

FNP 44

Interviewee: Larry S. Guest

Interviewer: Adam Warrington

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W: Please give your full name and date of birth.

G: Larry S. Guest and March 27, 1942.

W: Where were you born?

G: I was born in Waycross, Georgia.

W: Please give your parents' full names.

G: My father's name was Lawton S. Guest, and he is deceased. My mother is still living as Lillian Guest.

W: Talk about where your family lived early on, maybe between ages one and ten, and where you moved during your youth, if at all.

G: We lived in Waycross until I was about five, and then my father went back into the Air Force. Then we moved every time the rent came due, so I grew up all over the country, mostly in Air Forces bases in the South but some brave stops elsewhere. We settled into Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, when I was in junior high. We were able to put down roots, and I went to high school there and then on to the University of Southern Mississippi.

W: When you were growing up as a child, was your main interaction with other children of Air Force personnel?

G: Yes, other military brats.

W: Talk a little bit about memories you have from preschool through grade school.

G: Probably the biggest professional impact was a high school teacher named Zan Skelton. He was the English and literature teacher at Biloxi High School, and he was very intriguing. He managed to keep my attention long enough to teach me how to conjugate a verb and so forth. So, my basic English skills, I credit to him, as far as an impact professionally. I took no journalism courses in college. I majored in recreation administration and was going to--and I did, in fact--start off in the recreation field as the director of recreation for a small town in Mississippi, Brookhaven, and then sort of backed into journalism. I think having no formal journalism education, in retrospect, may have helped my writing style because, all during high school, I played several sports, and so I was a voracious sports

reader. I read the top sportswriters of that day, usually clandestinely, in the Biloxi High School library or in the New Orleans paper hidden behind my geometry book or whatever.

W: I believe you listed Red Smith as a big influence.

G: Yes, Red Smith and Jim Murray, certainly, and Blackie Sherrod. Red Smith, I knew casually, Blackie Sherrod remains a good friend, and Jim Murray and his wife became good friends of ours. I had dinner with him just a few weeks before he died last year. But, they were my professors, as such, in how to write a sports column. Fortunately, no professorial theories got in the way of that in college.

W: Going back to your youth a little bit, you talked about being a big-time athlete. What would you attribute to being the most important decision of your youth?

G: I do not know. As far as getting into this field, probably when I was a freshman in college, I thought I wanted to be an accounting major, but I played on the baseball team at Southern Miss. Accounting builds one day on the next, and our baseball team would take a two- or three-game road trip. I would come back and think I was in the wrong building. So, I struggled with accounting and, after that first year, I decided to switch over to the recreation major. That, indirectly, led me into what I do now. If I had stayed in accounting, I probably would still be an accountant or probably would have committed suicide by now, from nine to five, five days a week. That sort of thing is the antithesis of the job that I have had for thirty-five years.

W: Going back to talk about your younger years, is there anything that sticks in your head from growing up in Mississippi?

G: Not really. Actually, I was junior-high age when we got to Mississippi but, before that, I really do not know how I came to be so avidly involved in sports. I do remember, in 1954, I was twelve years old, and I really got into baseball and became a big fan of the Cleveland Indians. I was a fan of the journalism coverage as much as of a fan of the team, the writers and the broadcasters, Dizzy Dean and Buddy Blattner of that day. They did the national game of the week, and I used to sit down and listen to them on the radio. I would actually keep a scorebook of the games, no matter who was playing, and often [thought about] how I would formulate a story if I was writing about this game.

W: Have you been a lifetime Indians' fan?

G: No, it was just during that time.

W: Talk a little bit about your social life as a teenager, what you did for fun outside of school.

G: The normal thing[s]. It usually had something to do with sports. Whatever social life I had got involved with sports. I had a motor scooter when I was in junior high in Biloxi and at age fourteen or something, I think, I drove the motor scooter from Biloxi to Mobile, which is about sixty miles away, unbeknownst to my parents, to see a double-header of the Mobile Bears playing in the old southern league, the Dixie League I think it was called then. I told my mom I was going to spend all that day--it was a Sunday--with a friend across town. I left early that morning and drove all the way to Mobile on a little motor scooter and watched the double-header and came home.

W: Were there any other sports besides baseball that you were heavily involved with, or was baseball your primary love?

G: Well, baseball was my primary love as a kid and what I, kind of, excelled in and played in high school and college, but I had some interest in basketball, even though I was four foot six. I had an interest in football and played briefly in football, but I had a major league baseball scout who convinced me to concentrate only on baseball and to stay away from football because I might get hurt. I was a pitcher. Fifty pounds ago, I was a little jump ball pitcher. I had every known pitch to man except a fastball, and that got me through high school and college and a little service ball, too.

W: When did it become apparent that you had some skill at baseball?

G: I guess it was around high school when I started doing pretty well. I was a year ahead of myself. My parents had put me into school at age five. We had a large family and a sergeant's salary, and it was cheaper to put me in school than daycare, so they put me in first grade. The effect of that was that I was a seventeen-year-old freshman playing college ball against some twenty-two- and twenty-three-year-old guys who were coming out of the service with a five o'clock shadow and muscles on top of muscles. So, as a freshman, that was the first time I rued the decision of starting a year early because I could have still been wrapping my curveball around some fifteen-year-old instead of getting tattooed by a twenty-two-year-old ex-Army paratrooper or something.

W: What was that experience like, playing college baseball? Was it worthwhile or was it a humbling experience?

G: It was fun. I just played two years. I was not a very good student. I was not serious about school, so I dropped out and went into the National Guard for six months and then came back and had a much more mature attitude about school.

When I came back, I discovered I could work at a hamburger stand. It was like a McDonald's or a Burger King, except it was an independent fast food hamburger place. I could work there and make more money than my baseball scholarship was worth, so I dumped baseball then and just became a better student.

W: What was the experience you talked about before, having a major league scout come to you when you were in high school? I am sure that must have been an exciting experience.

G: Well, that is flattering, certainly. At that time, I thought, yes, I am going to play professional baseball. I could have signed out of high school, but I had a chance to go to Southern Miss on a baseball scholarship. By then, I was realistic enough to know that I was probably better off in college than I was wasting away a couple of years in what was then Class D baseball. That had the really low minors then, making \$100 a month or something.

