

COOKING UP A SPORTS FEATURE STORY:
Dissecting the writer-editor decisions and operations that lead to sports features
making it to publication

by MARK SELIG

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Living in New York for the bulk of his professional career, Leon Carter used cabs for transportation. He also used them for story ideas.

Carter, a former sports editor at The New York Daily News and ESPN New York who now works for ESPN's black culture site, The Undeclared, usually didn't share his line of work when he stepped into a taxi, but he did encourage conversations about sports. Cab drivers are often passionate about sports, Carter said, so he wanted to hear their opinions.

While his choice of vehicle for discussions might stand out, Carter is much like the other five sport editors I interviewed over the summer. One of the most fertile seeds for story ideas, those editors said, are conversations — from informal ones in Manhattan taxis to planned talks during staff meetings.

In addition to six sports editors at six publications, I interviewed six sports reporters who work for those editors. I aimed to examine the factors that lead to writers and editors identifying and selecting topics to cover for in-depth features.

Feature stories are, according to the Pulitzer Prize committee, "Stories that are not hard news and are distinguished by the quality of their writing. Stories should be memorable for their reporting, crafting, creativity and economy of expression." That's a good start on a definition (though obviously I'm considering more than just Pulitzer-worthy stories). Newspapers and web publications often devote additional resources to

these pieces and spotlight them in their overall coverage. In sports, they go beyond game coverage, daily news and reaction, and use deep reporting to better explain a person or topic. Feature stories certainly can be written quickly and on deadline (W.C. Heinz's Death of a Race Horse is a famous example), but for the purposes of this project, I'm looking at stories that were planned days or even weeks in advance. It's these stories that an editor will bring to his bosses and ask to carve out space or money to produce. I'm analyzing stories where there's a decision-making process between writer and editor, rather than a writer independently choosing a direction once he's in the field.

In a typical month I read close to 100 sports feature stories from newspapers, magazines and websites. Being in the industry — and working toward a master's degree — I digest these stories more critically. I'm constantly thinking "Why?" Why did they choose to cover this person or topic the way they did? Or how? How did they think to attack the story in that manner? By documenting the processes behind these decisions, I hope to provide an inside look that might help others in the industry develop ideas for feature stories that fit their coverage area.

There is no blueprint for identifying and selecting topics to write features on. My conversations revealed that. While it was my goal to identify connective tissue binding the techniques that a dozen writers and editors use to develop feature story ideas, each has his or her own nuanced line of thinking. Sure, there are similarities, but there is no definitive system that unites how journalists determine a story is worthy of the space and time commitment of a big feature: Some go by gut, some use analytics. Some mimic other journalists they respect, using peers as inspiration. Writers and editors all said they emphasize the need to create interesting content — but the definition of "interesting"

varies a bit, too. Whether stories are pitched from writer to editor or assigned from editor to writer varies drastically among the six publications. And while the six publications I researched use audience analytics in some way, the audience is still, often, a passive participant in this exchange. As Carter's cab rides suggest, sports fans might be a news organization's most invested audience. Yet the writers and editors I interviewed seem to be paying more attention to what their peers in the industry are doing, rather than what their audience wants. Each person I interviewed said they read other newspapers, magazines, books or websites as a way to think of potential story ideas for themselves. Many also read the Twitter feeds of their peers. But most said they don't actively seek out the opinions from those in their audience.

Journalism has long been governed by gatekeeping, "the process by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media," according to published research in 2001 by Pamela J. Shoemaker, a gatekeeping theorist and a communications professor at the University of Syracuse. When Carter talked to cab drivers, he was acquiring information that would help him rule his gate to the satisfaction of his audience. He was trying to remove some of the guesswork. While editors still decide what does and doesn't run in their publication, consumers in the digital age have helped minimize the power. In the digital age, consumers can choose to go elsewhere if a certain publication doesn't provide what they want. As Shoemaker wrote in 2009, "an entirely new gatekeeping process begins when audience members make their own decisions about which news items, if any, to view, listen to or read." But it appears some writers and editors are inattentive — if not blind to

— this new gatekeeping process when it comes to feature stories. They don't leverage the ideas of a potential audience that consumes these stories.

