Something in the air

George Ross ’46 (journalism), journalist extraordinaire, has spent a lifetime sharing stories, and changing how the world views serious sports writing.

GEORGE ROSS IS 92 YEARS OLD, and he moves with the deliberate, round-shouldered, slightly swaying steps of a man who recently had a stroke.

There is a walker nearby in the living room of his home in Graeagle, Calif.

He determinedly prefers not to use it.

And why should he?

When you’ve flown, like Ross has, there is a good chance if you aren’t fully upright, aware of the world opening up around you, you might miss something.

During a journalistic career that began as a young sportswriter on the University of Nevada campus and spanned the unquestioned golden era of Oakland sports in the 1970s as sports editor and then managing editor of the Oakland Tribune—an era where the A’s and Raiders combined for four world championships—Ross missed very few stories, if any.

In fact, for many, Ross was the most influential Oakland media figure of the era.

“It really was a golden age for the presence of first-rate sports,” says Frank McCulloch, a 1941 Nevada graduate who went on to become the Southeast Asia bureau chief for Time Magazine during the Vietnam War, as well as managing editor of the Los Angeles Times. Then, McCulloch chuckled lightly, recalling flamboyant Oakland A’s owner Charlie Finley—the man who brought day-glo uniforms to professional sports—and the enigmatic, brilliant owner of the Oakland Raiders, Al Davis. “It was an era where the players were colorful, and there were also some real jerks, which made it interesting to cover.

“You bet I feel George was one of the best there was. One of the qualities that made George unique … he’s personally and journalistically honest. That’s harder to find than we’d like to believe. That’s one of the most distinguishing things about him. There’s a quality beyond getting two sets of facts, and that’s honesty. It’s giving the public the most honest appraisal you can.

“George possesses it in abundance.”

The longtime Oakland Tribune columnist Dave Newhouse has written of Ross, “The name George Ross may not sound familiar, but Oakland wouldn’t be the same sports town without him. He nurtured the Raiders to respectability, recruited the A’s from Kansas City and wooed the Warriors from San Francisco. … Ross proved there was a there, there in Oakland sports-wise.”

TO GET TO GEORGE ROSS’ HOME IN GRAEAGLE, visitors must make the drive over 5,221-foot Beckwourth Pass, north on Highway 70. The land transitions from sage to pine, the color of the trees becoming more vivid, their branches shimmering in the fall morning sunlight like tiny mirrors.

Ross and his wife, Helene, moved to Graeagle after he retired from newspapers in 1980. Helene—“An incredibly great woman,” McCulloch says—dated Ross while the two were students at Fremont High School in Oakland. The couple danced many a night away at Sweet’s Ballroom and the Oakland Auditorium, to the sound of some of the best big bands in the country.

“Helene was real smooth,” Ross says, with a gentle smile. “So I became kind of smooth, too.”

Ross graduated from high school a year before Helene, and the two lost track of each other. Ross went to school in Reno, “I wrote her some, but we drifted apart.” He didn’t know that Helene was battling tuberculosis, and almost died. Once World War II began, Ross, who would eventually become a Navy ensign and train to fly, happened to see Helene on a streetcar near their old dancing spots in Oakland.

“I said, ‘Hel-eeen!’” he remembered, his voice rising. “I was in uniform, but she still recognized me. So we picked up from there.”

They were married, happily, for 50 years, before Helene passed away more than a decade ago. As Ross rests in his recliner in the living room, there is also a silver-framed photo of Helene, her head tilted, with a young Ross staring intently at his wife. An old clip book, containing Ross’ award-winning series of stories for the Placerville Mountain Democrat written in 1950—a series of stories that halted construction of Folsom Dam and brought into question some questionable land acquisition practices by the Army Corps of Engineers—rests next to the photo.

Like almost everything about Ross, there is an understated truthfulness to the Mountain Democrat series. Their richness lies in their rock-solid reporting and insight into the capacities of common people to work for the common good. Ross was a methodical journalist, and a good listener. He had to overcome a speech impediment, a stutter, which taught him to carefully weigh each word he spoke. When he wrote, he was similarly precise, using language like an instrument, like a jeweler’s loupe.
Ross learned the basics of writing and reporting from legendary Nevada journalism instructor Alfred "Higgie" Higginbotham, a former Ohio newspaperman. Higginbotham stressed, above all else, "accuracy, accuracy, accuracy." It was Higginbotham who encouraged Ross, after returning to Reno in 1946, to complete his degree. "If you were one of Higginbotham's students, you were considered one of 'Higgie's boys,'" Ross says. "I only wrote six or seven stories," Ross says of the Mountain Democrat series, still seeming surprised that they led to an embarrassing reversal for the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation. "I've got them here." He lifts the clip book over the photo of Helene, his ruddy fingers softly touching the yellowing pages. "This is the book I sent to the judges," he adds. He strokes the goatee on his face. "I don't know where the hell the prize is."

