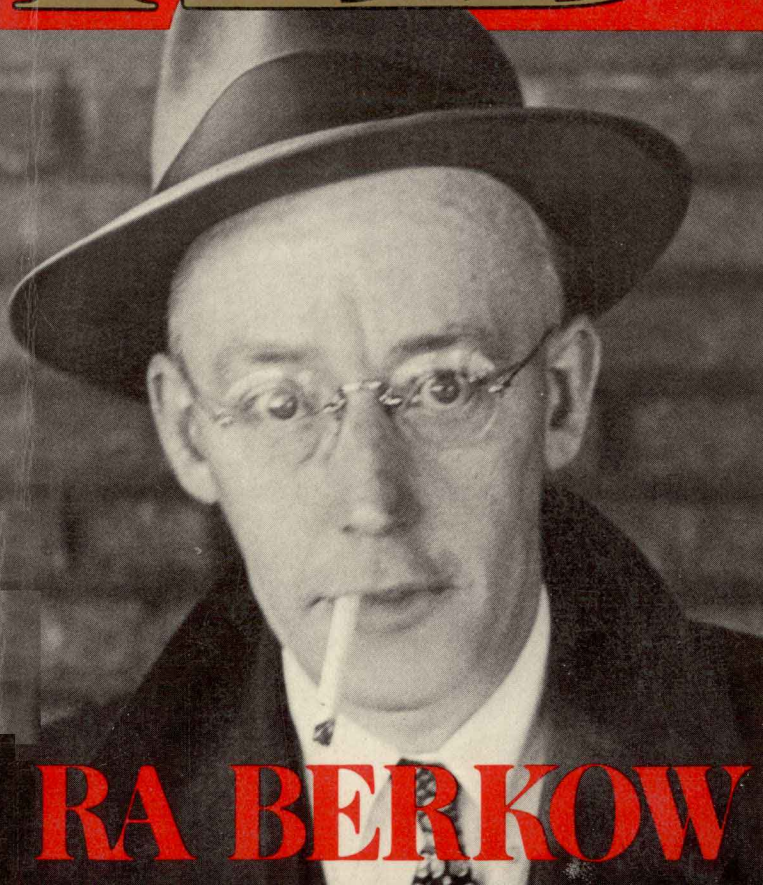


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A BIOGRAPHY OF RED SMITH

RED



IRA BERKOW

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McGraw-Hill Book Company

New York St. Louis San Francisco
Toronto Hamburg Mexico

For Dolly

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Reprinted by arrangement with Times Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

First McGraw-Hill Paperback edition, 1987.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 A R G A R G 8 7

ISBN 0-07-004852-5

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Berkow, Ira.

Red: a biography of Red Smith.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Smith, Red, 1905-1982. 2. Sportwriters—

United States—Biography. I. Title.

[GV742.42.S54B46 1987] 070.4'49796'0924 [B] 87-38

ISBN 0-07-004852-5 (pbk.)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To draw up a complete list and credit the hundreds of people who were helpful in the making of this book would be a formidable if not fruitless task. Somewhere along the line some who shouldn't be left out might accidentally be left out, and though they would probably understand, it would make the author unhappy. Regardless, forthwith is the list, as incomplete as it may be:

In particular, I want to give heartfelt thanks to Red Smith's immediate family: his wife, Phyllis, his daughter, Kit Halloran, and his son, Terry Smith. They gave me as much cooperation—and it was considerable—as I needed. Besides interviews, they were also generous with memorabilia and letters.

I am also indebted in this regard to Red Smith's niece Georgia Dullea and his nephew Pat Smith, as well as to his stepchildren, Jenifer Weiss, Karen Weiss, Kim Weiss, Peter Weiss, and Robin Weiss.

I want to thank Jonathan Segal, the editor of this book and the source of the idea for it. His guidance and insights were invaluable. And I want to extend my appreciation to his talented associate Ruth Fecych.

At *The New York Times*, those who allowed me much-needed time and provided much-needed support include Abe Rosenthal, Arthur Gelb, James Greenfield, and of course, the man with whom I work most closely, Joe Vecchione.

