

COLUMNIST

Allow me to introduce myself

CAM COLE VANCOUVER SUN

The problem with being asked to answer the question “Who are you and what are you doing in my paper?” is that you can’t avoid using the word “I” a lot — and it is (or used to be) more or less a byword among respectable sports columnists that overuse of the personal pronoun is indicative of: (a) laziness (b) excessive self-regard (c) a poor vocabulary (d) a lack of imagination, or (e) all of the above. But if we have to go there, we might as well go all the way. Just this once.

Who I am is a guy from Vegreville, a town of (then) 3,000 people, exactly 56 miles east of Edmonton on the Yellowhead. Home of the world’s largest Ukrainian Easter egg, or pysanka. Former deputy prime minister Don Mazankowski is from there, and my best childhood pal, John Charles Demco, a math whiz even as a kid, is too. He moved to UBC and was among the pioneers of the Canadian internet and founded the dot.ca domain. That’s pretty cool, but Vegreville isn’t known as the Home of Maz, or The Town Charlie Built.

It’s the Egg place, basically. We’re all stuck with it.

My dad’s insurance company shared an office building with the Vegreville Observer, so I wrote my first stories for Wuffy Horton, the editor and publisher, when I was 13 or 14, chronicling the baseball team I played on, which won a couple of provincial championships. I was the good-hit, average-field, bad-throw first baseman. Bad-write, too, I suspect. I didn’t save the stories.

We didn’t win so much at hockey. I was always a goalie as a kid, because I was not much of a skater, but when a Junior B franchise came to Vegreville they put out an emergency call for anyone with a pulse and made me a defenceman. I can only imagine what Brian Sutter thought when he came from Viking to play on that team as a supremely gifted 15-year-old, with his older brother Gary, to find a 19-year-old plodder like me on the roster.

Darryl Sutter was 13 or so then, and I recall him having a beer (I doubt that it was his first) in the basement of Charlie Demco’s house after a game he had come to watch. It turns out he remembers this, and mentioned it to me when his Calgary Flames made the Stanley Cup finals last year. This was my brush with athletic fame. Oh, and I won the Vegreville Spring Open golf tournament when I was 19, beating a middle-aged fellow from Derwint in a playoff while hung-over and on three hours’ sleep. (I play golf, hit a baseball, throw, write, and shoot a puck lefthanded. I have barely enough co-ordination with my right to hold a suitcase.) I had a near-Afro at the time of my great golf triumph, as the picture in the Observer would attest.

It wasn’t pretty.

My curly-headed friends, Randy Footz and Darcy Lukenchuk, and I used to wear toques to keep our hair straight while it dried after showering, before we unleashed ourselves on the female populace of Vegreville on weekends.

The female populace seemed strangely unimpressed.

I swam competitively but, alas, not quickly. I was a lifeguard one summer. I got hit by lightning once, thrown 15 feet in the air off a tractor while I was mowing the grass in a schoolyard for the County of Minburn as a summer job. A woman screamed from her door in an apartment across the street and told me what happened. I had no idea. I only knew the mower was running past my feet as I sat on the ground, wondering what hit me. I had a dull headache for a few days, that’s all. I walked home to my grandmother’s house for lunch that day. The tractor tires must have saved me from being burned, or killed.

Look, I’m being honest here. When this confessional is over, you’re going to know everything, so I don’t want a bunch of e-mails from disgruntled Canucks fans, the first time I cut up the team, saying: “You’re left-handed, you’re from Vegreville, and you got hit by lightning. No wonder you’re an idiot.”

The lightning that failed to kill me is probably as good a place as any to begin the “What are

you doing here?" part of the column.

It was, I believe, the start of the charmed life. I had dropped out of university by then after one year of trying to be like Charlie, taking math and computing science and physics and stuff that was 10 miles over my head. I applied for a job at the Edmonton Journal, but the personnel guy laughed at me, so after three years of working for a living — packing orders and driving a truck for a paperback book distributor — I went back to school, in Canadian history and English and psychology, but what I really stumbled into was an opening as sports editor of the U of Alberta's student paper, the Gateway.

Less than halfway through an arts degree, I got a call from the Edmonton Journal's acting sports editor, Wayne Overland — whose real job was to be the sportswriting equivalent of an axe-murderer — and I bolted the U of A for the high-school sports beat.

It was at the Journal that I met Jim Coleman, who was then the roving sports correspondent for the Southam chain of newspapers. I'd been reading him all my life, I had been totally captivated by his coverage of the 1972 Canada-Soviet series, and now, whenever he was through town writing about the Eskimos or the WHA Oilers, he would come into the Journal's office, remember everyone's names and treat us all as equals. He was a wonderful guy and I thought he had the greatest job in the world: travelling the globe, writing for papers all across the country.

Thirty years later — 30 years that have gone by like 10 — I realize that this, right here in this chair that someone was crazy enough to give me, is the closest thing there is to the job Jim Coleman had.

That's way too big an order to ever hope to fill.

All I can do is try to be a little bit amusing now and then, and get angry when anger is called for, and tell some stories and, on days when the ideas don't come easily, do a little song-and-dance and hope you don't notice.

The Vancouver Sun, the paper of Coleman and Jim Taylor and Denny Boyd when I was getting my feet wet in the business, is my home now, after 23 fun, formative years at the Edmonton Journal and seven thrilling years of missionary zeal at the National Post.

And that's it, the whole story, nearly. I'm 52, I married a lovely Regina girl, Jan, and have two wisecracking daughters, Michelle (22) and Kelly (19) and the world's smartest dog, a border collie named Kes. I've played Augusta National twice (shot 83 and 84, eight years apart). I caddied for Jack Nicklaus at the opening of The Bear in Kelowna in 2000 (he remembered me for about six months).

I misspelled a word once, and another time, when I was asked to pick a Stanley Cup winner in the season preview in October, I had the wrong team winning. Other than that, I've been right about everything.

I guess I never completely got over being a Western guy, although I always thought the Prairies was West. Out here beyond the mountains was ... well, you know what they're saying, out there.

My friends at the National Post sent me off with an umbrella, a bong and much advice on the proper way to hug a tree.

I don't smoke anything, let alone what goes in a bong, but I do know that rain beats the heck out of snow. And I kind of like trees.

I kind of like Wally Buono and Bob Ackles, too, and have known them almost as long as I've been a sportswriter. I played golf with Marc Crawford once. I covered just one Air Canada Championship, and Mike Weir won it. I got into the premier's reception at the grand opening of GM Place — some poor Orca Bay PR guy must have been fired for that — and drank a great deal of red wine and spilled some of it on Shania Twain's shoes while laughing at something Kurt Browning was saying.

This much I know. The Bell Canadian Open is coming this fall to Shaughnessy, and then the Grey Cup and then the World Junior hockey championship, and then — before we all know it — the Olympics.

The rest, I'll learn as I go along.

ccole@png.canwest.com