I conducted interviews with a six sportswriters and their editors. Three of these pairs work at print-and-digital operations; the other three pairs work (or worked) at strictly digital outlets. The panel:

- Boston Globe assistant managing editor Joe Sullivan, who has guided the sports department for the past 21 years.
- Boston Globe enterprise reporter Shira Springer, whose role is a bit different from the beat writers and columnists that dominate the Globe's sports section. Springer has a lot of freedom to write about what she wants, and if it doesn't fit squarely into the sports department's plans, the news side will often use it.
- San Diego Union Tribune sports editor Todd Adams. He took that job in 2012 after working at the Orlando Sentinel the previous two years.
- San Diego Union-Tribune Chargers beat writer Michael Gehlkin. This is Gehlkin's fourth year with the paper.
- Knoxville News Sentinel sports editor Phil Kaplan, who has been at the newspaper for 20 years and took over as sports editor in 2010
- Knoxville News Sentinel Tennessee football beat writer Dustin Dopirak, who's covered collegiate athletics throughout his 12-year career — first in Virginia then in Indiana, before joining Knoxville's staff in August 2014.
- Former ESPN New York editor Leon Carter, who is now heading ESPN's fledgling black culture site, The Undefeated. Carter worked at the Daily News more than 20 years before joining ESPN in 2010.

- ESPN New York reporter Ian O'Connor, who writes a mix of features and columns. He also hosts a radio show in New York. And used to work with Carter at the Daily News.
- Former Grantland editor Sean Fennessey, who, in October, left to work at HBO under Grantland founder Bill Simmons. Then, in November, ESPN shut down Grantland, an offshoot that presented lengthy sports and pop culture features. ESPN cited a willingness “to direct our time and energy going forward to projects that we believe will have a broader and more significant impact across our enterprise.” At the time of our interview, Fennessey was still at Grantland.
- Former Grantland football reporter Robert Mays, who had been with the website since its launch in 2011. Before moving to Chicago this summer, Mays was one of few Grantland reporters who lived in Los Angeles, where the website was based. That will come up later, when I discuss the challenges of remote working.
- Bleacher Report special projects editor Bill Eichenberg, a former Newsday and Wall Street Journal sports editor. Bleacher report is a 2007 fan-focused digital startup that’s received criticism in the industry for publishing low-quality coverage from its unpaid contributors. Eichenberger was brought in to run a more professional “Longform” section that’s added legitimacy to the website.
- Bleacher Report feature writer Lars Anderson, a former Sports Illustrated staff writer who is the only full-time writer in Eichenberger’s Longform section.

My interviews reveal the thoughts and leanings of several sports journalists as they consider possible in-depth feature stories to pursue. The interviews also show the decision-making processes that lead to what consumers read. Despite the lack of

consistency about how writers and editors determine what makes a feature story worthwhile, here are some things I discovered that are worth considering.

GENERATING IDEAS

Lars Anderson, formerly a staff writer at Sports Illustrated, now writes for Bleacher Report's Longform section, which was built in part to legitimize a website more known for its quick-hitting fan content. Anderson also teaches a sportswriting course in the journalism department at the University of Alabama, and lectures about the importance of coming up with good story ideas, which he considers the toughest part of writing.

"If you're good with ideas, you'll have a job in this business as long as you want," Anderson said, "because the ideas are what drive everything."

In sports journalism, the most outwardly compelling athletes — the ones that are the best or most vocal — receive plenty of coverage. Reporters try to come up with unique angles, which makes finding them all the more difficult, Anderson said. Anderson gravitates to stories about troubled or misunderstood football players. Within the last year he's written in-depth stories on [Rolando McClain](#), [Johnny Manziel](#), [Dorial Green-Beckham](#) and [Lawrence Phillips](#) — all current or former football players who have found themselves in various degrees of legal trouble, from assault to murder. Anderson humanized each of these players, and gave different sides to their stories than the negative ones that appeared so often in the news. The piece on Lawrence Phillips offers a sympathetic view of the former Nebraska running back who was found guilty of seven counts of felony assault after his career, and is now the suspected killer of his prison cellmate. Anderson's reporting suggests Phillips acted in self-defense during the prison killing. "I like stories in which you

can shatter perceptions,” Anderson said. Those are the ones, he believes, that can resonate with people and “percolate on social media.” The Phillips story has been viewed 1 million times, according to Bleacher Report. Phillips was charged with murder in September, but Anderson believes he was acting in self-defense.

