

Sirak gets PGA award

By Missy Jones • @missyjonjones • April 9, 2015



Ron Sirak shown with the legendary Dan Jenkins, who also received an award

Ron Sirak, Senior writer for Golf Digest, was the 26th recipient of the PGA of America Lifetime Achievement in Journalism Award Wednesday, April 8th at the annual Golf Writers Association of America dinner in Augusta. His speech and the video highlight of his career were big hits giving us much humor and sage advice. Here is his speech:

"Thank you. If I had known it would lead to this I would have had open-heart surgery a lot sooner..."

This is a truly an honor that I never expected.

I got into journalism sort of through the side door. Imagine a time when there were not only competing newspapers in this country but also a thriving alternative press. That's how I got here: Call it the alternative press, the free press, the underground press, that was my journalism school for 10 years, starting at the Lancaster (Pa.) Independent Press when I was 19 and still at Franklin & Marshall College.

And one of the things I learned during those years is that journalism is a team game.

Writers, editors, photographers, designers, fact checkers working together. And I have been fortunate to be on two great teams. First, 18 years with The Associated Press under Lou Boccardi, Walter Mears, Bill Ahearn, Darrell Christian and Terry Taylor. And now 17 years with Golf Digest/Golf World under Nick Seitz, Jerry Tarde, Terry Galvin, Geoff Russell and Jaime Diaz.

I'm blessed to have worked under such talent. Walter Mears, who got a Burning Tree membership from the AP for winning the 1977 Pulitzer Prize, had an odd habit of going through the mail and looking for uncanceled stamps, peeling them off and reusing them. Part of my job was to brief Walter when he arrived in the morning on what was on the news wire. He wanted to hear bad news from those below him, not above him -- and certainly not from anyone outside the company.

So I'd sit there and talk as he'd go through the mail. One day he gets a letter that reads: Dear Mr. Mears, My name is Billy Gazork. I'm 12 years old and my parents are making me write to famous people and ask for their autograph. May I please have your autograph?" Walter wrote back: "Dear Billy, Run away from home as soon as you can. Your friend, Walter R. Mears." Billy got his autograph.

The love of the people who do this job is as much of a reason why we do it as the love of the job itself. No one gets rich and famous as a journalist. Well, OK, Rick Reilly, but it's a short list.

I want to single out three editors. 20 years ago, Terry Taylor at the AP listened to my plan to expand golf coverage to include not just the PGA Tour but women, amateurs, the recreational game, the business of golf. She let me build a bridge from Bob Green to Doug Ferguson, who's taken the beat to a place I never dreamed of. Thanks, Terry.

Mike O'Malley at Golf Digest is simply the best line editor I've worked with. He asks the right questions, he fights for journalism and he treats writers with respect. Thanks, Mike.

And I owe three debts of gratitude to Golf Digest editor-in-chief and chairman Jerry Tarde. First, he hired me; Then, when I had an offer to leave, he wouldn't let me go and third and most important, professionally and personally he's always had my back.

I write a lot about the news of golf: TV deals, title sponsorships, endorsements, changes in leadership in organizations. And when you write about news you are sure to ruffle some feathers. The message from Jerry to me has always been, "You do your job. Be a reporter. And I'll do my job and deal with the fallout." Thanks, Jerry.

If the alternative press was my journalism school, the AP was my graduate school. I worked with a lot of people who cut their teeth as war reporters – editors and photographers in Vietnam – and they were tough. The first story I wrote there 35 years ago was on baseball. My lede was: "Bob Watson is a quiet man who likes to let his bat

do the talking.” Sam Boyle, the deputy sports editor, sent it back to me with a note saying: “Then get me an interview with the F’ing bat. Put a new lede on this, almost anything else will do.” I learned a lesson about clichés that day.

Let me tell you one of my favorite writer/editor stories. When I was a news guy at the AP, Brian Friedman was my national editor. He’s a bulldog. He was news editor in Moscow during the fall of Communism and when I became Deputy Sports Editor and needed an assistant I sent Brian an email asking; “What would it take to get you to move from Moscow back to New York.” He answered: “Do they have fresh broccoli?” Moscow was not an easy posting.

Anyway, one night we got a story we needed and on the night desk at the AP there is not a lot of time for niceties. This story was as dull as dishwater so Brian is grilling the writer, trying to squeeze detail out of him to make the story interesting. “What did the guy look like when he said this? What was he wearing? Describe the room he was in?” Finally the writer blurts out: “Look, I’m doing the best I can.” To which Brian calmly responded: “That’s the tragedy of it all.” A priceless moment in journalism.

Jimmy Cannon said sportswriters are under paid and over privileged. What he meant is we work long hours under deadline pressure, spend way too much time stuck in airports and throw away far too many stories but that we have the privilege of a ringside seat for greatness. We get to see genius first hand. I am thankful for the opportunity to live that life.

It’s an unusual life. My best friends live nowhere near me. I’m in Massachusetts. Dan Jenkins and his brilliant wife June, live in Texas and I cherish our dinners Colonial week and at the majors; Doug Ferguson, whom I’ve spoken with just about every Tuesday since 1998, is in Florida. So is Ty Votaw of the PGA Tour, and still I’ve been invited to a majority of his weddings – a slim majority but a majority.

