



Tommy Gilligan-USA TODAY Sports

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A smarmy, sarcastic phrase about the Tigers that started in 1983 turned into a nationwide rallying cry for the boys in the Old English D.

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If it wasn't for an acerbic sports broadcaster's biting sarcasm, the website you are currently visiting would likely have a different, less catchy name.

The phrase "Bless You Boys" didn't start out warm and fuzzy. Because nothing about its creator was warm and fuzzy.

It's sad to me to think that we now have a whole generation of sports fans who have never seen a local TV sports guy with any, shall we say, moxie. I'd use a different word, but there are likely women and children present.

Before the airwaves were taken over by the nice guy types with their blow-dried hair, pleasant personalities and "Golly, gee whiz" attitudes, before the respected journalist was over-riden by the clowns who yelled "We've got highlights!" there was Al Ackerman.

They called him Acid Al, and he ruled sports TV in Detroit at 6 and 11 on channels 4 and 7 starting in the late-1960s and lasting until midway through the 1980s.

Ackerman delivered the sports news of the day with a combination sneer/smirk. If the Detroit teams lost, Ackerman gave it to you straight, complete with odors. His was truly a no-spin zone.

"He was by far the single biggest influence on my own career," says retired sportscaster Bob Page, who shared channel 7's sports desk with Ackerman from 1977-79 before eventually moving on to much success in New York in the 1990s.

"I used to watch him as a kid and was amazed that he would go on the air and just give his opinions about sports," Page told me in an e-mail exchange. "He alone was the only TV/radio sportscaster in Detroit with enough guts to do that; with enough guts to really go after sports figures when the circumstances warranted it."

Page is right about Ackerman's zeal for the confrontation. Being in the studio, behind a desk reading scores and editorializing about why those scores happened the way they did, couldn't contain Ackerman's tenacity.

Ackerman was the Detroit sports fan's Mike Wallace, Morley Safer and "60 Minutes" camera crews rolled into one.

Ackerman, in "the field" as the TV folks call it, would shove a microphone into the face of his victim and wouldn't un-shove it until he got some answers.

In the early-1970s, Ackerman visited Lions coach Joe Schmidt at training camp. Al wanted to know what Schmidt was going to do about his linebacker situation.

Schmidt, on guard whenever Ackerman was around--as so many of Joe's brethren were--tried to turn the tables on Al.

"I don't know, Al, can you find me a linebacker?" Schmidt asked Ackerman.

"I'm not the coach," Al retorted. "I want to know what YOU are going to do about it."

"Do you have (a linebacker) for me to look at?" Schmidt said.

And on and on.

When Dick Vitale took the Pistons coaching job in 1978, just one year after resigning his gig at the University of Detroit because of stomach trouble, Ackerman blistered Vitale nightly at 6 and 11.

At issue was Vitale's reported \$100,000 contract to coach the Pistons with a supposed bum tummy.

"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz," Ackerman called the contract, ironically parroting a popular antacid commercial of the day.

Ackerman got Dickie V on a couch in the channel 7 building and confronted Vitale about the contract.

"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz," Ackerman said, leaning into Vitale's personal space on the couch. "You've gotten tremendous relief ever since you signed the contract."

"I like the contract, and I'm sure you like your big contract," Vitale said in defense, referencing Ackerman's TV stature.

The remarks were captured on an unedited clip that [can be found on YouTube](#).

"You're an evil son of a bitch, you know that?" Ackerman bellowed at Vitale. "You claim that I went on the air and said if your stomach went bad again and you died that I'd be happy? What kind of an a\*\*hole do you think I am?!"

"I don't know," Vitale said. "I'm beginning to think that you're a real a\*\*hole! Maybe Houk was right!"

"Houk is a loser!" Ackerman said.

AI used to call Ralph Houk, who managed the [Tigers](#) from 1974-78, Fifth Place Ralph.

Can you imagine such an exchange between, say, Fox 2's Dan Miller and Mike Babcock?

In 1983, when the Tigers were in a losing streak, the team finally managed to win one.

Ackerman, dripping with sarcasm, smirked, "Bless you boys" on the 11:00 newscast.

And Ackerman would continue to use the smarmy phrase whenever he came to bury the Tigers, not praise them.

"Bless you boys" caught on, but not in the way Ackerman intended. His sarcastic refrain somehow got turned into a rallying cry in 1984, when the Tigers took baseball by storm.

Even national celebrities began uttering "Bless You Boys!" for promotional clips used on WDIV-TV (channel 4).

The phrase got an exclamation mark bestowed upon it, and once it gained steam as the Tigers roared out of the gate with a 35-5 record, Ackerman's sarcasm had been shoved into the background, overcome by the fans' giddiness over their baseball team.

It was maybe the first time that Ackerman ever got upstaged---and by his own words, no less.

Today, "Bless You Boys" is synonymous with the Tigers in Detroit, and in only the most positive way. Hence the name of this website.

Sportscasters of AI Ackerman's ilk, at least in Detroit, are long gone. I've been watching the news off and on for 40 years, and no one on the air talking sports since Ackerman retired has one ounce of, ahem, moxie about them. They all seem to be one grape short in their loom.

Today's TV sportscasters don't have an opinion---at least not that they'll share on the air. They'll let it fly on Twitter and social media, but when the cameras turn on, it's all about smiles and personality. And, they don't confront.

Maybe they're just playing the game as it is meant to be played these days. Maybe the bosses don't want acerbic.

Regardless, we'll never see anyone like AI Ackerman again in Detroit.

Don't come at me with comparisons to the blowhards on sports talk radio, either. It's one thing to scream your frustration into a microphone in a radio studio, but quite another to confront your prey, face-to-face.

The next time you see Mike Valenti sticking a mike into Brad Ausmus's face, railing about a lineup change or an in-game decision, it will be the first.

Ackerman didn't just spew his venom into the camera, he took that camera with him and demanded answers from those he was spewing about.

No one on Detroit TV has the "moxie" to do that nowadays.

"AI Ackerman was a pioneer in our industry and every smart-ass kid with big opinions on a blog or a Twitter account should owe him a vote of thanks," Bob Page says.

Bless You AI!



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