

Vincent Cannizzaro, legendary Christ the King basketball coach, dead at 82

By

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Billy Donovan reveals most impresses him most about Julian Phillips

Vincent Cannizzaro, a mammoth figure in New York City girls basketball and the former coach at Christ The King High School, died on Saturday evening after a battle with cancer. He was 82.

Cannizzaro, a New York State Basketball Hall of Famer, earned 456 wins across 19 seasons at Christ The King, winning 16 consecutive Brooklyn Diocesan titles.

“Vinny Cannizzaro was the high school Pat Summit,” Bob Mackey, Cannizzaro’s former assistant coach and current Christ the King coach, told The Post over the phone Sunday. “He changed the game. He changed the way everybody looked at the game. He just really took the game and made it better for all the kids. And the respect that he had among college coaches, among high school coaches, AAU coaches, was immeasurable.”



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Vincent Cannizzaro, the former Christ the King girls basketball coach, has died at the age of 82. NY Basketball Hall of Fame

Cannizzaro left Christ The King in 1999 but never stopped working. Even last year, Cannizzaro was running a camp, Mackey said.

“It was always something going on,” Mackey said. “And he really did make a difference. Where girls basketball was back in the '80s to where it is today is incredible, the change. And a lot of it is attributed to Vincent Cannizzaro.”

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Cannizzaro began coaching at Christ The King in 1981, having done so at the boys CYO level for 20 years prior at St. Mary Gate of Heaven parish in Ozone Park, when someone

was needed to step in during a strike in the Catholic schools and his daughter, Lisa, was a player on the team.

Cannizzaro made his mark from that start.



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Christ the King high school. Christ the King High School/Facebook



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Vincent Cannizzaro posing with a number of his former players. Courtesy of the Cannizzaro family.

“He started us out right away with better competition,” Lisa Cannizzaro said. “That very first year we traveled to Boston on a very low budget to play a team from there. He started changing the culture of high school basketball even back then.”

Cannizzaro was initially the temporary coach, but his daughter knew that title likely wasn’t going to last long — saying the “interim tag lasted 19 seasons.”

“I didn’t know it would be this wonderful, but I knew he was something special as a coach,” she said. “You have no idea how many people still talk about him even [from] years ago and what impact he’s had on them.”

A retired police detective, Cannizzaro also founded an AAU team, the Liberty Belles.

The results soon followed.

He led Christ The King to 12 New York State Catholic High School and 10 consecutive New York State Federation championships.

His teams were thrice declared national champions by USA Today, with Sue Bird and Chamique Holdsclaw among those who came through the program.

“Vinny was the architect of the Christ The King program,” Mackey said. “He designed it, he built it. ... He made an impact on women’s basketball that is immeasurable. He took the girls high school game and made it better for every girl that plays basketball today. And he made a difference.”



