



On Writing Columns

By Monroe S. Miller

"Writing a column," said the late great Red Smith, "is like opening a vein and letting the words bleed out, drip by drip." It has been five years since I started my work with the *GRASS ROOTS* and one of the things I've enjoyed most has been writing columns, whether they were a President's Message, a "Jottings" piece or an editorial. Honestly, I have not found it to be as difficult as Mr. Smith says it should be. But, of course and quite obviously, I don't write anywhere nearly as well as Mr. Smith.

Nor as often. I figure I've averaged a couple of columns in each issue of the *GRASS ROOTS* for five years. I'm not counting news stories — they are entirely different and much easier to write than columns are. Arithmetic tells me that's around 60 columns. Five dozen. Once a month, about, for those five years. Red Smith, for the ten years he worked for the *Philadelphia Record*, wrote a daily column for that paper. That's right — seven columns a week. One a day. Three hundred and sixty-five a year. It's more than I can comprehend — thirty-six hundred columns in Philly!

Smith moved from the *Record* to New York, writing at different times for the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*. The move reduced his writing load from seven columns a week to a mere four. But Smith never was convinced that writing less was writing better. He worked, at one time, for publisher John S. Knight and was doing six columns each week for him.

"Nobody can write six good columns a week," Knight told him. "Why don't you write three? Want me to fix it up?"

"Look, Mr. Knight," Smith said, "Suppose I wrote three stinkers. I wouldn't have the rest of the week to recover."

Red Smith was a sportswriter and columnist by profession, the best since Ring Lardner, some say. He fed his family by putting words on paper. I certainly don't and never pretend to have enough writing ability to dot the i's or cross the t's for someone like Smith.

But this business of writing intrigues me, like any hobby would interest other people.

And I am particularly interested in Red Smith. He was a fantastic wordsmith, a great humorist and a brilliant phrase-maker. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1976 and had a reputation as a world famous storyteller. The wealth of his writing includes many, many pieces about golf. His writing has given pleasure to millions. But I'm especially fond of the man because he was a Wisconsin boy. He was born in Green Bay.

His father was the third generation in the family's wholesale produce and retail grocery business. Red has written of a happy childhood in Wisconsin in which his chief interests were reading books and following (and playing) sports. He graduated from Notre Dame and got his first journalism job at the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. The rest is sports-writing history. Red never lost his interest in Wisconsin, however. His summer vacations included annual trips to Door County. I learned a long time ago that even an amateur writer, to do a half decent job, has to be widely read, and many of my favorite stories were written by our own Red Smith.

I'd most certainly starve to death if I had to make a living by writing. Maybe that's why I'm intrigued by the Russell Bakers, Mike Roykos, George Wills and Syd Harris' of the world. It's probably why I have so much respect for the work of journalists like Rob Schultz. But really, I've got the best of it — I don't **have** to write columns or news reports, so I can enjoy it! And when one

is his own editor, well, it just doesn't get any better. The final joy for me is the incredibly rich subject matter given by golf courses — the people, the sport, the seasons, the work. I think it's as varied as the columns I've written in the last five years.

John Ruskin, an author of both serious books and children's stories, said this about writing: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a **plain** way." Keep it plain — that's good advice I try my best to follow.

Many people have commented on the time factor — "Don't you spend an awful lot of time writing for the *GRASS ROOTS*?" The time consuming part of an association or professional magazine is the editing. I spend around a hundred hours on each issue of our journal. That makes the writing part of it quite easy. And it is not the writing that takes all the time, anyway. Frankly, putting the words for a given column on paper, the actual writing of it, may only take an hour or two. The thought process, however, often is several days long. Sometimes I may be mulling a topic over in my mind for months before I sit down at my manual typewriter and pound out the column.

In fact, thinking about a column or story through before writing anything down is fundamental to making the writing process an easy one. That part can never be hurried. I've read that the same is true for musical compositions and theoretical formulas. Artists have their creative work completed in their

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mind before they put paint on a canvas. The mathematical genius, Karl Friedrich Gauss, commented once, "I have been sure of my results for some time; what I don't know is how I shall arrive at them." It is written that the reason Mozart composed music so rapidly was because he was merely "transcribing" the composition from his mind. A final example of my personal discovery comes from President Lincoln. It is believed that he wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an old envelope on the train ride from

Washington to Gettysburg. If that story is true, and I suspect it is, you can pretty much assume he had been thinking those thoughts and shaping that composition for a long time.

I have no illusions about the paragraphs I assemble for each issue of the *GRASS ROOTS*. I enjoy putting them together and hope that maybe someone can relate to my thoughts, experiences and emotions, and maybe even enjoy them.

Seldom, if ever, does a writer leave a measurable imprint on our society while alive. That's true for even our

best writers, so you can guess where that leaves rank amateurs like me. Fictional TV character Felix Unger — even you younger WGCSA members surely have seen reruns of "The Odd Couple" — had his proudest poetry used to decorate a dog's tombstone. Red Smith may have put it best for the "ink stained wretches" by admitting that even our best work shortly will be a "shroud for some haddock."

Or maybe it will find a comfortable resting spot on the tank behind the commode in some golf course shop! I couldn't ask for more.

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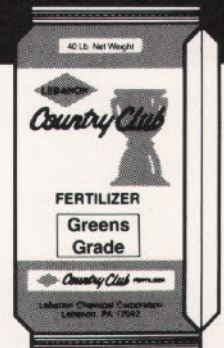


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