

October 6, 2008

BACK IN THE SADDLE, BUT STILL A LITTLE SHAKY

After the unexpected death of my beloved grandson Zack Wansley, I wasn't sure I wanted to do this anymore. Twitting inept politicians, know-it-all media, smug entertainers, greedy CEOs and the terminally humorless seemed absurdly irrelevant. Then I began to hear from friends and strangers telling me they missed my column. Several told me Zack would not want me to be a quitter. My son Ken put it most succinctly. "Dad," he said, "it is time to get back on the horse." So here I am. Back in the saddle, but still a little shaky.

When you lose a grandchild, the hurt is exponential. You grieve for the loss of your grandchild and for the pain your child must endure. Through this nightmare, our daughter Maribeth has exhibited a grace and strength I didn't know was possible. Never underestimate your kids.

Zack was special. He lit up a room with his personality, his enthusiasm and his attitude that everything was great. (Totally unlike his grandfather.) He died doing what he loved, and what he was very good at doing: running. He was training for the Thanksgiving Day marathon in Atlanta, an event in which he had participated over a number of years. He was 21.

The past few weeks have been a blur, but my family and I have been overwhelmed by the expressions of love and support we have received. Readers from across the state have said they felt they knew Zack personally through my annual letter to my grandsons, and it was as if they had lost a friend. I now realize the strong bond that develops between writer and reader. It is up close and personal.

I heard from a number of you who have experienced the loss of children or grandchildren, and in some cases, both. You have assured me that good memories will one day overtake the hurt, but that the hurt never goes away.

If Zack's death has taught me anything, it is that tragedy has a way of bringing out the best in people. People who normally can't abide my opinions have written me extraordinarily kind words. One of my severest critics sent me a personal note I will always treasure. If he is reading this, I promise not to rat him out. I also promise that I will have him ricocheting as soon as I am back on my game. He would be severely disappointed in me if I didn't, God bless his left-leaning soul.

Meanwhile, the world bumbles along. We ran out of gas in many parts of the state because the Gulf Coast hurricanes disrupted fuel supplies, resulting in long lines of angry motorists. In the middle of the crisis, Gov. Sonny Perdue announced that we were overreacting and that he was going to Spain, leaving us to fend for ourselves. I don't know about you, but I have this sneaking suspicion the man is fast losing interest in the affairs of this state.

Wall Street went belly up. Brokerage firms collapsed. Banks were taken over. The real estate market tanked. The federal government has approved a \$700 billion package to try and fix things. When business can't contain its greed, this is what happens. Government gets involved, and we taxpayers must foot the bill.

The polls say the sagging U.S. economy has boosted Barack Obama's chances for winning the presidency, although anything could happen between now and Nov. 4. Here at home, U.S. Sen. Saxby Chambliss' race with Democratic challenger Jim Martin has gotten tighter than the pants to my old tuxedo. Voters are mad as hell, and being an incumbent politician these days is like kissing a goat on the mouth: It's not something you want to go around bragging about.

Finally, as I straddle the saddle and get back in the fray, there will be no more gibes about Georgia Tech in this space. Zack was a junior at Tech, majoring in civil engineering, and he loved the place passionately. I used to take good-natured swipes at the institution because it gave the two of us something to tease each other about. But never again. Just the thought of it breaks my heart. Rest in peace, Zack.