

# 20 questions

## for Bob Hammel

Interview by Michael Koryta Photography by Steve Raymer

### A Revered Hoosier With Still a Lot to Say

For a city of its size, Bloomington has an extraordinary list of people who are not only esteemed here at home but famous across the nation. The list includes Menahem Pressler, John Mellencamp, Bill Cook, David Baker, Angelo Pizzo, Janos Starker, Joshua Bell, Bob Hammel. The most unlikely of these personages, and perhaps the best loved, is Hammel. Sportswriters from small cities rarely, if ever, draw national attention, much less the kind of acclaim afforded Hammel, a brilliant, affable, small-town kid out of Huntington, Indiana. Though in his long career he toiled mostly for the *Bloomington Herald-Times*, nee *Herald-Telephone*, the fact is he could have worked anywhere. Hammel has been honored by his profession innumerable times, written ten books, been compared to the legendary Red Smith of the *New York Times*, and been inducted into three journalism halls of fame. This past November, his long affiliation with the *Herald-Times* ended. Beginning with this issue of *Bloom*, Hammel, a young 70, begins a new phase in his career as a magazine columnist (see page 10). *Bloom* contributor Michael Koryta, a novelist and former *H-T* reporter, sat down with Hammel to ask him 20 questions.

**BLOOM** In your 30 years as sports editor of the *Herald-Times* is there one season that you enjoyed covering the most? Perhaps the '68 Rose Bowl team, the '76 perfect basketball season, or some dark horse?



**HAMMEL** Now that's dirty, because those two seasons were both so sensational. I suppose I'd have to give the perfect season an edge, because there was that element of reaching a deserved fate. The team had been there the year before when they really were the best but came away without anything tangible to show for it. Then in '76 they were perfect, and it is all the more gratifying because in 30 years of attempting to match that achievement, no team has.

**BLOOM** You came to Bloomington shortly before Bob Knight arrived with his reputation for sticky defense and volatile temper in tow. What was your first reaction to seeing one of his practices?

**HAMMEL** That this was coaching on a whole different level, a combination of cerebral and demanding. All of a sudden it was like a classroom. It was not like playing in a gym anymore. He had a coaches' clinic at the end of his first week of practice, the climax of which was his first scrimmage at IU. The freshmen were doing better than the varsity, and that wasn't what he wanted to see. He was struggling to get them to end practice on a high note, and he just couldn't. So he sent them to the locker room, and I think every coach there thought, "This team isn't going to win a game." I walked down to get a comment, and when I was about ten feet away Bob grabbed one of those ball racks and sent that thing sailing. It went all the way down the wall, and I thought, "Nah, we don't need a quote right now."



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**Hammel with hair.** A rare such photograph taken on the night of wife Julie's prom.

**BLOOM** Your friendship with Knight is widely known, but few people realize you also had some battles with him, such as the time when he cut off all communication with you. How did that one play out?

**HAMMEL** It began on April 1, 1977, not that I was counting. A story ran that he didn't care for. There was no declaration of silence; it just happened. I guess it went on for nearly seven months, most of which was off-season, when there wasn't much to cover in basketball. Then at the season's first game, he didn't show up at the press conference; he just issued a statement. I wrote a column saying how self-defeating that was because, shoot, he always controlled the press conferences anyway. The next Monday I got a phone call and he came on the line and said "Do you want war?" I couldn't help but laugh. That was the break in the ice.

**BLOOM** How were you able to sustain a positive relationship with Knight when so many other journalists failed to do so?

**HAMMEL** I think it was the work ethic we shared. Bob saw from the beginning that I worked hard. He didn't respect what I did; I think he considered me as he might have a really diligent prostitute. But he admired the effort at least. From my side, it was evident from the first day that this guy was head and shoulders above the rest. Temperamental, yes, but also brilliant.

**BLOOM** For years you've dealt with critics who said that your friendship with Knight went against the rules of journalism, that you were too close to your source. How do you respond?

