

ODE TO RED SMITH

(A Thank You to a Loyal Friend)

Fight Nite

This was Friday, January 15, 1982. My radio was tuned to KYW-News radio. (KYW - honored call letters in Philadelphia radio history.) Click-clack-click - bulletin - 4:25 P.M.... "Red Smith, sports writer of The New York Times is dead at 76. Repeat, Red Smith, sports writer of The New York Times is dead at 76."

What thoughts awaken as I say the name, Red Smith, and distance seems to fade and he is near me as I pray the name, again, Red Smith.

Before I realized it, I was crying. "God love you, cherished friend of mine as I yearn to love you."

I recall when Red got a call telling him a friend, a contemporary, had died, Smith would get himself a drink.

I had to do it, too.

I walked over and got myself a drink and turned my radio to WOR-New York and the Ole' Clevelander, Charley Steiner gave his sports report, "A sad note, my favorite sports writer, the greatest of my era, Red Smith, died. Red didn't have an enemy. Red Smith - the best."

This tourist having just finished writing a letter to Larry Speakes, President Reagan's press secretary, I added a P.S. - "Red Smith was a superior human being, the unrivaled scribe."

Red loved what he did with knowledge, youthful enthusiasm, intensity, feeling and affection. The epitome of the sportswriter - "I have never heard of a better way to live, but, you've got to keep pounding out that column."

When Grantland Rice died, Red wrote, "Granny's wisdom, his kindness, his faith, his friendship.... Rice wrote of the men he loved and deeds he admired and never knew how much bigger he was than his finest hero." Red never realized it then but he was really writing about himself. Smith never understood today's fashionable muck-writing.

I have been saving Red Smith's columns from 1945 - every column is just Red talking, stories, people, deeds and yarns told with warmth, much affection and humor.

Red was a gentle-man. Genuine. The fact that our dear friend of long standing always had time to help, to encourage another, especially a "young rookie", ("young stranger" as Jack O'Brian of King Features and radio station WOR-New York likes to call young upcoming talent in our dodge) is legend.

When Red's father died, Red sent me the following note, "My father was the finest man I ever knew. I only hope to live and die as my dad did." He did.

We had the opportunity to get to know a telegrapher in the Rose Bowl press box who handled the copy for the sports writers from around the country for over 40 years and we asked him, "Who was the finest gentleman you served and got to know in our 'dodge'?" He answered without hesitation - "Red Smith."

My own favorite Red Smith story is about Ted Williams. When Ted came back from Korea, President Eisenhower wanted Ted to come to the White House. Williams said invite the team. They weren't and Ted didn't.

In November of 1980, Red Smith was at a Bobo Newsom fan club meeting in Greenwich Village, New York. Ted DiTullio gave out copies of his list of four-decade players. Red asked, "Is Elmer Valo on the list?" Valo was not on the list, but Smith said, technically, Elmer belongs. In late 1939, just about the last game of that season, Smith was covering the Philadelphia Athletics. (Connie Mack was always one of Red's favorite subjects in his columns. He also covered the old St. Louis Cardinals famed Gas House Gang teams for the St. Louis Star.) Valo walked and was pinch-run for. The problem was that Elmer wasn't signed to a major-league contract. Judge K.M. Landis, then the baseball commissioner severely reprimanded manager Connie Mack for using Valo. But the ol' judge didn't fine the Athletics. Valo's name does not appear in the box score, so he doesn't make the four-decade list, though as Red points out, Valo belongs, technically.

Three sportswriters have earned the Pulitzer Prize - Arthur Daley, Red Smith and Dave Anderson. All three have by-lined and represented The New York Times.

Walter Wellesley Smith was born September 25, 1905 in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Graduate of Notre Dame University, 1927, started with the Milwaukee Sentinel. St. Louis Star, 1928, Philadelphia Record, 1936, a columnist, "Views of Sport", N.Y. Herald Tribune syndication, 1945 through 1966. The Women's Wear Daily was his home base for syndication till 1971 when he joined The New York Times at 66. He worked there till he died at 76. The New York Times got a real good ten years of his best stuff - "Sports of the Times."

On December 25, 1967, datelined Green Bay, Red wrote "Celebrating a White Christmas here today - the sports champions. It is an article of faith with the Packer-backer that there is but one Vince Lombardi and Bart Starr is his prophet."

Smith is the author of six extra-ordinarily good books. Views of Sport, 1954; Out of the Red, 1950; Best of Red Smith, 1954; Red Smith's Sports Annual; Red Smith on Fishing Around the World, 1963; The Saturday Evening Post Sport Stories, edited, and with an introduction by Red Smith, 1949.

In August of 1982, Red Smith's To Absent Friends was published by Atheneum. The Red Smith Reader, edited by Dave Anderson was published by Random House.

Two of my own favorite columns of Red are, "My Press Box Memories" by Red Smith, Esquire, 1975 and Harold Rosenthal's "Portrait of a Prize Reporter", The Sporting News, 11/7/56.

The Associated Press sports editors established the Red Smith Award to honor long and meritorious service to the profession of sports writing. The first recipient was Red Smith in June, 1981.

Harold Keith, University of Oklahoma sports information publicist, told me, "I always wanted an audience with Red Smith and finally got it in 1962, when Red came to the Oklahoma University press box at Norman to cover Oklahoma vs. Syracuse. I enjoyed introducing Red to everyone in our Oklahoma University sports information office."

When I guest on talk shows, the two most frequently-asked questions are, "Name your favorite sports and show people." My answers are always Red Smith and Gene Autry. The finest I've gotten to know and love on my circuit coverage through many, many very happy years. Autry is the epitome of the American cowboy, Smith, the epitome of the sportswriter. Both uncommon - yet kept the common touch. Admired and loved by fans the world over. For example, Red Smith got Christmas cards from famous and important people coast-to-coast yet he remembered receiving one from me!! We corresponded through the years.

Red, like his dearest friend, Grantland Rice, worked right up till death. "Baseball is dull... only for dull minds." "Baseball... meat and potatoes sport." "Talked about during the season and the rest of the way." - Red Smith.

"Blessed are they who know the ways to bring back the yesterdays." Red Smith did it - to the ultimate. Gene Kelly, voice of the Philadelphia Phillies, knew how.