

Post Sports Columnist Shirley Povich Dies  
By Leonard Shapiro

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Shirley Povich, the prolific and profound sports columnist, war correspondent and sports editor whose elegant work all those mornings in The Washington Post was mandatory reading in the newspaper for 75 years, died last night of a heart attack. He was 92 years old.

Povich was stricken in a car driven by his son, David, outside his Northwest Washington home after returning home from dinner. He was driven to Sibley Hospital where he was pronounced dead.

When Povich's first byline appeared in The Post in 1924, Calvin Coolidge was president of the United States, Walter Johnson was the "Big Train" of the Washington Senators pitching staff and the Washington Redskins had not yet been born. Jack Dempsey was the heavyweight champion of the world, and Lou Gehrig was still on the New York Yankees bench behind first baseman Wally Pipp.

His last piece, filed to the newspaper from his home Wednesday -- appears on the front page of the sports section today. It was about baseball, one of his favorite sports. "This is my comeback column" said Povich, who had been feeling poorly over the past month. He had been slowed by a heart condition since last October, when he collapsed at an Orioles playoff game in Baltimore. For much of the past 75 years, he was an eyewitness to many of the most significant events in the history of sports, from a press box seat covering the Senators' first World Series championship in 1924, to ringside at the long-count Dempsey-Tunney fight in 1927, to Chicago Bears 73, Redskins 0 in the 1940 NFL championship, to brash young Cassius Clay upsetting Sonny Liston to win the heavyweight title in 1964 to the massacre of 11 Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games to Baltimore's Cal Ripken breaking Gehrig's streak of 2,130 consecutive baseball games played.

He won hundreds of awards in his career, including last November when he became the first sportswriter to receive the Fourth Estate Award presented by the National Press Club. Post readers got the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth from Povich that morning, and every morning his work graced the paper's pages over eight decades.

"The first thing you say is that Shirley Povich was why people bought the paper," said Ben Bradlee, the retired executive editor of The Washington Post who first met Povich in 1948. "You got The Post for Shirley and the sports section. He was the sports section. For a lot of years, he carried the paper, and that's no exaggeration."

Povich, a dapper dresser who hardly went anywhere save the golf course without his signature grey fedora, was a gentle, caring family man who doted on his wife Ethyl -- "my favorite girl,"

he often called her -- and delighted in the success of his children, their children and their children. His oldest son, David, is a partner and attorney in the law firm of Williams and Connolly. Daughter Lynn was the first woman senior editor at Newsweek and is now chief editor at Microsoft. Son Maury is a popular television talk show host and married to newscaster Connie Chung.

Povich's extended family included most of his colleagues at The Post, where he was revered by anyone who ever worked with him, from publishers to printers to porters. He was a man of faith who met Ethyl Friedman on a blind date at a sorority dance in Baltimore in 1930. They were married in 1932, the wedding postponed for a full year of mourning after his father died visiting him in Washington, following the custom of the Jewish religion.

Even after his retirement in 1974, he remained a visitor to the Post's 15th Street building, where a desk -- and a computer he learned to use well into his 70s -- were always available to him. He continued to write columns, doing more than 600 since he retired. "I'm working harder now than I did before I retired," he said recently.

"He was a giant in his field, one of the greatest sports journalists who ever lived," said George Solomon, The Post's Assistant Managing Editor for Sports. "There will never be another one like him. We loved him at this newspaper."

Povich also achieved another small measure of fame in 1962, when he was included in Who's Who of American Women, a serious mistake on the part of the publishers but a gaffe that attracted national attention, got his picture and profile in Time Magazine and provided Povich with years of comic relief whenever it was brought up. His friend, Walter Cronkite, a regular reader when he worked at Channel 9 in Washington in the 1950s, telegraphed him to say "Miss Povich, will you marry me?" And Red Patterson, then vice president of the Los Angeles Dodgers, wired "My Dear Shirley -- and to think we roomed together in Miami." When the publisher later apologized for the mistake, Povich insisted it never bothered him. "for years," he wrote, "I've been hearing this is no longer a man's world and I'm glad to be listed officially on the winning side."

A few years later, he was sent an application to join the League of American Penwomen, and he answered all of the questions, though hardly with a straight face. "Has sex been a handicap to you in the journalism profession," the questionnaire asked.

