

## Lou Carnesecca: Lessons for Today's Executive that Goes beyond Basketball

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this research was to determine what lessons professionals and executives can learn from Lou Carnesecca, the St. John's Hall of Fame Coach, that goes beyond basketball. The methods of this research included a historical study of the career of Coach Lou Carnesecca and his professional style. The results of this study indicate that there are learning takeaways for professionals and executives that go beyond basketball including his charismatic and endearing approach, his understanding and love for his employer and his distinct professional philosophy. The conclusions of this study illustrate that professionals, beyond basketball, can learn valuable professional lessons from this quintessential coach. In addition, this research relates to the world of sports in that often times the human characteristics behind a coach can define his / her brand in the long term.*

**Keywords:** Carnesecca, St. John's, Chris Mullin, Redmen / Redstorm

### INTRODUCTION

Corporate training is big business. According to a recent McKinsey report, companies within the United States, spent \$14 billion on leadership development training. (Gurdjian, Halbeisen and Lane, January 2014). Training magazine further states that "training expenditures" hit \$90.6 billion in 2017. (2017 Training Industry Report).

In general, CEO's (not Chief Learning Officers) have primary responsibility for developing an organization's training and development budget. Companies also spend a higher percentage of their training budgets for senior leadership within organizations. (Wentworth, November 30, 2016). Training and development programs can also be costly. With 38% of new Chiefs failing within the first eighteen (18) months on the job, it is easy to see why. (Hedges, September 23, 2014). An example can be seen with the **CEO Academy** offered by Wharton which is currently priced at \$20,000 for a two (2) day course. In addition, a recent participant within another university's executive education program indicated that while satisfied, the program was "ridiculously expensive". (Ortmans, March 13, 2018).

Overall, the reason for this information is that learning can be achieved in a more cost effective manner.

The purpose of this research is to therefore present a learning opportunity for executives by analyzing the professional career of Lou Carnesecca, St. John's University Hall of Fame Coach. Often times, it can be the most unexpected figure that can provide a high impact learning opportunity. In this case, learning lessons for executives that go beyond basketball will be presented from Coach Lou Carnesecca's career.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

A historical study of the career of Lou Carnesecca was conducted. Upon completing the research, key takeaways were developed on what current executives and professionals could learn from this Hall of Fame Coach that goes beyond basketball. The goal of this historical study was to understand Lou Carnesecca from a professional and personal perspective. In addition, the goal was to see how all professionals and executives, no matter what industry, could learn from his professional journey and decision making.

## **SUCCESS AS A COACH**

Coach Lou Carnesecca had an outstanding career as the Head Men's Basketball Coach at St. John's University. In his twenty four (24) years at the helm, Coach Carnesecca generated a 526-200 record (0.725 Winning Percentage) and coached five (5) Consensus All Americans including Lloyd Dove (1967), Chris Mullin (1984, 1985) Walter Berry (1986), Mark Jackson (1987) and Malik Sealy (1992). (Sports Reference - SRCCB).

In addition, Coach Carnesecca and St. John's thrived in the Big East Conference which, at the time, was one of the premier Men's College Basketball Conferences in the United States. Coach Carnesecca's teams not only won the Big East Championship titles in 1983 and 1986 but St. John's also generated a 112-65 Big East Conference overall record. (0.633 Winning Percentage). ([www.redstormsports.com](http://www.redstormsports.com), December 13, 2017).

Coach Carnesecca, who took over the St. John's Head Men's Basketball Coaching position in 1965, after his mentor, Joe Lapchick retired, coached the team until his retirement in 1992. During these years, Coach Carnesecca would leave St. John's from 1970-1973 to be the Head Coach of the New York Nets in what is now the old American Basketball Association (ABA). He then returned to St. John's in 1973 and would stay until his coaching retirement. Coach Carnesecca would later refer to his stint in the ABA as a "great education" and also a "period of purgatory". (Retired St. John's Coach Lou Carnesecca, Extended Interview, Youtube). Upon his retirement from the bench, Coach Carnesecca's teams at St. John's would qualify for a post season tournament (NCAA or NIT) in each season. Coach Carnesecca also, three times, was awarded the Big East Coach of the Year. He also was awarded the National Coach of the Year in 1985 and was named to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame (industry's highest honor) along with the New York City Basketball Hall of Fame and the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame. (NIAF 2016 New York Gala Honoree, Youtube).