For help well beyond the call of any conceivable duty, for his reading of the manuscript in its various stages, and for his suggestions for its improvement, I want to offer deep appreciation to Larry Klein.

For their careful reading and astute comments on the final manuscript, I extend special thank-yous to Bill Brink, Richard Close, David Fox, George Kaplan, Jim Kaplan, and Jay Lovinger.

For extensive interviews, sometimes repeated, I want to offer gratitude to Dave Anderson, Tom Callahan, Harold Claassen, John Dell, Norbert Engels, Joe Goldstein, W. C. Heinz, Lawrence Hennessey, Jerry Izenberg, Roger Kahn, Al Laney, Robert Lipsyte, Sam Muchnick, Barney Nagler, Arthur Pincus, Shirley Povich, Marion Roach, Harold Rosenthal, Irving Rudd, Fred Russell, Dick Schaap, Le Anne Schreiber, Fern Turkowitz, and Larry Servais.

I want to thank Samantha Stevenson, who was kind enough to share with me the transcriptions of her lengthy taped interviews with Red Smith.

I also want to thank others who were important in providing background information and various leads on Red Smith: Seth Abraham, Dorothy Abramson, Wayne Ambler, Roger Angell, Ray Arcel, Pete Axthelm, Bob Balfe, Red Barber, Sylvan Barnett, Phil Berger, Jacques Barzun, Burton Benjamin, Stu Black, Jim Brady, Bill Brashler, Jimmy Breslin, Sam Brightman, Bob Broeg, Bob Burnes, Dave Camerer, Bob Cooke, Howard Cosell, Cliff Cristl, Jim Crowley, Betty Daley, Robert Daley, Paul Derringer, Joe DiMaggio, Roger Donoghue, John Duxbury, Vincent Engels, Joe Falls, Edward Fischer, Goodrich Gamble, Ike Gellis, Bob Goldsholl, Frank Graham, Jr., Rocky Graziano, Jane Gross, Colleen Halloran, David Halloran, Mary Catherine Halloran, Michael Halloran, Margaret Halloran, Betty Heinz, Porter Henry, Ed Hogan, John Horn, Jerome Holtzman, Donald Honig, George F. Howlett, Jim Kaplan, Isaac Kleinerman, Richard Kluger, Margaret Kohler, Jim Kohn, Leonard Koppett, Alfred Knopf, Jr., Seymour Krim, Lloyd Larson, Bud Leavitt, Allen Lewis, Wilda Lewis, Skipper Lofting, Melissa Ludtke, Mike Lupica, Pat Lynch, Harry Markson, Mike Marshall, William J. Marshall, Morris McLemore, Curtis MacDougall, Lawrie Mifflin, Marvin Miller, David Moore, Art Morrow, Wally Moses, Pat Murphy, Bill Nack, Skeeter Newsome, Mark Nevils, Shad Northshield, Murray Olderman, Inar T. (Ollie) Olson, Sandy Padwe, Ernest Paolino, Muzz Patrick, Ted Ravinett, James Reston, Arthur Riback, Margaret Roach, Pat Ryan, Bus Saidt, Robert Schmuhl, John G. Scott, Tom Seaver, Herbert L. Shultz, Jim Schwartz, Wilfrid Sheed, Morrie Siegel, Seymour Siwoff, Chris Smith, Daisy Smith, Harold Smith, Elizabeth Smith, George Steinbrenner, John Stravinsky, Tom Stritch, Anne Tedman, Vernon Tietjen, Jim Toomey, Bill Veeck, George Vecsey, Joe Wershba, Harvey Wertz, Ted Williams, Dick Young, and Vic Ziegel.

For technical assistance, I want to thank Howard Angione, the electronic sage of *The New York Times*. I also offer gratitude to Leslie Chambliss, Esther Fein, Michael Jensen, Jr., Steve Jesselli, Marc Myers, and Sheila Yablon.

