

Vince Papale

By Ron Sklar

INVINCIBLE

/ from / the / Stadium / to the Studio

“The response I’m getting, especially from people in Philly, it’s almost Rock Star,” says hometown legend Vince Papale. “It’s really humbling and quite an honor that people feel comfortable enough to walk up and shake my hand.”

The urge to do a meet-and-greet with the man known as invincible is irresistible. His story is as well known to Philadelphians as Rocky, but, of course, unlike Rocky Balboa’s tale, Papale’s story is amazingly, astonishingly true. Back in the day, the one-time bartender and schoolteacher tried out for the Eagles, and, against all odds, actually made the team. You would think the story would end perfectly right there, but Papale excelled beyond his or anybody else’s wildest dreams. Constantly pushing the envelope, and everything else in his path, he was the oldest rookie the NFL ever saw, and one of the few players to go professional without the benefits of college football experience.

This male version of a Cinderella (Cinderella?) story had been translated into a book and a 2006 Disney movie, winning undeniable critical raves and intense audience adulation. Now, the flick has achieved cult status worldwide, but the rags-to-gridiron tale has become part of the Delaware Valley’s most enduring and beloved folklore, and Papale has earned his place as one of our favorite sons. “The amazing thing is the little kids,” he says by phone from his busy home outside of Cherry Hill. “I mean, this happened thirty years ago. A lot of these kids who knew nothing about me are now coming up to me and saying ‘you’re the Invincible guy!’ Wow! Cool!”

“Wow” and “Cool” are two understatements

considering the odds of trying out and making the team amongst throngs of ambitious and younger competition. In his mind, Papale envisioned a lot of folks he did not want to let down – himself most of all.

“I’d see all the guys I taught school with,” he recalls about his life-changing Eagles audition, “and I’d see all my students and I’d see my dad with all his co-workers from Westinghouse, and they were just so proud of me for even trying out, that I couldn’t let them down. My parents, both immigrants, had a tremendous drive and a tremendous work ethic that was instilled upon me. I think a lot of it has to do with that, and I also think it is a gene thing.”

His transition from the classroom and to the stadium happened like a pop quiz. “It was intimidating,” he says. “[As a rookie,] sometimes I would be lying awake in the dorms and my roommate was snoring and I was trying to get two or three hours sleep. And I thought, ‘What am I doing here?’ That’s when it would creep in that, hey, I’m the old man here. They are all a bunch of kids.” “Still,” he says, “it’s hard for me to grasp and fathom that people are making such a big deal of it. The letters and the stories and the people who say they were touched by the movie, that’s the most rewarding thing. It hit a nerve. They’ve been affected by it in a positive way.”

Admitting that he was “one big goosepimple” when he first saw the trailer for the movie at an NFL Draft function, he now admits, “The more I see it, the more I appreciate it - how beautiful the city looked. I was so proud at how the neighborhoods looked. The first time I had seen it, it was a shock to me, because I was there every day at the

set. I wasn’t prepared to see what I eventually saw. Everybody had asked me, ‘what do you think,’ and I really didn’t know what to think, because I was in such shock. But the more I see it, the more it grows on me. For me, it captured the essence and the spirit of what I was going through at that time. Obviously, they took a few liberties, but not enough to distort the facts. The basic facts were conveyed in the movie.” He calls it “the reel versus the real.”

Portrayed in the film by Mark Wahlburg (with Greg Kinnear playing coach Dick Vermeil), the project also became something of a family affair. Papale’s two children, Gabriella and Vince, Jr., had small roles in the movie. “What’s driving me right now are my kids,” he says. “That’s what keeps you young, and what keeps you hip.”

His equally driven wife, Janet, is given credit by Papale in making their action-packed house run smoothly and efficiently. He says, “Janet is a woman who is the oldest of nine, a gymnast who was told she would never go anywhere, and she wound up on the USA World Gymnastics Team, competing in the World Games. We think that we as a team are, in essence, invincible.”

Is there a competition between these two go-getters? Even a friendly one? “I can’t compete with her,” he admits. “I tell her, I’m valium and she’s speed! She’s the Energizer Bunny to the max. No competition whatsoever. She was around when all this was happening and she was busy launching her own career as the University of Pennsylvania’s gymnastics coach. She’s everything. She drives this engine. She’s my biggest advocate, my best friend, my number one supporter, and my number one critic too.”



