

BILL PLASCHKE Has Been, Writing From the Heart for 38 YEARS

BY JOHN GITTELSON

LOS ANGELES TIMES SPORTS COLUMNIST COVERS
THE ULTIMATE REALITY SHOW, AND EARNS THE
JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

Bill Plaschke was preparing to call it a night on Saturday, Feb. 1. It was three weeks after the Eaton Fire destroyed half the houses on his Altadena cul-de-sac.

His home was left standing but rendered uninhabitable due to toxic smoke. He and his fiancée Roxana were now living a nomadic life, staying in one Airbnb after another, a state familiar to tens of thousands of Angelenos displaced by the wildfires.

Around 10 p.m., the phone rang. It was Plaschke's editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, Iliana Limon Romero, telling him the Lakers had traded Anthony Davis for Luka Dončić; it was a blockbuster deal that would supercharge the team led by aging superstar LeBron James. Plaschke roused himself from bed and composed a column.

"In making the boldest move in franchise history Saturday night, the Lakers rediscovered their fight, their future and the hearts of their fans," he wrote, his reflex for deploying superlatives in high gear. "Great trade. Tremendous trade. Championship trade."

He delivered the column at 1 a.m.

"I just felt it," he says in an interview. "That's when writing from the heart always works."

Plaschke has been writing from the heart about sports for 38 years, including almost three decades as a columnist for the *Times*. He is a member of the National Sports Media Hall of Fame and California Sports Hall of Fame. He

has been named national Sports Columnist of the Year nine times by the Associated Press, and twice by the Society of Professional Journalists and the National Headliner Awards. He has written six books.

He spent 22 years on ESPN's daily talk show "Around the Horn," where his self-deprecating claim to fame was being muted 1,758 times, a now unbreakable record. The show aired a final time May 23. The last episode brought Plaschke to tears.

Now he's got another prize for his shelf: the Los Angeles Press Club's Joseph M. Quinn Award for Lifetime Achievement. Previous recipients include Stephen A. Smith, Lester Holt, Andrea Mitchell, Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw.

"This is much larger than me," Plaschke says. "I accept the award for the whole *Los Angeles Times*, all we were and all we're trying to be."

He receives the award as the *Times*, like many news organizations, faces budget cuts and layoffs under a billionaire owner whose commitment to journalism has been questioned. Despite his notoriety, Plaschke lives in constant fear of losing his job. And that's a motivation.

"I spent my career waiting to get tapped on the shoulder and get fired," he says. "That's why I try to make the extra call, I try to do the extra interview, I try to make the extra observation, I try to give them more and more and more."

This month, Plaschke revealed that he's suffering from Parkinson's disease.



Phil Ellsworth / ESPN Images



Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times

Above: Plaschke is muted along with fellow panelists by "Around the Horn" host, Tony Real; the show aired for the final time in May, after 22 years.

Left: Plaschke works out at Kaizen Martial Arts & Fitness which offers a boxing fitness program for Parkinson's patients called Kaizen Kinetics.

"I've spent my entire career writing triumphant stories about athletes overcoming illness and adversity, only to reach the home stretch struggling to find a similar triumph in a story about me," he wrote. "Now I know what all those subjects of all those feel-good stories understood about the truth behind my positive prose. Degen-

erative disease sucks beyond any inspirational adjective. Incurable illness stinks beyond any hopeful headline."

Plaschke speaks with a slight stutter and the country accent of his native Louisville, Kentucky. He grew up watching the "Wide World of Sports." On Saturday afternoons, the opening

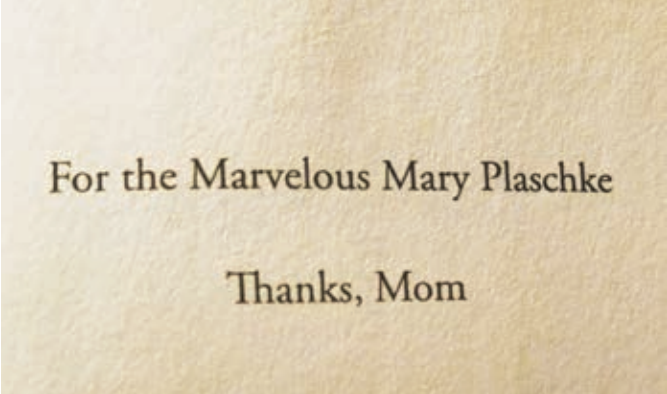
JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD BILL PLASCHKE



Plasche had a close relationship with his mother who supported his writing from childhood, typing his stories and delivering them to the local newspaper, to encouraging him to finish his book. Passing days before publication he was able to dedicate the book to her. Above, they hold up their betting tickets at Churchill Downs.



musical fanfare would play and the announcer intoned: “Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sports. The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” The voice played over



a montage of a man diving off a cliff, a figure skater spinning pirouettes, a skier wiping out.