W: What organization was that with?

G: It was with the [Philadelphia] Phillies.

W: You mentioned you came from a large family. Could you please give the names of your siblings?

G: The one living, besides myself, is my older sister. I [am] the baby. We [were] a family of six. My oldest sister [was] Imelda, and I dedicated my most important book of the four books I have written, *Arnie*, to her. The dedication is to her. I had an older brother named Gene, who was a football player for Southern Miss, and he died of a kidney disease. My living sister is Shirley, and she lives in the Biloxi area, the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Imelda died of complications from an automobile accident, not long after the *Arnie* book came out. She had been ill for a while, and I was thankful that she could see the dedication before she died, actually see it in the book.

W: Do you recall any professors at Southern Mississippi that were influential or had an impact?

G: Well, not in my career now. There was a fellow who was head of the Health and Recreation Department, a guy named John King, a big, rawboned guy. He got me into [being] a pretty dedicated professional in that field, and I think I became, sort of, his pet star student, as it were. He had a hand in talking to the city of Brookhaven, Mississippi, into establishing a recreation department and hiring me right out of school, which they did, and I did that for seven years. They had an award. It was funny. They had a partial scholarship which was more of an honor than anything--it was only like \$100 a semester or something--for the outstanding

recreation student. Among the finalists was my future wife. That is how we met, going for that award. So I established my superiority over her right away.

W: You mentioned spending six months in the National Guard. Could you please tell me what that was like, any positive or negative experiences?

G: Mainly, I played baseball. If the Russians had attacked, the only thing I would have been able to do is tell them to take two and hit to right. I went to basic training at Columbia, South Carolina. Then, the rest of the time, I was assigned to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I played on the Fort Sill post baseball team that had a number of ex-college players and a few ex-pro players.

W: How was the competition over there?

G: It was very good.

W: Now, when you left the National Guard, was that something you were happy to leave or sad, or was it just time to go?

G: Well what you did back then was you served six months, and then you would be six years in a Reserve unit where you would meet once a month and two weeks in the summer, weekend warriors. So, that was just a way of me getting my military obligation aside at that time while I got a little more serious about what I wanted to do in studies.

W: Of course, you talked about your first professional job, working for seven years at the recreation department. Would you chronicle those experiences, those seven years, as enjoyable or not enjoyable?

G: It was terrific. They started it on a \$6,000 a year budget. \$5,200 of that was my salary. I could take the other \$800 and build the biggest, greatest recreation program that I wanted to. We had a lot of fee-based things and sponsorship things where we set up Little League baseball and girls' softball and mens' volleyball, church league volleyball, and a ceramics class. We took an old building that they had and converted into a teen center and really had a pretty going outfit there the seven years I was there. Through that time, we worked up a full-time staff of about four or five people and somewhat of a more reasonable budget but not a hell of a lot more salary. So, I was getting to the point where, you know, did I want to have fun all of my life or, maybe, actually eat.

W: Sure. Now, when did journalism start to kind of creep into your mind during this time?

G: During that time, the little paper was called the *Brookhaven Leader Advertiser* when it was a twice-a-week paper, and it was owned by the Jacobs family. Chuck Jacobs was the editor, and his wife was the chief photographer. The rest of the editorial staff was all women. Nobody there knew anything about sports. The Jacobs' son had sort of covered the high school. The only sports they really did was covering the local high school football and basketball games and so forth, and their son had done that while he was in high school. Well, he went off to college, and so they did not have anybody. So, they asked me if I would do that, so I started doing that on the side. I began to write a column for them just as a lark. You know, Billy Martin would punch out another marshmallow salesman, and I would have fun with it. Then, they asked me to be the advertising manager of the little paper when it went daily, when it became the *Brookhaven Daily Leader*. So, for five years, I was the advertising manager and sports editor of the *Brookhaven Daily Leader*. The sports, again, was just sort of a lark on the side. I would write a column once or twice a week, and I would use that entree to get credentials to go cover the New Orleans Saints in their infancy and Ole Miss and Mississippi State in football and that sort of thing. So, it was just a fun thing to me and, still; that was not my job. That was just my recreation. Unbeknownst to me, the executive editor of the largest paper in the state, a guy named Percer Hewett--[who] was a wonderful old gem, who wrote a little column two or three days a week in the *Jackson Clarion Ledger* that was quaint little items from around the state--he would read all these little puddlejumps to pick up material. Unbeknownst to me, he was reading and giggling at my nonsense. So, when he lost his sports columnist/sports editor, he called me and offered me the job. I had never even thought about doing this for a living. It sounded fun enough. Actually, it was a little bit of a pay cut by then. Going from advertising manager of the little daily paper to sports editor and columnist at Jackson was about a \$10 a week pay cut, as I recall. But, it sounded like a heck of a lot of fun to me, so I did it, not knowing...I knew how to write. I mean, I had that knack from Jim Murray and Red Smith and others and from some actual experience of doing it part-time for the paper in Brookhaven. But, I did not have a clue how to be a sports editor, and I was a total bust at that. There were people on the staff who resenting me coming in, with no experience, to be the sports editor. So we had to struggle through that a few years. But, I kind of coped with that and continued. My primary job there, though, was to write a column. I had a good nose for news and wound up breaking several stories, including when the long-time legendary Ole Miss [football] coach--and that was the number one story in the state--Johnny Vaught was being pushed out in sort of an internal coup headed up by Bruiser Kinard, one of his top assistants. He brought in Billy Kianard, his younger brother, to be the head coach, a former Ole Miss player who at that time was an assistant football coach at Arkansas. He had been at the University of Florida at one time as an assistant. He was a very headstrong, controversial character. But, I broke the story several days before it actually happened. I guess that kind of put me on the map around the South,

and the Orlando paper called and asked me if I would come down and interview. They were looking for, at that time, a Gator beat writer and, sort of, backup columnist. So, I came down and interviewed. That was 1973, and I have been here ever since.

W: Now you talked about how you were a sports editor. How was that, writing the column and editing, kind of clashing against each other?