While Anderson tries to better understand misunderstood football players, an editor at a newspaper in Tennessee invests time in understanding how every dollar is spent by the University of Tennessee’s athletics department. Sports staff members at the 60,000-circulation Knoxville News-Sentinel frequently request public records relating to the Tennessee athletics program. Within each record is a possible story or more. Because the University of Tennessee occasionally uses public funding for sports, Knoxville sports editor Phil Kaplan believes it’s his responsibility to run a section that publicizes the numbers. Kaplan, who’s been at the newspaper for 20 years, says he takes “watchdog journalism” seriously. “I think readers are always interested in pocketbook issues,” said Kaplan, whose influence is visible in football reporter Dustin Dopirak’s May story titled [“How UT spent \\$1.25 million for one game.”](#) The story documents every dollar spent on the team’s most recent bowl trip — down to the cost of dining at Bojangles.

Dopirak, as a beat reporter, writes hard news, game stories and ambitious features that take more than a day to turn. He said one of his goals in writing features is to humanize the people he covers. He gets many of his story ideas from his strategy to “just be around” games, practices and other events. He starts conversations and develops relationships with people beyond the team he’s covering — be it high school coaches or boosters. Daily beat reporting can be a grind, and sometimes he needs to take a step back to assess what he knows and how big he should play it. “You say ‘Is there more to it than what we’re writing

today?” Dopirak said. “[Many times], a big story comes from something you already wrote a one-day story on. ... Is it more complex than what we’re writing right now? Should we dedicate more, so that the readers understand more about this. Is there a lot more that the reader needs to know?” If the answer to some of these questions is “Yes,” then Dopirak sees a need for a more nuanced, deeply reported story that isn’t so much about newsiness as it is further explaining a person or topic for an audience. While reporters can bat around story ideas in their own head, the editors I interviewed relied on meetings and conference calls with colleagues.

At Grantland, a now-defunct, ESPN-affiliated sports and pop culture website that prided itself on creative features, Los Angeles-based editors held idea meetings about once a month. Admission to these meetings was three big ideas (Really, you couldn’t go in unless you were armed with ideas). It was usually just the editors present, because most of the site’s reporters were stationed elsewhere. Many times, former deputy editor Sean Fennessey said, the ideas originated in the office, with editors chatting about what they found cool or funny in their favorite sports. The writers not being present in the office, though, complicated brainstorming sessions and possibly hurt the product. “It would certainly be easier if they were here, no doubt,” Fennessey said. “... Honestly it would probably be a better website if we were all in one room together.” It’s simply easier to communicate and develop mutual ideas that way. Modern technology allows for communication between writers and editors, but Fennessey said the conversations were smoother and more productive when he spoke to people in person. Often, he messaged his writers, but he admitted his attention was divided when doing so.

San Diego Union-Tribune sports editor Todd Adams meets in person with his Chargers reporters weekly. He leans on his reporters to come up with most of the ideas — they’re the ones in the field, after all — and Adams considers his own role to work with reporters to sift through all the information they gather and distinguish what is most “interesting” and “important.” A small idea can turn into something bigger after intellectual collaboration. For example, after a NFL wide receiver Josh Gordon was suspended for testing positive for marijuana, Adams chatted with a reporter about the news. As the chat went on, the two thought, “Maybe we should take a look at this.” And, so, after considerable reporting, the section [published a story about how athletes like to use marijuana as a pain reliever, despite the stiff penalties assessed if caught.](#)

WHAT MAKES A STORY INTERESTING?

If the goal is to generate an interesting story idea (and eventually an interesting story), then how do writers and editors define “interesting?”

That’s a subjective question of which answers will hinge on personal preference and a publication’s mission. Overwhelmingly, though, writers and editors I questioned said they try to produce fresh information and personality-driven stories. “Just tell me an interesting story about somebody,” Carter, the former ESPN NY editor, said, simply.

