COOKING UP A SPORTS FEATURE STORY

Dissecting the writer-editor decisions and operations that lead to sports features making it to publication

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Acknowledgments

There’s no way I’m going to get this done.

There was a moment this year — late winter or early spring, before I even decided what my final project would be — when I walked into a stairwell at work and stared out a window in desperation. I’m typically even-keeled, stoic, assured I’ll finish what I start. But for the first time in a long time, I had doubts.

Nothing on the other side of the window provided answers. My project, chair, Jacqui Banaszynski, did.

Struggling to find a topic to research or a practical project to propose, I emailed Jacqui and set up a meeting that week. By the time I left her office, I was back to my old self. I can do this. No sweat.

Thank you Jacqui for all of your guidance and suggestions, and for reading crappy first drafts that turned into better final products post-edit. You are the smartest person I know, and knowing that the smartest person I know is on my team gave me confidence everything would turn out all right.

Thank you Greg Bowers for challenging me to do better, whether you were inspecting my blog or editing my articles. I wouldn’t be known worldwide as “award-winning columnist Mark Selig” without your help. In all seriousness, I’ve absorbed a lot of journalism and life lessons from you over the past two years. They will serve me well as I move forward.

Thank you Joy Mayer for setting up your students to succeed, no matter what they want to do next. I still think “Participatory Journalism” is the wrong name for your class, but I also think I’ll get a job doing something digitally because of it.

Other thanks go to those who impacted me from afar. Thanks Dad for always supporting my decisions, even if they’ve taken me farther and farther away from the family. Thanks Dave for providing a great example of how to succeed in this fickle business.

Before this uncharacteristically sappy note closes, I have to shout out my boo, Lee Anne. Thank you for making my decision to come to Missouri my best decision yet. From pancakes to pudding, every hour of every day with you is exciting and fulfilling. I love you.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

When a guest speaker called in to class, it was the best 75 minutes of the week. My first semester at the University of Missouri I enrolled in Greg Bowers’ sports journalism course. The discussion-based class often featured guest speakers, and these visitors (or Skypers) represented a who’s who in today’s narrative journalism landscape.

Sports Illustrated’s Thomas Lake talked about boiling down his articles to a single word. And about how the best time to write a story is often a year after it is newsworthy, once the dust has settled. ESPN the Magazine’s Wright Thompson described his pre-reporting process and detailed his experiences covering Michael Jordan post-retirement. Freelancer Justin Heckert shared advice on recreating a scene through interviewing. He also displayed his unusual aptitude of remembering ledes — everybody’s ledes. I never wanted these conversations to end; there always seemed to be more to explore.

These are the types of conversations I hope to have as part of my next job. After graduation I will try to become a sports editor for a newspaper or web-only publication. Narrative feature writing is an interest and skill of mine, and I’d like to help other writers’ features sing.

What interests me most — and what still makes newspapers relevant to me — is the writing. As an advisor to undergraduate reporters, I’ve been forced to think about and articulate what makes writing successful. Prior to my enrollment at Missouri, I served four years as a sports reporter for the Daily News-Record in
Harrisonburg, Virginia. I’m proud of my work there. I produced award-winning stories and dominated a beat. But sometimes the daily grind left little room for reflection. My strategies had become more instinctive than calculated.

Through challenging courses and 20-plus hours per week serving as the assistant sports editor at the Columbia Missourian, I’ve broadened my outlook on journalism. While no single class has given me expertise in a particular area, each has shown me what is possible — and has provided the basic foundational knowledge to explore further. Working in the newsroom in a managerial position has taught me a different level of responsibility juggling and personality management. It’s also given me dedication to a product bigger than my own. My role as an editor at the Missourian has been refreshing in that I can revisit the building blocks every semester when we inherit a new staff with varying skill levels. As I prepared for similar jobs with very different staffs, I wanted to pick the brains of more experienced writers and editors.

My project was two-fold. For the professional element of my project I created a blog in which I highlighted meaningful sports journalism and discussed craft — what makes a story fun and engaging to read? — with the reporters and editors responsible. For my professional analysis, I focused on the process of developing story ideas, and the considerations writers and editors make before deciding to devote significant resources to a sports feature story.

I talked to writers I’d been reading since I first learned what a newspaper was. Boston Globe columnist Bob Ryan is the first person I remember calling my favorite journalist. In recent years, my favorite has been Lee Jenkins. In the last
several months, I might have found a new one — John Branch. I chatted with each of these writers about their storytelling strategies. This is like a young basketball player asking LeBron James about his post-up game.

But this project wasn't about hero worship; it was about learning tricks of the trade I could pass on to others. I developed a small community of journalists who appreciated that I did this and kept asking for more. That was the most gratifying part — knowing I was not only learning but also teaching. Hearing the stories behind the stories allowed me to analyze, critique and be more conscious about reading like a writer — habits that will serve me well as an editor. It also helped me create contacts in the industry as I networked with well-known journalists.

And speaking to writers and editors for the analysis portion of the project allowed me a better view of how these story ideas actually come about. If I plan to work as a sports editor, I need to know the types of conversations editors have with their writers before green-lighting a major feature story. I need to be aware of all the considerations journalists make: What are your main sources for brainstorming? What makes a story interesting? How does audience reception influence the work you do? Finding answers to these questions will help me from an operational standpoint as I reenter the industry. They can help me be a more informed editor who's cognizant of the thought processes of both writers and editors.

This project is the final step in earning my master's degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. I will now rejoin the work force as a more thoughtful, experienced, skilled and connected journalist.
Chapter 2: Field Notes

Week 1 (June 1-7)

WHAT I DID

• I interviewed ESPN’s Leon Carter for an hour. While Carter has worked at the New York Daily News and recently took a job at the still-to-launch black culture site, The Undefeated, I asked him to remark on his time at ESPN New York, where he served as the VP and executive editor since 2010.

• From Carter, I received contact info for ESPN NY columnist/feature writer Ian O’Connor. Carter and I specifically discussed one of O’Connor’s stories. I am substituting this duo for ESPN’s Mary Byrne and Coley Harvey (because Mary’s new job — she recently moved from USA TODAY — is not exactly what I anticipated).

• O’Connor agreed to speak with me Wednesday, June 10.

• Sent email invite to Joe Sullivan of the Boston Globe. He agreed to an interview and said he’d know of a better time next week

• Sent email invite to Mike Svetitz of the Richmond Times Dispatch.

• I created a spreadsheet with each of my targets, their email addresses, phone numbers and physical addresses (for thank you notes), as well as my progress in contacting/interviewing them.

WHAT I LEARNED

• Can’t say there were many surprises from my conversation with Carter, but I have a better understanding of his overall job and its demands.

• Interesting nugget: When Carter lived in New York he used to ask cab drivers what they thought of his stories/website. He wouldn’t tell the drivers who he was (for fear that they’d ask for tickets) but he liked their raw, honest opinions.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Sending Ian O’Connor an email reminder Tuesday and then interviewing him Wednesday. Will immerse myself in more of his work before this interview.
• Reconnecting with Joe Sullivan from the Boston Globe to make sure he hasn’t forgotten about me.

Week 2 (June 8-14)

WHAT I DID

• Sorted through website hosting options and settled on WordPress.com.

• Spoke with Columbia Missourian executive editor Tom Warhover about additional funding for the blog (in order to buy a domain name, a premium WordPress template and storage space). I have a $500 budget.

• Created Backstorysports.com and loaded my personal work to it.

• Interviewed Knoxville News Sentinel Sports Editor Phil Kaplan on June 8. In addition to using this interview for my research paper, I will take a blurb from our discussion and craft a blog post about it next week.

• Wrote an introduction piece on Monday and then my first full blog post Tuesday about NBA writers and their stories after Game 2 of the NBA Finals.

• Interviewed Ian O’Connor for research portion of project and reserved time for discussion of his recent Belmont Stakes coverage.

• Turned Belmont conversation with O’Connor into another blog post.

• Interviewed Knoxville News Sentinel’s Dustin Dopirak for research.

• Scheduled interview with Sports Illustrated’s Lee Jenkins for June 26. This, I hope, will be my first “podcast.” I’d like to use a Marantz tape recorder and run our entire conversation, if all goes well.

WHAT I LEARNED

• Blogging is fun!

• A retweet from a well-connected source can go a long way. My NBA post received more than 250 page views because Howard Beck (one of the writers I mentioned) retweeted it out to his 111K followers.

• It’s silly that this never dawned on me before, but I can easily turn my research conversations into blog posts.
WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Blogging about the Knoxville News Sentinel’s use of records requests in reporting.

• Contacting Bleacher Report’s Bill Eichenberger and Jason King (or Lars Anderson) to try to set up an interview.

• Interviewing Boston Globe’s Joe Sullivan on Tuesday, June 16 and going through him to set up an interview with one of his reporters.

• Contacting various winners of APSE awards to see if they’d be willing to spend time with me during the following week’s convention. I hope to use these conversations for blog posts.

• Transcribing another batch of my interviews. Though we agreed that I don’t need to transcribe everything, I’m converting my notes into more readable, organized notes. So for that, I’ll use the term “transcribing.”

Week 3 (June 15-21)

WHAT I DID

• Blogged about Knoxville News-Sentinel’s propensity to request open records.

• Interviewed Boston Globe sports editor Joe Sullivan for my research.

• Wrote a blog post analyzing the sports front pages of the winning/losing teams of both the NBA Finals and Stanley Cup.

• Interviewed New York Times reporter John Branch about his most recent take-out feature and blogged the audio from our conversation.

• Set up interviews with Bleacher Report’s Bill Eichenberger and Lars Anderson for next week.

WHAT I LEARNED
• My own newspaper, and many others, doesn’t request enough records. There are countless stories to be done after obtaining certain records, which we can acquire for a public school like Missouri.

• I learned the day-to-day operations of a sports editor at a big paper such as the Boston Globe. It was nothing unexpected, but still pretty neat to hear what Joe Sullivan does hour to hour.

• Even one of the most respected writers in the world (John Branch) doesn’t always outline his stories. He didn’t for Lost Brother in Yosemite.

Week 4 (June 22-28)

WHAT I DID

• Interviewed editor Bill Eichenberger and writer Lars Anderson from Bleacher Report’s Longform division.

• Interviewed Sports Illustrated senior writer Lee Jenkins about some of his recent stories and blogged our conversation.

• Interviewed legendary Boston Globe columnist Bob Ryan and blogged our conversation.

• Touched base with San Diego Union-Tribune sports editor Todd Adams about doing a research interview over the phone next week.

• Attended APSE Conference, which included a particular section about content promotion through Facebook that I found very useful for the purposes of my blog (not to mention the Missourian).

• Networked with more than 75 sports writers and editors at the APSE convention. Made contacts with people whom I might interview down the line for the blog.

• Made a list of possible people to interview for my blog.

WHAT I LEARNED

• Too much to list here. The APSE awards were valuable both for the sessions offered and the ability to chat with veterans across the country. Sparknotes version of what I learned:
  o How to use Periscope
○ How to create easy digital content that departs from traditional story forms
○ What makes good columns (a great idea and concise execution).
○ There aren't many shortcuts in the industry. The savviest, hardest working people are the ones who seem to succeed.

WHAT I'M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Hopefully interviewing San Diego's Todd Adams and one of his writers.

• Contacting Benjamin Hochman from the Denver Post about his “9 innings” series about community baseball series.

• Combing through my list of potential interview subjects and divising a plan on who to contact first.

• Reaching out to Shira Springer of the Boston Globe. She will be my Globe writing representative for the research portion.

Week 5 (June 29-July 5)

WHAT I DID

• Wrote four blog posts
  ○ A monthly compilation of my favorite stories

  ○ A review of how Bleacher Report is legitimizing it's damaged reputation with a Longform section.

  ○ A behind-the-scenes post about a compelling story that appeared on SB Nation.

  ○ A podcast with Denver Post's Benjamin Hochman.

• Interviewed Boston Globe's Shira Springer for my research portion.

WHAT I LEARNED

• I now better know the ins and outs of how a shop like Bleacher Report is run. The company has more money than God, and in terms of longform writers, it is only looking to hire people who absolutely blow them away.

• How a sportewriter successfully uses social media to generate story ideas. Benjamin Hochman crowd sources to find sources to talk to. If he wants to
write about people who use baseball to keep in contact with their parents, he has several options after a few keystrokes on Twitter.

- I never knew of SB Nation’s reach until I saw all the traffic the site directed to my blog. The editor, Glenn Stout, linked to my blog in the comments section of a popular story, and over the next two weeks, SB Nation gave me more than 500 referrals. I don’t want to pander to page views, but it was nice to see that type of bump.

Week 6 (July 6-12)

WHAT I DID

- Interviewed editor Todd Adams and reporter Michael Gehlkin of the San Diego Union-Tribune for the research paper.

- Interviewed Grantland’s Robert Mays, also for research.

- Interviewed Washington Post’s Steve Goff, who just returned to the country from covering the World Cup. I blogged about what interested me from our conversation.

- Interviewed ESPN producer Kris Schwartz about a fascinating TV story I saw over the weekend. Highlights from our talk are on the blog.

WHAT I LEARNED

- Reporters are the main sources of story ideas at the San Diego U-T. Editor Todd Adams trusts his beat people to have a better grasp of what’s going on than he would from the office.

- One of Adams’ best ways of thinking of bigger feature stories is to read magazines such as Sports Illustrated and ESPN. He tries to find an interesting nugget of a story and look deeper into that aspect.

- Most of the U-T beat writers spend little time in the office, but they consistently communicate with editors.

- Life of an NFL beat writer is hellish. Gehlkin feels like he’s on the clock 24/7.

- Robert Mays is moving to Chicago. He was Grantland’s only writer based in L.A., and now they have none.
WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Turning some of the material from my research interview with Michael Gehlkin into a blog about finding stories to cover.

• Revamping my approach a bit after Greg noted that I’m not showing enough mastery in my posts.

• Taking it easy for a bit as I travel to Boston to see family.

Week 7 (July 13-19)

WHAT I DID

• Turned some of the material from my research interview with Michael Gehlkin into a blog about finding stories to cover.

• Stepped away from research and the blog for a few days.

• Continued reading magazines/websites on the lookout for potential stories to feature on the blog.

• Set up an interview with Sean Fennessey, an editor at Grantland.

WHAT I LEARNED

• Looking back on some of my work thus far, I could be more authoritative on some posts and more explicit about why I believe certain stories work. Like most good writing, the more descriptive, the better.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Conducting my final research interview

• Trying to reach Sports Illustrated’s Jon Wertheim for a post about his recent magazine story on Wimbledon.

• Emailing several writers to set up possible interviews to use on the blog.

Week 8 (July 20-26)

WHAT I DID
• Interviewed Sports Illustrated’s Jon Wertheim and posted about how the writer uses his notebook to draft stories.

• Interviewed Grantland’s Sean Fennessey for the research portion of my project.

• Began research for a blog post I’m writing about baseball Hall of Fame coverage. Read all of the Boston Globe’s HOF coverage and spoke to editor Matt Pepin about it.
  
  o Set up interviews for next week with Arizona Republic’s Mark Faller, Atlanta Journal Constitution’s Ray Cox and Houston Chronicle’s Reid Laymance.

WHAT I LEARNED
• Wertheim writes all of his stories by hand in a notebook, each page a home for each paragraph. I thought this was a fascinating way to construct a story, and one I’m tempted to try (though I’m completely dependent on word processors.)
  
  o The writer barely uses quotes anymore, which was nice to see, because I, too have taken a liking to the minimization of quotes in stories.

• The blog received 452 views on the day I posted about Wertheim. That’s the most of any day so far. It seems people love SI’s writers (my prior Lee Jenkins post was also a big hit).
  
  o A good retweet or two (in this case Bob Kravitz from Indianapolis) can go a long way in spreading a link.

• Grantland, as an entire operation, is done more remotely than I thought. The editors begin their work days from home and then eventually trickle into the office for an afternoon meeting.
  
  o The site is strategically very basketball-centric because that’s what the editors enjoy talking about when they’re shooting the shit in the office. They figure if it’s interesting to them, it will be interesting to readers, too.
  
  o One of the sites goals, according to Fennessey, is to “take an incredibly serious look at things that are usually frivolous and a frivolous look at things that are serious.”

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK
• Interviewing Reid Laymance, Ray Cox and Mark Faller for a baseball Hall of Fame blog post.
I anticipate that fitting four separate interviews into a single post will be difficult, but I’ll try to keep it as focused as possible.

- Interviewing Washington Post’s Kent Babb for a blog post about his recent story on Chip Kelly. I’d like to find out how Babb reported such intimate details about such a private figure.

- Trying to set up a time to interview Buffalo News’ Tim Graham about a well-received feature story about a former Buffalo Bill’s player who retired early and now paints for a living.

**Week 9 (July 27-August 2)**

**WHAT I DID**

- Interviewed three more sports editors about their Hall of Fame coverage. Included those with my interview of Boston Globe editor Matt Pepin to write [this post on how sports departments covered local stars entering the Hall](#).

- Interviewed Washington Post sports features writer Kent Babb about his story on Eagles coach Chip Kelly. Wrote a post about covering a big figure without access, and watched my readership numbers skyrocket to the tune of nearly 13,000 views (more on this in the “What I Learned” section).

- Interviewed Tim Graham from the Buffalo News about a recent feature story he wrote. I will write a post about how Graham obsesses over story angles for the upcoming week.

- Continued to read 15-20 articles a day from my daily reading websites. I’m finding I’m being more and more selective about the types of articles to showcase on the blogs (I’m looking for a specific topic to write about).

- Began writing a “Best of July” compilation post that I hope to have finished and posted by Monday afternoon.

- Emailed Grantland’s Jordan Conn and Sports Illustrated’s Alexander Abnos about potential posts for the future.

**WHAT I LEARNED**

- The more focused a post, the more successful it is. Pointing out an aspect of somebody’s reportage is more educational than introducing the story broadly.
Twitter, not Facebook has been my primary driver of traffic. And never has it resulted in more visitors to my site than after the Babb piece. I included Babb’s Twitter handle in a tweet promoting the post, Babb retweeted it, and then NFL reporter Ian Rapoport did the same. Rapoport, who has 746,000 followers, helped my post generate nearly 13,000 views. The more people who saw it, the more it was shared. A blog called the Big Lead linked to it. Bleacher Report linked to it. A sports editor from Tennessee linked to it on Facebook. Every time I looked, the post had a thousand more views. Even on idle days, it’s picked up a few hundred extra views.

Many of Rapoport’s followers are NFL fans who lack a certain nuance in their thinking. So once I was thrust into his world, I received a lot of feedback from fans who wanted to complain about Babb’s reporting but didn’t want to have an actual conversation about it. I tried to start a conversation with one dissenter, but quickly realized that wouldn’t be possible with everybody. “Welcome to the NFL coverage party,” Babb tweeted to me.

I’d be remiss not to mention what I actually learned from my conversation with Babb: There are plenty of ways to cover a subject when you don’t have access to him/her. Babb has done it now with Kelly, with Hillary Clinton and with Allen Iverson. He said it’s more difficult, but often more rewarding. The reporter must be willing to think smartly about who can be his/her sources and ask the right questions to get them talking. For his book on Iverson, Babb spoke with the former NBA player’s favorite waiter and tattoo artists. Babb said he never would have thought to talk to them if he got more access to Iverson.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

Need to circle back with Conn and Abnos about the aforementioned posts. Conn said he’d be on board but did not answer a follow-up email when I asked what day/time. Abnos was also game, but in order to do a post on the story he worked on, I’d really like to get a hold of the two writers who were responsible for it.

Finishing my post about the best stories of July.

Writing a post on Tim Graham and his feature on Aaron Maybin (interview already complete).

Keep reading the Internet for interesting content that would be good to dissect.
• I didn’t do anything tangible on the academic research side of things, but I did think through some strategies for putting together my paper. I’d like to continue that process this week and hopefully start an outline.

Week 10 (August 3-August 9)

WHAT I DID

• Published a post with some of my favorite content from July, along with explanations of why I thought the stories worked.

• Published a post detailing the strategies of Buffalo News enterprise reporter Tim Graham, who explained “Productive Procrastination,” among other things, to me.

• Got the blog onto the APSE site after another phone call with past president Mike Sherman.

• Interviewed Grantland’s Jordan Conn and posted about how one rises from a freelancer to a staff writer at a publication like his. We also discussed one of his recent stories, and how he managed all the moving pieces for a dramatic murder mystery.

• Interviewed Brian Straus and Alexander Abnos from Sports Illustrated for a post about their Major League Soccer oral history. Straus was one of two reporters and Abnos compiled it. I also set up an interview with editor Adam Duerson, so I can possibly pull off an “Oral history of the oral history.”

• Emailed St. Louis Post-Dispatch baseball writer Derrick Goold about possible post on covering an MLB team. Goold was agreeable to an interview but did not respond to a follow-up message seeking a definitive time. I will contact him again Monday (his off day).

• Emailed Taiwanese media group about a series of comical videos it has published, but I have not heard back from them.

WHAT I LEARNED

• I’ve long wondered how the freelance underworld works, and my conversation with Conn helped me understand it better. It seems he really had to bust his ass to get his foot in the door, but once that door is ajar, opportunities come much easier. Being a freelance writer with no guarantee of income is not a situation I’d feel comfortable living, though the rewards can be fruitful.
• Compiling an oral history sounds much more difficult than reporting one. The reporting process, according to Straus is similar to any normal story he’d do. But then the compiler, in this case Abnos, had to sort through hundreds of pages of transcriptions to find the best material. He had to read the transcripts carefully because he was so afraid of scanning over a potentially golden quote.

• Persistence pays off sometimes. My latest phone call to Mike Sherman finally served as the catalyst to get my blog on the APSE site. He said the reason he dragged his feet earlier is because he didn’t want to overstep his bounds, now that he’s out of office. But in a message with third VP Todd Adams that Mike CC’d me on, Adams said he had no problem posting my stuff. I’m likely going to email both Sherman and Adams from now on, because my last post last week seemed to be ignored.

• Out of curiosity I began researching SB Nation, which is putting out increasingly good work in their longform section. It’s a department I’d love to work for. Glen Stout, who’s in charge of it, has a poetry background and is skilled with narrative writing. It’s refreshing to read his views on long journalism — the type that people will want to read more than once because of its quality. I’m hopeful there continues to be a place for this type of work, which is more appealing to me than the report-every-breath aspect of high-profile beat writing.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• As mentioned earlier, I plan to interview Adam Duerson and write a post on SI’s oral history.

• I also plan to interview Derrick Goold and post about his hectic life covering a 162-game season that annually spills into the playoffs.

• The list for The Best American Sports Writing book came out last week, and the book releases in October. I’d like to talk to series editor Glenn Stout and write a post about how he selects these stories. I’m also considering requesting a Galley proof, reading each of the stories and interviewing each author for posts throughout the fall. It could be a special series where I do one per week.

Week 11 (August 10-August 16)

WHAT I DID
• Interviewed Sports Illustrated editor Adam Duerson and wrote post about SI’s MLS oral history. The theme of the post is how one prepares an oral history.

• Interviewed Rick Paulas, a freelancer who wrote a story about doctored softball bats for SB Nation. The theme of my post is when “no comments” let you know you’re onto something.

• Interviewed Gregg Doyel, a columnist of the Indianapolis Star. Gregg is a talker, and an interesting one at that, so I turned my interview into a podcast. Still, I included a flushed out written component to go along with the podcast. The themes of that post are Gregg Doyel’s transition from provocateur to feature columnist, and how to find stories and approach strangers with curiosity.

• Interviewed St. Louis Post Dispatch’s Derrick Goold, but held off on writing a post on him because so much other content emerged for this week. Our talk was about covering the MLB in general, so it’s sort of evergreen anyway.

WHAT I LEARNED

• Writing an oral history is indeed quite difficult, as I tried to do with just three people. My topic wasn’t as wide-ranging as most, and I had so few participants, but even trying to do it with three voices was tough to organize. There’s a temptation to let quotes run long, but the shorter ones make the piece pop a bit more. Organizing an oral history into definite sections (and organizing your interviews that way, too) is quite helpful.

• Oftentimes reporters are too easily dissuaded by a few people refusing to comment. But maybe that’s a good thing when people won’t talk; it means you’re on the right track for a story with some conflict. Rick Paulas was not stonewalled by a few no comments. He got creative with messages on Craigslist and message boards, and eventually got the answers he wanted, albeit from sources that chose to remain anonymous for the story.

• Recreating scenes you weren’t there for is always a tricky task. Doyel’s advice seems like it could work (and I can’t wait to try it next). He simply says to people “Obviously I wasn’t there that day. If I was, what would I have seen?” Sure, Doyel has to do some digging to get the most vivid details, but he said that starting point always works for him.

• I knew life as a baseball reporter was nonstop, but maybe I didn’t grasp to what degree until I talked to Derrick Goold. He wakes up before 6:30 a.m., goes to sleep after 1 a.m., and is pretty much working during every hour he’s awake.
WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• I will interview Ben Shpigel of the New York Times, in reference to his article on IK Enemkpali — the former Jets linebacker who punched Geno Smith in the face last week. Shpigel produced a pretty well-rounded profile on the guy Saturday, and I want to ask the writer about his methods for acquiring those interviews.

• I will write and post from my conversation on Derrick Goold.

• I want to call Todd Adams of APSE to see if he can post my material to their website. After putting up one post, Mike Sherman has again gone missing. He returned one of my three emails, but failed to put anything up.

• Will possibly contact Glenn Stout (see last week’s notes) about featuring his Best American Sports Writing stories.

Week 12 (August 17-August 23)

WHAT I DID

• Blogged on Ben Shpigels’ NYT story about IK Enemkpali — the former New York Jet who punched Geno Smith.

• Blogged about St. Louis Post-Dispatch writer Derrick Goold’s life covering the Cardinals. This was an interview I had completed in the previous week.

• Interviewed and blogged about Kansas City Star report Andy McCullough and his strategies for writing game stories.

WHAT I LEARNED

• Don’t feel guilty about interviewing people and not using their voice in a story. As Shpigel said, we’re reporters, not quoters. Every interview helps inform our viewpoint on a certain subject. It is not our responsibility to use every interview on the exterior. It’s especially clunky to jam in quotes for the sake of it.

