



VINTAGE

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**BLOOD HORSES**  
JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN

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## About the Book

One evening late in his life, veteran sportswriter Mike Sullivan was asked by his son what he remembered best from his three decades in the press box. The answer came as a surprise. 'I was at Secretariat's Derby, in '73. That was ... just beauty, you know?'

John Jeremiah Sullivan didn't know, not really, but he spent two years finding out, journeying from prehistoric caves to the Kentucky Derby. The result is *Blood Horses*, a wise, humorous and often beautiful memoir exploring the relationship between man and horse and the relationship between a sportswriter's son and his late father.

## About the Author

John Jeremiah Sullivan is a contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and the southern editor of *The Paris Review*. He writes for *GQ*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Oxford American*, and is the author of *Pulphead*. Sullivan lives in Wilmington, North Carolina.

JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN

# BLOOD HORSES

*Notes of a Sportswriter's Son*



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*He had a sincere awe of the beasts around us, and he considered himself essentially on the same level with them, very closely related—not through evolution, that poor man's religion, but through common destiny.*

—Jochin Seypppl, *The Animal Theme and Totemism in Franz Kafka*, 1954





## THE KID

IT WAS IN the month of May, three years ago, by a hospital bed in Columbus, Ohio, where my father was recovering from what was supposed to have been a quintuple bypass operation but became, on the surgeon's actually seeing the heart, a sextuple. His face, my father's face, was pale. He was thinner than I had seen him in years. A stuffed bear that the nurses had loaned him lay crooked in his lap; they told him to hug it whenever he stood or sat down, to keep the stitches in his chest from tearing. I complimented him on the bear when I walked in, and he gave me one of his looks, dropping his jaw and crossing his eyes as he rolled them back in their sockets. It was a look he assumed in all kinds of situations but that always meant the same thing: *Can you believe this?*

Riverside Methodist Hospital (the river being the Olentangy): my family had a tidy little history there, or at least my father and I had one. It was to Riverside that I had been rushed from a Little League football game when I was twelve, both of my lower right leg bones broken at the shin in such a way that when the whistle was blown and I sat up on the field, after my first time carrying the ball all season, I looked down to find my toes pointing a perfect 180 degrees from the direction they should have been pointing in, at which sight I went into mild shock on the grass at the fifty-yard line and lay back to admire the clouds. Only the referee's face obstructed my view. He kept saying, "Watch your language, son," which seemed comical, since as far as I knew I had not said a word.

I seem to remember, or may have deduced, that my father walked in slowly from the sidelines then with the

exceptionally calm demeanor he showed during emergencies, and put his hand on my arm, and said something encouraging, doubtless a little shocked himself at the disposition of my foot—a little regretful too, it could be, since he, a professional sports-writer who had been a superb all-around athlete into his twenties and a Little League coach at various times, must have known that I should never have been on the field at all. Running back was the only viable position for me, in fact, given that when the coach had tried me at other places on the line, I had tended nonetheless to move away from the other players. My lone resource was my speed; I still had a prepubescent track runner's build and was the fastest player on the team. The coach had noticed that I tended to win the sprints and thought he saw an opportunity. But what both of us failed to understand was that a running back must not only outrun the guards—typically an option on only the most flawlessly executed plays—but often force his way past them, knock them aside. Such was never going to happen.

In fairness, the coach had many other things to worry about. Our team, which had no name, lacked both talent and what he called “go.” In the car headed home from our first two games, I could tell by the way my father avoided all mention of what had taken place on the field that we were pathetic—not Bad News Bears pathetic, for we never cut up or “wanted it” or gave our all. At practice a lot of the other players displayed an indifference to the coach's advice that suggested they might have been there on community service.

