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Gebhart: Westcott still heeding call to the pen 40 years later

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By ED GEBHART, Times Columnist

Let's get one thing straight, right off the bat. I am not a particularly great fan of Rich Westcott. Not that there's anything wrong with the gentleman. Far from it. Most anyone who ever met him would say he's an all-right guy. It's just that one thing he does really, really bothers me.

That one thing is Westcott writes books and I don't.

He not only writes books, he writes them by the library-shelf-full. At last count, he had published 21, as if anyone is counting. Need it be added that No. 22 is already on the drawing board? Making matters worse, almost all of his books are about the Philadelphia Phillies, who happen not to be among my favorite all-time teams. Hey, Rich. Ever hear of the New York Yankees?

Many, many years ago, about 40 or so, Westcott was part of an undersized sports department at the Daily Times, responsible for covering 22 high schools in the county. The only thing that made it possible was that Harry Chaykun hadn't invented scholastic girls' sports yet.

There's one thing you should know about newspaper reporters. Everyone who ever saw his or her name in a byline knows they have a book inside them, just waiting to get out. The big problem is very few of those books ever get out, and there is an excellent reason for that. That reason being a lack of talent.

Westcott has the talent.

His latest work is called, "Back Again: The Story of the 2009 Phillies." The book covers that remarkable season from spring training, through the regular campaign, to the playoffs and finally the World Series. Like all of Westcott's works, the book is a pleasure to read and is meticulously researched. Unlike me, you may not like the way the book ends – the Yankees in six! – but I can't

imagine any member of the Phillies Phamily picking up the book and not putting it down until the last page.

There's a moving chapter on the late Harry Kalas, a Hall of Fame announcer and a longtime Delaware County resident, and stories on manager Charlie Manuel that few fans have ever heard. Also, there's enough nostalgia to keep the old guys happy.

You'll probably ask why Westcott didn't write a book on the 2008 Phillies, the team that won the World Series. Another Philadelphia writer beat him to the punch.

That doesn't mean Westcott doesn't have another book being released at the same time as "Back Again." This one is called: "The Philadelphia Phillies: Past and Present."

"This is pretty much a history of the Phils, but certainly not in chronological order," Westcott said. "I've divided it into specific categories, like the best second basemen, the best left fielders, players' performances in all-star games, uniforms. You name it."

I'm warning you, Westcott. If you can't find room for Emil Verban at second base, Puddin' Head Jones at third and Morrie Arnovich somewhere in the outfield, you're going to hear from me.

His next book, as yet untitled, will name the 50 greatest players from the Phils, the A's, the Negro National League teams of this area and other big leaguers from the region. Luckily, Westcott will not list the 50 in order of greatness. "There will be more than enough controversy from fans who will be disappointed that one of their favorite players isn't among the select 50," he said.

So how does Westcott do it, bringing out one book after another? According to him, it's not that big a deal. He certainly has the credentials, including a stint at his least-favorite job, Official Scorer at Phillies home games.

For 14 years, he was publisher and editor of Phillies Report. He's a member of three Halls of Fame, has served as a journalism instructor at two local universities, has appeared in seven film documentaries, is special adviser to the Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame and is incoming president of the Philadelphia Sports Writers Association. Whew! And to think I knew him when.

Currently, he is in demand by two publishing houses for book signings and television interviews all over the region. This must be rather daunting for a man who claims that one of the joys of writing is that he isn't tied to a rigid schedule. But I must say that when we worked together, with a starting time of 6 a.m., I don't recall Westcott ever being late or missing a day.

"The nice part is that if I feel like writing at 3 o'clock in the morning, that's fine," he explained. "And if I want to take a day off and play golf, that's OK, too. As my wife, Lois, says, 'Writing keeps me off the streets.' Lois should know; she and Rich have been together for more than 50 years.

I'm just guessing but I'm pretty sure Westcott is well past the "retirement" age of 65. He has no plans to step aside anytime soon.

“When I was publishing Phillies Report, Allen Lewis, who had worked at the Inquirer, was writing for me, and he was 82,” he said. “He was my hero.”

You’ve got your hero, Rich, and I’ve got mine. Even if you aren’t 82.

Ed Gebhart is a retired public relations executive. His column appears Sunday.

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