

A Roger Ruhl Memory/Good Story ... 4/16/2021

A Lesson Learned from a Missed Opportunity

As I watched this year's Masters golf tournament, I found myself recalling a Master's memory. At first, I thought it would make another good story for my growing collection. But the more I thought about it, it wasn't really a "good" story ... the Masters story is more of a "lesson learned" ... and one that has served me well since the late 1970s.

As background, golf was a very important part of my life from 1960 until 1965. I was an undersized, pimply-faced high schooler who didn't have a lot of confidence and much going on in his life. A chance happening involving golf led to all kinds of opportunities. A "good story" is about golf in my life is still to be written. This "lesson learned story" is about acting when opportunity presents itself.

Much like the start of baseball season, the Masters comes at a wonderful time of the year. Time to say goodbye to winter and hello to spring. Ever since the early 1960s when I was introduced to golf, I have eagerly looked forward to Masters week. And most years I have found time to watch the excellent television coverage. I am sorry to say that I have never been on the hallowed grounds of the August National Golf Club ... and I am even sorrier to say that that did not have to be the case.

In 1976 when I was promotion director of the Cincinnati Reds, Cincinnati-based AVCO Broadcasting was being broken up and sold. WLWT television in Cincinnati, three other stations in Dayton, Columbus, and Indianapolis, a TV production company, and powerhouse WLW Radio were being split up. WLWT held the telecast rights to Reds games. WLWT and AVCO's production company were purchased by Multimedia Inc. of Greenville, S.C. Multimedia had its start in 1968 as the owner of three small South Carolina newspapers. The acquisition of more newspapers and then radio stations grew the company in the next 10 years. The purchase of WLWT was like going from AA league baseball to the Big Leagues. AVCO exec Walter Bartlett joined Multimedia and led the growth.

My best guess is that it was March of 1977 when Walter decided to bring his Multimedia bosses – Kelly Sisk and Wilson Wearn -- to Reds spring training camp in Tampa, Fla. Spring training time was great for VIP visits ... a perfect blend of business and pleasure. A small dinner party was arranged at Bern's Steak House (which remains one of my all-time favorite restaurants) so Reds General Manager Dick Wagner and I could get acquainted with our new Multimedia friends. Wives were included. And everyone seemed to hit it off just great.

I told Walter he should persuade Kelly and Wilson to come to Cincinnati for a baseball weekend. Wilson mentioned that he had been to Cincinnati several times ... that he has some golfing friends that he visits. I told Wilson that Cincinnati had some fine courses and we could find one to his liking. He replied that he and his friends usually played at Camargo Country Club. Hmm, I thought, if Wilson is playing at Camargo, he doesn't need my help. Camargo was and

still is very exclusive and primarily for Cincinnatians with old money ... often, it is one of two clubs to which they belong because the golf courses at Cincinnati Country Club and Hyde Park Country Club are not as good as Camargo's layout.

After my comment to Wilson about coming to Cincinnati, he suggested we Reds folks consider a visit to Greenville, Multimedia's hometown. He asked if I played golf and I replied, "Not really ... golf season conflicts with baseball season." I didn't mention that our workaholic lifestyle at the Reds (7:00 a.m. til after a game ended at 11:00 p.m.) did not fit well with golf. Wilson continued, "C'mon down for a few days. We have a nice little club and it's a good golf course ... Greenville Country Club." And then he added words I have never forgotten, "... and of course, I also belong to Augusta National and we could play there." I seem to recall choking quietly on my wine. I could barely muster a response and stammered something like "You ... you ... you belong to Augusta National?" Indeed he did. This, of course, meant little or nothing to my Reds boss Dick Wagner, who did not play golf and could not have identified with my excitement.

We had a great evening ... good meal, good talk ... it was obvious that it was going to be a good relationship. And it was.

Walter and Multimedia were a great fit, too. AVCO's production company, which included Phil Donahue's show that originated out of WDTN in Dayton, helped grow Multimedia. WLWT hired Jerry Springer as a news anchor and he surprised everyone by taking the station from last place to first place in the ratings. Springer's news success led to a talk show and then to the raunchy talk show that Multimedia tolerated because it was such a cash cow.

I saw Wilson a couple more times before I left the Reds in 1983. I would ask about his golf game, and he would ask when I was going to dust off my golf clubs and come to Greenville. It never happened.

At age 76, I don't have many regrets. But one regret that still lingers is that I never took him up on his invitation ... and I never got to find out just how hard the short iron tee shot is at No. 12 at Augusta.

In the opening paragraph I called this a lesson learned as well as a good story. I like to think that the missed opportunity of Augusta National has made me pay a little more attention over the years when other opportunities knocked.

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