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THE SPOKEN WORD OF TELEVISION SPORTS BROADCASTER
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ABSTRACT

The world of sports broadcasting is being transformed by an interesting trend. This trend, which allows professional athletes to retire from the field of play and to then reestablish themselves in the athletic world by becoming broadcast journalists, is already prevalent within the industry and it is only growing in popularity.

Vai Sikahema, a former athlete and a current broadcaster, has experienced the trend. He was a player in the National Football League for eight seasons and he has been a sports anchor at NBC 10 in Philadelphia for nearly twenty years. He has lived two occupations separately and simultaneously and he feels that he has benefitted from the combination of the two professions.

The following thesis revisits the life of Vai Sikahema. It highlights the personal events that succeeded in shaping his professional careers and it examines his thoughts and his opinions regarding the choices that he has made and the actions that he has taken as an athlete and as a broadcaster. The information presented in this thesis is based on a personal interview with Sikahema that occurred on January 3, 2012 at the NBC 10 Philadelphia station. It is further supported by additional research surrounding the history of professional sports and the emergence of professional athletes as professional broadcasters.

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Introduction

“I have had two jobs in my life. I played football, and I have been a sports anchor. That is it. I do not have much job experience outside of catching punts and doing sports on television so I am very fortunate.”

Vai Sikahema

When you leap out of your seat to catch a foul ball or when you scream uncontrollably after an interception, you are immersed in the world of sports. When you agree with an analyst’s pregame predictions and when you disagree with an analyst’s postgame explanations, you are immersed in the world of sports. When you are able to identify a television personality based on his previous occupation as a professional athlete, you are immersed in the “modern” world of sports.

A prominent trend that is present in the athletic world features the transition that more and more athletes like Vai Sikahema are making from the playing field to the broadcasting booth. These players include former baseball players Joe Morgan, Orel Hershiser, and Curt Schilling, former football players Howie Long, Dan Marino, and Shannon Sharpe, former basketball players Earvin “Magic” Johnson, Charles Barkley, and Shaquille O’Neal, and former ice hockey players Chico Resch, Steve Shutt, and Craig Simpson. How did the trend begin and why is it significant to the broadcast media and the viewers? Is the overall practice beneficial for sports journalism?

Vai Sikahema is a former collegiate and professional football player, and he is now a sports broadcaster for NBC 10 in Philadelphia. He played football at Brigham Young University, and, after a record-setting senior season, he was drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals. He played in the league for eight years, and he played for three different

teams, the Cardinals, the Green Bay Packers, and the Philadelphia Eagles. He retired from football in the city of Philadelphia, and he never left it. Sikahema has been working for NBC 10 in Philadelphia as a sports anchor for nearly two decades.

The words of Sikahema, which were obtained from an oral history interview, will serve as a guide to understanding the modernization of the athletic world. They will serve to isolate the prevalence of the trend and to dissect it from the inside. Sikahema's words will highlight his tale of success in two occupations. First, he was a professional football player. Now, he is a professional television broadcaster. However, before the life of Vai Sikahema can be relived, the origin of American sports journalism must be examined.

A Brief History of Sports Journalism

Although the first written reference to sports in the American colonies was in 1611, the formation of organized sports in America did not fully develop until the early 1800s (Franck and Brownstone 268). The most popular sport was horse racing. In 1831, a New York horseman, William Trotter Porter, created a new weekly magazine entitled *The Spirit of the Times*. His magazine emphasized the importance of order and efficiency in horse racing, and it ultimately succeeded in having a major impact on the sport (Davies 22-23).

In 1845, Alexander Jay Cartwright established the first formal baseball club in America, and he solidified the rules for the game that has been labeled "America's sport." The initial team, the New York Knickerbockers, adopted Cartwright's rules, but they also added some of their own rules to promote good sportsmanship (Davies 39). In 1857, the National Association of Base Ball Players, which was composed of 14 baseball clubs,

was created. Harry Wright assembled the first all-professional baseball team in Cincinnati in 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings (Davies 45). He became the manager of the Red Stockings, and he led them to an undefeated season in their first year as a professional baseball team. Wright and the Red Stockings set an example for the other baseball clubs, and, in 1876, the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs emerged. The National League still exists in Major League Baseball today.

The sport of football began at the collegiate level in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1869. Rutgers University and Princeton University played against each other in a game that most closely resembled American soccer. However, it evolved in 1874 to include more aspects of rugby and then again in 1891 to include two distinctive elements of the game today, the eleven-man team and the scrimmage line. These elements were incorporated into the sport by “the father of American football,” Walter Camp (Brasch 159-160). Camp, who was the informal director of athletics at Yale University, “spearheaded the transformation of English-style rugby into the uniquely American game of football in which the players become pawns controlled by the coach. It was Camp’s influence that essentially made American football more of a coach’s game than a player’s game” (Davies 67). The game was contagious, spreading from college to college and from coast to coast in the 1890s. It was attracting the attention of both students and adults, and it was also being closely followed by the media.

In 1892, William “Pudge” Heffelfinger, a former all-American football player at Yale, was paid \$500 to play for the Allegheny Athletic Association in a game against the Pittsburgh Athletic Club. He became the first professional football player in the history of the game (Carruth and Ehrlich 51-52). In 1920, the first professional league was born,

and it transformed into the National Football League. The American Football League was developed 40 years later.

The development of professional football in America coincided with the development of radio in America. The radio industry, which was not considered to be a dominant force in the media until the 1920s, was brought to life by the compelling nature of American sports. In the fall of 1920, a station located in Detroit, Michigan, WWJ, broadcast the results of the heavyweight fight between Jack Dempsey and Billy Miske. WWJ also broadcast the score of the World Series less than one month later (Covil).

On April 11, 1921, a newly developed Pittsburgh radio station, KDKA, broadcast the boxing match between Johnny Ray and Johnny Dundee on its airwaves. It was the first live sporting event to be broadcast over the radio in the United States (“Anniversary”). The radio industry had accomplished an incredible feat but the feat was questioned by the American people because, prior to the broadcast, the technology that was associated with the radio industry had been extremely unimpressive. According to an online article written by Eric C. Covil, “The original technology did not allow for live broadcasting to occur from the site of the athletic event. The radio station operators had to rely on reports and scores of games to be either telephoned or telegraphed to them after the conclusion of the games.” The sports that were typically broadcast on the radio were professional boxing, major league baseball, and collegiate football.

On May 17, 1939, the era of televised sports in America began. The American people were able to watch a sporting event, the baseball game between Columbia University and Princeton University, from their homes. It was the first time an American sporting event had been televised. W2XBX, the station that had broadcast the event, also

aired the first professional baseball game, the first collegiate football game and the first professional football game during the year (Davies 229-230). The ability to display athletic events on television was a great accomplishment but it was not initially appreciated. The majority of American homes did not have television sets. “In 1948, less than 200,000 homes had television sets. By 1950, the number had grown to almost four million. And by the end of the 50s, more than 40 million American households had a television set (Schultz, “Sports Broadcasting” 9). The timing was ideal and the market for televised sporting events took advantage of it. A plethora of opportunities presented themselves to the networks in the 1960s. The three major television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, became more and more competitive, and, as a result, the quality of the sports coverage was significantly enhanced (Gratton and Solberg 2).

The radio industry focused on the college football games in the 1920s, but the television industry would instead choose to place its initial focus on the professional football games. The American Football League, which was developed in 1960, was eventually forced to merge with the previously established National Football League. However, the merger of the two leagues did not completely dispel the division (Bolding). It ultimately enabled the contest between the best National Football Conference team and the best American Football Conference team to occur once every year on the television screen. This highly anticipated contest is called the Super Bowl and it dominates the world’s television ratings annually. The most recent Super Bowl between the New York Giants and the New England Patriots was attended by more than 500 journalists, it was delivered to nearly 200 countries, and it was shown in 25 different languages (Brewer).

The Senior Vice President of Insights, Analysis and Policy at Nielsen Wire, Patricia McDonough, discussed how Super Bowl XLV, which occurred in 2011, was the finale of an incredibly successful football season. “The number of people watching NFL games has never been higher, with 24% more people watching the average NFL game this year than just five years ago. The Super Bowl continues to be in a category of its own, with an appeal that transcends sports and extends even to the commercials. Because of the cliff-hanger nature of the game, viewers were tuning in until the very end, driving viewing levels to new heights” (“Super Bowl XLV”). The 2011 Super Bowl was watched in 53.5 million households, and it had an average audience of 111 million viewers. It surpassed the 2010 Super Bowl by 4,500 viewers to become the most watched television program of all time in the United States. According to the Nielsen Wire, the past four Super Bowls are among the top five most watched telecasts in the history of television in the United States. The American people clearly enjoy their televised sporting events.

On April 29, 1961, a new television show dedicated to sports aired on ABC. It was called the *Wide World of Sports*, and, although it was only intended to air during the summer, it continued to be produced because it became extremely popular. Pioneered by Roone Arledge, the show provided viewers with a unique coverage of sports, including international sports. *Wide World of Sports* covered everything from figure skating and skiing competitions to lumberjack and cliff diving championships. The viewers were noticeably enthralled by it.