G: Well, I did not know much about editing, actually, and I really was not editing so much as [administrating] over a staff. We had a staff of, as I recall, about ten or twelve people. I did not have much experience as a personnel manager, so that was a little herky-jerky, but it worked out in time.

W: Was it after college that you got married?

G: No, I got married while I was a senior in college. My wife Mary was at Southern, as I mentioned, and she was in recreation and education. She became a teacher, and she did that for fifteen years. She taught in Hattiesburg while I finished up. She was a year ahead of me because I dropped out to go to the National Guard. She taught in Brookhaven and in Jackson, and she taught about the first five years we were here. Then she became a tax accountant. She is what is called an enrolled agent which, in the eyes of the IRS, is a CPA, as far as tax returns. She has to pass all the same things that the CPA does, anything that is related to taxes. She has a partner. In fact, the guy who hired me to come to work at the *Sentinel*, his wife and my wife are now partners in this business which they have had for about ten years.

W: How long was the courtship, if you will, before you guys got married?

G: Oh, about a year, while we were students at Southern Miss.

W: Is this something you knew all along once you guys met, this would lead to marriage, or any stories behind that?

G: The first time we had a date, she had gone home to a little town, Bay Springs, Mississippi, which is about an hour from the campus. She was supposed to be coming back on Sunday evening for our date, and when I went there to pick her up, she was not back. So, I left and went someplace and came back. She was late coming back in and when I did not stay around, she assumed that everything was off. A football player came by to call on her and since I was not around and she thought our date was off, she went out with him. So, I came back much later as he was bringing her back to the dorm. The guy's name was Gerald Wilson. He was a punter at Southern Miss and went on to become quite an outstanding punter in the NFL for the Kansas City Chiefs. He had a pretty long career there.

He was kind of a raucous character. So, that has been our joke over all these years, anytime we playfully kid around or something, and I tell her she could have always married the punter.

W: And you have three children?

G: Three girls.

W: What are their names?

G: Krista is the oldest, and she is a chemical engineer. She went to [the University of] Florida. She has two children, and she lives in Lakeland. The second one is Dorrie, and she went to FSU [Florida State University]. She is the head of the accounting at West Virginia University Hospital, and she has two kids. The baby is Gina, and she went to LSU [Louisiana State University]. She is in her third year as a French teacher here at Dr. Phillips High School. It is her first year at Dr. Phillips, but it is her third year as a teacher.

W: I want to talk a little bit about your writing style and how it developed. Did you always take a humorous approach, even starting back at the *Leader*?

G: Yes, always, and that always was and still is [my purpose], to entertain first. I will not run from a controversy or if there is a very serious subject, [like] Payne Stewart [professional golfer] dying or Arnold Palmer [professional golfer] getting cancer. I go for the tear ducts, too. Or the controversy. If Steve Spurrier [head coach, University of Florida football team] does something crazy again or Penny Hardaway [professional basketball player] shows his immaturity, then I do not mind kicking somebody in the butt if I think that is necessary, too. But, still, my first aim always is to write humor or something entertaining or newsy or put a smile twist on it and that sort of thing. It is kind of the goal of this book. I say I have written three and a half books. I count this as only a half because, as you know, it is just a collection of columns that I have assembled. I wanted to do this here toward the end of my career as to sort of leave a legacy of light-heartedness and, I guess, to have documented that I did not always kick Spurrier in the butt, that I often had fun with sports. The readers that I have the most problems with are the people who take it so deathly serious that it is life-or-death to them. I just refuse to treat it that way.

W: Did you get some positive reinforcement from some of your early columns that pushed you in this direction?

G: Well, sure. I mean, if you make people laugh . . . the most positive thing I will get is little e-mails or letters or just comments from people directly that they really got a laugh out of such-and-such column. That is gratifying. I get more gratification

out of that than anything else. A close second to that would be to break a story. I have a pretty good newshound streak in me and a pretty good antenna, and I have learned that if you treat sources as friends and develop a trust, then a lot more stories will come your way. Breaking hard stories will come your way with that kind of relationship network of people, with that kind of relationship. A lot of young journalists nowadays try to always be a hardass or to create a gulf between them and the real world out there, like you cannot fraternize with the enemy or something.

W: How has the effect of your job been on your family, especially when your daughters were young, having you traveling around covering events?

G: Well, just like athletes, I missed a lot of their growing up, particularly when I first got into this business. I mean, I was twenty-four hours a day into this. I was so gung-ho for ten years. I was afraid I was going to miss a story. A lot of times when I covered events, I would go there and stay three days to really get plugged in and interact with the people when, probably, I could have gone there just on game day. I maybe would not have developed as big a network of sources and contacts, but I would have spent a little more time with the girls growing up. But, we have a wonderful relationship, and I am really enjoying the grandchildren, especially because they are not right here in town. But, we see them often, and they come here often. That pool out there is for them, not me. My wife and I use the spa often, but the pool is strictly there to dump the grandkids in while they are here.

W: I want to talk a little about your overall experience at the *Sentinel*. We can start from 1973, how things have changed and chronicle your experiences there.

G: Well, I have gone through about five sports editors. The original sports editor, Steve Vaughn, is the guy who hired me from Jackson, and he moved up the ladder. He went over to the news side and became managing editor at one time. When he moved out, we had a couple of very young guys. One of them now is the sports editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, and the other is the sports editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. They were very talented guys who were barely out of UCF [University of Central Florida]. I mean, they were twenty-one, twenty-two years old. It was felt that while they had the growing skills to technically run the department, to direct traffic, they were too young to manage a staff of thirty-four people, many of whom were twice their age. So, they made me sports editor and columnist. One of the young guys, John Cherwa, who is now the executive sports editor at the *Chicago Tribune*, they made him executive sports editor, and he worked under me. So, he ran the department, I mean as far as directing traffic and making schedules and planning and all of that, and all I did was have the hiring-and-firing hammer over his head so that all the forty-year-olds on the staff who might clash with him would have some comfort. That remained in that

sort of arrangement through one more executive sports editor, a guy named Steve Doyle, before I finally managed to cut that tether and just become a columnist only, an occasional breaking news writer and got totally out of administration, thank goodness. That is when I was able to primarily work from my office at home and on the road wherever the assignment took me.