**HAMMEL** Rules, like deadlines, are made to be broken. I've never denied or apologized for my strong friendship with Bob. Emerson defined a friend this way: "Before him I can think out loud." I have a few friends of that dimension, precious few. One is retired history professor George Juergens, whom I didn't meet until both of us were very senior citizens. And I have others, including a coach or two besides Bob. But did the friendship with Bob get in the way of my coverage? I guess only readers could say, and some have said "yes," strongly. I probably bargared people with ten times the IU coverage—in basketball, football,

and all else—that they got anyplace else in those years. Did they get absolutely everything I knew? No, not in basketball or those other things, but if there ever was a journalist who could say “yes” to that question, I’d say that person is either lying or sorely lacking in judgment and sources, as well as friends.

**BLOOM** To the critics who talk endlessly of chair throws and chokes, what’s one Bob Knight moment you would share?

**HAMMEL** None, because they’d just disregard it, say that it doesn’t mean anything. But if it would mean something...there was a time when he asked if he could ride with me over to Illinois, which was going to be a big game for the team. As always when he rode with me, he chose the route and had me go up highway 231. Without ever saying a word about where we were going, he had me pull into this nursing home. Apparently, he’d had a request for an autograph or something for a woman’s birthday. She lived in the nursing home and was a big fan. When we got there, about 50 people came out and stood in their doorways. They were just so excited to see him. We went into a room and he said hello to everyone and gave the woman an IU sweater for her birthday, talked to her a little bit, and then we went off so he could get his team ready to play Illinois. That’s just one example of the sort of thing that happened a lot.

**Bob saw from the beginning that I worked hard. He didn’t respect what I did; I think he considered me as he might have a really diligent prostitute. But he admired the effort at least.**

**BLOOM** You’ve won dozens of awards and been inducted into three national halls of fame. That’s impressive for any sportswriter, but unprecedented for a writer from a small paper like the *Herald-Times*. I know you had offers to leave over the years. Why didn’t you make the jump?

**HAMMEL** The trade-off for more readers and less autonomy was never attractive for me. Do you want the bigger audience or the better



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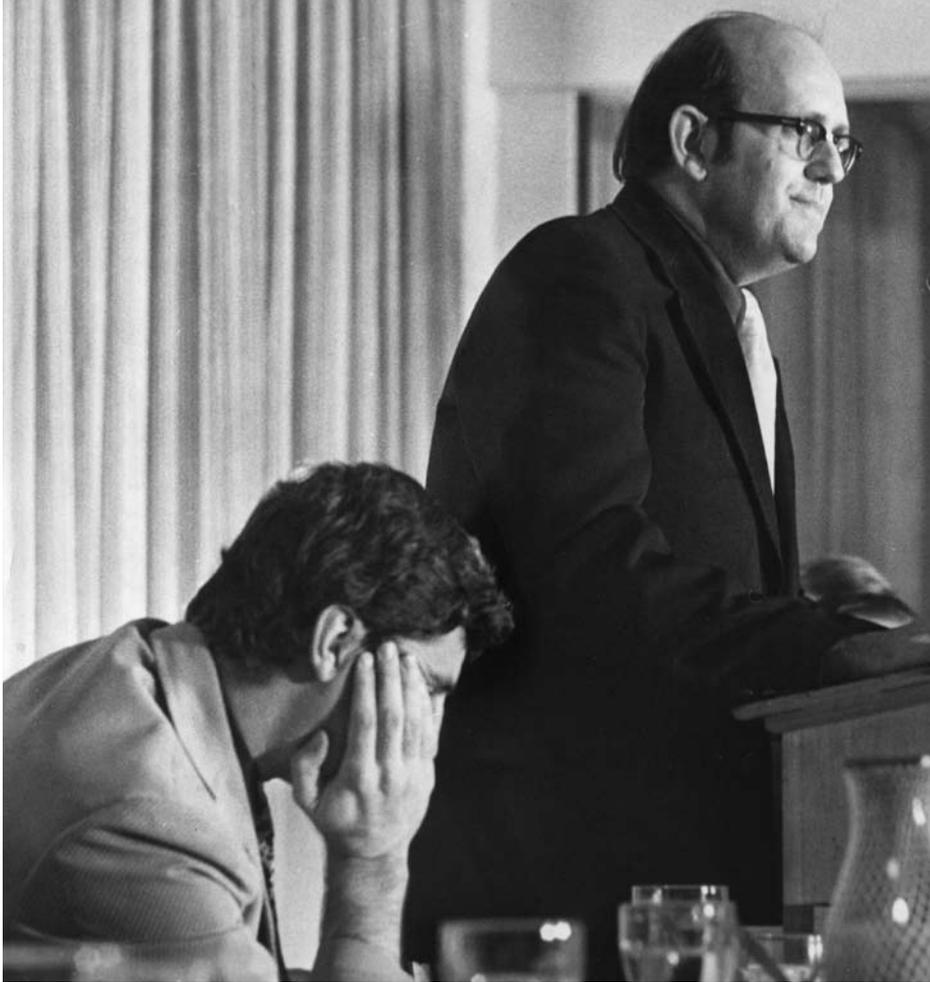
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Hammel speaking at a banquet in 1972. "I was probably driving Bob [Knight] to distraction."

