

St. Petersburg Times Aug. 1991

Saddlebags: A Collection of Columns and Stories

By Shelby Strother

Altwerger & Mandel, 414 pp. (plus 16 pages b&w photos)

The pleasures of sport are the same as those of art: conflict, heroism, beauty. Especially conflict. When the Bucs take the field, they embody our dreams. They are the good guys, the Allies, Othello, apple pie. Those monsters in purple from Minnesota are evil, the Axis, Iago, hemlock. During the struggle, our ecstasy rests with one side, our agony with the other. But in one crucial way sport usually falls short of art. The game holds little meaning beyond its duration. While art casts a light on the human condition, sport seldom moves beyond being self-referential.

But when the sportswriter is also an artist, he enlarges sport to sit credibly beside drama. There aren't many such writers in this field where cynicism, the cliché and the boyish "Gee whiz" come so easily. On March 3, 1991 journalism lost one of the few, Shelby Strother, who at 44 lost his battle with one of cancer's most virulent forms.

"Shelby was a special person," said Joe Childs, sports editor at the *St. Petersburg Times* where Strother once worked. "He captured the emotion of sport wonderfully and always evoked a powerful response in our readers."

Saddlebags contains more than 80 of Strother's best columns and stories from his 20 years at the *Times*, *Denver Post* and *Detroit News*. They are not what any other writer would have done. Semanticist S. I. Hayakawa once noted that if you can see in situations only what everyone else does you are "so much a representative of your culture that you are a victim of it." Strother shakes off such shackles, coming at his subjects from an imaginative angle of vision and writing of them in language fresh as new rain.

He describes football coach Jerry Glanville's life of contradictions: "You get a good seat on the luxury liner and then you happen to notice the ocean's on fire." He captures the heartbreaking saga of high school hoops prospect Curtis Jones's slide into schizophrenia: "When you live in the in-between world, between the gaps where even a streak of light gets bent and twisted and flowers seem evil and hairbrushes can walk, unable to cope with anything except yesterday, which happened an entire lifetime ago, your thirst is for redemption."

There's his song of Sugar Ray Leonard in training: "The huge cassette player . . . is suddenly silent. And Leonard, facing a portable full-length mirror, whirls the rope from side to side, skipping slowly, building the tempo. Then the scratchy sound of the rope on the floor becomes a percussion instrument and the dance begins, at first slow and simple. The rope obediently twirls over head and under foot, all motion muted and thrifty." The book swells with evidence why former *Times* colleague Hubert Mizell

wrote in a March 5 column, "Shelby was kissed with Hemingway spirit and hints of Papa-like talent."

He writes with special affection about the Tampa Bay area: the sweet pop of a baseball in spring training, Pinellas beaches, fish stories swapped in Pasco County, Dwight Gooden at 12 starring on Tampa's Belmont Heights Little League team.

Strother shows the flip side of heroes, how former Jet Mark Gastineau "has demonstrated his confused nature . . . by dancing at football games and fighting at discos," the off-field bullyism of Jim Brown, the downfalls of Heisman-winner Billy Cannon and NBA star Spencer Heywood. There's sympathy for jailed ex-Dolphin Mercury Morris, a requiem for Muhammad Ali and awe for golfer Dorothy Kohl's battle against ovarian cancer.

Strother profiles some of sport's most indelible figures: Mark Fidrych, Sonny Liston, Joe Don Looney and Pete Maravich. He contrasts the diverse styles behind successful coaches: drill sergeant Bobby Knight, quietly efficient Dean Smith, fiercely independent Jerry Tarkanian and ghetto wonder-working Will Robinson. He paints word pictures of ardent fans, from 12 year-old Jason Kercher to blind 93 year-old Leo Krass.

Strother makes sport large because of what it reflects, and its face is always human. He writes of backwoods Floridians, a Cuban professor escaping to Miami in a motorboat, German protest singers, pool hustlers, murderers and marriages. He writes warmly yet unsentimentally of things he loved: his family, Florida.

By the last page we realize we've held a man in our hands. Paradoxically, Strother's ability to get outside himself and inside his subject shows his own passion for life, shows even that 44 years, though too brief, may be less short than it seems. What is time except what it contains? Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, "Death tugs at my ear and says, 'Live, I am coming'." This collection answers, "I'm living every moment." I suspect that's why Mizell also wrote about Strother: "I loved the guy."