In a Sports Illustrated article published on May 27, 1991, Richard Hoffer offered his readers a refined answer to the questions surrounding the success of ABC’s *Wide*

World of Sports. He wrote, “Over three decades *Wide World of Sports* has secured its legend in sports television with innovation, excellence and a surprising, and probably unnecessary, elegance.” Hoffer targets the word “elegance” and it appears to be targeted because it relates to presentation of two sportscasters, Jim McKay and Bill Flemming. McKay, who truly thrived in his profession, shared a special relationship with Arledge. “The thought was, and from the beginning we were thinking exactly alike, that if these sports could be one of the most important things in the lives of a certain group of people, we should be able to make them interesting for 20 minutes on a Saturday afternoon” (Hoffer). Roone Arledge, Jim McKay, and Bill Flemming did make sports interesting in the summer of 1961 and they continued to do so until *Wide World of Sports* was removed from the air on January 3, 1998 (“ABC’s Wide World of Sports”).

In the meantime, ESPN was establishing itself in the field of televised sports journalism. ESPN, the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, was the brainchild of Bill Rasmussen and his son, Scott Rasmussen. On August 16, 1978, while they were driving from Connecticut to New Jersey, Rasmussen and his son devised a plan for the first all-sport network (Miller and Shales, 9). Bill said, “In one single day we decided that we would do sports twenty-four hours a day, have a half-hour sports show at 6:30 every night, which would be the sports center, that we would go out and hire sportscasters, and buy a fleet of trucks that would roam the nation covering sporting events” (Miller and Shales, 10).

The 13-month period that fell between August 1978 and September 1979 was a period of rapid development for the network. The establishment needed to be built, the available positions needed to be filled, and the content needed to be created. These three

aspects, which are obviously crucial to the success of a television network, demanded immediate attention. The construction of the ESPN facility occurred in Bristol, Connecticut, and it was funded by money derived from agreements with Getty Oil and Anheuser-Busch. Jim Simpson, George Grande, Bob Ley, Lee Leonard, and Chris Berman became the faces of ESPN, and they were able to position the content of the network in the right direction.

Jim Simpson, who previously announced games for NBC, was drawn to ESPN by a three-year, \$1 million deal. “ESPN needed an A-level announcer” and ESPN wanted Simpson to fill the role (Miller and Shales, 35). George Grande was working for the local CBS affiliate, WCBS, in New York when he was contacted by ESPN. They asked him if he was interested in anchoring in place of Simpson on the opening weekend. Simpson was not going to be available yet, and they needed a temporary replacement. After he received permission from CBS, Grande agreed to the proposal (Miller and Shales, 38). However, his “temporary” stint evolved into a full-time position. Grande eventually left CBS for ESPN. Graduating from Seton Hall in 1976 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in communications, Bob Ley was hired by ESPN when he was only 24 years of age. He is still a member of the broadcasting team at ESPN today. Lee Leonard was involved in both radio and television prior to joining ESPN. He was initially concerned with the current state of ESPN, but he willingly made the transition from NBC Sports to the new operation. The final member of the initial group, Chris Berman, has been with ESPN since the beginning. Born and raised in Connecticut, Berman majored in history at Brown University. “I majored in history because I knew that’s what I wanted to learn,” Berman said. “That didn’t change the fact that I knew what I wanted to do” (Miller and

Shales, 40). Berman wanted to “do” sports. He wanted to be a sports broadcaster and he was given an opportunity to follow his dream at ESPN.

On September 7, 1979, “The Worldwide Leader in Sports” made its television debut. Leonard and Grande were the first two faces of ESPN and Leonard spoke the very first words of ESPN. He said, “If you love sports, if you REALLY love sports, you’ll think you’ve died and gone to sports heaven” (Miller and Shales, 44).

Today, ESPN is the most powerful and prominent name in sports media. (Smith, XIV). It has grown tremendously over the years. ESPN’s channels have multiplied fourfold, and they have also gone international. They are now available in more than 200 countries (Smith, XIV). The growth of ESPN is attributed to its revolutionary and continuous display of sports and to the individuals who are responsible for it. In his book entitled *ESPN The Company: The Story and Lessons Behind the Most Fanatical Brand in Sports*, Anthony F. Smith describes the individuals who have contributed to the development of ESPN. He writes, “Being a fan – being a fanatic – may set you apart from your families, your loved ones, even your spouse, but it puts you into select company with other fans. You know how the others think, you feel sports in the same way, you get it, and you want it all the time” (XXIII).

The sports fanatics are drawn to ESPN because they are fascinated by the athletic games and, once they arrive at the network, they are often unable to leave it. Ley and Berman, two of the first people hired to be anchors at ESPN, are still anchoring at ESPN today. Their love for sports has enabled them to thrive in the field of sports broadcasting. However, their love is derived from the perspective of a viewer. They grew up listening to sports on the radio and watching sports on television but neither Ley nor Berman

experienced sports at the professional level. They never played in a professional league, and, although this is not a detriment to them, it is becoming less and less common.

ESPN has used former athletes extensively for its various shows but the network was not the first network to do it. The practice began on the radio in 1932. John Galdstone Graney, better known as Jack, was a former major league baseball player for the Cleveland Indians. In 1908, he began his 14-year career as a pitcher, but he achieved a greater amount of success as a left fielder. Graney was positioned first in the Indians' batting order and, although he was never an outstanding player, he sustained a solid major league career (Popelka). He retired from the field of play in 1922 but he reunited with Major League Baseball as a broadcaster for WHK radio in 1932. Graney was the first individual to make the transition from a professional athlete to a broadcaster and he did it with ease. "Possessing a crisp, stirring delivery, Graney was a master at setting the scene and his enthusiasm packed a sense of built-in drama. His ability to re-create a game from just a telegraphic report has never been paralleled" (Patterson).

Graney's talent for broadcasting was undeniable but it seemed to be strengthened by his love for the game and by his experience within it. When he spoke, he often used the phrase "my whole life" interchangeably with the term "baseball" (Patterson). However, "baseball broadcasting provided a new lease on life for [him] and he was always to say that broadcasting was the next best thing to playing" (Patterson).

Graney's opinion is shared by the large majority of retired professional athletes who have also been involved in the field of journalism. If they must end their career as a player, they are eager to start their career as a journalist. They want to continue to be involved in the world of sports and they have found a path that allows them to do it.

Red Grange is believed to have started the phenomenon in the television industry (Hedrick 173). In the late 1940s, following a successful collegiate and professional football career at the University of Illinois and with the Chicago Bears, Grange embarked on a new career as a television broadcaster. Initially, he announced games for his former team, the Chicago Bears, but he eventually joined NBC-TV. He became their color commentator for the college football game of the week. Grange was the perfect man for the job. He had brought the National Football League to life by his performance on the field and he did it again after retirement by his performance on the television screen (“Red Grange”).

The former professional athletes, although they may possess an extremely extensive amount of sports information, always try to provide commentary from the perspective of a common individual. They obviously know more about the game because they used to play the game professionally, but they do not allow their insider information to undermine their relationship with the viewers. “I always tried to give the fans an honest account,” said Graney. “It was a tremendous responsibility and at all times I kept in mind the fact that I was the eyes of the radio audience. I was like an artist trying to paint a picture. I never tried to predict or second-guess even though I had played the game. I just tried to do my best and I hope that my best was good enough” (Patterson). Graney’s words reveal his dedication. He was dedicated to his job as a player and to his job as an announcer, and the essence of dedication that he exuded is present in the work of the individuals who have followed in his footsteps.

The professional athletes, who have become sports broadcasters in the television industry, have created a well-trodden path since the 1930s. It had become increasingly

popular for athletes to transition into this industry, and, although it is an exciting industry, the on-air portion of it is demanding. According to Schultz, the author of *Sports Media: Reporting, Producing and Planning*, “anchoring is probably the single most important element of the entire process. Certainly, the other elements are important, but it takes good anchoring and good delivery to bring out the best in writing and photography. A good sports anchor ties all the other elements together and communicates them in an interesting and entertaining way. It is five or so minutes that will make or break your sportscast and, in some cases, an entire career” (123). Vai Sikahema, following his retirement from the National Football League, created an additional career for himself as a television sports anchor.

The Early Life of Vai Sikahema

Sikahema, who was born in Tonga, a remote island located in the South Pacific Ocean, followed his parents to the United States of America when he was seven years old. They had previously immigrated to the United States so that they could earn money to support the relocation of their entire family. “[My parents] worked to save enough money, and then they sent for me after one year,” Sikahema said. “It took them another two and a half years before they made enough money to send for my younger siblings.”

Although Sikahema and his family dealt with a period of separation, they were eventually reunited in the United States. They had made the transition from thatch huts and dirt floors in Tonga to cheap apartments and government-subsidized housing in Arizona but they were content. They were pleased with their new life and they were eager to prosper in it. “One of the reasons why we immigrated,” said Sikahema, “was

because my father wanted me to be a boxer. He had been a fighter and he was training me to box. He thought that that is how we would make our living.”

Sikahema proved to be a very talented boxer at a very young age but, when he entered high school, his attention was captured by a different sport. “I grew up being pushed into sports, into boxing specifically. I was good at it but football ultimately drew me away from boxing. I loved football because it was the first team sport that I had ever played.”

Sikahema went to Mesa High School, a large public school located in Mesa, Arizona. He played football for Mesa and, although he had never played before high school, he quickly excelled at it. He also developed a passion for it. The dynamic combination of talent and interest gave Sikahema a glimpse of the possibilities that lay ahead.

“It was not until I got to high school that I started playing football and I realized the opportunities that I had to go play at another level. Ultimately, if you played well enough, you could go pro and you could play for money. It was something I wanted to do and I hoped that I would be able to do it. I was very lucky that I did.”