In addition, Coach Carnesecca is one of the select individuals to have a banner dedicated to him and hung from "the rafters" at Madison Square Garden that lists his name and his collegiate victories (526). (Vecsey, January 21, 2001). Furthermore, St. John's University recently honored Coach Carnesecca by

renaming its on campus basketball facility to "Carnesecca Arena" (NIAF 2016 New York Gala Honoree, Youtube) in addition to honoring him for his fifty (50) plus years of service to his beloved alma mater. (CBS Sports Line, May 11, 2011).

Lastly, while there are other achievements and awards, one of note that must be mentioned is that Coach Carnesecca was recently honored with the Naismith Outstanding Contributor to Basketball Award. Other awardees, throughout the years, include Dave Gavitt, Frank McGuire, Red Auerbach, John Wooden, Bob Knight, Dean Smith and John Thompson ([www.redstormsports.com](http://www.redstormsports.com), December 13, 2017).

Overall, Coach Carnesecca has had an extraordinary collegiate basketball coaching career at St. John's University. As a result of his success, he received his industry's highest honor. Such a professional should be studied and that is the purpose of this research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Charismatic and Lovable**

Coach Carnesecca was not only a charismatic figure but he was also lovable and endearing. There are numerous examples that illustrate this description.

Chris Mullin, the current St. John's University Men's Basketball Coach and former All-American and perhaps the best player to wear a St. John's Basketball uniform within the Carnesecca coaching era, once stated:

*The most sincere and genuine man (Lou Carnesecca). I ever met.... Coach treated everyone the same. He treated everyone with respect. There's not one once of phony in him. He's always known who is.* (Brooklyn Nets, March 11, 2015)

Coach Carnesecca's genuine approach made him real to those around him.

A classic example of this can be seen during his landmark 1984-1985 season with his "lucky ugly sweater" phenomenon. Coach Carnesecca describes the origin of this phenomenon in the following way. St. John's was hosting, during the time, a basketball coach from the Italian Women's National Team.

Within these type of "touch points", there is usually an exchange of gifts and this Italian Coach gave Coach Carnesecca two sweaters in which he immediately put in his closet within his home in Queens, New York.

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Fast forward to January 1985 in which St. John's was about to travel to the University of Pittsburgh for a Big East game. Coach Carnesecca, who was suffering from a cold, packed the two sweaters and wore one of them for the Pittsburgh game in which St. John's won on a Chris Mullin "buzzer beater" at the end of the game. (SJU-TV Feature).

Following that game Coach Carnesecca started to wear these "lucky ugly sweaters" for future games and the media and fans started to take note so much so that he started to receive ugly sweaters as gifts from fans and friends. This all culminated on February 27, 1985 at a game at Madison Square Garden where St. John's (Ranked #1 in the Nation) played Georgetown (Ranked #2 in the Nation) and Georgetown's Coach, John Thompson, wore the exact same "lucky ugly sweater" as Coach Carnesecca which led to a playful pre-game moment on the court. All this would not have happened if Coach Carnesecca was not such a genuine and endearing figure. (Allen, February 18, 2015).

Another example of his lovable approach can be seen in Coach Carnesecca's description of how he ended up in the coaching profession. He indicated that he was never a great player but rather a "great observer" and was probably put on the age group team because "I loved basketball so much." Overall, coach Carnesecca was able to playfully mock his basketball playing abilities. (Center Stage Preview).

Another example can be seen when Coach Carnesecca describes his father's reaction when he told him, as a college student, that he did not want to be a medical doctor but rather a basketball coach. Coach Carnesecca's parents, who emigrated from Italy to New York City and opened "Carnesecca's Deli" in Manhattan, wanted their son to be a medical doctor. Upon hearing Coach Carnesecca's change in career aspirations, his father turned to his mother and said "look what you raised, he is going to disgrace the family." (Center Stage Preview). While Coach Carnesecca describes this encounter in a jovial way, he does indicate, in a sensitive manner, how his father would eventually support him and would close his store early and go to Madison Square Garden to watch him coach. (Center Stage Preview). This description reveals the genuine and human side of Coach Carnesecca.

