

# Introduction

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*Writing a column is like opening a vein and letting the words bleed out, drip by drip.”*

—Red Smith, *New York Times*

**P**eople ask why I never wear a wristwatch. They are surprised that someone who spent his life in journalism—a world defined by deadlines—would not want to know the time.

“Well,” I say, “it’s a long story.”

That’s my problem. Every story is a long story. Even short stories become long stories because that’s how I write them.

I . . . write . . . verry . . . sloooooowly.

In twenty-seven years in the newspaper business, I never missed a deadline, but I teetered on the brink almost every night. My editors have the gray hairs and nicotine patches to prove it.

For a while, I did wear a watch, but it only made things worse. I would check the time and see that another hour had passed. I’d feel the sweat trickle down my neck. I could hear the sweep of the second hand as it cut through the stillness of a deserted press box.

Two hours to deadline. One hour to deadline. I would be all alone staring at a blank sheet of paper, hearing the tick, tick, tick of precious time slipping away.

I thought the watch was part of the problem. I felt if I did away with that distraction, I would write faster. I removed the watch, but when I sat down to write, nothing had changed. The words still came out in a slow, painful drip like molasses poured through a strainer. I had to accept the fact it was my own sluggish muse that was at fault, and, sad to say, it wasn’t likely to improve.

Still, I left the watch at home. I learned to keep time by the rhythms of the stadium. The game would end. The clean-up crew would come and go. The security guards would change shifts. I knew their schedules by heart. I was the last writer to file every night, but I never missed an edition.

There was one night, however, when I almost didn’t make it. It was the final game of the 1979 World Series. Willie Stargell had just led the Pittsburgh Pirates to victory in a dramatic game seven in Baltimore. I decided to take the press bus back to the hotel and write my story there. I had until 6:30 in the morning to file my column to the *Philadelphia Bulletin*. Plenty of time, even for me.

Stargell had just culminated the finest season of his Hall of Fame career with a Most Valuable Player (MVP) performance in the World Series. As he savored the victory in the Pirates clubhouse, his sister Sandra burst through the crowd to embrace him. “I’m so proud of you,” she said. It was a wonderful moment that ended with brother and sister sobbing on each other’s shoulders.

I took a long time writing that column, selecting just the right words to describe a memorable night. Hours passed. Then I noticed an odd glow in the room. It was the sun peeking through the curtains.

“Oh, my God,” I thought. “What time is it?”

I didn’t have a watch, and I was afraid to look at the clock. I just started writing as fast as I could. Of all the days to blow deadline: game seven of the World Series. As I wrote the last line, the telephone rang. It was Bob Wright, the assistant sports editor, calling from the office.

“Are you going to file soon?” he asked.

Bob had placed these calls before, tracking me down in hotel rooms from Clearwater to Calgary, checking on the status of my column. His tone was usually calm and comforting, although the mere fact that he felt the need to call suggested the hour was late.

This time I could hear the anxiety in his voice, which was a very bad sign.

“Yeah, Bob,” I said. “I finished the column. I’m giving it one last read.”

I tried my best to sound as though I had everything under control, but the guys in the office were not fooled. They knew me all too well. I could hear someone in the background shouting: “Right (expletive) now. Tell him he has to send it right (expletive) now. I don’t care if it’s finished or not.”

I filed the column without looking at the clock. To this day, I don’t know what time it was. I was too shaken to sleep, so I checked out of the hotel and drove back to Philadelphia. I still wasn’t sure my story made it into the paper. There was always the chance the transmission was garbled or the editors tired of waiting and ran a wire-service story in my place. I would not have blamed them if they did.

It wasn’t until I picked up a copy of the *Bulletin* that afternoon and saw my column (“Pittsburgh’s Pops: Best of the Best”) that I was able to breathe again.

I don’t know why I was such a slow writer. To explain it would require taking apart my writing mechanism and inspecting it as if it were a faulty snow blower. That’s not how writing works. There are no moving parts to oil, no valves to replace, no wires to connect. If it were that easy, I would have gone in for servicing years ago.

Writing is an art. It flows from the imagination, and it flows faster for some people than it does for others. The great Red Smith, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist of the *New York Times*, once said: “I love my job, but I find one of the disadvantages is the several hours I spend at the typewriter each day. That’s how I pay for this nice job. And I pay dearly. I sweat. I bleed. I’m a slow writer.”

Red was a slow writer, but I was slower. At my first Super Bowl in January 1971, I still was fumbling for a lead on my game story when Red filed his column. I was the last writer to leave the press box that night. In fact, I was the last writer to leave the press box at every Super Bowl from V to XXX, and I'm sure the streak would have continued if I had not left newspapers for my current job as a producer with NFL Films in 1996.

I was locked in almost every stadium in North America. The security guards would assume that by 6 A.M., everyone was gone, so they would bolt the doors and turn out the lights. As a result, I often had to find my way out in the dark. After years in the business, I knew every fire escape and catwalk from Yankee Stadium to Candlestick Park. I scaled walls, crawled under fences, and outran guard dogs, all while carrying a briefcase and portable typewriter.

At Veterans Stadium, there was an elevator from the press box to the street level, which sounds very convenient, except, like many things at the Vet, it often broke down. If I finished writing in the wee hours of the morning, rather than risk being trapped on the elevator for hours, I would walk down the deserted ramps, listening to the rats scurry through the garbage.

Once after an Eagles Monday night loss in 1976, I was walking through the darkened concourse when I bumped into someone coming the other way. It was Dick Vermeil, then a rookie head coach, who was already notorious for working around the clock. He was so deep in thought he did not even recognize me at first. The pain of the 20–17 loss to the Washington Redskins was still etched in his face. He looked like he had been walking all night.

“I didn't know sportswriters worked so late,” Vermeil said.

“Only me,” I said. “It takes me a while.”