• The baseball beat — now more than ever — is an 15-hour/day job, at the very least. Goold constantly doing something work-related, even when he’s not on assignment or at the ballpark. It has to be a real dream to put up with the constraints of the job.
My talk with McCullough on game stories didn’t teach me as much as I thought it might. This is no knock on McCullough; I chose him for this conversation because I think he’s one of the best game story writers out there. But he didn’t offer many secrets or tips to the trade that I wasn’t already aware of. Perhaps this is because I’ve closely studied the best ways to write gamers. ... A lot of what McCullough does is by feel, he said. He had to develop a style that worked for him — strong verbs and imagery. Aside from having a good perspective and an ability to contextualize what happens in a game, McCullough isn’t reinventing the wheel. He doesn’t leave the press box or go anywhere other reporters don’t.

**Week 13 (August 24-August 30)**

**WHAT I DID**

- After receiving responses from a previous email correspondence with Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter Tom Haudricourt, I blogged a Q&A about the writer’s story on openly gay baseball player David Denton.

- Interviewed freelance writer Jessica Luther and blogged about her story on Baylor football and its handling of a sexual assaulter. This was one of my favorites, not only because I finally featured a woman on the blog, but also because of the tangible impact Luther’s story made (the Big 12 changed a rule because of this story and its response).

- Interviewed the sports editor and a reporter from the Williamsport Sun-Gazette, a small newspaper that covers a big event each summer: the Little League World Series. I later blogged about my conversations with them.


- Messaged Robert Klemko about what I found to be an interesting tweet he posted about a story he didn’t tell because of restricted access. Klemko was not willing to talk to me just yet, but I might write a post anyway.

- Made a list of reporters who cover each SEC football team, found the email address for each and sent them all a personalized message asking if they’d participate in a survey I made discussing access at the programs they covered. Thus far, I’ve received nine surveys and have followed up with the five participants who have not responded.

**WHAT I LEARNED**
I’ve resisted emailing questions to people to this point — I prefer a more free-flowing chat with room for follow-up questions — but the format worked fairly well with Haudricourt, who preferred to answer the questions that way. To be honest, I didn’t love the reporter’s story, and thought he could have done more with it. Had we spoken on the phone, I maybe could have dug deeper into those areas, but even his email response allowed me to take a critical look at how he approached it. He didn’t talk to the gay player’s teammates because he trusted the manager to speak for the mood in the clubhouse. I disagreed with that point, considering the relationships peers have with one another to be more important than that of a manager to a player.

As I wrote in the blog, perhaps college football reporters across the country get too caught up with depth charts and soundbites to investigate critical topics. Fans’ demands for every bit of minutiae on their favorite team require reporters to stretch themselves so thin they can miss the biggest story. It took a monthly magazine to fully expose gross malfeasance at Baylor.

My biggest curiosity about covering the Little League World Series is how the newspaper handled kids making mistakes. After all, plenty of papers face this issue with high school coverage, where the athletes are older still. Sports editor Ben Brigandi’s motto is “report but don’t belabor.” It’s the paper’s responsibility to say what happened, but there’s no use in kicking 12-year-olds while they’re down. The “report but don’t belabor” motto is one I’d inherit if I ran a staff that covered high school sports.

No surprise, but covering an event like the LLWS when your newspaper has a tiny staff requires plenty of planning. The Sun Gazette didn’t so much plan out what reporters would write about at the event, but editors made sure all of the other elements of their sports section (mainly H.S. football) were covered well in advance.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

Interviewing Brewer for what I plan to be a blog about what it’s like to move to a new location and immediately write with conviction. Brewer previously worked at the Seattle Times, and now he’s in the cauldron that is D.C. sports.

Posting my monthly (Best of ___ August) including roughly 10 stories and why I liked them so much. Most of the stories are already selected.
• Continuing to work on my SEC access story. That involves gathering all the information I’ve received (which could reach 10,000 words of responses) and distilling it into something sensible, informative and interesting.

• Possibly writing a post about access, based on Klemko’s aforementioned tweet.

Week 14 (August 31-September 6)

WHAT I DID

• Interviewed Jerry Brewer about what it’s like to move to a new location as a columnist. Brewer used to be at the Seattle Times and is now at the Washington Post — a big jump geographically and exposure-wise. Here’s my post about Jerry’s move and the challenges he faced.

• Posted my best of August column, featuring 11 stories I liked from the past month and why I thought they worked. In my two previous iterations of this monthly post, I didn’t talk to any of the writers, but for this one, I included some text from an interview exchange I had with Eva Holland. I thought it worked well and I’ll try to do more of that next month.

• Gathered more sources for my SEC access story. My Kentucky reporter hadn’t responded, so I contacted another (and coincidentally, they then both answered my questions on the same day). I found a new reporter for Texas A&M and Ole Miss because my first attempts never responded. Both of the new people said they’re on board, but they haven’t gotten me my responses yet, even after a follow-up email.

WHAT I LEARNED

• It doesn’t hurt to be a pest. When I first emailed Jerry Brewer, he didn’t respond. A few days later, I sent him a polite follow-up asking again if he was free. He responded quickly this time, and said he never saw the first message. I figure I’m a stranger to most of these people anyway, so I’ve put aside some of my pre-existing squeamishness about possibly being pushy. It resulted in a great interview this time.

• Brewer admitted he had a difficult time going from big fish in small pond to vice versa. I was curious to know how he adjusted to being the guy in Seattle for 8-plus years, and then having to relearn an entirely new sports scene. He said he had to admit what he didn’t know. Don’t come in trying to prove you’re up to speed to writers, he said. Be transparent and try to learn quickly.
Week 15 (September 7-September 13)

WHAT I DID

- Interviewed ESPN investigative reporter Steve Fainaru about his story on 49ers linebacker Chris Borland, who retired from the NFL after his rookie season. Blogged about how Fainaru organized five months worth of notes and wrote about a man he followed so closely.

- Interviewed Sports Illustrated reporter Joan Niesen and turned our conversation into a podcast. Also blogged about Niesen’s use of voice in stories.

- Read ESPN’s 11,000-word Outside the Lines investigation about the NFL’s handling of two Patriots scandals, and wondered how the reporters gathered the information they did. So I set up interviews with Don Van Natta Jr. and Seth Wickersham, and wrote a blog detailing the tricks of high-level investigative work.

- Interviewed recently laid-off sports reporter Patrick Stevens. I plan to turn my conversation with him into a blog post next week.

- Sent out reminders to the last three participants I’m waiting to hear from for my SEC access poll. One of the three responded with answers.

WHAT I LEARNED

- I’ve long wondered what reporters’ note-taking policy is when spending entire days with a source. Do they take a tape recorder? Furiously scribble notes? Just write down the good stuff? Steve Fainaru brings a notebook and a recorder, because he likes long quotes when they’re compelling (and wants to capture them accurately). He said whenever he motioned toward his notebook, his source reacted — it took the source a while to get used to this.

- After talking to Niesen and reading her work more closely, I think voice and experience go hand in hand. By experience, I mean experiencing a certain event, place or story. Niesen’s stories pop when she’s using voice, and she’s using voice when she writes about New Orleans, a city she’s spent much time
She knows the provincial rituals and can write about them like an expert rather than a tourist.

- One key to investigative reporting is to not be discouraged when sources rebuff you. Van Natta and Wickersham whiffed on 100 sources apiece and eventually spoke to 90 combined.

- The ESPN story reinforced that meeting with sources in person typically leads to better results than a simple phoner.

- Often media members miss looking for information in obvious places because they're too busy looking elsewhere. Even if a story has repeatedly been reported to death, there may be more out there.

- NFL fans are wackos. I learned this after a post last month about Chip Kelly, and it was reaffirmed after my post last month about the Patriots/Roger Goodell. Commenters flooded my Twitter and blog’s comment section. Unsurprisingly, most were Patriots fans who ignored the nuance of the story and got super defensive about accusations about their team.

**WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK**

- I’m making Wednesday a drop-dead date to hear back from my SEC respondents. After that, I will begin to organize whatever information I have into a post to hopefully run the following week.

- As mentioned above, I plan to write a blog post about Patrick Stevens and how journalists can navigate a life that includes possible layoffs.

- I plan to email Justin Heckert about a story he wrote in the last issue of ESPN The Magazine. Heckert wrote it completely in second-person point of view — — effectively, I think — and I’m curious to learn the strategies he used to pull that off.

- Paul Kix, the editor of Wright Thompson’s gigantic New Orleans story, told me to touch base with him this week, after I emailed him last month. Now that he’s back from vacation, I will try him again. I want to know how an editor approaches a mammoth story like that, and how he deals with a writer like Thompson.

- I will email Matt Stanmyre, a preps reporter from nj.com. He wrote a story I really enjoyed about an 8th grader whose already being groomed for a professional career.
**Week 16 (September 14-20)**

**WHAT I DID**

- Finally wrote my piece on SEC access. It was worth the wait and all the headaches putting it together. The article was a big hit, both in number of reads (nearly 3,400) and in the feedback received from readers.

- Blogged about Patrick Stevens and how he’s responded to three layoffs in his career.

- Interviewed Paul Kix, the editor responsible for Wright Thompson’s big New Orleans piece that took over the magazine a couple weeks ago.

- Tried to set up an interview with Matthew Stanmyre about a story he wrote this month, but my messages went unanswered.

- Set up an interview with Justin Heckert. We will chat this week about using second-person POV, as he did for his story on paralyzed former Rutgers football player Eric LeGrand.

**WHAT I LEARNED**

- Employed or not, you’ve got to keep working. Being idle does little for your career, so it’s smarter to work without a paycheck and remain on people’s radars. Patrick Stevens doesn’t sound optimistic about his future in journalism — he told me off the record he’s looking to switch over to work for a university directly — but his work ethic should help him find a job, wherever it be.

- Sometimes what’s obvious to a writer isn’t so much to readers. I often downplay my own knowledge and don’t realize when I know more than others about a topic. I say this in reference to my SEC access blog. I thought it provided a nice, accurate picture of the type of hoops reporters must go through to conduct interviews with players and coaches, but I didn’t think there was a ton in there that was revelatory. My readers, though, seemed to learn a lot. I got dozens of Twitter comments about how interesting the article was, and how people didn’t realize how bad SEC media members had it. Working at the Missourian, where we cover an SEC football team, I see this daily. Most people don’t.
WHAT I'M DOING NEXT WEEK

• I will post about Kix, and the process of editing a 25,000-word mega-story.

• I will interview Heckert and post that, too.

• I plan to call Glenn Stout of SB Nation. I want to talk to him about the Best American Sports Writing book series he edits, as well as his work with SB Nation Longform.

• It's been a while since I worked on the research portion of my project, so I’d like to revisit that. I need to organize my notes into categories and sub-categories

• Read Greg Bishop's SI cover story and email him about his notebook. One of my previous sources, Adam Duerson, sent me a photo of Bishop's notebook — shades of A Beautiful Mind — and I’m curious how Bishop outlines stories.

Week 16 (September 21-27)

WHAT I DID

• Interviewed Justin Heckert about his ESPN story on former Rutgers football player Eric LeGrand.

• Published a blog about Paul Kix, an ESPN editor who handles Wright Thompson’s magazine-long story on New Orleans.

• Interviewed and blogged about Sports Illustrated’s Greg Bishop, who discussed his outlining process.

• Spoke to Ed Sherman, a sports media columnist who wants to feature my work on his website, The Sherman Report. We agreed on terms so that can happen.

• Interviewed Glenn Stout, the editor at SB Nation Longform, and the series editor of the Best American Sports Writing books.

• Revisited the research portion of my project. I listened to my 12 interviews again and took more detailed notes than the ones I scribbled during the interviews.
• Separated my research notes into seven word documents, based on category. Some of these categories can be consolidated, but this is generally how I believe I will break up my research analysis.

WHAT I LEARNED

• To pull off second-person POV in a feature story, the writer needs to be intimately familiar with the subject he/she is covering. Justin Heckert was able to write about Eric LeGrand in this way because they spent four whole days together. That allowed Heckert the confidence to know what he was writing was how LeGrand felt.

• Editing longform journalism takes longer than one might think. To simply read through a story several times eats up hours.

• Writing magazine-length feature stories without an outline often leads to stories without a narrative arc or real purpose. Greg Bishop’s form of outlining — separating themes into categories — actually helped me write a preliminary outline for the analysis portion of my research.

• This job I’m doing — writing about the writing process — makes little money. That’s at least what Ed Sherman told me, even though his website gets over a thousand visitors a day.

• Taking notes on previous interviews is so much easier to do when you know exactly what you’re looking for and where you’re going to put it. My outlining proved huge in accelerating this process, and I hope the writing process as well.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Post about Heckert and his use of second-person.

• Post about Stout and his philosophies on editing.

• Set up interviews with two more writers (TBD) for the following week.

• Continue the analysis portion of my research assignment. My goal is to finish a first draft of it this week.
Week 17 (September 28-October 4)

WHAT I DID

• Finished the first draft of my project analysis, which answers the question: “How do sports writers and editors identify and select news items worth developing into feature stories?” The analysis is currently 3,700 words.

• Published a blog post about Justin Heckert and his use of second-person point of view for a story on a former Rutgers football player who's now paralyzed.

• Posted month-end column featuring my favorite sports journalism from September.

WHAT I LEARNED

• From going through my interview notes and putting together an analysis, I learned that writers and editors still rely heavily on instincts, even though some say they’re mindful of audience analytics.

• Conversations — varying in formality — are still usually the seeds of story ideas. Some editors go out of their way to start conversations with strangers. Staff meetings don’t always include both editors and writers, but most editors value whatever time they do get to chat with writers about story ideas.

• Writers and editors say they value their audience’s opinions, but they do very little to include audience members on story selection — the process journalists consider the most important.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK

• Write a post about Glenn Stout, his Best American Sports Writing series and his philosophies on editing.

• Write a short post off a pair of photos an editor sent me from Gay Talese’s outline of “Frank Sinatra had a Cold.”

• Write a post about a New York Times interactive piece published last month.
• Set up interviews with two writers — possibly Pat Forde and Jeff Pearlman — for next week.

• Continue to work on the research portion of my professional project.

**Week 18 (October 5-October 11)**

**WHAT I DID**

• Wrote a post about [Glenn Stout, his Best American Sports Writing series and his philosophies on editing](#).

• Wrote about Gay Talese’s outline of “Frank Sinatra had a Cold.”

• Received edits from Jacqui for the first draft of my project analysis and performed surgery on five sections of the report: Intro, Generating ideas, What makes a story interesting, Pitching vs. Assigning and the Power of Analytics.

**WHAT I LEARNED**

• In efforts to both be concise and get as many voices into my analysis as possible, I failed to be thorough or completely coherent in my first draft. The draft was strongest in places where I offered detailed examples. Obviously that takes some space to explain, but it’s space well-used.

• Some of the sources I spoke to contradicted themselves during my interviews — specifically when talking about their use of analytics vs. instincts. Instead of running from this point, I think it’s interesting to include. It shows how some people take half-measures to satisfy both the numbers and their gut.

• As rough as my rough draft was, it was effective in that it organized many of my ideas and called attention to (thanks to Jacqui’s editing) where I had some gaps in my thinking. I typically pour a ton of time into initial drafts and hope that they’re near ready. This one wasn’t, and I sort of knew that, but it got me on the right track to where I believe the final product will be solid.

**WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK**

• I need to rework two more sections and write conclusion. My aim is to get all that done and have it back to Jacqui by the end of the week.
• I will put the blog in the background in order to focus on the analysis and other components I need to finish in order to get this project through.
  o I do still have one post lined up about a New York Times digital project I found effective.
  o I will also try again to contact Yahoo!’s Pat Forde about covering college athletics with the breadth that he does.

**Week 19 (October 12-October 18)**

**WHAT I DID**

• [Wrote a post](#) about an interactive video story the New York Times published during the summer.

• Interviewed Yahoo! baseball writer Jeff Passan about his column on Chicago Cubs home run balls and [wrote a post about Passan’s strategy and execution of the story](#).

• Finished a second draft of my project analysis and sent it to Jacqui. Also worked on an author’s afterwards

• Documented all the changes I made from my proposal (mainly the interview subjects I chose for my analysis).

• Copied each of my blog posts in a separate word file for the “Physical Evidence” portion of my project.

**WHAT I LEARNED**

• Tapping into star athletes’ pasts — before they were famous — is a very compelling way to tell a new story. The New York Times went as deep as possible into various tennis’ players’ athletic pasts for a sometimes jarring story.

• I applaud when reporters leave the press box and look for stories elsewhere in a stadium, but the reason we don’t see it very often, I learned, is because stadium ushers are typically very protective of their sections. Passan said he was surprised how welcoming the ushers were when he went into the Wrigley Field bleachers; apparently he’s tries such things in the past and faced resistance from ushers.
• I’ve produced nearly 30,000 words worth of blogs thus far, and the website has generated nearly 38,000 views.

WHAT I’M DOING NEXT WEEK
• Contacting Yahoo!’s Pat Forde again (several attempts to interview him has failed, but Forde asked Greg about me last week, so I’m on his radar). I’d like to write a blog about how, as a national college football/basketball reporter, he maintains so many professional relationships and researches so many storylines throughout the country.

• While I wait for feedback on the second draft of my analysis, I will knock out some of the smaller elements of the written project and figure out the proper way to format the entire thing.

Week 20 (October 19-October 25)

WHAT I DID
• Wrote a column about a Mississippi newspaper that decided to stop covering its hometown college football team because of a lack of access. I explained why I disagree with the move—because I see other ways the newspaper could have continued coverage without speaking to players.

• Interviewed Yahoo! Sports’ Pat Forde about covering college athletics nationally and how that compares to beat writing.

WHAT I LEARNED
• The problems news media has with big-time college athletics restricting access is now trickling down to small schools as well. The newspaper I wrote about stopped coverage of Jackson State—not exactly a well-known football school. I spoke with my old boss in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and even James Madison University has become stingy with player availability. Learning to overcome access obstacles at Missouri will likely prove to be a big help for me moving forward.

• Covering national sports like Pat Forde requires a level of source maintenance that I’m personally uncomfortable doing. It’s not in my nature to send out-of-the-blue texts to sources (let alone my friends), but it’s how Forde stays plugged in to everything going on in college sports. If that’s ever a job I pursued, I’d have to change my ways in order to be successful at it.
WHAT I’M DOING THIS WEEK

• Publish a post from my conversation with Forde, and then not a whole lot more. I am headed to upstate New York to visit my lovely girlfriend Lee Anne this week, and I will put most project stuff on the back burner. That said, I might find opportunities in transit to tackle more of my analysis.
Chapter 3: Personal Evaluation

I came into this project with four main goals. I’ll go through each one and assess my performance at each.

**Learn more about the operations and strategies of successful professionals, and pass along that knowledge to others:** Both my blog and analysis allowed me to fulfill this. I spoke to 58 journalists including work on the blog and research. I picked a lot of brains. And I wrote a lot about what I found out. But occasionally I felt like there wasn’t an overt takeaway or lesson from my conversations. I’m not sure if this was a failing of my interviewing skills, or if I was simply hoping for something that wasn’t there. Sometimes, after an hour-long conversation that felt like it went very well, I had to take a step back and ask myself, “What did I actually learn here?” If I missed the mark at times, I at least learned to be more cognizant about that. There needs to be a takeaway, whether one is writing editorially or for research.

**Create fresh, compelling content that’s enjoyable to read:** This goal is quite subjective, and I’m a biased party who believes my blog was compelling, enjoyable to read, and filled an untapped niche. Fortunately, several journalists messaged me through email or Twitter to fortify that belief. One young writer said my post about a Sports Illustrated oral history helped guide him through a similar story structure. Others suggested my blog to their online communities. Here are some of the comments people made on Twitter, presented in a back-of-the-book lovefest kind of way:
- “I enjoy reading this blog by Mark. Some great tips and wonderful behind-the-scenes look at what we do.”
- “For those interested in sports writing, the ‘Backstory’ blog by @MarkRSelig looks [like] a terrific resource.”
- “I learned a lot from this article and you will too. Worth a read.”
- “Hey j-school students... Read and learn.”

(There were also dozens of people — Patriots fans — who think I’m an idiot because of my post about Seth Wickersham and Don Van Natta unspooling the New England Patriots’ recent issues with the NFL).

**Learn the worlds of blogging and audience building:** I’ve long read blogs and used social media, but I’ve never tried to promote my own blog, which I had to do for this project. Creating valuable posts is just one step of the process; if nobody looks at them, they lose value. I’m pleased my 55 posts in five months have generated 38,573 page views and 30,598 unique visitors. WordPress, the site I used to host my blog, provides data for each post. That allowed me to assess what was working and what wasn’t. Unsurprisingly, most of my traffic came from referrals (about 52 percent came from Twitter). Twitter helped generate about nine times the traffic as Facebook, where I created a professional page to help promote the content. A Facebook employee whom I met at the Associated Press Sports Editors’ summer conference in June helped me migrate all of my personal friends to this professional page, and verified the page for me. Still, the content never seemed to be shared much on Facebook. It was shared more on Twitter, where it was easier to tag the people I wrote about. Many times, these people, who have big followings, retweeted
my content. I kept a close eye on statistics of each post, made sure to promote each, and now have a better understanding of how content takes off. One letdown for me was that the APSE website didn’t showcase my work, as a former president promised it would do. I pushed this several times before deciding it was not worth my efforts to keep trying. Fortunately, though, the APSE’s Twitter account, which has 13,000-plus followers — most of whom are in the industry — retweeted each of my posts. That gave the posts a nice boost.

_Set myself up for future employment:_ The reason I wanted to learn everything I’ve discussed is because I want to be qualified for a job at a big newspaper or dot.com. I was transparent about this goal, even mentioning on the “About Me” section of my blog that I’d be available for hire come 2016. The jury is still out on this — I don’t have a job lined up as of mid-November — but I’m sure I’ve become a more known quantity in the industry. One example: A former professor from my undergrad years dropped my name to a Washington Post editor who was seeking someone for night desk position. I introduced myself and told the Post editor about my blog, with which he was already familiar. During my research interview with Bill Eichenberger of Bleacher Report, our conversation turned to more personal matters, and Eichenberger repeatedly said I’d be a great fit at his company. When applying for jobs, I will make Backstory a key element of my personal pitch.
Chapter 4: Physical Evidence

In the first class of my first semester of graduate school at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, we read the renowned 1949 deadline story “Death of a Racehorse” by W.C. Heinz. The lesson, as professor Greg Bowers told it, is that the best stories are usually where other reporters aren’t. Get out of the press box — like Heinz did to report the scene on the track when a doctor put down the horse Air Lift — and you can tell a more vivid story from a better perspective.

Fast forward a year and a half and that lesson was presented several more times as I interviewed contemporary reporters for a blog on the craft of sportswriting. ESPN New York’s Ian O’Connor pulled a Heinz to capture American Pharoah’s Triple Crown coronation in June, and Jeff Passan left the press box to tell a compelling story about Chicago Cubs fans, rather than just the home runs their favorite players hit on an October playoff night.

I spoke to more than 50 journalists over the summer for my final project. As I leave grad school, here are some of the takeaways I learned and can pass on:

• **Capture as many scenes as possible.** That was Lee Jenkins’ strategy when he covered the Golden State Warriors’ NBA championship celebration for Sports Illustrated. Celebration stories are unconventional assignments, but when Jenkins writes profiles, he also looks for (and asks about) anything that catches his eyes.

• **How to recreate a scene:** The journalist often isn’t present for the key moment he or she wants to draw out in a feature story. But that key moment can be described after good interviewing. Try this go-to line from Indianapolis Star columnist Gregg Doyel: “Obviously I wasn’t there, but if I was, tell me what I would have seen.”

• **No access? Find another way:** Often, journalists don’t get the access they want to a person; that’s no reason to squash a story. The Washington Post’s Kent Bab wrote an entire book about Allen Iverson, whom Babb never interviewed. Instead, he talked to people who could share stories about Iverson, such as the former NBA star’s barber. Babb suspects he never would have uncovered some of the anecdotes he did, had he not been forced to search for tangential sources.

• **Be thankful for the access you do have:** I surveyed a beat writer from each SEC football program and documented the drastic changes in access from the 1980s, when Arkansas Democrat Gazette’s Bob Holt used to attend every Razorbacks practice and talked to whomever he wanted afterward. Now, access is shallow across the board. James Crepea, who covers Auburn for the Alabama Media Group, described his relationship with team sports...
information directors as “Strained. Concurrently miserable. At times, contentious.”

• **Crowdsourcing works**: Benjamin Hochman proved in his nine-part baseball series for the Denver Post that some of the best sources are those found on Twitter. Hochman (who’s now with the St. Louis Post Dispatch), effectively crowdsourced to find story subjects, such as people who stay in touch with their parents through baseball and text messaging. “It’s easy access to 20,000 Colorado sports fans,” Hochman said of asking his Twitter followers for help finding subjects.

• **Don’t quote every source**: What to do with the material we glean from these sources? Ben Shpigel of the New York Times said he used to feel obligated to quote every source he spoke to — in a way to prove to the source that an interview was worth his or her time. “Over the years I’ve relaxed my view on that because we’re reporters, we’re not quoters,” Shpigel now says. An interview can be valuable merely for background information or to better understand a subject.

• **Heck, do away with quotes altogether**: L. Jon Wertheim of Sports Illustrated told me he’s sick of using quotes. “It is a strategy of mine to limit quotes. I’ve had it with quotes,” he said when asked about a Serena Williams feature that included less than 100 words in quote marks. “...Too often they don’t really add much; you feel compelled to use them too often because they’re provided.” His story is vibrant because it’s not bogged down with platitudes.

• **How to pull off an oral history (the story composed exclusively of quotes)**: OK, sometimes quotes work, like in Sports Illustrated’s oral history reminiscing the first few years of Major League Soccer. Putting together an oral history can be a bear. Here’s Brian Straus’ way of thinking about it: “You want to imagine that these 40 people are sitting around a really big room, eating pizza and talking shit about 1996 and laughing their heads off,” the SI reporter said.

• **Report but don’t belabor**: Every year, Ben Brigandi covers 12-year-old kids getting their 15-minutes of fame. The Williamsport Sun-Gazette’s biggest story is the annual Little League World Series. And Brigandi, the Gazette’s sports editor needs a philosophy on how to write about the mistakes the not-quite-teens make on the field: “Report but don’t belabor,” he said. And really, that should be a motto for all coverage, from Little League to high school sports to college and pros.

