

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH RON BRACKEN

Interviewed by Russell Frank

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Russell Frank: This is an interview with Ron Bracken, long-time sports editor of the *Centre Daily Times*. Ron Bracken is sitting here in my office in the Carnegie Building on the Penn State campus. And it is June 16, 2009. Why don't we just start with basic background about you, telling us where you grew up, where you were born, education and all that?

Ron Bracken: Okay, born on November 6, 1943. I grew up in Port Matilda, which is just 12 miles from this Penn State campus. Spent a good portion of my life tied to Penn State in one form or another. Education-wise graduated from Bald Eagle High School in 1961; spent two years as a student here at Penn State, and then got married and went into the job market, and found my way to the back door of the *Centre Daily Times* one day, and that's how the career was born. The time I was here at Penn State I hadn't taken any journalism courses, had never written a newspaper article, so until I went to work for the CDT, the very first story I had ever written was the one I wrote for them.

Frank: So where did the interest come from?

Bracken: Well, I'd always been interested in sports all my life. I mean I was a sports junkie. Growing up the typical 12-year-old kid cutting the covers off sports magazines, the photos and pasting them all over my room and destroying the wallpaper.

Frank: Redesigning the walls in your room?

Bracken: Oh, my God, all the big sports heroes from the mid-50s. You know the Hall of Fame list: Mickey Mantle, Warren Spahn, and Yogi Berra, Jackie Robinson, you know, all those guys. All the football stars from that era: guys like Lenny Moore, and Johnny Unitas, and just whoever was on the cover of sport magazines, they wound up on the wall of my room.

Frank: So it wasn't just like Pittsburgh guys or Philly guys.

Bracken: No, no, in fact, in Port Matilda I was sort of like the ugly duckling because I was a huge Milwaukee Braves fan, and that was Pittsburgh Pirates country, and so everybody else in town loved the Pirates except me.

Frank: Where did that come from?

Bracken: I just thought it was a neat name, and I liked the uniforms, and I like the names of some of the guys: Warren Spahn, and Lew Burdette, and Eddie Matthews, and Johnny Logan.

Frank: That was a good team.

Bracken: Oh, a great team.

Frank: Great team, yeah.

Bracken: Yeah, it was a great team. And, you know, I loved that 1950s [team]. In fact, I still have at home a 1955 Milwaukee Braves stamp book I bought at the Clover Farm Store in Port Matilda for 25 cents and each page was a little biography of a player and had this little colored stamp that you pasted into the corner of the page there and I still have that.

Frank: Did the Yankees beat the Braves in '57?

Bracken: '58

Frank: Or the other way around?

Bracken: Vice versa. In '57 Braves won, and the Yankees won in '58.

Frank: Yeah, I grew up with the Yankees because I grew up in New York and Mickey Mantle was my boyhood hero.

Bracken: Oh yeah, sure, sure. But yeah, those were some great Braves teams there and I've been a Braves fan all my life.

Frank: So did you play sports yourself?

Bracken: I played baseball and football at Bald Eagle [High School] and then after I graduated played county league baseball for a number of years, and then after that played softball until, I think, I was 55 or 56 when I quit playing softball.

Frank: So it seems like the way nothing has changed because I think a lot of our students in journalism now get into it because they're into sports. They say, "Well I am not going to be a professional athlete, but I like to be close to the sports world and being a sports journalist is a way to do that." That was what motivated you it sounds like.

Bracken: Oh yeah, I mean I just sort of fell into it. I mean it was really it was fate. I mean I just fell into this no plan, no game plan. I always knew that in some way I should be doing something with writing because in high school my best grades were in English. I mean, what carried me through English class was the papers that I wrote, not the grammar and the diagramming sentences and everything. My grades rested basically on my ability to write, the same with my other classes. If there was a paper due I could handle that, and that got me through, even here [at Penn State]. My best grades here were English, speech, sociology, those kinds of things. I hated Chem 11.

Frank: So where did that come from? Your parents, what did they do for a living? Were they [the ones who] encouraged that interest? Did they read to you like crazy when you were a kid? How did you get good in writing?

Bracken: No, that was pretty much just you know, reading. And that's what every class that I've ever been invited to speak with I tell them the way to learn how to write

is to read. And that was true for me; it was a gift. I just had that ability and I started reading when I was, oh I don't know however old you are when you are in third grade. I loved comic books; I devoured them, war comic books and the other stuff. I thought I was pretty cool because when I was in third grade. I was the only kid in the class that could spell lieutenant and sergeant. And I got that from reading.

Frank: That's a tricky one.

Bracken: Yeah, they are, and you know I got that from reading the comic books and everything and then from there went into, you know, just the books that kids read in school. They get [them] from the library or whatever. I just always loved to read and still do. I am in the midst of one World War II book now and there's another one waiting to be read. If the cable goes out on TV, no big deal. I'll take a book and I am happy.

Frank: Were there sportswriters that you admired when you were younger?

Bracken: No. I had no idea what a sportswriter was. I had no clue.

Frank: Do you remember that specific day you showed up at the CDT and what happened?

Bracken: Yeah, I was playing county league baseball that summer for Port Matilda, which is an adult league here. And I was working for an outfit called Penn's Valley Publishing, which had the back half of the CDT building at that time down on Fraser Street. And talk about boring; my job was rewriting borough ordinances. We'd get these towns that would contract with Penn's Valley Publishing. We need our ordinance book updated. That's what I did with no training at all.

Frank: You had applied for that job because you felt like you could write?

Bracken: Yeah. The ad in the paper said "editorial assistant." I thought, that sounds like something I could do. I went in did the interview at any rate because we were in the back half of the CDT building rather than me calling in the box score from our game the night before I would just take it in the morning because CDT was an afternoon paper then. So I would just take it in in the morning and take it back and give it to Doug McDonald, who was the sports editor. It saved him having to deal with a phone call the night before. It saved me from having to make the phone call. And at the end of the season, you know, just on a whim, I just gave Doug the last box score and I said, "Are you going to need any help covering high school football this fall?" And he said, "Are you interested?" I said, "Well, yeah." And he said, "Well, what's your background?" I said, "You know, other than being involved in sports, I've never written anything." But I told him I had good grades in English and everything. And he said, "Well, if you want to try it." He said, "Show up, go with this guy, cover the game, come back, and write a trial story." So we came back, sat down, and at that time of course it was the typewriter, and I sat down. I wrote that story long hand, and then typed it. I

hadn't learned how to think right on the keyboard yet. And[I] turned it in and he read and he said, "Well yeah," he says, "You know, I think you can do it." So the next Friday night, I was out there on my own and went covered the game. I came back, wrote the story. This time I wrote it on the typewriter. I had already made that leap. Fortunately, I was taking typing in high school, which was a godsend and I have to thank my guidance counselor because my senior year my schedule had 23 study halls on it. And she took one look at that and said, "There's no way you are going through your senior year with 23 study halls." [She] hands me a list of electives and says, "Pick three," which cut me down to [eight] study halls. But typing was one of them, so I took it and I was the only senior boy in the class of all junior girls.

Frank: That sounds good.

Bracken: It was, it was. But I learned to type there and again, fate. So anyway getting back to the story, [I] finished out the season with that and after my first story appeared that Monday morning, then I was at my desk back at Penn's Valley Publishing and looked I heard a tap on the door. I looked up and it was Jerry Weinstein, who was the editor of the *Centre Daily Times* at that time, and he motioned me out into the hallway. And he said, "Would you like to come to work for us?" And I said, "Nah, I think I'd just as soon stay you know part time," because my daughter was only like six months old at the time. And I already knew what the newspaper business was. That was nights and weekends, and I didn't want to be away from her.

Frank: What a good dad.