The coach's son, Kyle, was our starting quarterback. When practice was not going Kyle's way, that is, when he was either not on the field, having been taken off in favor of the second-stringer, who was excellent, or when he was on the field and throwing poorly, Kyle would begin to cry. He cried not childish tears, which might have made me wonder about his life at home with the coach and even feel for him

a little, but bitter tears, too bitter by far for a twelve-year-old. Kyle would then do a singular thing: he would fling down his helmet and run, about forty yards, to the coach's car, a beige Cadillac El Dorado, which was always parked in the adjacent soccer field. He would get into the car, start the engine, roll down all four windows, and—still crying, I presumed, maybe even sobbing now in the privacy of his father's automobile—play Aerosmith tapes at volumes beyond what the El Dorado's system was designed to sustain. The speakers made crunching sounds. The coach would put up a show of ignoring these antics for five or ten minutes, shouting more loudly at us, as if to imply that such things happened in the sport of football. But before long Kyle, exasperated, would resort to the horn, first honking it and then holding it down. Then he would hold his fist out the driver's-side window, middle finger extended. The coach would leave at that point and walk, very slowly, to the car. While the rest of us stood on the field, he and Kyle would talk. Soon the engine would go silent. When the two of them returned, practice resumed, with Kyle at quarterback.

None of this seemed remarkable to me at the time. We were new to Columbus, having just moved there from Louisville (our house had been right across the river, in the knobs above New Albany, Indiana), and I needed friends. So I watched it all happen with a kind of dumb, animal acceptance, sensing that it could come to no good. And suddenly it was that final Saturday, and Kyle had given me the ball, and something very brief and violent had happened, and I was watching a tall, brawny man-child bolt up and away from my body, as though he had woken up next to a rattlesnake. I can still see his eyes as they took in my leg. He was black, and he had an afro that sprung outward when he ripped off his helmet. He looked genuinely confused about how easily I had broken. As the

paramedics were loading me onto the stretcher, he came over and said he was sorry.

At Riverside they set my leg wrong. An X ray taken two weeks later revealed that I would walk with a limp for the rest of my life if the leg were not rebroken and reset. For this I was sent to a doctor named Moyer, a specialist whom other hospitals would fly in to sew farmers' hands back on, that sort of thing. He was kind and reassuring. But for reasons I have never been able to fit back together, I was not put all the way under for the resetting procedure. They gave me shots of a tranquilizer, a fairly weak one, to judge by how acutely conscious I was when Dr. Moyer gripped my calf with one hand and my heel with the other and said, "John, the bones have already started to knit back together a little bit, so this is probably going to hurt." My father was outside smoking in the parking lot at that moment, and said later he could hear my screams quite clearly. That was my first month in Ohio.

Two years after the injury had healed, I was upstairs in my bedroom at our house on the northwest side of Columbus when I heard a single, fading "Oh!" from the first-floor hallway. My father and I were the only ones home at the time, and I took the staircase in a bound, terrified. Turning the corner, I almost tripped over his head. He was on his back on the floor, unconscious, stretched out halfway into the hall, his feet and legs extending into the bathroom. Blood was everywhere, but although I felt all over his head I couldn't find a source. I got him onto his feet and onto the couch and called the paramedics, who poked at him and said that his blood pressure was "all over the place." So they manhandled him onto a stretcher and took him to Riverside.

It turned out that he had simply passed out while pissing, something, we were told, that happens to men in their forties (he was at the time forty-five). The blood had all gushed from his nose, which he had smashed against

the sink while falling, Still, the incident scared him enough to make him try again to quit smoking—to make him want to quit, anyway, one of countless doomed resolutions.

My father was desperately addicted to cigarettes. It is hard for me to think about him, to remember him, without a ghostly neural whiff of tobacco smoke registering in my nostrils, and when I have trouble seeing him clearly I can bring him into focus by summoning the yellowed skin on the middle and index fingers of his left hand, or the way the hairs of his reddish brown mustache would brush the filter of the cigarette as he drew it in to inhale, or the way he pursed his lips and tucked in his chin when exhaling down through his nose, which he made a point of doing in company. Once, in the mid-nineties, he lit up in the rest room during an international flight (a felony, I believe). A stewardess called ahead to alert the authorities, and he was nearly arrested after landing at the airport, but the coach of the team he was traveling with helped him grovel his way out of it. There were other little humiliations: places we were asked to leave, inappropriate moments at which he would suddenly disappear. He was absentminded, a trait that did not mix well with the constant presence of fire. Every so often I came home from school to find another small black hole burned into the chair where he sat. And there was the time a garbage bag into which he had tossed the contents of an ashtray caught fire in our garage, forcing my mother to point out to him again, with a look half earnest and half hopeless, that he was putting us all in danger.