• **Write with voice**: Stories with voice make a reader feel engaged. But voice is an intangible difficult to describe or execute. How does one effectively write
with voice? Joan Niesen of Sports Illustrated said its OK to have an intimate familiarity with a subject. Often, that can help breed voice. She packed a story about the 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with expressive phrases that reveal something about the city of New Orleans. She was able to do this because of her familiarity with the city, where some of her relatives live. For those writers who don’t have a personal connection, it’s incumbent to learn a situation inside out to be able to write with conviction.

• **File record requests:** Especially in college sports, where many universities are public, open records can be treasures full of story ideas. Knoxville News-Sentinel sports editor Phil Kaplan says “you’re not doing your job right if you’re covering a college and not filing these reports.” His department files them regularly, and serves as a watchdog to University of Tennessee athletics.

• **Sweat the small stuff:** When Glenn Stout edits pieces for his SB Nation Longform section, his final and favorite step is to consider the shape and sound of each individual word. For instance, a 2013 feature on late auto racer Dick Trickle had to consist of only words the blunt, beer-drinking Trickle might say. Keeping the reader in the right place and feel of a story is what can “turn it into something that’s memorable,” Stout said.

• **Outline your stories (or don’t):** Sports Illustrated’s Greg Bishop scribbles pre-story outlines that fill an entire notebook page with interconnecting words and bubbles. He calls it “the most important thing I do,” because it provides a structure and formula for writing. Meanwhile, New York Times reporter John Branch often starts writing and lets his stories flow from there. And Branch is a Pulitzer Prize winner. So do whatever works for you — but play around with multiple methods to find out.

• **Work hard; think smart:** Above all else, I learned there are no shortcuts. The people who succeed in this business are the most devoted, invested and creative minded. Sports journalism is competitive and saturated and ever-evolving. It’s also significant. Six decades later, writers still talk about stories like Death of a Racehorse. That gives writers reason to continue taking chances and striving for virtuosity.

Here’s each of my 55 blog posts, in chronological order:

**June 8, 2015 — This is ‘Backstory’**

Thanks for visiting Backstory — a site I hope can educate and entertain journalists as well as our everyday readers. Let’s discuss critical topics in the industry as I spotlight notable, contemporary work in sports journalism.
My name’s Mark Selig, and I’m vying for a master’s degree at the University of Missouri. This website is my professional project — a practical thesis of sorts before I return full-time to the real world, where I’ve broken a sweat as a college basketball reporter and currently instruct young, eager amateurs as the assistant sports editor at the Columbia Missourian.

As you begin to see this site take shape, please let me know what other types of content you’d like to consume from it. I believe in service journalism and aim to provide something distinct.

Enjoy the blog!

- Mark

**June 9, 2015 — NBA Finals reporters coming through in the clutch**

While the world’s best basketball players vie for the NBA title, there’s an intriguing, if informal, competition between the sport’s best writers.

The NBA dished out 1,800 credentials for the Finals, according to Sports Illustrated media columnist Richard Deitsch. Because of the media saturation, reporters — on this stage more than ever — must execute creative reporting and writing to differentiate their content.

Sunday’s thrilling Game 2 provided plenty to write about. The best takes came from those who didn’t rely on the post-game press conference.

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**ROB MAHONEY**

Everybody loves overtime. Except for deadline writers. But SI’s Rob Mahoney churned out this thoughtful piece in crunch time. An excerpt:

The execution in Game 2 was far from pristine. Then again, beautiful basketball is the luxury of a healthier, more talented team. The current, injured Cavs can only scrape. They’re at their best when turning idyllic basketball to pulp—gumming it up.
and grinding it down until its form is barely recognizable. It was that level of control that gave Cleveland any chance at all to win on Sunday.

Howard Beck

A reporter covering the Finals could skip post-game press conferences altogether and not miss a thing. Novel reporting is impractical in a stuffed media room, and the helpful ASAP service provides transcriptions of all quotes, anyway. But Bleacher Report’s Howard Beck spotted LeBron James before the Cavs star entered Clichéville, and provided readers with a scene they couldn’t view on TV. His lead:

The distance between the locker room and the postgame podium at Oracle Arena is about 40 yards, a space LeBron James could probably cover in five seconds, if properly motivated. But James was in no shape to sprint or even to jog or amble or saunter late Sunday after the Cleveland Cavaliers’ 95-93 overtime win in Game 2 of the NBA Finals over the Golden State Warriors.

He just sort of wobbled from side to side down the corridor, stepping gingerly—left, right, left, right—until he finally reached the stage and plopped his weary soul behind the microphone.

For 50 minutes and 20 seconds, through four quarters and an overtime, James had pushed and prodded, flexed and bellowed, channeling his fury into a box score for the ages and a victory for the record books.

Zach Lowe

NBA diehards turn to Grantand’s Zach Lowe for the best national analysis in print (or web). After Game 2, Lowe provided fresh anecdotes by going where others weren’t. Instead of relying on LeBron and Stephen Curry quotes, Lowe instead talked to Warriors wash-up David Lee for an viewpoint you won’t see in other stories. He also "cornered" forward Draymond Green, who held down LeBron on a crucial jump ball — a play that received little attention elsewhere because other big moments better fit into traditional narratives. Lowe spills his notebook and always educates.
The Finals resumes tonight in Cleveland. I’m rooting for some more gripping drama on the court and another batch of must-read stories available early Wednesday morning.

**June 10, 2015 — O’Connor on covering American Pharoah**

The way Ian O’Connor sees it, Yahoo!’s Pat Forde and Sports Illustrated’s Tim Layden are the frontrunners of national horse racing coverage. The two insiders have "context and contacts" that O’Connor — a football, basketball, baseball and golf guy for ESPN.com — lacks.

So when the New York-based O’Connor was tasked to cover American Pharoah’s ultimately successful bid to capture the Triple Crown last weekend, he needed a strategy to keep up with more equine-expertised reporters.

O’Connor’s story from the Belmont, "Latest Triple Crown history is about the horse, not humans," captured the scene in the winner’s circle — a sequence of events O’Connor could document thanks to his persistence and pursuit for a coveted green bib.

Hear O’Connor describe to Backstory how he used his nearly three decades of reporting experience to get where others weren’t and find sources others overlooked.

**O’Connor audio**

The author of *The Captain* and *Arnie & Jack*, O’Connor is in "the first hours" of writing a book about New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick — the NFL’s most intriguing character, in the author’s opinion.

“For starters, he’s had more success than anybody, and I think he’s surpassed Vince Lombardi for the greatest coach of all time,” O’Connor said. "Because he doesn't let anyone in publicly, I think that makes him not just mysterious, but fascinating. I think a lot of people want to know a lot more about him as a person…

“I guess we’ll find out by how many books I sell.”
June 15, 2015 — Chicken ’n records requests

The Tennessee football team spent $1,386.45 for dinner at Bojangles. And last month, the Knoxville News Sentinel reported all the juicy nuggets.

Ok, so the Sentinel didn’t find out whether quarterback Josh Dobbs ordered sweet tea, but the newspaper did detail every dollar the Volunteers spent related to the TaxSlayer Bowl. The final bill, including those Bojangles bucks, came out to $1.25 million, as football beat writer Dustin Dopirak documented.

Obviously, big expenses — such as $300,000 for a hotel to house and feed the guests — ate up a big chunk of the sum. The Vols didn’t make extravagant purchases (relative to other college football programs).

But the story was interesting, nonetheless. Especially when you get down to those smaller costs that begin to add up.

Like Bojangles. Like coaches using the copy machine in the team hotel for a week ($1,350). Like two bowl-goers, including one player, forgetting their luggage at the hotel and needing it shipped home ($607).

These facts are public because Knoxville News Sentinel sports editor Phil Kaplan emphasizes watchdog journalism. He’s often filing records requests or pressing his reporters to do so themselves.

His paper, which has a circulation in the low-60,000s often generates stories based on these records. The staff keeps an eye on the smaller sports, too.

"You’re not doing your job right if you’re covering a college and not filing these reports," Kaplan said, "because things like that will never get covered if you do not file these things."

Listen to Kaplan talk about the reporting process for bowl finances story (with Dopirak speaking from 1:54 to 2:29)...

Kaplan-Dopirak audio
June 17, 2015 — Title towns see seasons end

Covering a championship series means long days, late nights and tight deadlines for newspapers.

The finished product could end up framed in sports bars across the city or as wrapping paper for anyone who buys ceramics this week at Michaels.

The Stanley Cup and NBA Finals ended on back-to-back nights, both in Game 6.

Here’s how the Chicago Tribune, Tampa Bay Times, Oakland Tribune and Cleveland Plain Dealer played the season-ending wins and losses:

David Haugh captures the scene with this descriptive lead:

With patience wearing thin everywhere else Monday night in Chicago due to a scoreless tie at the United Center, Blackhawks star Patrick Kane waited near the blue line.

And waited. Then Kane waited some more.

The Hawks had waited two years for another chance to win a Stanley Cup. What was another few seconds? Especially with Hawks defenseman Duncan Keith rushing down the ice to make the wait worthwhile.

Keith skated into the Hawks’ offensive zone, and Kane set up his tireless teammate with the perfect pass between two Lightning defenders. Firing a rocket that bounced off the left pad of goalie Ben Bishop, Keith followed up by knocking the rebound past Bishop’s glove at the 17-minute, 13-second mark of the second period.

The horn blared, the crowd of 22,424 exhaled loudly and "Chelsea Dagger" played after Keith’s goal that served as, well, the dagger. It seemed only fitting that the game-winner in a legacy-defining 2-0 victory over the Lightning came from Keith, who plays hockey the way teenagers use iPhones — without worrying about the minutes that accumulate. The best player for the Hawks this postseason should be the one remembered most for winning the biggest hockey game in the city since 1938.
Tom Jones writes about the memorable Lightning season that couldn’t quite strike a title:

One day there will be time for the Lightning to perform the autopsy on the 2015 Stanley Cup final. On that day, the Lightning can dissect what went wrong, how the series was lost, everything it might have done differently.

But now is not that time.

Today is simply about disappointment. It’s about the heartbreak of coming so close to a lifelong dream and having it ripped from its hands at the final moment. It’s about anger and grief and all the rotten stages of letting a championship that was so close slip away.

The Lightning season — one of the best in franchise history and one of the most memorable in the history of Tampa Bay sports — is over.

Tim Kawakami gets biblical after 40 years of wandering by the Golden State Warriors:

The 40-year drought ended with so many splashes that the Warriors just about flooded Quicken Loans Arena on Tuesday.

Turned it into a mighty river, renewing and elevating everything about this franchise.

Stephen Curry and his teammates overflowed with pent-up energy in Game 6, they gushed, they were a geyser of revelation, relief and utter elation.

It was a biblical torrent—a deep blue downpour of joy and perfect jump shots—to conclude the Warriors’ long championship journey, from their last title in 1975 through years of horrors to this night.

And it ended in heavy sprays of champagne and shouts of purest sporting elation in the Warriors locker room.

“It’s raining out there,” coach Steve Kerr said when he came to his news conference in a drenched shirt and gigantic smile.

That was a flood that wiped away generations of failure and sorrow.

It was the last game and the last time this franchise will ever have to think or talk about a championship curse.
Terry Pluto looks at the Cavaliers' season in an encouraging light:

For the Cavaliers, the NBA season ended not with tears but with hope.

It ended at Quicken Loans Arena, Golden State defeating the Cavaliers, 105-97, in Game 6 of the 2015 NBA Finals.

It ended with the Warriors winning their first NBA title since 1975, and it ended with the Cavs still looking for the first NBA title in the 45-year history of the franchise.

But it also ended with the Cavs being closer to the title -- than ever. That's what I kept thinking while watching the Cavs in the last few games.

UPDATE: Apparently the Plain Dealer received backlash for its "Not Enough Grit" headline. Editor George Rodrigue admits the syntax was a bit off for what his newspaper tried to convey.

I wish we had said, "Grit was not enough". That's what the editor who wrote the headline meant to say. He was thinking that grit wasn't enough to make up for the injuries that sidelined some players, and the fatigue that drained others. He didn't realize, until he saw his words in print, that he had sent a very different message.

June 18, 2015 — John Branch on 'Lost Brother of Yosemite'

The author of Snowfall again has the Internet talking about an outdoorsy story. New York Times feature writer John Branch's latest deep dive delves into BASE jumping and an iconic figure who died doing it. Lost Brother in Yosemite is not just a tragedy but a culture story covering a growing but illegal activity. Branch spoke to Backstory about the story, his reporting process and how he got into journalism after a career at Costco.

June 22, 2015 — Lee Jenkins on covering the NBA
When everyday people succeed in their jobs, they don’t spray champagne on their colleagues or drunkenly sing "We are the Champions." Few adults experience the unbridled joy of an athlete winning a title.

But wouldn’t it be cool to sit in on such a party?

Sports Illustrated’s Lee Jenkins hung with the Golden State Warriors in a Cleveland hotel after the team won its first NBA championship in 40 years. Days earlier, Jenkins published a revealing profile on Warriors coach Steve Kerr. This week, Jenkins will wrap up the Warriors’ run in another big SI feature.

Moments after getting that piece fact-checked, Jenkins chatted with Backstory about his life as an NBA writer.

We discuss:

- Jenkins' fly-on-the-wall reporting of the Warriors’ championship celebration
- His in-depth profile on Golden State coach Steve Kerr
- How he finds details that make his stories memorable
- His admiration of and fascination with LeBron James’ life story (Jenkins wrote LeBron’s "I'm Coming Back To Cleveland" letter and the 2012 SI Sportsman of the Year profile on him)
- The NBA reporting landscape and Jenkins’ favorite basketball writer
- The differences between basketball and college baseball, in light of Jenkins’ Vanderbilt Commodores playing in the College World Series

Lee Jenkins audio

June 26, 2015 — Clean-shaven Bob Ryan discusses award-winning career

SAN DIEGO — Bob Ryan is done with the mustache. Forever.

The legendary Boston Globe reporter and columnist sported some facial hair from 1971-1997, as seen in the 1992 photo to your right (he’s the Hall-of-Fame writer in the middle of two Hall-of-Fame ballers).

But even Larry and Magic can’t coax him into sprouting whiskers again.
"Never coming back," Ryan said. "I've turned against facial hair. No offense.... I just no longer find it appealing. And I'm particularly amused with bald guys with goatees and beards — as if they're saying, 'I can grow hair somewhere!'"

Silliness aside, Ryan is in San Diego to collect the 2015 Red Smith Award for his contributions to sports journalism. It's a prestigious honor that puts him in the company of Shirley Povich, Jim Murray, Dick Schaap, Frank Deford and Red Smith — the initial recipient in 1981.

Ryan's career with the Globe has lasted more than 40 years and counting. He's "retired" but still writes a few columns each month.

On Thursday, Ryan will address the Associated Press Sports Editors at a lunch at the Westgate Hotel in downtown San Diego. Bill Walton will provide the introduction.

On the eve of his speech, Ryan sat down with Backstory to discuss his career, how he'd approach beat writing today and yes, his long-gone mustache.

Bob Ryan audio

**June 30, 2015 — Mark's picks**

Remember those relics called video stores?

Before Redbox and Netflix, brick-and-mortar businesses not only rented out films but also provided input from pimply-faced teenagers who spent too much time on their couches with bowls of popcorn.

A shelf would read "[Blank]'s Picks."

And maybe that stranger's predilection swayed you to select Se7en instead of Apollo 13...

Welcome to Mark's Picks, a monthly post in which I'll highlight some of the journalistic work I've enjoyed from the past 30 or so days (in this metaphor, I'm the pimply-faced teenager).
By no means is this an exhaustive list of all the good journalism of the last month. Admittedly, it’s a bit heavy with content from certain industry leaders. To help diversify this list in the future, let me know when you find something interesting in July.

**The Outside Triangle, by Nicholas Dawidoff** *(Adventure)*

The story seemed to be a writer’s quest of sorts but veered into a more interesting direction — a profile on triple-post offense maven Tex Winter. Plus, Dawidoff gave us this wonderful quote from Mike Krzyzewski: “The triangle didn’t win crap.”

**Pride. Regret. Hope, by Allison Glock** *(Drama)*

Hope Solo’s domestic violence issues are complex. So was her upbringing. This feature keeps the reader off balance while trying to understand a polarizing figure.

**The Best Movie Baseball Player Ever, by Dan Worthington** *(Action)*

This Emoji-illustrated tournament struck a nostalgic chord with this child of the 90s, and I’m a bit surprised it hasn’t gone viral (the hypothetical matchups are generating fewer than 3,000 votes apiece). Don’t worry, Worthington — I absolutely love this!

Baseball movies reigned in the 90s, and characters like Rick "Wild Thing" Vaughn and Benny "The Jet" Rodriguez made them sparkle. This may not touch Worthington’s brilliant NCAA Tournament Emojis, but it’s still a big winner.

**No-No Regrets, by Phil Taylor** *(Drama)*

Often, the best time to cover a story is after the dust has settled. Armed with perspective and time for reflection, the central characters can better articulate what
happened and how it affected them. Taylor waited three years to write about the
night that changed Johan Santana's life. Santana's composure gives this baseball
tragedy a happier ending.

**Sir Barton Easily Wins Belmont** *(Epic)*

In honor of American Pharoah's Triple Crown, I dug up this story, covering the first-
ever horse to win the Kentucky Derby, Preakness and Belmont Stakes (nobody
called the trifecta "Triple Crown" in 1919).

"Vociferous were the greetings which welcomed the new three-year-old champion as
he returned to the stand where Commander Ross was waiting, bubbling over with joy,
to shake the hand of Loftus and playfully pat his peerless thoroughbred."

**Eaton, Colorado, Lives and Dies with Baseball, by Benjamin Hochman** *(Adventure)*

Hochman's nine-part series on baseball in Colorado has been wonderful. Inning
three is my (and Hochman's) favorite thus far. It takes us to the tiny town of Eaton,
where a high school baseball powerhouse possesses big skills and storybook
traditions.

**LeBron James' Unfathomable Workload, by Tom Haberstroh** *(Science Fiction)*

Anybody watching the playoffs wondered if LeBron James is really a cyborg sent
from space to destruct basketball teams 48 minutes at a time without rest. Even
scientists couldn't grasp his physical achievements, considering the circumstances.

**At the Women's World Cup, a Memento Players are Stuck With and Stuck
To, by Juliet Macur** *(Action)*
Seemingly so innocuous, rubber pellets in field turf serve as the protagonist of this droll column. From personal experience, even reporters who have covered games or practices on this turf find their shoes littered with black beads.

**Pandamonium (Comedy)**

If you want to laugh yourself senseless thinking of how you’d describe this story to your grandmother or somebody stuck in 1996, read about Pablo Sandoval’s Instagram-fueled benching. So...an overweight baseball player nicknamed "Kung-Fu Panda" got in trouble for "liking" a photo of an attractive woman while he sat on the toilet, phone in hand during a ballgame?

In other amusing news this month, Sean "Diddy" Combs used a kettlebell as a weapon in a UCLA workout room. Los Angeles Times reporter Zach Helfand summed up everyone’s incredulity.

**Lost Brother in Yosemite, by John Branch;**

**Steve Kerr: The Warriors Ringmaster, by Lee Jenkins**

We covered these earlier this month in detailed podcasts with the writers. Thanks to John and Lee for participating.

**July 1, 2015 — Bleacher Creatures**

Bill Eichenberger tottered with his iPhone as he tried to send a text at breakfast.

Until recently, he used a flip phone. He’s admittedly behind the technology curve.

"It’s a fascinating marriage — me and Bleacher Report," Eichenberger, the company’s special projects editor, said.
When you see Bleacher Report editor you probably think of a 20-something computer whiz chasing the next page view. The San Francisco-based company is known for gaming the SEO system and "dumbing down the web" with click-bait.

But in the last two years, B/R has improved its journalistic curb appeal. It hired former New York Times writer Howard Beck and other credible reporters in 2013. And it began its Longform section, headed by Eichenberger, 61, a respected veteran print guy who spent nine years at Newsday.

Eichenberger, based in New York, says he has the resources to make writing hires, but anyone the company brings in needs to be someone who "blows us away" with their talent.

For now, the lone full-time Longform writer is Lars Anderson. He spent 20 years at Sports Illustrated, worked his way up the masthead from intern to senior writer and then took a buyout before joining Bleacher Report.

“Twenty years at one place is a long time and I wanted to write different kind of stories,” said Anderson, who mostly covered college football and NASCAR for SI.

The new digs allow him to write 4-5,000-word stories he believes he couldn't have done at SI because there's so much competition to get into the magazine.

It also gives him a platform to reach an up-and-coming audience.

Anderson teaches a sports writing class at Alabama, and when he asked his students where they acquire news, “the overwhelming majority of them said Bleacher Report.”

“It’s an exciting place to be because you can reach so many eyeballs,” he said.

This section’s work is undeniably quality, though still geared toward a narrow 18-24 demographic. Eichenberger said he green lights just 10 percent of writers’ story pitches. Stories must appeal to a young crowd. NFL, NBA and college football — in that order — attract the target audience.

It’s an audience known for its impatience and fast-changing habits for consuming media.
It’s Eichenberger’s task to give these "millenials" content that’s so good they can’t put it down.

THE LAWRENCE PHILLIPS STORY

Anderson likes stories that “shatter perceptions.”

His most recent article, on NFL flameout Lawrence Phillips, does just that. It offers a sympathetic view of Phillips, who is the suspected killer of his prison cellmate.

Anderson is from Lincoln, Nebraska and covered Phillips’ celebrated college career.

When Anderson heard news of Phillips’ prison incident in April, he didn’t immediately know he’d write anything about it. But when he made a phone call to the prison, he found the situation had been underreported.

Nobody had called the prison. Few knew it was just Phillips and Damion Soward, the victim, in that cell. More reporting made it ostensible that Phillips acted in self-defense.

Anderson couldn’t land a jailhouse interview with Phillips but still wanted to bring in his past with the player. He said used first-person speech to accomplish that.

“I think it gives you more flexibility as a writer, as long as you don’t overcook it and overwrite it and you have reported out opinions and analysis," Anderson said. "If you establish your credentials on the subject, I think it’s a useful literary technique.”

When Anderson filed the story, he thought it was just average.

According to the website, it’s garnered more than 985,000 reads.

July 2, 2015 — Detailing the Long Walk

William Browning walks two miles to work every day but never hikes.
He wandered deep into that world for his latest feature, *A Long Walk’s End*. The story focuses on James T. Hammes, who lived six years on the Appalachian Trail as a friendly hiker named “Bismarck” before the FBI arrested him in May for large-scale embezzlement.

Drama unfolds as Browning probes how a wanted man can become inconspicuous in the “don’t ask, don’t tell” culture of hiking.

The story checks in at nearly 10,000 words on SB Nation’s Longform section (headed by Glenn Stout, who edits the annual “The Best American Sports Writing” books).

Browning, the managing editor for the Commercial Dispatch in Columbus, Mississippi, stumbled into the story when a hiker from his town became key in finding Hammes. Browning wrote about this hiker for his newspaper but wanted to further pursue Hammes’ complex life.

He didn’t see it as a sports story, but Stout green-lit him to write it for SB Nation.

Browning interviewed roughly 30 people — all by phone or email, aside from the initial hiker from his town. He spent a month reporting and writing, he said, all while continuing to get to work at 5 a.m. for his day job. He said he got off the clock between 3:30 and 4 and then began pounding the phone lines.

“A lot of late nights,” Browning said from his office Thursday afternoon.

What’s impressive, given Browning’s remote reporting, is the amount of detail he packs into the narrative; we know exactly what outfit Hammes’ deceased wife wore on the couple’s first date.

“Just a little bit of a detail can add a personal touch and make it real to readers,” Browning said.

The writer’s one regret is never reaching Hammes’ most recent girlfriend. He said others in the hiking community refused to pass along her contact information because they wanted to protect her.
Browning's first phone call went to a little inn in a little Virginia town. And that's where the story begins.

On a Saturday morning in May, 2015, a group of law enforcement agents, the FBI among them, knocked on the front door of the Montgomery Homestead Inn in Damascus, Virginia. The proprietor, a retired kindergarten teacher who lives across East Laurel Ave. from the inn, happened to be there at the time. She does not know for sure how many agents were on the inn's porch. She guesses three or four, though her husband told her later another man was positioned at the back door.

Read the rest of Browning’s story, A Long Walk's End

July 3, 2015 — Mid-inning interview with Benjamin Hochman

Ben Hochman is taking baseball fans through the state of Colorado, one inning at a time.

He's now four parts into his series, "Nine Innings," which is enlivening The Denver Post while the city's baseball team predictably languishes in last place.

The first inning is about how a blind couple enjoys baseball. The second inning features a Nigerian 13-year-old who represents a small demographic in the sport. The third inning — a home run — dives into Eaton, Colorado, a small-town powerhouse.

Inning four, published after our conversation, details the life of an 81-year-old baseball player and is written in the style of the Old Man and the Sea.

On the podcast Hochman and I discuss...

- How Hochman uses social media to find sources
- What types of stories he's trying to tell for this series
- Improv and standup comedy (Hochman even humors me with a live standup bit)
- More facial hair talk (shoutout to Bob Ryan)
- A hidden gem burger joint in Charlotte
Apologies if the audio is soft in spots. Hochman’s personality still makes this worth a listen.

**Ben Hochman audio**

**July 8, 2015 — A World Cup veteran**

The World Cup lasts a month, so Steven Goff packs for a week.

Don’t worry, The Washington Post soccer writer knows what he’s doing: he just returned home from his 10th World Cup, dating back to the 1994 men’s event in America.

Limiting himself to a big suitcase, a smaller bag and a computer bag helps him stay mobile. World Cups are spread across entire counties, unlike the 17-day Olympics, which are typically confined to a city or region. Goff makes the most of his clothing, launders them if needed. “The blue jeans get a lot of wear and tear,” he said.

Covering a World Cup is all about logistics.

This last one in Canada was a bit easier than most. No massive time change. No language barrier.

But access to players and coaches caused more logistical planning.

Goff estimates roughly 25 people formed the core reporting group that covered the U.S. women’s team throughout. The United States Soccer Federation made coach Jill Ellis available to the media a few times per week and gave access to a couple players after each practice, Goff said. Locker rooms are closed to the media. Writers tend to write about the same players, because that’s whose quotes they possess.

