

Will the Daily News Feast After the Hunt?

By Thomas Forbes

"I'm not just another turkey from Chicago," a flustered Bob Hunt once said. Therein lies the most acute angle of the many comprising the story of James Hoge's succeeding Hunt as publisher of the *New York Daily News* last week. The *Daily News* story has always been a tale of two cities. Rupert Murdoch has turned the tale into an epic.

Hunt made the statement to a group of editorial employees shortly after leaving the *Chicago Tribune* for the *News* late in 1979—surely a winter of discontent. There were scars from the strikes of 1978. The *News* had folded its once highly touted New Jersey edition earlier in the year. Jobs were lost. And beneath it all, Murdoch's South St. *Post*

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was exciting readers with the bobs, weaves and under-the-belt jabs called tabloid journalism. The fans loved it; staffers at the *News* were reduced to sounding like punch-drunk heavyweights remembering the old days. Their trainer, Chicagoan Capt. Joseph M. Patterson, invented the sport.

But Bob Hunt was a go-get-'em guy, and he held a series of "meet your publisher" meetings. Hunt was an astute enough cornerman to know that his boys still had some fight in them; that their problem was mental attitude. So he gave a pep talk. It sounded like a pep talk. The boys had heard it all before. There was some banter. Hunt flinched: "I'm not just another turkey from Chicago."

In many minds at the *News*, that is his legacy. To others, he will always be the Chicago hit man. Shortly after his pep rally, Hunt announced the launch of an afternoon paper called *Tonight*. Fifty-three weeks, \$20 million and 320 lost jobs later, he shut it down. Four months later, the *News* was for sale. All prospective deals fell through. Fine, said Tribune Tower in Chicago. Hunt was told to shut the joint down—and he would have if the Trib's lawyers hadn't bungled the cost of paying off the unions. The law firm was canned, unions made concessions, Hunt beamingly announced a multimillion-dollar production upgrading—and morale slipped to the nadir it reached last Tuesday, the day before Hoge's appointment.

Morale is not the only thing that has been slipping at the *News*. The paper that not too long ago boasted a circulation more than twice that of any paper in America is still losing ground to the *Post*. Some might tell you that it's just Wingo beating Zingo; most will tell you that whatever the *Post* is editorially, the *News* is downright directionless and dull. The *News* has bet its Lucky Bucks—

contests and promotions—to reverse the trend; changes in editorial content have been little more than a recycling of abandoned ideas. Recently, the *News* reintroduced daily "women's pages"—they're called "You"—to its readers.

But the *Daily News* hasn't been slipping in advertising. Linage increases are still greater than the *Post*'s. But somewhere along the line, some say, advertisers are going to stop thinking of Murdoch's readers as their shoplifters. And with only 400,000 readers now separating the tabloids, the line is getting thinner. You can bet your Lucky Bucks that Murdoch has his eye on that line, which perhaps explains why the global nomad has pitched his tent in New York. In defending his purchase of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, he rhetorically asked an audience why a declared New Yorker should receive so much flak for buying a Chicago newspaper while a Chicago newspaper escapes reproach for running a New York newspaper.

Murdoch's foray into Chicago is only his most recent demonstration of the same verve and nerve that *News* founder Patterson had. Both have run one-man shops. Patterson, in fact, when asked by a *News* executive if he had plans for the paper upon his demise, replied: "It won't last five years." He fell in 1946; the *News*' circulation has been dropping since '47. Street-fighter Murdoch smelled the blood.

But Murdoch may have strayed onto the wrong turf this time, and not because he'll run the *Sun-Times* from New York. (Patterson launched the *Daily News* from Chicago in 1919 and didn't move to New York until the *News* hit 1 million in circulation six years later.) No, what Murdoch did was outbid a 25-year *Sun-Times* veteran by the name of Jim Hoge for a newspaper that was creating serious problems for the ad reps at a paper by the name of the *Chicago Tribune*. Three days before Murdoch took over, Hoge resigned, and Tribune Tower got a front-row seat at Murdoch's traveling exhibition of the ungentlemanly art of fisticuffs. Presumably, the owners of the Chicago Cubs will be more willing to defend the Windy City than they were the Big Apple. Maybe they'll be studious enough to learn what the fight game is all about; they've demonstrated that they didn't gloss over Hoge's lessons. They hired him. And when proverbial bullies meet their proverbial matches, the matches are portrayed as myopic and spineless—an apt description of the Tribune Co.'s past dealings in New York.

The Tribune Co.'s press release about the changes contained an impressive biography of Hoge: Steady rise after joining the *Sun-Times* as a reporter in '58; six Pulitzers under his tenure; Yale man; master's degree. But like any good news story, the essential facts were right up front in the lead: "James Hoge is a native New Yorker . . ." □

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