Carter wants stories that haven’t been done before. People don’t remember the obvious ones, he said of run-of-the-mill features born of an oft-discussed storyline. “They’ll remember the ones that took a lot of work, took a lot of research.” A story that falls into that category [is a piece by Ian O’Connor on the late Green Bay Packers coach Vince](#)

[Lombardi](#), a name so iconic that the Super Bowl trophy is named after him. In 2014, the Super Bowl was in New Jersey, where Lombardi used to coach high school before he was famous. It had been more than 60 years since Lombardi coached at St. Cecilia High School in Englewood, New Jersey, 10 miles north of Manhattan. But the story was personal to O'Connor, who played football at that school in the 1980s. O'Connor interviewed people who played under Lombardi in the 1940s and found out how the legendary Lombardi got his start in coaching. "There's no one tell," O'Connor said when asked if there's a specific element or theme he looks for in a potential feature story. "It's really more on feel."

Stories are often the fruits of personal interest. Before Michael Gehlkin was the Chargers beat writer for the San Diego Union-Tribune, he was a student at University of California, Davis. A communications professor assigned his class to read a psychological study that said, in part, "Research is Me-search," meaning if something interests you, there's a good chance it will interest others, too. That's a lesson Gehlkin recalls today when he's trying to generate interesting story ideas. "We're all human," Gehlkin said. "And if you're curious about something, it probably means somebody else is too." His curiosity radar began beeping last summer during an interview with Joe Barksdale, a player who was transitioning to a new position along the Chargers' offensive line. During the interview, the player talked about his emerging hobby, playing guitar. Gehlkin audibled from his original story idea and began working [on a more in-depth piece of the player and his guitar chops](#). It was an example of a reporter trusting his instincts and identifying a story idea on the fly.

Research is also Me-search for Boston Globe sports enterprise reporter Shira Springer. She's interested in sports business and technology — she sees both as emerging topics —

so she'll occasionally write about them. Because she's not tied to a specific beat, Springer gets the freedom to bounce around to stories that appeal to her. She likes to tell stories about "under-represented demographics," such as paralympians and other disabled athletes. Boston is a sports town dominated by its successful pro teams, which typically receive most of the attention in the press. Springer said she likes to write about topics she finds important that other people don't often think about. Ultimately, though, there's no formula for the abstract concept of what makes something interesting to her: "You have a nose for it," Springer said.

PITCHING vs. ASSIGNING

While both reporters and editors partake in the ideas process, the question of who is pitching or assigning a story varies wildly among the publications I researched.

At Grantland, NFL writer Robert Mays said 100 percent of his stories were his own ideas. Mays said he wouldn't have minded receiving assignments from editors, but admitted that he likely was more invested in story ideas he cooked up. "You want to prove that it was worth doing," Mays said. "If I'm asking my editors to put me on a plane and spend money and spend time, I want to make it good." He invested company time and money to profile Eagles linebacker Connor Barwin in Philadelphia and Texans defensive lineman J.J. Watt in Wisconsin. They were his ideas and he wanted to prove he could execute them.

The pitch process, for Mays, was always more of a conversation with his former editor, Sean Fennessey, about how best to approach a topic. Last year Mays wanted to write about Aaron Rodgers, the Green Bay Packers' star quarterback and eventual MVP. Problem is

everybody writes about Rodgers. Mays and Fennessey met in Grantland's Los Angeles office, as they often did — as one of the few writers to live in L.A., Mays took advantage of these opportunities — and spitballed ideas. How would they approach this differently than all the other Rodgers stories? They settled on a story about the Packers' offensive line — *The Men Who Protect Aaron Rodgers*.

At the San Diego Union-Tribune the writers also get independence to follow the angles they find interesting. Adams, the sports editor, understands his writers are plugged into their beats, and said his own role is often to provide perspective for when reporters miss the big picture because they're too close to the action. "A big part of my job is to help them distinguish what is important and what is not," Adams said.

At the Knoxville News-Sentinel, sports editor Phil Kaplan said he assigns roughly 40 percent of the stories, but he largely takes the same macro approach as Adams. "I think it's important for the editor to give the writer the luxury of kind of developing the beat and thinking 'What's a good story?'" Kaplan said. "Where I come in is going, 'OK, what makes this story Page 1? How can we present it in a better way? Do you need time to [develop it]? What other voices do you need in the story?'" Kaplan values stories that let the readers know more about the core of a human being — which is not always accessible through watching the athletes play sports. It's a philosophy shared by his Tennessee football writer, Dopirak, who said, "Humanizing a team is very important to the whole deal." Dopirak, whose 12-year career covering college sports has included stops in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Bloomington, Indiana, said he's always had a near 50-50 split of stories he pitches compared to stories an editor assigns him.

