



jcannonbooks

Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter

Seasonal affective disorder

As mistakes go, the one I made fifty-two years ago wasn't life altering. But when it comes to flubbing things, I'm like my old pal Bartleby the Scrivener: I prefer not to.

I didn't even realize it was a mistake until a few years ago, but with March Madness in the air, the embarrassment has surfaced.

Fifty-two years ago, I was a senior at Holy Cross High School, and my cousin Tom R. was the star center at our school's archrival, Notre Dame of Nilis. Tom and I were close. When our families visited, which was often, Tom and I often would play catch, whack a softball on a nearby asphalt playground, or fool around with a basketball. In high school, he was six-five and strapping, while I was six-two and skeletal. My decidedly average basketball talent meant I wouldn't face Tom in anything other than pickup games, but my nonexistent interviewing skills and inability to write a coherent story made me a perfect candidate for sports editor at our high school newspaper. The faculty moderator even decided I should write a sports column, examples of which now make me cringe when I have the misfortune to encounter one. I had the platform to write about Tom and his growing reputation as a basketball beast, to glimpse what existed on the other side of the rivalry divide, and to offer details of one last manageable chapter of adolescence before we plunged into a world boiling with war and inequality. I never produced such a piece. The idea never even occurred to me. Why did I instead focus on pumping out cliché-ridden sports

stories and a meandering, often pointless column? Beats me.

No one on the staff of the *Crusader* recommended that I write such a story. No one was aware of the familial link, but even if the connection was common knowledge, my guess is that such a story idea would not have occurred to anyone because we were all equally unsure of what made for interesting reading. I say that even though some of my fellow editors and writers at that student newspaper are subscribers to this newsletter.

Archrivalry is odd. Both sides have to agree that an archrivalry exists before either side can call it such a thing. I've never been sure that Notre Dame bought in. It's a bit like the so-called Los Angeles Dodgers-San Diego Padres rivalry. Padres fans think of the Dodgers organization as the great Satan. Dodgers fans aren't sure where San Diego is. And if Holy Cross and Notre Dame did have an archrivalry in basketball, it would have had to survive significant changes over the years: the introduction of the three-point line, the division of the Illinois state basketball tournament into divisions by school enrollment, and the 2004 closing of Holy Cross High School and its subsequent demolition.

But as newspaper people have told themselves for centuries (and I miss the days when the saying was considered ironic): Never let the facts stand in the way of a good story.

Here is my effort to right that wrong, to fill a gap in the journalistic record, to prove that it's never too late for a follow-up. It is in the form of a Q&A, which appeals to lazy reporters like me who don't want to spend time writing seamless transitions and doing other complicated stuff.

First, some background on Tom. He accepted a scholarship to play basketball at what was then Nicholls State College in Thibodeaux, Louisiana. It's now Nicholls State University. Afterward, he went to law school and had a long career as an attorney in the human resources department at John Deere.

Q: You went from a Chicago suburb to a place deep in the bayous of Louisiana to play college basketball on scholarship. Then you stayed in Louisiana. You now live in Baton Rouge and have cooked and eaten crawfish. I've seen the pictures. How does any sensible Chicagoan do something like that?

A: When you are thrown into and surrounded by a new culture, you adapt or die. Seriously, do you remember how bland the cooking was when we were growing up? Basically meat and potatoes, very little seasoning. It just can't compare with etouffee, jambalaya, fresh fish and oysters, gumbo, etc. Before you know it, you

are having crawfish boils and sucking the heads to get all the juice.

Q: Was basketball in the South different from what you knew in Chicago-area gyms and playgrounds?

A: I don't recall much different. The talent was similar within the circles I was in. The diversity on the teams in college may have been a bit more dramatic but part of that was probably due to my playing high school ball in the Chicago northwest suburbs. We did have two African American basketball players at Notre Dame at the time, Gabe Eaton and Byron King.

Q: Did they call you a Yankee?

A: Yes, frequently. But there was a group of us from the North so I wasn't the only one. For some reason at that time in the early '70s, the coaches recruited kids from Missouri, Indiana, and Illinois to play ball in south Louisiana.

Q: When did you first start playing organized basketball?

A: I was a late bloomer and only started playing in seventh grade because I was tall. I don't recall playing much on the seventh-grade team but played more in eighth grade.

Q: How is it that you immediately grasped how to box out, dribble with either hand, score, and rebound ferociously, and I never figured those things out?