"None at all," he replied.

"How do you get along with the men in your office?"

"I just try to be one of the boys," he responded.

He was definitely one of the boys during World War II, though it took him awhile to get into the fray. After begging his editors for several years early in the war to let him go to Europe as a correspondent, Povich finally got his wish in 1944 when he was assigned to the Pacific Theater. He covered the bloody battles of Okinawa and Iwo Jima, going in with the First Marine Division.

He also was in the first plane to land on Iwo Jima, with American forces at one end of the runway, and the Japanese dug in at the other end trying to knock him out of the sky.

Over the many years of his life, Povich was a champion of many causes. He supported integration in major league baseball and wrote a 15-part series in 1946 -- the year prior to Jackie Robinson becoming the first black player in the major leagues with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The series began "Four hundred and fifty-five years after Columbus eagerly discovered America, major league baseball reluctantly discovered the American Negro."

He had a long-running feud with Washington Redskins founder and owner George Preston Marshall over the team's all-white roster, once writing "Jim Brown, born ineligible to play for the Redskins, integrated their end zone three times yesterday." In another column, he noted "the Redskins colors are burgundy, gold and Caucasian."

Povich kept up the heat for so long, Marshall finally caved in 1962, with more pressure from the Kennedy Administration that often clipped Povich columns to use in New Frontier speeches. That year, the Redskins signed Bobby Mitchell, now an assistant general manager, and became the last team in the NFL with a black player. "I have the highest, highest respect for Shirley Povich," Mitchell said recently.

Marshall banned Povich from speaking to his players in the locker room for several years, and once sued Povich and the Post for libel. He sought \$200,000 in damages after Povich wrote that a Redskins exhibition in Los Angeles, billed as a charity game for war widows and orphans, had actually enriched Marshall's team by more than \$13,000 taken from the gate receipts. The jury voted 12-0 against Marshall, taking 20 minutes to make up its mind.

Povich also had frequent run-ins with Clark Griffith, a baseball pioneer whose adopted son, Calvin, eventually moved the Senators to Minnesota, and Robert Short, who took another expansion version of the franchise to Texas in 1972, leaving the Nation's Capital without baseball ever since. In the years after that last defection, Povich fired away at the baseball establishment for turning its back on his town. He has said one of the biggest disappointments of his life was not being able to help lure the game back to the city.

Bowie Kuhn, the former baseball commissioner, and Abe Pollin, owner of the Washington Wizards and Capitals, both grew up in Washington and read Povich as kids. President Dwight Eisenhower, who always insisted The Post was too liberal for his taste, also confessed to being a huge fan of Povich's. So was President Richard Nixon, an avid sports fan who once, as vice president, told publisher Phil Graham that "Shirley Povich is the only reason I read your newspaper."

"I never missed a column," Abe Pollin said recently. "He was my idol. I was a baseball and a boxing nut, and I read everything he ever wrote. There was something about his writing that was so very clear, so easy to follow. It was non-confrontational, no anger in it. But he always got his point across, and you knew exactly what he stood for."

Last night, Pollin added: "I loved Shirley Povich."

Said Kuhn, often an easy target for Povich when Kuhn served as commissioner: "He was the best damned sportswriter I ever read."

Povich also was an extremely enterprising reporter. He once picked up his friend Walter Johnson from his farm in Germantown to drive him down to Griffith Stadium to watch a rookie phenom named Bob Feller throw his fastball. When Povich asked the old and long-since retired Senators Hall of Famer if he thought the kid was any faster than he was, Johnson's answer spoke volumes. "No."

Feller said recently he never minded the comparison, in fact was honored by it. Later, he and Povich also became good friends. "You could always talk to Shirley in confidence, riding on trains, sitting in hotel lobbies, wherever," Feller said recently. "It's not like that anymore, but he was a guy you could trust. When he walked out onto the field, he was always welcomed everywhere, on the bench, in the clubhouse, and later in the restaurant. He was a wonderful companion."

Povich had the same sort of relationship with the likes of Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams, Frank Howard, Sam Snead, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, the Sugar Rays, Robinson and Leonard, and so many more. His favorite all-time event? Don Larsen's perfect game against the Dodgers in the 1956 World Series. "The million-to-one shot came in," Povich began his story. "Hell froze over. A month of Sundays hit the calendar. Don Larsen today pitched a no-hit, no-run, no-man-reaches-first game in a World Series."