A change in publication was more game-changing for Lars Anderson, who wrote for 20 years at Sports Illustrated before joining Bleacher Report last year. He said his experience at Sports Illustrated included resistance when trying to pitch stories. “Guys at Bleacher are great. If I believe in something, they’ll let me do it,” Anderson said. “But in the past, gosh, I’ve had a lot of ideas at SI. That was the frustrating thing at SI — I’d sometimes send five ideas to New York, and sometimes you’d get no feedback. That’s been a problem at the magazine for generations, the disconnect between the office in New York and the writers across the country.”

Bleacher Report’s office is also located in New York, but Anderson says his editors there give him freedom to work on projects he believes in. When Anderson has an idea, he’ll discuss it over the phone with special projects editor Bill Eichenberger. If Eichenberger is intrigued, Anderson will send a more formal email with the details. “When you pitch an idea, it’s not always fully formed, and you won’t know what you have until you go out and research, talk to people and develop a theme,” Anderson said. “...They want you to have a unique sort of angle on it, and you won’t know that until you get out [in the field] and sink your teeth into it. A lot of times, it’s convincing the top guys you have a sense that this could really be special. But they kind of have to take a leap of faith to let you pull it off.”

Anderson is a bit of a special case at Bleacher Report, where he’s the only full-time staff writer in the Longform department that Eichenberger oversees. Otherwise in that department, a group of four or five editors prepare most of the story ideas and then assign them to a pool of freelance reporters. Eichenberger said roughly 80 percent of the stories his section publishes are ones editors have thought of and assigned. Writers still pitch ideas, but about 90 percent of them are shot down, Eichenberger said. “As frustrating as

our winnowing process is, I think it really serves the site really well," said Eichenberger, who hopes the ratio of writer pitches to editor assignments evens out a bit in the future. A writer once pitched a story to Eichenberger about Ukrainian athletes coming to the U.S. to compete in athletics and avoid the military draft. Eichenberger, who spent nine years at Newsday, believed it would be a great story for a distinguished newspaper like the New York Times or Washington Post, but squashed the idea for Bleacher Report. It didn't fit into the site's target demographic, which, editors know from reader statistics, is a younger crowd that values stories about high-profile athletes.

THE POWER OF ANALYTICS

Eichenberger is 61 but says he must think like a 21-year-old. Bleacher Report — which relies heavily on audience analytics — targets 18-24 year-olds. National stories on the NFL, college football, the NBA and mixed martial arts play well in that demographic, Eichenberger said. "Our audience wants to read about people their age or younger," said Eichenberger, who noted the rule of thumb at his company is that there isn't an audience for any story that goes back 10 or more years. The metrics that are important to the company, he said, are unique visitors (the general aim is 100,000 for a story) and the amount of time a reader spends on a page.

News outlets are devoting more and more attention to audience analytics, the stats that quantify reader habits. "Through new audience information systems, such as web analytics, the influence of the audience on the news construction process is increasing," Edson Tandoc, a Singapore communications professor who earned a PhD from the University of Missouri, wrote in his 2014 academic article about how web analytics are

changing traditional gatekeeping. Also in 2014, the New York Times' innovation team delivered a report to its employees regarding its digital strategy moving forward. The report was leaked, and it reveals much about the Times' insistence on producing content with a focus on its audience. "Our core mission remains producing the world's best journalism," the report reads. "But with the endless upheaval in technology, reader habits and the entire business model, The Times needs to pursue smart new strategies for growing our audience. The urgency is only growing because digital media is getting more crowded, better funded and far more innovative."

While analytics are ingrained in the cultures of the six workplaces I drew from, editors, not writers, are the ones who keep an eye on story performance and make decisions based on stats. As a writer for Bleacher Report, Anderson barely considers how many people read his stories. Audience analytics "never sort of intrigued me," he said, and he never had access to them at Sports Illustrated.

