



lesley visser

Sweat, Soul & Inspiration



By Diane Feen

Lesley Visser would never believe that it's a man's world. And with good reason.

When other girls were playing with dolls and planning tea parties, Visser was plotting her future. At the age of six she decided she wanted to be a sports writer, and no one in the Visser family told her otherwise.

"My parents didn't say girls can't do that and my mother told me, 'Sometimes you have to cross when it says *Don't Walk*.'" So that's exactly what she did. She

crossed and crossed and continues to cross where it says *Don't Walk*.

Fortune comes to the fortunate, or so they say, and Visser has been fortunate. In the summer of 1974 she won a Carnegie Foundation Grant that allowed her to spend a summer interning as a sports reporter at the Boston Globe. She sat alongside the greats of sports reporting — Peter Gammons covered baseball, Bob Ryan basketball, Will McDonough football and Bud Collins reported on tennis.

"When I started at the Boston Globe we had the best sports section in America; it was legendary," said Visser, who spent her youth reading box scores in the newspaper rather than Nancy Drew novels.

In 1984 CBS came calling. "CBS came to me and said, 'We'd like to hire a woman and you're not just a pretty face, you have proven yourself. We will teach you television.'" So that's what happened. From 1984 to 1994 Visser covered sports for CBS. She also made sports history. "I was blessed to be able to be the first woman to cover the NFL. There wasn't even a ladies' room in the Press Room at the time. I was also the first woman allowed in the players' locker room." And if you remember the olden days of sports reporting, you will remember that Visser made quite a stir when she entered the last all-male bastion of vanity and vigor: the player's locker room. "I was part of the frontier. Bob Kraft of the New England Patriots owned the Boston Lobsters and he let me go into the locker room."

Visser likes to break barriers. As a sports broadcaster and reporter for the past 31 years, she has gone where no other woman has. In 2004 she was the first woman sportscaster to carry the Olympic Torch, and is the only sportscaster in history who worked on the network broadcasts of the Final Four, the Super Bowl, the World Series, NBA Finals, Triple Crown, Olympics, U.S. Open and World Figure Skating Championship. In 2004 she was named lead reporter for the network's coverage of the NFL.

And it's not just sporting spectacles that Visser has witnessed. "CBS sent me to cover the fall of the Berlin Wall. My segment was to show the world how sports would change now that democracy had come to East Germany. The power of being at the Berlin Wall with people who had walked for days to taste freedom was staggering," said the daughter of Max Visser, who was raised in Amsterdam.

It is her European heritage that Visser credits for her down-to-earth vision of the goodness that has befallen her. "I don't want people to take the U.S. for granted; it's such a great place. My favorite thing about sports is that anything can happen, people earn their success. It doesn't matter where your mom went to college or how much money

your father has, it's a meritocracy."

I suppose you could say the same thing about Visser. Her rise to the top has been gradual and steady. But as a child she was exposed to a lot. Her school teacher mother, Mary, and her father Max, wanted their children to see and experience the world. At the age of one and a half Visser went to Europe with her family. When she was 10 her mom took her to Stratford-upon-Avon to see Shakespeare's plays. But that was a hop, skip and a jump compared to the fact that the Visser family moved 13 times because of Max's career as a scientific engineer at the Stanford Research Institute.

It seems that her genetic make-up for perpetual motion is an inherited trait. Visser loves to travel and recently went to England for her 22nd wedding anniversary to her sportscaster husband Dick Stockton. When Visser isn't covering NCAA Men's basketball championships, the NFL, CBS News, horse races, major league baseball, figure skating, college basketball, tennis championships or a Super Bowl or pre-game broadcast, she just might be in a library in England studying the Magna Carta or on a bicycle trip through Bavaria.

Although she has done a lot on and off the field, Visser is still humbled by her roots. "I appreciate it all, I don't take any of it for granted. I live on a beautiful street that looks like a Monet painting in Boca Raton."

And Visser has a lot to appreciate. She received the Outstanding Woman Sportswriter in America award in 1983, was given the Compass Award for "changing the paradigm of her business," was named "Wise Woman of the Year," and won the Women's Sports Foundation Award for Journalism in 1992. In 1999 she won the first AWSM Pioneer Award and in 2003 she was one of 100 luminaries to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the CBS Television Network. She is also a spokesperson (and big fan) for St. John clothing line.

Even though the statuesque sportscaster was once called "cosmetically correct" by network executives, she likes to think of herself as knowledgeable, enthusiastic, authentic and passionate. She clearly takes an interest in others, and relishes her relationship with Stockton, who is an accomplished sportscaster at Fox (covering football) and Turner Broadcasting (for basketball).

"I love to hear about the achievements of women. I like to encourage them. My message to women is that it's nice to be well dressed and organized, but it's what's inside that counts," said Visser, who admits to wanting to marry Stockton after she found out he could name every starter of every Final Four *and* play Gershwin on the piano.

Although she is clearly a woman who appreciates the inner beauty of those around her, she does make a few exceptions. "I was so embarrassed one day when Dick sat down to play piano in front of our friend Burt Bacharach. I said you can't play in front of him, but he did anyway."

If you want to see Visser, she will be hosting the 12th Annual Sports Legends Golf Classic to benefit the Bob Fishman Foundation for Bone Marrow Transplants. The event will honor Pat Summeral and will be held on May 3rd at Addison Reserve. ❖

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