And then there’s the "mixed zone," a post-game availability area which Goff described as "warfare."

Players walk through a designated area with media members standing behind a barrier. Reporters ask players to stop, and players can choose if they want to or not (Hope Solo was a perpetual "no").
"Sometimes you're talking to one player and other players will pass through and you'll miss them," Goff said. "It's a scramble. It's warfare in the mixed zone. You're jockeying for position to talk to someone, you're trying to figure out the best spot to line up against the railing to grab someone. It's a challenge; it's an adrenaline rush going into a mix zone. You sweat a lot."

Here's a pair of stories Goff produced from his month at the World Cup, along with his comments on them.

Profile on U.S. coach Jill Ellis

Goff audio #1

Game story from the championship against Japan

Goff audio #2

July 10, 2015 — 7 marathons, 7 continents, 7 days, lots of Clif Bars

A man ran seven marathons in seven continents in seven days.

Kris Schwartz was there to document most of it.

Schwartz produced ESPN's “SC Featured” story that aired Sunday. It's about a bombastic English man named Ted Jackson who has an opera voice, a dad bod and a tongue for junk food. He neglects physical training but still pledges to run more than 180 miles in one week.

The story borders on absurd. At one point (when the protagonist curls 5-pound weights with a devious smile and then calls himself “woefully unprepared”), this viewer wondered if it was a Sidd Finch-esque hoax.

“I can easily see that, the way it came across.” Schwartz said, before assuring me it was real. Eventually, we see a more determined side of Jackson as he tries to complete the World Marathon Challenge alongside a dozen more serious runners.
Last November, ESPN received an email from charity organization profiling Jackson, an interesting character attempting an interesting exercise. ESPN spent four days at the manor where he lives — renowned reporter Jeremy Schaap joining on the third day for interviews.

Schaap guides viewers through Jackson’s ambitious feat from Antarctica to Chile to Florida to Spain to Morocco to Dubai to Australia.

Jackson appears to be breaking down physically and mentally between marathons No. 4 and 5. ESPN invested a good chunk of money to tell this story. Would it be squashed if the protagonist failed to finish?

“There were discussions — if Ted doesn’t make it, what do we do?” Schwartz said. “Say he stops after the third or fourth one — do we follow someone else?”

Schwartz learned compelling stories from other competitors and thought about including them in the piece.

But Schwartz was confident in Jackson finishing all seven marathons, especially after hearing Jackson’s mindset: “He would envision a child who needs help and if you don’t get to him, he’ll die,” Schwartz said.

ESPN joined up with Jackson during the third of seven marathons. It skipped the first two legs to save money, and instead used footage from Jackson’s GoPro, as well as film from another cameraman who taped the entire circuit for other outlets. At the end of the run, a local crew shot video for ESPN in Australia.

Schwartz, the most consistent presence for ESPN, was there for five days in five continents, constantly tracking Jackson’s progress.

An ESPN veteran of 17 years, Schwartz said this wasn’t the most grueling story he’s ever worked on; he’s faced more pressurized editing situations. It did require non-stop moving and decision-making to get himself and his crew in the right spots along each race.

He said he slept 15 hours and subsisted on a diet of Clif Bars, bananas, Gatorade and airplane food.
“We didn’t have a meal until we sat down in Australia — we didn’t have a meal at a table,” Schwartz said. “That was a good realization of what we had done in those couple days.”

Watch the story here

July 13, 2015 — Research, ‘mesearch,’ and guitar licks

*mesearch* | noun | careful study that is done to find and report new knowledge about something that interests you

A lesson from a UC Davis communications class has stuck with Michael Gehlkin as he tries to generate interesting stories on his beat.

"Research = Meseach"

If something interests you, look into it. There’s a good chance it will interest others, too.

Gehlkin, the 28-year-old Chargers beat writer for the San Diego Union-Tribune, found fascination during a routine interview with offensive lineman Joe Barksdale. It resulted in [this melodious feature about Barksdale's guitar chops](#).

Gehlkin deftly toggles between Barksdale's fledgling guitar skills and his developing NFL career. The story packs information, description and a suspense that keeps the reader wanting more.

Chasing Jimi Hendrix began with a $90 acoustic guitar, not a howitzer but hey, still a gun in Joe Barksdale’s hand. He absorbed the basics of maintenance and tuning, E-A-D-G-B-E. He learned about marker dots, frets, scales and bar chords. "Seven Nation Army," a simple White Stripes riff, was the first song he played.

Barksdale no longer owns the acoustic.
Eventually, Gehlkin transitions from guitar to football by drawing a definitive connection between the two: "Barksdale is a quick learner. The Chargers know it now."

When the writer chatted with the Chargers’ lineman last month, the two talked mostly about Barksdale’s transition to a new scheme with a new team. Barksdale mentioned his hobby, and his quickly improving proficiency at it, and Gehlkin saw a connection — fast learner both on the field and with the strings.

Gehlkin knew he was on to something. Because if Gehlkin was a reader, he’d enjoy a story about a millionaire athlete coming home from practice everyday and trying to shred like Hendrix.

After the interview, Gehlkin immediately phoned his editor, Todd Adams, and called an audible on a previously planned feature.

Hear him talk about his philosophy on story selection:

Gehlkin audio

The Barksdale story, to me, is far more interesting and digestible than a schematic breakdown of the player’s on-field role.

It shows personality. Its memorable. It’ll make me think, "Hey, that's the guy with the guitar," whenever I hear Barksdale's name during a Chargers game this season.

And the writing is crisp and topical.

Using song lyrics in stories can often come across cheesy or forced. But Gehlkin — playing off Barksdale’s first name — pulled it off with a subtle touch.

Barksdale came to San Diego to earn a starting job, and he’s put in the hours. Off the clock, he sits in a hotel room, practicing alone or receiving guitar lessons on Skype, chasing the ghost of a guitarist who, two decades before his birth, called his name.

Hey, Joe.

Where you goin’ with that guitar in your hand?
The takeaway: explore stories that interest you. Look for meaningful connections between athletes’ hobbies and the sports they play. And if a 300-pound lineman is training to play like Hendrix, bag your previous feature idea and go do some messearch.

July 24, 2015 — Sports Illustrated writer relies on notes, not quotes

Serena is not everybody’s cup of Earl Grey.

That line didn’t find a home in L. Jon Wertheim’s most recent Sports Illustrated magazine piece on Wimbledon winner Serena Williams. In fact, Wertheim is a bit sheepish to see it scribbled in his notebook.

But that notebook — filled with interviews, observations and wordplay — is the key to Wertheim’s writing process.

The notebook goes everywhere with Wertheim. And when it’s time to write, the notebook — rather than a word processor — stores the reporter’s entire first draft.

Every paragraph is its own page.

The story becomes a tangible puzzle ready for reordering.

“By the time I turn on my laptop, it’s basically a typing exercise,” Wertheim said.

It’s a process that best allows Wertheim, hardly a luddite at age 44, to organize his thoughts for deep, textured stories like the Wimbledon review (not yet online but available in last week’s Sports Illustrated).

Because the magazine often comes out three or four days after a big event, SI’s stories must be packed with intriguing anecdotes, analysis and turns of phrase.

The Earl Grey line might have lacked bite, but how about this one?

“Serena blitzed Sharapova yet again, pushing her career record in major semifinals to a ridiculous 25-3. And it pushed her head-to-head record (foot-to-backside record?) against Sharapova to 18-2.”
That’s wordplay that works, and adds character to what’s otherwise a paragraph full of statistics.

Wertheim’s strategy is to simply report as much as possible — to fill that notebook with enough details that an unexpected result won’t submarine his story.

So, at one point during the week, he decided he’d talk to Serena’s sister. Not Venus, but little-known Isha Price. That conversation with Price unearthed an anecdote that helped Wertheim develop the theme of his story.

Price mentioned Serena wanted to watch the Pixar movie Inside Out, which Wertheim actually saw with his children the day before leaving New York for Wimbledon. The writer was able to connect the plot of the movie to Serena’s accomplishment of handling her range of emotions to win another title.

As the magazine’s lead tennis writer, Wertheim has covered just about every Serena angle. But this was a new one.

All the quotes Wertheim used in the story are short and punchy. Of the total 2,500 or so words, only 93 were part of quotes (and just 33 quoted words from Serena).

That’s not by accident. It keeps the story coming at a fast pace. And it spares the reader of platitudes.

It’d be too ironic to quote Wertheim explaining his disdain for quotes, so here’s the audio from our conversation on the topic.

Jon Wertheim audio

That’s good advice to writers who lean too heavily on sound bites: report for information, not quotes.

I asked Wertheim for other advice for young writers. He instructed them to take risks to differentiate themselves. And he said one can never do too much reporting.

That’s why journalists carry those notebooks, after all.
July 28, 2015 — Boston Globe’s Hall-of-Fame coverage stands out for its variety, exclusivity

Like a vintage Pedro pitching performance, the Boston Globe whipped out its entire arsenal to cover iconic Red Sox starter Pedro Martinez’s Hall of Fame induction.

This array of content served the readers well for two reasons:

- It experimented with alternative story forms (interactive graphics, animations and videos) to go along with deep feature stories and nostalgic commentaries.
- Considerable long-term planning resulted in exclusive and interesting content.

A project of this scope would not be possible if whipped together a week or even a month in advance. So the Globe began a year ago.

Martinez was a good bet to make the 2015 class, and the Globe’s editors knew they had to provide substantial coverage on such a beloved figure. So they began planning not long after last summer’s Hall of Fame induction, according to sports editor Matt Pepin.

Red Sox beat writer Pete Abraham, national baseball writer Nick Cafardo, columnist Dan Shaughnessy and several editors met to spitball ideas. Because they began the game-planning so early, there was no need to finalize any decisions before digesting and refining those ideas.

The Globe rolled out some content in November, when ballots revealed Martinez as part of the four-man class, and then a bunch more in the spring and summer.

Two of their standout pieces come in untraditional story forms.

- The Globe detailed the step-by-step process of foundry-workers creating Pedro’s plaque. Hearing the sculptor describe her strategy and seeing factory workers pour 2,000-degree bronze creates memorable moments and a pass-along factor for readers. The paper received exclusive access to this process, with the plaque-making company even adjusted its production schedule to accommodate it. Pepin coordinated all of this in March. Again, planning.

- This interactive of Pedro’s pitches is just plain cool. The illustrations were created from photos and videos of Pedro gripping a ball and pitching, which makes them quite accurate. All the information — from the illustration to the graphs — is simple enough to digest.
Pepin said the Globe wanted to avoid duplicating any stories, but wasn’t afraid of fatiguing its audience with content.

“I don’t think we could overplay this story by any stretch,” Pepin said, noting Pedro’s popularity.

As far as this Boston-born fan of the Pedro era is concerned, they played it just right.

Craig Biggio coverage, Houston Chronicle

Biggio, unlike Pedro, needed three tries to reach the Hall of Fame. But his induction was equally big in Houston, which never before saw a player wear an Astros hat to Cooperstown.

The hometown Houston Chronicle succeeded in tackling all the angles that made Biggio memorable — his 3,000-plus hits, his position switch, his pine tar, his relationship with Jeff Bagwell and more.

Sports editor Reid Laymance said that cooperation with the advertising and production staffs helped their special section actually make money.

If there’s one drawback, the Chronicle’s digital offerings weren’t as robust as the Globe’s. Laymance (a former Globe staffer) admitted “that was something we should have done better on.”

Why didn’t that part pan out?

For one, Biggio isn’t as dynamic a player or person as Pedro (quietly stroking doubles, Laymance noted, doesn’t have the same appeal as a Pedro strikeout). Also, Biggio never agreed to sit down for a video with the Chronicle.

Still, everything the Chronicle did for print looks sharp on the web, and it’s organized in an easy-to-navigate section.

Randy Johnson coverage, Arizona Republic
The Arizona Republic’s strategy differed a bit from the hometown papers of the other Hall of Famers. Sure, AZ Central provided plenty of content on Randy Johnson (the first-ever Diamondback elected), but the section’s big feature story was part of a bigger summer series.

Sports editor Mark Faller said he and his staff decided to run four deep-dive features this summer — the slowest part of their sports calendar — on goliath sports figures in Arizona: Johnson, former GM/owner Jerry Colangelo, Cardinals coach Bruce Arians and Cardinals wide receiver Larry Fitzgerald.

The project was hatched at the end of the football season and approved by the end of winter. That gave D-Backs beat writer Nick Piecoro enough time to report out this thorough “Big Unit” feature without having to ever leave his beat to meet with sources.

**John Smoltz coverage, Atlanta Journal-Constitution**

Covering the 2015 Hall of Fame ceremony, with John Smoltz joining baseball’s cool kids’ club, was quite simple for the AJC — at least relative to 2014.

Consider this: last year's Hall of Fame class included Tom Glavine, Greg Maddux and Bobby Cox, all entering the hall as Braves. It included Joe Torre, who played and managed the Braves, and Tony LaRussa, who played for them, too. It also included Frank Thomas, who grew up in Georgia.

“It was easier for us this year, in some respects,” AJC sports editor Ray Cox said.

One lesson Cox learned from last year is to get started on coverage as soon as you can. With Smoltz an obvious choice, the AJC began planning roughly a year ago. Much of its content was practically finished by March.

Cox saw success last year with first-person pieces that tapped into notable figures' memories of the Hall of Famers. So the AJC brought the idea back for this well-done piece, which gathers recollections from teammates, coaches, opponents and friends.

Circling back to what made the Boston Globe’s coverage so compelling, this story works because:
July 29, 2015 — Reporting without access: How Kent Babb found out about Chip Kelly’s wife

When a famous football coach lives a strangely private life, and when public records reveal little more, finding Chip Kelly’s ex-wife becomes your "white whale."

That’s how Washington Post sports feature writer Kent Babb explained his quest to uncover fresh, revealing details about Kelly, the Philadelphia Eagles’ bold but secretive head coach.

[Spoiler alert: Unlike in Moby Dick, Babb succeeded and lives to tell about it. Read his article on Kelly here]

Babb’s account is one of persistence and industriousness. It shows that there are other ways to get a story when the main source and his old friends won’t talk to you.

It started with a rumor.

Babb began reporting a football-centric story on Kelly. The coach’s mysterious personality quickly became more compelling. When someone mentioned that Kelly might have once been married (a fact that flies counter to previously believed/reported information), Babb went digging.

"My Spidey sense was going off that he must be hiding something," the writer said.

This is the part where we hash out whether it matters if a football coach ever had a wife.

It did, Babb reasoned, because of what that revealed about the coach, whose persona is of a pigskin-mad boss too focused on Xs and Os to communicate properly with his players or the media. It did, Babb reasoned, because Kelly’s concealing of that information told us something about him. Plus, if Babb could speak to a potential ex-wife, he could learn even more about what makes the coach tick.
First, he had to find out if there really was an ex-wife.

Friends of Kelly refused to talk to Babb.

Babb called a spokesman at Oregon, where Kelly used to coach. No help.

Babb tried to acquire a marriage record from New Hampshire, where Kelly also coached. The state, according to Babb, doesn't make records available to journalists unless there's a "compelling reason." A feature story on Chip Kelly didn't qualify.

Almost ready to give up, Babb checked a bio of Kelly in an old New Hampshire Wildcats media guide.

A-ha.

There it mentioned his then-wife, Jennifer, who eventually became the key component of Babb's Washington Post feature.

Once Babb found out about her, it was easy for him to find her contact information through a public records search. And after some expected skepticism, she agreed to talk.

Jennifer Jenkins' stories are what binds Babb's feature. She offers insights about Kelly that would be tough to acquire elsewhere: He was shy as a 25-year-old. He read self-help books. His hyper-focus on football WASN'T the reason they got divorced.

"This story could not be a 'Gotcha, he's married,' and that's the whole story," Babb said. "Because being married isn't that big of a deal."

One tricky part for me to reconcile is that nobody ever asked Kelly point-blank whether he was ever married. (The fact that it wasn't asked weakens the argument that Kelly is actually concealing something.)

Babb's response to that concern is that Kelly never answers personal questions, and if he asked Kelly on the first day of training camp, it would turn into the type of TMZ "Gotcha" moment he aimed to avoid. Babb was fair enough to submit multiple
interview requests through the Eagles and indicate what information he found. The Eagles never granted him an interview.

This isn’t new for Babb to write about someone he doesn’t get a chance to interview. Last month he profiled Hillary Clinton and released a book with uncooperative former basketball star Allen Iverson.

That Iverson book made Babb a better researcher and organizer. And it validated for him that "just because you don’t have cooperation doesn’t mean you don’t have a story." (Listen to Babb discuss the benefits of reporting without access)

Kent Babb audio

During his conversation with Jenkins, Babb knew he found his lead or ending when the ex-wife mentioned in passing that she traveled to Kelly’s first game as an NFL coach. Babb was aware enough in that moment to pivot and begin drilling down on details of this account.

That’s how good reporters are able to generate description-packed leads like this:

On a Monday afternoon nearly two years ago, a woman in her mid-forties settled into a long Metro ride, Dupont Circle to Landover, bound eventually for FedEx Field. ¶ Jennifer Jenkins hadn’t been to an NFL game since she was a little girl, football making so much noise during one part of her life that for a long time she tuned it out. But this day in September 2013 was different: Chip Kelly was coaching his first NFL game, his Philadelphia Eagles playing the Washington Redskins. ¶ Kelly, 51, coaches football in a way that calls attention to himself, but he keeps much of his life off-limits. Even the profiles that have been written give little sense of him away from the field, apart from the occasional mention of how he is a lifelong bachelor, seemingly married to the game. ¶ Wearing neither team’s colors, Jenkins reached the stadium that afternoon and an old friend from her native New Hampshire pushed a ticket into her hand. She found her seat near the 50-yard line, behind the Philadelphia bench, surrounded by the hopeful, the jeering and the curious. ¶ A while before the game, she pulled out her cellphone and sent a text message to the Eagles’ rookie head coach, the man who had been her husband for seven years.

August 2, 2015 — Mark’s Picks, July
If you missed my post from last month, this is a spot where I’ll highlight some of my favorite pieces of content from the past 30ish days and try to explain what makes them sing.

As always, if you see a story that jumps out at you, please pass it along either by email (markrselig@gmail.com) or on Twitter @MarkRSelig.

Absurd But True: Safeco Field Fans Love The Mariners' Hydro Races, by Jayson Jenks

During a vacation last month, I went to an amusement park, and came up with a million inane questions: What’s the best ride to operate? Who decides how to load the Ferris Wheel? When will Dippin Dots become the ice cream of the present?

I love stories that answer silly questions you might consider but put down without further thought.

“Why do so many people care about a simulated race on a scoreboard between innings?”

Hydro races are the Seattle Mariners’ version of the racing presidents, sausages or condiments you see at other ballparks. Jenks writes,

In the land of $11 seats and cold Rainiers — a place otherwise known as the center-field bleachers — I found a spot directly underneath the scoreboard a couple weeks ago, meaning that by the time the hydros roared in the sixth inning, I couldn’t see the screen. All I could do was watch people watching the race.

Not to be too scientific about it, but people were acting like complete banshees.

Actually, he does get scientific, explaining humans’ need to pick sides and their propensity to act competitively when in a competitive environment.

I wish the article included a video of a race (available on YouTube), but otherwise, the story answered all those fleeting, innocuous questions.
**Gone Baby Gone: Boston Tells the Olympics to Get Bent, by Charles Pierce**

When sports intersect with politics, many fans tune out. In the case of an Olympics bid, we get far more politics than sports.

Charles Pierce, legendary sports and politics writer, does us all a favor by delivering the upshot of the smothered Boston Olympics bid, and he delivers it as entertainingly and digestibly as possible.

The proximate cause of what happened was that new governor Charlie Baker and new mayor Marty Walsh were not raised as fools by their respective mommas.

That’s a sentence that anybody can comprehend.

**Amir Johnson’s path to Boston, by Rachel G. Bowers**

Sticking in Boston, here’s an alternative story form that’s smart in its simplicity and regard for the readers' needs.

The Celtics signed a forward named Amir Johnson. Celtics fans like me want to know more about Mr. Johnson.

Instead of a typical news story with a lead, nut graph and some background information, this bulleted piece provides us information the most efficient way possible. It doesn’t reek of journalism; it just provides information.

Some of the bullets are basic (age, stats, quotes about the player) and some are fun (a photo of Johnson’s crazy haircut, a video of him buying and handing out hundreds of Drake albums). And after going through this piece, I am much more familiar with the Celtics' new acquisition.

**The Battle, by Rich Clune**

Is the Player’s Tribune "journalism?" That’s debatable.
But the Derek Jeter-founded website does provide many valuable takeaways from its first-person missives.

It gives a voice and a platform to athletes who’d rather tell their own stories than have them told for them.

Rich Clune, a hockey goon and reformed drug and alcohol abuser, gives raw details in his story on the Player’s Tribune. While we’re losing out on a layer of verification, hearing the player tell a story first-person, in some cases, can be more powerful.

“I started going on coke benders that would last for days. I lost 14 pounds over a summer, and the jig was up. My family sat me down for an intervention, and I couldn’t bullshit my way out of it anymore. I will never forget the look on the faces of my two younger brothers. I was like their hero growing up, their best friend, the leader. And I could see it in their eyes that they were legitimately afraid of me.”

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**Rashard Mendenhall: The Real Player Behind ‘Ballers,’ By Men’s Journal**

While we’re on the topic of empowering athletes and their voices...how about this story?

In a post with Jon Wertheim, we discussed the value of writing without quotes, especially when your subjects’ quotes are filled with platitudes. But in the rare instances when your subject has a very strong and possibly controversial opinion, it’s smart to get out of the way and let his words carry the story.

Mendenhall’s perspective is so interesting that the writer doesn’t need to dress up the story.

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**Defying Time and Space, by Dan Barry**

An compelling subject will take a story a long way.

Dan Barry chose New York Mets pitcher Bartolo Colon for a deep-dive feature. And who wouldn’t want to read about a 42-year-old, 285-pound pitcher?
There isn’t a ton of previous literature on Colon, given all he’s accomplished during his long, many-city career.

Seeing Colon play at his age and size is almost funny. His misadventures with the bat are frequent subjects of memes. So Barry had fun with this article, presenting doubt about Colon’ precise age and size, and comparing him to Ernest Borgnine and Fred Flintstone. The story eventually turns more serious and gives us a glimpse of how Colon achieves his seemingly unlikely success.

DeAndre Jordan’s Round Trip: How Clips Star Dissed Dallas for L.A. Return, by Ramona Shelburne and Tim MacMahon

It was a day worthy of a 30 for 30 documentary. Except now we don’t need one.

DeAndre Jordan’s free agency U-turn and the “hostage situation” in his Houston home nearly blew up the Internet last month. It was “The best Twitter day ever,” If only it wasn’t “the best day in Internet history.”

The following week, ESPN’s Ramona Shelburne and Tim MacMahon delivered an opus recounting all the events behind the scenes.

The reporters put us in a bar with Blake Griffin, Chandler Parsons and Mark Cuban. They take us out to sushi with Parsons, Cuban, Dirk Nowitzki and Jordan. From the content of Facetime messages to the experiences on a party bus, the article packs a ton of detail.

Rebuilding these scenes requires deep access to the key players. ESPN scored big points with its sourcing in this story — getting Cuban and Parsons to not only talk but to recreate now-painful moments.

Though Jordan didn’t comment beyond a “Talk later?” text, the story was able to capture his mindset throughout the free agency process by tapping into sources inside Jordan’s circle.
Mark Cuban’s Inbox, by Justin Halpern

Quite gimmicky, but this fake Mark Cuban inbox had me LOL-ing.

A Long Walk's End, The Eaton Reds, Football's Most Intriguing Figure, Is Also It's Most Unknown

Thanks to William Browning, Benjamin Hochman and Kent Babb for discussing their craft with me in July.

August 4, 2015 — Productive procrastination helps Tim Graham nail features

Tim Graham can write 4,500 bewitching words at a time but he still gets shy about the initial plunge into the pool, so to speak.

"Actually getting started to write is just grueling," the Buffalo News enterprise reporter said.

To combat his dread, Graham employs what he calls "productive procrastination."

Instead of writing — and yes, he typically writes his stories in one sitting, after his wife and kids have gone to sleep — Graham will make three more phone calls or head to the library to find a pertinent book he’s yet to read.

Not on the type of deadlines that beat reporters confront, Graham has the luxury to research and develop deep features this way.

His job comes with its own set of pressures.

“I have to hit home runs every time,” Graham said.

To do that, Graham obsesses over his topics.

He obsesses over stories' precise framing. He obsesses over whom to use as sources.
“I’m thinking about it all the time,” Graham said. “It’s on my mind. It comes to a point where I’m dreaming about it. Laying in bed, and right before I fall asleep…”

He’ll whip out his cell phone, open the notes application and key in a note reminding himself of another avenue to explore tomorrow morning.

He racks himself in hopes of achieving a general goal — to tell stories that present curiosities that readers didn’t know they had.

**Graham’s latest feature on Buffalo Bill bust Aaron Maybin** is a good example of this.

In the micro sense, the story is a profile on Maybin, and what the retired 27-year-old is now doing. More broadly, it’s about false optics: Though thousands of people resent Maybin for blowing off a career they’d love to have, it doesn’t mean Maybin is disappointed with his current hand.

Graham visited Maybin in Baltimore and spoke with him on the phone several times. He realized that the former linebacker’s truth wasn’t quite what most angry Bills fans assume.

Graham’s lede both introduces us to Maybin’s football-replacing pastime (art) and serves as poignant symbolism for a bigger-picture idea.

**BALTIMORE –** There comes a time in Aaron Maybin’s artistic process when he needs to scrutinize his canvas. In a cluttered, paint-splattered studio – on the first floor of his three-story row house in the city’s gentrified Canton neighborhood – Maybin will pace this way and that. He will squint, cock his head, even climb halfway up the staircase in search of a fresh perspective.

Right around then, Maybin will take a deep draw of marijuana from a Black & Mild cigar or toke from one of the bongs scattered about.

“When I light one up,” Maybin said, “I’m usually figuring out what my next move is. It helps you see your vision from a different angle.”

Maybin’s strong opinions and surprisingly sympathetic stories keep the reader invested in this piece.
Initially, Maybin declined an interview request, but several emails later, he gave in. As you can tell, Maybin allowed Graham deep access and kept very little — not even illegal drug use — off-limits.

