

REMEMBERING DAN JENKINS: A SPORTS WRITER WHO CHANGED THE DIRECTION OF THE RIVER

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Sports, at its very best, is more than games. The final score is not found in red lights on a scoreboard or black numbers etched onto a scorecard. The magic of these games we play and watch and write about is that they are an immediate window into the essence of what it means to be alive.

No one who ever sat down at a keyboard threw that window open as widely as Dan Jenkins. No one, writing about only sports, took readers inside human triumph and personal frailty as intimately as His Ownself. Without saying so, and often wrapped in laughter, Dan taught a post-graduate course in humanity.

When we lost Dan Jenkins on March 7 at the age of 90 we lost more than a man; we lost an artist who, like Picasso or Matisse or Dali, changed the way people look at the world. At his funeral service in Christ Chapel Bible Church in Fort Worth on March 15, his extremely talented writer of a daughter, Sally, said of her Dad: "He changed the direction of the river."

Truer words were never spoken. Red Smith, the Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for The New York Times, once said: "Writing is easy; all you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein." Dan did that in such a sublimely surgical way that we never felt the cut; never saw the blood. The tears we shed were from laughter; the wisdom we gained not only painless, but also enjoyable.

Dan's two favorite sports were college football and golf. He knew that in 60 minutes or 18 holes we were granted a precious gift – a glimpse deep inside a person, a revelation as to what they are all about.

That insight could come in one game, sometimes in one play; that report card could be tabulated in one tournament, one round or even one shot. That quickly, we could learn how someone handles success or failure; if they will be there when we need them most; we learn about their honesty and see in which direction their moral compass points – if, in fact, they have one.

Dan wrote sports from the inside out, not from on high. He was not an observer moralizing about the edges of reality but rather an explorer who took us to the heart of the matter and made us feel its beat. He took us on a tour of the good, the bad and the ugly.

He knew that, in games and life, the best we can do is to try our best. By being His Ownself, he allowed us to

better appreciate the individual journeys of others and, in doing so, better understand ourselves. And he did it all so gracefully we never realized we were getting smarter.

I read Dan Jenkins for more than 50 years and knew him as a friend and colleague for about 30, especially the 20 we were together at Golf Digest. I shared hundreds of meals, consumed untold numbers of adult beverages, breathed an ocean of second-hand cigarette smoke and laughed a million times with him.

He taught me more about writing than anyone I've ever known or read. Dan's barbs were sharp, with edges that cut, but he once told me: "I never sacrificed the truth for a laugh." There were times Dan wrote things that approached the line, but they were always true and always from the heart and never said without thought.

What a massively important lesson that is to learn, especially in the instant gratification world of social media in which we are now trapped. Observations can be expressed in impactful and even hurtful ways, but they only have real power if their origin has a grain of truth. Dan's truth was always bigger than a grain; he stalked it relentlessly.

David Ogrin, a former tour player and now teaching pro who I consider to be a friend, was the kind of guy Dan didn't like intruding on his story. He was what Dan

would call "The low lurker" when his name was on the leaderboard and the kind of player of whom Dan would say: "There is no second paragraph."

Almost a quarter century ago, Ogrin's lone PGA Tour win came at the Texas Open which, being a proud Texan, Dan took as a personal affront. That led Ogrin to say of Dan: "He's a hostile voice from another era."

When Dan heard that he said: "Somebody's got to do it." Dan was a truth-teller. He liked to remind people that Tiger Woods didn't invent golf and ESPN didn't invent sports. Great things happened before either existed. Dan was a history lesson with a keyboard.

Dinner with Dan usually started at the hotel bar, where we would pre-game, often with Bev Norwood, a PR man whose eyes darted when he talked and head bobbed up and down, disappearing into his skinny shoulders, when he laughed. He matched Dan puff for puff when it came to cigarettes.

In Dan's novel about the LPGA -- "The Franchise Babe" - - Bev appears as a character named Smokey Barwood and I am a writer called Cy Ronak. Bev and I pretty much felt that being in a Jenkins novel was the pinnacle of our respective careers.

Once, as the three of us were holding the bar up, a person with the gift of gab – in this case a curse – that

we'd known for decades and whose name will be changed to protect the guilty, approached us.

When he was about 10 feet away Dan said: "Shut-up, Fred," to which Fred responded: "But I haven't said anything." Dan took a long drag on his cigarette and replied: "Just saving time."

His Ownself did not suffer fools lightly, especially if they were not entertaining. Dan not only had the courage to say what he was thinking, but his thoughts were worth saying.

There was a time at the PGA Championship in Atlanta – about 20 years ago – when I walked outside the media center and ran into Dan puffing on a cigarette and staring out at the golf course. I asked what he was doing and he said: "Writing."

Dan was proof there is no "off" position on the genius switch. He was always writing; always thinking; always mulling over lines and turning them every which way but loose in his wildly imaginative brain. I quickly figured out that often at dinner Dan was throwing out lines to see how well they worked. If we laughed, the line made it into his story.

As much as I enjoyed those times with Dan at golf's major championships, the truly special week was in May when the Colonial Invitational was played in Dan's

hometown of Fort Worth. Colonial week meant I could have dinner with Dan and his wife June and sometimes his Fort Worth Press colleague from the '50s, Jerre Todd and his wife Melba.

I'd listen to them talk about the old times. I'd laugh and I'd learn. When Jerre was the butt of one of Dan's jokes his eyes would bulge and his mouth would open in mock horror, a perfect comedic take by Dan's lifelong straight man.

We would discuss writing, but not golf writing, mostly movies. Casablanca. Chinatown. The Godfather. On TV, Dan watched Arrested Development, Curb Your Enthusiasm and Mad Men. When asked why he liked Mad Men, he said: "They smoke." Dan loved good writing, especially when it tested the boundaries of who we are.

Usually, when I write, I don't sit down at the keyboard until I get a vision of the first paragraph and the last graf. I need that vision. I want to know how the story ends and then I figure out the path to get there. But this is a story I don't want to end. I don't want Dan to end.

But while those Colonial dinners are gone and those moments we shared at the majors will be no more, the memories remain. More importantly, the words of Dan Jenkins will live as long as people read. And when the history of modern sports writing is etched, it will begin

and end with Dan Jenkins. To say that now is just saving time.