“I base my whole career on that poor skier who gets knocked on his ass,” Plaschke says. “Everything for me is either something great or it’s a nightmare. Life is a disaster or horrific or wonderful or splendid or tremendous. I’m full of hyperbole.”

His journalism career began in eighth grade, covering youth baseball. He would pen a story that his mother would type and deliver to the box of the weekly newspaper, the *Jeffersonian Voice*, on Monday. It would come out in print on Wednesday.

“It was like a miracle,” he says. “I would write and somebody else would read. And I soon realized that my writing can make people laugh or



cry or think.”

He worked at newspapers in Fort Lauderdale and Seattle before joining the *Los Angeles Times*. He considers Los Angeles the world’s greatest city for athletic spectacles.

“No city has more live, viable sports than we do, nobody,” he says. “It’s part of me being so lucky. It’s impossible not to find a great story.”

He made a habit of preparing two columns for each game in order to meet deadlines: One for victory and one for defeat.

“USC wins and they’re a great program on the way back,” he says. “They lose and they’re a terrible program in ruins. I’m very black and white in my writing. There’s not a lot of gray in sports.”

His advice to aspiring journalists: “I just work



my ass off, and that’s the one thing you can control. You can’t control your God-given talent. You can’t control your background—whether you have parents with influence. You can’t control where you come from. You can’t control your race, your creed or sexuality. But you can control how hard you work.”

He also says not to get too hung up on style.

“I’m not writing Shakespeare here,” he says. “This is sports.”

Plaschke has a library of memories. He was in the stands in the 1988 World Series when a hobbled Kirk Gibson hit a game-winning home run for the Dodgers. He was at last year’s World Series when Freddie Freeman whacked another walk-off homer for the Dodgers against the Yankees.


He chronicled Kobe Bryant’s career from his rookie year. There were times when Bryant wouldn’t talk to him and other times they’d be best friends.



Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times

Above left: More childhood photos while growing up in Kentucky.-




Above: Plaschke carried the Olympic torch in downtown Los Angeles before the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City.




HONDA Center

Congratulations, Bill Plaschke
—A True MVP of LA Journalism

Thank you for telling the stories that shaped our teams, our fans, and our city.
From all of us at OCVIBE, Honda Center, and the Anaheim Ducks—congratulations, Bill.



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THE SPANOS FAMILY AND LOS ANGELES CHARGERS CONGRATULATE


BILL PLASCHKE

ON RECEIVING THE

JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD

FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AND SALUTES

ALL OF TONIGHT’S AWARD WINNERS



JOSEPH M. QUINN AWARD BILL PLASCHKE



Plaschke's Big Brother relationship with Andrew Ladores is captured above from age 7 to sitting with him in the Dodger dugout in 2017.

Bryant's death in a 2020 helicopter crash was one of Plaschke's hardest losses.

"I'm screaming right now, cursing into the sky, crying into my keyboard, and I don't care who knows it," he wrote after the fatal accident.



He's stretched beyond sports, writing about contracting COVID in 2020, about his decades-long relationship as a Big Brother to the late Andrew Ladores, who died in 2022 of cystic fibrosis; about the fire-ravaged town of Paradise and its gritty high school football team; of being wracked with guilt when his Altadena home was spared from flames.

The Lakers, as everyone now knows, are not champions after trading for Luca Doncic. That's sports.

"It's the only thing in life that's totally unscripted," Plaschke says. "It's real drama. It's real passion. It's real failure. It's the ultimate reality show." 🍷

**THANK YOU, BILL,
FOR A LIFETIME OF STORIES.**
CONGRATULATIONS TO YOU AND ALL THE HONOREES.

FROM LAFC



*The Dodgers congratulate
BILL PLASCHKE
on being honored with the Joseph M. Quinn Award
for Lifetime Achievement*

