

USED TO PLAY FOR THE CUBBIES, MERSCH: REMEMBERING WHEN JOURNALISM HAD MORE THAN 140 CHARACTERS

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When The Associated Press hired me in June 1980 to work the baseball desk Deputy Sports Editor Sam Boyle told me to call dayshift supervisor Dick Joyce for my schedule. That was my first encounter with a breed of individual mostly extinct in journalism – for better or worse.

Dickie was a 6-foot-5, 250-pound teddy bear in rumpled attire that resembled a pile of laundry strewn across an unmade bed. He spoke in a low voice, almost a mumble, and always had a twinkle in his eye, except when they were bloodshot on the morning after the night before. His half-smile made you feel he knew a joke you were not in on. And, for some reason, he called everyone “mersch.”

His way of saying my name – Sirak – was to call me Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego every time he saw me. When I reached Dickie he told me I’d work 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. and my days off would vary with the baseball schedule. He said to report Tuesday, paused for a second,

then asked: “Ever work on a computer?” When I said I hadn’t, he replied: “Better make that Monday, mersch.”

My job was called “baseball dictationist.” This was before laptops and a five-person team in the AP New York headquarters was hired to take in game stories and box scores. The writers called in the eighth inning and dictated a story and then hoped nothing in the game changed.

It was another time. Smoking was allowed and the liquid lunch was not uncommon. Dickie was familiar with both, puffing on a cheap cigar in a plastic tip down so low the smoke curled into his squinting eyes as he typed on a computer the size of a small refrigerator. He’d grab a sandwich in the cafeteria at 10:30, saying: “Gotta eat now so I can go to lunch later.” That meant powering down a few beers.

Dickie had his own language. If you mentioned something that was old news, he’d say: “Bottom of the birdcage, mersch.” If you suggested moving a story he felt was unimportant, he’d say: “Used to play for the Cubbies, mersch.” That meant no big deal. His wit snuck up on you because of his low-key deliver.

Dickie usually wore a black jacket, white shirt unbuttoned at the collar and skinny black tie. He combed his hair with his fingers. Frequently, he'd absent-mindedly place an uncapped pen into his shirt pocket, creating an ink stain. Once someone commented on the stain and Dickie said: "I got another shirt just like it at home."

One night, years after I met him, I was overnight supervisor on the general news desk when Dickie returned to the office after midnight following a lengthy session at the bar. It was too late for the train home so he said he'd sleep in the conference room and I should wake him at 7:30.

The next morning he threw water on his face, ran fingers through his hair and looked the same rumpled way he did every day, ready for his 8 a.m. shift. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day," Dickie said. "If you are not home by breakfast you are in big trouble." Once, after arriving home late and over-served, he was asked how his wife reacted. "Pots and pans, mersch," Dickie said.

No one could get in the last word with Dickie because he'd have a line you simply could not top. When cut off at an airport bar, he replied: "Hey, I'm not flying the plane, mersch."

In 1980, while enduring security at Moscow airport on his way to the Soviet Olympics, a red light flashed and alarm sounded. Dickie yelled: “Islander goal!” When he found out a favorite article of clothing was missing after security scoured his suitcase, he said: “I don’t want to see one of your guys running around Afghanistan in my Jets jacket.”

Not a fan of hockey, Dickie said: “If they played the Stanley Cup in my back yard I’d close the blinds.”

For a while, Dickie was the AP college basketball writer until replaced by Jim O’Connell, who went on to become a Hall of Famer. About two weeks after O’C got the job Dickie pulled him aside and offered words of wisdom.

“When you make your travel schedule,” Dickie said to O’C, who was eager to get sage advice, “get USA Today and go to the weather map. Stay away from the blue, mersch.”

On May 12, 1988, while watching TV with his wife, Bea, Dickie suffered a massive stroke and died two weeks later. Few people squeezed as much fun out of 53 years as Dickie, and even fewer have brought so much joy to others.

“Dick was a great comfort on the desk,” AP Sports Editor Darrell Christian said at the time. “His wry wit always put things into perspective even under the most difficult circumstances.”

That was certainly true and just as certainly, Dickie’s antics tested Christian. When AP sportswriters traveled to events like the NCAA Final Four, Darrell insisted on jacket and tie. On the Friday before the men’s semifinal, Christian would take his team of writers out to dinner. One year, everyone was in the hotel waiting for a lone late arrival.

Across the lobby lumbered Dickie in his black jacket, white shirt and skinny black tie. As he walked we could see the sole of one of his shoes flapping with each step. We could also see Darrell reddening with rage.

“Dickie,” Darrell snarled, “look at your shoe.” Dickie glanced down and said: “Good for scooping up quarters, mersch.” Even Darrell had to laugh. A wise man said sportswriters are underpaid but over privileged. One of my privileges was knowing Dickie Joyce. Used to play for the Cubbies, mersch.