Sikahema was a dominant player on the football team. Although he performed exceptionally on the field, he performed poorly in the classroom. His high school consistently excelled in football and wrestling and, as a result, the football players and the wrestlers received special treatment with regards to their academics.

“My high school was a powerhouse in two sports, football and wrestling, so typically, what they did was, as soon as they identified a kid who was a football player or

a wrestler, they immediately seized that kid's classes so you no longer did your own registration. The coaching staff would do it," he said.

The coaching staff adopted the additional responsibility of choosing their players' classes and organizing their players' schedules for one specific reason; they wanted to select their players' teachers. Sikahema did not understand the motives behind the process at the time but he is aware of them now.

"The reason why they did this was so they could assure that you were placed in classes where assistant coaches taught," he said. "My Arizona history teacher was the offensive line coach. My economics teacher was a JV football coach. My algebra class was taught by a baseball coach. The idea was that an athlete should be in classes that were taught by coaches so they could monitor you. They would let you slide, at least they let me and a bunch of other kids slide. If you were not quite ready for a test that was scheduled for Tuesday, they might let you take the test on Thursday or, if a test was on Friday, they would let you take the test on Monday. They would give you the weekend and then they would give you extra help over the weekend because they wanted to make sure that you were eligible to play on Friday night."

Sikahema admits that it was a "huge disservice" to him. "Obviously, I took advantage of it," he said. Sikahema floated through the academic portion of his high school career with ease but he did encounter one obstacle in Barbara Neilson's class. Neilson, who was a friend of Sikahema's mother, taught English at Mesa High School.

"When I got to college, the only class that I had in high school where a teacher made me work was Barbara Neilson's class," Sikahema said. "She made sure that I was enrolled in her class, in her English class, so I learned how to write. I remember fighting

her on why I had to apply for a school newspaper job because, by then, I was a big high school star and the kids that were on the school newspaper wanted to interview me. I thought that I was a big deal. I said that I did not need to write stories about others...”

Neilson encouraged Sikahema to apply for a position as a reporter and, when he was selected for the position, she forced him to pursue it. She knew that it would benefit him in the future. “She said that taking this class may be the difference between going to a Notre Dame or a USC or a private school and between going to a junior college or another school that is not as prestigious,” he said.

Sikahema ultimately choose to attend Brigham Young University on a football scholarship. He enrolled as a freshman in the fall of 1980, and, after two years, he left BYU to serve as a Mormon missionary in South Dakota. He served as a missionary in South Dakota for two years and then returned to BYU in the fall of 1984 to continue his collegiate football career. He considered majoring in an area that would enable him to become a sports information director, but he was hindered by his past experiences. He was not challenged academically in high school and, as a result, he was unable to cope with the academic obstacles that he faced at the collegiate level.

“I wanted to work in sports information because it would marry together sports and my writing,” he said. “The problem was that my grades were terrible coming out of high school so I was not well prepared in the other core classes to win a spot in the broadcast journalism classes.”

Sikahema’s inability to enter into his major of interest left him without a major, without a focus, in college. He said, “I essentially went through college without ever majoring in anything.”

Although Sikahema could not pursue his interest in broadcasting at Brigham Young University, he was able to pursue his interest in football. Sikahema played halfback and he was a return specialist for the Brigham Young Cougars. In 1984, BYU defeated the University of Michigan Wolverines 24-17 in the Holiday Bowl to win the national championship. In the 1986 NFL Draft, the St. Louis Cardinals selected Sikahema in the 10th round. He was chosen as the 254th pick overall.

The St. Louis Cardinals were a struggling franchise when Sikahema was drafted by them. The team finished in last place in the league for two consecutive years prior to Sikahema's rookie season. In 1987, the Cardinals recorded another losing record and their owner, Bill Bidwell, decided to move the team to Phoenix in 1988. The move proved to be a blessing in disguise for Sikahema and his career in sports broadcasting.

Sikahema's Career in Television

Sikahema wanted to become involved in the television industry and, when he moved to Phoenix with the Cardinals, he was presented with an unlimited number of opportunities. The city of Phoenix had been given its own professional football team and they had been given Sikahema. The media coveted this combination. They wanted access to the team and they wanted access to the players.

"I was a local kid, who grew up and went to high school there," Sikahema said. "I left the state to go to college but it had only been four or five years since I had been out of high school and I was back in town with the local professional football team that just moved into town. It was a big deal. Everybody, every TV station, was looking to land some players for shows. The coach had a show. The quarterback had a show. I was not a marquee player on the team but I had done enough TV work and I was a local kid and I

was interested in doing it. Some guys just don't have any interest. I was given the chance and I maximized the opportunities that I was given. It worked out really well."

He was a professional football player and he was becoming a television personality. Sikahema was able to balance two difficult and time-consuming occupations simultaneously. He was able to merge two different career paths into one and he thoroughly enjoyed the entire experience.

"I learned everything that I could learn about television," Sikahema said. "It seemed that it was something that I could do if I applied myself and so I did. I immersed myself in it."

Sikahema, although he was a professional athlete, did not view himself as a superior individual. "I would stick around in the off-season, and I would act as an intern for the station," he said. "I knew that I needed to do this to learn the business in the event that I would ever get released from football." He wanted to ensure that he would be able to support himself if he was unsuccessful as a professional athlete in the National Football League.

The unknown motivated Sikahema, and the possibilities intrigued him so he acted to satisfy both senses. "I would go out and do fun pieces with my teammates," Sikahema said. "If a guy was buying a house, I would go show his house off or if a guy went and bought a car, I would follow him and see the new Mercedes. I would test drive it with him. It was kind of odd stuff like that that really gave me a new sense of what interested people. Sometimes it is the most mundane things that athletes do. It is fascinating for people to see that kind of stuff so I would try to provide things like that. In the process, I was gaining the experience."

The experience that Sikahema was gaining in the television industry was invaluable to him and he was aware of it. Consequently, he continued to use his resources to give himself more and more opportunities to practice and to grow as a television broadcaster. After he had been with the Phoenix station for approximately three years, Sikahema decided to ask his news director for a favor. He had an idea in mind and he wanted his news director's permission to pursue it.

"I begged the news director, knowing that I was out of the football office at one o'clock every Friday, to let me go do live shots at the high school game of the week," he said. "They had to commit the resources. They had to send a photographer and they had to send a satellite truck but they decided that they would do it."

In the television industry, a live shot is simply defined as an unrehearsed standup. However, it is not simple. It involves poise and precision. If you are the reporter, you are only given one chance to perform the live shot to the best of your ability. If you make a mistake, you must overlook it and continue to deliver the information that you had intended to deliver.

"Every week, I would be at a live shot location at the high school game of the week," Sikahema said. "I was terrible but it placed me in front of the camera, live television, where the anchors would throw to me and I would have to figure out what I was going to say." Sikahema conducted live shots weekly and he noticed the improvements in his performance. "It was really good practice and it was a good experience for me and frankly I got better," he said. "Over the course of the season, I got better and by the end of the year, I was pretty good."

Sikahema was growing as a reporter and his producers noticed it. They were impressed by his creativity and they appreciated his work ethic. Sikahema was doing his best to help them so they decided to do their best to help him. “Along the way, as I showed that I was somewhat enterprising, I was getting coached by the producers at the station... They could see that I would put out some effort in going out and doing these stories. They would send a field producer to come with me and then they would make suggestions and I would make suggestions,” Sikahema said. “So along the way, I was really getting a free education in broadcast journalism because I did not have it while I was in college.”

The Phoenix station provided Sikahema with a free education and a small salary. He had officially become a professional in two fields, the athletic field and the broadcasting field. “I was technically employed by the station that I did work for because they wanted to make sure that you were exclusive to them,” he said. “They wanted to make sure that you were not going to be doing stories for them and then pop up on the competing station next week.”

In the television industry, the stations located in the same area are constantly trying to attract a larger audience. Sikahema, who was committed to both the Phoenix Cardinals and the Phoenix television station, KSAZ-TV, from 1986 to 1990, helped the station to gain more viewership and he helped his team to be more successful on the field. He was selected to the Pro Bowl as a rookie and he was selected to the Pro Bowl again in his second year with the Cardinals.

In 1991, Sikahema was traded to the Green Bay Packers. He was eager to get onto the field but he was also eager to enter into the local television market in Green Bay,

Wisconsin. However, his transition into the Green Bay market would be substantially different than his transition into the Phoenix market. Sikahema now had a resume tape.

“I went to Green Bay and, when they signed me, I rolled into town with my resume tape,” Sikahema said. “After our first practice, I started my search. I would go out and I would get names from some of the local reporters that were there for their stations. I would drop into their stations to make an appointment with their news directors. I would pop in with my tape and tell them, ‘I have done some TV work in my previous NFL town. I would like to do some work for you. You do not have to pay me a lot of money because I make good money playing football but I am looking for experience.’ The local stations would say, ‘We would love to have you especially if you are not looking to make a lot of money.’ I would do the same thing everywhere I went.”

