

“(Nielsen) was unquestionably one of the greatest men from the greatest generation,” he said. “So accomplished yet so humble, a vision we should all aspire to. May he rest in peace. He deserves it.”

FRANK LEIBFARTH

Nielsen

From Page 1

have been, for he leaves a legacy of service, citizenship and abiding friendship,” Brokaw said.

Brokaw wrote a letter to the editor, honoring Nielsen, that will appear in Monday's edition of the Press & Dakotan.

The following are other tributes provided to the newspaper:

FRANK LEIBFARTH

Yankton native Frank Leibfarth starred for the Bucks football team and gained national recognition as place-kicker for the University of South Dakota.

Leibfarth, who now resides in California, was recognized as one of the nation's top student-athletes by USA Today. While honored by a national publication, Leibfarth never forgot the special bond he enjoyed with Nielsen.

Leibfarth paid tribute to Nielsen in a 2007 letter to the editor in the Press & Dakotan, following the announcement of Nielsen's retirement from the P&D at age 87.

Leibfarth posted the full letter this week on Facebook upon learning of Nielsen's death. The following are excerpts from the 2007 tribute:

“EXTRAORDINARY”

Hod Nielsen once began an article with this simple word. Ironic, isn't it, that it should so well define his life?

Hod is the ultimate philanthropist. He has not given us money; he has given us more than 80 years of his life. He has made sure each and every triumph of local athletes is appreciated. He has touched innumerable lives in his time and has asked nothing in return save for a medium to share his ever positive message.

I met Hod unremarkably, sitting in the athletic office in Yankton High School. I knew of him as a gifted writer and a local legend. I never realized how he would so subtly impact my life.

We kept in touch in my high school years, and I always looked forward to his analysis of each of our football games in the Saturday paper. Thankfully, our relationship did not end when I began my career at the University of South Dakota, his alma mater.

Tom Brokaw once said, “It's always been special to read your name beneath (Hod Nielsen's) byline.” I never realized how profound that statement was until Hod wrote an article about me. It began, “Extraordinary,” and it didn't end before many of my tears covered the page. My father wept as he read the article to his mother. My mother just wept. My grandmother did not stop talking about it for three months.

I have never been complimented so well, or humbled so completely. To think, that was only one of the thousands of articles Hod has written over the years. He has touched so many of our lives.

Hod, at more than 80 years old, still walks down the Dakota-Dome steps an hour and a half before each Coyote football game and unassumingly stands on the sideline until I notice him between warm-up kicks. At no point throughout the year do I smile quite as wide.