Bracken: Well, I just I knew it was going to take a lot of time so I just said. "No." So I went on through the whole high school football season. What it got down to is that I really I just loved it. I just enjoyed that so much and it came easy to me.

Frank: How did you know what you were doing though?

Bracken: I knew football. I mean I knew, you know, to just write down what happened on the play and I made up my own score sheets and the whole thing.

Frank: It seems like it's one thing to like football. It's one thing to know how to write a good send sentence but to actually know it's a genre, you know, it's like tradition.

Bracken: Again, it comes from all the reading that I had done. I had a feel for how it should be. I had never done it but just instinctively I just had a feel for it. So at the end of the season, I can remember this as clear as day. My wife and I were sitting in our apartment watching the Smothers Brothers on television and I turned to her. It was a Sunday night and I said, "I am going to see if that job is still available at the paper." I said, "I don't want to get down the road and look back and say, 'Gee I wish I would've tried that.'" So the next morning I go in and I go back and talk to Mr. Weinstein and I said, "Is that job still available?" And he said, "Well we have a guy coming in to interview for it this afternoon." And

he said, "I'll let you know." The guy never showed up for his interview, so just like that, there I was. You know, next thing I know Doug is sitting down, and at that time because it's a small staff, I mean just Doug and I. I had no background at all and he's teaching me how to do headlines and how to count the characters and everything to make the headline fit at different type sizes and layout this way and do that and I am going "Whoa, I didn't know about this part of it." But I learned that.

Frank: Did you like that part?

Bracken: Not really, not really. I could do it, and it would work but I didn't have the flair. I mean, you got to have an artistic side to be really able to do that well and I didn't have that. That certainly wasn't my strength, but it was enough to get by and it was enough to get Doug a day off now and then because he was working seven days a week because he had nobody to back him up. And so that's how that's how it started. I mean it's as improbable as you can get. And I've always told these kids when I talk: I said this is not a career path you want to follow. But it worked out.

Frank: So, I mean from the first were you interviewing players and coaches and stuff like that or just writing about what happened?

Bracken: No, well, basically you know when I was doing the part-time stuff you interviewed the coach after the game. I mean, you would talk to him because you had to have quotes in the story and but that wasn't any problem because I knew the coach and so, I mean, he sort of did a double take when he saw me. He said, "What are you doing here?" And I told him. He said "okay" and so I got my foot in the door that way and then gradually just learned how to do it. I mean, because it's basically you are just having a conversation with somebody.

Frank: Did you like that part?

Bracken: Yeah, oh yeah. I loved that. I loved that I loved the whole thing. I loved high school sports – and still do. That's why I am still doing it. I am going full circle; I am back doing part-time stuff.

Frank: Yeah, I know. It's kind of interesting.

Bracken: For the CDT covering high school sports. I want no part of Penn State; I'm done with that. But I still love being out there among the high school people because that's the real people, you know the parents, the coaches, and the kids. That's where I am at home.

Frank: Yeah, well tell me about the CDT you know in those days when you first started there as a place to work and what the operation was like the size of the staff?

Bracken: Oh man, I don't know how ...

Frank: Two guys in the sports department managed to cover, you know, five high schools.

Bracken: Well, at that time we only covered four. We hadn't picked up Philipsburg-Osceola. We kept our coverage to this side of the mountain. So we had Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley and State College. So we had four and there were no girls' sports at that time so that made it a lot easier. So there was Doug and me and we had two part-time people covering the other two schools. Because in those days you just followed one team the whole football season. We got away from that years later because, you know, I just kept saying, "This isn't good, this isn't good." You get too attached and you get too identified with that team and we need to spread it around. We needed to and so eventually we got to that. But that's what we did. There were there were no girls sports at that time. But I couldn't tell you how many days I sat in there typing in the bowling scores. We took Little League box scores: full box scores for Little League games from all over the county. We took box scores from the local slow pitch softball league. I mean in the summer you just went crazy with all these box scores for all these sports.

Frank: How many pages did you have?

Bracken: Oh, two.

Frank: Oh.

Bracken: Two; it was a two-page section most times, sometimes page and a half. There was very little wire in it most days because we had all the local stuff to do. But there was just me, Doug and part-timers. Skinny staff. We had two photographers. But the whole operation was in the front half of that building and between, well, the front third of that building and then the linotype machines in the press room were in the middle, and then Penns Valley Publishing was in the back. So, I mean it was a long, narrow building and so I got to watch the whole thing. I mean it used to freak me out. We'd go out in the shop and watch those guys run those linotype machines and then watch them put the pages together and they are reading the type upside down when you are putting a page together and that took a little bit of adjustment. I mean upside down, but it was just it was fascinating. It was just fascinating. Of course, to me those were the best of times covering Penn State. I mean it was great, the legendary coaches that were here. Gymnastics with Gene Wettstone, and you know, wrestling with Bill Koll and John Hegley. John Bach was the basketball coach and Chuck Medlar was the baseball coach. These are all legendary people here and I knew them all. You got close to them and you know they knew who you were and they'd sit down and talk to you and easily accessible. Even Paterno was, I mean that was his early years. I mean we're talking '67 '68. '69, when it was much easier because there wasn't the following at that time. That monster was just starting to grow. Thursdays nights I'd go over to practice and catch Joe after practice and do the interview for the advance for the Saturday game. And stand on the sidelines talking to trainers, doctors, managers, players that were standing on the sideline.

You just became part of it, part of the wallpaper there. Those were great days. Those were absolutely great days to be involved and to be around and just to be a part of this whole thing as it grew.

Frank: At a certain point in time you are implying that you begin to lose access as it got bigger?

Bracken: Yes, it did. As they got better the coverage expanded, more and more papers came in here. I mean I can remember being in the press box and you knew everybody there. Because it would be the same guys: Philadelphia, Harrisburg, Allentown, Pittsburgh, Altoona and us. You know that would be the nucleus of the writers. Once in a while others would show up, but for the most part that was it. And we traveled with the team. I mean we went in on the team charter whenever they were going to away games that required a flight that's where we were. We were in the back of the plane. But then as the coverage expanded, the demands on the time became greater and greater, and Paterno began shrinking everything down so he could keep control of it, because he is a control freak. And everybody knows that.

Frank: That's right.

Bracken: Yeah, everybody knows that and so the only way he could control it was just to tighten the access. Because I can remember the first year I covered them, which was in '68, if I wanted to talk to a player I could go in the locker room and put a note in his locker and ask him to call me. And I did a couple of player interviews in our office downtown. They walked downtown, came in the office at the CDT, and we sat down and did an interview across the desk. It's unheard of now. People's eyes cross when I tell them that we could do that. Well, we did. It was just wonderful to do that. It was a great time to be around then. But then getting back to the access, it gradually just shrunk, and then in, oh geees what was it '83, I think, is when they closed the locker room then, because a woman reporter from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* named Sarah Jane Fraleigh showed up on the beat. And the first couple of games they would accommodate her for interviews post game. She would tell them what players she wanted to talk to. They would bring them out of the locker room and she would interview them outside the locker room. Well, she was pretty feisty and she decided this isn't going to work and so the *Inquirer* threatened to sue Penn State for access. And Penn State's response was, "Okay, the locker room is closed to everybody." And it's been that way ever since.

Frank: I didn't know that.

Bracken: Yeah, yeah, it's exactly what happened. She's the one who put the walls up, put the final bricks in the wall as it were. And I can understand it. I mean, I could certainly see her viewpoint because some of the best material you could get was in those locker rooms after a game, because you'd go in there looking for different angles. Now it's so homogenized. Everybody gets the same ingredients and then you are supposed to bake a different cake. Well, it just doesn't work out

that well. But in those days, I mean, you could go in there and look around and you'd see a player over here that you want to talk and nobody else is around him so you go over and sit down and you'd talk to him for 15 minutes. And, you know, and again they got to know you. They trusted you. They would tell you things that they never would say now. Players would say, "Help me take my jersey off." I mean they were just that comfortable with you around and that all went away.