Sikahema worked as a sports reporter for WFRV-TV in Green Bay, Wisconsin for one year before leaving the Packers for the Eagles. In 1992, he joined the Philadelphia Eagles roster and, with the help of his teammate, Randall Cunningham, he also joined the television team at NBC 10 Philadelphia. Cunningham, the team’s quarterback and best-known player, had a show called *The Randall Cunningham Show*. It was a weekly, 30-minute show that featured a variety of celebrity guests, from Patti LaBelle to Boys to Men. Cunningham, who was aware of Sikahema’s interest in television, added a new segment to his show. It was called *Vai’s Guys*. “The idea was to have me gain access to my teammates outside of the locker room,” said Sikahema. “They were trying to get me to give them a behind the scenes look into the lives of my teammates and I gave it to them.” Cunningham produced an entertaining show and Sikahema, who was grateful to be involved in it, benefitted from it substantially.

The television work that Sikahema did with Cunningham combined with the previous work that he had done in St. Louis, Phoenix, and Green Bay helped him to gain recognition in the Philadelphia station. “When the weekend position opened up, channel 10 knew that I had been doing this in different markets so that is how I got hired,” he said. When he retired from the National Football League in 1994, Sikahema was hired to fill a full-time position at NBC 10. He began as a weekend reporter but he was promoted to the weekday position within two years.

The City of Brotherly Love

Philadelphia, which is the home of the Eagles, the Phillies, the Flyers, and the 76ers, is passionate about its sports teams. Sikahema, when describing the Philadelphia fans, said, “They live and die by their teams.” Unlike most retired professional athletes, Sikahema wanted to find a job within a local market rather than within a network. His family situation impacted his desire immensely. “I had a young family and I did not want to travel that much,” Sikahema said. “I did not want to be on the road. I did not want to be flying all over the country covering games. I wanted to be at the same place every night and to be able to get home every night so I pursued the local television angle opportunity.”

NBC 10 also gave him the opportunity to travel internationally. “There are not a lot of television jobs that send you to places unless you are a foreign correspondent and frankly, if you are ABC or CBS, you do not have the Olympics so you do not get to go international if you are a sports guy,” Sikahema said. “I do not know if the local sports guys have traveled internationally in their jobs but I have because NBC has the Olympics.”

Sikahema's tenure with NBC has given him the opportunity to cover six Olympics, four in the summer and two in the winter. He traveled to Atlanta, Sydney, Athens, and Beijing for the summer games and he traveled to Salt Lake City and Torino for the winter games. His most enjoyable Olympic experience was in China. "It was just fun to be in China," he said. "The Great Wall was the most amazing man-made structure that I have ever seen in my life. The culture is different. Beijing is not a place where people just go. It is not an easy place to get to, but it was interesting place to be in."

However, Sikahema was excited to cover the Olympics regardless of where they were being held. He said, "I loved all of them. It is great to get to go to the games and to get to watch the games. I get paid to be there to watch the games and to talk to the players and to the coaches afterwards. Those are the things that make a difference."

Sikahema's presence in the field of broadcast journalism, as well as the presence of other former professional athletes in the broadcasting booth, has had a significant impact on journalism field. Players are perceived to be experts in their sport because they have played it at the professional level. Sikahema understands this perception and he tries to uphold it.

"I will try to give the station and the viewers my best work," he said, "and I will try to do the best that I can and try to create value for the what we do." Sikahema strives to uphold positive relationships with other professional athletes because he understands them. He used to live their life. He used to be a professional athlete.

"I understand the nuances of football," admits Sikahema. "I think that anytime you compete at a high level in sports it helps you if you cover sports because you understand what goes into an athlete's preparation. I think they appreciate when

somebody, who understands those things, asks them a question. I absolutely think that it is helpful to be able to play the sport that you cover.”

Sikahema feels that the viewers automatically think that the former athletes are credible. They also understand that they are not seasoned journalists. “When you are a professional athlete and you are on TV, typically viewers are more forgiving of your mistakes” said Sikahema. “With a professional athlete, they are going to give you some breaks because, one, you are familiar to them and, two, they understand that you are a professional as an athlete.”

According to Sikahema, the viewers understand that the retired players are not experts in journalism. They understand that they are experts in their respective sports and they only hold them accountable for the specific sporting knowledge that they possess.

“If you can half way put sentences together and sound half way intelligent, they will know that you are actually credible. So you trade in your credibility. What you have as an athlete to bring to viewers is your credibility,” he said. “People are watching you so they think that you should know what you are talking about. However, you may not be as crisp and you may not be as sharp with your on air presentation as someone who had been trained to do this through high school and college.”

Sikahema had left Brigham Young University for the National Football League before he had earned enough credits to graduate. After working for NBC 10 in Philadelphia for nearly ten years, he decided to finish his degree and in 2002, he graduated from Brigham Young University with a degree in communications.

Criticism

Are former athletes qualified to have an occupation in the field of sports journalism purely because they had have careers in sports? Do former athletes, who enter into sports broadcasting, receive jobs that might also be coveted by equally or better-qualified journalists, who did not play sports at the collegiate or at the professional level? It can be argued that college students graduating with degrees in communications are more qualified for broadcasting jobs than former professional athletes. They may feel more comfortable speaking in front of the camera, they may be able to form a stronger connection with the audience, and they may be better versed in a wider range of subject areas.

A college student, who chooses to major in the field of journalism, will undoubtedly be exposed to a substantial amount of practical scenarios pertaining to journalism before entering into the professional world. A student majoring in print journalism will be assigned countless writing assignments that range from news pieces to athletic pieces, from feature stories to game stories, from short articles to lengthy articles. The assignments will be varied but they will help the student to prepare for the world that exists after college.

Similarly, if a student is majoring in broadcast journalism, he will be given the opportunity to practice the aspects of television that are prevalent in front of the camera as well as the aspects of televisions that are prevalent behind the camera. He will be exposed to the talent side and to the technological side and, although he will develop a favorite side, he will be forced to learn about both of them. The experience that he will gain at the collegiate level will help him substantially at the professional level. In his

book *Sports Media: Reporting, Producing and Planning*, Brad Schultz writes, “Most news directors want a mature, established presence on the anchor desk, which is especially difficult for sports broadcasters just starting out” (124). He suggests that a brand new face in the industry, whether it a recent college graduate or a recent professional athlete, will be too raw for the television screen as an anchor. However, the college graduate may have the advantage. He will most likely possess a resume tape that displays the previous broadcasting work that he has done in school and, if his work is outstanding, he will be hired. An athlete is usually not proficient in speaking in front of the camera. The interviews and the press conferences that he has done in the past are not comparable to anchoring a newscast or conducting a live standup. An athlete is at a disadvantage and, without the notoriety of his name, he will not be given the opportunity to present his broadcasting talents to a news director.

The television broadcasters, who graduated from college with degrees in journalism, may be able to connect with viewers better than the former professional athletes because they are more similar to the viewers. They understand the world of sports to the same degree that viewers understand the world of sports. If they possess an interesting piece of information, they will be able to present it to the viewers in a manner that is easily understood. Alternatively, a professional athlete has a more sophisticated perception of the world of sports. The information that is perfectly understood by a professional athlete may be too complex for a regular person. Tommy John, a former professional baseball pitcher, “realizes that he can become too technical for a listener or a viewer. ‘If you talk about the way to throw a curveball, people don’t care about that

stuff. My wife tells me to do more human interest, to show that ballplayers are human beings” (Hedrick 180).

The nature of the broadcast journalism requires individuals to know more and more about topics that do not directly pertain to athletics and, although college graduates may not be fully adept, they might possess an advantage over former collegiate and professional athletes. Additionally, they may have been warned about the changing nature of the business and they may have prepared themselves for it. Schultz warns students about the troubles that are associated with being solely proficient in athletics. He writes, “A typical college student interested in sports media probably has a tremendous knowledge of sports. He or she probably became a fan at a very young age, and perhaps played sports as well. But too many students make the mistake of thinking that a tremendous knowledge of sports will translate into good sports broadcasting. Without a doubt, sports broadcasters have to know about the sports they cover. But the sports media now encompass a wide variety of topics, including drugs, crime, race, politics, law, and religion” (“Sports Media” 75).

Women in the Field

Sikahema, when asked how the industry has changed from when he first entered it, immediately referenced the emergence of women in the field. “I think that that is the most drastic change,” he said. “There are some positions that only women hold now since the sideline reporter used to be manned literally by men and a lot of them were former athletes. Lynn Swann used to sideline report on Monday night football. Eric Dickerson did it for a while. John Dougherty used to do it for CBS. Now, those

positions, whether it is Monday night football or college football with Erin Andrews or Sunday night football with Michele Tafoya, are almost exclusively held by women.”

Brad Schultz discussed the emergence of women into sports media in his book, *Sports Media: Reporting, Producing and Planning*. “Up until the 1970s, women had virtually no presence in the sports media,” he wrote. “Sports were considered a ‘male’ domain – played, coached, watched, and reported on by men. Sports journalism was considered an exclusive male club, in which writers covered games by day and then hung out in bars with the ballplayers at night” (229). His description of the “male domain” is correct but it has changed and, according to Sikahema, it has changed in a positive manner.

“Women are a lot more involved in sports broadcasting. It is good, and it is a segment of the market that the networks are trying to tap,” he said. “There are also a lot more women who play sports now than there were thirty years ago when I was in high school. It makes a difference. Now, women do play the sports of some of the games and they understand it and that has had a huge impact on viewership.”

