

PETER McFARLINE - 1998

By Neil Mitchell

Peter McFarline loved legends, particularly sporting legends, so let's try to build one here in the hope that what was great about his journalism can live with his memory.

And the first thing to say is that it is not possible to remember McFarline without remembering his illness. It didn't define him but it did make him inspirational.

McFarline (and remember it always had to be McFarline, never Peter) died in April 2002 after seven years in hospital paralysed from the neck down.

Syringomyelia, this disease was called, and it attacked his spinal chord. It was a bastard of a thing, degenerative, and despite the paralysis, extremely painful.

For the last years he relied on a ventilator to make him breathe, which meant he could not speak, forcing visitors to become expert at lip-reading or suffer his wrath.

But through these years, and the difficult ones before the hospital room became his jail, he broke stories, fought campaigns, and wrote with a perception and clarity improbable for a man with such health.

After he lost his voice, he would dictate his copy painfully to his wife Del, who was expert at the lip-reading, then polish it as she read it back.

The telephone became useless to him, so somehow he would manipulate his contacts and work his sources as a list of elite sportsmen and sports administrators visited the bedside.

Through all this his work was proof that the important assets in journalism are not the ability to travel, argue, or drink, all of which McFarline loved doing.

But his value to *The Age* proved that while a top journalist's brain works there is little else that matters to the quality of the copy.

Under his circumstances, most would have stopped work, sulked and died. Two things kept McFarline alive long after he could have reasonably been expected to give up. One was his work and the other was Del.

McFarline arrived at *The Age* from Brisbane in the early 1970s, full of bravado and Bundaberg rum. He quickly made a name for himself in football by befriending a number of the scallywag players who were always making news.

In McFarline, they found a soul-mate, just as likely as they were to be causing trouble and always ready to write the back page lead that irritated the coaches and delighted the readers.

But cricket and racing were his real loves and he had always aimed to be chief cricket writer, partly for love of the game and partly for love of the travelling party life style.

As chief he toured the world, invented expenses, broke stories and filed magnificently evocative copy describing test cricket.

He was old style: able to file 50 paragraphs within minutes of the day's play ending, sometimes because he was on deadline and sometimes because he was ready for dinner and a drink.

He was a larrikin and an urger. He'd argue bitterly about a point of grammar, citing as evidence a non-existent degree in English Literature.

He'd lure kids to the pub for lectures on what journalism was really about and why it was still their shout.

He was a hard worker when it was needed and a lay about when it wasn't. He was a luncher and a smoker and a party animal once the work was done.

He was argumentative and pig headed and as loyal as an old dog.

He loved words and much as he would try to hide it he loved to guide those young reporters on their way up as he basked in their growth.

He knew what mattered to his readers and he knew how to explain it to them. He wrote without pretension or waste.

Briefly, he tried his hand as a fill-in sports editor and discovered very quickly that the executive life was not to be his.

Briefly, he was a foreign correspondent based in Washington for the Herald and Weekly Times.

But his passion and his strength was sports writing.

He's been gone a fair time now but it's an indication of his impact that his name is still raised at functions where the country's great sportsmen, reporters and administrators meet.

It might be a retired player, or a barman, but there is always a story.

Inevitably, that means a tale of misbehaviour, news-breaking, or partying and is preceded by the word "bloody" as in "do you remember when bloody McFarline...?"

If journalism is to avoid becoming bland and corporate, managed by accountants and market researchers, it needs to remember bloody McFarline and what he did well.

For that reason, his legend must live.