

My Memories of *The National*

by Charles B. Pierce

By an odd chance, I was back in Spokane this year for Super Bowl Sunday, which I passed pleasantly at Jack & Dan's, a neighborhood tavern by the Gonzaga campus, and one that was partly owned for years by Jack Stockton, whose son, John, played point guard for the Utah Jazz. (Once, when asked why there were no pictures of his famous son in the place, Jack replied, "There aren't any pictures of me, either, and I own the joint.") I was there on behalf of a magazine on a story that had absolutely nothing to do with sports. The crowd was sparse, at least by Super Bowl Sunday standards. You actually could hear the Fox broadcast crew, which may or may not have been a blessing. I tucked myself into a group of Packer fans and had an altogether splendid time.

The last time I was in Jack & Dan's was my 37th birthday, in 1990, when Jack himself was tending bar and serving me these giant birthday schooners of beer while I watched the All-American Bowl in Birmingham, Alabama, and I was telling Jack about my visit to a place called Summerfield, in northern Louisiana, where I'd been a week or so earlier. I was working for *The National Sports Daily* on a piece about Karl Malone and John Stockton who, just at that time, were becoming the perennial winners of the NBA's Pairs competition. I had been in Summerfield, on the front porch of the general store of Karl Malone's mother, Shirley Jackson, who chewed tobacco and spit while we talked. The store looked like a place Walker Evans would have bought his Mr. Pibb – low-slung and slumped. There was a catfish pond out back with a couple of rusted folding chairs on its bank. Next to the chairs was a state-of-the-art satellite dish.

It had been hot on the porch, even though it was coming on toward Christmas. There was very little shade, even though there used to be plenty. There once was a huge tree out front of the store. However, during Karl's senior season in high school, the passel of assistant coaches who had taken to haunting the place had gotten on Shirley's last nerve, so one night she cut down the tree with an ax so the whole lot of them could broil in the sun. She told me this story on the porch, and then she talked about raising kids. A few weeks later, I was sitting in Jack & Dan's, watching North Carolina State beat a Southern Mississippi team quarterbacked by Brett Favre – who had not yet become America's most highly-paid migrant worker – 31-27, and telling John Stockton's father what I'd learned from Karl Malone's mother, and thinking that, damn, Spokane might just be the greatest place on earth, for a night, anyway.

I judge the jobs I've had in this business by the places they took me, and by that standard, there simply has been nothing to match *The National Sports Daily*. Now, it is undoubtedly true that, had *The National* not sent me and so many other people like me so many places, it might not have run through 150 million of Emilio Azcárraga's dollars quite as fast as it did.

Oh, money. Yeah, wait. I should tell this story about money first. In the spring of 1991, the last spring of our newspaper's life, I got a call from New York. Mike Lupica was leaving the paper to return to the *New York Daily News*, a development that surprised approximately nobody. He was taking with him his "Shooting from the Lip" column, the three-dot bullet template invented by the great Jimmy Cannon and subsequently appropriated by almost everyone else in the history of newspapers, including, most notably, in *USA Today* by Larry King. The column had been running in *The National* every Friday, and it had developed an audience. They wanted to keep the idea under a

different name, and someone had mentioned that I'd done a similar kind of thing when I was writing a column at the *Boston Herald*. So they asked me if I'd do it.

Of course, I told them, but I'd need more money to do it.

How much, they asked.

I had no idea, so I quoted them a figure that I thought probably indicated I was on mushrooms at the time.

They didn't even blink.

You start this week, they said.

I told my wife that I had good news and bad news. The good news was that I'd be making substantially more money. The bad news was that these people cannot possibly stay in business much longer doing business like this. I remain completely convinced that, had I asked for a Mercedes pulled by snow-white unicorns, one would have been in my driveway the next morning.

Then again, had *The National* not spent money the way that it did, it's unlikely that it would have sent Sam Donnellan all the way to Tokyo to watch the unbeatable Mike Tyson face off against an overweight schlub named Buster Douglas. (Later, it spent a lot of money sending a whole bunch of us to Vegas to watch Buster, an overweight schlub once again, underclub a left hand against Evander Holyfield and get starched for his trouble. I was there. I missed the end of the fight because my assignment got caught in a bizarre interoffice wrangle between my immediate superiors and some other titled layabouts in the operation. I still don't know what I was supposed to be writing about that night.) Peter Richmond wouldn't have had the chance to go to a Cubs game with Bill Murray and then hang out with Fleetwood Mac afterward. Which would have meant that we wouldn't have had the great scene several months later when Murray showed up in the New York offices to see Peter. Not long before that, a guy not many people liked had been fired, and Murray wandered into the daily editorial meeting, propped his flip-flops up on the table, and asked, "Show of hands. How many people thought [blank] was an [other blank]?" The world would be a poorer place without that moment.