A: Let's get one thing out in the open—I was never very good with my left hand or even dribbling, for that matter. But it helps to be six-five, and when you are tall and show a little interest, people encourage and even push you a bit to excel at those big guy skills. And the ones you mentioned were not all of them. When the referee isn't looking you can discreetly foul, step on the opponent's feet (hard to jump that way), pull on their shorts (a bit distracting). On a related note, I had the Nicholls State record for most fouls in a season for a couple of decades.

Q: Did Notre Dame consider Holy Cross to be an archrival?

In the long term, yes, Holy Cross was our archrival in many things. All the sports, of course, and then in academics, clubs/organizations, etc. To be honest, in the 1968-1970 timeframe, Holy Cross was outmatched in basketball, and they weren't viewed much differently than the other teams we played. *(Editor's note: Outmatched? Not much different? Tom, stab me in the heart why don't you?)*

Q: Notre Dame beat Holy Cross twice in the 1969-70 season, home and away, both times by thirty-five points. Are you still gloating?

A: No, no! We just were lucky to have a number of very good players. We had a lot of experience with five senior starters, and I believe four of the five received some sort of college scholarship.

Q: Rick Sievers was the stud forward on the Holy Cross basketball team when we were seniors. He also quarterbacked the football team and played baseball, the now rare three-sport athlete. He was a scoring machine on a basketball court, and I watched him almost singlehandedly dismantle some other teams. He may be the best athlete Holy Cross ever produced. Did you game plan for Rick Sievers? Does the name ring a bell?

A: Rick sounds like a terrific athlete. No, I don't remember the name, but I was the center on our team, and since Rick was a forward, he would have been more the responsibility of either Gabe or Russ Pohl.

Q: I was in the stands watching the Holy Cross-Notre Dame basketball games. Could you feel my pain as I struggled with the dilemma of whether to root for my favorite cousin or my high school? I went with the high school. Sorry, Tom, I was seventeen and caught up in the moment.

A: Somewhere deep in the back of my mind I think I always suspected it. But I don't really blame you because I remember how strong high school loyalties are. Apparently stronger and thicker than blood, huh John!

Q: My read of Illinois High School Association records is that when you were a senior, Notre Dame's record was 26-1. That means the only game you lost that season was in the state tournament playoffs. Is that right? Who did you lose to? Did it scar you for life and cause you to flee to Louisiana?

A: That is correct, we were 26-1. Our only loss was to Maine South High School in the state playoffs. I don't remember any particulars but we only lost by two points in overtime so it must have been an exciting game. I am actually a little surprised that I don't remember the game, but I guess four years of college games, and fifty years, dull the memory.

You asked if I was scarred by the game but after crying for a few days I think I was okay. I do remember a few players and names of guys who were studs in the Chicago area at the time and they definitely left an indelible mark on me since I remember them but can't even remember the names of some of my

grandkids most days.

Q: Do you remember when you and your teammate Gabe Eaton were featured in a 1970 photo that was published in the *Chicago Daily News*? I'm pretty sure the photo accompanied a story by Taylor Bell, who was a well-known Chicago prep sportswriter. I clipped that story and photo and may still have it somewhere. Even so, I didn't figure out then that you would have been a great story subject for me and the *Crusader*. What's wrong with me, Tom?

A: Ha ha! I don't remember the story, but Gabe and I did have an interesting experience together. After the season ended, we were invited to DePaul University in Chicago to go through a kind of tryout workout. The famous Ray Meyer was the coach of DePaul at the time. Neither one of us was apparently very impressive in the workouts. I was too small for a major college center and too slow for forward. Similarly, Gabe at six-three was too small for a forward and not quick enough for a guard spot. Regardless, it was a great experience.

Postscript: I plan to attend a high school reunion in a couple of months. Rick Sievers is expected to be there. I should ask him if he remembers Tom.



This stuff apparently is food in Louisiana. Photo by Dinielle De Veyra from Pexels

Wish I'd written that

From *Transcription* by Kate Atkinson:

Giselle would rouse herself from her torpor occasionally (she moved like a particularly lazy cat) in order to despise something.

Timeless advice. Economical, too.

Those who want to read these same three words on the Take My Word for It blog and explore other parts of my website can click [here](#).

Omit needless words.

(Rule 17, The Elements of Style, Strunk and White)

**Kind regards,
jcannonbooks**

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