Graham, who used to cover the Dolphins for the Palm Beach Post and then ESPN, is developing a national reputation in the journalism community as a writer who can knock features out of the park.

That's what he did with this story on brain-rattled Bills linebacker Darryl Talley.

And that's what he did with a June profile of new Bills coach Rex Ryan.

Graham visited Ryan's mother in a suburban Las Vegas retirement community, and told the story through her eyes. Many reporters, when writing about Rex Ryan, talk to his father, who was also a coach. It's the low-hanging fruit.

Turns out mom was the one with all the fascinating stories of the Ryans growing up, like how Rex and Rob once shared contact lenses on the baseball field and how they once drunkenly fought one another, leading to an arrest.

When Graham knocked on Doris Ryan's door and sat down with her for an interview, he asked the 80-year-old mom how many reporters she'd hosted throughout the years. Graham was the first.

As Graham has shown us, procrastination can lead to the idea that leads to Doris Ryan's doorstep and a treasure of valuable anecdotes.

**August 6, 2015 — So you want to write for Grantland?**

Wake up early every day with no promise of pay. Bust your butt to hone your craft. Find time to work on stories between other jobs. And cross your fingers.

That's not the only route to employment. But it's a good road map for freelancers who seek something more permanent.
It's how Jordan Ritter Conn latched on with ESPN's trendy sports and pop culture site.

After graduating with a master’s degree in journalism from Cal-Berkeley, Conn freelanced for three years before Grantland hired him as a staff writer in 2013.

During those three years, life was far from cushy. To pay living expenses in the San Francisco Bay Area, he covered high school football for the ubiquitous Patch media corporation and did copywriting for a website he described as a "Groupon knockoff."

"Honestly it was pretty brutal," Conn, 30, said of the workload.

He knew he wanted to write "longform," though, and knew, at his age and inexperience, freelancing was the most direct path to those assignments.

Conn considers his big break a story on former basketball player Manute Bol. He wrote it for the Atavist, which paid him $5,000 plus half of all sales (the site sells stories like e-books). The story didn't sell well, and Conn burned through $3,000 just to report in Sudan.

His profit didn't match his hours, but editors began to notice his chops.

He received better freelance assignments, executed them, and received a full-time offer from Grantland.

"You have to be a self-starter," Conn said of navigating the freelance world. "You have to make a routine for yourself every day. You have to find a way balance the stuff that pays the bills with the stuff that you're passionate about."

Conn's routine was to wake up by 7 a.m., and work on his preferred stories while he was fresh. He'd save the monotonous, bill-paying work for later. He made sure that he spent some time every day on those meaningful stories, "so you're not losing sight of why you're in this ridiculous, poorly paying field."

His advice: Look for places where you can do ambitious work, and look for editors who can help make that work better.
(And if you want advice on how to pitch a freelance story to an editor, check out this How-To from Berkeley journalism professor Jennifer Kahn, Conn's advisor from grad school.)

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Now that you know a bit about Conn, you should read his much-discussed story from last week — "Potsdam’s Nightmare: What Happened to Garrett Phillips."

It's a high-drama murder mystery with complex legal implications. Conn reported it off and on over the past year and sifted through hundreds of documents to synthesize the story.

Still, “it's impossible to know, at this point, all the evidence that exists,” Conn said of the ongoing case.

To sort through everything and stay organized, Conn used the software Evernote, which makes PDFs searchable and allows for notes and highlights. When an element of a document jumped out to him, he made a note of it, and later pieced it into the skeleton of his article.

Conn said he typically doesn't like to grant anonymity or conduct off-the-record interviews, but allowed himself for a story like this.

Sometimes you need silent sources to steer you in the right direction when the vocal ones are divided and have so much at stake.

And sometimes potential sources need a bit of urging to talk. When that's the case, Conn will often show the source his past work — like a freelancer proving to an editor he's worthy.

"I tell them I'm going to write a story that's true and fair and complex, and it's going to have nuance, and it's going to have context," Conn said. "I can promise them all of that, and can't promise them they'll like what I'll write."

August 11, 2015 — An oral history of an oral history
Twenty years ago, when professional soccer was a tiny niche to Americans, a group of people slapped together the MLS with about as much formality as your $50 fantasy football league.

They bastardized the rules. They discussed using bigger goals to attract more fans. They signed off on logos and uniforms that now appear foolishly gaudy.

Major League Soccer was so peculiar during its first season that a "Melrose Place" actor used run from the TV show set to soccer practice, and he wouldn’t tell the soap opera’s producers that he was in the league.

Sports Illustrated editor Adam Duerson wanted to capture these types of stories in SI’s annual "Where Are They Know?" issue. He assigned soccer reporters Grant Wahl and Brian Straus to interview several dozen key figures from the MLS' inaugural year, and then the reporters passed the baton to digital editor Alexander Abnos to compile an oral history.

The finished product is rich with funny anecdotes and unbelievable recollections.

Duerson, Straus and Abnos explained to me why an oral history was the best way to tell the story, and how a team can pull off that story structure. (Wahl, the other reporter could not be reached for comment).

Here's an oral history of how they made their oral history.

ADAM DUERSON (Sports Illustrated senior editor): The Super Bowl happens Feb. 2nd. Feb. 3rd I start working on this issue. And by middle of February I hope to have a story list out and people working on things. So this is probably the first thing I assigned.

BRIAN STRAUS (SI soccer writer): Grant and I and Adam Duerson just started coming up with names. You start with people you know, and you start with people who it’s not hard to get a hold of. And then you start working backward and looking at media guides and looking to see who was involved with the league and with the clubs and with the front office. ... We came up with a lot of names, 50 or 60 maybe.

DUERSON: Loose Balls is this old ABA oral history, and to me it had a lot of parallels with everything I've ever heard about the first year of MLS in that it was very
upstart. [The MLS] didn’t run a super-tight ship, they were really figuring themselves out compared to a lot of things you were watching on SportsCenter at the time — it probably felt a little bush league, which is a far cry from what it’s become now.

ALEX ABNOS (SI digital editor): So much of what’s cool about those early years are the stories and the experiences. Like people saying, ‘I can’t believe the MLS was a league that does this, this and this and they actually used to function in this way... By doing an oral history we were able to keep a sense of disbelief from the people who are actually telling the story.

STRAUS: I think, often times, writers can get in the way of a story. I see a lot of writers, especially recently, even putting themselves into the story, making it first-person, talking about their experience and how they interact with the subject-matter. And I think often times that’s a bit clumsy. Removing the writer and allowing the people to speak for themselves and allowing their words to tell the story unfiltered is refreshing.

DUERSON: Brian and Grant did all the interviews and Alex compiled it all together. So he really needed to read everything.

ABNOS: All the interviews had been done. I believe I had two, maybe two and a half weeks to pull it all together. ... Grant gave me transcriptions for all of his interviews straight up, word-for-word, everything that was said in the interview. And Brian gave me selects of his. ... I don’t know how many pages. In the hundreds.

STRAUS: These conversations could last 45 minutes to an hour. You’re jogging people’s memories, you’re mining for details. You’re asking them ‘Oh tell me more about the time you had a barbecue with Carlos Valderrama.

...It’s like any other interview...The basic strategy for an interview is know what you want to get out of it, don’t just go in unrehearsed or without a list of questions or topics you want to touch on. And I think the best interviews for any story — and especially a story like this — they become conversations. They don’t become
Question-Answer-Question-Answer. You're reminiscing, you're shooting the shit, you're telling stories. Ideally it sounds like give-and-take between friends, and that's how you get the best stuff.

**ABNOS:** To not have done the interview myself was a huge challenge because I don't have a mental record of how the conversations went. Literally, the only thing I have is the transcriptions in front of me... I'm basically coming into it completely blind.

**STRAUS:** He really did the heavy lifting. You want to make it look like a conversation. You want to imagine that these 40 people are sitting around a really big room, eating pizza and talking shit about 1996 and laughing their heads off. It was Alex's job to really create that impression.

**DUERSON:** [My advice to Alex was to] clear out some time on your schedule. Be prepared to read a lot. If it’s me, I’m pulling out those little sticky, color-coded page index things and a big fat highlighter and spend a couple days going through all the stuff.

**ABNOS:** I looked at it, actually, a lot like putting together a radio show.... You have some leeway to where you can jump in as a host and say such and such a thing. But really, when you’re working as a radio DJ and you want to do a big, long radio feature, in actuality, the stuff that you record, the interviews are going to carry the flow of the piece.

**STRAUS:** His job was much, much harder than ours. I can't stress that enough. I got to have conversations, and then I had to spend a couple hours fixing commas. What Alex had to do — to turn that into something that was readable — was Herculean and awesome. He's not getting nearly enough credit publicly for the role he did.

**ABNOS:** I just kind of winged it. I thought about it in chunks. I thought about it like: Big over-arching topics; formation of the league; finding the players; playing the first game; playing the final; and then overall reflections.

**STRAUS:** There were some laugh-out-loud moments in that piece.
ABNOS: It did make me laugh out loud the second that I read it: [D.C. United president] Kevin Payne’s recollection of seeing the Tampa Bay Mutiny’s logo for the first time.

KEVIN PAYNE: I told them, “I don’t get this [Tampa Bay] ‘Mutiny’. What’s with the symbol?” They said, “Oh, it’s a mutant bat.” Okay, what does that have to do with Mutiny? “You know—Mutiny, mutant.” I said, “Those are two different words with completely different meanings. They just share some letters. What are you doing?”

ABNOS: When I read that quote, when Brian sent it along, I actually, literally did laugh out loud at my desk. And I stayed laughing for five or six minutes. And I just said, 'Well, I know that's going to be the signature quote of the piece.'

STRAUS: What makes stories like this stand out is the detail. It's the granular, significant stuff that people recall.

_The problem was they acquired too much of this good detail. And Abnos didn’t want to kill any more babies._

ABNOS: The process of cutting it down is amazing. That’s when I lost all perspective. I was in too deep. I didn’t know what we could afford to cut or what needed to be cut, because to me everything was essential.

DUERSON: There’s the digital version and then the magazine. If I had to guess off the top of my head, I think they’re 3,200 words and close to 6,000 words. ... You’ve got to turn your brain as an editor to 'Well know I only have this size box, I’ve got to cram it into here. What can go?' And that was a really, really painful process because there’s such good stuff.

ABNOS: I don’t know how Duerson was able to get it down to fit in the magazine. There were two versions of the piece … Adam Duerson helped cut down that 8,500 to around 3,500 or 4,000. I have no idea how he did it.

DUERSON: At the very beginning it was 'What absolutely has to be here; what can't we take out? And then you just start killing these amazing little anecdotes and arguing with yourself for a half an hour over 'Do I cut these two into two, whittled
down, bare bones anecdotes or keep this one at its full brilliance?’ And that’s really not any fun at all.

**ABNOS:** It was kind of a crazy, compressed process to put that whole thing together, really with not much time, but I’m really happy with how the piece came out. I’m really happy with the way people responded to it.

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**August 13, 2015 — Diagnosing an outbreak of ‘no comment’**

**Story: The Bat Doctor Is In**, By Rick Paulas, SB Nation

When would-be sources won’t want to talk to you for a story, you might be on to something.

Rick Paulas ran into that problem — or solution — when he investigated illegal bat doctoring in slow-pitch softball leagues. A recreational player for the past decade, Paulas consistently heard rumblings about such nefarious activity. But when he put on his reporter’s cap and left messages with people who might have insight, their responses were curious.

“The weird part wasn’t that they didn’t respond or kind of cold-shouldered me at all,” Paulas said. “They responded and said that they’re not going to talk. It was kind of this weird area where, clearly they wanted to say something or clearly they were proud of something. It gave me more of a feeling that there was not only something to dig there, but you know you’ll end up with some type of gold.”

With the help of Internet message boards, Craigslist and an especially helpful source on deep background, Paulas eventually got to the inside of this netherworld where softball players shaft their opponents by using bats unfit for competition.

Read the story: it’s hilarious in its absurdity but serious in its potential consequences.
Told in the first person, the story reveals many elements of the writer’s quest. Sometimes that strategy comes across a bit self-important, but it works in this piece because it adds critical details such as the lengths people will go to produce and buy these bats (and the measures they take to confirm a reporter isn’t a snitch).

Paulas’ first-person account also adds humor. He ramped up the ridiculous by comparing this to Watergate — his go-to source is “Deep Out” — and putting himself in the crosshairs of a silly scandal.

“You can only have so much excitement talking about the specifics of softball bat doctoring,” Paulas said. “Especially for this, what heightened the stakes of it being a story worth telling, is that people are trying to obstruct the truth in a way.”

Paulas also uses first-person to help explain the importance of rec softball, because it’s an important part of his life, too.

Paulas said when he reports a long feature, he’ll talk it out with friends to better grasp how explicitly he’ll need to explain each element to the reader:

- “Here’s what it means to play softball...
- Then there’s this underground element...
- Here are the ways they cheat...
- This is why it’s important, because it’s dangerous...
- This is why it’s dangerous...
- And here are the rules...

“I just kind of build it by speaking the story out a bunch of times.”

When Paulas, a freelancer, pitched this story to SB Nation, the topic was the “bat wars” of the 90s, when companies raced to create the lightest, strongest, best-performing bat on the market. As Paulas dove into his reporting, that angle turned into a section of what became a more intriguing narrative.

And a great conversation starter for my Tuesday night beer league.

Guys on my team often joke about opposing teams’ bats being “corked.” Truthfully, cork would do very little to enhance a titanium bat. But it’s possible teams are taking other measures to doctor their sticks.
Maybe I’ll ask. And if people don’t want to talk about it, well, it might be time to find an anonymous source.

**August 14, 2015 — Hot take: Gregg Doyel is a really good columnist**

Gregg Doyel was long known as a provocateur who delivered "hot takes." Might still be known as that.

Shouldn't be for much longer.

A former CBS Sports columnist who's now at the Indianapolis Star, Doyel began to resent himself for his work. He considered himself "part of the problem" in journalism.

So, a couple years ago he transformed into more of a featurey columnist. His recent work for the Star has been exceptional in its depth and intimacy.

See for yourself with [Doyel's recent column about a police officer who lost his leg in the line of duty](http://www.indystar.com/story/news/2015/09/14/indy-weekly-life-columns/severed/33552823/).

It's inspiring and suspenseful — written with pacing that makes you savor every sentence.

How Doyel got the story is that he was curious.

The cop worked at the Indianapolis Colts' training camp, and Doyel wanted to know how his left leg came to be a prosthetic. So he walked up to the cop and asked. Doyel didn't introduce himself as a reporter, although his occupation was probably clear.

"The key is to not have barriers or be awkward," Doyel said. "'Hey, I see your leg there; what happened?'"
The cop told him. After a minute of chatting, Doyel realized there was a story. He followed up with a more formal request for an interview.

"I don't even think about being a sports writer, honestly," Doyel said. "...After about two sentences, the journalism kicks in and 'Wait a minute, wait a minute — this is a story.'"

Doyel found himself a hell of a story. He uses a similar process to find many of his other stories.

He's always curious, borderline nosy.

You can't fake curiosity, Doyel says, but if you're a journalist, you better try.

And now, for him, it's all self-perpetuating. Doyel said he's receiving more and more quality tips from readers because his recent work suggests he might be interested.

That's how he discovered this story about two high school football coaches, playing each other tonight, both in need of a heart transplant.

Doyel chatted with me Thursday and had plenty more to say. Listen to hear more. Here are some of the topics we discussed:

- His transition from a hot-take artist to a more profound reporter
- The value of picking your battles (even if Doyel isn't good at saying 'no' to any battles)
- How to report detail for a scene you weren't there for (Doyel has a go-to-question that's proven successful)
- Doyel's typical writing process (a lonely room and 70s music)
- Advice for young reporters (Hint: You are not as good as you think you are)

Gregg Doyel audio

August 18, 2015 — Try 30, talk to 15, use 8

When Ikemefuna Enemkpali punched teammate Geno Smith in the jaw last week, Jets beat writer Ben Shpigel canceled plans to bring home Thai food for his wife’s
birthday. He also canceled plans to travel to Detroit for the Jets’ first preseason game.

The new plan was to find out exactly who is IK Enemkpali.

By Friday, the New York Times published Shpigel’s profile on Enemkpali — a rare measured and nuanced look at the biggest sports story of the week.

Shpigel talked to teammates and coaches from high school and college to sketch a portrait of a man who’s typically gracious and principled — despite a now-infamous assault committed for reasons that seem, if not justifiable, at least understandable after reading Shpigel’s story.

Step 1 for Shpigel was "reaching out to everybody and anybody who might know him, because you never know where that leash is gonna take you."

He made a list of possible contacts and then fired off emails or social media messages to...

- SIDs at every school with a coach who worked close to IK at Louisiana Tech
- Coaches from high school
- Players who were teammates with him in high school or college

Shpigel estimates he contacted 30 to 40 people and spoke with 15-18.

He quoted eight.

Shpigel’s restraint in quoting just eight is a good lesson that interviews are not just for adding voices to a story, but also corroborating what sources are saying. Interviewing 15-plus people allowed Shpigel to write with conviction, because person after person after person insisted IK was never a bully or a thug.

Though he once might have, Shpigel doesn’t feel guilty for interviewing people and excluding them from his stories.

"I used to really feel that way," Shpigel said. "I felt obligated — if I spoke to someone for 15 minutes or 20 minutes, that was time out of his day that he generously gave to me, and I wanted to prove to him or to her that I had used something that they said, and it wasn’t all for naught."
"...Over the years I've relaxed my view on that because we're reporters, we're not quoters."

Ultimately, Shpigel chose the anecdotes he believes are most interesting and revealing, such as IK hiding a tattoo from his mother or IK going to the library while his buddies played video games.

It was Shpigel’s goal to present the situation with more nuance than most football fans initially received it. He used a similar strategy for a story when Richard Sherman became a household name after his rambunctious rant immediately following the 2014 NFC title game.

The more people Shpigel talked to, the more confident he was in his thesis. Even if some sources remained anonymous via the writer’s volition.

**August 19, 2015 — Managing the all-consuming baseball beat**

Major League Baseball beat writers don’t get much leisure time, so Derrick Goold wakes up early and watches Phineas and Ferb.

“It’s awesome. It’s fantastic. It’s one of the best cartoons ever,” Goold, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch’s Cardinals reporter, said of the Disney Channel show.

Goold is awake shortly after dawn not exclusively because of Phineas or Ferb, but because it might be the only time he’ll see his 9-year-old son that day.

Life of a baseball beat writer is busy, routinized and seemingly never-ending. Rarely can Goold shelf his responsibilities and relax. If he can steal 30 minutes to watch cartoons with his son before school begins, that’s a good start to his day. When he takes an hour to visit a local comic book shop on certain Wednesdays, Goold is practically on vacation, sipping Mai Thais.

Most minutes, he’s drenched in baseball.
That’s the life Goold dreamed of as a child, and it’s a life he’s become quite good at since beginning to cover the Cardinals in 2004. Goold, the vice president of the Baseball Writers of America, is one of the most respected scribes in the industry.

Every day — maybe after a cartoon with his son — Goold begins his own homework. That includes reading nationwide baseball coverage to stay informed of what’s going on throughout the league, especially with teams close on the Cardinals’ schedule. He also analyzes St. Louis’ stats; he notes trends and possible nuggets for upcoming stories.

As we chatted late one morning before a Cardinals’ night game, Goold was occupied coding photos for a blog. Soon, he’d head to Busch Stadium, talk to the manager and players, report any pre-game news, watch the game, write a game story for 10:15 p.m. and midnight deadlines, crunch more stats, leave the ballpark around 12:30 p.m., get some sleep and do it all again the next day.

A recent “off day,” when the Cardinals traveled home from a road trip, wasn’t much more calm. Goold left Milwaukee at 8 a.m., headed for a flight in Chicago. The flight was canceled, which allowed him time to post a blog and write two more stories for the next day’s newspaper. He didn’t arrive home until midnight.

“People doing sports writing and doing beat work have never written this much and this often, I would imagine, ever,” Goold said.

What keeps him going?

“Stupidity,” Goold joked. “I’m wired for this. I had a professor at Mizzou tell me ‘If you can’t write well, you better write a lot. So you better write a lot’.”

Goold accumulated as many bylines as possible as a student at Missouri. After graduating in 1997, he wrote for the Times Picayune in New Orleans (covering LSU football, baseball and women’s basketball) then the Rocky Mountain News in his home state (covering the Nuggets and enterprise). He covered the St. Louis Blues for three seasons before the Post-Dispatch moved him up to the Cardinals beat.

The lifelong baseball fan views reporting like the sport he covers: It’s a daily grind, and you’re measured by a full body of work — not a single game. Goold knows one great day isn’t enough to carry him all year.
He swings for the fences with his Sunday features, which measure out at 1,300-1,500 words (here’s one on second baseman Kolten Wong, and the significance of the message written on his bat).

Goold’s daily routines allow him to write deep, meaningful stories along with all the newsy tidbits he’s responsible for. Here are some tips to take from Goold’s reporting:

- **Zig when others are zagging, but zag, too:** Journalists want fresh information, but they’re afraid of missing out on the news the pack is receiving. To satisfy both sides, Goold knows his locker room. If there’s a scrum around a certain player, he knows whether he should join the scrum or if that player has a tendency to stay a bit longer to talk one-on-one. He weighs various factors before deciding whom he’ll interview and when.

- **Be organized:** Goold transcribes everything soon after he records it. He then tags it with keywords he can search later. This helps him recall useful sound bites later in the season.

- **Read as much as you can:** In addition to his daily baseball reading, Goold brings books on plane rides. They make him curious beyond baseball, and sometimes inform his writing. Goold recently read Flash Boys by Michael Lewis, How Not to Be Wrong by Jordan Ellenberg and Devil in the Grove by Gilbert King. Next in queue is Fourth of July Creek by Smith Henderson.

**August 20, 2015 — Andy McCullough talks game stories**

In the last post, Derrick Goold informed us of the wide-ranging responsibilities of a modern-day baseball beat writer.

The most central of those responsibilities might be writing game stories.

Each one is a chapter in the book that is a team’s season. They should allude to the past and foreshadow the future.

Goold writes a gamer this way. And if we travel travel west on Interstate-70 to Kansas City, there’s another reporter who’s mastering the art of the gamer.
Andy McCullough covers the Royals for the Kansas City Star. He writes detailed, scene-filled game stories under tight deadline pressures.

Here's his lede from Sunday's extra-inning affair against the Angels:

The man treats these moments as if they are his stage, and his stage alone: Two on. Two out. A baseball game on the line? The Kansas City Royals could do worse than turn to Kendrys Morales.

In the final at-bat of a 4-3 victory in 10 innings over the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, Morales does what he has done more than any other Royal this season: He drove in a run. It took a single to left field off Los Angeles reliever Trevor Gott. Ben Zobrist raced home from second base to complete the comeback. The team mobbed Morales in the infield.

McCullough typically must file his gamer within minutes of the game ending. So he often begins writing it at 5:30 p.m. — an hour and a half before the game begins.

It's not ideal to write a story fat with B-matter, but pre-writing helps him add context in situations where he won't get the chance to talk to players after the game. He keeps a running play-by-play story throughout the game, too.

"Readers tend to gloss over play-by-play," McCullough said, "so you try to make it as vivid as possible and you also try to provide as much perspective that wasn't apparent to people watching the game."

McCullough's style came after plenty of tinkering for the 28-year-old who previously covered the Yankees at the Newark Star Ledger.

McCullough said he used to write folksy, like a "bullshit, fake Joe Posnanski," but realized that wasn't his style. Now he considers his writing "muscular," with active verbs and imagery.

“Try to figure out who the writers are you want to write like, study what they do and then try to make it your own,” McCullough said. “Imitate them until you sort of figure out who it is you are as a writer.”

Here’s our full conversation on writing game stories:

Andy McCullough audio
August 26, 2015 — Coming out to media

David Denson, a prospect in the Milwaukee Brewers’ farm system, came out as gay to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel this month. He is the first active player affiliated with an MLB team to be openly gay.

Veteran Brewers beat writer Tom Haudricourt helped tell Denson’s story, which appeared on A1 of the Sunday paper.

I asked Haudricourt several questions about the reporting, and he answered them via email. Here’s the Q&A:

How did Denson contact you/your paper?

TH: Billy Bean, MLB’s Ambassador for Inclusion, contacted me earlier in the season and said he had an unnamed player in the Brewers organization who was thinking about coming out as gay. We talked several times on the telephone over the next few months until David Denson felt the time was right to make his announcement. Billy put me in touch with David and we did an extensive interview over the telephone, and followed up in text messages and emails.

What was your strategy for reporting the rest of the story?

TH: Basically, I just let David tell his story. It was his story to tell and I let him do most of the talking. Then, I asked the appropriate questions. After the story ran in the Journal Sentinel on Sunday, Aug. 16, I went out to the ballpark to get reaction from the Brewers.

How long did it take from the time he came out to you to the time when the paper published the article?

TH: I did the first extensive telephone interview with David on Thursday before it was printed on Sunday Aug. 16. I had done some prep work beforehand, but basically we turned the story around in a few days. We felt time was of the essence and we wanted to get it done as soon as possible. It was quickly targeted as an A1 story for that Sunday and I pretty much worked nonstop on it for 2 1/2 days.
Did you have any experience with similar stories?

TH: This was the first story for me of this kind. David was the first active player in affiliated baseball to come out as gay, so it was the first for any writer. I had not done something similar to this in any sport.

Why do you think he came out to you (instead of MLB.com or perhaps Outsports)?

TH: All I was told is that Billy Bean asked for recommendations in the Brewers media to do this story and was referred to me. We spoke many times on the telephone and via messages to get comfortable with each other, and went from there. They wanted a baseball writer to do this, it seemed to me, because after all David is a baseball player.

Did you — or other media — know he was gay before he came out (in the case of Michael Sam, it was no secret to anyone who covered the team)?

TH: No other media knew about David being gay as far as I knew. Earlier in the year, he had come out to his family, Brewers officials and his teammates in Helena, Mont.

There are a lot of athlete "coming out" stories, especially recently. What did you try to do to distinguish this story from the others?

TH: No other active baseball player in baseball affiliated with MLB had come out as gay. That distinguished it from any other story about athletes coming out as gay. David was and is one of one.

Why did you feel that this was an important story to tell?

