

Final story for Republican Journal and TCP sports editor

DARLINGTON - There is an old tradition in journalism—and I am an old journalist—to include the code of - 30 - at the end of a story. Although the origin of the term is unknown, the practice dates back to the time of telegraph transmission and simply means, “No more, the end.”

After 27 years working for the Republican Journal, the time has come for me to place my last - 30 - at the end of my journalism career. I recently made one of the hardest decisions of my life when I resigned my position at the newspaper to accept a position as Deputy Clerk of Courts in Green County. This paper will be my last.

As I approach my 52nd birthday, it's time for me to slow down. The long, crazy hours, working four or five nights a week and three or four weekends a month, have taken their toll on me.

I graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the spring of 1994 with a degree in Advertising and an added focus on Public Relations along with a love for photography honed by working five years for the UW-Zoology Department photo lab.

After moving back to my parents' house after college to begin my job hunt, I started freelance sports writing for my hometown paper, The Iola Herald, and soon moved to a full-time position as a reporter/news editor for the Tomorrow River Times (Amherst) and sports writing for those two papers along with The Manawa Times.



Tom Gunnell

Unsure of whether or not I even wanted a full-time career in the newspaper industry or in another sector of journalism, I accepted a job as sports reporter at The Republican Journal in August of 1995. Not knowing a single soul south of Madison, I moved to Darlington looking for adventure and career direction.

I thought that if I could do the job where no one knew me and succeed, then journalism may be the career for me. If things didn't go well, then at least I got some writing experience, which would help out in advertising or public relations. Well, after 27 years, I feel I did pretty well.

During my first interview with the R.J., I was told if I came there I would be covering state events. Boy, has that been the case over the years.

The first fall sports season at the paper, Darlington's boys' and girls' cross country teams each

advanced to the Division 3 state meet with the Redbirds finishing second and the Lady Redbirds placing fourth. Just a few weeks later, Darlington's football team won what—to this day—remains one of the most lopsided state championship games ever with their 63-6 victory over Hurley in the Division 5 game.

The Redbirds still hold the all division record for points (63) and touchdowns (nine) in a state title game along with several other D5 records from that game.

Since that brilliant start to my career, the six local high schools I regularly cover—Darlington, Shullsburg, Belmont, Black Hawk, Cuba City and Benton—have continued to have success year after year. Each school has won a state title in at least one sport and several have won multiple titles in multiple sports.

There is nothing like the pride and passion that shows up in our communities during these special seasons. I never got to be a part of a championship team during my own high school athletics career, but in my time at the paper I have covered state champions in football, cross country, boys' basketball, girls' basketball, wrestling, girls' track and field, boys' track and field, softball and, most recently, baseball.

If you add in all the other state qualifiers in those sports as well as in gymnastics, boys' and girls' golf and some of the new sports like trap shooting and esports, and it's safe to say I have been very lucky to be a part of so many spectacular events. I

have been honored to be able to share these events with all these athletes, their parents, their fans and last but not least our readers.

I have also had several unique honors not afforded to every small-town newspaper reporter. I have interviewed Olympians and NFL players, national champions and national award-winning coaches, and many other special people who all had a story to tell. I have worked the sideline at an NFL game of my favorite team. I have also been on the sideline for a Badger's Ax Game celebration and two Big Ten West championship programs at my alma mater.

Those were amazing days at work. However, they were also a lot of work.

Those events have given me plenty of fantastic memories but have kept me busy for 10+ months out of every school year over the past 27 years from the start of football practice in early August to when the prep baseball ends in mid-June.

Being a reporter means covering things when they happen. As it is, sporting events happen on nights and weekends. Those long months during the school year feature 10+ hour days several times a week, events stacked upon each on weekends, and sometimes even work over the holidays.

For every state event and special game I have covered, there has been a random game at the end of a long day that I have also gone to that kept me from being home with my family.

My wife, Jacinda, and our two sons, Kellen, 20, and

Brayden, 17, had to learn to schedule our time around game times and our events around the sporting events I had to cover. It is part of job and they have understood and accepted that, but it wasn't always easy. Lately, it had been harder and harder for me to understand and accept. That's when I knew something had to change—for them and for me.

For the first time in my working life, I will have a “9-to-5” weekday-only job. I'm really looking forward to that.

I have forged many lifelong relationships in this career and have made so many friendships that my list of personal “thanks yous” after 27 years is just too long to publish. I would be afraid to leave somebody out. But, I will leave with these:

To all the athletes and their families, thank you for allowing me into your lives to share in your adventures. I hope that I have added something to your memories with my coverage. And, to those parents with cameras, thank you for filling in for me whenever I asked for help. I could never have done some of the things I done without that help.

To all the communities and schools, thank you for welcoming me in to tell your stories. Our communities and schools do so many good things, and I am happy to help promote those good things whenever I could.

To all the coaches, thank you for all that you do for your athletes and thank you for putting up with me and helping

me do a better job of covering your teams. Without dedicated coaches, you don't have all the successes that the teams I cover have had. Having the right athletes is important, but having the right coaches is vital.

To all the readers, thank you for welcoming me into your homes week after week. Knowing that there were people out there that made my stories required reading week after week and could not wait to see my pictures following games, made all the work and long hours worth it.

To all my co-workers and colleagues, thank you for being part of my extended family and putting up with me. Producing a newspaper takes a lot of teamwork and I have had plenty of good teammates at the Republican Journal over the past 27 years, at The Tri-County Press and Platteville Journal for the past 10 years, and among the entire Morris Multimedia publishing group. Local newspapers can only survive with dedicated workers, and I have worked with so many over the years.

And, finally, to my family, thank you for all your understanding and help you have given me over the years to allow me to cover high school sports for a career. I hope you all know how special you are to me. I have tried to make up for the sacrifices you have all made for me, and I hope it's been enough. From now on, you'll have me around a lot more, so I guess we'll see how that goes.

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