Frank: Did you have a sense that there were certain things that you would do to protect them? You know, you wouldn't just print stuff to make them look bad.

Bracken: Yeah, well, protective of Joe, yeah, and I always said that. Sometimes you've got to protect them from themselves. And you know, again, that's how you build the trust. I mean, there were lots of times that one of these kids would say something, and I thought, "Oh my God, that's a great quote but if I use that, you know, he's going to be in trouble. He's going to be in trouble with the coach." And I would be in trouble with the coach because he would blame me. And I had that happen where I quoted the kid exactly, and Joe bounced him about it, and he said he didn't say it and then Joe came down on me, and said, "Well, he said he didn't say it." And I said, "I know he said it; I quoted him exactly."

Frank: Why would he take the kid's word for it?

Bracken: Well, because he is part of the family. That's the whole family thing: We're Penn State football players -- and you are not. You cannot be part of this family. You can be around the edges of it, but at the end of the day you are not one of us. It's an "us versus them" thing. And it's still that way today.

Frank: Did you ever have any big run-ins with Paterno?

Bracken: Oh yeah.

Frank: What were they about?

Bracken: Access for one thing and just basically not telling the truth a couple of times. The biggest one I had with him was, if we can sort of get off track a little bit here. There was a player who left here; his name was J. T. Morris. He left at the end of the season and Joe wouldn't sign his release for him to go to another school; just refused to do it. So the kid was in limbo. He couldn't transfer because he didn't have the money that he could pay his own way to another school. He needed a scholarship to be able to go to school, and Joe was not going to let him have that. I mean, he just backed up and said, "No." And I heard about it.

Frank: Now, this is what year?

Bracken: '90, '91, '92, somewhere right in there. I finally just figured this is a pretty good story. So at the Blue-White game that week Joe always has his press conference before the game. But I asked him, "Well, you know what's the situation with J. T.

Morris? Is he going to be back or what?" He said, "J. T. and I are going to talk here in a couple of weeks." Okay. So I called J. T. Morris to get his side of it and he just unloaded. And I can still remember he said, "My future is in the pen on Joe Paterno's desk." Which is a great quote and we just went on and on. And finally I said, okay, I mean he told me the whole story from his point anyway. And so that was in the evening. I couldn't wait to get to work the next day, and so I called Joe. And he gave me the same thing, "Oh, J. T. and I are going to talk." And I said, "Well Joe, I am going to tell you. I talked to him last night and he told me his side of the story, and I said I am giving you a chance to tell me what you are thinking." "No, we will be all right," [he said]. Five minutes later the sports information director from Penn State calls me [and said], "Ron, I heard you talked to J.T. Morris last night. Well, what did he have to say?" I said, "I am not going to get into that now."

Frank: Read the paper.

Bracken: Yeah, without saying that, that was what I was saying. But I said, "I'll tell you this, what he said wasn't very complimentary. He says, "Well I hope you don't write anything that's damaging to the program." And I said, "Well, I am just going to write what he said." "Okay," [he said]. I hung up. Five minutes later the phone rings again. It's Paterno calling me back, and now he's not in a congenial mood. "Well, what did he say?" And I said, "Joe, I am not going to get into that, I am just not. But I said I want to give you a chance to respond if you want to. I said I want to be fair to you and here's your chance." [He said,] "No, I am not getting into it and I don't understand what you are doing. That's not much of a story anyway. I've got 100-some kids that I got to look out for and be a dad to, and he's just one of them and I've got to put his feet to the fire." And he just went off on this tangent and I just let him go. And finally he just says, "Well, good luck with your story." Bang, and that was it. Turns out the story won an AP national first place award you know for him saying it wasn't much of a story it was. But, yeah, I mean there were a couple of those.

Frank: Did that change your relationship with Paterno at all, or did he get over it?

Bracken: He became a little more distant after that. But I would hope that in retrospect if he ever sat down and gave it a two-minute thought, I gave him every chance to respond and to give his story and he chose not to. But then when he saw that wasn't going to work, then he tried the intimidation bully factor that he does that every once in a while where he just tries to, you know, put his foot right on your throat. And he found out it didn't work even though, you know, it's just a small local newspaper, you know. He still had a job to do and there's a right way to do it and you know. I personally felt that was a textbook case of how to how to deal with the whole thing, and so yeah, I think grudgingly then he looked at me in a little different light like I wasn't on a leash anymore.

Frank: Do you think before that there was an expectation? I think the way you put it is, you know, you are not going to write anything damaging.

Bracken: Exactly, exactly. I think that's what it was. But, you know, we had some go-arounds before that over access and you know we had a couple of, you know, discussions about that.

Frank: I mean, how did you did you even think about it in terms of what is the nature of my job? Is the nature of my job to make Penn State look good in the local paper? Is it the nature of job to just tell the story as I see it and let the chips fall where they may.

Bracken: Well, that was all part of the maturation process. If I stumbled on that story when I first started I wouldn't know what to do with it. And I would've really been afraid to do it, for fear it would have cost me my job. But then you know as you are around and you grow; like I said, I had no journalism training. So I was just sort of learning on the fly. And gradually I grew up. Because when I started, I was a fan, an unabashed fan. And then gradually I grew away from that and that's, you know, once I did it then I started getting better. You know but it just took that; it just took that exposure and learning how to deal with things.

Frank: Were there ever stories that you kept under your hat at the time that maybe if you came across the same kind of information now you would certainly write about it.

Bracken: Every once in a while a kid would say something that would be a pretty inflammatory quote. I thought I am not going to put you in that situation because I like these kids and I didn't want to get them in trouble. There was any number of times that happened.

Frank: I know that you wrote a lot of columns in recent years about Penn State players getting in trouble. Earlier on, was it that the kids were better behaved or, would the authorities look away, the sports section of the newspaper would look away or is it a combination of those things?

Bracken: It was a combination of those primarily. The kids, I don't know if they were necessarily better behaved or that the stuff they did was different. It didn't really cross the line as far as the law was concerned. But I think the cops did look away. They had a working agreement with Paterno that if a kid got in trouble, they'd call him, he'd come get the kid, handle it internally, so that it never got out. The public, we weren't aware of it. Nobody told us and so anything that may have happened we didn't know about it because it was such a closed society at that time. But now, I mean, the relationship between the football program and the police department has eroded. The cops are sick of these kids behaving the way they do and they are sick of, you know, the football office trying to apply pressure to get them to let these kids go or let them handle it or whatever. I mean that's all gone now. And so that's why you see more of it. I think it's a different kind of kid now. The things that they are getting in trouble for now are different than what they used to be. And now with the Internet and the cell phone cameras and everything, there's no chance these kids are going to get away with this stuff because it's going to be out there. Somebody will see it; somebody will

take a picture. It will be out on the Internet and, of course, newspaper people are no different than anybody else. They'll see it on the Internet and then there it goes. So yeah, the world has changed.

Frank: So do you think this is good or bad?

Bracken: I think it's good, I think it's good. I don't think they should be allowed to get away with that stuff. They should not be treated any differently than anybody else when it comes to a DUI or beating somebody up downtown. They break the law, they pay the price. That's the way it should be. You know so really, I always felt like Joe created somewhat of a monster there because he did have that relationship with the police, and so these kids weren't held accountable to the extent they should have been. And yet he always said, "Well, I don't want my kids treated any differently than anybody else." But yes you do, because you expect them to be able to get out of these things where you know an English major is not going to get away with it. So he had a hand in it.

Frank: I don't want to neglect high school sports because I know that's your first love. But you do have this amazing front-row seat, as you said, to watching the growth of Penn State sports and the football program especially. So I wondered if you could just talk more about that. I mean just in terms of, you know, the size of crowds and the bigger stadium.