TH: Because David felt strongly about telling it and also refer to (the previous response)

There are no teammates quoted in the story... Did you try to talk to any? If so, why did it not work out? If not, how come?

TH: I talked to David's manager. The team is in Helena, Mont. I had a couple of days to do the story. I wasn't going to try to call around to teammates who were busy
playing baseball games. I felt very comfortable that manager Tony Diggs, who I know and interviewed, could accurately tell me how the players had handled the news that David was gay. A manager always knows how players are handling clubhouse matters.

**How difficult was it to write authoritatively for this story, considering you don’t often cover Denson as a player?**

TH: I’ve been a professional journalist since 1976 and have covered either minor-league or major league baseball for more than 30 years, so it was not difficult at all to write about David. I knew his baseball background and let him tell his story about being gay. As I said, this was his story, not mine. I was merely the conduit for him to tell his story.

**What takeaways do you have from this experience? What advice would you give yourself if you were just starting this story over again?**

TH: I would do it exactly the same if starting over. Billy and David came to me. I waited until they were ready to tell the story, then let them do it. My goal was to handle it professionally and sensitively and have David be happy with it. After all, it’s his life and he has to live with it, so I wanted him to have no regrets about choosing me to do the story.

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**My musings:** Sexuality in sports is obviously a delicate issue, so these coming out stories seem to always be facilitated by another party, and hand-delivered to a specific source.

The same was true of Michael Sam coverage last year. Pretty much the entire media corps knew of the former Missouri football player’s sexuality, but everyone kept it private, out of respect to Sam. Eventually, Sam decided to release the information with a three-pronged attack: an announcement on ESPN; a feature story in the New York Times; and a backstory explanation at Outsports. Meanwhile, UMass basketball player Derrick Gordon came out to ESPN and Outsports.
Denson giving his story to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel is a rare case of an athlete choosing the local paper over a national outlet. Haudricourt’s venerable reputation appears to be a big reason why.

Haudricourt’s strategy to "just let David tell his story," is admirable and pretty much the norm with coming out stories. But I wonder, because the topic is so sensitive, if a reporter is a bit handcuffed when a subject — and his representation — chooses the reporter to tell a coming out story.

_The story is yours because we trust you — now don't blow our trust._

The Journal Sentinel story includes interesting anecdotes that Denson provides (such as hints of mild homophobia from teammates and his father).

I wonder if conversations with teammates would have allowed this story to be more transcendent.

Haudricourt let the manager speak for the entire team, but Denson's teammates — the peers he's growing with as a ballplayer and a human being — could have offered more color about what it’s like being around a young man with a secret.

Especially in a culture where derogatory terms flutter in the clubhouse, as Denson details.

**August 27, 2015 — ‘Silence at Baylor’ now a thunderous topic**

A freelance writer received a tip, and less than three weeks later, it led to tangible change in big-time college athletics.

Jessica Luther has written more than a dozen articles about sexual assaults in college football, so it’s common for her to receive the type of message she did this month, when someone — she won't reveal who — told her a Baylor football player was about to stand trial for rape. What’s uncommon is that she found absolutely no information when she researched it online.
Bemused, Luther contacted fellow Austin-based freelancer Dan Solomon, who discovered the football player on a docket for trial. The two hopped in a car and drove to a Waco, Texas courthouse, looking for more information.

What they unearthed in court documents throughout the next two weeks is detailed in this explosive Texas Monthly exposé, which prompted the the Big 12 this week to adopt a policy to block incoming transfers who were dismissed from a previous team for misconduct.

Baylor University, its athletics department and the media that covers the program all come across as negligent in Luther and Solomon’s piece, which details how defensive lineman Sam Ukwuachu remained a member of the Bears’ roster despite a sexual assault case in which he was eventually proven guilty.

The story presents records describing how Ukwuachu assaulted another Baylor athlete the night of a big football win. When the Jane Doe sought to avoid Ukwuachu in classes and tutoring sessions, Baylor did nothing to assist her. Meanwhile, the football program anticipated its player's return to the field.

After the news broke, coach Art Briles told media he "liked the way we handled it."

It was actually Baylor's hometown paper, the Waco Tribune, that broke the news, but curiously late. The Tribune's first story informing the public of Ukwuachu’s trial published the night Luther received her tip. It was 406 days after the football player was indicted on two counts of sexual assault.

"Part of the shock for me from the get-go was that there was none of this in the media," said Luther, who's unsure if the Waco Tribune's tip was the same as hers. "As soon as we saw his name on the docket to go to trial, I just couldn't understand how there was nothing about it."

In an editorial after the Texas Monthly story had caught fire, the Waco Tribune defended itself, saying there was no arrest record and the indictment was sealed (Luther said that on the day she visited the court, it was not sealed.)

The Dallas Morning News and Austin American-Statesman also cover Baylor athletics.
Perhaps college football reporters across the country get too caught up with depth charts and soundbites to investigate critical topics. Fans’ demands for every bit of minutiae on their favorite team require reporters to stretch themselves so thin they can miss the biggest story. It took a monthly magazine to fully expose gross malfeasance.

Jessica Luther never went to journalism school, has no official training, and admits she’s "learning as I go."

That’s all quite ironic considering the big-J Journalism she uncovered. Her story goes deeper to document the rampant inattentiveness to the issue that took place at Baylor.

The article is important in the landscape of journalism because it confidently held everybody accountable for, at the very least, willful ignorance.

It’s easy for the reader to understand the issues at stake because Luther and Solomon turn byzantine legal matters into accessible facts.

Luther said she and Solomon spend much time just talking the case out, and that helped them comprehend the situation well enough to write it clearly. Luther said her lack of a journalism degree makes her extra careful in reporting because she’s cognizant she doesn’t have traditional training.

(She majored in Classical Civilizations and Greek/Latin at Florida State, got a Masters in Latin Lit at the University of Texas, and then worked on a PhD from the history department before leaving academia to write).

Now, Luther commands respect as a journalist. She served as a watchdog and the moral compass that Baylor football coach Art Briles wasn’t.

The Big 12 instituted a rule because of this story.

That’s progress, thanks to journalism.

**August 28, 2015 — Little League a big event for little paper**

Every August, Ben Brigandi faces a similar but daunting challenge.
“How much bubblegum pop music of Taylor Swift and One Direction can you listen to,” he asks, “while it’s blaring on the speakers and you have one headphone in your ear, trying to write?”

Williamsport, Pennsylvania hosts the Little League World Series every year, providing the Williamsport Sun-Gazette’s sports editor with more headaches than just those from Harry Styles’ vocals.

Brigandi’s section employs four full-timers, including himself. The sports desk is tasked with filling a six-page LLWS wrap throughout the 11-day event — in addition to a four-page sports section.

“I joke that we’re the only paper in America that considers preseason football an afterthought,” Brigandi said.

In reality, it has to be a forethought. The cover story for the paper’s upcoming high school football magazine was written on May 15. Summertime, Little League takes precedent.

With most eyes on Lamade Stadium, the Sun-Gazette’s news reporters assist with coverage of the town’s biggest event. Despite two planning meetings to make sure everybody’s on the same page, the Gazette doesn’t assign many story ideas in advance, Brigandi said, because the teams that reach the World Series are determined just a week before they get there.

Sports reporter Chris Masse, who’s been with the newspaper since 1999, said he uses ESPN-televised regional qualifiers to scout the field and ponder possible features. He also reads newspaper clippings from the teams’ home towns.

Masse calls coaches and does leg work on stories before the teams arrive in Williamsport because, he said, once they’re in town, their itineraries are packed.

Last year, Masse wrote a feature on Philadelphia’s Mo’ne Davis before the World Series began. It seemed logical to profile the dominant pitcher who happens to throw like a girl. But even Masse didn’t anticipate Davis would completely take over the World Series in terms of national coverage, despite her team falling short of the American title.
It was Jackie Robinson Little League out of Chicago that outlasted the U.S. field a year ago. Later, the team was stripped of its title because it used players outside its regional boundaries.

“I don’t think it’s as sweet and innocent as it’s portrayed on TV,” Masse said when I asked what viewers watching the LLWS don’t see. The other day, Masse watched a parent argue with the California coach over playing time.

Typically, the adults making errors.

But what happens when a 12-year-old makes a miscue on the field?

“Heard but don’t belabor,” Brigandi uses as a mantra. It’s a policy that transcends to high school sports coverage.

“There’s nothing I can do to a 12-year-old in print that’s bigger in magnitude than it’s on ESPN for everyone to see,” he said.

September 22, 2015 — Mark’s Picks (August)

This is the third installment of my monthly picks. It includes stories that entertained me, gave me a broader idea of a subject and, in some cases, made me think how’d they do that?

This month is heavy on football (and on the juxtaposition between its inherent problems and our love for it).

Scroll about halfway through this post for coverage of other sports.

Why we love football (Even though we shouldn’t), by Tom Junod

Junod, author of 9-11 masterpiece Falling Man, eloquently articulates our addiction to football and why we can’t walk away — even with all moral forces tugging in that direction. The sport’s aesthetics keep improving; the world’s top athletes have brought the game vertical. Personally, I can’t wait to bury myself in NFL Red Zone
seven hours at a time, though I'll undoubtedly cringe when a player wozily walks off the field with a potentially debilitating injury.

Why Chris Borland is the Most Dangerous Man in Football, by Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada

Brothers Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada profile a man who walked away from football after a promising rookie season. Chris Borland is a man who read their book — League of Denial — and wanted to stop before his life spiraled down a path of brain damage. The reporters embed themselves in Borland’s life, provide the man a platform and give the reader a complete understanding of why he made his controversial decision. ESPN The Magazine devoted 12 pages to this in its NFL preview. And then proceeded to prove Junod’s aforementioned point: The next 40 or so pages featured scouting reports, which only served to excite fans for the upcoming season.

The Confession of Arian Foster, by Tim Keown

That Arian Foster doesn’t believe in God is hardly “news.” But Tim Keown wisely framed this story as Foster being an outsider to the pro-God NFL culture. Quotes from fellow agnostic Chris Kluwe and interaction with devout Christian Justin Forsett make the reader think a bit more about each side. Kluwe compares the culture in NFL locker rooms to that of white privilege: The people inside it don’t realize others feel excluded. Make it all the way through for a powerful ending that ties the story together with the daily issues we face.

Notre Dame great Tommy Zbikowski ascends from addiction to redemption, by Mike Vorel

Zbikowski was a near household name for his work with Notre Dame last decade. Then he fizzled in the NFL and faded into a life as an alcoholic. Before all that, he was
an adrenaline addict, and Mike Vorel writes with a pace that makes you feel that adrenaline rush.

He took the punt and burst around the right edge, a blur of green and gold, chugging through a seam as the volume cranked with each purposeful stride. He shed his first tackle just inside the USC 25, then another at the 20, and another at the 10, obliterating Trojans like a monster truck crushing rows of broken cars.

The Hall of Fame speech Junior Seau’s daughter couldn’t give, by Sydney Seau

Agree or disagree with the NFL’s 5-year-old policy to not allow surrogate speakers at its Hall of Fame induction. Kudos to the New York Times for presenting Sydney Seau the platform to give the speech she would have delivered behind a lectern in Canton, Ohio. Because the NFL’s decision sparked so much controversy, the idea of Seau’s speech was all the more intriguing.

Harry Edwards is in Chip Kelly’s corner, by Mike Sielski

It’s a columnist’s job to write provocatively and provide context to hot-button issues. Sielski does that by finding a former Black Panther who’s something of a counselor to Chip Kelly, a coach some players accuse of racism. The column challenges perceptions, and without Sielski himself being the one with the strong opinion.

Hellbent, but not broken, by Eva Holland

With narrative writing and pretty description, Evan Holland's first-person story reads like a novel. In some ways, the reporting is a bit easier because it’s experienced; there’s no need to interview deeply to recreate vivid scenes. But how did she take notes while paddling a canoe for 58 straight hours? I asked Holland and she emailed me back, saying she brought a waterproof notebook to use during 5-minute breaks. She couldn’t muster the energy to take notes, though, and used the breaks to eat or pee.
"What I did instead was repeat details to myself, in my head, over and over again — so things like the bits of dialogue I include, or the various things I hallucinated," she said. "I just chanted to myself about them for hours and hours — which was actually kind of useful, story aside, since one challenge of the race was keeping my mind occupied all that time — and then wrote them down in a notebook after the race was over."

**The website MLB couldn’t buy, by Ben Lindbergh**

A fun story of a writer getting to the very bottom of a curiosity. Lindbergh explains how baseball teams attain their URLs, and why some can’t outmuscle smaller companies for a preferred name. Rolling Stone’s article about Space Jam’s website carries a similar theme. It’s worth reading if you’re into nostalgia or rudimentary web design.

**The end of the hoop dream: a journey to the extreme fringe of international basketball, by Jordan Conn**

The protagonist is sort of a joke. He’s a failing agent of low-wattage players. He lacks self-awareness and decorum. He won’t give up on this career that’s given him nothing. Conn isn’t rude but also tells the story as he sees it, unafraid to paint the agent as naive, if not foolish.

**The missed shot that was Master P’s career, by Thomas Golianopoulos**

There’s no news hook here, but it’s smart to circle back to a time when rapper Master P tried out for the NBA. The article provides reports from 12 scouts to give us an idea of P as a player. This was more than a publicity stunt.

It’s fun to imagine how much publicity news like this would garner nowadays. I would have liked a section in this story that delved into public perception and how media covered Master P’s basketball “career.”
Star Tribune’s Amelia Rayno adds her own story to Teague scandal, by Amelia Rayno

Rayno bravely writes about being subjected to inappropriate texts from an athletics director she covered. The AD — Minnesota’s Norwood Teague — was fired amid complaints of sexual assault. Rayno didn’t come forward until after his firing. Reading her reasons offers plenty of perspective. As a male, it made me more aware of the potentially awkward situations female sportswriters encounter. It makes me wonder how I’d handle them.

September 3, 2015 — Jerry Brewer tries to establish himself again at the Washington Post

Sports columnist at The Washington Frickin’ Post.

It’s a job title thousands of sports writers would give their right and left hands for, and then learn to type with their noses.

Jerry Brewer long wanted that job, but when the 37-year-old landed it last spring, he froze.

How does a writer, even an accomplished one, thrive without institutional knowledge?

After 8 1/2 years at The Seattle Times, Brewer transitioned to The Washington Post and plummeted from expert to novice, losing much of what he established out west.

"It was the hardest thing in the world for me," Brewer said. “I was fighting it, man.”

Brewer had moved before — from Philadelphia to Orlando to Louisville to Seattle — but never spent more time anywhere than at his last stop, where he built credibility as the voice of the Emerald City’s sports scene.
In Washington, he’s just another voice, one that hasn’t experienced the Redskins’ glory years or struggles. One that hasn’t lived through the playoff failures of the Capitals, Nationals and Wizards.

Now nearly three months into his new job, Brewer is re-establishing his voice. (It helps that the Redskins are always newsmakers, even in training camp).

Eventually, Brewer wants to become “the African-American, modern day, digital media version of Red Smith,” he said.

How did Brewer assimilate D.C. sports and begin to write with conviction?

Brewer said his strategy was to stay humble and acknowledge what he doesn’t know. He said playing off his own naïveté can be advantageous at times. Because he was on the other side of the country during Robert Griffin III’s rise and fall, he was able to offer an objective, measured take to the latest developments in the Redskins quarterback’s saga.

(Hear Brewer talk about that process)

Brewer audio

When Brewer was hired, he tried to fill his D.C. sports knowledge gaps with research. He read Post archives and watched recent games of college and professional teams.

He sought advice from another sports columnist who thrived after a move. Gregg Doyel, who went from CBS Sports to the Indianapolis Star, “set a new standard of what can be accomplished when you get to a new place,” Brewer said. Doyel told Brewer to focus on smaller stories around the community rather than making a permanent home in 70,000-seat stadiums.

Another distinguished columnist, Yahoo!’s Dan Wetzel, offered somewhat contradictory advice to Doyel’s — play the hits. In D.C., you can never write too much about RG3. But, like a band trying to please its fans, you’ve got to remix the hits, making your articles stand out with a different angle.

Regardless, he’s got to play with the passion of an artist yet to sign his first record deal.
At The Washington Post, he must establish himself all over again.

"You get into an environment like this and you either just fade into the background or you stand out," Brewer said. "There really is nothing in between."

September 9, 2015 — Joan Niesen on ‘voice’ and her fast-rising career

To advance in this industry, Joan Niesen says, your writing needs voice.

Niesen knows a bit about advancement: She ascended from intern to NBA beat writer to NFL beat writer to Sports Illustrated staff writer all in her mid-20s.

She knows about voice, too. Read her recent story on Tulane football and Hurricane Katrina. It’s packed with expressive phrases that reveal something about the city of New Orleans, the Tulane football team and the deprivation both overcame 10 years ago.

Voice is a bit intangible for the fast-talking Niesen, who struggled to define her own voice beyond that it’s “conversation al.” It’s apparent in her writing.

Niesen describes Katrina as “a giant counterclockwise mess of moisture and wind.” She describes the football players who stayed on the team “loyal, dedicated or delightfully insane.” To write with that type of voice, a reporter needs an intimate familiarity with his/her subjects.

Journalists are taught to be impartial, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be invested.

Niesen, who has family from New Orleans, considers the city “a second home,” and it shows with the way she writes about it. She lets her larynx do work and gives the reader a sense of place, especially in this passage.

It’s a place where you learn by doing, by winding up with your sandal drenched in a puddle of Bourbon Street piss water, by waking up with a saccharine hangover headache, by drinking tap water you later learn might have been contaminated. You don’t ask questions. *(Why should I suck the crawfish’s head? Who dips eggplant in powdered sugar? Does the streetcar ever come on time? Do the cops arrest anyone?)* Instead, you simply do. You suck and you dip and you wait and you hope you don’t do anything that’ll land you in the Orleans Parish Prison. Along the way, you’ll find
out all about the Rebirth Brass Band and turtle soup and general human decency, of which New Orleans has a mother lode to spare. No storm could wash that away.

Listen to my conversation with Joan, who discusses her career, how she manages the challenges of being a woman in sports journalism and, of course, voice.

Joan Niesen audio

September 10, 2015 — Fainaru’s system helps him distill months of research

You followed a man for five months, and now you have 18 days to write 7,500 words about him.

Go!

ESPN investigative reporter Steve Fainaru faced that challenge for his August story on Chris Borland, a 49ers linebacker who retired after his rookie season because of concerns about head injuries.

The volume of writing — roughly 420 words per day — doesn’t seem daunting until you consider the copious notes Fainaru had to sift through while trying to capture the essence of Borland’s conflict.

Fainaru — who won a Pulitzer prize for his investigative work in Iraq and is perhaps best known for the book League of Denial, which he co-authored with brother Mark Fainaru-Wada — has a system that keeps him organized for such ambitious projects.

Every writer should have his or her own system. It will vary, depending on the circumstances of the work, but the more consistent it is, the better prepared you’ll be.

Fainaru clearly isn’t a rookie to deep investigative work. He wrote a 10-part series on private security contractors in Iraq, and he wrote a book that helped shift perceptions about football.
Over a beer at a cafe in downtown Columbia, Missouri, Fainaru explained his process for reporting the thought-provoking Borland story. Here’s how he managed his notes as he trailed Borland off and on for five months in San Francisco, Wisconsin and Ireland:

Fainaru tape recorded as much as possible, because he likes using paragraph-long quotes when a subject says something compelling. He also kept a notebook on him at all times, because sometimes recording a conversation isn’t feasible.

Some writers like to transcribe their own tape to better familiarize themselves with their interviews, but Fainaru didn’t have time to do that, so he farmed out that work — a benefit of writing for a well-heeled company.

Still, he got plenty familiar with his notes, reading through them and highlighting important passages. He made electronic index cards and separated them into what might become the sections of his story. He views writing as fitting his notes into a puzzle. Some pieces in the box are eye-catching but simply don’t fit.

Scrivener, a software application, is Fainaru’s personal organizer. It stores documents and displays them like a bulletin board.

Ultimately, the most important part of the reporting process is figuring out what your story truly is. It’s one thing to document someone’s thoughts and experiences. The more crucial step is to synthesize all the elements into a well-defined narrative.

Here’s Fainaru explaining what he and Fainaru-Wada decided was the crux of Borland’s story.

Steve Fainaru audio

September 11, 2015 — A master class with Don Van Natta Jr.

This was a complex story — one with a most secretive institution to crack — but Don Van Natta Jr. is “the best reporter in America,” according to the guy who just worked with him for four months.
Because of that, Van Natta and ESPN colleague Seth Wickersham were able to deconstruct Roger Goodell’s NFL — and the way it operated through two New England Patriots scandals.

In his career, Van Natta has investigated Bill Clinton’s impeachment, post-9/11 counterterrorism and the controversial 2000 presidential election. Add “Spygate” and “Deflategate” — lazy suffixes be damned — to his list.

“The degree of difficulty on this story was very high,” Van Natta said on the phone from an ESPN office in Bristol, Connecticut this week. “Most projects I take on are difficult. It’s just the nature of this kind of work. But even by that standard, this was a particularly difficult one because a lot of people were not motivated to talk, obviously.”

Wickersham described working with Van Natta as an accelerated master class in investigative reporting. Here are some of the best lessons, told through their experiences on this story.

FINDING SOURCES

In May, right after the NFL released its arguable Wells Report, Van Natta and Wickersham began reporting a story that would focus on how Goodell handled Deflategate in relation to Spygate. The reporters compiled list of potential sources, ordered by the likelihood they’d talk to one of them. The odds weren’t good for many, because the NFL is an institution ruled by omertà.

The reporters knocked on doors, but “people were scared,” Wickersham said. They made phone calls, many of which proved fruitless.

Wickersham said a typical day included calls to 15 sources...

- 13 of them wouldn’t respond or talk.
- 1 would talk off the record but lie.
- 1 would talk off the record and, Wickersham said, “maybe say one interesting detail that you needed to try to follow up and get other people to confirm, and you have no idea how to get those people.”

Wickersham and Van Natta estimated they each tried 100 people who wouldn’t play ball.
They had to find sources with a reason to spill — whether it be a desire to share the truth or an axe to grind with the Patriots or NFL. Often, a complicit source would provide another name the reporters should try. Ultimately, Wickersham and Van Natta combined to interview 90 people.

BUILDING TRUST

When trying to build trust with sources, visiting someone in person, rather than relying on a phone conversation, can lead to pay dirt.

Van Natta flew from Miami to Idaho to spend a day with former St. Louis Rams coach Mike Martz, whose Rams lost to the Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVI and were never the same again. In a cabin in the mountains, Martz delivered what would become some of the most memorable moments in the ESPN story, including Goodell begging Martz to write a statement that would help exonerate the league.

"It makes all the difference in these types of stories," Van Natta said of in-person visits. "It's to earn their trust. And when you see somebody, it's a lot easier to earn their trust than if you just do it over the phone."

Van Natta went to Idaho prepared, too. Wickersham said his partner brought a key document to Martz that allowed Martz to strongly dispute the content of it.

Of course, not every news outlet affords its reporters the time and resources to travel the country in search of golden nuggets. When he must settle for a phone call, Van Natta said he keeps a conversational tone that can comfort his sources.

“A lot of investigative reporters are kind of ballbusters and they don’t have the best social skills, but they’re really dogged bulldogs,” Wickersham said. “Don is a rare combination of a lot of things. He applies the human techniques that you would want to apply in a profile to investigative reporting.”

Those techniques are thinking long-term and treating sources with dignity. You never know when you’ll need that source again down the line.

DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS

Another feature-style technique of Van Natta’s is mining for details.
Van Natta will abandon his conversational tone to pepper someone with questions about details, which he said “add a credibility and authenticity to writing.”

If someone mentions being in a car, he’ll ask for the make, model and color. If someone mentions the destruction of video tapes, he’ll include a vivid scene of NFL executives in a conference room stomping the tapes into small pieces.

**CLEAN THE SPOTS OTHERS MISSED**

This wasn’t the first time Van Natta tried to report about Spygate. He was stonewalled in the past, but remained ready for a potential story.

He kept hundreds files on his computer and would look at them “when he was bored,” Wickersham suspects.

A breakthrough in this story was acquiring key files from the Arlen Spector archives at the University of Pittsburgh. Details from those public files had never been reported, simply because no other reporter bothered.

“Investigative reporting is going back over the things the first people reporting didn't have time to do,” Wickersham said.

**BE BULLETPROOF**

Van Natta’s reputation is important to him. Whose isn’t?

But in the big-stakes arena of investigative reporting, it’s vital to protect that reputation.

He uses off-the-record sources (people who provide information that’s not for publication) to confirm what other sources say, or to make information what he calls “bulletproof.”

Even if the story is as bulletproof as a bank vault, readers will criticize investigative work (especially if they’re Patriots fans).

Wickersham, when we spoke Friday afternoon, was frustrated not by fans’ skepticism — which was expected — but by the disbelief of Boston media people.
Turns out, to do investigative reporting your skin must be bulletproof, too.

“There’s a reason why a lot of people don’t do investigative reporting,” Wickersham said. “Because it’s incredibly challenging, your reporting has to be unassailable, and then when you’re done with it, everybody just calls you an asshole.”

September 15, 2015 — Layoffs, Schmayoffs, Patrick Stevens keeps working

When the Washington Times wiped out its sports department at the end of 2009, Patrick Stevens, newly unemployed, went to work the next day.

He’d been covering college sports, and didn’t see any reason to stop. So he started a blog and continued to write about D.C.-area basketball programs in his well-researched (and sometimes snarky) style.

"There didn’t seem like much of a reason to slow down at that point," Stevens said. "Basketball season is kind of my bread and butter, and I really didn’t want to disappear off the face of the Earth — thought that wouldn’t have been a very good idea, and I think that that’s a theme that’s continued through each of these."

By each of these, he means layoffs. All three of them.

After losing his job at the Times, Stevens copyedited for the Washington Post until the Times revitalized its sports department and rehired him 14 months later. It wasn’t long before another round of layoffs sliced the staff in half. Stevens was a casualty again.

He found part-time work projecting the NCAA Tournament brackets for USA TODAY. A lesser-known Joe Lunardi, he correctly predicted all 68 teams in the 2013 field. Syracuse.com hired him to cover the ACC, and he correctly predicted the brackets again in 2014.