The involvement of women in high levels of sports, which is similar to the involvement of men in professional sports, seems to solidify them as credible sources in the eyes of the viewers. When women as athletes became more noticeable and more appreciated, the doors into the sports broadcasting field were left ajar for them. Schultz wrote about the presence of the first female broadcasters in the world of sports. “In 1975, Phyllis George broke through the barrier and became the first female sports figure on a national network when she began hosting *The NFL Today* on CBS. Just a few years later, Gayle Gardner occupied a high-profile anchor position on ESPN. And in 1990, Robin

Roberts became the first black woman to anchor at the network sports level when she also went to ESPN. ‘It’s something I’m proud of,’ says Roberts” (“Sports Media” 230).

Women entered into the industry with a vengeance and their opportunity came in the form of a gradual transition from the playing field to the broadcasting booth. They are now prominently seen on the sidelines of collegiate and professional football and basketball games and they appear to have permanently adopted the sideline reporter position. However, women are not being given these opportunities solely because of their playing experience. They are also being chosen because of their intelligence and because of their ability to perform well and to interview well in front of the camera. Tom Hedrick, the author of *The Art of Sportscasting: How to Build a Successful Career*, writes, “Slowly, eventually, the emergence of schooled journalists with honed on-air skills brought changes to the landscape of women sportscasters, too. Gayle Gardner at ESPN and Leslie Visser at CBS (and later ESPN) blazed a path for ‘real’ journalists, ‘real’ broadcasters, known not for their prowess on a field or court, rather for their skills in front of a microphone, or on mike in front of a coach or player” (188).

The ascent of women into the sports field has been met with praise. Al Jaffe, who is a talent scout for ESPN, said, “The timing is right for women and the market is wide open to them. I encourage them to pursue play-by-play more as well. The women anchors here have proven themselves to our audience” (Hedrick 189).

However, it has also been met with opposition from some men. “It’s not just the athletes doing the criticizing. Many male sports reporters also resent women’s intrusion into ‘their’ world and, to a larger extent, the overall effect of the growth of women’s sports” (Schultz 23).

It is not uncommon for women to be tested in the industry. They face challenges in the locker rooms and in interviews and they are harshly judged on their appearance. In the past, women have been denied access to male locker rooms. If they received the approval that they needed to enter, they were sometimes verbally harassed. Their presence in the locker rooms is accepted today but the verbal harassment that was common in the past has not been entirely eliminated. Susie Kolber, who is a sideline reporter and an anchor for ESPN, captured the essence of a woman's job in the sports journalism industry perfectly. She said, "As a woman, you definitely have to rise to a different level" (Hedrick 200).

A Different Level

The world of sports has risen to a different level due to the prevalence of a trend. It is becoming increasingly popular for former professional athletes to make the transition from the playing field to the broadcasting booth. Although the trend is met with mixed emotions, the success of individuals like Vai Sikahema cannot be undermined. Sikahema currently serves as NBC 10's sports director and sports anchor in Philadelphia. Additionally, Sikahema is the host of *Wednesday's Child*, a weekly show that strives to connect orphaned children with adoptive parents.

Sikahema views his career at NBC 10 in Philadelphia as an incredible opportunity for past, present, and future success. "I was in a good spot," he said. "Few people leave these kind of jobs because these jobs do not open up that often and, when they become available, if you do well, you could keep this job for as long as you want to keep it." Sikahema wants to continue to work in Philadelphia as a sports broadcaster for many more years. "You just need to be passionate and you have to really want it," he said.

“You have to really want to do it and to do it well and you have to put up with people who do not think that you can do it.” Sikahema’s words, which are derived from his own experiences, unlock the key to success in the sports broadcasting industry. The key is passion. An individual’s previous occupation is irrelevant but an individual’s passion is essential.

My Interview with Vai Sikahema

The interview occurred on Tuesday, January 3, 2012 at the NBC 10 Philadelphia station.

Gabrielle Shirley: Where were you born?

Vai Sikahema: I was born on the island of Tonga. I moved to the United States when I was seven. My parents immigrated to America the year before. They worked to save enough money, and then they sent for me after one year. It took them another two and a half years before they made enough money to send for my younger siblings.

GS: Can you describe your childhood to me?

VS: I am the oldest of three children. I grew up on a very remote island in the South Pacific called Tonga. We lived the way everybody else on the island lived. We lived in a thatch hut with a dirt floor. I remember one of the chores that I had was gathering firewood for my mother to cook our meals, which she did over an open fire. We did not have running water or inside plumbing until we came to America. We saw it in the homes of the Americans who came as teachers to our island. We never had it ourselves. That is basically what our life was like before we came to the states, and, once we immigrated, we lived as poor, uneducated immigrants. My parents bounced us around from apartment to apartment. They worked to save enough money so that they could move us to section eight housing, which was government-subsidized housing for the disadvantaged. I started playing football in high school and I earned a scholarship to go to Brigham Young. I played well enough when I was there to get drafted by the NFL. I

played for eight seasons in the NFL for the Arizona Cardinals, the Green Bay Packers, and the Philadelphia Eagles.

GS: Were academics and athletics important to your parents when you were a child? Did they push you in a certain direction?

VS: One of the reasons why we immigrated was because my father wanted me to be a boxer. He had been a fighter and he was training me to box. He thought that that is how we would make our living. I fought as a kid in a golden glove tournament, and I actually won my division as a fourteen year old in the state of Arizona where we lived. I grew up being pushed into sports, into boxing specifically. I was good at it but football ultimately drew me away from boxing. I loved football because it was the first team sport that I had ever played. I was also good at it.

GS: What was the name of your high school?

VS: I went to Mesa High School.

GS: Can you tell me about your experience as a high school football player?

VS: When I started playing, I was a quarterback. I did not throw a lot but I was the quarterback because I could run. I was fast. I did just about everything. I punted, I kicked off, and I returned kicks. I was naturally more athletic than my peers because I had been boxing for seven years in my early childhood. I was physically more developed than my peers at that age. By the time I was an upper classman in high school, I was playing well enough to get noticed. I had taken my team to the state championship game my senior year. I was an all-state player, and I was recruited by a lot of big schools. I had given Arizona State a verbal commitment that that is where I would go, but then their head coach got fired a couple of weeks before the signing date. BYU was my third or

fourth choice, but, given the circumstances at the other schools that had recruited me, BYU seemed to be the best place that I could go to play right away. It turned out to be a great choice. I ended up playing on a national championship team while I was there, and I played well enough at BYU to attract the attention of the NFL.

GS: Why did you choose to go to Brigham Young University?

VS: BYU was not my first choice. My first choice was to go to Arizona State because that is where I grew up. They probably recruited me the hardest. The problem was their head coach got fired just a week or two before the signing date. Their program was placed on probation. They could not play on national television, and they could not go to a bowl game. I probably could have lived with all of those things, but I was not sure what kind of offense they would have with a new coach. I am not sure if they hired somebody or not. I do not think that they hired anybody right away. It was left up in the air, and I did not want to go to a place where I may not fit in. The second option was one of two schools. The first one was UCLA, and the second one was the University of Hawaii. Both places were good. They had established coaches and solid programs at that time but Hawaii was too far away. My parents did not have the money to fly back and forth for my games, and they played a lot of their games in Hawaii because people wanted to go visit Hawaii. UCLA was too big of a school and I felt like I would get lost in the shuffle. They had at that time tons of great recruits. They did not have a limit on scholarships in those days. Scholarships limits were something that came later. UCLA typically recruited dozens of players at one position so I was afraid that I would go there and get lost in the shuffle. I am just giving you an explanation as to why I ended up at BYU. BYU was not my top choice but I ended up going there because things sort of fell

apart with my top choice and with two and three. I did not feel like they would work out so I ended up going to BYU, and I am glad that I went there.

GS: So it did have a lot to do with football? Did you always want to play football in college?

VS: Sure. When I started playing high school football, I did not know. I did not really follow football until I got to high school because my sport was boxing. I was a boxer and it was not until I got to high school that I started playing football, and I realized the opportunities that I had to go play at another level. Ultimately, if you played well enough, you could go pro, and you could play for money. It was something I wanted to do, and I hoped that I would be able to do it. I was very lucky that I did.

GS: Why did you choose to major in communications?

VS: Well, when I was in high school, I had an English teacher named Barbara Neilson, who took me under her wing because she had befriended my mother in our church. My high school did something that a lot of big public schools do with their kids especially if they have a strong, dominant football program. My high school was a powerhouse in two sports, football and wrestling, so typically, what they did was, as soon as they identified a kid who was a football player or a wrestler, they immediately seized that kid's classes so you no longer did your own registration. The coaching staff would do it. I did not know this until later but the reason why they did this was so they could assure that you were placed in classes where assistant coaches taught. My Arizona history teacher was the offensive line coach. My economics teacher was a JV football coach. My algebra class was taught by a baseball coach. The idea was that an athlete should be in classes that were taught by coaches so they could monitor you. Presumably, and I am sure the way

that they explained it to administrators, was that, “Hey, we want to make sure that these kids get a kick in the behind.” The reality was they would let you slide, at least they let me and a bunch of other kids slide. If you were not quite ready for a test that was scheduled for Tuesday, they might let you take the test on Thursday or, if a test was on Friday, they would let you take the test on Monday. They would give you the weekend, and then they would give you extra help over the weekend because they wanted to make sure that you were eligible to play on Friday night. It was a huge disservice to me because obviously I took advantage of it. I was a sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year old kid so, you know, if you have the maturity, which I didn’t, to know, “Hey, what they are doing is ultimately going to cost you down the road” then you would never do it. Few kids have the academic maturity to say, “I am going to take the tough classes” so I ended up in a bunch of classes where they just let me slide. When I got to college, the only class that I had in high school where a teacher made me work was Barbara Neilson’s class. She made sure that I was enrolled in her class, in her English class, so I learned how to write. Then, she insisted that I apply for a position on the newspaper because she was also the faculty advisor for the school newspaper. She insisted that I apply for a position as a reporter, which I did. I am not sure if I would have qualified if I had not know her off of campus and if she was not friendly with my mother but she seemed to take an interest in making sure that I worked in her class. I remember fighting her on why I had to apply for a school newspaper job because, by then, I was a big high school star and the kids that were on the school newspaper wanted to interview me. I thought that I was a big deal. I said that I did not need to write stories about others, but she said that taking this class may be the difference between going to a Notre Dame or a USC or a