When Carter was ESPN New York's executive editor he viewed web analytics with a common tool called Omniture every hour on his iPads (yes, plural) or phone. He said the numbers didn't necessarily influence what he decided to cover, but they would affect story placement on the webpage. For instance, if a story in a featured spot on the homepage wasn't as popular as one elsewhere, Carter might change the layout first thing in the morning to make the popular story more prominent. As a writer at ESPN New York, Ian O'Connor said he is generally aware of what stories play well based on the ones that receive the most shares on Facebook, but he uses his news sense over numbers to determine what he's going to write next. "I think [analytics are] definitely a factor, but you can't have that constantly dictate what you're doing," O'Connor said. "Your opinions have to be honest

ones. You can't start manufacturing rage or whatever emotion for the sake of page views." Assuming people like to read about star players, O'Connor said he might write about a megastar like Yankees slugger Alex Rodriguez instead of lesser-known outfielder Brett Gardner. It's often O'Connor's goal to "get the fan and the reader closer to the core of" superstar athletes or coaches, he said.

At the Boston Globe, editors use Chartbeat as an analytics tool. It tracks concurrents, which is a combination of the amount of people on the site and the amount of time they spend. "We are not ruled by it but we certainly are influenced by it," sports editor Joe Sullivan said of analytics. There are times, he said, when the section will make a commitment to something editors deem important, even if they know another topic will do better online. For example, over the summer, they played up a women's soccer game instead of preseason New England Patriots news. Meanwhile, Globe enterprise reporter Shira Springer pays little mind to analytics. If the Globe allowed metrics to steer coverage, "The paper would be 90 percent Tom Brady and Gisele Bundschen," she said of the New England Patriots' MVP quarterback and his supermodel wife.

There's a consistent trend at the newspapers I looked into: Analytics can persuade an editor to make a certain content decision, but usually it influences ideas for quick-hitting content rather than deeper feature stories.

San Diego Union-Tribune sports editor Todd said that during big events he spends time on social media to see what people want to know about. In 2011, when the Packers played the Steelers in the Super Bowl, a Green Bay player named Nick Collins intercepted a pass for a touchdown. Adams, then at the Orlando Sentinel, saw that numerous posts on Twitter asking about the little-known Collins. So Adams posted a quick 3-4 paragraph story

with basic info about Collins. He said it did “gangbusters” because so many people were Googling “Nick Collins.” It was, as Adams said, a service for the reader.

“It used to be 10 years ago that we were the gateways, where we said ‘Here’s what’s important; you need to read about it.’ The readers didn’t have much of a choice. There was really only one way to get the news — it was what we gave them,” Adams said. “Now, it’s the other way around. We need to be responsive to the readers. Because the readers can get their information in a lot of different places. We need to answer the questions the readers want answered. I’ll look at the analytics to try to bend our coverage to what people want to know about.”

While he is heedful of his section’s performance, the bigger features at his paper are products of in-house conversations, not analytics. It’s the reporters, he said, who drive feature ideas. And his Chargers reporter, like all the reporters I surveyed, isn’t much interested in the data. Said Michael Gehlkin: “I don’t want to be blind to analytics; I don’t want to pretend that they’re not important, that web traffic is not important — because it is. “However... I don't want to chase clicks and post photo galleries all day.” The newspaper sends a weekly email to staff that shows the top five authors of the week in terms of how many people read their stories. Gehlkin admitted, competitively, he likes to see his name up top. But he said it doesn’t drive his decision-making.

At Grantland, writers were not given data on analytics. And again, analytics didn’t sway what was written so much as how it was presented on the website. Editors looked for readership trends. If they scheduled five football stories for Wednesday and the fifth one got lost, they’d maybe space out stories differently in the future. Former deputy editor Sean Fennessey said staff was “reluctant to talk about traffic,” in the nascent stages of the

website, because “it didn’t seem germane to the mission of the site, which is to tell good stories.” Their attention to analytics grew after their 2011 launch, but mostly on the editorial side. Editors didn’t use the numbers to push writers to cover certain topics, Fennessey said, because the website was so writer-driven.

READERS’ CHOICE?