W: I want to talk about the growth of the Orlando sports teams since you have been here. Obviously, the city has boomed with some of the athletes moving down here.

G: Yes. When I first came here from Jackson, I thought this would be a nice three-year stepping stone to Denver or Dallas or Detroit or whatever and, now, it has developed into one of those. When those kind of offers started coming in, we had roots here and liked the area so much. Golf had become a big part of my life professionally, coverage and the contacts of all the PGA Tour players here. We were very comfortable here and did not want to leave, so I turned down all of those offers. I have been turning them down for, I guess, the last fifteen or twenty years. It has kind of slowed down now because, I guess, people have given up pulling me out of here. I have never had a problem--people say, what the heck did you write before the Orlando Magic [professional basketball team], but there is always something. In a city like this, there are so many athletes and other sports.

W: I know that golf is your major hobby. Did that develop in Orlando? Can you talk about your experiences, recreationally and professionally?

G: I began playing golf in Brookhaven at the little Brookhaven Country Club. Being an ex-athlete, I got fairly good at it. In fact, I was club champion there one year at the Brookhaven Country Club. I beat a college player. In the finals, I had a match point. Anyway, when I came here, because this is such a golfing area and because, at any one year, there are always about twenty four players who live here, that became a major part of what I did. It was a major joy to get so connected with the PGA tour. I became good friends with a lot of these guys, including Arnold Palmer, and I wound up doing a lot of magazine pieces on these guys. I began to be in demand at *Golf* magazine and *Golf Digest* and some of those others, the *Wall Street Journal* even. When they were doing a special section before each major [golf tournament], I would often do the lead piece for them. You know, if Nick Price or Payne Stewart or Mark O'Meara [professional golfers] was going back to defend their championship at one of the majors, I would do the lead piece on them. So, it has been terrific. That, of course, led to me doing a book, getting so close to Arnold, socially and professionally, and traveling with him some. That led to me doing the book on him, which is easily the most important of the four books that I have done.

W: That experience, the whole process of writing that book with him, what was that like?

G: Well, it was actually on him, not with him. Technically, it is a non-authorized biography because it was not in collaboration, nor did he have any rights to edit any of it or whatever. We had talked about doing a book for several years in collaboration, and he kept putting it off and putting it off. He is so busy. He has do many companies going and all this. He did not have time to sit down and so, as his fame started to ebb and the market for an Arnold Palmer book was beginning to ebb, then I just made the decision finally that rather than doing it with him, which may or may not have ever happened, that I needed to go ahead and do it. So, I just did it. I told him I was going to do it, and he was very cooperative in providing some photos that are in the book, very personal, intimate photos that were on the walls of his office and home that he allowed me to duplicate or copy and run in the book.

W: How long did you work on that for?

G: My stock answer was at either six months or fifteen years. It was fifteen years accumulating all of these anecdotes. Most of the book was personal observation and incidents and anecdotes where I was there and actually saw. In all this time that we were talking about doing a book, I began to squirrel away--I would write an anecdote or something and store it away in the computer. I had all this mass of material already set. So it was fifteen years of doing that but when I actually started to write the book, then it took six months to pull it all together and fill in the blanks and add here and there until the manuscript was finished.

W: What have you found more enjoyable, writing your column or putting together a whole book like that?

G: The columns are more enjoyable. Writing is not easy to me. I am not a prolific writer. I cannot sit down and write a column in thirty minutes or write thirty pages in one day if I am writing a book. I agonize over it. It is hard to me. So, columns are easier. Doing books is just absolute torture to me, especially the way that I have done them, because the three real books that I did were done with essentially no time off from my job. Some of it was done during some vacation time and that sort of thing but, basically, I have not taken a leave of absence or anything to do the book. So, it was on top of my job already. The three books that I did, it was like taking six months out of my life, because I was just oblivious to my family and everything then. I mean, I was up until three o'clock in the morning on the computer often. It was just totally consuming for me, so I vowed that I would not do another book after the *Arnie* book, which was 1993, was the first one. Then, in 1997, we did an update version for another publisher. After that, I vowed that I would never do another book, a real book. Of course, the

collection of columns is a different thing, but to do a real book while I was still fully employed at the *Sentinel* . . . although I am on the cusp of possibly getting involved in a Payne Stewart book. But, that is one that, if I do it, is going to be capturing me rather than the other way around. Because of the timeliness and all after his death and I knew him so well, his wife has said that I am obviously the one she wants to do it because I knew him better than any journalist. It is not one that can wait until a year or two years from now, or whenever I retire to do it. I mean, it has to be done right now while it is pertinent.

W: Talk a little bit about the importance of the Orlando Magic to the Orlando area since they have come into fruition and how that affected you in your column.

G: Well, it changed the working arrangements, or the working situation, for a while because until that time, the main sports entities in town—the Florida Citrus Bowl, the Bay Hill Tournament, the Disney Tournament, and then UCF’s emerging football program and so forth [did not treat the media as] the adversaries. There was not an adversarial relationship. But when the Magic moved in and it was run by people who, with the Philadelphia [76ers, professional basketball] team, mostly—Pat Williams, John Gabriel and others, Jack Swope—they brought with them a tough adversarial media relationship from their experience in Philadelphia in the NBA, where [the attitude] was, you are not our friends, you are to be controlled, and you are to be held at arms’ length. So, it was, for a while, a rather unpleasant experience, actually. A lot of that has eroded away. I think the people who run it have finally realized that it is better to have a little bit of a friendly professional relationship than a crack the whip and a moat around us sort of relationship. So, that softened quite a bit in concert with Shaq [Shaquille O’Neal, professional basketball player] leaving and Penny [Hardaway] leaving, who were very difficult to deal with. It has gradually gotten a lot more pleasant to cover the Magic, but they were not very pleasant to cover for a long time. That was the first time in my long career that I have had that kind of situation where it was not pleasant to go cover something. Florida became that way when my little tete-a-tete with Spurrier developed three or four years ago, and that is unfortunate dealing with him under those circumstances. I will continue to deal with that professionally, but it is not as much fun nor as productive, for both of us.

W: Then, of course, you have the book with Pat Williams.