My friends are out here, on the road: Players, caddies, tour and tournament officials and, of course, other writers. My friend Missy Jones calls us Road Trolls. The image I have is like working for the circus. You roll into town on Monday or Tuesday, throw up the tent, perform your act for five or six days then strike the tent on Sunday night and head for the next town. I’ve loved every minute of it. One of those who has helped me cope with this life and the challenges it brings is Bill Fields, a brilliant writer and even better friend.

Another colleague I need to thank is Dom Furore, who is not only one of the best golf photographers but one of the best photographers, period. And there is no better person to travel with. Ask him to tell you the Bujimbura story sometime. Or the Grand Mosque. Or bribing a helicopter pilot in Dubai. Or when I gave his hotel room away in Kigali and he had to stay in the Hotel Rwanda. And yet he still speaks to me.

Among those who sacrifice for us so we can live this life are our families. From 1987 on, I was never home for Father's Day because that's when the U.S. Open ends. I'm thrilled that my daughter Rachel, her husband Jeremy and my grandson Declan are here tonight. Rachel and I lost her Mom when Rachel was 7 years old. I didn't travel in 1990 to adjust to being a single parent and to make Rachel feel safe. When I did travel again and she was worried something would happen to me I'd say, "Don't worry Rachel, I'll be there to dance at your wedding." I cried when I was able to keep that promise. Thanks Rachel, for sharing me with these people.

Let me tell you another AP story. One of the all-time great characters is Ed Schuyler Jr. He covered boxing and horse racing for the AP. Ed had many feuds and one was with a woman whose job was to keystroke horseracing agate into the system. Irene Von Gnippe was her name. Ed and Irene couldn't stand each other.

One day, a public relations firm sent a press release over by a guy dressed in a shark costume. So Irene gets off the elevator at 50 Rock and BAM runs right into the guy. She comes around the corner into the sports department talking a mile a minute and says: "I just ran into a guy dressed like a shark, scared the hell out of me." To which Schuyler replied, "Imagine what the freaking fish was thinking."

For a kid who grew up in Western Pennsylvania when a local boy, the son of a PGA pro, Arnold Palmer, was bursting on the scene, ending up as a golf writer is a dream come true. If you want to argue who the greatest golfer of all time was, there are a handful of names in that discussion. But if you want to talk about who the most important golfer of all time was there is only one – Arnold Palmer. He took the game out of the country club and brought it to the masses. Thanks, Arnold. If not for you I wouldn't be here today.

Combining golf and journalism is my dream job. I love everything about it. And I cherish the relationships I have with the game's organizations: The PGA of America, USGA, R&A, PGA Tour, European Tour, Augusta National Golf Club and others. Their trust in me has made me better able to do my job.

But I do need to single out one group that has brought me special joy – the LPGA. I've known LPGA commissioners John Laupheimer, Charlie Mechem, Jim Ritts, Ty Votaw, somebody whose name I forget, Marty Evans and Mike Whan. I'm not sure why I became such an advocate for women's golf. Maybe it was because my Mom worked as a welder during the day and then as a cleaning woman at night to take care of us. In the LPGA founders I have been fortunate to become friends with – Louise Suggs, Marilyn Smith, Shirley Spork among them – and some of those who followed, like Kathy Whitworth and Patty Sheehan as well as Morgan Pressel and Stacy Lewis, who are here tonight, I saw women as strong as Mom. And I saw people who were trying to hold them down, belittle them. I wasn't going to let that happen. I've always felt the biggest critics of the LPGA both among fans and media are people who don't go to their tournaments. Once you go, you are a convert.

The single most-satisfying story I've done came out of the 12 days I spent in Rwanda with Betsy King, Juli Inkster, Katherine Hull Kirk, Reilly Rankin, Renee Powell and Wendy Poscillico on a humanitarian mission to help orphans. Thanks, LPGA for sharing your story with me.

I told myself that tonight I would not let myself become another old guy lamenting about the demise of print journalism. However.... I will say this. Our concern should not be about the demise of print; it should be about the demise of journalism. Social media is driving the bus right now when it comes to communications and it is the wild, wild west. There are no rules. But journalism, like golf, is all about the rules. Without rules there is no trust. And what we do is based on trust. Our purpose should be to inform and educate and if we entertain along the way, that's gravy. We shouldn't be rolling the ball over when it comes to our obligations to the truth. When we put our name on a story – or a Tweet – it is like signing a scorecard. We are attesting that we have made every effort to make certain that what's in the story is true.

This notion of the Citizen Journalist is beyond me. While these new forms of communication can provide instant information, that information is still merely tips like in the old days that need to be checked out, verified before being published. When I found out I needed my aortic valve replaced I didn't look for a Citizen Cardio Vascular Surgeon. I found a guy who had done it before. I looked for a pro.

The challenge is to bring the old values of print – professionalism, responsibility, and accountability – to the new forms of delivery.

I want to end with one more story from the AP. Among the many feuds of Ed Schuyler was one with the college football writer. One day they're having a full-throat F-you fight in the middle of the sports department. People in other departments are cowering in their cubicles. Finally, the football writer thinks he has the crowning blow and yells at Ed, "You're nothing by a professional drunk." To which Schuyler replied: "At last I'm a pro at something." A priceless moment in journalism.

From the bottom of my mechanically repaired heart I want to thank the PGA of America and the panel who selected me for this award.

Tonight, I feel like I am a pro at something. Thank you."