About once a year he would decide to stop, but it was rare that he could go a full day without a “puff,” and as long as he was sneaking puffs, the abyss of total regression was only a black mood away. He tried to keep his failures a secret, even allowing us to congratulate him for having gone two days or a week without smoking when in fact the campaign had ended within hours, as I realize now with

adulthood's slightly less gullible eye: the long walks, "to relax," from which he would come back chewing gum, or the thing he would be stuffing into his pocket as he left the store. Sooner or later he would tire of the effort involved in these shams and simply pull out a pack while we sat in the living room, all of us, and there would be a moment, which grew familiar over time, when we would be watching him sidelong, looks of disappointment barely contained in our faces, and he would be staring ahead at the television, a look of shame barely contained in his, and then, just as the tension neared the point of someone speaking, he would light the cigarette, and that would be it. We would go back to our books.

The trip to the hospital—or rather the vow he made, when he got home, that enough was finally enough—seemed different. Before that afternoon his body had been weirdly impervious to insult. This was a man who never got a cold, and who was told by a radiologist, after thirty years of constant, heavy smoking, that his lungs were "pink," which almost made my mother cry with frustration. But now the whole neighborhood had seen him being loaded into the ambulance, and the enforced silence surrounding the question of his health—which, if it could only be maintained, would keep consequence at bay—had been broken.

He lasted four or five days. I assume so, anyway. My mother found him hiding in the garage, the "patch" on his arm and in his mouth a Kool Super-Long (his cigarette of choice from the age of fourteen—he liked to say that he was the last white man in America to smoke Kools). This doubling up on the nicotine, we had been warned, could quickly lead to a heart attack, so he threw out the patches and went back to smoking a little over two packs a day.

The thing they say about a man like my father, and a great many sportswriters match the description, is that he "did not take care of himself." I cannot think of more than

one or two conventionally healthy things that he did in my lifetime, unless I were to count prodigious napping and laughter (his high, sirenlike laugh that went *HEEE Hee hee hee, HEEE Hee hee hee* could frighten children, and was so loud that entire crowds in movie theaters would turn from the screen to watch him, which excruciated the rest of the family). In addition to the chain-smoking, he drank a lot, rarely ordering beer except by the pitcher and keeping an oft-replaced bottle of whiskey on top of the fridge, though he showed its effects—when he showed them at all—in only the most good-natured way. Like many people with Irish genes, he had first to decide that he wanted to be drunk before he could feel drunk, and that happened rarely. Still, the alcohol must have hastened his slide from the fitness he had enjoyed in his youth. He also ate badly and was heavy, at times very heavy, though strangely, especially taking into consideration a total lack of exercise, he retained all his life the thin legs and powerful calves of a runner. He was one of those people who are not meant to be fat, and I think it took him by surprise when his body at last began to give down: it had served him so well.

Anyone with a mother or father who possesses fatalistic habits knows that the children of such parents endure a special torture during their school years, when the teachers unspool those horror stories of what neglect of the body can do; it is a kind of child abuse, almost, this fear. I recall as a boy of five or six creeping into my parents' room on Sunday mornings, when he would sleep late, and standing by the bed, staring at his shape under the sheets for the longest time to be sure he was breathing; a few times, or more than a few times, I dreamt that he was dead and went running in, convinced it was true. One night I lay in my own bed and concentrated as hard as I could, believing, under the influence of some forgotten work of popular pseudoscience, that if I did so the age at which he would die would be revealed to me: six and three were the



numerals that floated before my eyelids. That seemed far enough into the future and, strange to say, until the day he died, eight years short of the magic number, it held a certain comfort.