I envied the writers who could dash off a readable column on deadline. Bill Lyon of the *Inquirer*, Stan Hochman of the *Daily News*, and Mark Whicker of the *Bulletin* (and later the *Daily News*) had the wonderful gift of writing both quickly and well. All three of them could knock out a column in less than an hour, and it would read as though they had labored over it for days.

I once shared a Florida condominium with Whicker during a Phillies spring training. One afternoon, Mark wrote his game story, a sidebar, and a two-thousand-word piece on college basketball while I was trying to finish my column. He played two sets of tennis, came back to the room, and I was still writing. He went to dinner, came back, and found me still hunched over my computer. I finished just in time to catch the end of the eleven o'clock news.

After three days, Mark stopped asking: “Are you almost done?” By then he knew the answer. It was always, “No.”

Doug Todd, the former publicity director of the Dallas Cowboys, gave me the nickname “Dawn Patrol.” Doug was in charge of media transportation at several Super Bowls, which meant he had to draw up two post-game itineraries: one for the two thousand or so accredited reporters assigned to cover the

game; the other for me. I was at least one hour behind the next slowest writer, so Doug usually kept one bus waiting just for me.

Super Bowl XXI was the worst. The New York Giants defeated the Denver Broncos, 39–20, at the Rose Bowl. I spent nine hours laboring over a column about Giants quarterback Phil Simms. At 2 A.M., Pacific time, there were only three people left in the press tent—Doug, a very irritated bus driver, and myself—and I wasn't even close to being finished.

“Go ahead,” I said, “I'll find my own way back.”

“Are you sure?” Doug asked.

“Yeah, don't wait for me.”

I finished my column an hour later and called for a taxi. The driver was thrilled when I told him I was going to Anaheim. That was a \$95 ride from Pasadena, not counting the tip.

When I turned in my expense account, my editor asked about the cab fare. “Why didn't you take the press bus?” he asked. I told him I missed it.

“You missed *all* the press buses?” he said.

I nodded.

“You have to start writing faster,” he said.

I promised to try, but I knew it was impossible. I had been trying to write faster for almost twenty years, ever since my first road trip with the Eagles in 1970. I was twenty-three years old, a wide-eyed rookie on the football beat, when the Eagles went to Buffalo for their pre-season opener. It was a nothing game between two nothing teams, but I was determined to compose a masterpiece.

By the time I finished writing—and it wasn't a masterpiece—they had turned off the lights in War Memorial Stadium. If it hadn't been for a compassionate security guard who stood behind me with a flashlight, I might still be there. “Why does it take you so long?” he asked. I explained I was new on the job, so I was taking great pains to make sure I got everything just right. I thought I would get faster with experience, but I never did.

Part of the reason, I suppose, is I spent most of my life working for afternoon newspapers. That meant I had all night to write. If an Eagles game ended at 4 P.M., I had twelve hours to file a game story and a sidebar. I used all of it—writing, rewriting, and polishing. I became a slow writer, basically, because the P.M. deadlines allowed it.

If I had worked for a morning paper, I would have been forced to write faster. I know I could have done it. There were times at the *Bulletin* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* when stories broke late at night, and I'd write a one-thousand-word column on deadline. I did it because I had to. But if I had more time, I'd use it.

It didn't always make the finished product better. At Super Bowl XX, I was assigned two stories: one was a column on Buddy Ryan, Chicago's defensive coordinator who was about to be named head coach of the Eagles; the other

was a sidebar on Walter Payton, the great running back who finally won his first NFL championship.

I spent almost ten hours laboring over the Ryan column. It was 5 A.M., Philadelphia time, when I filed it. The editor said, “You know you’re on the schedule for a Payton story, too.”

“I’ll start it right away,” I said.

“We need a twenty-inch story, and we need it in twenty minutes,” he said.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

I grabbed a few quotes from my notebook, a couple stats from the play-by-play sheets, and slapped them together. I hit the “send” button with two minutes to spare. The story was a total blur. I just knew it was done and on time.

The next day, I bumped into one of the *Daily News* editors. “Nice piece on Walter Payton,” he said. Nothing about the column I spent the whole night writing. He liked the sidebar I had dashed off in eighteen minutes. There is a moral in there somewhere.

This book is a collection of my writings, mostly from the *Bulletin* and *Daily News*. It spans more than thirty years and represents countless hours spent at the keyboard. It isn’t about one sport or one athlete. It is more like a portrait gallery, dozens of individual pieces, each one capturing a different face and a different moment in time. Some are heroic; others, tragic, but I remember them all. In many ways, they define my life.

I reread hundreds of columns to select the ones that appear in this book. It was like revisiting the old neighborhood, it brought back so many memories. I smiled when I saw a January 1981 column previewing the Eagles–Cowboys NFC championship game. I described sitting with Tex Schramm, the Cowboys’ president, when his secretary handed him a wire from the NFL office. It read: “Please be advised the Philadelphia Eagles will wear their white jerseys in Sunday’s championship game.”

That meant the visiting Cowboys would have to wear their blue jerseys, which they considered bad luck. Schramm’s smile dissolved into a “What-the-(expletive)?” scowl.

“How many times have the Eagles worn white at home this year?” he asked.

“This will be the first,” I said.

Schramm growled, “White jerseys. Blue jerseys. I’m glad that’s all they have to think about with a championship game coming up.”

The final score was White Jerseys, 20; Blue Jerseys, 7. Did the colors make a difference? Probably not, but so what? The look on Schramm’s face made it all worthwhile. I mentioned it to Dick Vermeil, later and he smiled.

“That’s what we were hoping for,” he said.

There were painful memories, as well. For example, the July day in 1981 when I was writing the Jim Tyrer story in a Kansas City hotel room. Suddenly, the afternoon calm was shattered by the wail of sirens. I looked out the

window and saw dozens of police cars, fire engines, and ambulances pulling into the Hyatt Hotel across the street.

I did what any reporter would have done. I grabbed my notebook and ran into the Hyatt. I will never forget the sight. A skyway had collapsed into the lobby. There were 114 people dead and more than 200 injured. I spent hours on the scene, interviewing rescue workers and survivors. That night I dictated a story to the *Daily News* city desk.