G: Yes, we did that at the very start. That book was about the dream, the seed of the dream to the point of the first game. It was how the whole idea got sold to Orlando [and] to the NBA for the acquisition of an expansion team and then to get it up and running. So, it was from the seed of the dream to the opening tipoff. Hence, *Making Magic* was the title of it, meaning how the Orlando Magic were actually cooked.

W: Can you talk about the most important experiences you have had at the *Sentinel*, events you covered, stories you cracked, or anything like that which sticks out?

G: Well, I have broken a lot of stories, local and national, particularly in the early years here when they wanted me to be more aggressive about doing that. For a while, the trend in our business drifted away to where we were not sure if we were a newspaper or a magazine, and everything started to get blanded with soft features and long-range planning and all of this. In this business, and particularly here, we kind of lost that spontaneity for a while. That has cycled back now to where we are after hard news a little more. But, in the first ten or twelve years that I was here, the whole state of Florida had a lot of good newspapers. Every place you would go in the state, you would drive into a motel, and there would be eight or ten racks there. It would be in every major paper in the state, and it was circulated throughout the state. You still see that in Gainesville a lot because of the campus there. But, that has changed, that extended circulation is costly, so they pulled back. Basically, most circulations now are concentrated just in the area of the town that the paper is in, or the immediate area. So, there is not all that cross-competition. I mean, back then, there were ten papers competing for the same story, and the only stories in the state, the big stories, were Florida and Florida State [college] football and the Miami Dolphins [professional football team]. So, everybody was covering those three entities and trying to beat each other on the stories. So, I broke a lot of those stories. You know, it is fun when you break a story in somebody else's town. But, I broke Howard Snellenberger leaving the Miami Hurricanes. I broke Jimmy Johnson getting the [coaching] job at the University of Miami. I broke Ray Perkins getting fired in Tampa. I broke Spurrier coming to Florida. And, I also broke Dickey [Dickey Douglas, former University of Florida head football coach] getting fired ten years earlier in mid-season. They denied it and called me everything but a white man for about a month until the season was over, when they finally said, well, yes, the story was true. But, they had to go along with this ruse for all that time. Nationally, I broke the story that Earl Bruce was going to be the new [coach] at Ohio State to replace Woody Hayes. I use to break several of the bowl match-ups all the time because I became very closely involved with the Citrus Bowl here. When they went from the Tangerine Bowl to the Citrus Bowl, they moved into the big leagues, and a lot of the guys who ran the bowl at that time did not have many contacts among the college coaches. So, they would use me as a conduit to keep them from embarrassing themselves as they would go after Georgia or Clemson or Ohio State or whomever. I knew all of those coaches through my network of sources, and I was sort of the go-between. The byproduct of that was, I would find out, you know, the coach at Notre Dame would tell me, no, Larry, tell them that, sorry but we are not interested in that because we are going to be going to the Gator Bowl. So, I would break the story that Notre Dame was going to the Gator Bowl. That was my little caveat out of playing that role for the Citrus Bowl. I did break that, the first time that Notre Dame decided they could

go to a bowl or a non-traditional New Year's Day game. They lowered themselves to go to the Gator Bowl, and I broke that story at mid-season, that they were going to the Gator Bowl, or late season. Of course, the arrangement was made way ahead of bid day, legal bid day at that time, so Notre Dame and the Gator Bowl also called me ugly names and denied it until the actual bid day when they, indeed, invited Notre Dame. Those are fun. I mean, that is fun and personally gratifying to break, to beat the competition. But, nowadays, there are not many stories that everybody is competing for because everybody is covering [their own]. We are covering our Magic, and Tampa is covering their Bucs [Tampa Bay Buccaneers, professional football team]. There is minimal attention paid to the same stories, except Florida and Florida State now, still a top news subject of most every paper in the state. So, that is about the only area where we really compete anymore. But, I loved the days, you know, my first ten years in Florida. I mean, it was a mad scramble by everybody over the same stories.

W: Now, when you go and cover an event, is it more work, or is it more fun for you?

G: It is both. I mean, again, it is not being an accountant nine to five in an office. I am going someplace different every week. There is a lot of color and pageantry in most everything that I cover. I cover things on a national basis for [the *Sentine*]. So I am at the Super Bowl and the [Kentucky] Derby and the Masters and the Final Four and all of those things where everybody is excited about being there. So, you get swept up in it. It sure beats pushing paper clips around for an eight-hour day.

W: What would be advice for that next generation of journalists in school? Would you recommend this field?

G: Yes, I would recommend it, although it is evolving now. It has become such multi-media. It is getting into the Internet now and, fortunately, our paper is heavily involved in the Internet. With the advent of television, you know, everybody is busy and they have a short memory or attention span, and they are not as anxious to pick up a paper and wade into a 400-line in-depth story on something. They want it snappy and quick, and *USA TODAY* has proven that recipe is what sells. That is what readers want. They want all the news on events in three or four paragraphs. They want a snappy column, and they want to be entertained. But the opportunities are great. I mean, I did not dream when I was a recreation director in Brookhaven, Mississippi, that I would have the opportunity to write books and national magazine pieces and do some television work and make a good living out of this. I mean, I am not wealthy but upper-middle-class, I guess I would be somewhere in there. I am comfortable financially. The opportunities are there in this field now because there is such varie[ty]; there are online services that are begging or throwing money around, trying to hire people to write for them because they have just got so much space

to fill. And the same in television, with so many different channels and so many specialty channels now. There are just endless opportunities for people in the journalism business. But, as far as just the strict, pure newspaper writer, those opportunities are probably narrowing rather than expanding.

W: As you kind of look back on your career here, what is the kind of legacy you would like to leave?

G: Mainly, that I was not boring and that I was fair. As a columnist, you are charged with the responsibility of analysis of opinion and judgements. So, you want to be remembered that, well, he sure made me mad with some of the things that he wrote, but I respect that he was fair and tried to deliver an honest opinion. I might have been off-base, and I am wrong often, but it is always an honest opinion based on the input that I have. That is a problem sometimes when you run into athletes or coaches who stiff-arm you. If they will not give you their input, then I feel they lose the right to complain about what opinion you form, if they have denied the columnist their perspective on something. So, I am wrong often, but it is always an honest opinion based on the input that is available to me.