control over what you do? I could not have asked for more freedom than I had in those years. I never regretted the choice I made to stay, and I think that my wife Julie would agree it was best for the family. Bloomington was a wonderful place to raise our two children.

**BLOOM** Ever take any heat from your big-city colleagues, writing for something that was for years called the *Bloomington Herald-Telephone*?

**HAMMEL** Heat, no. Needles, yes. I remember in the 1983 NCAA Tournament we were down in Evansville, and I came to the arena way ahead of time, walked over to my spot, which was in the front row and near the middle of the court, and I heard this voice coming from way up in the rafters: "Hey, Hammel. Only in Indiana is the *New York Times* way up here and the *Bloomington Herald-Telephone* down there." It was a triumphal moment. That writer's name was Frank Litsky, and he always loved Bloomington, too.

**BLOOM** In Munich in 1972, when access to athletes was limited following the murder of 11 members of the Israeli team, you were able to get the only interview with IU swimmer Mark Spitz, who won seven gold medals. That interview appeared in newspapers across the country. How did you manage that coup?

**HAMMEL** Like so much of what I brilliantly accomplished in my career, the Spitz interview was dropped in my lap. I'd asked a team manager to set up a brief interview even though I knew that was contrary to coach Doc Councilman's instructions to Mark. Nevertheless, I went down at the meeting time I had suggested and was not surprised when Mark wasn't there. Just as I was leaving, a guy told me he'd seen Mark go into the hospital tent. I went over to the tent and suggested to an attendant that I had an appointment with Mark, although I'm not sure if Mark was aware of the appointment. He was in the hospital tent with a sun lamp baking on his back. He had to be there for 45 minutes and he was already bored. It was a wonderful chance for me to sit down and talk, and that wound up being the only personal interview he gave during those Olympics.

**BLOOM** You retired from sportswriting in 1996, but remained affiliated with the *Herald-Times* writing a Sunday column until last November. Why cut all ties after 40 years?

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**HAMMEL** I knew that the time wasn't far away when I would probably be leaving the Sunday column, but I wasn't really, truthfully, ready to leave. The ground rules changed a bit on me. That column was a lot of fun, though. It was a different stage in my life and I enjoyed having some different readers.

**BLOOM** Did you leave on good terms with management?

**HAMMEL** You know, I think (*H-T* publisher) Mayer Maloney came along at a time when I was so far over the hill and not really contributing that if there was an element with him of "What has he done for me lately?" then I can't really blame him. I felt that I was considerably more valued under the previous publishers and when Mike Hefron was general manager. But, in fairness, I was probably considerably more valuable. I think when Mayer came in he was committed to a whole different style of operation and I wasn't part of it.

**...there were times when I was late with the pages. There developed a kind of nasty little nickname around the paper — "The Late Bob Hammel."**

**BLOOM** You were born in Huntington, a small town in a conservative state, have always lived in Indiana, and yet you dared to support liberal politics in your column. Did that shock some of your loyal sports readers?

**HAMMEL** Some liked me both in sports and the new, sometimes-political role. Some, including some dear friends who are conservative, had a nice way of putting their discomfort: "Gee, I really liked you as a sportswriter." Some said versions of, "I'm sorry, but I don't like sports. I never really read you until you started your new column. I love what you've had to say." And some said: "This is two things now where you are terrible." Nice blend.

**BLOOM** You hired Greg Dawson, who went on to a very successful career as a columnist in Indianapolis and Orlando, when he was still in high school. How did you stumble across him?

*Continued on page 107*

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