

BOBBY HAWTHORNE

In 1978 or '79, Professor James F. Paschal of the University of Oklahoma asked me to write an article on sports writing for a little magazine he edited. Since he was my mentor, I did everything he told me to do, so I did.

After the magazine ran, Mr. Paschal rang me and said, "Well, you've gone this far, you should think about turning that article into a book."

That was his way of saying, "Write a book," so I did, except he didn't want to call it a "book." He wanted to call it a "monograph."

There's a difference. A book is a collection of chapters. A monograph is a "scholarly" collection of chapters.

Either way, my effort had marginal impact on scholastic journalism at best, with one exception: A copy fell into the hands of Bob Button, and Bob was, among other things, a member of the local committee for the 1980 JEA Fall National Convention in Detroit, so out of the blue, I received a phone call from Bob Button — who, at the time, I did not know. Bob introduced himself and asked if I planned to come to Detroit for the convention and, if so, would I be willing to present a half-day session on sportswriting, given that I'd written a book about it.

"Monograph," I said. "It's a monograph."

"Whatever," Bob said, or something to that effect. "You in?"

"Sure," I said, and a month or so later, I stepped off a plane in Detroit, and Bob was there to greet me. He was short and trim and mostly bald and very happy to meet me. At first, I thought, "This guy can't be for real. No one's that happy, especially to meet me."

But Bob was. He had a smile that stretched from Frankenmuth to Kalamazoo. I knew immediately we'd get along fine. He escorted me to my hotel, then took me to dinner, then helped me find the sliver of a hotel ballroom that served as my classroom.

I taught the half-day session, and then we attended an adviser's reception where Bob introduced me to his Michigan crew, and we all seemed to click, so eventually, they invited me to join the Michigan Interscholastic Press Association's summer workshop faculty.

In return, I invited Bob to teach at my summer workshop at the University of Texas at Austin, and he did so for several years, and I have no idea how many "several" is. Five or six, probably.

Typically, he taught newspaper editors, but once, I asked him to teach advisers, which is always dicey. They want to talk. They want to complain about their principals and yearbook reps. They want to take afternoons off to nap or shop.

I must have forgotten to tell Bob that, so two of them cornered me in the Jester Dorm cafeteria.

"He's impossible," one said.

"Why? What's he done?" I asked.

"It's not what he's done," the other said. "It's what he expects us to do."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Homework," they both said.

"Oh my," I said, then promised to talk to Bob about it, but I didn't. I knew he could handle himself, and he did.

The next year, he was back teaching Texas newspaper editors, who, because they were Texans, were apt to gloat about the magnificent successes of their once-a-month

newspapers and magazines until they learned that Bob advised a newspaper that published once a week, every week during the school year, every school year.

And not just “came out.” His kids broke real news. They told real stories. Reporters relied on multiple, authoritative sources, and stories were filled with revealing direct quotes. Not only that, the opinion section offered wise counsel on timely and relevant issues without defaulting to the boilerplate litany of teen suffering, whining and woe.

In other words, Bob ran a program that mattered.

Year after year, *The Tower* was among the nation’s top 1 percent of student newspapers, and I was borderline apprehensive when I learned he planned to retire because it’s difficult to find a replacement with enough brain and brawn to sustain the kind of success “The Tower” had enjoyed under Bob.

For the record, Jeff Nardone succeeded Bob beautifully. I’d love to eavesdrop on whatever they’re talking or laughing about right now.

Anyway, a few years later, I learned that Bob was thinking about applying for a job with the Virginia High School League, which is based in Charlottesville, Virginia. He would direct the scholastic journalism program, among other duties. The VHSL director, Ken Tilley, was a good friend, so I wrote a letter of recommendation and laid it on thick without exaggerating one thing. I didn’t need to. All I needed to do was tell the truth.

“I would have trouble sleeping knowing I had a chance to hire Bob Button and didn’t do it,” I wrote, which is literally true since I’m a life-long insomniac.

Well, Ken hired Bob, and Bob served with indefatigable distinction.

After Bob retired from that position, I wrote Ken Tilley again, this time enthusiastically supporting a campaign to induct Bob into the VHSL’s Hall of Fame.

“I know of only a handful of people who’ve given as much as quietly, selflessly, gracefully and graciously to our profession as Bob Button,” I wrote, and I’m confident to this day that I spoke for every person who has ever met or served with or worked for this grand and lovely gentleman.

It breaks my heart to know that this is likely the last piece I’ll write on behalf of my dear friend. I’ll never forget his boyish enthusiasm, his laugh, his selfless and endless contributions to our profession, his unshakeable commitment to a free and vibrant student press, and — most importantly — his smile.