Bracken: Sure. When I started Beaver Stadium held, what was it 47,000 [fans], I think. And then they started adding on to it and, you know, it was a big deal when they went to 70-some thousand because they took out the track that] used to be inside the stadium there. They had the state track champions here at Penn State on the track inside the stadium. Well, in order to expand the stadium they had to take the track out and lower the stadium and we've got whole folders of stories at the CDT photo packages of the expansion of the stadium and everything. After a while you just got so used to it happening you don't really grasp the enormity of it. But sure, I mean it went from 40-some [thousand], to 47, to 60, then up to 78 [thousand] and then on up and added the decks and the whole thing. The one thing they didn't do much with was the press box. That was sort of last and still is. I mean, that thing is just a rat hole; for a school this size it's an embarrassment.

Frank: Oh really?

Bracken: Oh, my God.

Frank: Even now?

Bracken: Even now. I mean, they stretched it out and added to it. But the amenities in it— you've got one little bathroom there for men and one for women— and there's hundreds of people in the press box. They have two little bathrooms, no place to eat. And I know that sounds whiney. They give you food but you have no place to eat it. You have to eat it at your workspace there. I mean you walk through that place down the second or third, or first and second levels, and there's rust all

over the place, and you can see there's holes in the floor. It's corrugated metal and you can see clear to the ground. It's cold in the winter and bakes in the early season. You go to all these other stadiums and, you know, they are nice places and they are functional. And this to me, this just reflects their lack of respect for the media. I mean they want the coverage. They want the exposure but as far as you know the media itself, you really are ants at their picnic. But you know, television used to be a big deal; Penn State game is on television. "Oh wow." Everybody used to make a big deal out of that. And if they got a story at *Sports Illustrated* it's huge news. And you know then gradually it's just grown with the television and everything to what it is now: where every Saturday they are on TV somewhere. If it's not a network, they are on their own on one of these other channels that you can get.

Frank: Yeah, Big Ten Network.

Bracken: Yeah, yeah, but it was amazing to watch. Now that I have the benefit of being able to look back and just sometimes factor in everything, I think, wow, that was an incredible ride. And it was, it really was. You know, 95 percent of it was just pure enjoyment; just great moments, great people. For me, I mean, I got to go places I never would have gone otherwise.

Frank: Yeah, it strikes me that that's what's interesting about [you]. On one hand, you are working for this small community newspaper but you are covering a very big-time sports program. So it's kind of a major league job in a minor league town.

Bracken: Exactly. And you know many times I had people ask me, you know, "Well why didn't you move on?" And I had a couple of chances to go elsewhere, but number one I am just a homebody. I didn't want to leave Centre County; I just didn't want to do it. And secondly, I always told them I said, "Where would I go to get something better than what I have here?" If I go to a bigger paper or, you know, end up in a metro, then I am covering the pros, which I don't want to do because I've had enough exposure to that and I don't want any part of it. And I said, "When you drop down to the college level, what's bigger than this?" So, I've got the best of both worlds. I am happy where I am, covering a major, major, major program. What else is there for me?

Frank: But to play devil's advocate, you were talented enough to go anywhere you wanted to go. And were you ever curious to see how far that talent could take you?

Bracken: No, no, I wasn't because I wasn't driven in that way. Had I set out early in life to become a career journalist, yeah maybe I would've taken that path. But I just I just fell into this comfortable niche and, to a degree, I realized that I probably could've worked at a higher level. And, as I said, I had a couple of offers to go other places, but I thought, why can't I just use that talent here? I mean, don't these people here deserve somebody that's capable of doing that work? Why should they have to settle for less? I mean, yes we might be a small-time paper,

but that doesn't mean that we have to have small-town talent working here. And you were there, I mean, you knew that newsroom. There were a lot of great people there who could've worked at other places and a lot of them wound up leaving. But for a time there were some incredibly talented people in that building.

Frank: Yeah, well the other thing about this place is that this is a university community. You know, a lot of people have moved here from big cities and read big-city papers and their expectations are pretty high for reporters. They expect things to be pretty literate and you don't have to write down to the seventh or eighth grade reading level that people tell you have to write to when you write for a newspaper.

Bracken: Yeah, yeah, well my feeling always was I am just going to write it the best I can. You know, I am not going to worry about whether they can understand it at the seventh or eighth grade level. I am just putting it out there and if you like it, fine. If you don't, well hey, it's the best I could do and read some other paper if you don't like this.

Frank: Well, that gets us into your relationship with readers over the years and how was it. Did you hear from readers a lot over time before the age of e-mail? Did people call you? Did they write letters?

Bracken: Yeah, you would get letters once in a while. I mean, typically they don't call you if they are upset unless they are really upset. They won't call, they'll write a letter. And then of course once e-mail happened, and they could hide behind the anonymity then, it just it just exploded. You know in my last years, that was the thing that bugged me the most, is that they [readers] could write anything they wanted to. They don't have to sign their name to it. And my argument the paper always was, we won't print an unsigned letter to the editor and yet we're subjected to all this, which is ten times worse than what you'd see in a letter to the editor. And we're expected to sit here and take this, you know? There's nothing you can do about it; there's absolutely nothing you can do about it. But, yeah, you know, you have people that just strongly disagree with it or just flat don't like you, and that's part of the deal. Happily, I can say that probably 95 percent of the time it was positive, and I was grateful for that.

Frank: So when people disagreed with you did they think you were too much of a homer or not enough of a homer or both?

Bracken: I got I got it from both sides, which told me I was doing the right thing. Yeah, you're the hometown paper. You're supposed to be supporting these kids. You know, if it wasn't for Penn State, you wouldn't have a job. And then the other side is, you're covering up for these guys all the time. Why aren't you writing this story and this kid did that and this coach did that and somebody else did something else? Well, a lot of times I had no idea that was happening. Oh, well, thanks for the information. I'll look into it. I didn't know. Well, you should know.

You are a newspaper guy. And they think you know everything. They think you are this person who is just aware of everything that's going.

Frank: And you have a pipeline to all the private offices.

Bracken: Yeah, and, of course, some of them have axes to grind. They want to get this coach or they are jealous of this athlete. Because my son is just as good as he is and he gets his name in the paper all the time. Well, your son is an offensive guard and he's a tailback. How come? You know figure it out. How many stats do you have for an offensive guard? But yeah you get that and that's when you realize the impact that you have you know on people's lives. Even this spring after a softball game, I had written a story about this girl and she really was the star of the show, but she's only a sophomore. She's a baby-faced kid out there. You look at her and you think, "My God, how can she be that good and that tough and look like she does?" And so I called her "baby faced assassin" in the paper the next day. The next game I went to her dad came over to me and he said, "Boy, you just made her day. She came running into the bedroom at 5:45 with the paper: "Dad, look at this, look at this." And that's just brings it home. I mean, it means so much to these people. But you have to be so careful with that because you really can have an impact on their lives, and you don't want it to be a negative one, especially the high school kids. I just have a soft spot for them, and these are the best times of their lives. They may not realize it, but they are never they're never going to have it as good as they have it right there, but at the end of the day, it's still just a game. That's what I always kept coming back to and say, "Hey, you know they are just athletes playing a game. In the scheme of things it's not going to change anything in the world tomorrow. And it's so let's keep it in perspective." And that's one thing Jerry Weinstein said to me early that on I never forgot: "Sports aren't important, so you got to make them interesting." And that just registered with me. I just kept telling everybody "Don't get too caught up in it; it's still it's just a game." But it's hard, people invest so much of their lives in it they don't see it. They lose that perspective.

Frank: Oh yes.

