

Bringing a column to life



OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS I've spent a lot of time on airplanes. I'm also one of those annoying people who grab every available newspaper when getting on a plane.

However, before I get immersed in any of them, I always end up flicking through the in-flight magazine.

There is always something in there that grabs my eye. So when I had the chance to become a columnist for **Blue Wings** exactly five years ago, I jumped at it. The instructions were clear: write about being a Finn and a European. Great, I thought: I can basically write about anything. And I have.

In some 50 columns I've dealt with everything from President Obama to the virtues of the sauna, from Finnish cuisine to law writing in the European Union, and from finishing an Ironman triathlon to branding Finland.

I simply love writing this column. I like it so much that when I became foreign minister some two years ago I decided that this would be the only regular column that would I keep in my arsenal.

I'm often asked about the art of writing a column. How do you write a good column? What does it take to keep the interest of your reader? Here are a few tips.

First, decide your topic a few days in advance. Let it mull inside your skull. Narrow down an angle; this will facilitate the actual writing process.

Second, pick a theme that makes you feel something. There's no point in writing about something that doesn't interest you. If you get

a kick out of collecting stamps, it will show in your column (you will, of course, have to take into consideration that not everyone feels passionately about stamps).

Third, try to grab the attention of your reader from the beginning. Your headline must be interesting. The lift should give a teaser to

the theme and your first sentence should not be a turn-off. Try to finish the column by making reference to where you started. The column should also have three parts: a beginning, a

middle and an end.

Happy 30th birthday, Blue Wings!

Finally, be bold. A column is not supposed to be a boring list of facts. Let loose; be wild, argumentative and even a bit non-factual in a column. Make a claim and stick to it.

My dad, **Göran Stubb**, has written a column about ice-hockey for Helsinki's Swedish-language newspaper, **Hufvudstadsbladet**, for almost 30 years. I used to marvel at the speed with which he produced his texts. I asked him about his secret. "Simple," he said, "it's all about having a routine and a passion."

Be it due to routine, passion or both, I hope you've had as much fun reading this column as I've had writing it. Your feedback has been positively overwhelming.

I will probably continue to spend a lot of time on planes, and you'll be able to recognize me as the guy who grabs the in-flight magazine before takeoff.

Happy 30th birthday, *Blue Wings*! And thanks for letting me fill this space with wild stuff. ■

Alexander Stubb is Finland's minister of foreign affairs and Blue Wings columnist since 2005.