

Been Thinking 'Bout... Tom

Whil Hentzen

In the early '70s, there was a distance runner named Steve Prefontaine who ran for the University of Oregon. He was a living legend, larger than life. A no-holds-barred, no quarter asked or given kind of competitor. The kind of guy who won races by pushing the pace from the opening gun, and simply burying the competition. The kind of guy who told the national media he was going to take Olympic gold medalist Frank Shorter to the cleaners, and then did. But also the kind of guy you'd want as your best friend.

One spring day in high school, one of the guys on the track team walked up to me after fifth period and said "Pre is dead." Some people know where they were when JFK was shot—I know which locker I was standing by when I heard those words. Ten minutes later, members of the track team started appearing in the locker room. We cut class for the rest of the day, told the coach we weren't going to be at practice, and went out for a quiet 15-mile run—a special eulogy for our hero.

Tom Rettig died on February 14, 1996.

Apparently it was a medical condition involving his kidneys and other internal organs, and, as he wished, it was sudden. I had been seeing customers all day and when I got back to the office about 6 p.m., I saw a number of messages, including one from Tom's partner, Tom Rombouts. As I started to pick up the phone to return calls, it rang, and Val Matison gave me the news.

Our community is spread out across the world these days, and there's no mechanism for us to spend time together as we did that spring day in high school. So I've spent the last few days alone, thinking about Tom. His death has had the same effect on me as Pre's. Tom,, also, was a living legend, larger than life.

Acknowledged as the "guru's guru" at Ashton-Tate, Nantucket, and Fox, Tom treated software like Pre treated track—an opponent to be controlled, molded, and ultimately overpowered. Tom had a mastery that few others will ever understand. But there are a lot of smart folks out there, and Tom also knew that he put his pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else.

He was genuinely approachable, and I can't count the number of times I heard people say "I can't believe I'm talking to Tom Rettig." Over the past decade, his classic "handbooks" gave him special visibility, but he never distanced himself from those who were just learning. And he was always engaging. I remember the first time he showed TRO in Windows in public. I asked him what the pattern of the TRO logo meant, and he paused and returned with a grin, "What would you like it to mean, Whil?"

Yet he was still willing to admit his own shortcomings. I once heard him discussing the issues involved in porting DOS to Windows. Someone pointed out a trick to aid with some task in Windows, and Tom responded in front of hundreds of people, "I didn't know that—that's a good technique."

Tom also pushed living to the limits. If you knew him, you know he partied as hard as he wrote code. I've been at various DevCon gatherings in which the hotel security staff has visited at 2 or 3 a.m. with orders to "keep it down" or "break it up." Somehow, I seem to remember that Tom, despite being nearly 20 years older than I, always seemed to be in the vicinity.

If there was a Fox Hall of Fame, Tom would be a charter member. While his physical presence will be missed, he's left a legacy for the rest of us. The chapter in our lives that holds Tom Rettig may be finished, but we'll be rereading it many times.

Whil