Bracken: And I always felt like part of my job was to keep it in perspective: Hey, let's blow away all the smoke here and take a look at it. And so certainly as I got older that's the way I looked at it.

[Tape turned over]

Frank: Okay, were there any stories that you regretted writing later on because you feel like it did hurt somebody.

Bracken: Yeah, it was interesting. There was a kid, long-time Penn State fans would recognize the name, Matt Suhey. He was a great high school football player, probably the best high school player I ever had the privilege of being around. It came down to his senior year and it looked like he was going to break the state rushing record. And this was a big deal, a kid from State College. Certainly in

Pennsylvania, with the history of high school football here and all the great players, for Matt to end up being the best, or have the most rushing yards of any, was an incredible local story. And we were following it obviously. It got down to the end of the year and he played his last game at Williamsport and he wound up getting the yardage. So, it was a big story: Matt Suhey breaks state rushing title. Thank God, Doug McDonald was a stickler for detail. I wasn't. And one night, I think it was that Sunday night or Monday night, the phone rings at home and Doug says, "Ron, we got a problem." And I said, "What?" He said, "Matt's stat totals are wrong." I said, "What?" And he says, "Yeah. I've added these things up and I keep adding them up. And he didn't break the record." You know for us that's a huge deal. "Oh my God," I said, "Are you sure Doug?" He said, "Yeah. When you come in the morning you can check them, but I've gone over it and over it and over it, and I keep coming up with the same number." We missed something, somewhere, I forget now what it was, but anyway, it altered the total. Oh, my God, I didn't sleep much that night. [I] get in the office the next morning and go through it. Sure enough we were wrong. Now, what do you do? I mean, Doug and I were the only two people in the world who knew that, the only two. All we had to do was keep our mouth shut. So I went in and I told Jerry Weinstein. I said, "Jerry, we got a problem." He said, "What's that?" I told him. He says, "Well, what are you going to do? I said, "We have to print a retraction." I said, "We can't let this go." He said, "Well, go ahead and do it then." So, I called Matt at home that day after I knew he was home from school and I said, "Matt, I hate to tell you this but you didn't break the rushing record." He said, "I didn't?" And I said, "No," and I explained to him what happened. And he said, "Oh, well, that's all right." Matt was cool with it, he was cool with it. Then I saw his dad and talked to him and he said, "That's no big deal. He said, "You guys make too much of that anyway." That was Steve Shuey. So we print the story. Well, that touched off a circus because the *Pennsylvania Mirror* – they were here from '68 to '77 – they jumped into it, and they got to digging around, and they found out it was this guy from northern Bedford that actually had the state rushing record. So they write this big story. Well, then I start digging around and I found out that he didn't do it. It was some other guy and it was a week of, you know: Can you top this until we finally did. Some guy by the name of Charlie Myers actually broke it [the record]. But we finally got that all straightened out. That was a real tempest going on. Somebody from the Williamsport paper actually wrote a column and commended us for doing that because they said, "You know they could have just kept their mouth shut and nobody would have ever known, and yet they came out and did the right thing." I was always proud of that because I really felt good about it.

Frank: Where did that come from? You didn't study journalism in college. Nobody ever said, "Okay Bracken, you know, here's how to be an ethical journalist." And yet you know you are in situations where you got to make a call and you know where did that thinking come from? How do you figure out what is the right thing to do is?

Bracken: Well, there's a right thing and a wrong thing to do, and you just let your conscience guide you. You know it wasn't through training. It's just the way I

grew up and the ethics, the people I was around in the Boy Scouts, and church, and school. At that time coaches and teachers commanded a lot of authority and a lot of respect, and I grew up with that. And you end up thinking, "What would they want me to do?" You know what the right thing here is and I just did it. So it was a real-life situation set in a journalism sports background.

Frank: So Weinstein set a good tone?

Bracken: Oh, yeah. Jerry was hard-nosed, but yeah, he was old school. And I couldn't have learned any more in four years here than I did spending four years working for him. Because he was just that kind of guy.

Frank: Speaking of learning from people, did McDonald take you aside say here's how to do this better?

Bracken: No, Doug would proof; he would read it. Doug was good with grammar. But again, grammar, sentence structure, I didn't have much of a problem with. And in those days we had proofreaders, so if there was, you know, an error in there they would point that out to you, too. You always had that safety net, which is gone now. You've got to be your own editor for the most part. And people don't even use Spellcheck even though you have it. They don't use it. No it was edited for spelling and grammar but not sentence structure or you got to take this. But I can go back now and look over some old clips that I have and, [say], "Oh, my God."

Frank: But you also look at some that you are a particularly proud of?

Bracken: Oh sure, sure that's well whenever I put that book together those were they were all from later years. But yeah, yeah that's what. That book was just basically a selfish thing on my part because I always said I just like to have, you know, the good stories that I've done the ones that won awards and then some that I just liked because I liked them and some day down the road they are all in one place. Get it out and go back over it so I have that now. And that's what that was all about so those were the fun ones.

Frank: So how did the sports department grow?

Bracken: I want to say, the spring of '74. I'll never forget that night. Doug was away covering the national wrestling tournament. That was a big college wrestling thing. He was away covering the NCAAs, and the PIAA state wrestling championships were here in Rec Hall at that time, and the PIAA swimming was here at the Natatorium, and there was just me. You know, so I had to cover the state wrestling and we didn't even have anybody to cover the swimming. I had to get the results from up there. I had to do that and Doug was sending his stuff back here, and at that time when he would go up to the wrestling the results would come in on a ticker tape, no, we could get them off the wire. And then Doug would send his stories by dictation. So when that phone rang, and it was Doug I had to stop everything to take the dictation. Then when that was all done,

I had to lay out the sports section and get it done. It was like 4 o'clock in the morning whenever I left the office, and I had to be back up here at noon for the state wrestling [tournament]. I just snapped and I just fired off a note to Jerry Weinstein, saying in no uncertain terms that I am sick of this. I said here's the deal. You know *Pennsylvania Mirror* had somebody at all these things – and there was just me and Doug. I said, "If you want to compete with them, we can't keep doing this." On Monday morning I went into work and I didn't know what kind of response I was going to get. And he came over to me and he said, "Do you have somebody in mind you want?" I said I did actually, and he said to call him. So that's how we got the third guy. Then gradually it grew and women's sports started to creep in and they needed to be covered. So it became obvious we needed another body to do that. I had to go and present the case and they would see it and say, "Well, yeah you are right." And you know we need this and so gradually we got up to where we had seven people on the staff. It's down; they have six now. It was six when I left because, you know economic situation with newspapers. You lose somebody you are not going to be able to replace them. But yeah, we actually got it up to a seven-person staff, which you know for a paper that size that's a pretty big staff. But you know most papers that size don't have this [Penn State sports] to deal with. So we were we were able to get the manpower we needed. We probably still could have used one more person ideally. But the way we had it set up we had two people on the desk and we had five people to do the writing and the coverage. And most of the people were able to do both. They would write and then on certain nights give one of the desk guys a night off they could step in do the layout. [It] became a job requirement really. But that that's how it just unfolded with the growth of women's sports and this place. The demand was there for more people. It couldn't function otherwise.

Frank: So how long had you been there when you became the editor?

Bracken: Oh, the first time I became the sports editor was in '76. I did that from '76 until the summer of '79. I left to be the editor of this fan magazine like *Blue-White Illustrated* is now. It was a slick deal, a guy from Kansas City was running it. He had them all over the country. And came here and asked me if I'd want to do it. He gave me \$6,000 a year [pay] increase. I could work out of my house and he gave me a car. Yeah, what's not to like about that. So I left. I did that and then one day in February '80, the phone rings and a guy from out there who used to be the sports information director here and left to be vice president [of the magazine] called me and said, "Ron how are you doing?" And I say, "Okay." He says, "You are not doing as well as you think. We're closing the magazine." So now I am adrift. So the first thing I thought was, "I've got to get back to the CDT." Jerry had left, and that summer that I left is when they were sold to Knight-Ridder. And so I went back. It was a different world but a lot of the same. Bill Welch was still there; Bill was the editor then. And he says, "Well, we can hire you can back and do some part time stuff with us." They had never hired a replacement for me. And so I went back and I wound up working Saturday mornings laying out the Saturday paper and doing some part-time stuff. Then

that summer Bill called me in and he said, "Well if you want your old job back you can have it." And so I got it back.