Woody Allen said that 90 percent of life is showing up. He's right, except that 100 percent of journalism is showing up. If *The National* hadn't spent money the way it did, I wouldn't have gotten to spend a week in Oklahoma with the late Abe Lemons, the funniest man who ever coached anything anywhere. And I sure as hell wouldn't have been in the car with him, driving back in the middle of the night from a game in Lawton, when it occurred to Abe that, "You know where we are? We in UFO country. This is the kind of place where they see them UFOs. How come they never see them in big cities?"

"I wonder about stuff like that. You know what else I wonder about? Lion tamers. How do they get the lions to know how to do all that stuff? And those whale guys. I think you could get one of them whale guys from SeaWorld and he'd be a helluva basketball coach.

"Oh, and you know something else? Are you aware of how many people in the world who love you and care about you have no idea where you are right now?"

Most of us grunts knew the paper was spending a lot of money, not least because it was spending a lot of money on us. Because of that, there was always a vague unease about the

possibility that the business side of things might be being run by marmosets. There were hints that all was not well. The long-distance telephone cards we were assigned belonged to some piggy-back Ma Bell system that required us to enter what appeared to be a nuclear launch code before we could complete a call. One day, the whole system simply collapsed. (The rumor in the field was that the tinker-toy system had been run by a friend of the corporate officer who'd signed the contract on the paper's behalf. Having spent seven years covering the Massachusetts State Legislature in my younger days, I was not only pissed at the inconvenience, but also quite disappointed in the quality of the scam.) Things became a little clearer on the Day of the Assassins, when the folks from Mexico showed up in Manhattan one fine morning and pretty much defenestrated everyone on the financial side of things. For a brief afternoon, while in a hotel in (I think) Charlotte, I was unclear whether or not the newspaper had a publisher, and thought that, perhaps, the whole thing was now being run from a Sabrett's stand on Fifth Avenue. The resulting layoffs and personnel shuffling threw everything into confusion; one writer had to move from Chicago to Denver with about two days' notice. It was like being a utility infielder.

But the point was that, for perhaps the last time, a publication launched itself with the proposition that its journalism would be something of great value, and that, therefore, it should pay people in a fashion commensurate with the value it would place on their work. This is what sent America's sports editors straight to the fainting couch, clutching their pearls and moaning like Aunt Pittypat Hamilton at the fancy-dress ball. *The National* wasn't shy about raiding people's rosters, and even a lot of writers who didn't come aboard were able to leverage the offer into handsome new deals with their current employers. Pretty soon, the bellowing from the Associated Press Sports Editors was audible on Neptune, and the APSE was pretty much a dog's breakfast as regards *The National* for the entire eighteen months of its existence. Very few of our pieces were considered for the organization's annual awards, and, when we finally folded, Bill Dwyre of the *Los Angeles Times*, one of those people who (to borrow a Christopher Hitchens line) fancied himself a wit and was half-right, assigned one of his columnists to dance on our freshly dug grave. A couple hundred people thrown out of work, and this guy decides to spike the ball in the end zone. Stay classy, big guy.

There's not much of an argument to be made that any of this was sustainable over the long haul. Hell, after all, we did fail after a year and a half. But I'm fairly sure that most of us got everything out of the paper that we came there to get. I know I did. In the fall of 1989, I was writing 600-word columns at the Herald. My heart always was in long-form narrative writing, though. It's what I cut my teeth on at the *Boston Phoenix*. (I once wrote 6,000 words on lobsters there.) It's what my entire generation of writers growing up wanted to do – The New Journalism, even though it wasn't really new – whether we were reading Tom Wolfe and David Halberstam and Larry L. King at *Harper's*, or Tim Crouse, Tim Cahill, and Hunter S. Thompson at *Rolling Stone*, or the astonishing crew that Andre Laguerre brought in and nurtured at *Sports Illustrated*, most definitely including our own editor, Frank Deford. These were the guys who were doing the best work, and who in any case appeared to be having almost all the fun. (When Dan Jenkins wrote about an Oklahoma game, he could make you think, well, screw Paris in the '20s – Norman, Oklahoma is the only place to be. While I was at *The National*, I finally made it to Norman. I realized that what had made Norman great was that Jenkins was there.) *The National* was a way to get back on that track again. I didn't care if the damned thing lasted 20 minutes. I grabbed it with both hands, and, within two months, I was flying through a

snowstorm in Iowa, following Pearl Washington in his wanderings through the CBA, trying not to think too much about Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper, and having the time of my life.

Not long after that, they brought us all into New York to meet one another, one of only two times the whole staff was gathered together. (The second time was the now legendary breakup party which featured, I am told, my own impromptu recitation of the 22nd Chapter of the Gospel of Luke.) I met people there I will count as friends for the rest of my life. Chris Mortensen and I discovered that we have sons born less than two minutes apart. I met David Granger, who has been my editor ever since, at one place or another. Dave Kindred and I talked about Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell – Dave talked, I listened – and, as Dave put it, where I had been all these years. (I still owe him for that.) It was a giddy, happy time of it, although none of us were really sure if there was a marketing plan or a distribution strategy, or whether they were simply going to fly over major urban centers and drop the thing from airplanes. It was the big time, or at least, it passed for it as far as I was concerned.

