

Jim Taylor was a sportswriter more entertaining than the teams he covered. He was certainly more popular.

Generations of Vancouver sports fans knew that however disappointing the performance of hockey's Canucks, soccer's Whitecaps, or football's B.C. Lions, they would be treated the following day to a funny, acerbic and satisfying sports column.

Mr. Taylor, who has died on Vancouver Island at 81, showed little patience for prima donna athletes, or wannabe jocks in the press box. He abhorred cliché, eschewed the bland quote, and took delight in eviscerating the pompous.

His bon mots were shared at office water coolers, stuck to refrigerators, kept folded inside wallets and purses. In the days when he wrote for the afternoon Vancouver Sun, sports-obsessed schoolchildren raced home after the final bell to read his column.

Over the years, he wrote more than 15,000 newspaper columns, many of them produced on deadline. He did at least twice as many radio commentaries, as well as countless television appearances, and found the time to write more than a dozen books, including collaborations with wheelchair athlete Rick Hansen, big-band leader Dal Richards and the father-son duo of Walter and Wayne Gretzky. Two collections of his columns were titled, "You Mean I Get Paid to do This?" and "Forgive Me My Press Passes."

His writing displayed a deft, conversational touch leavened by sarcasm and wit. It had been his ambition as a young man to be a humourist like Eric Nicol.

When a hockey team agreed to pay out the remaining \$60,000 on a player's contract, Mr. Taylor conjured an epistolary exchange with his editor in which he munificently offered to not write for a similar amount.

When another hockey player's first-person account of skating in the Stanley Cup playoffs was pitched to his editor, Mr. Taylor's response was a column in which he offered to be a sixth-string defenceman for the New York Islanders.

"In my entire life I'd bet on four horses," he once wrote. "At last report all four were still running and the clocker was using a sundial."

Mr. Taylor once explained to readers the positions of a curling foursome: "Each rink is made up of a 'lead,' who is first to the bar; a 'second,' who is a step slower; a 'third,' who arrives in time to buy the round; and a 'skip,' so called because he's always in the washroom when the tab arrives."

When the Edmonton Eskimos dominated football and the Edmonton Oilers hockey, Mr. Taylor assured Vancouver readers that those fans, however happy, still faced the ignominy of living in a barren wasteland.

“It’s Minor Hockey Week in Canada,” he once suggested. “Take a Canuck to lunch.”

The concluding series of never-ending hockey playoffs he described as “the Stanley Cup Finally.”

He dismissed baseball except for its soporific qualities. “To be properly appreciated,” he wrote, “baseball requires a great sofa.”

There was nothing athletic about Mr. Taylor, who was bald in his 20s and squinted behind thick glasses. He had a braying laugh and a habit of testing one-liners on fellow sportswriters. Colleagues nicknamed him Skull for his barren scalp. When he and fellow Sun columnist Jim Kearney both took ill during a road trip, Mr. Taylor branded them as “Butch Casualty and the Sunstroke Kid.”

His humour about gender roles and conjugal relations dated from the Mad Men era, yet he helped at least one aspiring young woman to break into sports writing. He was known for his generosity to young reporters, offering words of praise. His opinions about newspaper management were mostly unprintable. He left the Vancouver Sun when a new publisher forbade freelance work. Mr. Taylor’s impressive output in print, radio and on television was fueled by a desire to provide the best possible care for a daughter rendered a quadriplegic when crashed into by a reckless skier in 1976.

James Edgar Taylor was born on March 16, 1937, in the Saskatchewan village of Nipawin, population 892. “To get to Nipawin,” he wrote, “you headed the dog team north and when the last dog died, you were almost there.” He was the youngest of four children born to the former Ethel Florence Quinton, the daughter of a Winnipeg sheet-metal worker, and James Edgar Taylor Sr., known as Ed, a grocer who became the proprietor of a coffee shop.

Mr. Taylor’s earliest memory was of listening to hockey broadcasts on the radio on Saturday evenings with his father. At the grocery store, the boy would be plunked onto the counter to recite the roster of the Toronto Maple Leafs by memory in hopes of coaxing a nickel from customers.

