

COMMENTARY: MICHAEL MACCAMBRIDGE

## **Bud Shrake began brilliant career in sports**

By [Michael MacCambridge](#)

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When I was first introduced to Bud Shrake in 1988, I knew only that he was the lifelong best friend of my sportswriting hero, the legendary Dan Jenkins, as well as the inspiration for Jenkins' impossibly romantic and mysterious character Marvin "Shake" Tiller, in the bawdy 1972 best-seller "Semi-Tough" and subsequent novels.

It turned out that Shrake the man was even more impressive than "Shake" the character. A rakishly handsome figure, he possessed the quiet, formidable presence of Clint Eastwood, the effortless charisma of Paul Newman, and the penetrating eye of a born novelist. He made writing for a living seem like the most exciting thing in the world.

Shrake and Jenkins came of age in the romantic era of American newspapers, at a time when sports were still treated as a second-class vocation, the marginal "toy department" of the news world. The genius of their writing, and their personas, was that they were fully-rounded individuals, worldly men conversant with and influenced by the great writers and thinkers. Yet none of this prevented them from losing all sense of reason over the outcome of a football game.

Shrake the novelist/playwright/renaissance man of letters eventually transcended the world of sports so completely that people forgot what a terrific sportswriter he was. On Halloween night 1959, covering the epic LSU-Ole Miss game, he wrote what friend Gary Cartwright would later call "the greatest deadline sports story I've ever read in my life." Shrake went to Sports Illustrated in 1964 and memorably covered the early days of the American Football League. In 1967, in the days before Muhammad Ali formally declined to enroll in the Army, Shrake drove him around Houston. Along the way in the '60s, Bud cavorted with millionaires and hobos, dated strippers and swimsuit models, and always seemed to land in the center of things.

On a bender one night in New York, he hired an amateur photographer to cover a coming prizefight for SI. It was Frank Sinatra.

Shrake outgrew Sports Illustrated, settled down in Austin and stopped drinking, but the questing spirit never left him. He was secure enough in his own accomplishments that he derived greater joy in the success of others.

Befriending Harvey Penick at the Austin Country Club, Bud persuaded the revered pro to share the notes accumulated in his decades of teaching into what became the "Little Red Book." Shrake loved to tell about the long struggle to get a book deal for the improbable effort.

When he finally got an offer from Simon & Schuster, he called Penick to let him know that the book would be published, for an advance of \$100,000. Penick seemed unimpressed, and he told Bud he'd think about it and call him back the next day.

The next morning, Shrake's phone rang. "I've talked to my wife," Penick said regretfully. "Bud, I'm sorry. I'd like to have the book published. But we don't have that kind of money."

Bud gently explained that the money was paid to Harvey, not by him. And then the "Little Red Book" went on to become the best-selling sports book in history.

In the end, what endured were Shrake's literary gifts, his generosity of spirit — he nurtured my career, along with those of dozens of more talented writers — and that enduring friendship with Jenkins.

When I was writing my first book, about the history of Sports Illustrated, I came to understand just how different Shrake and Jenkins were. Yet they were fiercely loyal to each other; friendship trumped all.

The day that the O.J. Simpson verdict was handed down, Oct. 3, 1995, I was in Fort Worth, interviewing Jenkins at the Worthington hotel. Riffing on the case, he mentioned offhand that Bud thought O.J. was innocent, then launched into another angle on the human circus.

I did not often interrupt Jenkins, but in this case I couldn't help myself.

"Wait — Bud thinks O.J. is innocent?"

Dan paused, took another drink of coffee, and seemed to ponder how best to explain his best friend.

"There's two things you must know about Bud," he said. "First of all, he hates all cops. Secondly ... he bet on Argentina to win the Falklands War."

When I would return to Austin, Bud always found time to meet me for lunch at Las Palomas — usually joined by our friend Barbara Morgan, the executive director of the Texas Film Festival. Barbara and I always remarked afterward that this was how we wanted to be when we grew older — wise, self-possessed, vital, curious, productive, and at some level still inscrutable.

But there were hints. In 1998, I started a football pool, in which a bunch of friends were asked to pick the winners of 20 college and pro games each week. Shrake participated every year, with his partner and longtime friend Rick Pappas. In eleven seasons of predicting football games, he never once picked against his beloved Cowboys or Longhorns.

Shrake always led with his heart. And a generation of writers followed.

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