

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

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## SPORTS

# Didinger sails away from his own spotlight

By Mike Sielski  
Staff Columnist



**R**ay Didinger is gone. Gone on vacation, gone to the other side of the world, gone to places he has never been before and will never visit again.

He and his wife, Maria, left last Sunday on a five-month Magellan-like cruise, a journey to Bora Bora, to the Hawaiian Islands, to

New Zealand and Tasmania, to the Far East, to Canada and Alaska and back home again to their 15th-floor apartment in Center City.

He will not be in Philadelphia to watch Super Bowl LX — a prospect, given the very real possibility that the Eagles will return to the big game and win it again, that once would have been unthinkable. Didinger, after all, is regarded as the foremost authority on the franchise and its history, having covered, commented on, and written comprehensive books about the Eagles over his half-century-plus in journalism and media.

He also wrote a play tied to the Eagles, *Tommy and Me*, about his relationship with Hall of Fame wide receiver Tommy McDonald, and the play is the thing that makes the

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# Didinger

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timing of his once-in-a-lifetime trip so ironic. Ten years after *Tommy and Me*'s debut, *Boys to Fame* — a documentary/feature film, produced by Sam Katz, about Didinger, his play, and McDonald — became available for purchase and viewing on Sunday morning.

Didinger, a week into his journey, isn't around for the release. And there was no chance he would be.

"I would rather be here to help Sam promote it as best I could," he said before embarking on the cruise. "But this trip has been two years in the making, so there was no way to be here and tell Maria, 'Honey, we've got trip insurance. Let's just bag this thing.' It's a long fall from the 15th floor to Locust Street."

Katz, 76, has seen his career evolve into multiple iterations that he maintains simultaneously: a player in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania politics — he ran for mayor three times — a venture capitalist, and a filmmaker. Through his company, History Making Productions, he has produced documentaries about Philadelphia's filmmaking history, the rise of classical music in China, and one about Detroit's bankruptcy, *Gradually, Then Suddenly*, which in 2021 won the Library of Congress' Lavine/Ken Burns Prize for Film.

When he saw *Tommy and Me* in 2016, its first run, he thought the play was worthy of film treatment — a film about the play and Didinger, that is. "The play itself was powerful, emotional, and a really incredible story of a relationship between two men," he said. "I felt that a feel-good story like this would be timely,



**Ray Didinger, a longtime Eagles historian, is the subject of the documentary *Boys to Fame*, which explores his relationship with Hall of Fame receiver Tommy McDonald. David Maialetti / Staff Photographer**

and I still feel that way."

He worried, though, that funding such a project would be a challenge.

His other documentaries, historical and, to some degree, educational in nature, lent themselves to philanthropic contributions. A film delving into the life of a sportswriter, even one as well-known and locally admired as Didinger, required Katz to find private investors — and contribute money himself.

He found a group willing to back the film, former City Councilmember Allan Domb and Bullpen Capital founder Paul Martino among them, and decided, instead of pursuing a deal with a streaming service or television station, to release the film independently. It will be available on a website, [boystofame.com](http://boystofame.com), on a pay-per-view basis — "I'm selling it direct to the Philadelphia

sports fan," Katz said — and he hopes to generate attention and interest through grassroots media coverage and screenings at film festivals and private clubs.

The 82-minute film covers topics, features voices, and reveals details and emotions that *Tommy and Me*, by its singular focus on the big brother/little brother dynamic between McDonald and Didinger and on Didinger's efforts to get McDonald into the Hall of Fame, didn't and couldn't.

Katz interviewed Didinger for more than five hours, talked to all four of McDonald's children and several members of his Hall of Fame class, and even tracked down Billie Jo Boyajian, who was McDonald's Queen's Court escort at the 1998 induction weekend — and whom McDonald scooped up in his arms and carried to the stage

during the Hall of Fame dinner.

(In a fascinating side note, Boyajian pleaded guilty last January to charges of theft, forgery, and misuse of credit cards while she was the treasurer of a Canton high school basketball booster club. Katz had interviewed her for *Boys to Fame* years earlier.)

The documentary bookends McDonald's life and Didinger's. It directly confronts the fact that in 2021, three years after his death at 84, McDonald was diagnosed with the brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy, commonly known as CTE.

They also provided him with a video of McDonald's reaction — joyful tears, dozens of thank-yous, and thank-Gods — when he received the phone call to tell him that he finally would be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

"I've seen it a hundred times, and I still get a lump in my throat," Didinger said, "because it's so raw and real and so true to the guy I know."

To Katz, though, it was important to give Didinger's background and story — his childhood in Southwest Philadelphia, his careers at *The Bulletin* and *The Daily News*, NFL Films and WIP and NBC Sports Philadelphia — as much weight as McDonald's. To recreate Didinger's youth, Katz took over *The Barn*, a pub near his vacation home in Eagles Mere, Pa., for two days and transformed it into Didinger's grandfather's bar, the place where Didinger, as a kid, spent hours wowing patrons with his encyclopedic Eagles knowledge. Katz hired several of *The Barn*'s regulars and a 10-year-old boy, none of whom had

acted before, to star in the film.

To depict the vacations that Didinger's family would take to Hershey each summer to watch the Eagles at training camp, Katz coaxed a collector of antique cars to bring three 1955 vehicles to the Eagles Mere community center. "I insisted on everything being better," he said.

The most poignant moments of the film come when Didinger describes in depth his last visit with McDonald, on the day before McDonald died.

"Sam kept telling me, 'For this thing to work, I need you to open your kimono,'" Didinger said. "That was the hardest and least comfortable aspect for me, but that day Tommy and I spent together had to be talked about."

In the film's final scene, Didinger and his son, David, sit together on the couch in Ray's home, watching an Eagles game. On Feb. 8, the day of this year's Super Bowl, the Didingers' cruise ship is scheduled to be off the coast of New Caledonia.

If the Eagles do make it to Santa Clara, Calif., for the big game, it would hardly be surprising if Ray stood atop the bow, hurled himself into the South Pacific, washed up on the beach in Sea Isle City, and was in front of his TV, pen and yellow legal pad in hand, by kickoff. Sorry, but that would be a better ending to the doc. Prepare accordingly for a reshoot, Mr. Katz.

*Columnist's note: In the interest of full disclosure, I succeeded Didinger as a WIP cohost in July 2022, and I appear briefly in the documentary.*

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