The family opened a coffee shop down the street from their home. Taylor’s Lunch Room served fresh pies and doughnuts, as well as sandwiches for the lunch crowd. His mother cooked, a sister served and an older brother chopped wood to keep the ovens roaring. By then, his father had been left bedridden with cancer in a room off the dining area. He died two weeks after Jim’s seventh birthday. A fortnight after that, the boy was in a Winnipeg hospital to have an operation on a lazy left eye. In his 2008 memoir, “Hello Sweetheart? Gimme Rewrite!,” Mr. Taylor recounts awakening from surgery to utter darkness. He screamed until calmed by nuns. No one had thought to warn him he would need to wear a bandage over his eyes for two weeks.

With an oldest brother fighting overseas during the Second World War, the family struggled financially, living briefly in Winnipeg, where his mother operated a rooming house before

returning to Nipawin, where she opened a smaller coffee shop called Kozy Korner. They returned to Winnipeg before moving to Victoria to move in with her brother.

An English and journalism teacher at Victoria High School spotted the young man's felicity with words and got him a part-time job at the Daily Colonist covering men's softball. The youth was so inexperienced that for his first story he set the margins of his typewriter the exact same width as a newspaper column. So uncertain was Mr. Taylor of his future that for a time he retained his morning paper route for the same newspaper.

Mr. Taylor also successfully proposed a column about popular music for young people. (He mostly wanted free records.) The column, called "Needle Dust" before he renamed it "Off the Record," is remembered for his prediction of the flash-in-the-pan popularity of a young singer named Elvis Presley.

In 1963, Mr. Taylor traveled from Victoria to Vancouver to cover the Grey Cup football championship, during which Angelo Mosca of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats delivered a devastating and possibly late hit on hometown hero Willie Fleming of the B.C. Lions. The Ticats went on to win the game. Mr. Taylor raced to the ferry, wrote his stories while aboard ship, dropped them off at the newspaper office, and then covered a local hockey game.

After a decade in the British Columbia capital, Mr. Taylor was lured to Vancouver to join the staff of the fledgling Vancouver Times, a daily founded by hustling advertising salesman Val Warren. The city's third daily lasted less than a year before folding and Mr. Taylor retreated to the Colonist.

The Vancouver Sun hired him to cover the football beat in 1966. Four years later, he joined Mr. Kearney as a columnist in replacing the great Denny Boyd. The sports department also included the fine horseracing writer Archie McDonald and a stellar cast of beat reporters. Mr. Taylor covered the 1972 Winter Olympics in Japan, as well as hockey's legendary Summit Series in September, which placed him in Moscow to witness Paul Henderson's famous goal.

Mr. Taylor left the Vancouver Sun by moving down the hall of a shared building to write columns for The Province, his home for the next 16 years. In 1995, he was hired away to become the assistant publisher and marquee columnist for a weekly called Sports Only, a tentative foray into the Vancouver market by the Toronto Sun newspaper chain. After the weekly soon after folded, Mr. Taylor became a nationally syndicated columnist with the Calgary Sun until his retirement from daily journalism in 2001.

Mr. Taylor was inducted into the Canadian Football Hall of Fame (1989), the Greater Victoria Sports Hall of Fame (2006) and the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame (2005) in Vancouver. In 2010, he received the Bruce Hutchison Lifetime Achievement Award from the Jack Webster Foundation, the province's highest journalism accolade.

Mr. Taylor died on Monday (Jan. 7) at his home at Shawnigan Lake, outside Victoria. He leaves a son, Christopher, and a daughter, Teresa. He was predeceased by his wife of 56 years, the former Deborah Easton, who died in 2016.

For all his accolades, Mr. Taylor readily acknowledged missing out on the sports scoop of his career. At the teary 1988 press conference announcing his trade from the Edmonton Oilers, Wayne Gretzky opened by saying, "I want to apologize to my friend Jim Taylor in front of everyone." Mr. Taylor had learned of the pending deal but out of loyalty to the family pledged to hold the information until an approved time. Instead, news leaked out and Mr. Taylor lost the scoop. He did not regret it, he said. After all, he had given his word.