Another example of Carnesecca's approach can be seen when he reminisces on how he became interested in sports and the impact Sr. Mary

Joelle, from his grammar school, had on him. He discusses how Sr. Mary Joelle got him excited about sports to keep him off the streets and out of trouble and his appreciation, gratitude and sensitivity of her impact on his life is apparent. (Center Stage Preview).

Coach Carnesecca's charismatic, lovable and endearing approach can be seen yet still in other ways. When he speaks about coaching Mario Cuomo, the future Governor of New York, on the Freshman Baseball Team at St. John's, he stated "If I knew you were going to be Governor I would of batted you fourth." (Retired St. John's Coach, Youtube).

When Chris Mullin, his former player and star, was recently hired as the Head Men's Basketball Coach at St. John's, Coach Carnesecca was so happy for him like a proud parent celebrating his child's recent success. Coach Carnesecca stated "I can't describe it. I am so excited. It's like I am going through it all again but even more and you know it's so wonderful and I am so happy." (Lou Carnesecca on Chris Mullin).

When retiring from coaching at St. John's University in 1992, he was certainly genuine as per his reasons. He stated "I know I am going to miss it... You know you're going to have second thoughts. I have had some great kids. You're going to miss them but you have to look at the whole picture....". (Moran, April 14, 1992).

Overall, there are so many other examples that can be discussed. Coach Carnesecca was charismatic and lovable. His approach not only as a professional but also as a real person made him an endearing figure. In general, executives should take note. Coach Carnesecca was not only a successful coach but his personal brand was so much more. This made him a distinct figure within his industry space.

### **Knows Employer... Loves Employer**

Coach Carnesecca understands and loves St. John's University. This is apparent within the research.

St. John's University was founded in 1870 by the Congregation of the Mission which is a religious order known as Vincentian Fathers, Brothers and Lazarists. The Mission of St. John's University is as follows:

As a Vincentian University, St. John's is committed to following St. Vincent's teachings, which emphasizes respect for the individual, service to the needy, human solidarity and adherence to the belief that giving of one's self

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helps make the world a better place. ("Our Mission" <http://www.stjohns.edu>).

In addition, St. John's University's Core Values include Truth, Love, Respect, Opportunity, Excellence and Service. ("Our Mission", <http://Stjohns.edu>).

Overall, Coach Carnesecca not only lived the Mission and the Core Values of St. John's University, he has also been referred to as follows by its President, Conrado "Bobby" Gempesaw, Ph.D.:

*It is rare that the University can point to one individual as the embodiment of its mission and proud athletic tradition. At St. John's, we have that privilege. His name is Lou Carnesecca and he is simply known as "Coach".* (Sharing Knowledge, Youtube).

Coach Carnesecca was first introduced to the St. John's University Men's Basketball Team in 1942. As a high school basketball player in what is now known as Archbishop Molloy High School, Coach Carnesecca would receive tickets to attend St. John's games at Madison Square Garden following his high school games. He would watch the St. John's games and there was an instant connection. He has stated "That was my first experience watching St. John's and I fell in love with them." (Lou Carnesecca: The Godfather of St. John's, Youtube). Playing in New York City, "on Broadway", was also always something that Coach Carnesecca loved about St. John's. (Lupica, March 12, 2013). In addition, Coach Carnesecca had an immediate liking to the types of students who attended St. John's University.

According to Coach Carnesecca, these students would attend class and then work in the evenings. They would become doctors, lawyers, teachers and professionals in law enforcement, to name a few. He also indicated that ..."It was a local school that turned out good workers with ethics...and basketball was part of it." (Sharing Knowledge, Youtube). Coach Carnesecca loved the fact that basketball was part of the tradition. He would state that "It came from the top. The President (Religious - Vincentian Priest) wanted good basketball." (Sharing knowledge, Youtube).

Coach Carnesecca enrolled at St. John's University and would play Junior Varsity and Varsity Baseball under legendary Coach Frank McGuire. He was a member of the Varsity Baseball Team that went to the College World Series in 1949. Upon graduation and after completing his required military service, Coach

Carnesecca would coach his high school basketball team and then in 1957 he became an Assistant Basketball Coach for St. John's under Coach Joe Lapchick.

Under Lapchick's tutelage, Coach Carnesecca would learn the "humanistic side of coaching" and how to handle "difficult situations" (NIAF 2016 New York Gala Honoree). Such lessons turned out to be extremely valuable throughout his coaching journey at a Vincentian University.