Just nine months earlier, I was in the same hotel, writing about the Phillies–Royals World Series. Now I was piecing together the details of the worst structural disaster in U. S. history. That is the nature of a reporter’s life. It is unpredictable, often wrenchingly so. My journalism career was a long, winding journey across four decades, and the stories you will find in this book are like the oversize postcards I wrote along the way.

An older fan will find moments that are familiar but worth reliving. Garry Maddox catching the final out in the Houston Astrodome, lifting the Phillies to the 1980 World Series. The Eagles celebrating their championship win over Dallas. A younger fan who wasn’t around for the Flyers’ Stanley Cup parade or the Miracle of the Meadowlands can learn how it all unfolded. I was there, and I will give you the whole story.

But slowly, always slowly.

I can’t tell it any other way.

The thought first hit me on August 1, 1998, while I was riding in an open convertible through Canton, Ohio. The sun was shining. There were two hundred thousand people lining the streets. There were twenty-three marching bands in front of me, twenty-one spectacular floats behind me, and my boyhood idol, Tommy McDonald, was sitting alongside me.

All I could think was, “How did I get so lucky?”

It should have occurred to me years before, when I was given the opportunity to do the thing I loved—write about sports—in the city where I was born and raised. It should have crossed my mind hundreds of times when I found myself in the company of people like Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, Jack Nicklaus, Gordie Howe, Joe Montana, Jim Brown, and Don Shula.

I’ll never forget the day I sat with John Unitas in his kitchen talking about the 1958 NFL championship game. I was with NFL Films at the time, and we were working on a documentary about the Hall of Fame quarterback. The crew was in another room setting up the lights for the interview, so I was alone with Unitas as he ate his morning Wheaties. How could I not ask about the ’58 championship, the historic game in which Unitas led the Baltimore Colts to their first world title and lifted pro football to the top of the American sports marquee?

I asked Unitas if he was nervous on the drive to the winning touchdown. It was, after all, football's first sudden-death overtime, uncharted water even for the great Unitas.

"You're only nervous if you don't know what you're doing," he said. "I knew what I was doing."

It should have dawned on me then—how lucky I was to be in that position, talking to a legend and seeing in his eyes exactly what it was that made him great. But at the time, I didn't see the bigger picture. I was in my reporter mode: This is my job, this is what I do. I meet people, I ask questions and for almost thirty years, one story just followed the next.

But that day in Canton changed everything. For the first time, I took a step back. I reflected on where I was and what I was doing; Tommy McDonald had asked me to be his presenter at the Pro Football Hall of Fame. I would stand on the steps of the hall and deliver a speech about the great receiver I once chased for an autograph at the Eagles' training camp in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

"How did I get so lucky?"

I asked myself that question a thousand times.

I grew up in Philadelphia, which meant I grew up loving the Eagles. They were there every Sunday when I awoke, like the church bells and Blondie. Our family would go to mass; then we would go the Eagles game, and I couldn't tell where the religion left off and the football began. For me, it was all part of the same ritual.

I went to my first Eagles game in 1956. I was ten years old, and the team was playing at Connie Mack Stadium. We rode to the games on a bus chartered by my grandfather. He owned a bar on Woodland Avenue in Southwest Philadelphia called Ray's Tavern. He was the original Ray Didinger. The name was handed down to my father and me, along with a passion for sports. Each year, my grandfather ordered a block of Eagles season tickets for his patrons. My father, my mother, and I tagged along. Every Sunday morning, we piled aboard the bus with our hoagies and our hope.

There were usually about forty people on the bus. My mother, grandmother, and aunt were the only women, so they sat up front. My father and I sat a few rows back. The men who rode with us were all working-class guys from the neighborhood, burly cigar smokers with names like Big Don, Old Gus, and Whitey the Milkman. Some of them struggled to come up with the \$18 for their season tickets (six home games, \$3 per game), but they were always there, sitting in the same seats every Sunday.

One of the regulars was Johnny Hayes, a former boxer with a raspy voice and a cauliflower ear. He liked nothing better than needling my grandfather.

"You know, Ray," he'd say, "for a few more bucks, you could get a driver who actually has a license."

"Don't start, John," my grandfather would say.

The bus would rock with laughter.

I remember walking into Connie Mack Stadium for the first time, seeing the field, hearing the band, and feeling my heart leap. I fell in love with football at that moment. The Eagles won the game, 13–9, over the Washington Redskins, one of only three games they would win that season. It was played in a driving rain; we were soaked to the skin, and I didn't care. I was having the time of my life.

In 1957, the Eagles drafted Tommy McDonald from the University of Oklahoma. He was the smallest man on the field at five-foot-nine, 172 pounds, and he bounced around with the exuberance of a schoolboy at recess. I loved watching him.

Every Sunday, they would introduce the starting lineups. One by one, the players would jog through a gantlet of drummers and baton twirlers. Then the public-address announcer would say: "At flanker, number 25, from Oklahoma . . ." and Tommy would charge onto the field in a full sprint. We never heard his name announced because it was always drowned out by the cheers rolling down from the upper deck.

In the five seasons from 1958 through 1962, Tommy scored fifty-six touchdowns in sixty-three games, including the 1960 NFL championship game against Green Bay. The Eagles defeated the Packers, 17–13, and I was there in Section EE at Franklin Field. Tommy scored the first Eagles touchdown right in front of me, catching a thirty-five-yard pass from quarterback Norm Van Brocklin. I've carried that memory with me ever since.

Years later, after I became a sportswriter, I was named to the Hall of Fame selection committee. I began a personal campaign to get Tommy into the hall, not because he was my boyhood hero, but because I felt a player with eighty-four career touchdown receptions deserved enshrinement. Tommy heard about my efforts and called to say thanks.

"If I ever get in," he said, "I want you to be my presenter."