I also received extensive help from the main libraries of Chicago, Green Bay, Milwaukee, New York City, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, from the newspaper annex of the New York City Public Library and the Queens Borough Public Library. I want to thank for their help the Baseball Hall of Fame, the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and the Famous Writers School. Also of considerable aid were the morgue libraries of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The New York Times*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

F O R E W O R D

On Friday afternoon, January 15, 1982, I was home in Manhattan in front of my typewriter having just completed my sports column for *The New York Times* when the phone rang. The caller was Joe Vecchione, sports editor of *The Times*.

"Got bad news," Joe said. "Red died. . . . Can you come in and write the obit?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course."

It was about three-thirty and I would have to complete the obituary no later than 6:30 P.M., the deadline for copy. I usually write at home, but Vecchione thought that since all of Red's columns for *The Times* were in the morgue there, I could make use of them.

I gathered some of Smith's clips that I had saved over the years, and a couple of his books, which were bound collections of his best columns, and left my apartment. I searched for a cab, found one, and, as it jounced over potholes across town on that cold but sunny winter day, I thought of Smith.

His death at age seventy-six, due to kidney complications and congestive heart failure, came as a shock to me, though not a surprise. He had become increasingly ill over the previous two years. In the previous six months, *The Times* had more and more frequently been delivered without the 900-word column headed "Sports of the Times/Red Smith" brightening a corner of the sports section. Though he tried desperately, Red was often physically unable to write his assigned four columns a week.

When he died, he was in his fifty-fifth year as a newspaperman. He began with the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in 1927, a month or so after Lindbergh made his solo flight across the Atlantic. Smith became as distinctive in his profession as Lindbergh had in his. Just as Lindbergh proved more than just a stunt pilot, Smith proved more than just a sportswriter. He was one of the best writers in the country, newspaper or otherwise. His sports column invariably reflected his graceful use of language, his deft insights, and his humor—sometimes dry, sometimes ironical, sometimes even a bit slapstick—and there was always, too, his sense of humanity. He was syndicated with

the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1945 through 1966 when the paper folded, then was carried by the Publishers-Hall Newspaper Syndicate to 100 newspapers across the country and abroad, with a circulation of some twenty million, and from 1971 until his death was with *The Times*. He was the most widely read sports columnist of his time. And one of the most influential.

Respected sportswriters of today, among them Pete Axthelm, Frank Deford and David Kindred, credit Smith with being an important role model for them. And Smith certainly made a major difference in my life.

I remember a column he wrote when I was a freshman at the University of Illinois in Chicago in 1958. I read the piece in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which carried him regularly. Smith described the middleweight championship fight between Carmen Basilio, the title holder, and Sugar Ray Robinson, who succeeded in regaining the title. Basilio's eye had closed from the repeated pounding by Robinson, and late in the fight Smith described Basilio: "It was an odd and unforgettable picture—a gaunt, hatchet-faced fighting man wading everlastingly forward to meet a fate which he accepted with a curiously fixed expression of sleepiness. Seen from the left side with the eye more tightly closed than a dreamer's, he looked like a somnambulist fighting with some primeval instinct. . . ."

I was moved by Basilio's pluck, as portrayed by Smith. I had not read much of Smith before this—I hadn't read much of anything in high school before this—and I didn't know anything about him, but I began looking regularly for his column. I delighted in his wide range of subject and approach.

He placed people and events into perspective. He noted, with his typical irreverence toward sports, that the Yale Bowl "was just a mite squalid for a shrine." The brushback pitch in baseball, coming after two strikes, was, Smith wrote, in "the classic pattern, as rigidly formalized as the minuet." When Everett Case, a head basketball coach at North Carolina State, blamed players from the North for the college basketball scandals, Smith reminded that Southern colleges, too, had been giving players illegal financial help and allowing them to attend phony classes. Case, wrote Smith, "got integrity confused with geography."

He saw through pomposity and pricked it. He felt for the underdogs or underclass in sports, and wrote about their plight with concern: the stable swipes, the blacks, the ball players bound by the pernicious reserve clause.

There were great characters to be met in the world of Red Smith, such as the horse trainer Max Hirsch: "At lunch Hirsch said no, thank you, to the waiter with a tray of martinis. 'I'm running a horse this afternoon,' he said. 'If I drank one of them I'd probably bet on him.'"

