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Don Smithey

### FROM THE NOTEBOOK

# Kelly: Des Moines' airport 'international,' Omaha's isn't, but both credit same man for growth

By [Michael Kelly](#) / World-Herald columnist

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» Commercial airlines fly in and out of Omaha's "airfield," but much-smaller Des Moines is home to an "international airport." Hmmm.

Eppley Airfield counts about 4 million passengers a year, and Des Moines International Airport a little over 2 million. So that "international"

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designation must mean the Iowa airport schedules commercial flights to and from other countries?

"No, it never did," said Don Smithey, who knows both airports well.

Don, who retired in 2009 after 20 years as chief administrator at Eppley in Omaha, was soon lured out of retirement to take over as interim chief at Des Moines International for six months — but stayed four years.

Now he is on final approach to his second retirement, preparing to step down on Valentine's Day. He loves both airports, OMA and DSM, but at 73 is ready to retire for good.

A pilot himself, he plans on restoring his 1956 Ford Thunderbird and, with wife Lisa, visiting sites in Europe where his late father fought in World War II. But no more daily work pressures.

"I'll try again," he told me with a chuckle, "and maybe I'll have more success at retirement this time."

Don has surely enjoyed success in his career. The World-Herald honored him as the 2008 Midlander of the Year for building up Eppley while executive director of the Omaha Airport Authority.

The Des Moines Register reported last week that under Smithey, passenger totals at Des Moines have surged past the 2 million mark, setting records each of the past two years.

In his final year at Eppley, passenger traffic totaled 4.37 million. Since then, numbers have dropped in Omaha and at the Kansas City airport, at least partly because more Iowans are flying out of Des Moines rather than driving to Omaha or KC.

As he did in 1995 in Omaha, Smithey helped recruit low-fare Southwest Airlines to Des Moines in 2012.

But his biggest accomplishment, he said, was helping create an airport authority like Omaha's, which replaced a city department in Des Moines. Under an authority board, he said, the airport is more independent and can react more nimbly to changes in the airline industry.



Michael Kelly

While in Nebraska's largest city, Smithey never proposed changing the airfield name to Omaha International. Like Des Moines, Eppley doesn't schedule international commercial flights. (Corporate aircraft occasionally fly internationally at both airports.)

"I always said the name didn't matter," Don told me. "You can call it anything you want, but what's important is that you have to provide service."

» For a couple of months, a plastic grocery bag was stuck high in a tree at the Sarpy County home of Tom and Karen O'Connor.

Especially with the recent high winds flapping it, Tom said, "it was driving my wife crazy."

So when Sunday provided warm weather and a reprieve from the high winds, Tom, a wiry 63-year-old, took action. He placed a stepladder next to the tree and, with Karen

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steadying it, he began climbing.

Tom and I have known each other for decades, and I teased him that Karen was in perfect position — to call 911 if he fell and broke a leg.

The couple live near the Tiburon golf course, and Tom, a spokesman for the University of Nebraska Medical Center, is an avid golfer. So he took a golf-ball retriever — which extends 20 feet — and put duct tape on the end, sticky side out.

He reached for the annoying bag and snatched it, pulling it down. He said proudly: “Karen was very impressed.”

A day later, he heard her call out, “Ohhh, no!” Sure enough, another plastic bag was snagged in the tree, but higher this time. Luckily, it blew away on its own Friday morning — possibly to someone else's tree.

» Athletic Director Shawn Eichorst of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln hosted some retired Husker coaches and staffers for lunch Wednesday inside Memorial Stadium.

Afterward, at a “Legends Reception,” he invited news media veterans to join them for dessert. One by one, the retired legends walked in.

Among them: Don “Fox” Bryant, who was sports information director and associate athletic director; Milt Tenopir and George Darlington, longtime assistant football coaches; Al Papik, who served as assistant athletic director; George Sullivan, who was head trainer; Art McWilliams, who managed the athletic training table; Bill Shepard, who was head groundskeeper.

There were others, such as Francis Allen, who coached Husker gymnasts to five national championships and twice coached the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team.

Jack Payne of Omaha, longtime former public-address announcer for the College World Series, was among the media veterans. There were no speeches, just reminiscing all around. ([A photo gallery can be seen at huskers.com](#))

Said Chris Anderson, UNL director of athletic community relations: “It was just an opportunity for staffers who were so important to Husker athletics to reconnect.”

» In Sunday's Denver Broncos playoff game, Peyton Manning started off slowly with his “Omaha!” audibles, instead shouting, “Marshall! Marshall!”

A columnist for the Peoria Journal Star in Illinois wrote that his area's Marshall County should jump on the Peyton bandwagon because “it worked wonders for publicity for Omaha, Neb. ... Last week, NFL fans were going gaga over 'Omaha.'?”

You may have noticed that only after Peyton quit shouting “Marshall!” and returned to a steady “Omaha!” did the Broncos offense rev up.

The National Post in Canada carried a headline Friday about “Omaha overdose.” The publication noted that a Canadian-based online sports book was taking wagers on the number of times Manning yells “Omaha” in the Super Bowl.

He called out our city's proud name 44 and 31 times in the past two games, but



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oddsmakers have placed the over/under bet for the Super Bowl at 27½ Omahas.

Overdose, maybe. But is Omaha having fun with it, even when gamblers wager? You bet.



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Mike writes three columns a week on a variety of topics.

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