

EDITING THE COACH

In 2005, my uncle informed me of his latest writing project and asked me if I'd be willing to assist him by editing the chapters. He gave his manuscript the working title, "Memoirs of an Eight-toed Octogenarian." There was no way was I passing up the opportunity to be part of a literary enterprise of that sort.

Immediately I accepted the job of Editor in Chief. His thanks were profuse but the deeper gratitude was all mine.

Frank Morris, the husband of my mother's sister, Helen, had always occupied a major place in my life. As the parent of my closest male cousins, as one of my first coaches in organized sports, and as a gentle, humorous adult presence in my childhood, Frank was both a mentor and a model.

Before his work on the memoir, he had written a compelling document on his World War II army experience in the jungles of Burma as part of the American forces in the China-Burma-India Theater fighting the Japanese. His monograph bore the title, Half a century ago, half a world a world away. As part of the security detail assigned to guard the legendary American general, Joseph Stilwell, Frank had regular contact with "Vinegar Joe" and there were many tales to tell.

Reading Frank's monograph in 2003 had served to reawaken my curiosity about my father's WWII service in the Navy. Before his death in 1999, I had been going over some of the PT boat stories with my father but we never had the opportunity to drill down as far as I wanted to go. Frank's narrative pushed me to get back on track.

Motivated by his success in getting the military portion of his life down in writing, Frank decided to expand his focus and tell the story of his entire life. Writing in longhand on a legal pad, he churned out chapters detailing his Irish-Catholic boyhood in Philadelphia, his courtship of my mother's sister, his career in the advertising industry, and his adventures as the father of my seven cousins, one

of whom, Frankie, had been my closest childhood companion.

As quickly as his granddaughter converted the long yellow pages into word-processed chapters, Frank mailed them to me. Regardless of the month they arrived, those chapters felt like Christmas cards showing up on an overcast December afternoon. Reading his words, I heard his voice, one that I'd known since the time I learned to walk. It was a voice I never heard raised in anger, a voice that frequently spilled into laughter which quickly became contagious. No one could tell jokes like Frank; his timing was impeccable.

Although in his eighties, with two toes lost to diabetes, Frank stayed on task. There was a lot of ground to cover. With his characteristic humor and strong attention to detail, he got the chapters down on paper. With an advertising executive's affection for phrasing and efficiency, Frank's approach was anything but cavalier. The sentences were clear and the paragraphs cohesive. Frank made his living with words and his respect for the power of language has remained immense. Years of writing tightly crafted letters to the editors of newspapers in major American cities, as well as Ireland, had also served to keep his skills sharp.

With every fresh installment of his magnum opus, I found renewed validation of the Socratic axiom bequeathed to us by Plato—the unexamined life is not worth living. I took extreme delight in my role as editor for the collected reflections of a life that was eminently worth the trouble.

Frank was a major figure in my first foray into organized sports. My passion to play little league football was fueled by the desire to wear the uniform of the Hillcrest Hornets and the Olney Eagles, just like my Morris cousins, Michael, Frankie, and Rob. As part of the coaching staff, Frank was a constant presence at every practice and game. He was a gentle, positive force in an athletic environment that enforces its rigorous and unforgiving standards on even its youngest participants. Frank had limitless patience as he introduced a squad of eager ten-year-olds to the nuances of blocking and tackling.

The practice sessions were long and the games fiercely competitive. It was the unrelenting intensity of our head coach Jim Lynch that accounted for the fact that we won far more games than we lost. Jim maintained an edge that gave his young players an edge. Being more scared of Jim than our opponents yielded positive results on the football field. Like my father, Jim expected his charges to progress quickly in their grasp of the games subtleties. Unlike my father, Jim's minimal tolerance for mistakes was balanced by a strong tendency for effusive praise when things were done right.

In a setting that grew increasingly pressure-filled and complex, Frank provided me with the most enduring lesson I ever received in athletics at any level—the unshakable conviction that sports are *supposed* to be fun.

No fumble, missed tackle, or dropped pass could diminish the enjoyment that Frank clearly took from every game. The smile on his broad face and his soft words of encouragement were always awaiting us on the sidelines whether we scored a touchdown or surrendered one. Without ever having to say it, Frank's presence on the sidelines communicated one thing with utter clarity—we were playing football and what in the world could be better than *that*?

The joy that characterized Frank's coaching was abundantly evident in his writing. The gentle irony and buoyant humor conveyed in the manuscript's working title found their way into every segment of the text. Even in his description of the most heart wrenching tragedy of his life—the death of his son Frankie in 1978 as the result of a car accident—there was the unmistakable echo of his gratitude for the gift of his second son whose achievements never failed to bring him pride and delight.

Through the days that were happy, sad, or somewhere in that vast territory between, Frank found wonder in them all. He is a person who has paid attention to things. Through the written word, he paid tribute to the span of days that defined his rich and remarkable life.

In the dialogue we constructed through his writing and my editing, I came to the gentle realization that my uncle was coaching me once again. As we both got a little bit older, he was again

my mentor. His voice was as clear as it was when he held the clipboard and wore a whistle and I was decked out in helmet, shoulder pads, and cleats. With his manuscript in my hands, it always felt like a crisp autumn afternoon when the air magically carried the slightest hint of burned leaves from my childhood days in Philadelphia when that practice was allowed.

Through our interactions via the written word, we were engaged in something that was as meaningful as it was enjoyable. The message was as clear as a cloudless sky: this activity of writing, this drive to get the words down on paper—it's nothing if it's not fun. If that weren't the case, why bother?

In my mind's eye, there is always a broad smile on that familiar face which has never aged. With a trace of laughter in that familiar, gentle voice, Frank encourages me again.

Holding the now finished and published book in my hands, I again hear that familiar voice. “We're writing, Steve,” Frank is saying, “and what in the world could be better than *that*?”

Stephen J. Stahley

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