Together, they try to instill a healthy and active lifestyle in their family. “This house is action, action, action,” he says. “There is always something going on here. “With the children, we do a lot of walking and bike riding. My son plays football and my daughter dances twelve hours a week, and that’s a pretty intense workout. With Janet, she loves spinning. Janet blew her knee out, doing a dismount on the balance beam, so we do a good deal of walking in the morning. It’s a good way for us to reconnect before our busy day. Janet is a tremendous cook. She is almost gourmet. We try to stay away from the sugars and the fats. We’re proponents of The South Beach program. But I can’t pass up on pasta every once in a while. Janet cooks fit. She cooks and prepares meals for us all the time.”

The constant action had almost come to a standstill a few years back, when Papale was diagnosed with colon cancer (he had since beat it – as he calls it, “Over six years green and clean.”). He owes his rapid recovery to his workout regiment and, above everything else, his attitude. “It was easy to recover from my surgery because I was in such tremendous condition,” he says. “Even at the age of fifty - five, they were amazed at how quickly I recovered from my surgery. It just gave me a tremendous appreciation of everything that I ever had. I certainly will never take life for granted. I certainly won’t ever take my children for granted. I just feel that I’m the luckiest, happiest guy on this earth. Some people have a difficult time dealing with it. They think it’s all a façade.” What is his secret for staying on the right side of attitude? “I impress upon everybody, no matter what level they are, that they

all have the potential to take it to the next level,” he says. “I always refer to the Vince Lombardi definition: potential is something you ain’t done yet. Everybody has the potential to be great. Everybody has the potential to be a genius, in their own way. It doesn’t have to be being a great athlete. You can have the potential to be more creative. Personally, you should have a game plan, know where you are going, and know what you are up against. You should be prepared

for all eventualities, both positive and negative. Attitude is certainly the key. Keep a good, positive attitude. Invariably, there are going to be some pitfalls. Things are going to be thrown in your face. There are going to be obstacles, adversity, naysayer’s, laughers. Finally, just be the best that you can be, physically, spiritually and mentally.”

In fact, his best example of his may come, not from his Invincible story, but from long before that, during his pole-vaulting days at Interboro High School. He recalls, “It was Father’s Day, 1964. I hit fourteen feet, six inches. I was just a foot-and-a-half off the world’s record. I had several colleges from Philadelphia run up to me right on the spot and offer me a scholarship. That’s when I got the scholarship to St. Joe’s, and that’s when I was able to give my father the first outstanding Father’s Day gift anybody could give a dad, and that’s a scholarship to college. That supersedes anything because that was the one that really changed my life.”

Still, his story is not yet over. “I feel that there are still some things that are incomplete out there that still need to be taken care of,” he says. “When you lose that sense or that drive, you may as well just stick your toes into the ground. You’re gone.” In the meantime, he still has his legacy, which follows him everywhere he goes, be it a charity event, his successful commercial mortgage career, or simply just walking down the street. Regarding the endless questions about the movie, he

says, “I kid with people and say, ‘the whole thing was fictional. Nothing like that could really happen.’ Sometimes I look back and say, ‘did I really do that?’ To me, it wasn’t such a big deal. I was just a guy given a shot. And I was trying to play for a team that I loved dearly, and that was my Philadelphia Eagles.”

Favorite healthy food: fish
Favorite guilty pleasure: rice pudding or steak

Favorite type of workout: Wissohicken Trail. I put my iPod on and just run.
Most dreaded workout: Treadmill on an incline
Favorite form of relaxation: reading.
Favorite type of music: Marc Anthony, Invincible soundtrack
Pets: My kids (kidding!). No, we have two turtles- Luke and Isabelle
Favorite TV show: 24
Favorite season: spring
Astrological sign: Aquarius.
Most triumphant sports moment: When I found out my wife was pregnant with Gabriella (half-kidding, of course!)



Ron Sklar is a free-lance writer who was born and raised in Philadelphia and now lives in New York.

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