We pleaded with him, of course, to treat himself better—though always with trepidation, since the subject annoyed him and, if pressed, could send him into a rage. Most of the time we did not even get to the subject, he was so adept at heading it off with a joke: when a man who is quite visibly at risk for heart attack, stroke, and cancer crushes out what is left of a six-inch-long mentholated cigarette before getting to work on a lethal fried meal (“a hearty repast,” as he would have called it), clinks his knife and fork together, winks at you, and says, with a brogue, “Heart smart!” you are disarmed. I have a letter from him, written less than a month before he died, in response to my having asked him about an exercise regimen that his doctor had prescribed. In typically epithetic style (it was his weakness), he wrote, “Three days ago didst I most stylishly drive these plucky limbs once around the 1.2-mile girth of Antrum Lake—and wasn’t it a lark watching the repellently ‘buff’ exercise cultists scatter and cower in fear as I gunned the Toyota around the turns!”

And still we would ask him to cut back, to come for a walk, to order the salad. I asked him, my brother and sisters asked him, my mother practically begged him until they divorced. His own father had died young, of a heart attack; his mother had died of lung cancer when I was a child. But it was no use. He had his destiny. He had his habits, no matter how suicidal, and that he change them was not among the things we had a right to ask.

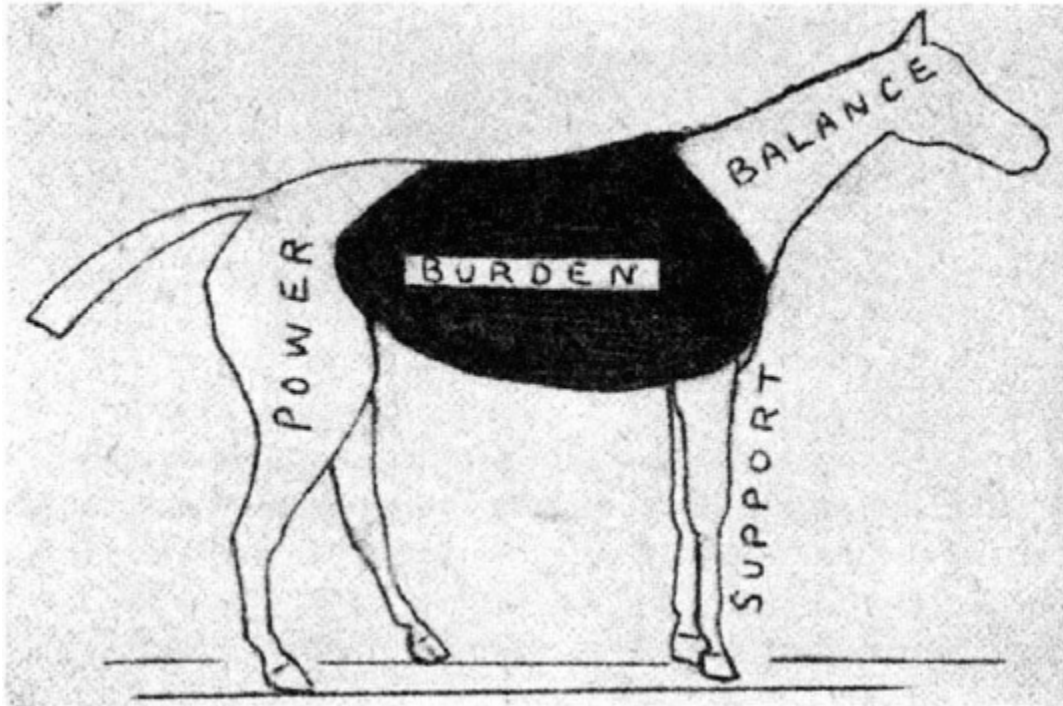
It hardly helped that his job kept him on the road for months out of the year, making any routine but the most compulsive almost impossible, or that the work was built around deadlines and nervous tension, banging out the story between the fourteenth inning, the second overtime,

whatever it was, and the appointed hour. Among my most vivid childhood memories are the nights when I was allowed to sit up with my father in the press box at Cardinal Stadium after Louisville Redbirds home games (the Redbirds were the St. Louis Cardinals' triple-A farm team, but for a brief stretch the local fans got behind them as if they were major league, breaking the season attendance record for the division in 1985). While the game was in progress, I had a seat beside him, and I watched with fascination as he and the other reporters filled in their scorebooks with the arcane markings known to true aficionados, a letter or number or shape for even the most inconsequential event on the field. Every so often a foul ball would come flying in through the window, barely missing our heads, and my father would stand and wave his ever-present white cloth handkerchief out the window, drawing a murmur from the crowd.

