

King of the World

■ *Nobody is going to bait a notes column with a sharper hook than Jimmy Cannon's wise-guy signature: "Nobody asked me, but . . ."*

By the time I became a full-time columnist in 1987, notes-column titles were like oceanfront lots—all the choice ones were gone. I had a friend who, when angry, frustrated or disgusted, often blurted: "When I'm King of the World . . ." I asked him if I could rent it monthly for twenty years or so.

When I'm King of the World . . .

Aspiring baseball writers will be required to read the selected writings of Dick Young when he covered the Brooklyn Dodgers for the *New York Daily News*.

Dick Young did for sports journalism what the hand-held minicam would later do for television. While his colleagues tapped out varying accounts of the game they had just witnessed, Young dashed off a quick lead for the first edition, then raced for the clubhouse to ask the salient questions that arise in nearly every baseball game. Then Young would go upstairs and write a second lead (called a write-through these days) for the later editions of what was then the nation's most read newspaper (2.2 million copies daily in its heyday) that wove quotes from players and managers into the game story.

Sports columnist Jimmy Cannon once wrote, "A baseball writer's relationship with a ballplayer is a cop-and-crook relationship." Young's clubhouse incursions made him the J. Edgar Hoover of his craft.

"I just thought it was interesting if there was a controversial play in a game or something similar that needed explanation," Young told me in 1980.

"It was that simple. I thought it was just an integral part of the story. The older writers didn't like that much. It was pretty much a handout era where the guys would sit up in the press box with a release from the ballclub and write what they saw . . . I don't know why, but nobody did it any differently. I guess you could get away with anything if everybody was doing the same thing. That's why I wasn't too popular at the time, because some of the guys had to get off their butt and go downstairs, too."

During a conversation last October, when Young covered his 41st and last World Series as a columnist for the *New York Post*, he pointed across the room at a half-dozen young baseball writers swapping items for their Sunday notes columns. "Look at them," he said. "Everybody shares everything these days; everybody's afraid to get beat on a story. You could fly coast to coast this Sunday with a stopover in each key city and read the same trade rumors and anecdotes in 10 cities."

Young went full cycle, from a man perceived as an ultra liberal in the 1940s to an arch-conservative in the '80s. Dick wanted law and order in baseball. He wanted "druggies" barred from the game for life. He swapped insults with Howard Cosell for 20 years, a feud that hurt neither man's career. "Howie the Shill," Young called him. He savaged Tom Seaver for the disloyalty and greed that forced the Mets into a 1977 trade with the Cincinnati Reds, yet unashamedly walked out on his *New York Daily News* contract when the *New York Post* offered him a better deal. He had an almost manic disdain for radio and TV journalists and rare was the World Series when Young was not the center of at least one pushing-and-shoving match between members of the print media and a TV crew trailing some talking head.

On balance, though, Dick Young, who died at age 69 last week, was a newspaper giant, one of the most influential American journalists of this century. He was an angry voice from a gentler time, and he will not be replaced.

(September 11, 1987)

When I'm King of the World . . .

Dick Vitale Inc. will be prohibited from speaking in capital letters. Therefore, P-T-Ps will be O-U-T . . . Putting Keith Jackson and Vitale—Howard Cosell on laughing gas—in the same TV booth is like pairing Dan Rather with the Greengrocer. Vitale plumbed new depths of self-promotion Sunday in a college basketball game between Temple and UNLV. His commentary should

have been accompanied by the POW! SLAM!! KERPLUNK!!! billboards from an old "Batman" rerun.

(January 26, 1988)

The America's Cup will be contested every four years in a 25-mile sudden death race down the Niagara River. First yacht to cross the plane of Niagara Falls will be declared the winner.

(June 30, 1988)

The Kentucky Derby field will be limited to 10 entries. Let the hackers run a pre-Derby cavalry charge and reward the winning trainer with a mint julep and a spot in the Derby field. Letting in some of those 80-1 oaters is like permitting Gerald Ford to tee off in the Masters . . . When Triple Buck tossed a shoe to cause that unprecedented post-time delay, there were a lot of confused, nervous animals milling about, looking wild-eyed. Which underlines the impression that on the intelligence scale, horses fall somewhere between sea gulls and Big 8 football players.

(May 13, 1989)

Some Royal Bounties

Bring me the head of Alfredo Garcia. Or Emiliano Zapata. A brace of pheasants and a hundred guineas for the loyal subject who delivers Sir Robin of Locksley—Robin Hood to you—dead or alive. If you see Kid Shelleen in Tombstone, tell him the Man with No Name is looking for him, oooo-eee-ooo-eee-oooo. Send my regards to Josie Wales, the outlaw, and Simon Wiesenthal, this century's most relentless man hunter. Where is Lee Van Cleef when Buddy Ryan needs him?

In the spirit of furtive rewards for savage blind-side hits, in the name of the federal witness-protection program, some bounties worth posting. Coming to the bulletin board of a post office near you:

Five C-notes in a sealed, blank envelope if you can deliver a pound of Jimmy Johnson's hair. Ten C-notes if the Pompous Pompadour is attached to the hair.

A Bible autographed by Reggie White to the party responsible for the mysterious disappearance of Rockin Rollin, the unkempt zealot whose presence at every major sporting event snowballed the "John

3:16" epidemic. For years, I thought the born-again banners were making fun of John Denny's 1982 pitching record.

An autographed picture of Margo Adams to anybody who can prove Steve Garvey fathered her baby during 1989. Births through midnight September 30, 1990 will be considered. Births resulting from sperm implantation will be disallowed, however.

