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ESPN analyst Jay Bilas leaves Red Smith crowd laughing

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APPLETON — He's got about as many layers as an onion.

Except Jay Bilas will leave you crying with laughter.

"He's very intelligent, he's very well-spoken," said ESPN play-by-play man Sean McDonough, who works with Bilas and Bill Raftery on college basketball's "Big Monday." "He's candid. A lot of guys are smart and they know the game, but they're not willing to express their mind. And he's got a sense of humor, too, which he sprinkles in at the appropriate time."

Bilas is a dying breed of college basketball players that actually stayed all four years. The Duke University center started all four years from 1983 to 1986 and his teams went 95-38, which included a 1985-86 national final loss to Louisville.

"The teams probably aren't as good as when I played and the sole reason is because the best players don't stick around for four years," said Bilas, who was the main speaker for the 45th Annual Red Smith Sports Award Banquet at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel. "So you don't get a chance to see seniors against seniors and that's a shame. Unless the players stick around for three or four years, it will never be as powerful as it once was and as well-played as it once was. Mature players playing against each other is always going to be a better game."

Bilas, 46, grew up in Southern California and chose Duke because he trusted coach Mike Krzyzewski, who often flew out to watch him play pickup games. Coach K would begin his third season at Duke when Bilas arrived on campus as a skinny freshman.

"When he was recruiting me, a lot of guys negatively recruited against Duke by saying, 'If you go play for him, he's going to make you play center for four years.' And I asked him about that. He said yeah for a year. He said for a year, you'll have to because I don't think we have anyone else. I'll recruit other big guys and I'll make an effort to move you back to your natural position."

Incidentally, Bilas never moved from center back to forward and in his first game, the 6-foot-8 Bilas was giving up more than eight inches.

"My first game I guarded Ralph Sampson," he said. "He's 7-4. I did a hell of a job on him, though. I held him to 36 points. Not many guys could do that."

After scoring 1,062 career points, followed by a short pro stint, Bilas came back to Durham to sit alongside his lifetime mentor and friend as an assistant coach. He showed how important his wife Wendy was after leaving the profession after three of the most successful years in Blue Devils history — three Final Fours and two national titles.

"I wanted her more than I wanted to coach," Bilas said. "When you sit down and try to explain to your wife how it's going to affect your family, and you explain, 'Listen, honey, if this goes really well for me, we're probably going to have to move every five years for the next 15 and then maybe we'll find a place that we can stay for a long period of time.' But they may kick me out at any time."

Bilas has two kids, Victoria, 15, and Anthony, 13. He continues to coach in the summer at camps and clinics and is still on the radar of college programs, even though he hasn't been on college sideline in nearly 20 years.

"He had a pretty prominent school come after him hard a few years ago, but he said no because he doesn't want to move Wendy and the kids," McDonough said.

"If I were living in a cave somewhere, I wouldn't have to consult anybody but that's not the way it is," Bilas said. "Sometimes I know they wish I was alone living in a cave somewhere."

That's when the guy with the perma grin chose another career path and was winning battles in the courtroom as a lawyer for Moore & Van Allen in Charlotte. But in 1995, the Worldwide Leader turned on his microphone and he was hooked.

"I got into broadcasting because I thought it would be fun and it got me out of the office a couple times a week," Bilas said. "I don't look at myself as a broadcaster, I look at myself as a basketball guy."

His role as an analyst is a perfect fit for guy that has been perfecting his craft ever since college.

"From day one, when we met on campus and we would go eat dinner or we would go to the cafeteria for lunch, he was always the guy with the spoon putting it in your face asking you for comments," said Stanford men's basketball coach Johnny Dawkins, who was Bilas' teammate at Duke. "You kind of become what you repeatedly do. So, not only was he a terrific player, but he honed his skills."

Bilas, McDonough and Raftery love to bust each other's chops, even when the camera's rolling. During the commercial breaks, they'll high-five each other and praise each other for the best zinger.

"I look forward to every Monday," said McDonough, who has been with ESPN for 20 years and was the main speaker for the Red Smith in 2004. "It's like hanging out with two of your best friends."