private school and between going to a junior college or another school that is not as prestigious. So when I got to Brigham Young, I thought that what I wanted to, because I had a couple years of experience writing for the newspaper staff, was to become a sports information director. I wanted to work in sports information because it would marry together sports and my writing. The problem was that my grades were terrible coming out of high school so I was not well prepared in the other core classes to win a spot in the broadcast journalism classes. I essentially went through college without ever majoring in anything. It was not until I left college that I was accepted into initially public relations and then, after I left college and went to the pros, I sort of stumbled into television because I had opportunities to do some TV work in some of the cities where I played in St. Louis and in Phoenix and then here in Philadelphia. Then, I changed my major while I bounced around from city to city playing football and ended up in communications and it worked out. I did not graduate until years and years later. 2002 is when I graduated from college.

GS: Because you went to the pros?

VS: Yes, because I was in the pros and then I already had this job. I had been working here for almost ten years before I decided to go and get my degree. I went, and I got it.

GS: Where did you get your college degree?

VS: I got my degree from BYU but I took courses in all of the places that I lived. I took classes at Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, which was just outside of St. Louis when I lived there. I took classes at Arizona State when I was living there. I was only in Green Bay for one year so I did not take any courses there. I actually took the last

course that I needed to take in order to graduate at Burlington Community College and it was a physical science class.

GS: Do you feel that the time that you spent in the NFL helps you in your profession today?

VS: Yes, there is no question because I do sports. There was a time when I first retired from football when a lot of my teammates were still playing and it took maybe five, six, seven, or eight years before the guys that I played with were aged out of the NFL. You know these kids now that are playing, a lot of them do not even know that I played so, when they see me, it is not great. When I first retired, it was interesting to go back to try to get interviews with the guys that I had been playing with. That was always an interesting prospect but yes, it helps because I understand the nuances of football and Philadelphia is a big football town. I think that anytime you compete at a high level in sports it helps you if you cover sports because you understand what goes into an athlete's preparation. I think they appreciate when somebody, who understands those things, asks them a question. I absolutely think that it is helpful to be able to play the sport that you cover.

GS: Were you ever interested in covering a different topic in the field of broadcast journalism or no?

VS: No, I was pretty much set, and I had already gotten a lot of experience while I was still playing. It was just a matter of where I was going to work. When I was hired here, I actually had an offer in Phoenix, but Phoenix is a smaller market, although Phoenix is where I grew up. I already had a home there but I felt that this was a better station. It

was a better job. The Philadelphia market is a much better sports market than Phoenix. I had to weigh all of those factors. I grew up in Phoenix, and I had a home there with my kids. Our off-season home was there. I had family in Phoenix, but I traded all of that for the chance to come back and work at the better station, in the better sports market, a bigger market. I think that all along I thought that we would go back to Phoenix at some point, and I have had chances to. I had an offer to go back to Phoenix years ago, but I passed on it. Within a year and a half after I was here, I was promoted to the weekday position and so I was in a good spot. Few people leave these kind of jobs because these jobs do not open up that often, and, when they become available, if you do well, you could keep this job for as long as you want to keep it. The guy that I replaced, Al Meltzer, may have been here for 35 years. There is such a thing as stability in our industry. This is pretty stable. It is not a network, but that is fine because it is a big market and you make good money. You can make a name for yourself, and you are home most evenings. You are not living out of a suitcase, which is good.

GS: It appears that you began your television career in Phoenix while you were playing for the Cardinals. Did you have any prior television experience before then?

VS: Actually, the first taste I got of television was in St. Louis when the Cardinals were still there, but they were not there very long, and then we moved to Phoenix. The reason I had more opportunities in Phoenix was because I grew up there, and the media knew that when I arrived with the team. I was a local kid, who grew up and went to high school there. I had some renowned as a high school kid before I grew up and went to college. I left the state to go to college, but it had only been four or five years since I had been out of high school, and I was back in town with the local professional football team

that just moved into town. It was a big deal. Then, I was given a chance to do some TV work because, when a team moves into a city that has not had football, it became a big big deal. Everybody, every TV station, was looking to land some players for shows. The coach had a show. The quarterback had a show. I was not a marquee player on the team, but I had done enough TV work, and I was a local kid, and I was interested in doing it. Some guys just don't have any interest. I was given the chance, and I maximized the opportunities that I was given. It worked out really well.

GS: Do you remember the first time you went on the air when you were in Phoenix?

VS: The Cardinals had actually drafted me when they were still in St. Louis, and then the team moved to Phoenix. I grew up in Phoenix so it was a big deal that the team came and that I was on the team. When we arrived in Arizona, a lot of the local TV stations were putting together Cardinal shows. There was a show from the coach and a show for the quarterback of my team. They were looking for people who could speak well in front of the camera. They also wanted people who were enterprising and who were willing to do other things besides sitting on the set talking about the X's and the O's. I was willing and I was also interested in it because I had left BYU without my college degree, and I had no idea what I would do if my team was to cut me. I had not thought through what I would do with the rest of my life after football so, when I was given the chance to step in and do some television, I jumped at it. I learned everything that I could learn about television. It seemed that it was something that I could do if I applied myself and so I did. I immersed myself in it. I would stick around in the off-season and I would act as an intern for the station. It was funny because I was a professional athlete, but I was coming into the station to log games and tapes. I would go out with reporters on shoots. The other

professional athletes in the city played for the Phoenix Suns, and they would see me out holding cords. They did not see me with a microphone so that were wondering what I was doing, but I did not really care because I knew that I needed to do this to learn the business in the event that I would ever get released from football. I ended up playing long enough though. I went to Green Bay, Wisconsin, which is a small television market, and they were more than thrilled for me to do television work for them. I did as much as I could do for them while I was there. After Green Bay, I came to the Eagles and, when I got to the Eagles, I involved myself in the industry. Randall Cunningham had a television show at NBC 10, and I started doing things on his show. I did a weekly piece called *Vai's Guys*. A photographer and I would go do interviews with my teammates in their homes and at other places.

GS: What exactly was *Vai's Guys*?

VS: The idea was to have me gain access to my teammates outside of the locker room. They wanted me to get my teammates in places like their homes. They wanted me to get them in places where they were doing different things. They were trying to get me to give them a behind the scenes look into the lives of my teammates and I gave it to them. When my contract with the Eagles expired after doing *Vai's Guys* for two years, they had an opening for a weekend sports anchor. The producers of *The Randall Cunningham Show* looked at my work, and they thought that I could do it. They hired me because of the work that I did on *Vai's Guys*.

GS: So were you technically employed by the station or were you only a regular guest?

VS: I was technically employed by the station that I did work for because they wanted to make sure that you were exclusive to them. They wanted to make sure that you were not going to be doing stories for them and then pop up on the competing station next week. They did not pay us a lot of money, maybe it was 500 bucks a week to show up. Over a sixteen-week season, you could make eight thousand bucks for showing up every week. They also left it up to you if you were enterprising at all, which I was. I would go out and do fun pieces with my teammates. If a guy was buying a house, I would go show his house off or if a guy went and bought a car, I would follow him and see the new Mercedes. I would test drive it with him. It was kind of odd stuff like that that really gave me a new sense of what interested people. Sometimes it is the most mundane things that athletes do. They do not always realize that it is unique to people that watch because most people do not get to follow the number one draft pick as he goes and buys his house or buys his car, but people like to see that because they are interested. This guy is 22 years old, and he just put ten million dollars in his bank account. What does he do with it? How does he pay for it? Does he pay cash? Does he get a mortgage? How does he select a car? It is fascinating for people to see that kind of stuff so I would try to provide things like that. In the process, I was gaining the experience that was necessary when I finally got this job.

GS: I am sure that the fans loved the behind the scenes aspect of your work.

VS: Yes, they did. They thought that it was pretty fun. Along the way, as I showed that I was somewhat enterprising, I was getting coached by the producers at the station where I worked. They could see that I would put out some effort in going out and doing these stories. They would send a field producer to come with me, and then they would make

suggestions and I would make suggestions. So along the way, I was really getting a free education in broadcast journalism because I did not have it while I was in college.

GS: Was it hard to be involved in the journalism field while you were playing professional football?