In 1998, thirty years after his retirement, Tommy finally was voted into the Hall of Fame. He kept his promise: He asked me to be his presenter. As we rode together in the parade, he said: "This never would've happened if it wasn't for you." He gave me a tearful hug, and that's when it struck me: what a billion-to-one shot this was.

Growing up, everyone has a hero, but for most people, that hero remains an image on a poster or a bubble-gum card. If you're lucky, you might get an autograph one day or maybe a quick handshake, but that's it. As a fan, you never expect to step across that line and into their world. Yet here I was, riding in the Hall of Fame parade with Tommy McDonald and sharing in his finest hour.

Lucky?

You bet.

On some level, I think I always felt it. That's one reason why I was such a slow writer. I was grateful for the opportunity to make a living writing about sports, so each time I sat at the keyboard, I wanted to do the best possible job. If that meant writing all night, so be it.

I grew up reading the *Philadelphia Bulletin*—in particular, Sandy Grady's sports columns and Hugh Brown's coverage of the Eagles. By the time I was in the eighth grade, I knew that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a writer; specifically, I wanted to be a sports writer for the *Bulletin* covering the Eagles.

Imagine my joy when in 1969 Jack Wilson, the sports editor of the *Bulletin*, called to offer me a job. At the time, I was working as a news reporter at the *Delaware County Daily Times* in Chester, Pennsylvania. That was my first job after graduating from Temple University. The *Daily Times* did not have any openings in sports, so I agreed to work on city side, covering county politics and school-board hearings for \$100.25 a week. But, really, I was just biding my time, waiting for a chance to move up.

When Jack offered me a job covering high-school sports at the *Bulletin*, I almost leapt from my chair.

"Yes, absolutely," I said.

"Don't you want to know what it pays?" Jack asked.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be fine," I said.

"You're easy," he said with a laugh.

Jack started me at \$150 a week and gave me the desk next to Sandy Grady. I felt like a rookie called up from the minors and assigned the locker next to Babe Ruth. Sandy was the best sportswriter in America. He could take a ninth inning rally or a first round knockout and turn it into poetry. His writing was witty and graceful, and in my undergraduate days at Temple, I imitated him shamelessly. Now I was working alongside him.

In 1970, Hugh Brown was easing toward retirement, and Jack surprised everyone by assigning me to the Eagles. At twenty-three, I was handed my dream job. It was a huge leap of faith on Jack's part. I was the youngest writer on the staff. I had spent all of one year covering high schools. I was a rank amateur compared with the veteran reporters on the football beat. It was a wonderful opportunity, but also an enormous challenge with real crash-and-burn potential.

The day I left for my first Eagles training camp at Albright College in Reading, Jack asked how I felt. I answered honestly.

"I'm not sure I'm ready," I said.

"Then get ready," he said.

I'm often asked if it was hard to make the transition from life-long Eagles fan to beat reporter. It is a fair question, given the fact I went directly from the \$3 seats at Franklin Field to the press box. But the truth is, I did not have a problem being objective, largely because the team was in such sorry shape.

The Eagles were 3–10–1 in 1970. They were on their way to their fourth consecutive losing season and their eighth losing season in nine years. They were a bad team. It was obvious to everyone, and I had to write that in one form or another every day. It would have been dishonest to do otherwise.

Besides, I knew there were people who questioned Jack's decision to put me on the football beat. It was the most coveted job in the sports department. Win or lose, the Eagles led the paper almost every day. There were a lot of shocked faces in the newsroom when Jack chose me to replace Hughie. I knew if I went soft on the team, there would have been pressure on Jack to put me back on high schools and promote someone else. I didn't want that to happen.

So I was pretty tough on the Eagles that season. It did not endear me to the players, especially the veterans. They asked what qualified me to critique their performance. Some, like quarterback Norm Snead and tight end Gary Ballman, were playing pro football when I was still in high school, yet here I was ripping them every day in the city's biggest newspaper. They saw me as a punk kid trying to make a name for himself at their expense.

Ballman sat next to me on the team charter to Dallas. He asked: "What do you know about pro football? I mean, what do you really know?" I said, "I know a losing team when I see one." Since the Eagles were 0–6 at the time—and the Cowboys would soon make them 0–7—there wasn't much he could say.

While I had no trouble maintaining my objectivity around the Eagles, that was not always true when I visited other teams. I remember walking into the Baltimore Colts clubhouse after they defeated the Eagles that season and seeing John Unitas standing alone at his locker. There were a dozen reporters in the room, but none were talking to the winning quarterback.

"Don't waste your time," one of the older reporters said. "Unitas is a terrible interview."

Impossible, I thought. I grew up watching Unitas. He was one of my earliest sports heroes. There he was just a few feet away. I had to talk to him.

I introduced myself. Unitas nodded but said nothing. I asked about his game plan for the Eagles. He shrugged and said, "We made enough plays to win; that's all I care about." I asked about one touchdown pass in particular. "Nothing special," he said. "We have that play in every week." I began asking another question, but he didn't let me finish. "It's one game," he said, pulling on his coat. "We have another one next week."

With that, he was out the door. I looked at my notebook. I had a few scribbled quotes, but really I had nothing.

Years later, when I was working on the Unitas documentary, I told him that story.

"Don't feel bad," he said. "I was that way with everybody."

"You knew you had a reputation as a terrible interview?" I asked.

“I’d rather be known as a bad interview and a good player than the other way around,” Unitas said. “My job was winning games, not talking about them.”

Unitas made me realize just how differently sports journalists and athletes view the same game. I always accepted the fact we had nothing in common off the field. They are wealthy, we’re not. They are worshiped by millions, we’re not. They live in a spotlight that we merely illuminate. I get it.

I thought the one thing we had in common was what happened between the white lines, but Unitas made it clear that’s not true, either. The players, especially old-school types like Unitas, are defined by their performance, what they do on the field, good or bad. All we can supply are words, and no matter how lovely, they still are little more than tinsel on the athlete’s tree.

“I wasn’t trying to be a jerk, I just could never figure out what you guys wanted,” Unitas said. “After the game, reporters would ask, ‘What happened on that play?’ Or they’d say, ‘Describe that touchdown.’ It didn’t make any sense. You saw the game. Why do I have to describe it?”