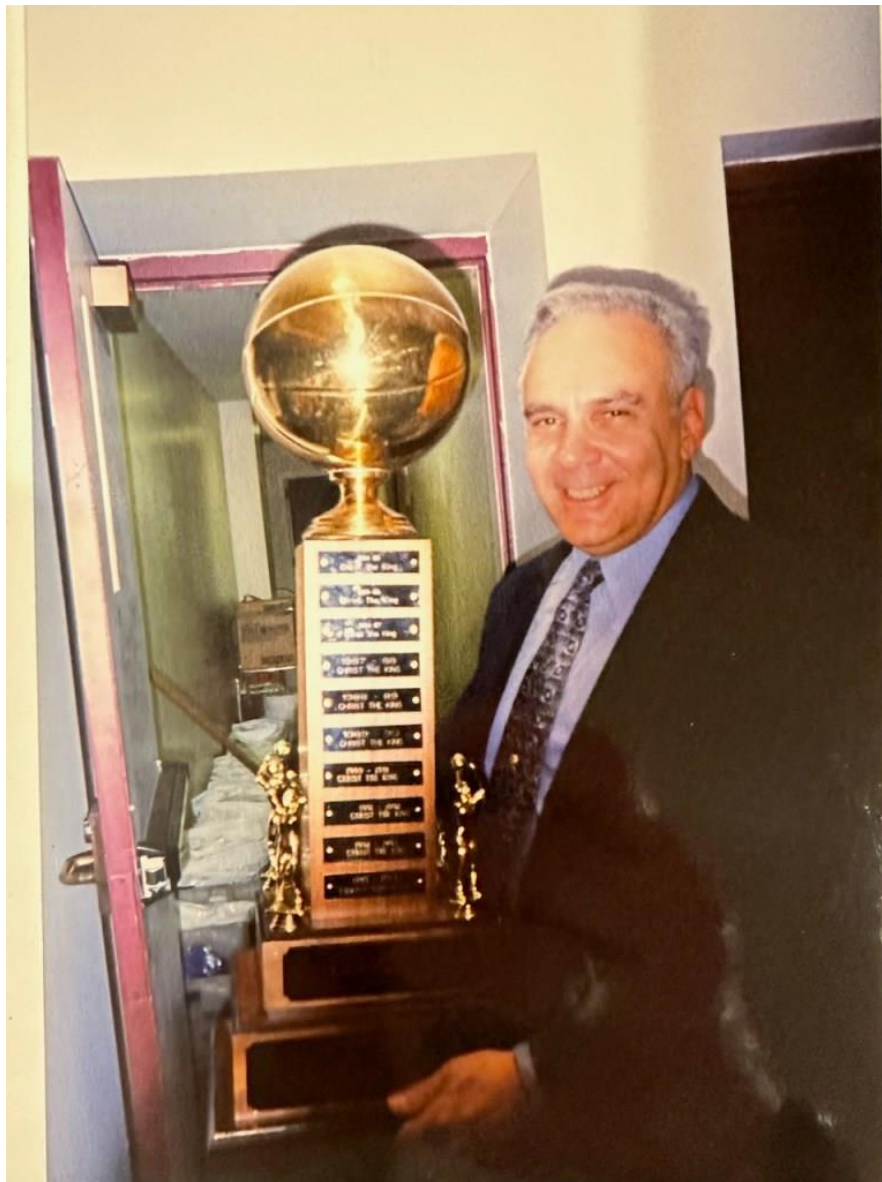
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Vincent Cannizzaro (right) and Christ the King celebrate a state championship. Courtesy of Christ the King.

To Jill Cook, who both played for and was a longtime assistant to Cannizzaro at Christ the King, that meant pushing the boundaries of what was being done in girls basketball as the team began playing a national schedule. He took the team to California and Canada during her two seasons on the varsity.

“If there was any team we could realistically travel to whether it was in Boston or Scranton, Pennsylvania, or Ohio or Florida, he wanted the school on our schedule”

After leaving Christ The King, Cannizzaro was an assistant coach at Stony Brook for four seasons. He later ran the Vincent Cannizzaro National Recruiting Report and was inducted into the New York State Basketball Hall of Fame in 2008. Basketball was always a big part of his life.



Vincent Cannizzaro holds the CHSAA Brooklyn/Queens championship trophy. Courtesy of the Cannizzaro family

“I still can’t believe he’s not gonna call me tomorrow and say, ‘Hey, let’s drive to Jersey and watch seven basketball games tomorrow,’” Cook said. “The man could sit in a gym

for 12 hours and not only sit in a gym but be completely engulfed in the nuances of every game going.”

Cannizzaro is survived by his wife, Carol, and three children, seven grandchildren and five great grandchildren. Details on Cannizzaro’s funeral service were not immediately available.

“We grew up in two-family house, my grandmother lived downstairs, we lived upstairs,” Lisa Cannizzaro said. “He was NYPD. He would work midnight to eight when we were little and he would come and go to the beach in the summer. Family was everything to my dad. He said, ‘No matter what in life, Lisa, family always comes first. That was true even till the end.”