Overall, Coach Carnesecca treated his players and assistant coaches like family. In following the Mission and many of the Core Values at St. John's University, it was not uncommon for his players to stop by his home and speak with his wife and family. (Berkow, March 24, 1983).

It was also not uncommon for his team to go out to an Italian restaurant for post game eggplant that Carnesecca loved. (Giles, March 9, 2016). In general, he was more than just a coach as his relationships would indicate. Coach Carnesecca gave of himself, beyond coaching basketball, to enhance the lives of his players post St. John's. This may be best stated by Chris Mullin during his first statement as the Head Coach of St. John's Basketball when he mentioned the following:

*..... There's not a day that doesn't go by that one of his lessons he (Lou Carnesecca) taught me that doesn't come up in my head. I always reflect back on my days at St. John's and a lot of them were basketball games ... You know those tough games against Georgetown... You know a lot of times how Coach handled losses stuck out to me more than the way he handled his wins. He taught me so much on how to conduct myself as a professional...* (Chris Mullin's First Statement, Youtube)

Overall, Coach Carnesecca was more than just a strategist and coach. To many, Coach Carnesecca was the embodiment of St. John's the Vincentian University of New York City. Coach Carnesecca not only understood St. John's University, its history and mission but he also loved St. John's.

In a recent television interview, Coach Carnesecca was asked the following question: "Who loves who more? Does St. John's Love Lou more or does Lou love St. John's more?" Coach Carnesecca immediately responded with the following: "Of course I love St. John's. It's home." (Retired St. John's Coach Lou Carnesecca, Youtube).

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Overall, executives must take note. Coach Carnesecca understood St. John's and loved St. John's. His passion not only for his work as a coach but as a representative for the institution was evident and his success is beyond the won / loss column.

Given Coach Carnesecca's professional success, such characteristics should be explored and seeked out within all organizations.

### **Professional Philosophy**

It can be stated that Coach Carnesecca had a simple and humble coaching philosophy. Overall, Coach Carnesecca, who played a Prototype System, believed in the following: (1) take good care of the ball (no turnovers); (2) play solid defense; and (3) play for the good shot. (From Redmen to Redstorm). It was a philosophy he learned from former St. John's coaches Frank McGuire and Joe Lapchick. (Sharing Knowledge).

Coach Carnesecca's simple approach could also be seen with the players that he recruited. More specifically, Coach Carnesecca "worked the New York City High School basketball scene" recruiting local talent to stay home and play for St. John's University which included Chris Mullin, Mark Jackson and Walter Berry. (Rochford, October 17, 2012). For example, Coach Carnesecca's great 1985 team was mostly comprised of local players who all played for and against each other in high school and summer leagues and had "familiarity". (Sharing Knowledge). St. John's would even capitalize on transfers more specifically New York City high school students who first went away for college but decided to transfer back to St. John's and play basketball for the Redstorm. Coach Carnesecca was also known to use local public transportation (i.e. subway or bus) for recruiting purposes. (Sharing Knowledge). Overall, Coach Carnesecca "stayed local" to capitalize on the New York City basketball talent.

In addition, coaching basketball was not just a job for Coach Carnesecca but rather a vocation. This can be seen in the following statement by Coach Carnesecca:

*It's my life. I didn't think about it as a job. It was a vocation. I loved it, that's all. I mean we had our problems. You had your bad days but it's a feeling you get when you step on that court. It's the laboratory and you love it and you think about it. You're consumed by this crazy coaching. You know sometimes you can be good and sometimes you can be bad but*

*it's a wonderful way. You are really able to express yourself.* (Retired St. John's Coach).

After Coach Carnesecca's stint with the Nets in the American Basketball Association he knew that college was a better fit for him as he loved to "teach the game." (Hall of Famer Lou Carnesecca, March 11, 2015).

It should also be noted that Coach Carnesecca was humble within his approach to coaching basketball. He realized the importance of recruiting "good players" and was not shy about their critical importance to his coaching success. Overall, Coach Carnesecca believed that players made up 70% of a team's performance and coaching only comprised 20%. He would also indicate that 5% to 10% of a coaches success was attributed to luck. (Sharing Knowledge).