“But people want to hear what you have to say,” I said.

“What I say doesn’t mean squat,” Unitas said. “If we won, that’s all that matters. If we lost and I played lousy, nobody wants to hear excuses. I just thought talking was a waste of time.”

Unitas laughed. “I guess I was a terrible interview,” he said.

My fondest memory of that 1970 season was the week three game against Washington at Franklin Field. I was shuffling through my notes at halftime when I felt a tap on the shoulder. It was Jim Heffernan, director of public relations for the NFL.

“The commissioner wants to meet you,” Heffernan said.

“Yeah, sure he does,” I replied.

Heff was a former *Bulletin* sportswriter, a friend, and a practical joker, so I assumed he was kidding. He insisted he was telling the truth.

“Pete likes to meet all the new beat guys,” Heffernan said as he walked me to the far end of the press box. There, as promised, sat Pete Rozelle, dapper as always, extending his hand.

“Welcome to the NFL,” Rozelle said.

I’ll always remember that moment. The warmth of his smile, the ease in his manner. It wasn’t at all what I expected from the man who was referred to as the czar of professional football.

He was eating a hot dog. His binoculars hung on a strap around his neck. I remember thinking he looked like a regular fan, which is what he was. He wasn’t a lawyer, a politician, a former player or coach. He was an ex-sportswriter and publicist, but at heart, he was a fan. His greatest pleasure was kicking back on a Sunday afternoon and watching a game, even if it involved two winless teams, as that one did.

I asked Rozelle why he came to see the 0–2 Eagles play the 0–2 Redskins. He said he thought it would be a good game. It wasn't. The Redskins won easily, 33–21. But the stadium was full, the October sun was shining, and to Pete Rozelle, it was Camelot on the Schuylkill River.

That was the dawn of a golden decade for pro football. The NFL and the American Football League (AFL) had merged. *Monday Night Football* had debuted to blockbuster ratings on network television. The Super Bowl had become the world's biggest and most lucrative sports spectacle. Pro football was taking off like a NASA rocket, and Rozelle had his hand firmly on the throttle. I had hopped on for the ride.

We talked for about ten minutes. Rozelle asked about my background. He laughed when I told him I was the youngest beat man in the league. He reminded me that he was only thirty-three when he was named commissioner. He said: "I'll tell you the same thing the [team] owners told me, 'You'll grow into it.'"

I spent seven years on the Eagles beat, then I became the sports columnist after Sandy moved to Washington, D.C., to cover politics, and his successor, Jim Barniak, left the paper for television. Again, I was lucky because Philadelphia was enjoying a sports renaissance. After decades of losing, all the local teams were arising. Julius Erving signed with the 76ers. Dick Vermeil resurrected the Eagles. The Phillies, led by future Hall of Famers Steve Carlton and Mike Schmidt, were on their way to five division titles in eight years.

As a sports columnist, it was like being a guest at a party where the good times never stopped. On any given day, you had your pick of winning teams to write about. At Broad and Pattison, where once there was a swamp, now was a land of milk and honey. It all began, really, with the Flyers. They taught Philadelphia how to win again by capturing back-to-back Stanley Cups in 1974 and '75. They were an irresistible story, a team known as the Broad Street Bullies brawling its way to the National Hockey League championship while a good-luck charm named Kate Smith sang "God Bless America."

There was a sweet, unspoiled quality to that first championship. When the Flyers won the deciding game, 1–0, over the Boston Bruins, the Spectrum security guards threw open the locker-room door. The players' families rushed into the room—wives and mothers included—along with reporters, photographers, fans, and what seemed like half the population of South Philadelphia. It was utterly out of control, yet utterly wonderful.

I was literally shoved into the locker of Dave Schultz, who earned the nickname "The Hammer" by pummeling every tough guy in the league. But on this day, Schultz was sitting with his arm draped around his father, Edgar. Father and son were sipping beer and enjoying the celebration.

The elder Schultz was a garage mechanic in Rosetown, Saskatchewan, and he had taken his vacation to follow the Flyers through the playoffs. "Last week, they told Dad to come home," Dave said. "They told him it was inspection

time, and work was piling up. He said, ‘No damn way I’m coming back now. My son is going to win the Stanley Cup, and I’m going to be there.’”

And so he was.

The city held a victory parade the next day. The police expected a hundred thousand people to attend. Instead, 2 million people filled the streets. Joe Watson Sr., the father of Flyer defensemen Joe and Jimmy Watson, could not believe his eyes. “I didn’t know there were this many people in the world,” said Watson, who rode a bus for thirty-three hours from Smithers, British Columbia, to see his sons drink from the Stanley Cup.

The crowd engulfed the cars carrying Flyers captain Bobby Clarke and goalie Bernie Parent, and the police pulled them out of the parade for their own protection. Andrea Mitchell, now an NBC news correspondent, was a reporter for KYW radio at the time. She filed a report quoting City Representative Harry Belinger as saying it was the biggest celebration in Philadelphia’s history.

“All of this,” she said, “for a hockey team.”

Well, not exactly.

I never believed there were 2 million hockey fans in Philadelphia. But clearly in 1974, there were 2 million people in this area who were anxious to celebrate *something*. They wanted to point their index fingers to the sky and yell, “We’re Number One.” Other cities were doing it; why not Philadelphia?

The Flyers broke the cycle of losing, and their success seemed to energize the other franchises. It wasn’t long before this was being called the “City of Winners,” and lucky me, I had a front row seat to the whole thing.

Some people would say I was covering games, but I knew I was writing about something much larger than that. These athletes—beginning with the Flyers and soon including all of the local teams—were changing the self-image of Philadelphia.

As Red Smith once wrote: “Sports is not really a play world. I think it’s the real world. Not in who wins or loses as it is reflected on the scoreboard, but in the people in sports who are suffering and living and dying and loving and trying to make their way through life just as bricklayers and politicians are. The man who reports on these games contributes his small bit to the record of his time.”

