

A stroll down memory lane

Veteran sports scribe reminisces

If these were the last days of my college career at Penn State, I'd get sentimental and maybe hum a few bars of "Dear Old State." I'd write about the times I stayed up most of the night studying for big exams. I'd get really philosophical — maybe talk about how scared I was to leave the sheltered, idyllic Happy Valley life and go out into the "cold, cruel world" and work for a living.

Rick Weber



But these aren't my last days at Penn State — I don't graduate until May — so there's no reason to think and write about those things yet. However, this is my last day as a member of the sports staff at The Daily Collegian. That's good reason to reminisce about a college sportswriting career that has spanned three-and-a-half years — starting with my first term.

That first term up here was a unique, almost mind-blowing experience for me. I came to Penn State fresh off stints as sports editor and editor-in-chief of my high school newspaper. I had a strong desire to be a journalist — to achieve a sense of accomplishment that I could be part of a communications system that reaches people directly and informs them on the issues affecting them.

Even with those strong career goals, I didn't expect to write for the Collegian during my first year — I wasn't even sure I wanted to. I, like most of the other students who had just left the "teenybopper" high school life, had to

make a big adjustment and any time-consuming extracurricular activity might make the transition period more difficult.

But when I was told that I could try out to be on the staff, I eagerly accepted the challenge — and I made it through candidates' school, which I considered a step up on my aspirations ladder.

As a rookie reporter, I was totally in awe of Sports Editor Jeff Young and his sidekicks, Gordie Blain and Brian Miller. They were like Red Smith and Art Spander are to me now. I read their articles and columns about Penn State football and I wished I could be in the same position. But if I would have stood next to Joe Paterno or Greg Buttle or Tom Rafferty then, I would have been in a semi-daze, saying things like "Gee, wow," instead of asking questions.

The whole idea of being aggressive in order to get a story was fairly new to me. The first event I covered was a cross country meet. My assignment was to watch the meet, get a feel for the sport, and arrange an interview with Paul Stemmer, the star runner. Well, after watching the race, I stood on a grassy hill watching Stemmer put on his warmup suit. I had to nudge myself to get up enough courage to wander over and approach him.

That new experience of gathering a story was made easier by cross country coach Harry Groves, who spoke colorfully and candidly any time he had something on his mind. Many things he said were unprintable, but he gave me a clear understanding of the sport. His help made the whole year easier, since I covered indoor track in the winter and then outdoor track in the spring. With Groves, the dull moments were few and far between.

The second year was a period of

growth and further maturation. It was also a time of promotion, since I was "moving up" to bigger sports beats like soccer and basketball.

I sometimes wonder if the students here really realize the incredibly qualified, talented coaches we have at Penn State. Walt Bahr, the soccer coach, is one of them. Bahr competed in the Olympics in his earlier days and he's been just as successful as a coach. Right now, he's simply one of the finest technicians in the nation.

It was easy and enjoyable to write about soccer not only because Bahr was so cooperative and polite, but also because his team was so superior to its opponents.

The same can't be said for the basketball team (it was horrible), but coach John Bach was a gracious man. Sure, he had some faults as a coach, but he took the criticism in stride and always maintained a determined attitude and positive outlook. I only wish the people who verbally attacked him could have known him.

Shortly after the basketball season, the Collegian sports staff ushered in "The Pete Dougherty Era," so named because he was our new sports editor and George Patton-like leader. It was in that era that I spent my first full season covering the football team and my first year covering the wrestling team.

I still remember walking up to talk to Keith Dorney, all six feet, five inches and 260 pounds of him, after Penn State's big win over Houston. I shook his hand and he almost reduced it to a mass of crumbled bones. Then he looked down at me and smiled. I didn't try to shake his hand the rest of the season.

Too bad the wrestling team didn't have someone like him. The heavyweight position was the only thing

that separated Penn State's 12-2 team from being undefeated. The rest of the team was pretty solid with guys like Dave Becker and Mike DeAugustino, who placed fifth and sixth respectively at the NCAA's. "Sweet Old Bill" Koll, the Lions' coach, made that year memorable. Once again, another unique Penn State coach. Koll never lost a bout as a college wrestler and he went on to the Olympics. After going 127-22-7 in 14 seasons at Penn State, Koll retired. If ever I met a man with a sense of humor, it was the tobacco-chewing Midwesterner.

Shortly after Koll stepped down, I assumed duties as assistant sports editor in the new regime headed by the unflappable Joyce Tomana. To me, I had reached the minimum goal I had set in my freshman year. I really felt good.

I didn't think any feeling could be reached — until I covered the 1978 football team, a pretty unique collection of individuals. Sure, they lost the biggest Penn State game ever. Heck, I must have been as disappointed about the outcome as they were. But I think Chuck Fusina said it best: "I don't think the world will end because we lost." That, perhaps, gave me a clearer perspective in the world of sports. Yes, sports are enjoyable and they provide a much-needed diversion, but they're not the fiber that holds society together. They're not the end-all.

Excuse my rambling; it's just that the thoughts and memories come easily when I think about something that has been such a big part of my life.

What does it all mean? I guess if I wish anything, it would be that I have had an effect on the way sports at Penn State have been interpreted. I guess my real hope is that I have effectively reached you, the readers.

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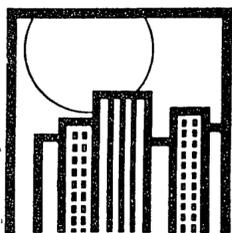
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