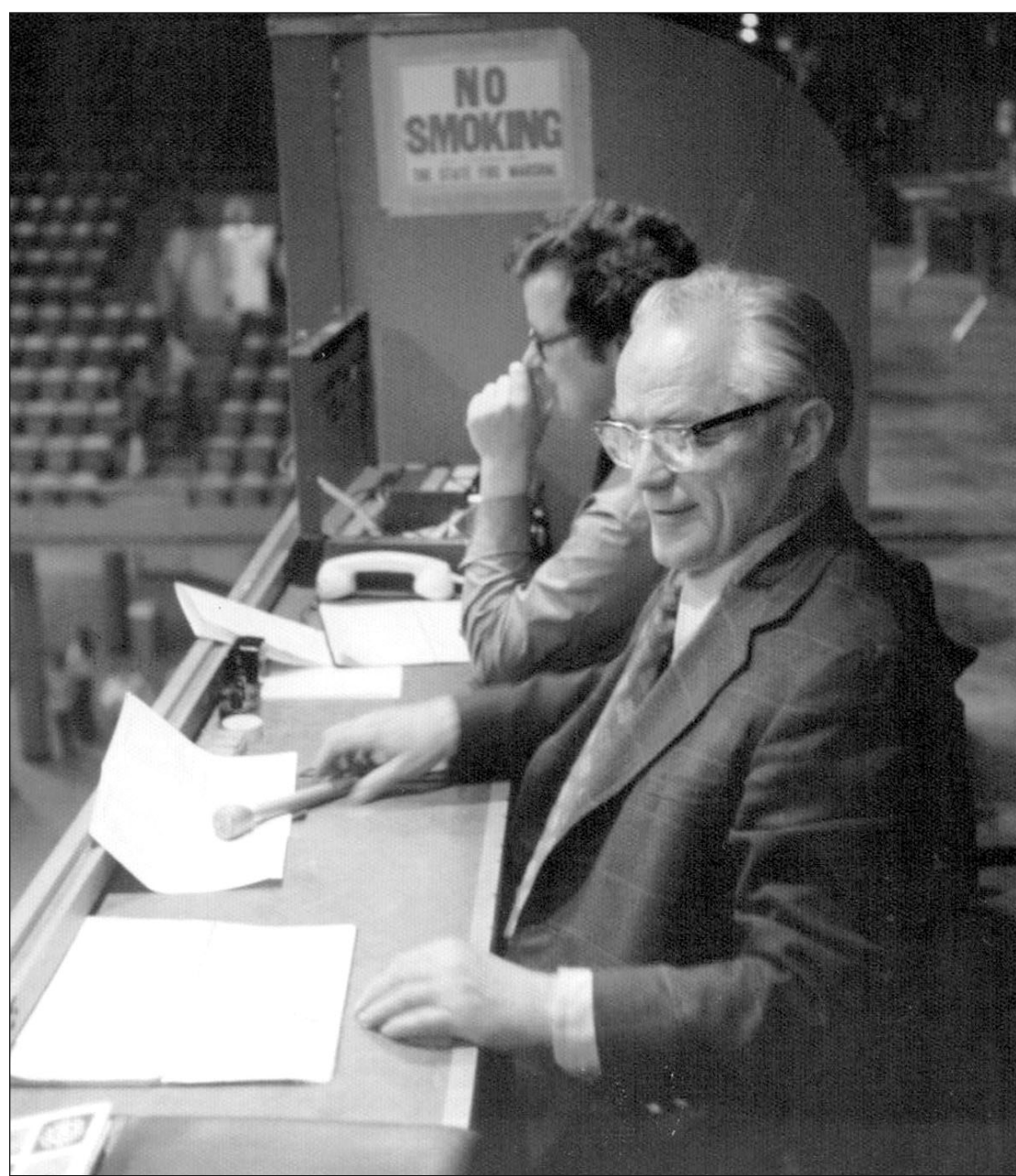
So, Hod, thank you for your tireless commitment to your noble profession. Thank you for serving our South Dakota community so diligently, and thank you for making such a positive and lasting impact on so many of our lives. You are one of the greatest men of the Greatest Generation.

You will not be forgotten.

Leibfarth told the Press & Dakotan this week that he felt tremendous emotion upon learning of Nielsen's death.

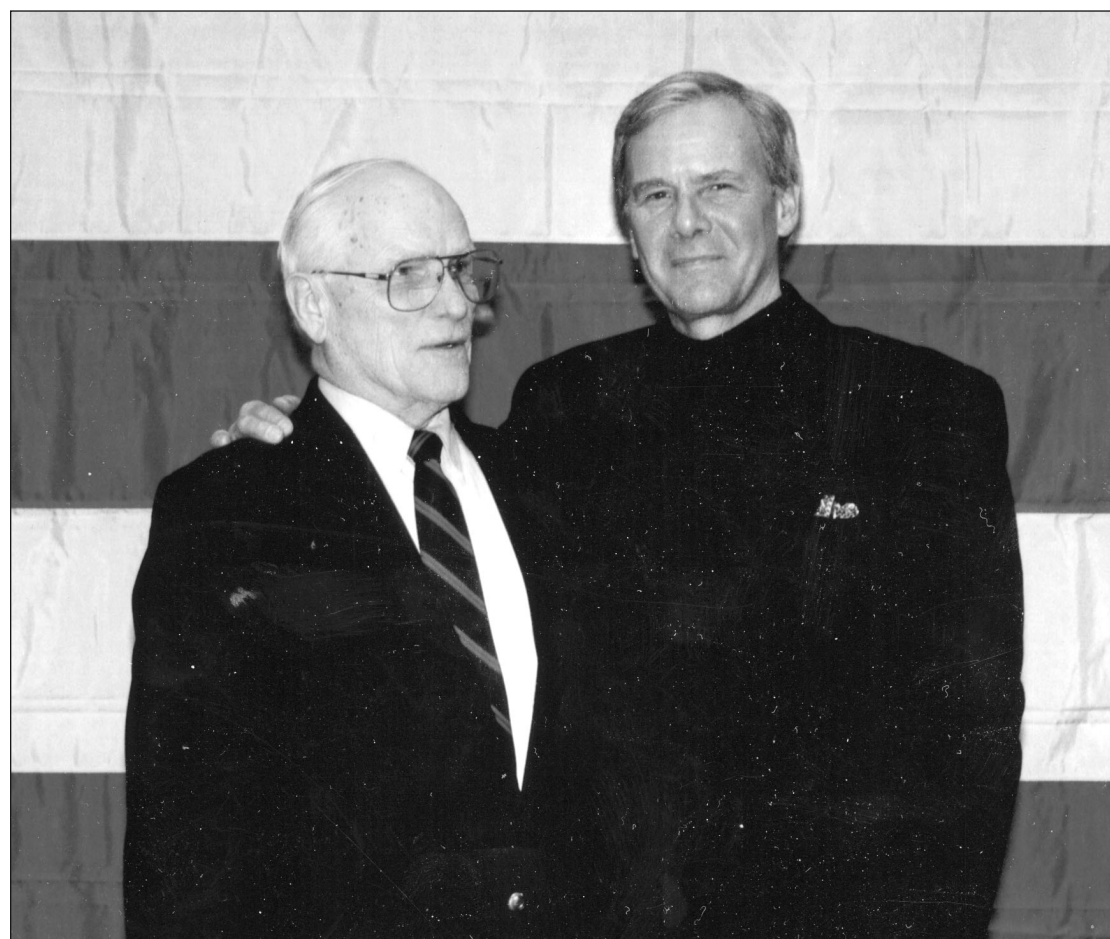
“I want to reiterate how happy I was to see Hod before every Coyote game. He didn't realize what an honor it was FOR ME that he made the trip all the way down to the field before every game,” Leibfarth said.