My regular presence up there likely grated on the other sportswriters, but they put up with me because of my father. Every few months, I get a letter from one of his old colleagues saying how much less fun the job is without him. Last year I came across an article in *Louisville Magazine* by John Hughes, who worked with him at the *Courier-Journal* "Things happened in those newsrooms that are no longer possible in this journalistically correct era," Hughes remembered. "The New Year's night, for instance, when former *C-J* sportswriter Mike Sullivan made a hat out of a paper bag from my beer run and wore it while writing about the tackle that ended Woody Hayes's coaching career." This was typical. Once, when I was with my father on the floor at the newspaper office—I was probably five—he saw that I was excited by the pneumatic tubes that the separate departments used to communicate back then, so he started encouraging me to put my shoes and, eventually, my socks into the canisters and shoot them to various friends of his. When a voice came over the intercom saying,

*“Whoever keeps sending this shit through the tubes, stop it!”* we had to bend over to keep from hooting and giving ourselves away. In the press box, he would trot me out to tell jokes I had learned. One of these involved the word “obese,” and when I got to that part, I paused and asked, out of politeness, “Do all of you know what obese means?” The room exploded. For him, this was like having his child win the national spelling bee.

It had to have dismayed my father somewhat that the games themselves were lost on me. How many men would love to give their red-blooded American sons the sort of exposure to big-time sports that I took as the way of things? It was a wasted gift, in most respects. I remember meeting Pee Wee Reese in the Redbirds press box. His son Mark worked with my father at the *Courier-Journal*, and Pee Wee had come up to say hello. My father, sitting beside *his* father, had watched Reese play shortstop for the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field in the mid-fifties, and he introduced me to the man as if he were presenting me to a monarch. I was embarrassed more than anything and turned away after shaking his hand. This scene repeated itself, with various sports legends playing the part of Reese, into my adolescence.



As an athlete, too, I was a disappointment. I made use of the natural ability that my father had passed on to me, but my concentration would flicker on and off. I could never master the complexities. A referee actually blew the whistle and stopped one of my sixth-grade basketball games to explain the three-second rule to me. He was tired of calling me on the violation. He put his hands on my hips and moved me in and out of the key, telling me where it was and how long one was allowed to stay there, while the crowd and the other players watched in silence. I had no idea what he was talking about and was quickly taken out of the game.

I was better at baseball, my father's favorite sport. It thrilled him when I was picked to bat cleanup in Little League, though I did it as I did most things, with an almost autistic hyperfocus: *The ball is there. Swing now.* I routinely homered, but still I would stand on the base with the ball in my glove when I was supposed to tag the runner, or forget to "tag up" after a caught foul and slide with gusto into the next base, only to be leisurely tapped on the

shoulder by one of the in-fielders. Soccer I actively hated. But it lasted only a few weeks, until I figured out that if you were too tired to keep playing, or if you had a cramp, you could raise your hand and the coach would pull you out. So as soon as he put me on, I would raise my hand. Once I did this and he yelled, from the sidelines, "Come on, John, *goddamnit!*" Our eyes met. I kept my hand in the air.