Frank: Yeah, I wondered where you would have gone if you hadn't been able to go back.

Bracken: I have no idea; I have no clue what would've happened. So I came back as a sports editor again, and in '83 there was an editor then. He and I just didn't see eye to eye. It's the only time I really had a disagreement with the editor there. Jim Carlson was my assistant, and Jim is the assistant sports editor [in] Harrisburg now. That guy called us into a meeting and started questioning our Penn State football coverage. He said, "I just want to make sure you are asking the right questions." And Jim said, "I thought you were going to go right across the desk and choke him." And it crossed my mind. Boy, I went home that night and I thought some things got to change here. So I went back in the next day and actually my personnel review was coming up within a week. So we were having a conversation and he says, "Well, you know, five years from now what do you see yourself doing here?" I said, "Five years from now I'd love to be a columnist here." I said, "That's [what] I think that's what I am best suited for because I hated the corporate meetings and budgets and all this stuff that corporate brought. I hated that.

Frank: I was going to ask you that question. What changed with Knight-Ridder?

Bracken: My God.

Frank: Bureaucracy?

Bracken: Everything. I mean, you couldn't just do what was right. It had to go through all these channels and I despised that. So he said, "Why don't we do that now." I said "Really?" He says, "If you want to do that, we'll just move Jim up. Do you think Jim's ready?" I said, "Jim he's fine, no problem." Two days later they announced the restructuring and that was one of the best moves that I ever made because from that point on, if there was a real turning point in my career, that was where my writing began to get good. I mean, it was it was acceptable before that but that took it to a different level then because you know I was older, and that's all I had to worry about. I was able to just come up with all these different ideas and not have to worry about whether I have enough people and who is working here and how are we going to get that story. I didn't have to worry about that anymore. I could just write – and that's what I was meant to do. From there it just took off and I was totally content with that until 1997. A sports editor that we had at that time just was not getting it done. I mean, the staff was big enough but he wasn't a people person. He just had no way of dealing with people.

Frank: Yeah, I was there at the time.

Bracken: All right, you know who I mean then. I don't want to single him out. But one day the editor at that time called me into the office. He said, "We're making a change."

He said, "I want you to be sports editor until we get until we get somebody," So I wasn't really thrilled but I had done it before. I knew the ins and outs and so I said, "Well, okay I'll do it until you get somebody else." And they never got anybody else. So I wound up doing that until I retired, which was another eleven years. But I was more comfortable with it but when I went back into it. I resigned myself to say, "Hey you know this is what it is. You are going to have to deal with the corporate stuff, so just accept it, deal with it and don't let it drag you down. It's part of the job." And so that's how I finished out.

Frank: Were there any advantages to the becoming a Knight-Ridder paper?

Bracken: Oh sure, yeah, a lot of them. When we were privately owned [before]. They didn't spend money. I mean, you talk about low budget operation; I mean we really were. And then, of course, Knight-Ridder came in and they started giving us money to spend updating equipment, upgrading everything.

Frank: Had you been computerized before Knight-Ridder?

Bracken: No.

Frank: After?

Bracken: After, after. Because I don't know if that would've happened when we were privately owned. I don't know what would have happened there.

Frank: You'd still be using typewriters?

Bracken: Might be. Well, at least they would've been electric. That was a big deal when we got electric typewriters. That was a major upgrade going from the old Royal to the IBM electrics. That was a huge deal.

Frank: Yeah, they were nice machines.

Bracken: Yeah they were. Knight-Ridder got a bad rap. People blamed anything that we didn't cover well [saying] it's because Knight-Ridder took over. In the old days this would've been done, that would've been done. That was true. Knight-Ridder made us be able to compete and certainly our travel budgets expanded. I mean we would go with the football team, and for a while we traveled with the men's basketball team. We didn't have an unlimited budget but we could do pretty much everything we wanted to do and what we needed to do. I spent ten days in Miami for the Orange Bowl because they wanted me down there, before the game and after. We'd take three people on road trips to football [games], two writers and a photographer. So yeah, on the whole that was a good thing. I mean otherwise the CDT might be gone. [It] may not have survived, certainly not in this climate. So, yeah, on the balance that was a good thing. The bad news was when it sold the paper to [McClatchy Newspapers]. I don't think that was a good move. Maybe from the corporate standpoint it was, but from our standpoint it wasn't.

Frank: Well it's hard to know how much of it was economic.

Bracken: Exactly, exactly.

Frank: The timing was really bad.

Bracken: But you know our pensions and benefits and everything were better thanks to McClatchy and Knight-Ridder. Nobody heard of a 401K under the old plan.

Frank: Was that a tough adjustment for you going electronic and how you do layout and all that stuff?

Bracken: Oh, yeah, it was huge. And I never did get into the actual pagination process; that happened when I was a columnist. I wasn't expected to do that, and I never wanted to edit to begin with. So I was able to stay clear of that. But prior, I mean I would do the layout on the old layout sheets and then write the headlines.

Frank: What about just writing on a computer versus writing on the typewriter?

Bracken: [It] didn't really matter, didn't really matter. You know it's just a smaller screen certainly on those old "trash '80s" [computers]. I mean, you only had four lines of your story on the screen at a time. And that made it hard but you adjusted to that. I mean in the old days your biggest fear was writer's block, and once you got to those then your biggest fear was: Can I get this damn thing transmitted back to the office? And we never had a problem except one time. It was '91 right around there. Penn State was playing out at Southern Cal on a Saturday night, so there was a real deadline issue there, a three-hour time. And we tried to file and the mainframe had crashed back here. So we couldn't get our stuff in the paper the next day. That's the only time we had a problem. I remember Carlson and I the first time we used the "trash 80s" was out in Iowa for a football game. We were both scared to death. How are we going to do this? Is this going to work?

Frank: Why were they called "trash '80s"?

Bracken: TRS 80 made by Radio Shack. But they were great little machines and I loved that one of mine. It was so reliable. It never let me down and I could take it anywhere. It was real portable. They had to pry my fingers off of that baby to get me up to a laptop.

Frank: So, you had to deal with those big rubber cups that you put on?

Bracken: Those were awful. Yeah, those were horrible. And you were at the mercy of the phone lines. Yeah, I mean you could transmit one of two ways. You could either use those or they did have the wires that you could plug in and make it work that way and we found out real fast if you can do the wires, that's the way to go. But that depended on your access to being able to unplug the phone that you were working and plugging it into your machine.

Frank: Right, right, right.

Bracken: And some places you could do that and some places you couldn't. I mean, we spent lots of times underneath tables in hotel rooms unplugging the phone jack from the wall. It's the first thing we'd do when we checked into a hotel. Well, where is the phone jack? How can we get this hooked up? And so we had to do that. But it all worked; it all worked out.

Frank: So at the max how many columns a week were you writing?

Bracken: Well, at the max I was doing seven days a week.

Frank: You'd write a column every day?

Bracken: Yeah, for a stretch. Not all were good – believe me. Plus I had to do one non-sports column. That was part of the deal: if I became a columnist they wanted me to write one non-sports column a week.

Frank: Were you also doing game coverage or you were relieved of that?

Bracken: Oh no, there was a stretch there where I probably had ten twelve bylines a week.

Frank: Wow, that's quite a pace.