“I also appreciated Hod's respect for me (and others) as a person. Most people in the athletic world knew me as an athlete ... and that was all. It's just easier to have a one-dimensional image



COURTESY PHOTOS

ABOVE: Nielsen is shown preparing to broadcast a basketball game (probably a state tournament contest) in a photo taken in an unknown year. **BELOW:** Longtime friend Tom Brokaw (right) featured Nielsen in the best-selling book “The Greatest Generation,” highlighting Nielsen's experience as a photo reconnaissance pilot during World War II. **ABOVE RIGHT:** A few years ago, Nielsen got the chance to sit in a restored P-38 airplane, similar to the aircraft he flew in the war, when the plane made a stop in Yankton.



of someone you see on the field.”

Nielsen looked at the entire person and didn't view someone strictly in terms of sports or the event at hand, Leibfarth said.

“Hod always took a holistic view of the athletes and people he covered. He was just as likely to mention someone's scholastic or artistic achievements as their athletic ones,” he said.

“For me, who never considered myself an ‘athlete,’ this acceptance from him and others in the community put some of my insecurities to rest and allowed me to pursue my many interests with confidence.”

Nielsen's legacy will remain alive in the thousands of people whose lives he touched, Leibfarth said.

“(Nielsen) was unquestionably one of the greatest men from the greatest generation,” he said. “So accomplished yet so humble, a vision we should all aspire to. May he rest in peace. He deserves it.”

YHS COACHES

Three long-time Yankton High School coaches recalled their experiences working with Nielsen.

Former volleyball coach and current tennis coach Ginger Larsen, who knew Nielsen for 30 years, recalled her nervousness

just prior to her first radio interview with the broadcaster during a Saturday morning coaches show. However, he soon put the coach at ease on the air.

“He was a great guy and great supporter of Yankton High school athletes and coaches,” Larsen said.

Football coach Arlin Likness appreciated Nielsen's approach to interviews.

“He was just a great sports writer that had the ability to put coaches' thoughts on paper in a positive way all the time,” Likness said. “Hod was an amazing guy. He used his experiences to enhance his writing and column.”

Girls basketball coach Doug Pesicka saw Nielsen's death as the end of an era.

“Hod's passing is a great loss for the Yankton community. Hod was one of the last links from Yankton's present to its tradition-rich past,” Pesicka said.

“As a young coach, I always felt like Hod was one of those sports writers that just simply ‘got it.’ He understood the mind and the emotion of coaches. In victory and defeat, Hod was always positive and had a great knack for keeping things in perspective. He was a very ‘coach

friendly’ sportswriter.”

DON SMITH

Former Press & Dakotan publisher Don Smith, now at the Grand Island (Neb.) Independent, recalled Nielsen as both a sportswriter and decorated war veteran.

“South Dakota has lost one of its favorite sons. I will always remember Hod as one of the most remarkable people that I have known,” Smith said.

“Like many World War II veterans who survived unbelievably harrowing missions, he was a humble man of great character, honesty and humanity. He had a sharp and unflinching sense of humor and, of course, he leaves a towering legacy in the realm of South Dakota sports writing. I feel privileged to have known him.”

ROGER SMITH

Yankton businessman Roger Smith knew Nielsen for years as a referee, fan and leader of the Yankton Quarterback Club.