So I got my company laptop and my company AMEX card and my weird NORAD telephone card, and I went out on the road. There were no home games to cover at *The National*. I went all over Oklahoma with Abe. I drove logging roads in Louisiana, and hung with the crowd at Jack & Dan's. Peter got to go to ballgames with Bill Murray, and Johnette Howard wrote eloquently about a hockey goon gone bad. "The Main Event" became something of a staple for readers of *The National*, especially, I've discovered, among people who were then in journalism school, the way The New Journalism was for people my age. I still get a great kick out of that.

(A note about readers: Once, in Dublin, a cabbie drove me by the General Post Office, where in 1916 a group of mystics and poets launched the Easter Rising. "Listening to all the people who say now they went in there to fight for Ireland," the cabbie said, "you wouldn't be thinking that building held 500,000 people, would you? And how ever did we lose?" If everyone over the past 20 years who's told me they read *The National* faithfully was telling the truth, we never would have folded.)

There are people who believe that, if we'd just managed to hang on until the Internet devoured the world, we might have been able to make a go of it. I'm not sure about that. An all-sports daily newspaper is a fine idea for all those countries whose regular newspapers don't have sports sections. We were never able to make the whole "we're local/we're national" thing work, probably because nobody could. (You can't just parachute somebody into, say, Chicago and declare them a local sports columnist. They'd get eaten alive.) And it turns out that the answers to the questions about the marketing plan and the distribution strategy were "No," and "We'll make it up as we go along," respectively. (Launching a newspaper without a coherent idea of how you're going to promote it, or get it to people who might want to read it, is like launching a boat without a rudder or an engine...or a hull, now that I think about it.) Given all of that, and given how completely different the world became when the Internet exploded, I doubt we'd have survived the intervening years or the detonation. We were what we were. Period.

The important thing, though, is not that *The National* folded. The important thing is that it existed at all, and that there were people willing to take the chance to be part of it. For good and ill, the sports media universe was just starting to explode out of the box of what would become known later as the "mainstream media." *The National* was a part of that, and a great number of people who worked there went on to play significant roles as the expansion of the sports media continued and

accelerated. For the rest of us, *The National* would have been a gamble worth taking if only because of the places that it took us.

One of my last trips sent me to Mexico City to write about a boxer named Jorge Paez, who'd once been a circus acrobat, and who was considered more than half-crazy even by boxing's standards, which are considerable. I booked my own flight and my own hotel. This would prove to have been a mistake. First, the airline lost my bag. And then, just as I was wandering unencumbered into my hotel room, the phone rang. It was the man who ran the sports division for Univision, the broadcast empire owned by Emilio Azcárraga, the owner of *The National*, and the man whose money I was at the moment spending in the Willy Loman Suite of this imitation American chain hotel in which I'd found myself. I told him where I was staying.

"No," he said, "this will not do. Please wait by the phone."

A few minutes later, he called back. "Mr. Pierce," he said, "your driver will be downstairs in 10 minutes and he will take you to your new hotel."

Driver?

"Also," he continued, "Señor Azcárraga will see you at 10 tomorrow morning."

I explained then about my lost luggage and that Señor Azcárraga might well be seeing me in clothes that I'd been wearing for 48 hours.

"This will not do, either," he said.

I assume that, at some point, somebody at Aeromexico got torn a new aperture, because my bag showed up early the next morning at my new hotel – which, I should add, was altogether a step up from the "Hey, it's just like the one in Keokuk!" Arms into which I had booked myself earlier. I went off to the Univision compound to meet the boss. He was tall and elegant and very interested in what we were doing with his money. Spending it wisely, I told him. As I recall, he didn't think much of Paez. He thought him undignified.

That afternoon, I went out of the city with Paez and his manager. We jounced along some back roads until we came to an orphanage, a stark, calcined place built atop the ruins of an old slaughterhouse. At one point, while Paez was entertaining the orphans, I wandered around out in back of the building. Some kids were playing baseball, running and sliding in the dry, rust-colored clay. The ball was a battered thing that at one time might have been a sock. They were using anything they could pick up as a bat – slabs of wood, a mop handle, an unidentifiable shaft of metal.

The sun was going down, orange over the broken hills. The sunset filtered through the clouds of reddish dust gave the scene the aspect of some lost Biblical place out of the Sinai that you'd walk through, howling mad with thirst, in the general direction of what looked like revelation. Another kid stepped up to hit. I noticed that, for a bat, he was using the spinal column of a cow long ago slaughtered on this ground. The dust rose around him. The pitcher delivered, and the kid swung the old cow's spine with all his might, connecting solidly, and shattering the old vertebrae in all directions. He got thrown out at first. Behind him, some other kids bent down and picked up the bones.

There has to be a place for that in the collective memory of the tribe – orphaned children, playing baseball, swinging old bones as a choked, blooded sunset falls on a small, scalded corner of the world. For a while, it was *The National* that provided that place. I'd be ashamed to say it wasn't worth the gamble.