(February 4th, 2026)

If you know someone who would benefit from being an Insider, feel free to forward this PDF to them so they can sign up here.

Note: As an Insider, you can read all prior Insider newsletters here.

Quick Tips for our Insider friends!

I don't know why but I'm always glad when January is over – it's my least favorite month of the year! I think it feels cold, dark, and stark, compared with December's coziness, holiday lights and cheer. February seems to be when things start to come alive again – we already have snowdrops pushing up and buds on the willow tree outside the window where I'm writing this.

Talking of rebirth, I've just (re)started a blog series on the transaction log that I'd begun four years ago on the now-defunct sqlperformance.com. I'm intrigued by the Change Event Streaming feature of SQL Server 2025 and how it works – I'll get to that later in the year – stay tuned!

SQLskills News

I've lowered all course prices for 2026. I went through our entire recorded course and course-bundle catalog and rationalized and revamped all the prices for 2026, making learning about SQL Server much more cost-effective for your training budgets. For instance, our signature Blackbelt bundle is now only US$1,299! Check it all out here.

Joe Sack is now available for Proof-of-Concept, evaluation, and general consulting work around vector search. If you're interested, let us know here!

Joe's course on Vector Search Essentials continues to be popular, and the follow-on course should be ready by the next newsletter. Check it out here. Use the 'newsai' discount code to save $50.

Kimberly and AIJoe continue their video podcast with #5 and #6 released this morning – watch them here.

Book Review

Here are two wonderful books I listened to back-to-back since the last newsletter, both by Kate Atkinson.

Firstly, *Life After Life*. I noticed this on Audible a few weeks ago and decided to spend a credit on it. Excellent book and very clever! The Amazon precis is almost exactly what I'd write: "On a cold and snowy night in 1910, Ursula Todd is born to an English banker and his wife. She dies before she can draw her first breath. On that same cold and snowy night, Ursula Todd is born, lets out a lusty wail, and embarks upon a life that will be, to say the least, unusual. For as she grows, she also dies, repeatedly, in a variety of ways, while the young century marches on towards its second cataclysmic world war." I enjoyed it so much I just spent a credit on the follow-on and started it. Highly recommended!

And the follow-on is *A God in Ruins*. Wonderful book! I'm glad I listened to it right away while all the characters were fresh. This book is from the perspective of Ursula's younger brother Ted, the heroic Halixax bomber pilot during WWII, plus his children. This portion of Amazon's precis sums it up: "After all that Teddy endures in battle, his greatest challenge is living in a future he never expected to have. An ingenious and moving exploration of one ordinary man's path through extraordinary times, A God in Ruins proves once again that Kate Atkinson is one of the finest novelists of our age." Very highly recommended!

Ponderings…

I know a lot of you like the non-technical ponderings so here's another (short) one for you.

Over the last few years that we've had Camp Savage, I've learned a lot of practical skills, mostly out of necessity, some fun and some not so fun.

Probably the best example is how to safely use a large excavator. Mostly fun, especially when a huge tree stump finally pops out, but sometimes hair-raising, such as when I pull at the wrong angle and Isabel tips slightly onto one track. Although I know she'd have to tip a *lot* further to risk going over, I still stop and think through the joystick movements to put her right, rather than knee-jerking. I've gained healthy appreciations for center-of-gravity, leverage, and the ridiculous multiplicative power of hydraulics!

An example of a not-so-fun skill is figuring out how to put just the right amount of tension on the various ties, straps, and guy lines of a 10'x20' gazebo roof so that in a wind-and-rain storm the water doesn't puddle and cause a giant bulge that can collapse the thin metal roof struts, or make the roof so taught that the force of the wind rips the fabric. Often this involves checking on things in the dark in the middle of the night, during a storm, and having to re-tie stuff or put in props while getting soaked. Kimberly can testify to that from some of my exasperated overnight texts!

None of these were epiphany, light-bulb, aha! moments though, that I've often had from learning something about computers.

Fast forward to the last couple of months, where I've been learning about vector search while doing production of Joe's new courses. (No, not a thinly-veiled marketing blurb!). Several times I've experienced the sheer joy of aha! moments while I've been reviewing slides and talking points. The light bulb turned on and I understood how something works that was a black box with an unknown input->output function before.

I now understand why it can sometimes be so difficult to get a search engine to give you the results you want, rather than the results it 'thinks' you want. That's especially true if you have a negative in the query, where the search engine seems to ignore it (because it actually does, for the most part), requiring grammatical gymnastics to rewrite the search terms to encapsulate the negative without explicitly stating a negative (e.g. 'setup doesn't work' becomes 'setup fails')

I also now understand why searching can be so frustrating on Amazon – sometimes it seems to be only doing keyword matches and sometimes only semantic matches. It's another juggling exercise to get it to hone in on what I'm actually searching for.

I learned some new things and my life is easier because of it.

(But no amount of learning is going to enlighten me as to how cut-and-paste of bullet points in Word works – it's like asking a Magic 8 Ball the same question over and over – different results every time!)

Call to Action: I'm not sure what the call to action is, I just wanted to write about how cool it is to have light-bulb moments. Never stop learning? You learn something new every day? Sometimes learning can be a surprise? All of the above? You choose.

The Curious Case of…

This section of the newsletter explains recent problems we've helped with on client systems or been asked about online; they might be something you're experiencing too.

Another case where I was going to write a blog post and found I already had one! A prior student wanted to know how to see when plans are going parallel – and I'd already written about using the *degree_of_parallelism* extended event to track that. Read about it here…

#TBT

(Turn Back Time…) Blog posts we've published since the previous newsletter plus some older resources we've referred to recently that you may find useful.

The theme for the TBT this time is query plan and query performance analysis:

- Our IEQS class on Solving Common Performance Problems with Query Store

- Erin's Pluralsight course: *SQL Server: Analyzing Query Performance for Developers*
- Jon's Pluralsight course on Using SentryOne Plan Explorer
- Joe's Pluralsight course: *SQL Server: Query Plan Analysis*
- Joe's Pluralsight course: *SQL Server: Troubleshooting Query Plan Quality Issues*
- My blog post: *Query plan analysis first steps*

I hope you find these useful and interesting!

Video Demo

Continuing the query plan analysis theme… In SQL Server 2017 information about statistics considered during optimization was added to execution plans, providing information that can be extremely useful when troubleshooting performance and tuning queries. But reviewing the information in the XML can be a bit clunky, which is why in this last Insider video by Erin she'll share a method to programmatically get the statistics data from a plan to make your query tuning efforts a bit easier.

The video is 6 minutes long and you can get it in MP4 format here.

The demo code is here.

Enjoy!

SQLskills Training

We have no plans for live, public classes in 2026, but we've already released the first of many new courses coming over the next year! And of course, all our recorded courses from the last few years are still as relevant as ever.

To help your manager understand the importance of focused, technical training, we've also added a few items to help you justify spending your training dollars with us:

- Letter to your manager explaining why SQLskills training is worthwhile
- Community blog posts about our classes

You can get all the details in our shop.

Summary

I hope you've enjoyed this issue – I really enjoy putting these together. If there's anything else you're interested in, I'd love to hear from you - drop me a line.

Thanks,
Paul

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