My involvement with any kind of organized athletics ended at a tae kwon do studio in downtown Louisville. Why it was, given my particular handicap, that I chose a sport famed for its emphasis on absolute concentration, one has to wonder. There was nobody I wanted to fight, and I feared pain. My teacher, Master Gary, was a wiry-bearded veteran of the war in Vietnam, which had left him angrier than one who works with children should be. His lessons were governed by a constantly expanding set of rules and Korean words that left me paralyzed with confusion. I remember with an especially violent cringe the night I decided to practice my "form" during "meditation time." The other boys and girls were silent on their knees in perfect rows, hands folded, eyes closed. Master Gary faced them in an identical posture. At a certain point I inexplicably rose and went to the corner, where I began to flail away on the heavy bag. My father, who had arrived early to pick me up, finally hissed at me to stop. Master Gary never opened his eyes. Two weeks later I was leaning against the wall, trying to be invisible, when one of his sublieutenants, a mannish teenage girl with short dark hair and a slight mustache, swung into view before me. She screamed something, startling me so badly I had to ask her to repeat it. So she screamed it more loudly, "*We do not lean in this dojo!*"

If I was doing all this largely to please my father—and I can think of no other reason—he never made me feel that he cared very much how I performed. During games, he would cheer loudly, and torment me, no matter how hard I pleaded with him to stop, by using my nicknames: Prodge

(short for progeny) and Beamish (from the Lewis Carroll poem: I got used to waving off my teammates when they would walk up and ask, "*What's he calling you?*"). I remember none of those clichéd angry silences after lost games, only a lightening, a sense of relief that at least it was done. And if all that professional baseball that I watched from on high, with that perfect view, seemed to me like modern dance—intriguing but in the end inscrutable—we were together. I was never bored when I was with my father.

The real joy for me came after the game; after I had followed him into the locker room, where he would dutifully get his quotes while I stood behind him, horrified by all the giant exposed phalli that were bobbing past me at eye level; after the other sportswriters had gone back to their houses or hotels (he was the Redbirds' "beat," or all-season, writer, which meant that he often had to file two stories before packing it in); after he had settled back into his seat and flipped open his notepad, the long, lined, narrow pages blue now with his swirly shorthand. That was when the stadium emptied out and the bums who had somehow found a way to evade the security guards would emerge from the shadows, like ragpickers, and move about in the diminished light, finishing off half-empty beers. Looking down at the stands, I marveled that a place so recently full of bodies and noise could in such a short time empty out and take on this tremendous, cathedral-like silence. I would cross the suspended metal walkway that led from the press box to the bleachers and play by myself in the stands, now and then getting into some awkward, upsetting conversation with one of the bums. After a few months I built up my nerve and started venturing onto the empty field, running the bases, pitching invisible balls to ghostly batters, calling up to my father, hundreds of feet above in the press box window, to check me out. He would wave. On one of these nights, when I was restless, I learned

to pick the lock on the door to the press-box concession stand by sticking a straightened paper clip into the tumbler on the handle and wrapping it around the knob. From then on, after hours, it was unlimited Cracker Jacks for me, and unlimited six-packs for my father, in whose delight at my ingenuity I took bottomless pride. There he would sit, an open beer next to his PortaBubble (an early laptop computer that weighed as much as a four-year-old child), a burning cigarette in his fingers, pecking out strange, clever stories about inconsequential games. There was a mildly retarded janitor who took me up onto the roof of the “box” one night and taught me the constellations. As the sky got darker, armadas of giant green bugs would come in at the windows, which were left cracked on account of the smoke. I would roll up a program and do battle with these, rushing around smacking the walls while my father sat with his back to me, typing and smoking and typing and drinking.

I can still reenter the feeling of those nights: they were happy. My father and I hardly spoke to each other, or I would ask him something and he would not hear me, or else he would answer only after the twenty-second delay that was a private joke in our family, suddenly whipping his head around, after I had forgotten the question, to say, “Um, no,” or “Sure, son.” But for me this distance somehow increased the intimacy. This was no trip to the zoo. I was not being patronized or baby-sat. I was in his element, where he did his mysterious work, and this—being close like this—was better than being seen or heard.