VS: In some ways it was. Some things that I did were hard but, for instance, after a couple years of doing this, I got up the nerve to beg the news director at the station where I was doing these pieces. I begged him to let me do the high school football show. I had played high school football in the town so I begged him to let me cover the games. Fridays are kind of a free day for NFL players. It is an early day so you go in a little earlier because the coaches want to break you to get you home early on Fridays. So practice would be wrapped up at one o'clock in the afternoon. I begged the news director, knowing that I was out of the football office at one o'clock every Friday, to let me go do live shots at the high school game of the week. They had to commit the resources. They had to send a photographer, and they had to send a satellite truck, but they decided that they would do it. I think that, at that point, I had been doing it for two or three years and, at that point, I think that they thought that it seemed like a natural progression in my development. They decided to send me out there to see if I could do live shots. They did and every week, I would be at a live shot location at the high school game of the week. I was terrible, but it placed me in front of the camera, live television, where the anchors would throw to me and I would have to figure out what I was going to say. No one was around. Sometimes some band members would be there practicing or sometimes some cheerleaders would be there. It was really good practice, and it was a good experience for me and, frankly, I got better. Over the course of the season, I got

better, and by the end of the year, I was pretty good. People knew that I played for the local professional team and that I was doing this stuff on the side.

GS: Do you think that they appreciated that?

VS: I think so. When you are a professional athlete and you are on TV, typically viewers are more forgiving of your mistakes as opposed to a John Clark. When John Clark pops up, they expect him to be solid, and he is because otherwise he would not be in this market. With a professional athlete, they are going to give you some breaks because, one, you are familiar to them, two, they understand that you are a professional as an athlete but, if you can half way put sentences together and sound half way intelligent, they will know that you are actually credible. So you trade in your credibility. What you have as an athlete to bring to viewers is your credibility. People are watching you so they think that you should know what you are talking about. However, you may not be as crisp, and you may not be as sharp with your on air presentation as someone who had been trained to do this through high school and college.

GS: Are there any players that you know of that do what you did today? Is it possible or have the times changed too drastically?

VS: Yes, there are players and there are players that did it before me too. Actually my competitor at Channel 3, Beasley Reece, did it. He had retired from football. He is older than I am, and he had retired from football and was doing what I was doing when I was still playing. I got to watch him in some of the markets where I played football. I think that he worked in Tampa as a sports director at a station there. When I was still playing, we would go to Tampa and play the Buccaneers, and I would see him on local television. More recently, I cannot think off of the top of my head of any players, but I do not travel

as much anymore. I do not go into the cities. There are a couple of players though. There is a guy named Babe Laufenberg, who was a backup quarterback for the Cowboys. He is a local guy. I do not know of a lot of former athletes who do the local sports like I do. Most of them go into the network. A lot of them try to go into the network once they retire. That was part of my decision too. I felt like I should stay at the local level, based on my own family situation. I had a young family, and I did not want to travel that much. I did not want to be on the road. I did not want to be flying all over the country covering games. I wanted to be at the same place every night and to be able to get home every night so I pursued the local television angle opportunity, but a lot of athletes try to get network jobs. Those network jobs are few and far between too, not a lot of those.

GS: You continued working in television when you were with the Packers. Was that job significantly different than the job that you had when you were with the Cardinals?

VS: No, same thing. All that changed is that I left Phoenix with a resume tape. I went to Green Bay, and, when they signed me, I rolled into town with my resume tape. After our first practice, I started my search. I would go out and I would get names from some of the local reporters that were there for their stations. I would drop into their stations to make an appointment with their news directors. I would pop in with my tape and tell them, 'I have done some TV work in my previous NFL town. I would like to do some work for you. You do not have to pay me a lot of money because I make good money playing football but I am looking for experience.' The local stations would say, 'We would love to have you especially if you are not looking to make a lot of money.' I would do the same thing everywhere I went. When I came to the Eagles, I actually came here to this station, and I learned when I got here that Randall Cunningham had a TV

show at this station, *The Randall Cunningham Show*. I asked him about it at practice one day. I said, 'You think I could do some work? I have done work in Green Bay and I have done work in Phoenix' and he said, 'Yes, let me put you in touch with the people at channel ten.' So I came here and did stuff on Randall's show. I did a segment on his show called *Vai's Guys* and it was shot by their photographer, a channel ten photographer.

GS: What was that show like?

VS: It was cool. It was a half hour weekly show with a lot of guests. Randall fancied himself as kind of a Hollywood icon. He loved the Hollywood set. He had Boys to Men on the show because they were from Philly. They were his buddies and they popped in every now and then. He loved Patti LaBelle, but he provided me with an opportunity to come in and do some work. When the weekend position opened up, channel 10 knew that I had been doing this in different markets so that is how I got hired.

GS: Did you do any television work in Green Bay that you were particularly proud of?

VS: When I was in Green Bay, I did do one thing that was not television related but it really helped my career. I was hired by the Milwaukee Journal, which was one of the papers that covered the team, to write a weekly column. They did not give me much money for it. If I can remember correctly, it was about 50 or 100 bucks per column, but it was 50 or 100 bucks every time I wrote one. They sent me a check. The job helped me to improve my writing skills. There were a lot of things that I did along the way that, in retrospect, did not directly relate to a career in television. I think that I just did stuff to gain the experience even if it was not directly related to television. I found that writing a weekly newspaper column was extremely helpful to me.

GS: Were you released or traded by the Packers to the Eagles?

VS: I was traded.

GS: Would you say that television jobs in the broadcast journalism field are fairly similar regardless of where they are located?

VS: They are pretty similar. The jobs are the same. The difference is how the organizations that you cover differ from place to place. In Green Bay, Wisconsin, the Green Bay Packers are king. They do not have a hockey team there, they do not have a baseball team there, they do not have a basketball team there. It is the Green Bay Packers and that is it. It is a small market. They are also not far from Milwaukee. They are close to Milwaukee so Milwaukee is a little bit of a bigger market, and they, of course, cover the Packers, but the Packers are king in that whole region. When you are working in a town like that, the Packers provide jobs, and they are powerful too. They are very powerful. You do not hear as many negative things said about the Packers in Green Bay as you do about the Eagles here in Philadelphia because our media here is tougher. It is a bigger market, and you have a bunch of other sports that compete with the Eagles. In Green Bay, it is just the Packers but, in terms of the job, the job is the same. In a market like Phoenix, where I used to live and work, there are not as passionate there. People are not as interested. People here sort of live and die by the Flyers, the Eagles, and the Phillies. Right now, they do not care as much about the 76ers because they are not that good, but people here are knowledgeable about their sports teams. In Phoenix, they can take it or leave it. It just depends on if their team is good. If the Cardinals are good one year, they went to the Super Bowl, they will follow them that year, but otherwise they do not live and die by them. They live and die by their teams here especially the Eagles and

lately the Phillies and the Flyers. The Flyers have always been a good hockey team. In terms of the job, they are all pretty much the same.

GS: According to my research, you covered the Olympics in Greece, Italy, and China. Is that correct?

VS: My first Olympics was in Atlanta, and then I went to Sydney, Australia followed by Athens and then Beijing so that is four in the summer. The winter games started with Salt Lake, and then I went to Torino, Italy. I have done four summer and two winter, and I did not go to Vancouver two years ago.

GS: Did you cover them while you were here at NBC?

VS: Yes, I was here. We sent a crew to Vancouver.

GS: Did you travel to all of those places?

VS: Yes, I traveled to all of those places. I went there and I spent almost one month in each one.

GS: Were you reporting back to the station? How does that work?

VS: Yes, whatever the time difference is, you change your schedule. I think in Beijing and Sydney the time differences were both 12 or 13 hour time differences. I am not sure if I made appearances in the six o'clock news. I think that I did the morning shows. It was flipped. The times were crazy. When we were in Italy, it was a five or six hour time difference. The station would select shows that they wanted to pump, and they would bring an increase of viewers to that particular show whether it was a morning show or an afternoon show. You would adjust your schedule accordingly. I had a producer there. I think that Colin traveled with me for a couple of those Olympics. I had a photographer there, and I did a lot of reports from there every day.

GS: Did you enjoy that?

VS: I loved it. It was really a lot of fun being at the Olympics. I love the Olympics. It is also a lot of work, and you are working at odd hours. It was cool to go to the games and to be in a foreign country though.

GS: You went to six Olympic games. Did you have a favorite? Did you like one more than another?

VS: Beijing was probably my favorite.

GS: Why?

VS: It was just fun to be in China. The Great Wall was the most amazing man made structure that I have ever seen in my life. The culture is different. Beijing is not a place where people just go. It is not an easy place to get to, but it was an interesting place to be in. I loved all of them. I think that Beijing was just my favorite because it was easy. It was a matter of ease. Our hotel was close to where our workstation was so that makes a difference. We have been in places where it is not so convenient. Athens was a nightmare. It was a nightmare to get from your hotel to your workstation everyday. You had to take two buses, and the traffic was horrendous so it was hard to get around. Athens is a great place to be though. I felt the friendliest place to be was in Sydney, Australia. The people were terrific there. The people were really great. Each one was different, but I think that Beijing was probably my favorite Olympics.

GS: What do you like most about your job?

VS: There are a couple of things. One is the chance to travel. There are not a lot of television jobs that send you to places unless you are a foreign correspondent, and, frankly, if you are ABC or CBS, you do not have the Olympics so you do not get to go

international if you are a sports guy. I do not know if the local sports guys have traveled internationally in their jobs, but I have because NBC has the Olympics. I have gotten to travel internationally to Greece, to China, to Italy, and to Australia. That is cool. It is great to get to go to the games and to get to watch the games. I get paid to be there to watch the games and to talk to the players and to the coaches afterwards. Those are the things that make a difference.

GS: Reverting back to the Olympics, did your family get to go with you?

VS: No, my family had other things going on so they never came. If they did, they would never see me because I was working.

GS: What would you say that you like least about your job? Is there a downfall to this job?