One of the worst days of his life: Lou Gehrig being honored by the Yankees in 1939 after lateral sclerosis had forced him to quit the game.

"I saw strong men weep this afternoon, expressionless umpires swallow hard and emotion pump the hearts and glaze the eyes of 60,000 baseball fans in Yankee Stadium," he wrote. "Yes, and hard-boiled news photographers clicked their shutters with fingers that trembled a bit." Povich also debunked the myth that Babe Ruth had pointed to center field for his famous "called shot" home run in the 1932 World Series against Chicago Cubs pitcher Charlie Root at Wrigley Field. Povich was there that day, and never mentioned anything of the sort in his account of the game in *The Post*.

No matter what era, Povich always was an enjoyable read, particularly on his favorite sports -- baseball, always baseball, football, boxing, horse racing and golf, which he also played to a six-handicap as a long-time member of Woodmont Country Club in Rockville. Two years ago he complained bitterly about the state of his game.

"I've lost club speed between the ages of 88 and 89," he said with typically self-deprecating humor.

Povich's arrival at The Washington Post remains one of the lasting stories in newspaper history. He was born July 15, 1905 into the only Orthodox Jewish family in the resort town of Bar Harbor, Maine, one of nine children of Nathan and Rosa Povich. His parents had left the anti-Semitic oppression of their native Lithuania and eventually set up shop selling furniture, mostly lawn and patio variety for the summer crowd, with the family living above the store.

Shirley was a common name in Povich's native Maine, and he grew up idolizing an older brother, Abe, an all-state player in football, basketball and baseball, even if he only weighed 105 pounds. Povich also became a voracious reader of anything having to do with sports, often waiting for the boat from Boston to bring in the big city newspapers, with all those box scores and stories to inhale.

Early in his teenage years he also helped out the family finances by caddying at the nearby Kebo Valley Golf Club, an oasis for the well-to-do who summered at Bar Harbor. One day, Caddy No. 23 was assigned the bag of Edward B. (Ned) McLean, then the publisher of The Washington Post. Povich, an active golfer up until his death, also was an eagle-eyed caddy that day, and was given two dollars for his work, a nice tip above the 85 cent going wage. McLean asked him to tote his bag the next day and soon was using him regularly and offering the teenager's services to his friends at the club.

In 1922, Povich's second year caddying for McLean, the publisher asked him what he planned to do after graduating from high school. Povich told him he'd probably go to the University of Maine, where admission was virtually assured to any state resident and, more important, tuition was cheap.

"Then I learned of Mr. McLean's plans for me," Povich wrote in his autobiography. "Next Monday, my private [railroad] car is leaving for Washington, and I want you to come with me,' McLean told him. 'You can go to my college and work on my newspaper in Washington.' His college, I learned, was Georgetown University and I was learning too that he owned a newspaper called The Washington Post."

Povich, then 17, never did get to ride in that railroad car, because McLean was leaving on Yom Kippur, a high holy day in the Jewish faith. (Years later, both he and Dodger pitcher Sandy Koufax refused to work on Yom Kippur during the World Series of 1965). Wearing his high school graduation suit, Povich eventually found his way to Washington, with a short stopover to watch a World Series game -- his first of thousands of major league baseball games witnessed over the years -- between the Yankees and Giants at the old Polo Grounds.

His first day in Washington, Povich also found himself on the first tee of McLean's private estate golf course being introduced to President Warren G. Harding. "Mr. President," McLean announced, "this is Shirley Povich, the best caddy in the United States, and he's going to caddy for you today."

The next day, McLean sent him to the downtown offices of the Post and told him to speak with the business manager, Arthur D. Marks, who would find him a job. Povich also was to get over to see the dean of the Georgetown University law school and enroll in the fall term. "And send the bills to me," McLean told him.

Povich was hired that day as a copy boy assigned to the newsroom, and he was told to report to a "Mr. Fitzgerald," the city editor who occasionally had played golf with McLean in Bar Harbor. "Fitz" recognized the young man from his caddying days, and Povich has since written "I knew I was in good hands."

