully." The Baseball Analysts. 18 Apr. 2006 <http://www.baseball-almanac.com/quotes/vin_scully_quotes.shtml>.

⁴ Murray, Jim. "His Touch Made Dodgers Special." Jim Murray: The Last of the Best. Ed. Bill Dwyre, Mike James, Steve Horn. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times, 1998. 35-41.

Sports would not have that lasting effect if it weren't for the excitement and exhilaration of those climatic moments. Vin not only portrays those specific, typical special instances, but routinely captivates the most standard of plays. Commentating on Tom Glavine's performance in the latter innings of a game in 2000, Vin said, "He's like a tailor; a little off here, a little off there & you're done, take a seat!" The smallest details and gestures are always commented on. These details are often ignored today, although they are so important in understanding the poetry and value that baseball, and sports in general, bring to peoples' lives.

Vin was the man who described Dodger great Sandy Koufax's 1965 perfect game. Scully did not get caught in the moment, but described it to perfection, using metaphors that no one had ever thought could be applied to baseball. "Koufax lifted his cap, ran his fingers through his black hair, then pulled the cap back down, fussing at the bill. Krug must feel it, too, as he backs out, heaves a sigh, took off his helmet, put it back on and steps back up to the plate," he said.⁵

At this point, we learn the professions of the batter's parents, how Koufax and the batter somehow crossed paths five years before, what the batter likes to read, what his childhood dreams were, or his typical morning routine. One of the few downsides of professional sports is that it is difficult to relate to our heroes. However, Vin solves this real quick; whenever the mic is in his hands, the stars become known beyond the surface.

Another interesting aspect of this broadcast came in the way Scully chose to say the time every minute in the ninth inning as the game reached its climax. As an ordinary listener, one may assume Scully was doing this for dramatic purposes, but his

⁵ Vince, Scully. "Sandy Koufax 1965 Perfect Game." Dodger Radio Network, Los Angeles. 12 Oct 1999. Transcript. 18 Apr 2006 <http://www.salon.com/people/feature/1999/10/12/scully_koufax/>.

motivations were far from this. "I put the date on the broadcast so when he would play the game 30 years from now for his grandchildren, he will hear that on July so-and-so that his grandfather pitched a gem," Scully explained. "Now I've done that three times for Sandy Koufax. As we were coming to the ninth inning, I wasn't so wrapped up in the perfect game and all that drama. I asked myself, 'What could I do to make this a little extra special in case Sandy does it?' My only motivation was that I thought it'd be fun for Sandy to have down the road. When the game ended, everyone talked about how dramatic it was that I was giving it time, thinking that I had this great sense of theatre. All the while I was just trying to give Sandy a little something extra for the tape."⁶ A huge part of baseball and sports in general is the history and which athlete did what when and where. Sports fans love to recollect old timers and special moments. This is only one example that demonstrates that Vin understands this.

Any youngster should make an attempt to listen to Vin, at least once. Too many times do young athletes, in any sport, become consumed with the concept of winning. Vin's objectiveness not only is keener to the ear than listening in to a "homer," but it symbolizes that winning should not be the primary focus in sports, even at the professional level. The little things are what matter, the making of a "sensational" or "dazzling" play as Vin says, or the roar of the crowd. One of Scully's most valuable tools is how he utilizes crowd noise and the excitement and passion that satiates a stadium.

Another widely remembered call from Vin came in the 1988 World Series when hobbled Kirk Gibson came off the bench to deliver a walk-off home run off Hall of

⁶ McMillin, Rob. "A Love Offering: Vin Scully Calls The Koufax Perfect Game ." [6-4-2: an angels/dodgers double play blog](http://6-4-2.blogspot.com/2005/02/love-offering-vin-scully-calls-koufax.html#comments). 17 2005. 19 Apr. 2006 <<http://6-4-2.blogspot.com/2005/02/love-offering-vin-scully-calls-koufax.html#comments>>.

Famer Dennis Eckersly. "High fly ball into deep right field. She is... gone!" Vin proceeded to pause for a good thirty seconds to allow the moment to reach its emotional climax. He simply let dead air be the crowd noise and speak for itself. These moments are what sports are all about. "In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened," he said, captivating one of the most memorable moments in sports history.

In an era where salaries and constant adversity overshadow the history of the game and its heroes, you would never know it listening to Vin. After he established himself as great as soon as three years after his inauguration as Dodger broadcaster, the offers piled up on Vin's desk from other organizations. The Dodger radio and television networks have been engaged in constant battle with the team, but this never has fazed Vin. He has been back each night of every season, and although he wouldn't admit it, will always be driven deep in the hearts of millions of listeners.