W: You mentioned before your relationship with Arnold Palmer. What other relationship with either athletes or coaches have you cherished the most?

G: I have had a very, very healthy and friendly relationship with Bobby Bowden [head coach, Florida State University football team]. He is a quality person with old-time values that were sewn into him being way back yonder. Bear Bryant [head coach, Alabama football team] had lots of faults, but he was a very unique individual. He was almost without peer as a coaching motivator and psychologist. There have been people before and since who have been craftier drawers of X's and O's, but there has never been, I do not think, another coach in any sport who was so adept at getting between the ears of his players and getting the absolute maximum out of not only his players but his coaching staff. So, I really cherish the relationship I had and the entre that I had with Bear Bryant. The first time I was in his home, he was so focused on football. A lot of these guys are. Vince Dooley [former head football coach, University of Georgia] is one of the few guys that really has a broad perspective on life and history and so forth. Bobby Bowden has a little of that. But, most football coaches or big-time basketball coaches are so riveted and one-dimensional in what they do, they hardly realize what is going on in the world. But when I went to Bear Bryant's house to do this piece, we went off into his bedroom, this combination bedroom/den, to sit down and do the actual interview, I happened to look up and I saw a painting on his wall that looked familiar to me. At that time, it was a football scene, but it was a semi-abstract painting that was familiar to me. It had been the cover art on a *Sports Illustrated* a couple of years before that for a big

Alabama-Tennessee game, and it was the crucial play in that game. It was painted by Leroy Neiman. It was a Leroy Neiman original. When I asked Coach Bryant about it, his reply was, oh, some guy did that and sent that to me. So, Leroy Neiman, to him, was just some guy. He was oblivious to the fact that he had, probably, a \$200,000 picture hanging on his wall.

W: With the advent of teams and, even, top players having their own public relations people, I am sure it is much more difficult now to have interaction with athletes.

G: It is.

W: How do you feel about that?

G: Yes, it has changed. The personal relationship with athletes has gotten more contentious. It has gotten adversarial. Big Money has brought that on. In the earlier part of my career, athletes in college and, particularly, pro athletes had some respect for the media because they needed the media. They needed publicity to advance their own careers and help their sport. But, now, when a guy is making \$3,000,000 or \$4,000,000 or \$6,000,000 or \$15,000,000 or whatever a year, he does not need the media, and his usual attitude is, I do not need these guys, they are just a pain in the butt, I have my millions, to heck with the sport, I do not need them. They have lost sight that they need to help promote their business, just as if they are a clerk at a Sears or Penney's. That has gotten unpleasant and if an athlete does not want to talk to me, I do not have a problem with that. But he has an obligation, as a human, to be civil about it, and a lot of them are not civil. So, it is degrading a lot of times now when you go into a locker room or something and you get cursed and you get treated like some sub-human, usually by some sub-human who happens to be able to bounce a ball or throw a pass or hit a curve, and who is making \$10,000,000 a year and thumbing his nose at the world.

W: Some of these experiences have really fueled your columns. Do you think this maybe has some effect when you get the creative juices going, this anger of being treated poorly?

G: Well, sure. I mean, sportswriters are human, and I am human, too. So, if somebody is rude to you, it is going to seep over, and you are not going to give him the slack that you would if somebody is courteous and open. When push comes to shove, as a human, that is going to get into your pen to some extent. I am not suggesting that, because somebody guy treats you well, you become a total Homer for him or, if somebody treats you badly, you stalk back to your typewriter and say, I am going to stick it up his twat. Those are the two extremes, and I try to stay away from both of those. I always tell athletes, you want to stay away from reporters who do that. But, the professional reporter or

columnist still has a little gray area there where he does have some wiggle room. When something controversial comes up, you can still cover it and give the guy a little bit of the benefit of the doubt, or you can lean the other way and let the chips fall where they may. You are still professional either way as long as you do not become totally vindictive on one side or totally Homer on the other. Both are dangerous. A lot of players think they want a Homer, but what happens with a Homer is that the reader or the television viewer sees through that pretty quick and they give no credibility to him.

W: Personally, how do you, yourself, stay away from those two extremes? Is it kind of something you just developed over the years, to stay in that gray area?

G: Yes. I mean, I do not know that there is a technique or anything, but I am conscious of it. I am conscious that if I am irritated by the way I am treated by some guy that, wait a minute, I cannot let that influence what I am writing here. Let us look at the facts and make an objective judgement on whatever I am writing.

W: Probably, in the 1990s, the three biggest athletes who have lived in this area would be Shaq[uille O'Neal], Penny [Hardaway], and Tiger Woods [professional golfer]. Are there any experiences or any stories you would like to talk about [concerning] those three?

G: Yes. Shaq is a unique individual. Again, he is the perfect example of a guy who got millions of dollars and worlds of attention, and he did not feel like he owed anything back to anybody. So, he was very difficult to deal with. He was just like a big twelve-year-old. I told the story in there about when he was not going to talk to me for a month. Now, Penny is a curious study and, in a lot of ways, he and Tiger are the same person. They are consumed by entitlement. They think they are entitled, and they want their sport to revolve around them rather than contributing to their sport. Tiger, [when] first onto the scene, [said] that he wanted to deal with golf on his terms, not that he had to adapt to the way that things are done in golf. Fortunately, he is showing great signs of maturing a little and softening and growing out of that quite nicely. Penny never did. Penny was raised as an only child by his grandmother, and he wanted to be grandmothered the rest of his life, and I guess he still does. So, he has totally distorted facts, and he has twisted them that somebody is knocking on him. He has this need that he has built up to have his rump smooched every hour on the hour. Steve Spurrier is a little like that as well. What causes that, I do not dare psychoanalyze them, but why they have this insecurity that has to be stroked constantly might be a good case study for some shrink. I mean, it has consumed Penny and, unfortunately, Penny was surrounded by a lot of sycophants, his agents and his handlers and all whom, instead of helping him, only entrenched him in that thinking, that the world is out to screw him and that people should be

bowing down to him, that he is so wonderful and great. All they are doing is, they are trying to preserve their spot on the gravy train and, instead of helping him grow, they have pushed him in the wrong direction, in the other direction.