Coach Carnesecca has professed this belief on multiple occasions. When Chris Mullin was hired as the coach of St. John's, Coach Carnesecca's advice was as follows: "I said this many times. Get good players. OK and handle them. That's it." (Lou Carnesecca on Chris Mullin). Regarding the great 1985 basketball team, Coach Carnesecca again took the humble route and stated the following about the great players on that squad: "I am not trying to belittle motherhood but my mother could of coached that team" and that people remember that team because of the "makeup of the players". (Sharing Knowledge).

Another example can be seen with after an exciting St. John's victory over Big East rival Syracuse University at Madison Square Garden. Coach Carnesecca was ecstatic with the win and was immediately interviewed on the court by a reporter. He stated "Let me tell you something, looks like nothing is going your way and these kids, they've been like this all year long." (Lou Carnesecca - The Godfather of St. John's, Youtube).

He further stated the following within another interview:

*It's always the players. They win the ball game.... Coaches are important, yes, but the players put the 'meat and potatoes' on the table. Respect is important. If you expect respect, give respect. They may differ sometimes with you ... they may differ with your philosophy but they can't differ if you are respectful to them. It's important. That's what makes a family.* (Lou Carnesecca - The Godfather of St. John's, Youtube).

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Overall, Coach Carnesecca strongly believed that players are more important than coaches. (Perez, October 2, 2013). His humility as a coach can be simply seen on how he would like his career to be remembered as ... "a coach who had good players". (Sharing Knowledge). In addition, it should be noted that Coach Carnesecca has a perspective that all can learn from. For example, throughout his career he always followed a piece of advice his coaching mentor, Joe Lapchick, gave him. More specifically, you may have a successful season this year and you are beloved however if the following season your performance slips then your perception among your fans changes quickly. The bottom line is that you cannot rest on your laurels and you must always keep working. Coach Lapchick referred to this phenomenon as "Peacock Today, Featherduster Tomorrow". It is a mantra that Coach Carnesecca followed throughout his career. (Perez, October 2, 2013). Coach Carnesecca also displayed a wise perspective upon his retirement. During one of his interviews upon his announcement, Coach Carnesecca stated the following:

*.... I think the time has come now. And why? Too very simple reasons. Number one, I still have half of my marbles and number two, I still have a wonderful taste in my mouth about basketball.* (From Redmen to Redstorm)

Overall, Coach Carnesecca knew when it was the right time to step away and he did so with class. Lastly, Coach Carnesecca displays a level of gratitude that is worth noting. When discussing his coaching success, he refers to the importance of being at the "right place at the right time." (Retired St. John's Coach Lou Carnesecca). Toward the end of his signature 1985 season, Coach Carnesecca stated the following:

*I don't even know if I'll ask God to give me another year like this one... If I were to stop coaching tomorrow, I'll say, Hey, my cup is pretty filled'.* (Hersh, February 27, 1985)

When recently reflecting on that same 1985 final four season, Coach Carnesecca stated the following:

*I think (winning a championship) would've been a wonderful thing for the team, for the players, for the alumni, faculty..... But you know the world, as it is, is wonderful.* (Perez, Oct 2, 2013)

In closing, Coach Lou Carnesecca's professional philosophy is worth noting and executives

should take note. Coach Carnesecca was humble and he greatly appreciated his players. He also had a simple and direct strategy on the court and capitalized on the local talent. Overall, humility, appreciation and focus led to his success. Such characteristics are transferable to all functions and industries.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to illustrate what executives and working professionals can learn from Lou Carnesecca, the legendary Hall of Fame Coach from St. John's University, that goes beyond basketball. As one can see, some takeaways from this research include that Coach Carnesecca was charismatic, lovable and had a unique professional philosophy.

In addition, Coach Carnesecca understood the St. John's brand and loved St. John's University. Such lessons are very important for all working professionals looking to develop the management and leadership skills of their peers within their industry. In terms of application in sports, Coach Carnesecca had an outstanding coaching career and he was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

He obviously knew the technical component of coaching basketball. (i.e. the Xs and Os). However, what made him a legendary and special figure was not just his knowledge of the game but so much more. Coach Carnesecca possessed human qualities beyond coaching that made him an endearing figure and defined his personal brand. All professionals, including athletes, should take note in that all can learn from Coach Carnesecca's journey.

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