This book represents my small bit to the record of a truly remarkable time.

Dick Vermeil arrived in Philadelphia in 1976. I was in my seventh year of covering the Eagles for the *Bulletin*, and Vermeil was the fourth head coach to come through owner Leonard Tose’s revolving door.

It was easy to be cynical about the new hire, and most of the writers were. Jack McKinney of the *Daily News* took one look at the handsome, thirty-nine-year-old Vermeil and called him “California Slick.”

“I wonder how long this one will last,” Jack said as Tose and Vermeil posed for photographers.

We had witnessed this scene—smiles, flashbulbs, and promises—so often that by now we felt like guests at one of Tose’s weddings. Those, too, started with the best of intentions, but they always ended badly. It was the same with Tose and his football coaches.

I had an advantage over the other writers because one month earlier I covered the Rose Bowl where Vermeil’s UCLA team upset top-ranked Ohio State. The big story leading up to the game was the near-revolt among the UCLA players. They saw photos of the Ohio State players riding on floats with Mickey Mouse and frolicking at the pool with the Rose Bowl Queen. They could not understand why those guys were having so much fun while they were practicing three hours a day and studying film at night. So they went on strike.

That afternoon, Vermeil walked onto the practice field and found one player, quarterback John Sciarra. Sciarra told Vermeil the team would only return to practice if he agreed to lighten up. Vermeil told Sciarra the players had exactly fifteen minutes to get on the field. Anyone who did not report in that time was off the team.

“Tell them if they don’t want to play, I’ll go on campus and ask for volunteers,” Vermeil said. “I won’t have any trouble finding fifty kids who want to play in the Rose Bowl.”

Fifteen minutes later, the entire varsity was assembled. Vermeil worked them for the customary three hours. When practice ended, he called the players together. “You want to have fun?” he said. “Win the damn game. Beat the number-one team in the country. That’s what we’re preparing to do.”

On New Year’s Day, UCLA shocked the mighty Buckeyes, 23–10, as Sciarra threw two touchdown passes to wide receiver Wally Henry. Afterward, the same players who had wanted to walk out on Vermeil were thanking him for a victory they would cherish forever. It was a masterful coaching job. I left the Rose Bowl thinking: “This guy Vermeil is going places.”

Little did I know he was going to Philadelphia.

Vermeil walked into a bleak situation. There was precious little talent on the Eagles roster. The previous coach, Mike McCormack, had traded away most of the draft picks. Morale was at rock bottom. The fans were fed up. It looked like a hopeless cause, but Vermeil insisted there was no such thing.

“We’ll just work until we get it turned around,” he said.

Having seen what Vermeil did a month earlier at UCLA, I knew what to expect. Training camp would be hell. The Eagles practiced longer and harder than any team in the NFL. Vermeil brought more than a hundred players to camp—including Sciarra and Henry from his Rose Bowl team—and he drove them mercilessly. Three-hour practices in the sweltering heat. Full contact every day. Players were not permitted to remove their helmets or even

unbuckle their chinstraps. The veterans grumbled about Vermeil's rules and called him "Harry High School." He knew it, but he didn't care.

"If they weren't bitching, I wouldn't be doing my job," he said.

My most vivid memory of that camp is Vermeil barking: "Again." When a play was not run to his satisfaction, Vermeil would make the players repeat it. He would stand with his arms folded, watching. If it still wasn't good enough, he would say it more sharply: "Again." It went on like this, every day for nine weeks.

The coaches studied film until three in the morning and were back on the field at eight. There were no days off, no time to rest. One afternoon I was interviewing Johnny Roland, the backfield coach, on a bench outside the cafeteria. Five minutes into our conversation, he fell asleep. I waited, hoping he would awaken. Instead, he began to snore. I nudged him, and his eyes fluttered open. He offered an embarrassed apology.

"I love Dick," Roland said, "but he's killing me."

On July 4, 1976, while America celebrated the Bicentennial, Vermeil stuck to his normal schedule: one practice in the morning, another in the afternoon, meetings at night. I asked why he did not give the players time off. It was the Bicentennial, after all, and the celebration was taking place at Independence Hall, just a short drive from the training camp at Widener University.

"The Fourth of July is just another block on the calendar," Vermeil said.

I thought he was missing the point.

As it turned out, I was.

Vermeil was building his kind of team. He wanted players who shared his commitment. All coaches talk about character, but for Vermeil it was a coat of arms. He believed in it as a way to live and a way to win. But for all of his passion and hard work, he did not have success overnight. It takes time to sweep away the cobwebs of nine straight non-winning seasons, and that's the kind of broken-down flop-house he inherited in Philadelphia.

The Eagles were winless (0-6) in their first pre-season under Vermeil and they were thumped by Dallas, 27-7, in the regular-season opener. I wrote an article about their lack of talent. I criticized Vermeil for not pursuing Larry Csonka, Jim Kiick, and Paul Warfield, the former Miami Dolphins who were free agents after the collapse of the World Football League. If Vermeil wanted any of those players, all he had to do was say the word, and Tose would have written the check.

"Why didn't you?" I asked.

"You can buy a player," Vermeil said, "but you can't buy motivation."

I'll never forget those words, because they were the foundation of what Vermeil built over the next six seasons with the Eagles and later in St. Louis, where he won the Super Bowl, and in Kansas City, where he won a division championship. He looked through each player's face mask, into his eyes, and,

ultimately, into his heart. If he didn't like what he saw there, the rest of the package—the size, the speed, the muscle—didn't matter.

Vince Papale was a flesh-and-blood symbol of Vermeil's Eagles. He was a thirty-year-old schoolteacher who had never played college football—he attended St. Joseph's on a track scholarship—but he fought his way up from the local rough-touch leagues to the Eagles roster. He was the oldest rookie in NFL history and the most illogical, except he found in Vermeil a coach who was willing to give him the one thing he needed, and that was a chance.