W: I am curious to hear what your opinions are on the relationship you have had with the four main coaches the Magic has had, from [Matt] Guokas to now Doc Rivers.

G: I had a good relationship with Guokas. In fact, he worked with me on the creation of the *Making Magic* book, on a lot of the things of how he was hired, that whole process. But, Guokas came in here like a lot of those guys, that Philadelphia group of guys who formed the core of the Magic staff at the start, and he came in here with a little snobby attitude, looking down his nose that there is a bunch of rubes here who know, nothing about the NBA or covering the NBA, which is probably true, but he would have been a lot better off had he not projected that all the time. Brian Hill, who took over for him, was very media suspicious. As it turned out, we developed a wonderful relationship. I kind of got to him through his daughter. I broke the story, which was a secret for a long time, that she had cystic fibrosis, a life-threatening breathing disease. Their daughter had this disease, and they were very sensitive about it and they were very protective of her. They did not want anybody to know. Only a few very, very close people knew about it, and I got onto it. It was about to come out so it was kind of inevitable that, once a few knew it, there was not a decision of whether to write it or not because it was going to come out whether I did the story or not. If I did not, then I was working more for Brian Hill than the *Orlando Sentinel*. So, anyway, I broke the story. I wrote a story, but I was very sensitive with it, and I told him that I wanted to write a story about it, that it was certain to come out. Brian Hill and his wife had agreed to become the local honorary chairpersons for cystic fibrosis and it was going to come out, so I wanted to write this piece and talk to them about the background of it. I knew some of it, enough to write it, but I really did not have the intimate details of how their life was turned upside down when they suddenly realized that she had it. At the time that she got it, it was a disease where, typically, the person would only live to about twenty years old, and she was about ten at the time. But, as they made discoveries and advancements in treating it, she has been ten years behind the curve the whole time. The average age of the life-span of a person with cystic fibrosis keeps going up. She is now in her mid-twenties, but now people are living to thirty-five with that. Anyway, I made the offer to him that, I want to write this, I want to sit down and talk to you about it, I will write it, and I will give you the piece before I send it into the paper so that if there is something that you feel is insensitive or you want to make a case that you'd rather I did not write this, then we would talk about it. I would not give him the red pencil, but I opened it up and allowed him to read the piece first and gave him the opportunity to protest anything or make an appeal. Then the piece came out. It was a big story here, a

huge breaking story, and played very prominent[ly]. One long story, all about the touching moments that they went through when they first found out. He and his wife were very pleased, and so we developed a bond from that. We are still very good friends. It was a joy covering him. I think that kind of broke down the media moat that he had come equipped with, that maybe some of these reporter guys are actually human, too, or responsible and sensitive and professional. So, we had a fine relationship the rest of the time he was here. Chuck Daly came in. Chuck Daly has always been fascinated by journalists, so we hit it off instantly. We played a lot of golf together. Doc Rivers, I have not gotten to know as well. He has only been here a short time, but we are already developing a good relationship, an enjoyable relationship, because he has that with everybody. He is very outgoing, has great people skills, is very responsible, and he understands the need to help sell the Magic and sell pro-basketball to the public, and you do not do that by stiff-arming the media. So, he is a journalist's dream, really, because he is fun to be around and he is very cordial and accessible. So, I anticipate nothing but a very pleasant experience dealing with him.

W: Going back to your days in Mississippi, what has been the toughest story for you to cover?

G: The toughest story, probably, there was a coach named Bob Tyler, who became the head coach at Mississippi. He was a very corrupt coach, and I had gotten too close to him and was too young at the time to realize that what he was doing was cultivating me for his own purposes and that it was not a sincere relationship. It was his attempt to cultivate or create a Homer for him. When I came to realize how corrupt he was and got documented evidence of a lot of infractions, you know, recruiting cheating and so forth, then that was probably the toughest column. I blistered him and just labeled him as an absolute cheat. That was probably the toughest thing. The Payne Stewart column, the morning after he died—for which I have been gratified and it has gotten a lot of huzzahs and applause, atta boys and so forth—was probably one of the easiest columns I have ever written, as far as actually writing it. I mean, it was sad and I was touched by Payne and I was very affected by his death and, like a lot of people who knew him, had come to admire him and watch him grow into a wonderful gentleman and a regular person. I mean, he went from being a celebrity to a person, which is a compliment, [from] me. So, I was affected, and I dropped some tears writing it, but it was an easy column to write because I felt so confident about the subject. It just flowed very quickly. I was off and the incident happened around lunchtime, so they asked me to come into the paper, because they knew I knew him so well, to help them try to reach different people around him and people around the country. A lot of my colleagues around the country, other columnists, were calling all day to pick my brain. They wanted to write a piece, and they knew I was close to Payne and, perhaps, could help them with an anecdote or two. I was on three or four or five radio shows around the country. So, I was [so]

busy all day, helping our guys cover the story, writing the various stories or sidebars on him and pals and business all over the country that, finally, I had to leave the paper and come home to write. I came home about seven o'clock. Normally, my column needs to be in by about seven, unless I am covering an event, writing live. The time dictates that. So, I finally just had to come home and not answer the phone and sit down. But, when I sat down to write, I wrote it in about forty-five minutes, which is about half the time it takes me on a good day. I write, normally, an hour and a half to three hours, to write a column when I actually sit down and start. But, when I started this, forty-five minutes later, it was in the paper. I mean, I sent it.

W: I am just curious about any of your peers around the state of Florida, any fellow columnists you have developed close relationships with, anyone from Tom McEwen to Ed Pope.

G: That has been one of the real joys, developing a friendship and mutual respect with Eddie and McEwen and Hubert Mizell and, now, Mike Bianchi, who is Jacksonville. I tried to get the *Sentinel* to hire him when he was in Cocoa Beach, but they would not, or did not. We are like a tribe, and not only statewide but nationally because I cover the national events for us. It is like a travelling family out there. It is all the same guys that you see, starting with Jim Murray, when he was alive, Blackie Sherod in Dallas, and Ron Green with the *Charlotte Observer*. Where are you from?

W: I grew up in Michigan.

