

Top 10: Stories for Thinking, Feeling

By Scott Yates
Staff Comment

SPOKANE — Seems like everybody has a Top 10 list.

A search of the Internet reveals the No. 1 story in 2003 at the National Geographic was on flying sharks off the coast of South Africa. At the National Association of Stock Car Racing website, the year's top pick was Nextel taking over sponsorship of the NASCAR series. The Associated Press ranked the Iraq War at No. 1. China Daily had a list of the country's Top 10 sports stories headed by their volleyball team's World Cup title.

I've always liked writing Top 10 lists. On New Year's Eve every year I sit down and write my personal Top 10. It's like putting a frame around a picture.

That goes for my work at the Capital Press too. I like reviewing the stories I've written the previous 12 months. Unlike the big picture list the Capital Press published recently, however, my Top 10 reflects stories that made me think and feel.

- Bearing that in mind, my No. 1 story for the year was meeting Tom Rettkowski. A 49-year-old — same as me. He was spraying weeds from a four-wheeler one minute and paralyzed from the neck down the next. It took me a long time to write the story of his struggle. I didn't want Rettkowski to come across as a pitiful figure. Mostly, he impressed me as a man doing the best any man could, given his new reality.

- No. 2 on my list was watching and writing as the hard red winter wheat brouhaha unfolded. The rationalizations that allowed farmers to grow and companies to sell inferior wheat varieties.

- No. 3 on my highly personal list is Rep. George Nethercutt's decision to run for the U.S. Senate. Regardless of his success next November, Nethercutt's decision to seek greener political pastures will be a loss for every farmer who lives in the fifth district.

It will also be a loss for at least one reporter. Although I do not respect all of Nethercutt's political positions, he made it easy for me to respect the man.

- Coming in at No. 4 was watching the mutiny unfold at U.S. Wheat Associates last January in Albuquerque. It was like being on the front lines of a very polite battle where Robert's Rules of Order served as the weapon and parliamentary skills the bullets.

- No. 5 on my list was the "reassignment" of Jim Zuiches, former dean of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at Washington State University, recently renamed the College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences. I believe Zuiches' removal is a signal of a shift in direction and emphasis at the school.

Exactly what direction and what emphasis will only become clear with time. My bet is on a big push toward the science of genetic modification.

- No. 6 has been watching and writing stories about two men who push the wheat farming envelope. Love 'em or hate 'em, you can't pretend Karl Kupers and Fred Flemming aren't innovative. As a result of their efforts, and in an arrangement with the Northwest Food Alliance, they have a Portland pizzeria making pies out of wheat grown in Eastern Washington. Artisan bread bakeries are next.

- No. 7 on my list is a series of stories I wrote beginning last March when the Washington Wheat Commission temporarily withheld funding from a wheat breeder at WSU.

Aside from personal lessons about the meaning of life as a result of attacks on me, I discovered some professional truths too.

- No. 8 on my list is Jonathan Schlueter's decision to step down as executive director of the Pacific Northwest Grain and Feed Association. Schlueter, it appeared to me, was one of the most able representatives of an agricultural organization in the Northwest. Unflappable, articulate, loyal to the organization, he also knew how to work the media.

But his departure is also on my list because of what it says about agriculture's relentless consolidation. When Schlueter came on board 20 years ago the PNWGFA had about 300 members. It has fewer than half that now.

I include these last two entries at the end of my list, but without a ranking because it is unseemly to number a person's death. In terms of sheer emotional impact, these last two belong on another list altogether.

- The passing of Adrian DeVries, the Washington State Grange Radio reporter — as gracious a gentleman as I will ever likely come across — affected me deeply. His death reminded me there are no guarantees the person we see at a meeting today will be around tomorrow.

- The same is true of Roger Veseth, extension tillage specialist at Idaho State University and WSU. Paralyzed in a sledding accident with his family in March, Veseth died six months later. There are few individuals reporters can count on for the truth. Veseth was one of them.

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