Bracken: It was, it was. But I got into a rhythm and some days, I'd go into the office and I'd just be so full of ideas, I'd crank out two or three columns in a day and just have them ready to go. And then that would give me a day to sort of look around and see what's out there. I'd go in the mornings and do a column and then go out and cover a game that afternoon or that night. And that was just what we did.

Frank: I am in awe.

Bracken: Well, it was a simpler time.

Frank: Would you ever, you know, bitch about it?

Bracken: No, I mean, that's what we did through the mid '80s.

Frank: And I got the sense you like just being a writer much better than you like being an editor.

Bracken: There were a lot of days, honest to God, when it was like stealing money. You know, it just came so easy and again I go back: It was just a gift that I was given. I mean, it was like turn on the spigot and the water just flowed.

Frank: I always had the sense you preferred high school sports.

Bracken: Absolutely, absolutely. I mean even now I go to a really significant high school event, I mean, on a Friday night if it is a big high school football game, and I walk in there and I just look around I am just I am still a kid. I look around and say, "This is where I am meant to be. This is where I belong." And the one year that I was with *Roar* magazine I wasn't covering high school sports. I could stand on my front porch and the football stadium is just down over the hill from my house. I remember standing out there on a Friday night -- I could see the glow from the lights, I hear the band and everything -- and I think, "What am I doing here? I should be down there. That's where I am supposed to be." And I walk into a gym on a night of a big wrestling meet, and the place is packed, and I just look around and I say, "I can't believe I am getting paid for this." So it's just my world and it's a simple world, but it's where I am comfortable and this [Penn State] has gotten to be so big. This is almost pro level here and it's just not the same. I mean it's almost dehumanized. When they took the access away, then you got to where you don't know the players -- and they don't know you. I'll guarantee you that in the last ten years covering the players that I interviewed, there might be two that would even remember who I was. Whereas when I go back into the '60s '70s '80s, those guys, I could still call them up, talk to them and say, "Hey, how you doing? How [have] you been? What's up?" Once that connection was severed and once that went away, then it really became cold.

Frank: So, when you talk to classes, do you talk to the kids about high school sports in that way because, I could see where the kids starting out they would be chafing, "Oh, this is bush league. I want to get to the big time," you know? They would sort of look down their nose at high school sports.

Bracken: Yeah, I tell them that. You know, if you want to find the last vestiges of purity in sports that's where you have to go. And even that is starting to fray at the edges to a degree, but it's still there. And I never thought I'd say this, and if you'd ask me this fifteen years ago I would have said no way, but the sports that I love cover the most now is high school girls softball. (A) Because it's really good around here. I mean, we just had another state champ. But (B) those kids are still having fun. You go to those games and those kids will strike out and they'll come back to the dugout and they will be laughing. No temper tantrums or anything. And after a game you'll see one, maybe she'll be crying, or another one will be laughing, but it's real. I mean there's purity there. But you know, you got to look harder to find it and maybe that's part of the reason why I am drawn to that. It's still fun; those kids are still having fun playing. Yeah, that's what it is supposed to be. And they are not there thinking, "Oh, I am going to get a college scholarship?" No, they are there because their friends are playing softball. They are playing softball. They are having a good time doing it. And what other reason is there to play sports?

Frank: Yeah.

Bracken: And I just enjoy that.

Frank: You were big in wrestling. I got the sense that wrestling was a big one for you.

Bracken: Oh, it was still is, still is. There again, that's sport stripped down to its basics. It's just one athlete, only one. You can't blame anybody else if you lose. I mean, if you are a pitcher and you got a no hitter going, and the shortstop boots the ball, and you lose one [to] nothing, well you walk out of there and say, "Well, I did my part but he screwed up. That's why we lost the game." At wrestling, it's not there. If you lose, you lost. You made the mistake pal, live with it. And that's what I always liked. And again, that was, you know, a lot of purity there because there's none of the other stuff going on. It's all right there. And those kids are usually pretty grounded too, and they can handle it if they lose. Yeah, they are pretty upset, but you know you talk to them afterward and they say, "Well, he did this and he just got me. Whatever." They are pretty honest for the most part. Yeah, I always liked that about them. And then again growing up around here, it's part of the culture. Central Pennsylvania is a hotbed for wrestling, so that's what I grew up with.

Frank: So we have to get your friend T. West Brillik, into this conversation.

Bracken: The legendary T. West, yeah.

Frank: Tell us about him.

Bracken: Well, he actually started over at the *Pennsylvania Mirror*. He was classic and then when the *Mirror* folded, that guy came over and began working for us. So I asked him, "Do you want to continue." [He said], "Oh yeah," so he did. I still have some of his columns at home; I have a whole folder. I ran one through a spell checker one time and came up with 69 different places where the spelling was wrong. But he was great.

Frank: You are not going to reveal any more than that?

Bracken: Well, it wouldn't hurt anything. [His name was] Denny Gildea. I don't know if you ...

Frank: Well, I know the name.

Bracken: That's who it was. He brought him over from the *Mirror*. We had to tone him down when he came to the CDT because he just made outrageous comments. He had people so mad. One of our teams was going to play Curwensville in football, and he wrote a prediction column and he said, "Well, the Rams will do whatever because Curwensville is the worst football team in Pennsylvania." My God, those people over there got a hold of that, and they were calling and they wanted to know, "Who is this T. West Brillik and I want to talk to him and they had people cancel subscriptions to the paper. It was outrageous – and he was outrageous. There's no doubt about it. But, you know, there are still people who ask me about him even today.

Frank: So for people who don't know, the idea that he was an alter ego?

Bracken: Exactly. He was an alter ego. He would pick against Penn State every single week. He would pick against the local high school teams. I mean, he just went around just poking everybody in the eye with a stick. And did it with the worst possible English you could use; I mean he butchered it. But he was an invented character, and oh my God, was he funny. There were truly those who liked him and those who hated him. They would see Brillik and they would just immediately go to something else, and others would be just couldn't wait to see what he had to say.

Frank: So do you think most people knew that it was an invented thing?

Bracken: I don't think so. I think they thought this was a real, honest-to-God person.

Frank: So, I know it's been about one year since you retired, right?

Bracken: June 30, yes.

Frank: If you could talk about a few of the highlights that come to mind, both Penn State and high school: big games, favorite personalities?

Bracken: Oh, big games. I have always said that 1987 Fiesta Bowl -- Penn State and Miami --with everything that was involved, I never did get back to anything close to that. I mean that was magical. That whole season, Penn State's 100th season of football, and goes through undefeated, and ranked number two in the country, and it's going to play number one. And the Penn State good guy image against the Miami bad guy image. You know that's still the highest rated college game; more people watched that than any other college football game in history, even today. That is still the most watched game. And just the atmosphere; the word "electric" probably gets overused but it was. I mean that stadium out in Arizona was just alive. And you know the game lived up to the hype. I mean, all the things that happened in it and some great people on that Penn State team. Guys like John Shaffer who, you know, is one of my all-time favorite Penn State players because he was such a class guy. I mean just a stand-up guy. And then there was the opposite: Trey Bauer, a linebacker who they had to keep away from the media that week because he would say anything, and they didn't want him further fanning the flames.

Frank: Bulletin board material?

Bracken: Oh, my God, he was a walking bulletin board. But he was one of my favorite players for that reason. Just as an aside to him, after they played Notre Dame. I think it was the next year, and Trey was back and he was a senior. There was a play that went out of bounds on the Notre Dame sideline and there was a scuffle over there. After the game, Trey was talking to the media and he says, "One Notre Dame coach just kicked me. I know who he was. If I ever find him, I am going to kick his ass." He is saying this up in front of the whole roomful of media.