Vermeil opened the door, and Papale did the rest, earning a place on the Eagles' special teams. In an era of long-term contracts and yawning superstars, he reminded everyone that football is still a game played by kids with scabby knees and sandlot hearts.

Since Papale made the team in 1976, the same year the film *Rocky* was released, his against-all-odds story was often compared to that of Sylvester Stallone's Italian Stallion. How fitting that thirty years later, Papale had a film of his own: *Invincible*, with Mark Wahlberg playing Vince and Greg Kinnear playing Vermeil. The film earned glowing reviews and was a \$60 million hit for the Disney Studios.

Papale lasted three seasons with the Eagles, all on raw desire and determination. When Vermeil finally released him in 1979, Papale asked: "Is there anything else I could have done?"

"Die on the field?" Vermeil said.

It was his way of saying what Papale and everyone else already knew: He had given absolutely everything. By rising from rookie walk-on to special-teams captain, Papale had accomplished more than anyone thought possible. And it was that kind of passion, inspired by Vermeil, that eventually turned the Eagles around.

The team won only four games in Vermeil's first year and five the next. But by the third pre-season, the pieces were coming together. Vermeil had the attitude in place, and he was acquiring better talent. Wilbert Montgomery, a running back from Abilene Christian University, was a star in the making. Ron Jaworski was maturing at quarterback. The defense, led by linebacker Bill Bergey, was developing a snarl.

The Eagles concluded the 1978 pre-season with a 14–0 victory over the New York Jets. I could see the confidence growing. Vermeil still was barking at practice, but not as often. Most of the time, he stood with his hands on his hips, nodding as he watched the plays he designed come to life. "That's it," he would say. "That's what I'm looking for."

The week before the regular-season opener, I wrote a column saying the Eagles had the look of a winner. I had covered the team for nine years at that point, and it was the first time I had that feeling. In his first two seasons, Vermeil sometimes pulled me aside and told me I was too negative. He felt I

dwelted too much on the years of losing and the ineptitude that characterized the Eagles for more than a decade.

I told him: “When I see something better, I’ll write it.”

In 1978, I saw it and wrote it in a Sunday column for the *Bulletin*:

“Dick Vermeil’s plan, so painstakingly implemented over the past two seasons, has finally taken hold . . . It is now possible to talk about the Eagles having a winning season and perhaps even competing for a playoff berth without feeling foolish.”

Two days after the column appeared, I received a letter from Vermeil. “I appreciate your positive approach to what we’re doing,” he wrote. “Not that we’ve set the world on fire, but I do believe we cleaned up a real mess and have everything going in the right direction. . . Thanks. I know you are only doing your job.”

The Eagles opened that season with narrow losses to the Los Angeles Rams (16–14) and the Washington Redskins (35–30), but they won four of their next five games, including a 17–3 upset of the Miami Dolphins. They carried a 6–5 record into the Meadowlands on November 19. What happened next was football history—and the most unforgettable day of my newspaper career.

It began when I arrived at Giants Stadium, and Jim Gallagher, the Eagles’ publicity director, handed me a press release. It was a two-paragraph statement about Leonard Tose being in a Houston hospital following open heart surgery. The sixty-three-year-old owner was under the care of Denton Cooley, the world-renowned surgeon. Tose, we were told, was doing fine and would be listening to the game on a special radio hookup.

Perhaps the Eagles were unsettled by the news, or maybe, as some suggested, they were trying too hard to win one for the owner. Whatever the reason, they played miserably. With four minutes to go, they trailed the Giants 17–13, and when Jaworski threw his third interception, I headed for the elevator. I planned to watch the last few minutes on the field, then go to the locker room.

I was standing behind the end zone as the Giants ran out the clock. Quarterback Joe Pisarcik dropped to one knee as the seconds ticked away. One more snap and the game would be over. I was trying to decide what to write. Should I write about Tose? Should I write about the disappointing loss? Should I write off the post-season?

Then it happened.

Pisarcik took the snap, but instead of kneeling, he attempted a handoff to Larry Csonka. The ball hit Csonka on the hip and fell to the ground. It took a high hop off the artificial turf, and Eagles cornerback Herman Edwards caught it in stride. He was running right toward me, but it seemed like everything was in slow motion. I remember two things: the “Is this really happening?” look on Edwards’s face and the stunned silence in the stadium.

The cop standing next to me said, “That won’t count. The whistle must have blown.” I checked the scoreboard. It read Eagles, 19; Giants, 17. It was, indeed, an Eagles touchdown, forever known as the Miracle of the Meadowlands.

I went inside and ran into a wave of reporters coming off the elevator. They had no idea what had happened. They had left the press box with the Giants leading. They thought I was joking when I said the Eagles had won. Then the teams came through the tunnel. The Eagles were whooping and hollering; the Giants were cursing and punching the wall. Suddenly, I was surrounded by reporters asking, “What happened?”

I saw the whole thing, but I still had trouble explaining it. It didn’t make any sense. Why didn’t the Giants just fall on the ball? I still don’t have the answer. I just know that was a breakthrough for Vermeil’s team. That was the day the players realized anything, even a trip to the Super Bowl, was possible. They made the playoffs that season, and two years later they were NFC champions.

General manager Jim Murray called Tose from the pay phone in the locker room. Murray handed the phone to Vermeil, who asked Tose, “How’s your heart now?” Vermeil passed the phone to Jaworski, who told Tose the team was sending him the game ball.

“We won this one for you, boss,” Jaworski said.

“You could’ve made it a little easier,” Tose replied.

The next day, I flew to Houston and visited Tose at the hospital. Caroline Cullum, who would become his third wife, was at his bedside. Tose was on the phone, still talking about the game. “When Edwards picked up that ball,” he said, “I let out a yell, and all the doctors came running into the room. They thought I was dying. I told them, ‘Are you kidding? I never felt better.’”

We talked for more than two hours. The nurses were not happy. They wanted Tose to rest, but they knew he was going to do what he damn well pleased. On this day, with his heart thumping happily and his team in the playoff hunt for the first time, he felt like talking. So he talked, and I listened.