When I got older, there was another kind of distance between us, one that we both noticed, and both minded. I was angry at him for years, at the way he had passively allowed his marriage to my mother to drift into dissolution, at the fact that he was visibly killing himself. That night, in his room at Riverside, there was a certain unspoken feeling of “Here we are” between us, which may explain the morbidity—one might say the audacity—of the question I

found myself asking him, a man of only fifty-five. There had, in the preceding year, already been the aneurysm surgery then the surgery (unsuccessful) to repair the massive hernia caused by the aneurysm surgery. For almost a year he had walked around with a thing about the size and shape of a cannonball protruding from his stomach. "My succession of infirmities," as he put it to me in a letter, "has tended finally to confront me with blunt intimations of mortality." Otherwise, however, it was not a morbid scene. This last operation had gone well, and he seemed to be feeling better than he had any right to. The waning sedative and, I suppose, twenty-four hours without cigarettes had left him edgy, but he was happy to talk, which we did in whispers because the old man with whom he was sharing a room had already gone to sleep.

I asked him to tell me what he remembered from all those years of writing about sports, for he had seen some things in his time, had covered Michael Jordan at North Carolina, a teenage John McEnroe, Bear Bryant, Muhammad Ali. He had followed the Big Red Machine in Cincinnati and was on the Cleveland Indians beat in the nineties when the Tribe inexplicably shook off its forty-year slump and began to win. He had won awards and reported on scandals. A few years ago, when my job put me into a room with Fay Vincent, the former commissioner of baseball, Vincent asked me who my father was, and when he heard, said, "Oh, yeah. I remember he was very fair about the Rose thing." I had to turn to my friend, a baseball expert, to put together that Vincent meant the story about Pete Rose betting on his own games in 1989, when Rose was managing the Reds.

Back home we rarely heard about any of this stuff. I had those idyllic nights with him at the park in Louisville, but that was triple-A ball, small-time city (which, in retrospect, was the reason I got to come along). My father's position was that to talk about work was the same as being at work,



and there was already plenty of that. A sportswriter gets used to people coming up to him in restaurants or at PTA meetings and taking issue with something he said in his column or on some call-in show. But my father was sensitive to the slightest criticism—really the slightest mention—of his writing, almost to the point of wincing, I think because he came to the job somewhat backward. As opposed to the typical sportswriter, who has a passion for the subject and can put together a sentence, my father's ambition had been to Write (poetry, no less), and sports were what he knew, so he sort of stumbled onto making his living that way. His articles were dense and allusive and saddled, at times, with what could be called pedantic humor. They were also *good*, as I realized after he was gone—I seldom read them when he was alive.

His ambition, always, was to generate interesting copy, no matter how far from the topic he had to stray. Some of his readers loved him for it, but others—and it is hard to hold it against them—wrote angry letters wanting to know why the paper refused to hire someone who would tell them the score, not use big words, and be done with it. Years of getting such letters in his mailbox at work had embittered my father, though never enough to silence his muse. When the *Other Paper*, the alternative weekly in Columbus, started running a regular column entitled “The Sully,” in which they would select and expand upon what they they felt to be his most bizarre sentence from the previous week (e.g., “‘Second base is still an undefined area that we haven’t wrapped our arms around,’ Tribe general manager John Hart said, sounding very much like a man about to have his face savagely bitten”), we were baffled by my father's pained reaction. The compliment behind the teasing would have been plain to anyone else, but he would not have the thing in the house.

On top of the touchiness, which, senseless to deny, had more than a tinge of pride to it, my father was self-effacing

about his knowledge of sports (staggering even for a baseball writer, that living repository of statistical arcana), and this in turn made him quiet when faced with the ubiquitous “sports nut,” his enthusiasms and his impassioned theories. The reaction could be painful to see, because the sports nut—with his team cap, powerful breath, and willingness to repeat nine times that Henderson was a moron to throw to third with two outs—often wants nothing more than affirmation. Few people understand, however, that the sportswriter, the true sportswriter, is never a fan. His passion for the game is more abstract. He has to be there, after all, until midnight, whether his team wins or loses, and his team is a shifting entity, one that wears many colors. He considers the game—or the race or the match or the meet—with a cooler eye; and for him there is no incentive to exaggerate or distort events. For the fan, the game is theater; it has heroes and villains, just or unjust outcomes. But however much the sportswriter tricks out his subject in the *language* of theater, it remains in his mind something else, a contest not between the more and less deserving but between the more and less skilled, or lucky. The contest, only the contest, endures, with its discrete components: the throw, the move, the play, their nearness to or distance from perfection.