Every week, Chargers beat writer Gehlkin hosts a “Chargers Chat” live blog with fans. The fans ask Gehlkin (the expert) questions about the team. If a fan asks a question and he doesn’t know the answer — such as, ‘When are the Chargers going to wear their powder blue uniforms this year?’ — he’ll look into it and write a story. Though Gehlkin has an ear to his fan base, he doesn’t actively ask readers for recommendations for feature story ideas. His chats are meant to answer readers’ questions, not take their suggestions.

The reporters and editors I interviewed say they’re open to readers’ ideas, but do little to foster them. “There are so many smart friggin’ people out there. To ignore those suggestions would be silly,” said Grantland’s Robert Mays, who looks at suggestions sent to him but doesn’t seek them out, even if he believes they might be valuable. Mays leaves his email address in his Twitter bio but, like the other reporters and editors surveyed, does not do much more to invite readers to suggest stories.

Unsolicited, readers occasionally submit story tips, which usually come in the form of emails or tweets, several journalists said. Boston Globe enterprise reporter Shira Springer said she might use a reader’s suggestion once or twice a year, but only from a certain type of reader. “When it’s readers, it’s often readers who are ‘in the business,’” she said. “For example, there’s a sports professor at a local university — a professor who has a

class in sports management. If I get a suggestion from him, I'll trust it and know that it's a legit suggestion." She's leery of people trying to promote friends or relatives, so she tries to stay away from tips from fans, she said. But earlier in the conversation, when asked about what serves as inspiration for story ideas, she did mention a wide range of sources, including neighbors talking about their kids or grandkids. "There's no place that's off-limits, as far as where inspiration can come from," she said.

For Dopirak at the Knoxville newspaper, he visits online message boards to take the temperature of a fan base, but does not solicit ideas from the fans. He tries to talk to as many people as possible to generate story ideas, and most of his targets are coaches and staff who work for a college team. "I haven't built a really good group of spies yet," said Dopirak, referring to his network.

The reporters I interviewed seemed disinterested in letting the audience influence what they write. But when it comes to drawing ideas from peers in the industry, they're all about it. Editors and writers read other journalism voraciously as a way to spark new story ideas. San Diego Union-Tribune sports editor Todd Adams often reads sports magazines over lunch. Once, when he was at the Fayetteville (N.C.) Observer, he read a blurb in ESPN The Magazine about a football umpire (the referee who used to stand in dangerous territory before the NFL repositioned umpires after several injuries to them). He mentioned it to one of his writers, who began reporting a long story on the challenges and dangers of that position.

Multiple reporters said a throwaway line in a news story can turn into a full-blown article for them. Mays follows all NFL reporters' Twitter feeds. At Grantland, he had the advantage of swooping in after a beat writer had reported something and developing a

deeper feature, like he did leading up to the NFL Draft with a feature on then-University of Washington defensive tackle Danny Shelton and the death of his brother. “They’re going to get a lot of personal nuggets about guys that they don’t have the time to truly explore,” Mays said about beat writers.

The editors’ daily routines are filled with reading. Sullivan said he reads his home-delivered Boston Globe while eating breakfast or riding a stationary bicycle, and then after he gets into the office, he reads the direct competition (The Boston Herald) and other big papers (New York Times, USA TODAY), and also scans Twitter for links to read later. In New York, Carter sometimes bought the three big city papers — The Daily News, New York Times and New York Post — a habit he figures caused people to think he was playing the lottery.

CONCLUSION

As much as I’ve tried to separate and compare the actions of writers and editors, digital and print, my interviews didn’t reveal patterns or processes that could be considered a list of best practices. A lot of decisions are made by feel, based on personal preferences, experiences and beliefs. Even with increased access to data that can help validate decisions, these writers and editors have not been robotized to follow a specific decision tree. Their values more often influence how their work is done. Conversations with anybody can prompt story ideas, but more often conversations with insiders influence what’s actually written.

The day before I interviewed Leon Carter about his time at ESPN New York, we chatted over grilled hamburgers and hot dogs at a cookout for an event Carter ran. Carter is the founder of the Sports Journalism Institute, a program for young minority reporters that began last summer with a boot camp at the University of Missouri, where I work. He asked about my career, which included four years of reporting in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Conversation eventually turned to Ralph Sampson, a Hall-of-Fame basketball player from Harrisonburg. Carter wrote himself a note: Sampson might be an interesting person to cover for Carter's new black culture site for ESPN, the Undefeated. Voila. Again, a casual chat produced a possible story idea. It wasn't the purpose of the conversation, but it could have been.