We're all cracking up. But he was just that kind of guy. And you know that was special; that really was. That was a Hollywood movie, really. All the ingredients were there and yet if you tried to run it by Hollywood they'd say, "That's too hokey." But it was real life. It was great, and I'll never see anything like that again. Never, just never,

Frank: It was hard enough to be a fan.

Bracken: To a degree, yeah, because, you know, Miami made it so easy to dislike them. I mean they were just thugs and subsequent acts just proved it. I mean, the kind of people they were after that. This was really good guy-bad guy. Penn State's there in their blazers and ties, and Miami is in their camouflage fatigues and the whole thing. I mean it was just amazing. So that would be the epitome, but you there were others. The other national championship game when they beat Georgia. That was a great night because they had never had a national championship here before that. Some of the Gene Wettstone gymnastics productions that he used to put on up here where they'd bring in a team from Japan or the Hungarian team and a Russian team. Bring them in and Rec Hall would be jammed. I mean, there would be 7,600 people there and it was like a Broadway play, the way he did it. It was a big social event. The men would be in coats and ties and women all dressed and there was just total silence in the gym.

Frank: Almost a theater.

Bracken: Oh, it was. There wasn't a sound in the whole building when they were competing, not a sound as opposed to now. Those, those were great times. The State College team in 1973: We'd go cover a State High game Friday night, watch Matt Shuey, and come up here Saturday afternoon and watch John Cappelletti. They were like twin brothers, just three or four years apart. And that State High team went undefeated and was mythical state champions. They didn't have playoffs then. Then Penn State went undefeated that year and Cappelletti won the Heisman. That was a magical, magical year around here, just watching all that stuff. Cappelletti was special. I mean he is still one of my all-time favorites. I mean he's such a class guy; for as good as he was, he was so humble. And it's ten years ago now that my high school, Bald Eagle's wrestling team won the state championship and was ranked number one in the country. A little school here, just graduated 168 kids, to be recognized as the best high school wrestling team in the whole country, whoa, where did that come from? Just to watch that, a little school out in the middle of nowhere and they are number one in the country. Wow, you know, that's spectacular. I got to see it; I covered them all the way through. I graduated one year after one of the coaches. And I knew them all for a long time and knew the kids, knew their parents. To watch the rise of girls' sports, especially softball, getting back to that. I mean, the teams in this county are so good; they are so good on a state level. We've had five state championships here in the last nine years, just from these high school softball teams. One team has won it twice now and three of the other teams have won it. You just go, "Man, these kids are really good." And they are just coming from

these little, small towns around here and yet they go out and it doesn't matter. That's what I enjoy, I really do.

Frank: So you retired a year ago, and I think that in that last column you said you felt like your skill had diminished. Your love of your job remained but the ability to do it, as well as it needed to be done, had slipped away. And yet, if you were called upon to go out and write a column, a sports column tomorrow, don't you feel like you could crank out a good one?

Bracken: I probably could but not with the regularity that it needed to be done. This is a full-time job. I mean it was getting harder to come up with fresh ideas because nothing was really new to me anymore. Just the spark wasn't there like it used to be. There would be days when I couldn't wait to get to work because I had this idea and had the column half written before I got there. And now it would be, "Geez, I've got a column coming up, what am I going to say? What am I going to write about?"

Frank: That is the danger with columns. You start to repeat yourself.

Bracken: Yeah, I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to be stale. You know, I was starting to get branded as this negative person, which I am not. By nature I am not. But you know so many of the things that happened here at Penn State, you had to comment on them because the trouble that was going on here and you had to comment on them.

[End of side two]

Bracken: By nature I am not a negative person. You know from working in the news department, I am usually the junior high kid roaming around.

Frank: You seemed like you were enjoying yourself.

Bracken: Yeah, I was. But I mean, if you are going to do your job and you are going to do it right you got to stand up and say, "This is wrong" and be willing to take the hit for it. But then when you do that often enough then you get branded as this naysayer. I mean, you are just this grouchy old person that can't see things clearly and you never write anything good about Penn State. You want to say, "Go back over all the years I worked there and read the bloody work and tell me I haven't written some good things about Penn State." But you got to take the good with the bad.

Frank: I mean, you can't win in a way. You've got half the community thinks you should just be true blue and supportive and the other half thinks you are just totally cowed by the big university and when they say, "jump," you jump.

Bracken: Yeah, it's an extremely, extremely skinny tightrope that you got to walk there and there's somebody on each end shaking it. It's really tough, it really is.

Frank: So, do you miss it?

Bracken: No, no I can honestly say that. I get asked that a lot. I don't.

Frank: And, as you said, you have returned to covering these softball games as a stringer. Returned to your beginning.

Bracken: Yeah, exactly, and that's fine because I know that's all the further that's going to go. But as far as the day in, day out, no, I can truthfully say I haven't looked back with regret at all. Not even 30 seconds. The day I walked out of there, I was ready to go. I just went. And you know if you are true to yourself and you are honest with yourself, you know. You go.

Frank: Did any of the coaches like Paterno or anybody else say anything memorable to you to usher you into retirement?

Bracken: No.

Frank: Party?

Bracken: I never heard one word from anybody at Penn State, not one word. That's okay, I got a lot of nice emails and letters from the high school coaches and those people. They are the ones I care about anyway. I always knew where I stood in relation to these people here. They are bigger and better. I always just figured fine, you want to think that, go ahead. I knew better. That's the way you are, that's the way you are. So, no, I didn't hear anything from them.

Frank: And if you were if you were starting over now, the newspaper business being the way it is, what would you do?

Bracken: Oh, my God, I don't know. I truthfully don't know. I mean, that's such a scary landscape out there now I honestly don't know where I'd go or what I'd do. The world has changed so much. And yeah, I was just lucky. I was in the right place at the right time and I just sort of went along with the current. I felt like one of those little care bears that dropped out of the sky just sort of bounced along and it was an incredibly good ride for me. It really was and, I know I said it before, but it was all fate. I mean, there's no other way I can look at it except to say that's what you were meant to do, and that's what I did.

Frank: So are you doing any writing on your own these days?

Bracken: No.

Frank: You don't have that "Okay, now I am going to write that novel" kind of thing?

Bracken: Nope, I never had that ambition. I just never did. I don't mind doing a little freelance work now and then. I get out in the community and touch base with people I haven't seen for a while and renew friendships. That's all part of the

good stuff. So now the writing it's all of the good things and none of the negative things about the newspaper business. It's just all good now. Every day is Saturday.

Frank: Are there any topics that we didn't cover or things that you think are worth in the context of summing up a career as a newspaper guy in this part of the world?

Bracken: No, we pretty much hit it all. We didn't spend a lot of time talking about the rise of women's sports and Title IX. At the time that was so controversial, and now you look around and women's sports are such an integral part of the landscape. I got to watch that evolve.

Frank: I also was thinking about Kim Jones being on your staff and covering Penn State football.

Bracken: Yeah, and you know now Kim is working for the YES Network. And that is one of the things: I have had some great people work for me, work with me – people that have gone on and really done nice things with their lives. And, you know, I always feel good about that. Heather [Dinnich] was here just a few years ago. Now she is working for ESPN Magazine and a guy like Jim Carlson, he's assistant sports editor of the *Harrisburg Patriot [News]*. I mean that's a major paper in the state and, you know, Jim started out with us as a sports writer and then worked his way up. And so it's great to see look back and see. And guys that have gone on to be lawyers and just a lot of really good people and just so many great people to see. If you start looking back people like Barb Bruggebors, and Dick Brown and Denny Gildea, and Terry Dalton, I mean there is so much talent that went through there. I don't know that people really understood how good those people were and how lucky they were to have people of that caliber writing for a paper our size. I mean, they were extraordinary people that just really made it fun.

Frank: Okay then, we can be done.

Bracken: All right, that's cool.

[End of interview]