Smith's descriptions were a joy: the Olympics were "the BVD ballet"; an outfielder making a terrific catch "stayed aloft so long he looked like an empty uniform hanging in its locker"; the partnership between two fight managers, Blinky Palermo and Eddie Coco, "was dissolved when a judge, in a fit of pique, gave Coco life for murdering a parking lot attendant."

Smith made the reader see and feel and think. He could set a scene and place the reader in it, but with the advantage of Smith as a guide. His language was fresh and witty and original. He strove to say things in new ways, and in doing so, saw things from a fresh angle. And it was people he was most interested in. Games came second.

All this from a man writing in an area—sports journalism—which for a long time had been set on a low rung of the literary ladder.

Smith himself wrote about numerous writers, and two of them are especially pertinent, John Lardner and James Thurber. About Lardner, Smith wrote: "The true humorist has a mind that functions differently from most and eyes that see past the horizon to discover wondrous things." And on Thurber, Smith said: "He recognized and appreciated his enormous talent but resented the fact that in many minds the definition of humorist was 'unserious.' Mentioning this rather angrily on a television program recently, he said, 'I except Great Britain and Continental Europe,' where, apparently, he was accepted as the thoughtful and perceptive critic of humankind that all great humorists are."

Smith, too, was a humorist and a thoughtful and perceptive critic of humankind, and may or may not have consciously been thinking of himself when writing of Lardner and Thurber. But he wrote on another occasion, "I flinch whenever I see the word literature used in the same sentence with my name. I'm just a bum trying to make a living running a typewriter." He didn't diminish the importance of his work, however. He said: "It's no accident that of all the monuments left of the Greco-Roman culture, the biggest is the ball park, the Colosseum, the Shea Stadium of ancient times. The man who reports on these games contributes his small bit to the record of his time. It's one aspect of the culture we live in."

In later years I read something that William Zinsser, author of the highly respected guide *On Writing Well*, noted, and which, I believe,

I responded to when first coming across Smith. Zinsser said: "The writing that we most admire over the years—the King James Bible, Abraham Lincoln, E. B. White, Red Smith—is writing that has the strength of simplicity."

Later, too, I would read the poet and critic Donald Hall, who drew a comparison between Smith's lively use of metaphors and that of Shakespeare's.

And, I'd learn, Smith's fans also included people from housewives to truck drivers to Hemingway.

I wasn't crazy about all of Smith's columns, though. There were pieces I simply wasn't interested in, such as those on harness racing and, as a city kid, those about the outdoors and his one and only participation sport, fishing.

And yet even in some of them I found delightful reading. "A good deal of richly purple prose," he once wrote, "has been perpetrated in recent years on the subject of the bonefish in the Florida keys, a villainous little beast of inexhaustible malevolence. Pound for pound, the authors declare, he can outfight a maddened bull elephant, outrun a virtuous blonde, and outdive a British heavyweight. It is now possible to report that he can also outsmart a sportswriter, an anticlimax as ever was."

When I transferred from Chicago to Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, I continued to read Smith in the *Dayton Daily News* and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. I also discovered his books—the first of several. They were both collections of his columns, *Out of the Red* and *Views of Sports*. I had entered college with the idea of becoming a lawyer for want of something better to become. I majored in English for want of something better to major in. Never, though, had I thought of sportswriting or even journalism as an occupation.

In Brandon Hall, I lived across the hallway from Dave Burgin, a student from Dayton. Dave was an assistant sports editor for the school paper, the *Miami Student*. We became friendly and discovered that we had a mutual interest in sports and in Red Smith. Burgin had dreams of becoming a sportswriter or sports editor. (He became sports editor of the *Washington Star* and the *San Francisco Examiner*, then assumed a series of general editorial positions and later became the editor-in-chief of the *Examiner*.) His hero was Red Smith. The pinup on his wall was the *Newsweek* cover of April 21, 1958, from which a baldish man with glasses peered out, with several sporting events going on in the background. The cover read: "Red Smith/Star of the Press Box."

Burgin suggested I try a story for him. I did, and a few months later, when he became sports editor, he gave me the sports column.

The longer I wrote the column, the less I thought of law as a profession.