G: Jerry Green with the Detroit paper and (I am having a brain cramp now) the old white-haired guy who was the icon columnist for so long with the Detroit paper. Anyway, Dave Anderson with the *New York Times* and Woody Paige in Denver. We have all become friends and our wives have become friends, because we are all together in the same hotel at the Super Bowl for a week or at the Masters or at the British Open or the World Series or whatever, so we have become social friends as well as professional friends. And there is healthy competition between all of these guys, but there is also a sense of helping out one another as well. I mean, I did not mind spending two or three hours helping other columnists around the country the day that Payne Stewart died and helping them flesh out their columns because I do the same thing when the situation is reversed.

W: What are your opinions on guys, maybe the younger generation, like Album and Bianchi, kind of relating back to Gainesville, Pat Dooley [sportswriter, *Gainesville Sun*], who kind of voice their opinions in different ways than you do in your columns? I mean, these guys are, perhaps, more abrasive.

G: There are a lot of different styles, and there is a lot of great young talent out there. I think Mike Bianchi in Jacksonville is one really enjoyable bright young columnist around, as an example. But the Woodward and Bernstein [and] Watergate infested journalism with people who wanted to get somebody, to get some spectacular negative. There did grow to be, as I mentioned before, the guys in our field who think that you have to have a moat out there, you do not fraternize with news sources. That is kind of unfortunate. There did need to be some cleaning up at one time, and there was a movement to raise the ethics of journalists. In some cases, I think it went too far. It went so far that it lost connection with the sources and the people and the world and the guy on the street. It lost that sensitivity, you know, that the president of the local bank, just because he is a successful capitalist does not mean he is the devil incarnate. He has his problems, too. There was that loss of understanding a lot of times, which is mainly on the news side but it infested sports as well. One sports editor, whom I will not name here, got so carried away with the ethics at an APSE meeting, Associated Press Sports Editors Convention [that] he got up and proposed that they adopt ethics guidelines that would include repaying teams for their fax transmission when they sent you stats, from the University of Florida or the Tampa Bucs, and he was hooted down. We had a young guy who became our swimming writer. Of our important beats, that was maybe the twelfth or fourteenth, but this was his opportunity to get his teeth into something. He did a wonderful job with it. You know, we did not have big swimming stories around here but when the Justis Aquatics Center came in, we started having some national meets, and there were some stories of mild significance anyway. When Greg Louganis [professional diver] was going to come here to compete in a meet, that was news of sorts. It was not thunderclap news but it was news, and it got to where he was breaking all of those stories and, partially, because he had established a very good, healthy, professional relationship with the female PR director of the Justis Aquatics Center. Well, at Christmastime, she baked him a tin of cookies and sent it to the paper as a Christmas gift. Our idiot sports editor made him send those back, in thinking that he was going to really impress her with how ethical we were, and I had to explain to him that her first thought is not going to be how ethical you are but how rude you are and wondering what planet you are from. So, you take it to such extremes that it becomes counterproductive, and you create suspicion rather than respect. That has happened some. There is a story I like to tell of Jim Murray, the columnist in L.A. He is like me. He got to where he was working strictly out of his house or at an event and almost never went to the office at the *L.A. Times*. But he heard from some of the younger writers that there was this ethics movement and that there were no-nos about accepting this and that. Santa Anita Racetrack sent him, as they did every Christmas, a fifth of whiskey as a Christmas gift. So, he called his managing editor whom he worked under and said, I know that we have some new rules about gifts and things; Santa Anita sent me a fifth of whiskey for Christmas, so what should I do about it? And the guy said, drink it. He said, a

fifth is gift; a case is a bribe. So, I have told that story often. There are some social graces involved. If I play golf some place and people insist that I have a complimentary drink, I can kick and scream and say, how dare you, and I am going to pay for this drink. Well, what I do in a case like that is, I will go over and buy a shirt from the shop or a sleeve of balls or something or, at some later time, I will try to take that person out to dinner or something to reciprocate, to balance the relationship. But, there is just the human interaction that intervenes at some point and time. I am all about trying to establish trust with people. When you come off as pious and perfect, then you do not establish trust; you establish suspicion.

W: Wrapping it up here a little bit, now, at age fifty-seven, I am wondering what your life's greatest joys are, both personally and professionally.

G: Personally, my family. I have a wonderful family, and I definitely over-married. I joked about establishing my superiority right from that first meeting when we were competing for the same scholarship prize that I won. But, I definitely over-married. I am married to a wonderful lady. We have been married now for thirty-five years, which does not happen very much anymore. That has been the great joy. Professionally, pick out any six of those national breaking stories that I did. Those are a real high, particularly on a national story like Woody Hayes' successor or something where there is interest all over the country. That is a real high. And I guess the *Arnie* book coming out. That was my third book. The *Making Magic* book was my first book, so that was a real breakthrough and a joy. But, the *Arnie* book, I knew, was something I had been eyeing and working on for most of my career here. Knowing that it was a national/international book and that it was going to be on the shelf, with my name on it, a long time has been a great satisfaction. And getting my only hole-in-one in my checkered golf career, probably, and I wrote a column about that. It is in there. It finally came a year ago, and I have been a single-digit handicapper for thirty-five years. Most people, at my skill level, have eight or ten aces by now, but I have a golden one. It is just, kind of, a fluke of nature that had not happened until last year. So, that was a great thrill, and I had a lot of fun writing a tongue-in-cheek thing about it and got a lot of responses from people that they enjoyed it as well.

W: Finally, here, any predictions for the UF-FSU game on Saturday?

G: Yes, I got it in the paper this morning. I picked FSU by thirteen. They probably will not win by thirteen, if they do win, but you go for a little bit of shock value there. Anybody can pick somebody [to] win by three or two or something. In that game, in years past, I have normally done that, too. Whether it was Florida or Florida State, I will raise a few eyebrows by picking a win by two touchdowns or twenty or something absurd. I do not take predictions very seriously. I am always amused at how seriously fans take them, like you are trying to affect

something or you are trying to punish some team by picking them to lose, and that is silliness. But, as I have always said, fans are funnier than people.

W: I want to thank you very much for allowing me to do this oral history interview.

G: I am glad to help you.

[End of the interview.]

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program

University of Florida

Florida Newspaper Project

Interviewee: Larry Guest
Interviewer: Adam Warrington