VS: There are downsides to every job. Sometimes you have to work on Christmas day if a game falls on a holiday. Sometimes you have to work on New Years. It does not stop. The games do not stop. Whatever is in season is in season and you have to be there. You need to adjust accordingly. That is a downside, but I am sure that there are downsides to everything.

GS: It was different for you because your professional football career helped you to get into this profession, but do you have any recommendations for college students who are looking to build a career for themselves in this field?

VS: Yes, you just need to be passionate, and you have to really want it because it is so competitive. You have to really want to do it and to do it well, and you have to put up with people who do not think that you can do it. You have to work in small markets and suffer financially until you find a job in a place where you can make a living. It just does

not work out for some for whatever reason and a lot of it is just subjective. Sometimes you may not have the right look. There are all kinds of reasons why people hire or do not get hired but that is the nature of the business.

GS: As we previously discussed, you started in Phoenix, which is a smaller market especially in comparison to the Philadelphia market. Do you think that that was a big factor in helping you to get your foot in the door?

VS: Yea, I think so. I think the bigger factor was that I was from that area. I grew up in that market so I think that there were reasons why they wanted to put me on TV. I had always been accommodating as an athlete to the local media. I made myself available. If they wanted to talk to me, I would make myself available. I would go out of my way, and sometimes I would wait around until they finished what they were doing because I knew that this was something that I wanted to do, and I wanted to be accommodating. Some guys can get away with being jerks to the media and then come back because they have big enough names, and they would get hired anyways, but I do not work that way, and I am not that kind of person. It is not my personality to be that way. If somebody wants to talk to me, I will stick around and make myself available. I think that it is good to develop a rapport with people and to develop a reputation as someone who can be counted on. You know the media appreciates that so when they have a chance to help you, they will help you. I think that that is how things worked out for me.

GS: Being that you were able to see things from the opposite side as a player, is the general consensus in the eyes of professional players that the media is a nuisance?

VS: A lot of them do. A lot of them do not understand and a lot of them. However, some athletes are short sighted, and they do not quite understand that the media is a conduit to the fans. The fans hear from the media. The fans typically get the media spin on the players and on the teams so that is sometimes what happens.

GS: I always worry about inconveniencing people and I feel that, more often than not, nobody really wants to talk to the media.

VS: Yes, that is just the nature of the job and, if you do not have thick skin as a prospective media person, than you may not make it. You have to understand that you are going to have to impose upon people. I have to impose on people all the time even the people that I am friendly with. I have to impose on their time sometimes but that's what the job calls for. You just do what you have to do.

GS: Have you ever experienced a conflict of interest in your profession because you do know people who may still be involved in the league? Different players? Different coaches?

VS: Here is a perfect example. Andy Reid is a good friend of mine. He and I were college teammates. We have known each other for a long time, since I was a teenage kid. He was a couple of years older than me in college, but we have known each other for a long time. I am expected to get interviews with him and I do and I have, but, when I do, I am expected to ask him the tough questions. That is not easy when a guy is your college friend but that is part of the deal. It is part of what you have to do.

GS: I am sure that Coach Reid understands that correct?

VS: Yes, he does understand that and that is part of our working relationship. He understands that that is what I have to do in my job.

GS: Did Andy Reid go to BYU?

VS: Yes.

GS: Did he play football there?

VS: Yes, we were at BYU together.

GS: How many years did you play with him?

VS: I think that we played together for two years.

GS: Which sport, if you had to choose one, do you enjoy covering the most?

VS: It is still football. I played football, and it is still my favorite sport.

GS: Was football always your favorite sport? You were also a boxer.

VS: I have always loved football. Football is a great game, but boxing is also a part of my childhood. There was a period in my life where I loved tennis. I still love tennis. I love to watch tennis. I love to play tennis. I would say football is one, boxing is two, and tennis is three. I love baseball too. I love baseball.

GS: You like all of them!

VS: I do like all of them. I love all sports. Some are more important to me than others, but the one sport that I do not like is MMA. It is too violent for me, and I am a boxing guy. It is too violent for me.

GS: Do you prefer to cover college or professional football?

VS: We do not really cover college football here. This is a pro town so we do not really go and cover the Temple Owls but, in general, college is easier to cover because the players are more accessible, and they are more accommodating because they want to be

on TV, and they want to be interviewed. Most of the pro players could care less. That is the difference.

GS: Vai, from your perspective, how has the industry changed since you first entered it?

VS: How has it changed? Women are a lot more involved in sports broadcasting. It is good, and it is a segment of the market that the networks are trying to tap. There are also a lot more women who play sports now than there were thirty years ago when I was in high school. It makes a difference. Now, women do play the sports of some of the games, and they understand it, and that has had a huge impact on viewership.

GS: Any other noticeable changes?

VS: I think that that is the most drastic change. There are some positions that only women hold now since the sideline reporter used to be manned literally by men, and a lot of them were former athletes. Lynn Swann used to be the sideline reporter on Monday night football. Eric Dickerson did it for awhile. John Dougherty used to do it for CBS. Now, those positions, whether it is Monday night football or college football with Erin Andrews or Sunday night football with Michele Tafoya, are almost exclusively held by women. There are certain positions that are taken. If you are a guy and you are interested in doing sideline reporting, it is not very realistic. It will probably never happen. Another big one is that we just get less time. Local sports does not get as much time as it used to get. We are all fighting to get a little bit more time and we do not. We do not have as much time as we used to have.

GS: What is that attributed to?

VS: A lot of that has to do with ESPN. People can now go to ESPN for their sports so you have to be local centric to be able to survive so those are some of the things that have changed in the last twenty years.

GS: You mentioned earlier that this is a fairly stable position. Do you envision yourself working here for many more years?

VS: I hope so. You know that is up to them. I hope so. I will try to give the station and the viewers my best work, and I will try to do the best that I can to create value for what we do so that when there are big events we are there. It would be hard to do local news without a local sports team, but you know the pie has shrunk. Now, there are five hundred channels, and people have a lot more places to go to watch whatever they want to watch so the advertising dollar has shrunk, and that makes it difficult on everybody. People are not getting their news from local TV stations as much anymore, and that is only going to get worse. It is not going to get better. People can get their news off of their cell phones and their computers. It is different.

GS: You are also a writer. Do you think that, because the television industry is becoming less dominant, writing is also suffering?

VS: It is even worse. The newspaper industry is folding up shop. They are closing down, and they are losing money so I do not think that that is a viable option. Now, people are going to blogs and other places where they can basically get things for free. You used to have to pay fifty cents or one dollar to get your newspaper. I could be wrong, but I do not think that it is a bad thing to know how to write.

GS: Do you think that being a good writer has helped you to be a good broadcaster?

VS: In some ways, it has helped, but, in other ways, it has not helped. We know what we do on a day-to-day basis. We write the highlights to the videos. It is not a place for a lot of self-expression but, in other things, when we do more long-term pieces, it lends to that. I do think that being a good writer is important.

GS: Do you love what you do?

VS: I do. I love what I do. It is awesome.

GS: Do you feel fortunate that you were able to stumble upon this profession?

VS: Oh, everyday. Everyday. I have had two jobs in my life. I played football, and I have done this. That is it. I do not have a lot of job experience outside of catching punts and doing sports on television so I am very fortunate. I hope that it keeps going.

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The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

February 2011 – June 2011

Carried 16 credit international load and traveled extensively

EXPERIENCE:

GoPSUsports.com, Penn State, University Park, PA

August 2010 – Present

Reporter for Football, Field Hockey, and Men's Basketball

- Write scripts, conduct interviews, and perform stand-ups for field hockey and basketball highlight videos
- Interview members of the Penn State football team for the Big Ten Network (Illinois 2011)
- Hosted "Go PSU Preview," short form, all sports, online show

Women's Basketball, Penn State, University Park, PA

August 2010 – Present

Reporter and Assistant Producer

- Host "Lady Lion Insider," bi-monthly, online show
- Create interview questions and edit the footage for "Lady Lion Insider" videos
- Film Lady Lion basketball events and convert footage into promotional recruiting videos

Video and Technology Operations Intern

January 2010 – May 2010

- Edited footage from a Sony AVCHD NXCAM
- Produced highlight videos for Lady Lions' basketball website and YouTube page using Final Cut Pro

NBC10 Television, Philadelphia, PA

July 2011 – August 2011

Sports Department Intern

- Used DaletPlus to edit Philadelphia Phillies games into clips for evening news highlights

PHL17 Television, Philadelphia, PA

May 2010 – December 2010

Promotion and Production Intern, Events Assistant

- Used Avid to capture footage and to tag promotional commercials
- Promoted the station by distributing posters, magnets, and tattoos at various sporting events

ComRadio, Student Radio Station, Penn State, University Park, PA

November 2009 – December 2010

Broadcaster and Talk Show Host

- Hosted weekly, sports talk show, "The Sports Buzz"; called play-by-play for State College High School softball team

PSN-TV, Student Television Station, Penn State, University Park, PA

August 2009 – December 2010

Broadcaster, Reporter, and Camera Operator

- Covered football and field hockey games, track and gymnastics meets, and wrestling matches

Club Field Hockey, Penn State, University Park, PA

August 2008 – Present

Team Member and Game Coordinator

- Planned home tournaments by contacting opponents, hiring referees, and creating a game schedule

SKILLS:

- Final Cut Pro
- Avid
- DaletPlus
- Microsoft Office
- Social Media – Facebook, Twitter, Linked In