But Nielsen also drove Smith's grandfather, U.S. Sen. Chan Gurney, around the state for appear-



ances and fund-raisers. When Gurney lost a re-election bid in the Republican primary, Nielsen changed his party affiliation from Republican to Democrat, Smith said.

Nielsen was a voracious reader, and his passion for education extended to his newspaper writing and work with the schools, Smith said.

“Hod was big into education and with kids doing things like academics and the arts,” Smith said. “He was interested in the kids following those venues as much as he was the kids who were in football, basketball and track.”

“He liked to see kids accomplish a number of things. That was a big deal with him.”

Nielsen and other World War II veterans returned home to help build Yankton and the nation. They showed a passion for life, including a local group who golfed and spent time together in other activities.

“After the war, they were all glad to be alive,” Smith said. “They were footloose and fancy free, just enjoying life. It was amazing.”

CHUCK IVERSON

Mount Marty College athletic director Chuck Iverson knew Nielsen as very supportive of the college, even serving as the sports information director in the school's early days.

Nielsen continued his strong interest in the college as P&D sports editor.

“Hod was the only sports person who really covered the Lancers from the start. He covered us for 34 years,” Iverson said. “He didn't get paid for it, but he also served as our publicity chairman for the Nebraska-South Dakota All-Star Game (held on the MMC campus). He just enjoyed meeting the kids.”

Iverson enjoyed Nielsen's visits to the MMC athletic department.

“The highlight of my day was when Hod visited me at the office. I just loved that,” Iverson said. “He was always full of new subjects, and it was great to talk to him about things in the world. He was a great guy, and I don't think he said a negative thing in his life.”

In his later years, Nielsen became more comfortable talking about his World War II experiences, Iverson said.

“Hod was one of the greatest guys to come out of the Greatest Generation,” Iverson said.

BOB WINTER

Former YHS basketball coach and activities director Bob Winter knew Nielsen for more than 50 years.

Winter unexpectedly became

part of Nielsen's sportscasting crew for a time in the early years.

“Hod accidentally got shot in the leg when he was pheasant hunting. The radio station had this piece of equipment, and he had a tough time carrying it around, so I started carrying it for him when I went along on broadcasts” Winter said with a laugh.

In the 1960s, Nielsen and other broadcasters formed a radio network to broadcast the state basketball tournament, providing statewide coverage to areas that may not have received it otherwise.

“Hod would broadcast the state tournament. As a result, he knew everybody, and he knew the coaches from everywhere,” Winter said.

Nielsen's patriotism showed during athletic contests, Winter said.

“Hod was adamant about the National Anthem being played or sung correctly — in other words, the standard U.S. Army way,” Winter said. “If it wasn't sung properly, Hod let them know. Very seldom would you hear any variation. It was the real thing. It was Hod's patriotism, no question about it.”

Nielsen began to speak about his war experiences in recent years, including flying without parachutes while escaping German airplanes, Winter said.

Nielsen briefly relived a war experience — in a much safer environment — in recent years in Yankton.

“The P&D did a story, where somebody brought a P-38 here to the airport,” Winter said. “They took Hod out to the airport, and he climbed into that thing. Hod said, ‘Give me the key and I can fly it out of here.’”

Winter quizzed the veteran about a reported local aerial maneuver.

“There was one of those rumors that Hod flew under the (Meridian) bridge. He would never admit it, but one day when I asked him about it he said, ‘Maybe,’” Winter said.

Nielsen supported education, including the arts, and was inducted into the YHS Fine Arts Hall of Fame for his journalism contributions.

Nielsen drew a large and loyal following among Yankton and area residents, Winter said.

“When they had the 90th birthday celebration for Hod at Walnut Village two years ago, he had people literally come out of the woodwork that he didn't expect to be there,” Winter said.

“I think that showed how much respect that people had for him.”

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at twitter.com/RDockendorf

10% OFF Your Project

Blackburn Basement Systems
Waterproofing & Repair

Basement & Foundation Specialists™

Wet Basement? Basement Wall Bowed? Foundation Settling?

- FREE Estimates
- Financing Available

Toll Free 1-800-392-3389
www.blackburnbasementrepair.com
(Cannot be combined with any other offers)

Warm Air Heat Pumps, Geothermal and Air to Air

Quieter and 22° warmer than any other.

Available exclusively at...

Larry's HEATING & COOLING
920 Broadway • 665-9461

FACTORY AUTHORIZED DEALER
Carrier
turn to the experts

Jueden Lawn Service

Total Lawn Service

Fertilizer/Chemical Application
Landscaping • Lawn Irrigation
Snow Removal

31147 445th Ave, Yankton, SD
402-841-2046