Tribute

Former AP football writer dies at 73

By BARRY WILNER, The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Dave Goldberg always relished the chance to share his journalistic expertise and views with his peers. In turn, reporters walked away wiser, often chuckling from his humor.

Goldberg, one of the nation's top football writers and an award-winning veteran of 41 years at The Associated Press, died Sunday. He was 73.

Goldberg, who retired from the AP in 2009 after a quarter-century as its lead NFL writer, died at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, New York, from complications following hip surgery Jan. 24, his family said.

One of the lead voices on the Pro Football Hall of Fame committee, Goldberg's insight and storytelling highlighted his writing, whether he was covering sports or politics.

"The NFL community has lost a good friend and highly respected professional," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said. "Dave's integrity, passion, and sense of fairness enabled him to maintain excellent working relationships with team owners, coaches, players, and commissioners. He was a real pro who served NFL fans exceptionally well with his coverage of the league for many years."

Goldberg's worldly view brought a freshness and edginess to his reporting. A self-taught authority on the Civil War, his sense of history clearly informed his political reporting.
"Dave loved covering the NFL as much, if not a wee bit more, than the other two loves of his life: the Grateful Dead and schmoozing," said former AP Sports Editor Terry Taylor. "His colleagues even good-naturedly dubbed him 'Dr. Schmooze.' Dave happily weighed in on any subject that came up in the office: sports, politics, music, dogs, cats, horses, the Mets and certainly the New York Giants.

"But, most importantly, his sharp insights and good instincts, his wit and his big heart, greatly endeared him to all of us. Dave was truly a kind and gentle man."

Highly esteemed by NFL Commissioners Pete Rozelle, Paul Tagliabue and Goodell, team owners and executives, coaches and players, Goldberg covered some of the biggest sports stories, including Rozelle's surprise resignation in 1989, and the long process resulting in Tagliabue's ascension.

"Dave was a great writer and a great person, someone who was always involved with the NFL," Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney said. "He also did an outstanding job with the Pro Football Hall of Fame because he knew the players from the past and knew the history of the league."

Added Hall of Fame Vice President Joe Horrigan: "He epitomized everything you would hope a selector would represent: integrity, commitment, courage and honesty."

Goodell, Rooney and other key NFL figures trusted Goldberg because they knew his priority was reporting the news, not sensationalizing it.

"Dave and I did not always see eye to eye on league matters. But, considering our jobs, neither of us really was surprised by that," said Joe Browne, a longtime business contemporary of Goldberg's and senior adviser to Goodell. "However, he never let his personal opinions affect his NFL coverage."

His background as a political reporter helped define his coverage of two NFL players' strikes and the USFL-NFL trial.

"He developed close relationships and appeared as comfortable discussing collective bargaining issues with union leader Gene Upshaw as he did matching wits on a blackboard with coach Bill Walsh or arguing the merits of a draft pick with Giants general manager George Young," Browne said.

Players' union spokesman George Atallah lauded Goldberg as a journalist who "cared about the facts and held all of us in the business accountable to the highest standards."

Like the star athletes he wrote about, Goldberg excelled in the tightest situations. His stories from Super Bowl squeezers or routs were filled with nuance and description that made readers feel as if they were at the 50-yard line.
In previewing the 1988 Super Bowl, he wrote: "For the second straight year, the Super Bowl comes down to John Elway against the world, the world this year being the Washington Redskins rather than the New York Giants. Is there anyone else on the Broncos besides their quarterback?"

Goldberg also served as an assistant bureau chief, correspondent, editor and supervisor for the AP from 1968-2009.

A former football and baseball player and graduate of Williams College, Goldberg did graduate study at Stanford. He joined the AP in '68, rising from New Jersey state house correspondent to news editor, to assistant bureau chief in Chicago to supervisor on the general news desk in New York. He soon was elevated to a features writer, editor and supervisor, frequently handling political stories.

Goldberg joined the sports desk in 1982, and covered a variety of other sports — from baseball at Shea Stadium to the Pan American Games in Venezuela.

"Dave was more than a man of opinions," said Darrell Christian, who preceded Taylor as AP sports editor. "Sure, he had many, and he was never shy about expressing them, but the important thing was that people listened, even if they didn't agree. He engendered that rare type of respect, be it from the supervisors who basked in his success or the people he covered in the moneyed offices and stadiums of the NFL."

Goldberg spent countless hours with coaches over the years and had little patience for coach-speak or breathless talk of the critical importance of an upcoming game. Goldberg would be quick to remind everyone what one of his favorite NFL figures, Hall of Fame coach Marv Levy, once told him: "A must win? World War II was a must win."

Among the sports writers Goldberg took under his wing was Judy Battista of The New York Times.

"He didn't know me and he was obviously much older and much more well-connected and experienced," said Battista, now with NFL Network. "And he offered me advice, told me who to call, shared a lot of insight. He certainly didn't have to do that and I never forgot it."

Goldberg had pet peeves about the business. He wondered if reporting was losing its standards, with less fact-checking and excessive use of anonymous sources. And when Goldberg heard NFL announcers utter such phrases as "future Hall of Famer" or "these teams don't like each other," well, he was ready to hold court.

Goldberg is survived by brother Lenny, sister Myra, sister-in-law Katy and nieces Devlin, Anna and Morgan. He was predeceased by longtime partner Kay Bartlett, a former AP writer.