Journalists often talk with direct stakeholders and coworkers, and read the work of industry peers in hopes of finding a story idea. But it's rare — at least among the six shops I surveyed — for journalists to cultivate conversations with unrelated people for the same purposes. Technology allows easy communication with the audience, yet the communication is often one-way. The media delivers information to an audience, and is selectively deaf to feedback. Sure, journalists occasionally respond to their Twitter followers or answer emails about stories. But they rarely, if ever, enable their audience to choose the content it will eventually consume. Perhaps more, genuine interaction with audience members would lead to a more loyal audience in a digital landscape where consumers have so many choices they can change the publication they read by the minute. And again, readers sometimes have the best story ideas.

In 2010, a man from Georgia emailed Sports Illustrated writer Chris Ballard. The man wanted to tell Ballard about his high school baseball team, which, in 1971, made an

improbable run to the state finals. Ballard listened. He did some research. And he eventually flew to Macon, Georgia, to meet some of the people involved. It resulted in a descriptive and captivating feature story in Sports Illustrated: [The Magical Season of the Macon Ironmen](#). Ballard had so many charming details and characters to explore that he turned the story into a book. All because of a reader's email that many other reporters might have ignored or treated with a polite, perfunctory response. Now, what if we took this attention to audience a step further and made the audience a stakeholder from the start? Request ideas. Spitball with readers, not just editors. This might not work for fast-paced breaking news, but for feature stories, it could. Content producers are asking a lot of their readers to dedicate 15-20 minutes to consuming a large feature story. If they had more stakes in the ideas phase, they might be more committed to reading it. If journalists flat out asked consumers what they're interested in reading, it could create relationships that lead to brand loyalty.

It was Lars Anderson, a former co-worker of Ballard's at SI, who reminded me of how that high school baseball story came about (though Anderson conflated some of the details). Yet Anderson said he doesn't look at reader mail or comments "for your own self-preservation or for your own sanity." Sports fans have a reputation as vitriolic and vacuous on social media, so why deal with them? The reason, I contend, is because they are part of the audience news producers so covet. Eyeballs lead to advertising money, which allows websites and newspapers to function.

This project gave me a clearer picture of how stories come about at various publications I respect, and helped me develop story ideas during my final few months at the Columbia Missourian, a local newspaper in Columbia Missouri, where I've served as the assistant

sports editor since January 2014. As someone who is looking to advance in the world of sports journalism, and particularly the editing of it, I listened to the experienced editors I interviewed, and tried to emulate them in some ways. One is simply getting as many people from as many departments in a room at once and allowing conversation to flow into an idea. As the lead editor for our 16-page “Tiger Kickoff” insert, which comes out the day before each Missouri Tigers home football game, I huddled up a dozen people in some planning meetings. With writers, editors, photographers, photo editors, copy editors and even an illustrator, we tossed around ideas, tested the room on their appeal, and ultimately came away with deep yet focused concepts for the writers to explore. Our Sept. 18 cover story about Missouri’s athletics slogan, “Mizzou Made,” dove into a topic people encounter daily but rarely consider. The flashy cover (a conceptual illustration of several key Missouri figures creating a tiger as if it’s Frankenstein), came after significant brainstorming and several bad ideas.

Another idea I took from an editor (Phil Kaplan of the Knoxville News-Sentinel) is requesting various public documents and searching through them for anything that jumps out. One of my information requests — for all emails between the University of Missouri’s Chancellor and former athletics director — yielded nothing I thought was worthy of a story. But a separate request, for information pertaining to the football team’s championship rings, turned into a fun and informative piece for a Tiger Kickoff.

Throughout my interviewing, some of my own pre-existing strategies were validated (i.e. reading magazines and searching for a nugget to turn into gold; keeping a long word document of potential story ideas to be developed further). It’s good to know I employ some of the same tactics as other, more accomplished writers and editors. It’s also a

reminder that we must all continue to evolve to prevent becoming stale. In a digital world that few can predict, we need new ideas and strategies that others have yet to try. The future of meaningful sports journalism might depend on it.