ROSS' HOME HAS NO SHRINE TO HIS CAREER. There are no photos on the walls of Ross interviewing famous athletes like Willie Mays—which he did, by the way, and often with much greater success than many other sportswriters, who found Mays difficult. Ross, on the other hand, had a fondness for Mays that says much about Ross' ability to peel beyond the obvious to the essence. "Willie and I were good friends," Ross says. "I liked him, he liked me. I'd be looking for dope for a column, and he'd say, 'You got your story yet? Sit down. I'll give you one.' And he'd tell me some anecdote and I'd get a great sidebar. He was like a managing editor himself in that sense."

With Al Davis, it was much the same way. When Davis was interviewing to become the head coach of the floundering Raiders in 1963, Ross was trusted enough by the Raiders' managing partners to sit in on the interview. "Al was a very impressive young man," Ross said. "He was good looking. He had been called a genius in one of the publications—he made sure I knew that. He was single-minded, he was an innovator, and he helped change professional football."

Davis used Ross as part-sounding board, part-1960s version of Google. He discovered that one of Ross' great strengths was the sportswriter's ability to go beyond sports. Ross understood power as well as personalities. Ross could mentally divide the East Bay into clear hubs of transportation, supply chains, and pockets of growth. He could see what was in front of him in two or three dimensions, rising above it like the private pilot he was, lifting off the ground to see a vast array of land grids and possibilities.

Davis wasn't the only one seeking Ross' insight. Ross knew all of the members of the planning group that would eventually make the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum a reality. He was considered central to the campaign that convinced Oakland's city leaders that it was worth the effort to woo Finley to move his A's from Kansas City to Oakland. "There are only two people I've been acquainted with like that, who were listened to by the policy people in sports," McCulloch says. "George Ross was one. [Pulitzer Prize winning Los Angeles Times columnist] Jim Murray was the other. That's rare. They not only wrote clearly and well, but they also had deep understanding of their communities and the important policy issues of the day."

A moment on a long-ago American Airlines flight in January 1959 is telling. It was the first jet airline trip across the country, from San Francisco to New York with a stop in Chicago.
Ross was among a group of journalists selected to take the journey.

While many of his cohorts were caught up with the scene of a pretty, well-dressed woman who walked up an elaborate red carpet to press a button to fire up the jet engine, Ross could not shed his pilot's eye. A moment that occurred later stuck with him. Someone had placed a burning cigarette on the edge of a table, and Ross could not peel his eyes away from the cigarette. He could see the limits of physics and structural sciences expanding before his very eyes, as the cigarette sat there, mutely, stiffly, never showing the slightest shake or tremor. Everything was about to change in the airline industry. The moment was so simple, so obvious … and yet so revelatory.

"My lead stuck to the story that the end of piston engine aircraft was on the books," Ross says. "They had increased the speed of airline travel by double and by flying over thermal storms, they'd increased passenger comfort. You were going to see jet aircraft from now on."

Although there are no sportswriting homages in Ross' home, one can certainly still sense Helene's spirit. It is there in the tasteful display of shining china, the clocks on the walls, the warm paintings of farmhouses, the reverent intensity of Sierra landscapes.

And even though he is alone, Ross is a secure man, certain that he's led a good life, a productive life.

Retirement to Graeagle brought an entirely new chapter. He became a state park docent. He taught mineralogy. With the help of a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley, he helped re-introduce giant Sequoia trees into the northern Sierra Nevada, planting several of them himself in his yard. He's watched them grow from three feet over the past 25 years to more than 40 feet tall today. He became, in McCulloch's words, "the wise man of Graeagle and Plumas County. He's the guy at the top of the mountain. Over the years, the locals have increasingly turned to him. I really envy him."

The view out the back of his home is superb. The Plumas National Forest is only a few feet away. Ross' dog, Gretchen, a 14-year-old English sheep dog, moves slowly, if a bit arthritically, through the backyard.

A visitor notices that there is a Louisville slugger propped against the wall, near a sliding glass window.

"Maybe this is a chink in Ross' armor. Maybe there is more ego-driven reliquary to his home than meets the eye? Maybe it's a gift, an expensive collectible … signed by his friend, Willie Mays?"

"Oh no," Ross quickly says. His large eyes twinkle. His words, like everything else in his 92 years, have the unerring elegance of simplicity to them. There are no surprises here. Only honesty. "It's only there as a last defense against a bear … that's it."