

# Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

## Ring Shares Secrets of Writing a Newspaper Column

Let me tell you the “inside scoop” of writing this newspaper column.

In September 2008 I e-mailed Tiffany Kjos, editor of the *Foothills Star*, about my interest in writing a monthly column. She called me back that same day and asked, “What makes you think you could write a column?”

I directed Tiffany to my website to review my previous newspaper columns plus a group of lighter-sides articles. Of course the fact that I offered to write the column for free (and fun) probably helped too.

So, I was “hired!” However, just before the agreed-to publishing date of my very first column, Tiffany called to tell me that she had postponed my article for a week. I artfully told her that I had invited all my neighbors to a new-column celebration at my house right after the planned publication date and that she was killing my party. Tiffany called me back a few hours later to say that she had reformatted that week’s paper to include my article. I was impressed (and thankful).

I had to decide what I was going to write about – and remember, it’s not just one time, but at least once a month. Were my subjects going to be local community affairs, history, travels, family activities, editorials, fantasies? Was my writing style going to be serious, opinionated, humorous, complaining, satirical, or all of the above, as my mood or the subject dictates? Put me down for (trying) all of the above.

I had always been impressed with the bright, colorful photos in the *Foothills Star*, so when I started submitting columns, I sometimes included photo(s) that Pat or I had taken that related to the article.

I had to learn two RULES OF THE NEWSPAPER COLUMN BUSINESS. The first rule is that the columnist does not write the headline – the editor does this key job. In the 20 previous columns I have written for the *Foothills Star*, the headline that appears in the newspaper hasn’t even come close to what I submitted. At first my feelings were hurt, but I’ve learned to live with the wisdom of the editor.

The second RULE is that the editor has absolute control over how much of my column actually appears in the paper. I may be proud of every line I submit, but it’s “space available” that is the final arbiter. Some of my “best lines,” or photos, have been cut!

That brings me to editing – where my golden words meet the red pen (or the “delete” key) of the editor. First, I show the column to Pat, who often gets me back on the right track, as she did with this column. But, she can’t be too critical because I get to final-edit her knitting guild newsletter.

Then it's on to the *Foothills Star*. There, remarkable things happen; the editor improves punctuation and sentence structure, fixes spelling errors, and even fact-checks important issues. (Editors HATE to run corrections or retractions.) This only works up to a certain threshold of editing-time though. I cross that threshold and I can expect an e-mail zinger about "cleaning up my act."

As a regular columnist I had to develop a thick skin about the responses some columns generate, especially when talking about controversial issues like a cross-Foothills freeway. I've had to tighten my "glutes" on a few.

I have achieved a certain amount of notoriety. My friends at the gym are big fans. I was recently introduced as a celebrity at my neighborhood's homeowners' association meeting. And one guy told me recently that I was taller in person than my photo made me look in the column sidebar.