Before long, Povich was going to school and working as a cub reporter at the princely sum of \$12 a week, supplemented by the \$20 bill McLean gave him every Sunday for carrying his golf bag. In 1924, Post sports editor Norman Baxter offered him \$5 more a week than he was earning as a police reporter and night rewrite man, and in August of that year, he had his first byline in the newspaper, then running a poor third in circulation and advertising behind the far more dominant Star and Herald.

Povich had written a story on the Senators' return to Union Station from New York after beating the Yankees in three straight games to move into first place in the American League. A crowd of 5,000 was on hand to greet them, and when Baxter read Povich's account he told him "I'm going to put your name on this."

"I could scarcely wait for the morning paper to see my name in print," Povich once recalled. "In fact, I did not wait. I snuck downstairs into the composing room and stole a galley proof of my article off the proof press, feasting my eyes on "By Shirley Povich." Even this did not suffice me. I sidled over to the make-up banks where the sports pages were being prepared and searched until I found my story in type. . . . Not until I ran my fingers across the metal and actually fondled my name in type was I certain of this dream come true."

In 1926, at the age of 21, it got better. McLean made him sports editor, the youngest in the history of any metropolitan newspaper in the country, moving Baxter up to managing editor. In August that same year his long-running column, "This Morning With Shirley Povich" made its debut.

One of his earliest moves as sports editor also gained Povich some notoriety. At the time, it was common practice for newspapers to have ghost writers author stories under the bylines of famous athletes. Before the 1927 World Series, the Star was trumpeting that Ty Cobb and novelist Charles Francis Coe would write pieces on the Series for the paper. The Post was in no financial position to do the same, so Povich had a better idea.

He wrote the copy for an advertisement, then ran it across the top of the front page of the sports section: "Col. Charles Lindbergh, Vice President Charles G. Dawes, Aimee Semple McPherson, the King of England and Charles Chaplin will NOT cover the World Series for The Washington

Post. This baseball classic will be covered by our baseball writers. REACH FOR A POST INSTEAD OF A GHOST.”

Povich never did need a ghost, though his production seemed to be the output of four men. In addition to writing his daily column, for more than 20 years he also covered the Senators baseball team home and away, meaning more words, more stories, more deadlines. With three children to send through school, annual family trips to spring training and August vacations back in Maine, he also was a prolific freelance writer by financial necessity. One of his semi-tongue-in-cheek pieces appeared in Sports Illustrated in 1958, explaining why Povich was no longer a basketball fan.

"Basketball is for the birds -- the gooney birds," he wrote. "The game lost this particular patron years back when it went vertical and put the accent on carnival freaks who achieved upper space by growing into it. They don't shoot baskets anymore, they stuff them, like taxidermists." Fifty-one years after joining the Post and thousands of columns later, Povich "retired" from his regular six-column, 900-words-per-piece routine a week after covering the Ali-Frazier fight in 1974. He always said he asked himself two questions when he got out of bed: "What day is it? And what the hell am I going to write about today?"

In the 24 years since stopping full-time, he's taught journalism and sports in society at American University, lectured at countless schools and seminars, appeared as a guest speaker on a wide variety of television shows, including a few hosted by his youngest son Maury and the recent Ken Burns baseball series on PBS. In 1976, he was elected to the writers wing of the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. He covered 60 World Series over the years, and 20 Super Bowls. In retirement, Povich's writing style was just as lively, timely, pointed and vibrant as ever. His editors would mention a subject and Povich would say "let me think about it." A few days later, a man who started his career batting out columns on a manual typewriter and filing them through Western Union, had tapped out another 900 words of impeccable prose on his laptop back home at his Washington apartment.

In recent years, he also preferred not to write about people who had only just been chronicled on the obituary pages. He wanted to be current, not just a writer of tributes. There were some exceptions, of course, including a very special remembrance of his old friend Red Smith after his death at the age of 76 in 1982.

"Those, of all persuasions, who had an appreciation of the written word were attracted to him and his facility for using the language," Povich wrote at the time. "He raised the sportswriting trade to a literacy and elegance it had not known before. Red wouldn't agree to that either, but only the most ungrateful of sportswriters would fail to genuflect to the one-time redhead gone white-haired on the job. He also gave their business class.”

Certainly, Smith might have written the same thing about his old friend, Shirley Povich.