Twenty minutes of mud-wrestling with Roseanne Barr if you can induce Marge Schott to sell out as Reds limited minority partner. Check her miserable organization after the latest round of hirings, an incomprehensible litter of Yankees flotsam so inept that even George Steinbrenner dumped them. Her new manager doesn't know the National League, but that's OK . . . Neither does her new general manager. If Schottzie, Marge's malodorous, slobbering St. Bernard, could learn to write memos, the efficiency of her front office would double.

(November 27, 1989)

When I'm King of the World . . .

There will be weight classes for women's gymnastics, just like boxing and wrestling . . . There should be a place on a balance beam for a graceful, 5-7, 125-pound woman who has been forced out of the sport because she grew bigger than one of those jellybeans with legs Bela Karolyi, The Exercist, totes around by the six-pack.

(July 2, 1992)

Marge Schott will run the Welcome Wagon program greeting Third World workers emigrating to Germany.

(December 3, 1992)

Pardons to Ponder

'Twas the night before Christmas and President Bush, a.k.a. "Clemency Moore," hung the stockings with care. He pardoned anybody who could locate Iran on a map or use the political label "Contra" in a complete sentence.

When will John Thompson get off the Dole? That's Dole as in Dole Pineapple. Once again, Georgetown's intrepid Hoyas have begun their suicide basketball schedule with victories over Hawaii Loa, Hawaii-Pacific, Hawaii Kai, Hawaii Five-Oh, Outrigger Canoe Club, St. Leo, Molokai Leper Colony, Maryland-Eastern Shore, Western Shore, Southern Shore and Northern Shore, D.C. Auto Body, Capital City Savings & Loan, Foggy Bottom Work Release Program, and Senate Pages (Male).

(December 26, 1991)

Although thousands flunked Bush's kind offer, everybody indicted for an Iran-Contra felony, including former defense secretary Caspar Weinberger, passed with flying colors.

Therefore, when I'm King of the World, pardons will fill the air like fruit flies in a restaurant alley. These are some:

Sal "The Barber" Maglie, who died yesterday, is pardoned for taking "Five O'Clock Shadow" out of the closet and for throwing so many baseballs at so many heads.

Once, Maglie threw at Richie Ashburn in the on-deck circle for timing his warmup pitches. Maglie also was pitching when Ashburn had the legendary at-bat in which he fouled off a dozen pitches. Exasperated, Maglie lobbed the 13th pitch over the plate. Ashburn popped it up.

Pete Rose is pardoned for betting on baseball and reinstated as a member of the establishment. He is immediately eligible for election to the Hall of Fame. But the Florida radio sports talk host must agree to a five-year probation: His satellite dish will be jammed and he is not permitted within 100 feet of a dog track, gambling casino or Lenny Dykstra.

And what would forgiveness be without a general amnesty for New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, a Ronald Reagan pardonee who has been forgiven more than Mary Magdalene? The Boss will be free once more to collude, fire managers, pay outrageous sums to .250 hitters, fire managers, leak stories to his pet sports writers, and fire managers.

Charles Barkley is pardoned for the painful and seditious statements he uttered during his final season as a Sickser on grounds that most of them were at least partly true. We'll always keep a light on for you, Charles, at Motel 76.

(December 29, 1992)

I just want to thank Flyers fans in advance for the sportsmanlike behavior we can count on tonight when the vile, cheap-shooting representatives of Quebec City's demented, obscene, pacifier-abusing hockey fans visit the Spectrum with their high-sticking, ankle-slashing, Lindros-trashing brand of hockey. I know there will be no scatological chants or obscene banners, eh?

(December 3, 1992)

Michael Dokes had one of the great straight lines at the press conference to announce tomorrow night's mismatch with heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe. After a stirring account of how he has battled to defeat substance abuse, Dokes was asked if he has been drug-free since returning to the ring. "More or less," the fighter said.

(February 5, 1993)



Here's an innovative suggestion for Mike Tyson's first post-stir fight: Instead of shipping a body from the undead sector of the heavyweight division, how about making a Tyson match with the prison guard he dislikes most? Hey, it'll be bloody and a lot of sick Americans would pay \$39.95 to watch it.

(August 16, 1994)

When I'm King of the World . . .

Ken Burns will be commissioned to do a 20-hour, 10-installment series titled: "1812—The Anthem War." Is this guy tone-deaf, or what? Have we heard enough variations of the Star-Strangled Banner, history's most mutilated piece of music, which intrudes ad nauseam on his epic baseball documentary? And shouldn't Kenny Ballgame tell us that the anthem was not a daily baseball occurrence until World War II, when Cubs owner Philip K. Wrigley decreed it should be played before every game? Awash with patriotic fervor, the rest of the clubs followed suit . . . Before that, the anthem was an Opening Day treat requiring a band. Since most owners were too cheap to hire bands for anything but special occasions, they were content to wait until the advent of public-address systems good enough to maintain the fidelity of a \$2 recording.

(September 23, 1994)

A Decree on Names

St. John's Redmen . . . Imagine how offensive that Native American-bashing nickname must have been all those years to the Mohawk tribesmen whose ironworking skills helped build New York's skyscrapers.

The Atlanta Braves keep tomahawk-chopping away. The Florida State Seminoles chant their stupid chant. The Kansas City Chiefs copy both.

It took those gutty Redmen from the borough of Queens to take a stand. The St. John's student body, following Stanford's trendy lead from the '70s, voted for a new nickname, the Red Storm. I say, let's keep this up. There are other insidious, sexist, sectarian, xenophobic nicknames the nation's colleges and universities have lived with too long.