“The thought that producing projected brackets has helped pay the bills here for a few years, I mean, God Bless America, right,” Stevens said.
But it won’t pay the bills forever. There wasn’t enough interest in ACC coverage for the Syracuse Media Group to justify keeping him.

At the end of August, his position was cut, making Stevens, once again, a "media free agent," as he calls himself on Twitter.

Sadly, layoffs at newspapers happen with great frequency these days. The Los Angeles Times appears to be the latest outfit to shred its payroll. Many in the industry are reconsidering their careers.

For the past six years, Stevens has pondered other career options, too. But he’s yet to find a palatable alternative. “That’s probably why I keep knocking on the door I keep knocking on,” he said.

He’s somewhat limited by where he can work. Stevens bought a house in 2005 in Glen Burnie, Maryland, and he doesn’t want to move. (It would be burdensome to relocate the 15 shelves-worth of media guides Stevens has in his home office, yet there are bigger reasons he opposes a move.)

Stevens has been able to deal with a fickle career partly because he doesn’t have a wife or kids who depend on him financially. For this reason and others, Stevens doesn’t see himself as an exemplar of a journalist who weathers layoffs. Certainly, each person’s life circumstances must dictate the path they take when faced with a proverbial pink slip.

Still, Stevens’ resilience — he calls it stubbornness — is instructive to those in similar spots. That he continues working despite being unemployed is a smart move for several reasons.

The first is inertia: An object at rest stays at rest; an object in motion stays in motion. If Stevens stopped, it would be that much harder to start back up again. So he stays in motion.

Another reason to keep working is to stay sane. "It was better for me, and I knew it would be better for me to be around people than to be sitting home alone," Stevens said of the first two times he was laid off.
Also, working without a paycheck shows Stevens’ dedication to the job. It keeps him relevant, too. Potential employers have him on their radar because he’s constantly producing content.

It didn’t take long for Stevens to land part-time work after he was let go two weeks ago. This college football season, he’ll be writing a couple of web pieces a week for The Washington Post.

Stevens is a known commodity because he never stops producing content.

“I’m not sure this is a path that anyone would want to replicate,” Stevens said. “I’m not sure there’s much that anyone would take from it. But I’m just trying to hang on and see what comes next of it.”

September 17, 2015 — Assessing access in the SEC

Bob Holt remembers the early-80s fondly. When Holt began covering the Arkansas football program in 1981, Lou Holtz was the coach and media access was practically unrestricted — at least compared to today’s limited and controlled arrangements across the country.

Every practice was open to the media. When practice ended, a reporter “just grabbed whoever we wanted to talk to that day,” Holt said. Assistant coaches talked to media when they left the locker room. After games, the locker room was open. Reporters could even go inside the training room to get an injury report during the week.

“On summation, we got who we wanted, when we wanted them for as long as we wanted them,” Holt said.

In 30-plus years, teams’ relationship with media members has obviously changed. Just how much?

To get an extensive picture of the challenges reporters confront in covering college football today, I polled reporters from 12 of the 14 SEC teams (media members from Ole Miss and Texas A&M did not fulfill multiple requests).
They answered questions about access, restrictions, treatment compared to national outlets, and relationships with PR people.

Below are some of my questions and their responses. Some answers are shortened or omitted. Some (ones without direct quotes) are paraphrased.

**The Panel**

*Aaron Suttles*, The Tuscaloosa News (Alabama)

*Bob Holt*, Arkansas Democrat Gazette (Arkansas)

*James Crepea*, Alabama Media Group (Auburn)

*Robbie Andreu*, Gainesville Sun (Florida)

*Seth Emerson*, Atlanta Journal Constitution; (Georgia)

*Ross Dellenger*, The Advocate (LSU)

*Kyle Tucker*, The Courier-Journal (Kentucky)

*Dave Matter*, St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

*Michael Bonner*, Clarion Ledger (Mississippi State)

*Josh Kendall*, The State (South Carolina)

*Dustin Dopirak*, Knoxville News-Sentinel (Tennessee)

*Adam Sparks*, The Tennessean (Vanderbilt)

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If you wanted to write a story about a player, how confident are you that you can get 10-15 minutes for an interview?

*Emerson (Georgia)*: “Somewhat.”

*Tucker (Kentucky)*: “Very.”
Crepea (Auburn): “Absolutely no chance this will happen.”

Suttles (Alabama): “This is a chip you can play at best twice a season.” [Suttles said the most access he’s received for a story in the past year was 10-12 minutes with Landon Collins and T.J. Yeldon].

Holt (Arkansas): “I’ve had some situations where I was able to get a one-on-one with a player during the season, but that’s usually if it’s a player who other media aren’t interested in talking with at that time.”

Bonner (Mississippi State): “I’d be pretty confident. Every time I’ve explained the idea and story to the SIDs, they’ve been more than willing to arrange the time.”

Kendall (South Carolina): “Not at all. I’ve had one true one-on-one since I’ve been here (five years), and it turned out to be a great story because it’s a way better interview format.”

Dopirak (Tennessee): “Last year, answer was not at all. This year, answer is much more, but I understand the timeline is longer and there are no guarantees. [Tennessee has a new media relations director]. I have, I think, four standing requests for one-on-ones. If I get two of those I’ll be ecstatic.”

Can you set up interviews with athletes directly?

Nobody in the SEC is permitted to do so, but sometimes media members try if a player is suspended or has transferred. In many cases, athletes are trained to not answer media requests. It wasn’t always this way.

Holt (Arkansas): “Believe it or not, in the 1980s, they used to put players’ home numbers in the media guide bios.”

How many opportunities each week do you get to talk to the head coach?

Georgia’s Mark Richt is the most frequently accessible, according to reporters' responses. He’s available four times a week: Tuesday and Wednesday, after games
on Saturday, and then Sunday night on a teleconference. Other coaches around the
league are available two or three times a week, including their Wednesday SEC
teleconference appearance.

**How much practice do you get to watch?**

Fall practices are completely closed at most places, but again, Georgia proves to be
most accessible (at least for a little while). On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, reporters
are permitted to watch 12-15 minutes of practice, Emerson said. Tennessee lets
reporters into fall practice, allowing them to come on Tuesdays. Florida grants its
reporters access twice a week, but only for six minutes.

Most of the other schools allow sporadic access during preseason and spring camp.
What reporters see is mostly stretching.

Missouri provides access to the team’s intrasquad scrimmages, but little more than
stretching on other preseason days.

Sparks at Vanderbilt can take in five practices during both fall and spring camps, but
nothing during the season. He covered mid-major Middle Tennessee for 10 years,
and said all practices were open.

**Are there restrictions on what you can cover or who you can speak to?**

True freshmen don’t talk to media at Florida or Alabama. At Auburn, freshman
come available once they’ve played in a game. At Mississippi State, freshman
aren’t allowed to speak to the media until they’ve contributed enough. “The
modifier is determined by the coaching staff and SID,” Bonner said.

Meanwhile, at Arkansas, freshmen do interviews right away. Each summer Holt
writes a series on the Razorbacks’ newcomers, and he gets assistance from the
school in arranging those interviews.
At South Carolina, Kendall said, it’s Steve Spurrier’s call — and it’s subject to change. “He lets freshmen talk but he might not let a senior talk if he’s upset with the player or thinks the player will say something he doesn't want said.”

At Georgia, “a lot of players are kept off limits for unexplained reasons, or because the coaches have deemed them too talkative,” Emerson said.

Sparks said a quarterback competition at Vanderbilt this preseason made the potential QBs unavailable for comment.

Schools also try to restrict reporters from writing about certain things they see at practice. These policies vary in formality.

“According to the team's media policy, reporters are prohibited from writing about the content of practice: injuries, depth changes, strategies, etc.,” Matter said about Missouri.

At Tennessee, “We can't put out anything until the practice is over,” Dopirak said. “We can't report on schematics. We can point out who is practicing with the first team and second team, but we can't report anything that gives away a formation. For instance, if a fullback only comes out in a certain package, we can't put that out there. As far as injuries are concerned and players that are missing practice, we can't report those until we at least ask about it after practice.”

If you called the head coach, what are the odds he'd answer or respond?

Dellenger (LSU): “50-to-1”

Suttles (Alabama): “No shot”

Tucker (Kentucky): “Very good.”

Matter (Missouri): “Most likely I would contact him via text message first. Whether or not he’d agree to talk, on or off the record, would depend on the subject matter. Most likely he’d refer me to his media relations staff.”
Bonner (Mississippi State): “It depends on the topic. At first, the odds were zero. However, as I gained experience and trust on the beat, the odds are pretty good now.”

Kendall (South Carolina): “I can usually get Spurrier on his cell if I need him, but I imagine that puts me in the minority.”

Sparks (Vanderbilt): “There’s a decent chance he would answer, but it would probably depend on the perceived reason for the call.”

Does the program give preferential treatment to national media?

Suttles (Alabama): “Yes. ESPN often gets access regular beat reporters do not.”

Andreu (Florida): ESPN and SEC Network “seem to get one-on-ones with whoever they want.”

Tucker (Kentucky): Tucker said it doesn’t happen for Kentucky football. “This is much different with UK basketball, though.”

Dopirak (Tennessee): “When the national guys show up, they get the red carpet. One-on-one with [coach Butch] Jones plus any player he wants to talk to. Holly Rowe got to go to a class with Josh Dobbs. Not sure if I could’ve done that or not but I doubt it.” Dopirak said that national media members don’t get to watch more practice, though.

Holt (Arkansas): “The schools know the local media are going to cover the team no matter what, so they’re going to roll out the red carpet for the national guys. I’m not saying they don’t treat us well or don’t try their best to help us (I believe they do), but the national guys are going to get special treatment — especially ESPN, which with the SEC Network is a business partner of the SEC. That’s just a fact of life these days.”

Reporters from Georgia, LSU and Mississippi State said they get fair treatment compared to national outlets.
**Kendall (South Carolina):** “[Spurrier] is an old school newspaper guy, God bless him, and from my perspective as the beat writer at the largest local paper, that's great. From that perspective, I have it better than any beat writer in the country.”

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**In three adjectives, describe your relationship with media relations.**

**Suttles (Alabama):** “Adversarial, conflicting, cordial.”

**Tucker (Kentucky):** “Cordial, professional, helpful.”

**Andreu (Florida):** “Decent, disappointing, frustrating.”

**Crepea (Auburn):** “Strained. Concurrently miserable. At times, contentious.”

**Emerson (Georgia):** “Good. Sympathetic. Helpful.”

**Bonner (Mississippi State):** “Respectful, friendly, professional.”

**Dopirak (Tennessee):** “Improving. Increasingly collegial. Less than perfect.”

**Sparks (Vanderbilt):** “Trusting, helpful, fair.”

**Holt (Arkansas):** “Friendly, respectful, professional.”

**Matter (Missouri):** “Congenial, professional, respectful.”

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**How satisfied are you with access?**

**Andreu (Florida):** “Not satisfied at all. With all this group stuff everybody gets the same thing. With social media, it's all out there right away, so if you're trying to put something together for later in the week, the quotes are stale by the time you run your story.”

**Matter (Missouri):** “The restricted access makes it difficult to write original stories or get 1-on-1 time with players or coaches because only a limited number are available each day. More reporters cover the team now also, which means bigger
crowds around players and fewer interesting interviews.... [On the flip side] Having access to the assistant coaches is vital.”

**Crepea (Auburn):** “Player access has steadily worsened. We haven’t been formally asked by an SID who we would like to talk to, other than after a game, in over two years, though I submit requests which almost always go unfulfilled. I’ve submitted as many as 20 names before and not gotten 1 player from my list. We routinely aren’t informed the players we will be speaking to until the moment they walk into the room, so planning/budgeting is impossible. The only times I’ve had 1-on-1s with a player were if I followed them out of a group interview. We conduct all interviews in an auditorium with the players at a podium, which is not conducive to asking questions of a more personal nature.”

**Emerson (Georgia):** “Overall dissatisfied” because coaches and players are talking less and less to the media.”

**Bonner (Mississippi State):** “I’m very satisfied. As I said, certainly no complaints regarding access to players and coaches.”

**Kendall (South Carolina):** “I think as writers, we always want more access. I have the opportunity to get most of the team’s players and coaches once a week. I have the opportunity to get most of the team’s players and coaches once a week, which is enough to do my job. It’s very much on their schedule, though, so our coverage plans have to be dictated by the access schedule.”

**Dopirak (Tennessee):** “Moderately. ...I spent five years covering Indiana football and basketball and I covered football at Penn State when I was in college. I’ve come to the realization that I will never be happy with access as long as I cover major college sports.”

**Holt (Arkansas):** “Given today’s limitations that I think are a fact of life with every major college team — and a lot other teams, too — I think Arkansas does a pretty good job as far as opening some practices, setting up interviews. We get to talk to assistant coaches during the week, and a lot of schools don’t allow the assistant coaches to talk, so that’s a big deal.”
**Suttles (Alabama):** “Access is only OK. All player interviews are conducted in a group setting, no one-on-ones. Only certain players are brought in to the media room. Assistant coaches are off limits.”

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**Miscellaneous tidbits**

Andreu has been covering Florida football since 1993. “When Steve Spurrier was here, the access was unbelievable,” he said. “You could request any player you wanted for after practice and would have a one-on-one with him if no one else requested him. We also were free to talk to all the assistant coaches, which allowed reporters to create a relationship with them. Now, there are no one-on-one interviews, basically. All group stuff.”

Now at South Carolina, the Ol’ Ball Coach is still pleasant to work with. “Spurrier sets his own schedule,” Kendall said. “He has spoken after all but one practice this season. I am betting that he has been available more than any head coach in the country this year, which is great.”

The change in head coach at Missouri in 2001 drastically changed access there, too. During the Larry Smith era, all spring and preseason practices and most regular-season ones were open to the media, Matter said. There used to be weekly luncheons with the coach where they could chat off the record. When Gary Pinkel took over, this type of access was stripped.

At Georgia, Emerson got increased access when he wrote about something “close to the coach’s heart — on how he set up a network for his former players as they go into the business world — he sat down with me for a half hour, and gave me numbers of some other people to contact for the story.”

It’s seldom, but sometimes SEC players open up their lives to reporters, too.

“I was able to go into the players’ film room with quarterback Dak Prescott, hook a PS3 up to the wall-sized screens and allow Prescott to break down game-situations using the video game,” Bonner said. We filmed it and made a feature out of it. It took about 30-45 minutes to tape.”
September 21, 2015 — Meet the editor behind Wright Thompson's stories

Wright Thompson has received plenty of praise for his story about New Orleans, which nearly filled an entire edition of ESPN The Magazine. Titled Beyond the Breach, it’s a landmark piece of journalism because of its intimate reporting of characters and place, and also because of the way the mag played it.

It’s rare that a reporter does interviews after a feature story (usually that happens following breaking news), but Thompson appeared on a gamut of ESPN platforms to discuss the story — SportsCenter, the His & Hers podcast and ESPN Front Row.

In that last link, you’ll notice an editor named Paul Kix, a man with perhaps the most thankless job of all: Cut 15,000 words out of a story by one of the most distinguished sports writers on the planet.

It took "almost every waking moment” of two weeks to execute properly, Kix said last week as we discussed his behind-the-scenes role in making Thompson’s story happen.

Kix helped turn a 40,000-word draft into a more streamlined 25K. He made a third of a beautifully written story go poof for the sake of concision.

Through four edits, he used an axe, a butcher knife, a scalpel and eventually a polisher.

Kix knew Thompson would bring the goods. "I also knew that this thing was going to be a beast to tame," he said, "because the schedule was so tight and so unrelenting, that I knew once it actually kicked in, it was going to be painful."

To tell the story behind this story, let’s flash back to early May, when ESPN published Thompson's feature on Ted Williams’ daughter — a piece also edited by Kix. It took 13 drafts before that story was ready, and when it was done, Kix told Thompson it was the best thing he’s ever written. They toasted themselves, Kix said, and then planned to get some rest.
But by the weekend, Thompson already had another story he wanted to write — about a top-rated football prospect out of New Orleans. After pitching it to magazine editor in chief Chad Millman, the seedling of a story turned into a far greater project on New Orleans, 10 years after the storm.

While Thompson has proven throughout his career that he can handle stories of great magnitude, logistically, this one would require another level of attention.

Enter Kix.

Some people outside the industry assume an editor just edits words and sentences. The term "editor," truthfully, is quite limiting. Sure, Kix eventually edited the story for content and clarity, but so much more goes into the job, especially for a project like this.

He participated in several meetings with ESPN higher-ups to determine a strategy for producing and unveiling the whole project. And leading up to the time when Kix received a full draft, he was right alongside Thompson, riding shotgun to his thinking.

Kix visited New Orleans in June, and the two mapped out an outline of the story.

An important process for Kix was finding "connective tissue" between the characters Thompson was writing about. Having the characters interact organically, rather than Thompson stretching to make connections, would enrich the story. Thompson's reporting was so full of connections already that it didn't need a writer manufacturing them.

Thompson finished his reporting on July 1 and then disappeared to Chicago for four days for a Grateful Dead concert. With an August 1 deadline looming, he began writing in mid-July. In 16 days or so, Thompson wrote 40,000 words.

...Which makes Kix's job, to edit it in two weeks, sound easy. But reading 40,000 words — let alone reading it as carefully as an editor must — takes time.

Kix said his initial read lasted six or seven hours.
"The only way for me to work is just read the story once," he said. "Then I sort of think to myself, 'How does this 'taste,' I guess, for lack of a better word. How do I feel when I read it? Am I satisfied with this? Are there things I wish there were more of? This isn't really even an intellectual exercise at that point; it's 'How do I feel emotionally,' having finished this story?"

After four or five days, Kix sent his first round of edits back to Thompson.

"The second time you read it, you think, 'Alright, this is 40,000 words.' The both of us knew that was way too long," Kix said. "So the second time you read it, it's like 'What is not working?' And it becomes more of an intellectual exercise."

They cut an entire chapter, including the one Thompson initially pitched about the football prospect.

Kix described the process of editing the self-assured Thompson as playful and argumentative. The two have worked together for four years, and have developed a trust and short-hand language. They can also sift through the B.S. and say what they think without hurting one another's feelings.

"Every story with Wright is a complete give-and-take," Kix said. "I will give him an edit and he'll come right back and say 'Why did you think that? Why did you do that?' Or he'll say 'You're stupid here.' Or he'll say 'That's a dumb suggestion.'"

Kix says this wistfully. Working with Thompson, while not easy, is something Kix savors.

Thompson's story was worth it. It shows how a battered New Orleans has recovered, and in some ways, how it and its inhabitants will always be different post-Katrina.

Each chapter brought forth compelling new characters that made it read like a novel.

It's powerful, coming from a writer who clearly feels a kinship with the city. You feel Thompson's presence in the story. Maybe, if you read it again, you'll feel Kix's.

He's the one who made all those "dumb" suggestions.
September 23, 2015 — For Bishop, an outline is a map to a good story

After Greg Bishop finishes reporting, and before he starts drafting, the Sports Illustrated football writer does this...

If his notebook looks like the work of a Beautiful Mind, well, it is mathematical in a way. It’s Bishop’s formula for magazine-length features. He calls it “pre-outlining.”

To gather his thoughts to write a story with arc, Bishop goes through a now-trusty process, which includes an entire day spent outlining.

For his most recent magazine piece on Aaron Rodgers, Bishop conducted 30 interviews and accumulated 83 pages of notes and transcriptions. He read through those notes and organized them into themes, which you can see on the notepad.

There was a theme on Rodgers’ privacy, one on his training regimen. One on his evolution, and another on the skills that makes him such a good player.

This process helps Bishop connect the dots for a larger picture of an athlete like Rodgers, who’s received plenty of media attention in his career.

“If the page is pretty blank, you’re in trouble,” Bishop said.

Bishop’s, clearly, is plenty full. It doesn’t always work out this way, but the themes on the notepad eventually became sections of his story.

For Bishop, after outlining, the writing process takes half the time it used to for him because he’s so prepared when it comes to actually typing out the story.

After graduating from Syracuse in 2002, Bishop worked at the Seattle Times for five years.

Bishop didn’t outline early in his career. He said he used more flowery language “that covered up some pretty serious deficiencies” in storytelling.
When he took a job at the New York Times, he knew he needed to step up as a writer.

“I can’t believe I actually had like a five-year career where I didn’t outline,” said Bishop, who’s been at Sports Illustrated close to two years. “It sounds almost reckless to me now. I think it’s the most important thing I do; everything else follows it. It becomes more like a mathematical kind of thing, rather than ‘I’m a writer and I’m going to pull my hair out for eight hours.’”

September 29, 2015 — Justin Heckert’s LeGrand story shows effective use of second-person POV

Justin Heckert wanted to write about "the real shit."

That’s how former football player Eric LeGrand — paralyzed after a freak injury at Rutgers — describes what’s truly going on in his life. Questions like "How's rehab going," are general and boring.

But the real shit? That's what we're all curious about.

What's life like for a 25-year-old who talks about women but can't enjoy sex?

How do you use the bathroom?

That’s the real shit.

Heckert found out what it’s like to be Eric LeGrand after spending four days with the former player and his mother.

Sometimes, when LeGrand explained his situation, he spoke in second person. You do this. You do that.

Heckert thought it might be smart telling LeGrand's story that way, too.

He wanted the reader to be able to see life as LeGrand, even if they couldn't literally feel it.
Writing in second person and capturing the real shit were ways to differentiate Heckert's story from others on LeGrand.

"I just thought that the realer I could make it — good and bad — would be true to what he's experiencing," Heckert said.

Second-person (putting the reader in the place of a subject by using the pronoun "you") doesn’t always sound natural. It can seem forced.

Heckert, a skilled freelancer, used the right touch.

The reason Heckert believes it works for his story is because the reporting is there. He spent four entire days with LeGrand and got an intimate look his life.

"There's no suppositional second person of me imagining," Heckert said. "I'm asking him what every bit of this is like that I wrote about. So it's really from his perspective, but it's just switched to second-person. None of it is me imposing something on him."

(Heckert has tried suppositional second-person before. When he was at the University of Missouri, he wrote a magazine story from the perspective of two dogs he watched for days).

With LeGrand, conversation was easy. Heckert felt as comfortable with him as he has any other source in his 13-year career. That also gave him confidence to take the strategy he did.

The story was actually supposed to appear in Esquire, but the editor-and-chief did not want it to run. Esquire gave Heckert a second crack at it, and he wrote it in the more common third person.

His new lede: "Eric LeGrand wanted to watch football. But he couldn't turn on the TV. That was because of football. He was in the hallway that led to his bedroom, a nylon jacket zipped up to his neck."

Still, Esquire didn't want it.
So Heckert presented both efforts to ESPN The Magazine, where he used to be on contract before leaving in 2010 to pursue non-sports stories.

ESPN chose the original, in second-person point of view.

Here's the lede we all got to see:

**IT'S YOUR NOSE** this time. You try to do what you can for it, sitting alone in your bedroom, arms resting on each side of a $40,000 wheelchair. You are parked beneath a giant TV, watching football. You scrunch your eyes and flex your cheeks, wriggle each nostril, stretch your mouth, until your entire face is dancing. But the itch won't go away, so you call out to your ma for the third time in the past hour.

"MAAAAAA!"

**October 1, 2015 — Mark’s Picks (September)**

My September picks include stories about football, tennis, baseball, baseball cards, basketball and basketball logos. The topics and approaches differ. But for the most part, these stories stand out because of the access acquired by the reporters.

Enjoy some of the best work from the past month.

*A day on the bubble with Packers’ Alonzo Harris, by Michael Cohen*

Leading up to the moment when NFL teams trimmed rosters to a final 53, Cohen got access to Packers running back Alonzo Harris and his family as they waited in conference room for Harris’ fate. Cohen uses a good mix of information and descriptive scene writing.

Harris, a burly 6 feet 1 inch and 235 pounds, with an inviting smile and laid-back personality reflective of his Alabama roots, is uncharacteristically fidgety, anxious. His tongue flicks back and forth on a series of mint candies. His eyes, glassy and low, suggest a lack of sleep even before Harris admits he went to bed around 4 a.m., a mere 60 minutes from his typical waking hour during training camp.

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*The definitive NBA logo rankings, by Zach Lowe*
You’ve seen this type of “journalism” everywhere: a writer ranks the 30 logos of NBA teams. The Bulls’ logo is the best. The Thunder’s is the worst. But what did we learn?

Actually, in this piece, a lot. Instead of producing a lazy clickbait slideshow, Lowe researches each logo and includes expertise from various designers. Sure the rankings are subjective, but they’re also informational and thought-provoking.

In one inning, Nationals’ bullpen delivers a tough truth and tougher consequences, by Barry Svrluga

Savvy deadline writing from Barry Svrluga, especially considering this game changed so drastically in the late innings (when the Nationals blew a 7-1 lead in the seventh). The story puts entire season in perspective after a game that served as a microcosm. And that was even before the team’s closer choked its superstar outfielder.

The engineering of 15-year-old Josh McKenzie, by Matthew Stanmyre

Matthew Stanmyre followed a 15-year-old super-athlete for more than a year to see how his circle has groomed him to eventually become a professional. The top football player and wrestler in his age group, this teen appears worthy of the hype, but Stanmyre isn’t blind to the perils of big expectations for a kid with such preternatural abilities and maturity.

What the world got wrong about Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, by Jay Caspian Kang

Jay Caspian King probably knew he’d get little few quote-worthy sound bites from interviewing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who’s notoriously closed off to the media. So he did extensive research, spent a day with his subject and didn’t use a quote from Abdul-Jabbar until the final six paragraphs of this entertaining magazine
story. Abdul-Jabbar is a well-documented character, and this piece still reveals new information about the basketball legend.

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**Tim Wallach fan has a real house of cards, by Zach Helfand**

This is the type of absurd story that's fun to read no matter your sports allegiances. There exists a Tim Wallach baseball card collector — somebody who worships a career .257 and is trying to do what he knows is impossible: collect every card ever printed of Tim Wallach. The writer, Zach Helfand doesn't have to take the story too seriously because the collector and his wife don't really, either.

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**The night Kansas City baseball came back to life, by Andy McCullough**

Andy McCullough relives the Royals’ wild-card playoff win from last year. Waiting a year and allowing the dust to settle provides an opportunity for key sources to speak with perspective. Any Royals fan will read this story, considering all the happy memories it brings back.