I was never a fan. I was something else: an ignoramus. And in the end I think that was easier for my father. We had other things to talk about; the awkwardness of trying to bring “the job” over into civilian life never got in the way, since there was no question of my keeping up. The few times I tried—“So, quite a game last night,” when by some chance I had seen it—he laughed me off, as if to commend the effort.

But now, this night, was different. I wanted to know, since the opportunities seemed to be slipping away. I wanted to hear what he remembered. This is what he told me:

I was at Secretariat's Derby, in '73, the year before you were born—I don't guess you were even conceived yet. That was ... just beauty, you know? He started in last place, which he tended to do. I was covering the second-place horse, which wound up being Sham. It looked like Sham's race going into the last turn, I think. The thing you have to understand is that Sham was fast, a beautiful horse. *He* would have had the Triple Crown in another year. And it just didn't seem like there could *be* anything faster than that. Everybody was watching him. It was over, more or less. And all of a sudden there was this ... like, just a disruption in the corner of your eye, in your peripheral vision. And then before you could make out what it was, here Secretariat came. And then Secretariat had passed him. No one had ever seen anything run like that—a lot of the old guys said the same thing. It was like he was some other animal out there. By the time he got to the Belmont, he was pretty much lapping them.

My father had never mentioned this before. In fact, my only real awareness of the Kentucky Derby, growing up within minutes of Churchill Downs, lay in noticing the new commemorative glass that appeared in the cupboard each May, to be dropped and broken, as often as not by me, before the next one arrived. I knew that he had attended the race every year for more than a decade, and that he sometimes took my older brother along, but he never said anything to me about it apart from asking, when I got old enough, which horse I would like him to bet on with my allotted two dollars.

I wrote down what he had told me when I got back to his apartment, where my sister and I were staying the night. He lived two more months, but that was the last time I saw him alive.

A year later I went to the New York Public Library and looked up the pieces he wrote for the *Courier-Journal* (then the *Courier-Journal & Times*) on that first Saturday in May 1973. There were two by "Mike Sullivan, Staff Writer": the procedural one, about Sham (including an interview with the jockey Laffitt Pincay in which Pincay predicts that although Secretariat had "ultimately pulled away" in what my father describes as a "magnificent, spine-tingling stretch drive," Sham would get him at the Preakness), and another, stranger piece, buried well into the section, which may be of interest to scholars of the newspaper business someday, if only because it shows how far into the provinces the New Journalism had penetrated by the early seventies. In it my father describes floating around Churchill Downs on the morning of the Derby, looking for something to write about.

Midway through the story "The Kid" appears, "loose-limbed ... fitted out in old jeans and sneakers ... slightly in need of a shave, he looked very much like a groom or stable boy." My father always wore a white linen suit to the Derby, à la his great hero, Mark Twain, though his colleague and friend the noted horsewriter Billy Reed once wrote that he looked more like a deranged Colonel Sanders, a look I imagine would have made him quite approachable to a lost hippie.

"Aren't you a groom or something?" my father asks, but The Kid replies, "No, I'm a—, uh, snuck in." The Kid says that he drove through the night to get to Louisville, and that he is on a mission to get Pincay's autograph for his "buddy" back home. Some weird post-sixties dialogue ensues. My father advises him not to go forward with his plan of impersonating a groom (the *man* might catch him) but instead to "wedge against the runway fence after the race" and try for the autograph there. The Kid is then given a meeting place for after the Derby. "At that time," my

father wrote, “he would tell whether he’d gotten the autograph.”



It was the next and last sentence that, for some reason, struck me as odd and oddly affecting, coming across it there in the hum and the mortuary light of the microfilm machine. It is: “If The Kid failed in his mission, this story will end here.”