I loved writing that column. I also loved rewriting it, lying in bed at night, changing words and paragraphs around, mortified when I realized I had left out an important fact, pleased to think I had created a felicitous phrase—what I considered felicitous, anyway. I wanted to get better at the column. That led me, in the late fall of 1960 when I was a junior, to send Smith two of my columns from the school paper. Just like that. I mean, we were both sports columnists, weren't we? I mailed the pieces to the *Herald Tribune* and asked him for comments. As if he had nothing better to do with his time or brain. I received nothing for two weeks. A month. Two months. Then when I returned from Christmas vacation to my apartment on High Street in Oxford, a letter was waiting for me, post-marked December 22, 1960. The return address on it was "W. W. Smith, 4 Cedar Tree Lane, Wire Mill Road, Stamford, Connecticut."

Here is what he had typed:

Dear Ira Berkow,

When I was a cub in Milwaukee I had a city editor who'd stroll over and read across a guy's shoulder when he was writing a lead. Sometimes he would approve, sometimes he'd say gently, "Try again," and walk away.

My advice is, try again. And then again. If you're for this racket, and not many really are, then you've got an eternity of sweat and tears ahead. I don't mean just you; I mean anybody.

My first impulse was to paste up your stories and write in marginal criticisms. They wouldn't have made you happy. Just keep trying to do it your way, never imitating.

I'd make two suggestions. Don't write "precocious phalanges." That's just a pretentious way of saying "educated toe," a cliché you were trying to avoid.

Be careful about the exact meaning of words: "crunched heads pungently." Pungently means sharp, keen, piercing, etc., usually with reference to taste or smell, not to physical combat.

Never mind about this. Keep trying to do it your way. Good luck and god bless. . . .

Yours,
Red Smith

I had hoped that he would like my stories more. But I was flattered that he had taken the time to read them—and to write. I pasted up those same two stories, sent them to him, and asked him to make me unhappy.

He wrote back with criticisms in the margins, and we kept up a modest correspondence that continued after I began my first newspaper job with the *Minneapolis Tribune* and lasted (with occasional brief notes) to nearly the end of his life.

A year after I first wrote to Smith, I met him in Cincinnati when he was covering the 1961 World Series between the Reds and the New York Yankees.

A college friend of mine named Jim Schwartz, who was from Cincinnati, got us jobs as runners for a UPI photographer. My post was in the mezzanine right above home plate in old Crosley Field. From there I could see the temporary press section just above me. There were long rows of makeshift wooden desktops set up in the stands. The photographer knew Smith and pointed him out to me.

Smith wore a dark fedora, and I could see that the rim of hair under the hat was nearly white, not what I expected of a man of fifty-six and certainly not what I expected of a man named Red. He wore wire-rim glasses, a nondescript sport jacket and loosened tie.

When the game ended, my friend and I walked upstairs and waited for Smith to finish working. His face was ruddy, and his brow was marked by a deep furrow. His nose looked slightly veiny and his mouth had a little twist to the right side. He was smoking a cigarette held deep in the V of two nicotine-stained fingers of his left hand. His hand trembled slightly. Then he began to type on a portable. A few moments later, he stopped, tore out the yellow copy paper, crumpled it, and tossed it to the floor. He rolled in another sheet and started typing again. When he rolled in the paper, I noticed that his right hand shook.

He crumpled several starts before he began to develop a rhythm.

"Smith!" someone called. "Red Smith! Telephone, your office."

"What the hell do they want now?" Smith said. His voice had a slightly high, raspy quality to it, but it was firm. He made his way out of the narrow row of writers and walked up several concrete steps to the telephone. He looked slight—small-boned, about five feet eight, around 135 pounds.

Smith took the call, then returned to his seat and soon finished his piece. He packed up his typewriter, placed several sports reference

books into a briefcase, and started down the steps. He was one of the last writers to leave the press area.

I met him at the bottom of the stairs and introduced myself. I felt shy. "I remember you, Ira," he said. I felt better.

Behind his rather thick glasses, his light blue eyes appeared large and slightly red around the edges. His look was direct, with a curious power of observation.