He talked about his father, Mike, the Russian Jewish immigrant who started the family trucking business with one horse and one wagon at the turn of the century. He talked about how his father became a millionaire yet never lost touch with his roots. Mike Tose was always reaching out, helping people and for all his playboy swagger, Leonard Tose was very much his father’s son.

Stories of his generosity were legendary. In 1970, Tose donated \$79,000 to keep extracurricular activities alive in Philadelphia’s public schools. He wrote a \$25,000 check to buy bulletproof vests for the police department. He pledged \$1 million to launch Eagles Fly for Leukemia which helped build the bone-marrow-transplant laboratory at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and funded the first Ronald McDonald House.

Those stories made headlines, but there were other acts of kindness that went unreported. Tose would see an item in the newspaper—a story about a

family losing its home or a recreation center in need of repair—and he would circle it, hand it to one of his aides, and say, “Take care of this.”

He once read about a young girl, a music prodigy, in North Philadelphia who was unable to continue her piano lessons due to a transit strike. Tose had a Steinway piano delivered to her home that afternoon. He did this sort of thing all the time.

Tose insisted on doing everything first-class. He had a fit when he arrived for a press conference and saw the staff putting out a tray of cold steak sandwiches for the media. “That’s garbage,” he said. “My team doesn’t serve garbage.” From then on, Tose treated the press like guests at one of his Main Line parties, bringing in tuxedoed caterers to serve filet mignon, lobster and even champagne for Monday night games.

When Tose traveled, he rode in a chauffeur-driven limousine, preferably with a police escort. On one trip to Los Angeles, Tose told Murray to arrange for his motorcycle escort. Murray called the Los Angeles Police Department who told him the LAPD had more important things to do than get some rich guy through rush-hour traffic on the Harbor Freeway.

But Murray was resourceful. He contacted a friend in Hollywood who lined up four actors, who were extras in the TV series “*CHiPs*” to serve as Tose’s escorts. They had uniforms and motorcycles, so for three days they served as Tose’s personal highway patrol, stopping traffic and waving him through. Tose had no idea the whole thing was a charade.

His reputation as a reckless spender made Tose an easy mark when the casinos came to Atlantic City. He lost an estimated \$50 million gambling, and in 1984, in an effort to avoid bankruptcy, he negotiated a deal to sell a minority interest in the Eagles to the Arizona real-estate developer James Monaghan. The deal involved the Eagles’ moving to Phoenix.

I was outraged that Tose would even consider taking the Eagles away from the fans who had supported them for so long. I wrote a series of columns that were sharply critical of Tose. As it turned out, he did not move the Eagles. Instead, he sold the team to Norman Braman, a Florida car dealer who kept the franchise in Philadelphia.

Most of the columnists in town let Tose down gently. They said in the end he did the right thing: He left the Eagles where he found them and where they belonged. I was not as forgiving. I wrote: “Tose and [daughter Susan] Fletcher turned off the city’s sports fans with their disloyalty and they outraged non-fans with their greed.” Rather than say goodbye to Tose and his daughter, I said good riddance.

The next morning, Tose called me at home and cursed me out. “If you ever see me coming,” he said, “you’d better get out of the (expletive) way.” He slammed the phone down, and we did not speak again for five years.

I felt bad about it. I didn’t regret what I had written. I felt Tose’s conduct was deplorable, and I said so. That’s what columnists do. But I had known

Tose for a long time, and I had seen him do some very kind things. He had a good heart, but he also had a terrible weakness that was destroying his life.

He sold the Eagles for \$65 million, but he netted only a fraction of that after his debts were paid. He swore he was set for life, but we knew better. It was only a matter of time before the casinos tapped him dry. In 1996, he was evicted from his Main Line mansion, and he lived out his final years alone in a center-city hotel room. Vermeil sent him money to keep him going.

Tose and I eventually repaired our relationship. We saw each other at a ten-year anniversary for the 1980 *NFC* championship team. It was held at Jaworski's golf club, the Eagle's Nest in Sewell, New Jersey. I was one of two media members invited; the other was Merrill Reese, the team's radio play-by-play man. It was a wonderful evening, with the coaches and former players hugging and reminiscing about that Super Bowl season.

At one point, Tose excused himself from the group and walked toward me. I was sure he would tell me to leave. Instead, he extended his hand. "I'm too (expletive) old to hold a grudge," he said. "Besides, I don't even remember what you wrote, it was so long ago." We shook hands, and that was that.

I've often thought back to that night and what it said about the 1980 Eagles. It was a collection of rather ordinary players, many of whom had been cast off by other clubs, but Vermeil molded them into something special. After dinner, Vermeil made a short speech, thanking the coaches and players for all they did.

"I'm as proud of you today as I was the day we beat Dallas," Vermeil said, referring to the *NFC* championship game that the Eagles won in a frigid Veterans Stadium.

Vermeil invited everyone to take the microphone. One by one, the players stepped forward. Wide receiver Charlie Smith, the quietest player on the team, spoke eloquently about the kinship he felt with the men in that room. He said: "You called me 'Homeboy.' That was my nickname, and that's how it feels being with you again. It's like being home."

Tose was the last to speak. He, too, talked about the Dallas game. He talked about the fans' rushing onto the field to celebrate. That was the moment he cherished, he said, because he had delivered on his promise. He brought Philadelphia a championship. Tose turned to Vermeil and thanked him for making it happen.

"Dick Vermeil took us—all of us—from nowhere to somewhere," Tose said. "He taught us how to win football games and a helluva lot more. He left his mark on the city, and I know he sure as hell left his mark on me."

Over the next few years, I ran into Tose occasionally, usually at a Maxwell Club dinner or an Eagles Fly for Leukemia function. Sometimes he would call me at work just to talk. He was lonely and disconnected from the action. It was hard to accept for a man who lived so long in the spotlight. He would talk about the good times, hanging with Frank Sinatra, knocking back Scotches