

SIDEKICK

By Fred Hobbs

The controversy over nature vs. nurture remains today when examining the lives of individuals pursuing a myriad of passions and goals. The debate may unfold in the lofty realm of intellectual power (“born to be a genius”) or the physical level (“always destined to be a great athlete.”) That’s nature’s work. However, the genius might have been helped by a Harvard education or the athlete nurtured by an exceptionally skilled coach.

In my own experience, anyone who knows me realizes I am nota genius. Anyone who has seen me in action on a softball field or on the golf course knows also that I was born with an athletic skill set so meager that no amount of coaching could ever overcome the deficiency.

In sports, what I did was develop an ongoing interest in the subject. And, in my chosen profession, I discovered the opportunity to apply skills I did possess to participation in sports vicariously. As part of the duties in my broadcast career, I delivered radio and TV sportscasts based on material compiled from wire services or from “stringers” (sports reporters actually on hand at the scene.) Nurtured by sports directors and “play by play” broadcasters, I became a so-called “color man”, a sports sidekick who sets the scene, describes the crowd, mentions key players, talks about the records of the teams involved and conducts half-time interviews.

These opportunities mostly came at small market radio stations. The experience was thrilling, challenging and sometimes dangerous. In one instance, a high school football game in Louisville years ago, no field press box was provided. We broadcast from the slanted roof of the school’s gym. Our play by play broadcaster had to hold on to a protruding pipe with one hand, his mike in the other. My spot was a little more level, but I had to balance the remote amplifier, a mike and a clipboard with commercials and a game statistics sheet on it. A cold wind was blowing. We feared for our lives, but never complained, at least not to the radio audience.

Candidly, my duties and curiosity did not focus solely on sports. As a consequence, I had neither the skill level nor opportunity to do play by play. Except as a sub on high school basketball broadcasts when the main guy was doing a college game or wasn’t feeling well. The station’s sports director pointed out that, contrary to what some might believe, fast action basketball was the easiest to broadcast. “Remember, this is radio, not TV, he said. “All you have to do is talk fast, know who finally put the basketball through the hoop and what the score was when that happened. The rest you can make up as you go along.”

That nurturing seemed to work for me, particularly in one situation. Sometimes, I had to work alone, especially in my broadcast “salad days”. Luckily, that time, a colleague at the station had volunteered to go with me to the small Wyoming town of Lovell. I knew all the players from our town, the Thermopolis Bobcats, by sight, but relied on a roster supplied by the opposing coach listing his teams’ numbers. In the pre-game practice, the boys from Lovell wore warm up jackets without numbers. As the referee signaled the opening of the game, Lovell’s starting five peeled off their jackets and entered the court.

None of the numbers matched the names on the list I had memorized, at least partially. That’s when nature kicked in. I knew we were broadcasting only back to our town’s fans. As my “color man” dashed to the opponent’s bench and madly scribbled down the right numbers, I stalled as long I could, keeping up a running account of the play of our guys, thanking our sponsors of the game and the loyal backers of the Bobcats, and remarking that the opposing team had gotten off to a slow start.

It was only a matter of a minute or two until the correct roster was in hand. What a relief, and clear proof of the value of a sidekick!