I introduced my friend, Jim, and the three of us chatted for about forty-five minutes as twilight descended and park attendants noisily swept up beer cans in the aisles. I don't remember anything I said to Smith or he said to me, but I remember a question Jim asked—and so did Smith, because he mentioned it in a foreword that he wrote years later for a collection of my columns. "Didn't writing about games every day grow dreadfully dull? the classmate asked," Smith wrote. "Only to dull minds, I told him, and I tried to explain that in newspaper work, unlike the wholesale hardware game, today was always different from yesterday and tomorrow refreshingly different from today."

When I began writing for newspapers, first in Minneapolis and then in New York, we'd see each other at various events—the Kentucky Derby, the U.S. Golf Open, the World Series, or at a press conference—and we'd chat. He was always approachable. We ran into each other in the restaurant of a Baltimore hotel, where we both were staying for the Preakness in 1969. He was having dinner alone, and I joined him. At one point, I wanted to write something down on a napkin, the name of a trainer or somebody Smith had said might make a good story for me. I remember feeling my pants pockets for a pen, and not finding one there, searching my jacket pockets. Nothing. I was embarrassed. What kind of a professional journalist was I that I didn't carry a writing instrument? Smith said, "That's okay," and felt in his pants pocket for a pen. Nothing. He tried his jacket pocket. Then he looked up and smiled. Red Smith wasn't carrying a pen either.

I continued reading Red Smith. His work endured, and so did his best lines: On an aging ball player named Willie Mays, for example, Smith wrote that "he's a folk hero who's future is behind him." When the Yankees were winning pennant after pennant with cold efficiency, Smith wrote that "rooting for the Yankees is like rooting for U.S. Steel." And when a Senate Investigating Committee called hearings about the reserve clause in baseball, Smith believed it was nothing more than a self-serving stunt. "In an effort to avoid public-

ity," he wrote, "the group started by interviewing that celebrated authority on constitutional law, Mr. Ty Cobb." Smith said that, though he disliked quoting himself, there is a line that's "been stolen so often that I feel I have to step up and take my share of the credit. I wrote that the year Lombardi came to Green Bay, the Packers were the most softbitten team in the league. And I said, 'They had overwhelmed one opponent, underwhelmed twelve, and whelmed one.' "

As I got older, and as he did, I came to learn of some of his flaws, as a man and writer, and some of his fears and vulnerabilities and excesses. But my high opinion of him was never diminished. Perhaps it was enhanced. He was a man, for all that. In his life, and in his writing, I saw him struggle as a man, and grow. He wrote about the deaths of close friends. And I learned of difficult changes in his life. The death of his wife of thirty-three years, the folding of his flagship newspaper the *Herald Tribune*, were followed by a period in which he seemed to be drifting, in his early sixties—his flagship paper in New York City was *Women's Wear Daily*. Then, at age sixty-seven, in 1971, Smith, with the support of his second wife and her five school-age children—a transition that wasn't always smooth, however—made a comeback no less dramatic than those of the athletes he wrote about. *The Times* hired him, and four years later, in 1976, Smith won the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary.

In 1980, President Carter was influenced by—or at least gained support from—Smith's columns that called for a boycott of the Summer Olympics in Russia as a means of protesting the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The United States did not send a team to the Olympics that year.

On March 15, 1981, the top-rated television show *60 Minutes* carried a profile of Red Smith. The reporter on the segment, Morley Safer, said that Smith was "America's foremost newspaperman" and "the keenest of all the observers of the games people play." Smith was then seventy-five years old.

I went to work at *The Times* in March of 1981. Smith, as far as I know, had not known *The Times* was interested in me until I joined the paper. During the period in which we regularly drew checks signed by the same person, I saw Smith only once—at the World Series at Yankee Stadium, and both of us were working. We talked briefly. I never saw him again. I had hoped to spend some time with him during Super Bowl week in Detroit. He died nine days before the game.

F O R E W O R D

I wrote the obituary on Red Smith. It was longer than I had planned, and it just made the 6:30 P.M. deadline. *The Times* ran it on page one.

Ira Berkow
NEW YORK CITY
January 7, 1986

RED