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**For Red Sox broadcaster Don Orsillo, a moving goodbye, by Gordon Edes**

In a Red Sox season that’s long been over, the most important story Sunday wasn’t the game. ESPN Boston’s Gordon Edes instead tailed play-by-play announcer Don Orsillo, whose station controversially released him, effective the end of this season. It’s a day in the life of Orsillo — a very special day.

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**Rocky Perone’s quest to play pro ball was just the start of his wild tale, by Chris Ballard**

This story is, as the writer describes it, “part Sidd Finch and part *Catch Me if You Can.*”
It begins mysteriously and reveals just enough to keep the on the edge. Eventually, we learn of a complex baseball man who’d do anything to stay in the game.

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**The audacity of Peyton Manning, by Kevin Van Valkenburg**

What haven't reporters written about Peyton Manning? Kevin Van Valkenburg finds something — the painful process of the 39-year-old quarterback removing his equipment after a game. The lede works because its so visual with adjectives and verbs: “His socks come off after several violent tugs, revealing toes that are twisted and bent into obtuse angles.” Much of the story covers topics often discussed about Manning, but the imagery at the top makes this piece memorable.

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*See a story you love in October? Let me know at markrselig@gmail.com.*

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**October 5, 2015 — What’s that in Gay Talese’s pocket?**

Frank Sinatra had a cold and Gay Talese had a story. But only after he had an outline.

Two weeks ago Sports Illustrated's Greg Bishop shared his outlining strategies with the blog. Successful narrative journalism is often the result of a dedicated outline that organizes ideas.

This was true, even in the 1960s.

In reference to Bishop's lessons on outlining, the New York Times' Jim Luttrell passed along these photos. They show Talese's outline for his famous Esquire piece, *Frank Sinatra Has a Cold*, widely considered one of the greatest profiles ever written.

Talese, a Times alum, once visited some members of the newspaper and talked about his craft.
"He also showed us some of the notes he took while reporting," Luttrell said. "He cuts up cardboard from new shirts because they fit neatly in the inside pocket of his suit jacket."

A smart note-taking process must have been essential for Talese, whose story on Sinatra is transcendent in part because it was filled with observations rather than interviews.

October 6, 2015 — The Best American Sports Writing series and the editor behind it

As of today, The 2015 Best American Sports Writing paperback is available on Amazon, which means writers ranging from aspiring to accomplished now have new material on their reading lists.

I’ve bought the book annually since the early 2000s, and always wondered what goes into its making. Wonder no longer. The series editor, Glenn Stout, explained the process last month.

Stout, who lives on Lake Champlain in Vermont, reads voraciously, often while using an elliptical machine. Sometimes, he'll read just the beginning and end of a story, and if he’s still engaged, finish the rest.

He chooses 75 stories to nominate to the edition's guest editor, this year Wright Thompson.

Stout sends each story as a word document without the author’s name or publication, though that’s easy enough to find. The guest editor is welcome to choose stories Stout has not nominated.

"I just try to pick stories that I want to read again," Stout said of his philosophy.

There's a certain literary aspect to the work Stout chooses. Some sportswriters — notably Bob Ryan — have commented about the lack of deadline newspaper work in the book series. Those writers who have registered gripes fail to understand the mission of the book series, Stout said.
"From the very beginning, this book has been Best Sports Writing. Two words. Writing about sports. Not sportswriting," Stout said. "Those are two different things. There's an overlap. But they're two different things."

Stout says there’s a wider definition to sports [space] writing, which opens the series to more material than strictly what you’d see in a daily newspaper. In the 2015 entries, you’ll find just one story from a newspaper (a feature by Tim Graham of the Buffalo News).


"The variety of work being done now is really unparalleled," Stout said. "This genre was dominated by newspaper people writing takeouts, and magazine people. You had to be in the club. Now, with the proliferation of the web, there are so many places to write, there’s such an excitement for writers and readers. People are so inventive now."

Who’s Stout?

A longtime freelance writer, Stout now edits the acclaimed Longform section of SB Nation.

Stories from Stout’s section have appeared on this blog multiple times. They’re typically vivid with description, deeply reported and written like mini novels.

"Our goal is to write something that’s good enough for the Best American book," said Stout, whose stories are eligible for his book. "Let’s try. We won’t always get there.

"Often people aren’t asked to do their best work. They’re just asked to do work."

While Stout wants the best out of his writers, those who work with him characterize his editing style as collaborative.
"I don’t want to say he’s a fatherly figure so much as a buddy who knows what you’re going for and how to get you there," said Rick Paulus, whose story titled *The Bat Doctor Is In* appeared on SB Nation this summer.

"...He’s a literary dork in a good way."

Stout might go back and forth with edits eight to 10 times. He’s looking first for reporting, structure and narrative arc. Then, when that’s up to standard, he begins tinkering with what he calls "the good stuff" — the shape of the story and the sound each word makes.

Every story has its own language, he said. A 2013 feature on late NASCAR driver *Dick Trickle*, for instance, needed to consist only of words that Trickle might say — words that keep the reader in the place and feel of the story.

"I think that last step," Stout said, "is what can take a story that is otherwise fine but eminently forgettable, and turn it into something that’s memorable, that can be shared, and when you finish it, you turn to somebody else and say 'You have to read this. That’s the goal."

**October 12, 2015 — Interactive journalism executed well**

Last month, with the U.S. Open tennis tournament beginning, the New York Times opened its readers to worlds they’ve never seen or even realized exist.

This Times’ interactive story shows where the world’s best tennis players first learned to play, and blows up the perception that everyone in the sport was a financially privileged kid practicing on manicured courts.

“They’re all showcased at these pristine venues,” sports editor Jason Stallman said of how tennis players are shown during television broadcasts. “We wanted to take readers back to where some of the top players came from, those places that bear little resemblance to Wimbledon, Roland Garros, Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, etc.”
The project features videos of eight courts where current tennis pros began playing as kids. A 1- or 2-minute audio interview accompanies each video.

It’s one thing to describe the Compton courts where Venus and Serena Williams first hammered forehands. It’s another to see kids playing on it today, while Isha Price, the Williams sisters’ sister, explains what Venus and Serena learned there.

“We are always trying to find smart new ways to tell stories and convey information, to exploit the possibilities offered by digital journalism,” Catrin Einhorn, a multimedia reporter who worked on the project, wrote in an email discussing the project. “Steve Duenes, who runs graphics, came up with the idea. A couple years ago, he saw an image of a court in Compton where Venus and Serena Williams played as children, and ever since he’s been looking for a way to get back to it. We liked the idea of bringing people to courts around the world and letting them compare the courts visually, with audio of someone who remembered the player as a child providing the context.”

Tapping friends, family and old coaches to rather than interviewing the players directly was smart journalism. It offered better perspective and provided anecdotes a pro wouldn’t think to or want to reveal (one player clutched a stuffed animal while she first played).

“Ask yourself what you were like at age 4 or 5,” Einhorn said. “Now ask your mom or uncle or a really important teacher. They probably have a lot more insight.”

The project took a month to complete, according to Einhorn, who was one of eight staff members working on it. The Times also used freelancers to help capture video and audio across the globe. The project featured courts from Serbia, Scotland, Venezuela to Switzerland, Japan, India, Russia and America.

To keep each story consistent, Einhorn created a list of questions covering three themes: the players as children, the evolution of the courts and how the court affected the player.

In 10-15 minutes, we get a global view and experience of tennis and its stars’ roots.
October 16, 2015 — Passan’s story stands out after his trip to the bleachers

Wearing a dress shirt and tie where everybody else dons Cubs jerseys, Jeff Passan didn’t exactly blend in with the fans in the Wrigley Field bleachers. After all, he never expected to be there when he went to work Monday.

But the bleachers — and the people in those jerseys — provided an opportunity for Passan to tell a story that differentiated from those of his peers.

The Cubs bashed a record six home runs in their Game 3 NLDS win over the St. Louis Cardinals. The storyline for any journalist was easy. Passan, who writes columns for Yahoo! Sports tried something different.

“You can write about the six home runs, which everyone did. Or you can cover the six home runs with a twist,” Passan said Friday evening as he drove from his Kansas City home to Kauffman Stadium for Game 1 of the ALCS.

(READ PASSAN’S STORY)

Passan’s twist was interviewing the fans who caught Kris Bryant and Anthony Rizzo’s back-to-back, fifth-inning home run balls — the Cubs’ third and fourth homers of the day. The idea came from a Yahoo! blog editor named Kevin Kaduk. Passan watched replays of the home runs five times apiece and then left the press box to find the landing spots.

As Passan interviewed the man with Bryant’s home run, Cubs outfielder Jorge Soler hit another one in the sixth.

A new story emerged. “I gotta find all of them,” Passan thought.

He went across the bleachers to get the guy in right field who caught Rizzo’s. Then he found the keepers of the shots from Soler, Starlin Castro and Kyle Schwarber.

Surrounding fans shouted “Don’t give it to them!” and “Get tickets to the World Series!” — they thought the overly dressed Passan was a Cubs representative asking for the balls — while Passan asked each ball-bearing fan the same set of questions.
Did you actually catch it, or what was the story behind it ending in your hands? How long have you been a Cubs fan? How deep does your fandom go? Is this the year?

As Passan headed back up to the press box, Dexter Fowler added a sixth home run in the bottom of the eighth inning. One more lucky fan to interview.

After the game ended, Passan went to the Cubs’ clubhouse to chat with players. He’s typically the last reporter out of the clubhouse because, as he said, “The best work can be done when the fewest people are there.”

Or, it turns out, when the most people are there — so long as you’re in the bleachers and the nearby people aren’t other journalists. Leaving the press box is a way to find a different story than the pack. In 2012, Passan made a similar move for a quite different story documenting the emptiness of Yankee Stadium.

“You have to take advantage of things like that,” Passan said.

Taking advantage of Yahoo!’s soft deadline, Passan wrote his Cubs story in three hours and settled on a chronological telling.

It turned out poignant and memorable. And certainly distinct.

October 20, 2015 — If college teams don’t provide access, let’s report without it

Mississippi’s biggest newspaper will stop covering its hometown team until it gets access to players and assistant coaches.

After Jackson State University fired its football coach this month, the interim coach has been the only voice available to media for the last three weeks. It’s his choice, the school says, to restrict access, and that’s what he wants to do in order to keep his players focused. That’s not OK with The Clarion-Ledger, which is located in Jackson, Miss.
“This kind of restriction keeps a reporter from properly doing his or her job,” The Clarion-Ledger sports editor David Bean said in a story announcing the Gannett paper’s decision to move its JSU beat writer onto other coverage.

My two divergent thoughts:

1.) Kudos to The Clarion-Ledger for taking a stand. As journalists we should show solidarity in the fight for access.

2.) Access to a college football team is overrated.

While there’s great merit in journalists pushing for access, and while Jackson State is arrogant to squash interview opportunities, the restrictions shouldn’t handcuff The Clarion-Ledger.

Journalists must use their powers of observation — and more often than not, these observations are more interesting and revealing than tired platitudes from football players.

How many times have you read a story and skipped over the quotes because they’re so predictable and shallow?

Sure, interviewing is about more than gathering quotes. Experienced reporters use these sessions to develop an understanding for a situation, gain background information and verify facts. It’s a bit limiting if a newspaper is blocked from doing this. But it’s not crippling.

One of the best profiles ever written was completed without a single interview of the main character. Gay Talese’s “Frank Sinatra has a Cold” got to the soul of the famous crooner through observation and interviews with Sinatra’s entourage members.

A 50-year-old feature story and contemporary college football coverage aren’t synonymous, but both present strategies one can employ when stonewalled from access.

Want to write about a Jackson State linebacker?
Talk to recent opponents. Talk to family members. Often, tangential sources yield far better information than the people directly involved. If the team doesn’t want to provide context from its own point of view, that’s a missed opportunity for the team.

Antonio Morales, who was hired in July to be the Jackson State/SWAC reporter, said he will cover the Southwestern Athletic Conference game between Mississippi Valley State and host Grambling State this weekend. The Clarion Ledger plans to not send a reporter to Jackson State’s homecoming game against Arkansas Pine Bluff.

Morales didn’t choose to leave his beat, but he understands why his editor wants to deploy him on a game where he can actually talk to players. He sees the restricted access as a lose-lose situation for everybody.

“We’re losing out on the coverage that we had. Fans are losing out on the stories, players are losing out on exposure,” Morales said. “I don’t think this is a winning scenario. Everybody’s losing out on something.”

Once upon a time, athletic programs needed newspapers to remain relevant. Reporters got access because, well, what other option did a team have to be noticed, sell tickets and lure recruits?

Now, every team has its own web page with its own subjective reporting. A program can frame stories however it wants, make players available for in-house promos whenever it wants. With digital marketing tools, a team’s reach often is much larger than the newspaper that covers it (though probably not the case with Jackson State, which is why The Clarion Ledger, which also covers Ole Miss and Mississippi State, has some leverage here).

When I polled Southeastern Conference reporters about their access this summer, most were displeased but resigned to their less-than-ideal situations.

While team sites have the resources to produce and promote flashy content for their fans, traditional journalists convince themselves they’re valuable because they are watchdogs who disseminate the truth, without spin.

And they can be, with or without access to players and coaches who provide perfunctory quotes about focusing on the next game.
We should look past the obvious sources in search for the revelatory ones. If players only speak when a pack surrounds them, find related sources that are less in demand — be it high school coaches, relatives or friends. At public schools, we can request records that reveal the underbelly of an athletics department’s operations.

The result will be stories far more rich than ones filled with coachspeak and cliché.

Any self-respecting fan will pick newspapers over those flashy team sites.

October 26, 2015 — Pat Forde’s got the nation covered

A journalism axiom says reporters should go an inch wide and a mile deep. Keep a topic focused but report every little detail about it.

To find success, Pat Forde sometimes has to go both a mile wide and deep.

As a national college sports columnist for Yahoo!, Forde must keep track of 128 Division I-A football programs and 351 Division I basketball programs. Sure, only a fraction of those are relevant and nationally newsworthy at a time, but the list changes every year.

“It’s impossible to stay on top of all that goes on,” Forde said. “The big transition was me working at a newspaper, you know a lot about a little, to going to a national publication where you know a little about a lot.”

Readers are savvy, though, so a national writer like Forde can’t necessarily get away with knowing just a little about something. He has to know a lot about a lot. Or at least a moderate amount.

Forde’s been doing it for more than 10 years, first for ESPN and now Yahoo! He’s one of the most respected writers in the game. So how does he cover the nation?

Like many college football fans, he’s on his laptop throughout Saturdays, tracking scores and watching how games develop. Unlike most fans, he also manually writes down the final score of each game in a book. This helps Forde commit the scores to memory and notice trends and developments.
He’s also quite active on Twitter, where he follows more than 1,700 people, including plenty of college sports reporters. One of the first things Forde does when he wakes up is scroll through his Twitter timeline to see who’s written what.

But there’s more to covering the country than being well-informed. You need to be well-sourced to break news like Forde did when he reported Louisville is investigating claims made in a book about its basketball program offering prostitutes to recruits. (Forde lives in Louisville but says his source on that story came from a longtime worker in college athletics — certainly not anyone from Louisville’s side).

Sourcing requires a lot of maintenance. Forde often calls or texts coaches and athletics directors to chat about sports or family news. “Not looking for anything from them,” he said. “Not expecting them to do something for you then and there. But when you do need to ask them something, they’ll at least have some positive thought about you. ‘Ok, this guy can be trusted.’”

Some of Forde’s critical columns have put him on the you-know-what list with schools such as Kentucky, Baylor, Alabama, Florida State and SMU. Forde said he doesn’t regret writing negatively about programs he believes deserve the flak. What keeps him credible, he said, is “establishing a track record for not being wrong on things.”

There are benefits and drawbacks to covering the country rather than a single team. It’s more difficult to write the type of intimate features Forde did when he worked at the Louisville Courier Journal. “When you’re trying to be something of a jack of all trades, that’s something that kind of gets pushed to the side,” he said.

Then again, he never has to slog through a 4-8 season with a dud program. As a rule, he’s always covering the best teams.

He’ll be at the national championship game this year, with a chance to write a memorable story, no matter who’s playing.
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 Undefeated, 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. Philips 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 that 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 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 Ukranian 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 send to him but doesn’t seek them out, even if 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 robotocized 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’ 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.
Appendix: Project proposal

When a guest speaker called in to class, it was the best 75 minutes of the week. My first semester at the University of Missouri I enrolled in Greg Bowers' sports journalism course. The discussion-based class often featured guest speakers, and these visitors (or Skypers) represented a who's who in today's narrative journalism landscape.

Sports Illustrated's Thomas Lake talked about boiling down his articles to a single word. And about how the best time to write a story is often a year after it is newsworthy, once the dust has settled. ESPN the Magazine's Wright Thompson described his pre-reporting process and detailed his experiences covering Michael Jordan post-retirement. Freelancer Justin Heckert shared advice on recreating a scene through interviewing. He also displayed his unusual aptitude of remembering ledes — everybody's ledes.

I never wanted these conversations to end; there always seemed to be more to explore.

These are the types of conversations I hope to have as part of my next job. After graduation I will try to become a sports editor for a newspaper or web-only publication. Narrative feature writing is an interest and skill of mine, and I'd like to help other writers' features sing.

Narrative feature stories are different than news stories in that they circumvent the traditional “inverted pyramid” framework of journalism, in which the most important facts and quotes are placed near the top and anything toward
the bottom — the least important matter — is subject to potential cutting. Orange County Register Deputy Editor Rebecca Allen explained narrative journalism further in a post for Nieman:

“A narrative is a story that has a beginning, middle and end. It engages the reader’s mind and heart. It shows actors moving across its stage, revealing their characters through their actions and their speech. At its heart, a narrative contains a mystery or a question—something that compels the reader to keep reading and find out what happens. Newspaper narratives are also entirely true and factual in every detail.”

What interests me most — and what still makes newspapers relevant to me — is the writing. As an advisor to undergraduate reporters, I’ve been forced to think about and articulate what makes writing successful. Prior to my enrollment at Missouri, I served four years as a sports reporter for the Daily News-Record in Harrisonburg, Virginia. I’m proud of my work there. I produced award-winning stories and dominated a beat. But sometimes the daily grind left little room for reflection. My strategies had become more instinctive than calculated.

Through challenging courses and 20-plus hours per week serving as the assistant sports editor at the Columbia Missourian, I’ve broadened my outlook on journalism. While no single class has given me expertise in a particular area, each has shown me what is possible — and has provided the basic foundational knowledge to explore further. Working in the newsroom in a managerial position has taught me a different level of responsibility juggling and personality management. It’s also given me dedication to a product bigger than my own. My role
as an editor at the Missourian has been refreshing in that I can revisit the building blocks every semester when we inherit a new staff with varying skill levels. Now, as I prepare for similar jobs with very different staffs, it’s time for me to pick the brains of more experienced writers.

For my professional project I plan to start a blog and corresponding podcast in which I highlight meaningful sports feature stories and discuss craft with the reporters who wrote these stories. I aim to start deeper conversations with preeminent sports journalists — the same types of conversations we had in that sports journalism class, but this time one-on-one and more structured. A lecture in that class included 15 students lobbing questions to a writer during the 75-minute time frame. Conversations were rarely “off the record,” but the purpose of them was never publication.

This look at the story behind the story will allow me to analyze, critique and be more conscious about reading like a writer — habits that will serve me well as an editor. It will also help me create contacts in the industry as I network with well-known journalists. I’d like to become a known commodity in sports journalism circles; I want editors to listen to my discussions of journalism and wonder how they can get me on their team. I will also learn the world of blogging and play with the idea of creating a brand — something I’ve learned to do for the Missourian (rather than for myself) through a course in Participatory Journalism.

This project will be the final step in earning my master’s degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. I intend to fulfill this requirement in December
2015 and then rejoin the work force as a more thoughtful, experienced, skilled and connected journalist.

2. Professional skills component

Because technology makes remote communication so easy, and because I still have responsibilities at the Missourian through December, I will mostly remain in Columbia as I conduct the skills component of my professional project.

I have navigated the graduate program without a defined area of emphasis (beginning in convergence but ultimately enrolling in classes across the board to fulfill my goal of achieving the most well-rounded education to complement my pre-existing skillset). My four years as a professional journalist gave me an advantage in experience and journalism know-how when I entered this school. The aforementioned sports journalism course with Greg Bowers further heightened my critical thinking for sports writing. Additionally, my ability to report a lengthy feature piece grew through an independent study with Jacqui Banaszynski. Using experts’ analysis as well as personal accounts acquired through interviews and time in the field, I wrote a 3,500-word story on local stand-up comedians who cope with mental illnesses and anxiety. Now it’s time for the next challenge.

My research component will begin on June 1 and I intend to finish it by August 30. I propose beginning published work on my professional project blog July 1, 2015 and continuing it through November 25 (though I will certainly begin formulating strategies and finding possible podcast guests earlier — and will
consider continuing this blog into 2016 if its successful). This timetable of 21 weeks allows me to work 20 hours per week to reach my total of 420 hours.

Much of the work I do will not be visible to the public, so I will keep logs of every step I take toward progress to a product. It starts with consuming journalism. A lot of journalism. My daily routine already includes reading multiple news and feature stories from a selection of websites, but my project will intensify and focus this routine. I plan to read 5-10 sports feature stories per weekday and highlight them with a quick-hitting, cogent blog post (200-300-word analysis) two times per week. Then, one other post will be more detailed, consisting of additional research and interviews (500-750 words). I will aim to publish the audio from one of these interviews per week, creating a sort of podcast. To find relevant stories for discussion, I will begin with my pet sites and sources (Sports Illustrated, ESPN The Magazine; SB Nation, Bleacher Report, Grantland, Washington Post, New York Times, Esquire, Yahoo!, Longform, Grantland, USA Today, Sports on Earth, Monday Morning Quarterback, and others.

To find reporters to interview on the “podcast,” I will start by indicating stories worthy of further discussion and then pitch them on my idea either through email or phone conversation.

The Associated Press Sports Editors will feature my blog, which I will host personally. Current president Mike Sherman agreed to an arrangement in which the APSE website reserves space for the first few lines of my posts and then links to the blog. It will also share to its 13,000 followers on Twitter.
The physical evidence showing my expertise in journalism will be the blogs and podcasts I publish. I will also file weekly field notes that document my every action leading toward the tangible product. My committee of Jacqui Banaszynski (chair), Greg Bowers and Joy Mayer will supervise my project. Like many blogs in the industry, I intend for most of my writing to go straight to post. But I propose finding a supervising editor who will look at the larger interview pieces before I post or soon thereafter. The editor will read all posts — even the smaller, quick-hitting ones — and notice patterns and trends. I am unsure who that editor will be just yet.

3. Analysis component

How do sports writers and editors identify and select news items worth developing into feature stories?

That’s the question I will explore for my professional project, in hopes of discovering answers that can help guide me as I try to enter the professional world as a sports editor. I expect that some sports departments use significant digital analytics data to steer these decisions but I suspect many do it just on feel. Still, something must be guiding these decisions, even if writers and editors haven’t stopped to consider it. This project, ideally, will give an insider’s look at the operations that lead to significant feature stories in sports sections and websites.

Professional journalists should care about this question because it impacts the way they make decisions on micro and macro levels. Reporters and editors should be aware of ways to make judgments and gauge audience expectations in
order to decide what stories they should follow up on. Starting a conversation with professionals about their processes and considerations when selecting stories can help other writers make their own decisions.

My research question also complements my practical component of a blog and podcast that drills down on a big sports feature and discusses the reporting process and story craft. The research and practical component together should provide a deep look at the inner workings of narrative journalism.

I will draw on Gatekeeping theory to guide my research work.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Gatekeeping

Why do we eat what we eat? More than 50 years ago, early-20th century psychologist Kurt Lewin explained this phenomenon through “channel theory.” People probably don’t stop to think about it when they’re munching on a slice of pizza, but the ingredients that they’re consuming — before entering their mouths — came from various channels, whether it was a garden to one's kitchen or a farm to a distributor to a restaurant freezer.

Along the way, those ingredients had to pass through gates. “Food does not move by its own impetus. Entering or not entering a channel and moving from one section to another is effected by a ‘gatekeeper,’” Lewin wrote (37). The psychology of the gatekeeper, Lewin said, determines what people eat. The gatekeeper decides what is food and holds a large influence on controlling what people eat (Lewin, 40).
Enough about dinner, though. While Lewin devised the idea of gatekeeping by studying the food industry, he noted — and many researchers have reiterated — that it can also apply to communication and other organized structures, where groups of power determine what stays and goes.

“In its simplest conceptualization within mass communication, gatekeeping is 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. It is often defined as a series of decision points at which news items are either continued or halted as they pass along news channels from source to reporter to a series of editors” (Shoemaker et al, 233).

The gates in mass media are the checkpoints at which decisions are made that will ultimately shape what reaches publication. While gatekeepers for food may be farmers or restaurateurs, the gatekeepers for newspapers are reporters and editors — and those gatekeepers can be “highly subjective” and “reliant on upon value judgments” (White, 384). Whether a piece of news gets covered or not can hinge on the whims of a single person, as White showed in a 1949 experiment with a small newspaper wire editor he dubbed “Mr. Gates.” The editor rejected stories based on the amount of space left in the newspaper at that time of the night, his belief of the stories’ veracity, and whether or not a similar story had already run (White, 386). The “Mr. Gates” example is widespread and included in many research studies on gatekeeping. Though the journalism landscape has changed drastically with the revolution of the Internet and audience tracking, the gatekeeping model is still the foundation of many industry research studies. This paper will note the
various threats or changes to gatekeeping later. For now, it will show the ways in which gatekeeping comes into play.

The gatekeepers can also be routines of an organization (Shoemaker et al, 235). For a piece of news to be conceived, somebody must first notice and identify it (McQuail, 308). Then the news must pass through entry points, which vary depending on the medium. Multiple forces swirl around gates, and the forces that are the strongest prevail in pushing the gatekeeper toward a decision (Shoemaker et al, 240).

What do gatekeepers consider when deciding what makes the news? Timeliness plays a big factor in what news is selected (McQuail, 315). And with many options to choose from, news managers “pick those issues and events that have the greatest ratio of expected appeal for demographically desirable audiences to cost of news-gathering” (McManus, 114). That means editors must consider the cost of producing a piece of journalism and assess whether the benefit of the finished product outweighs those costs. Media firms consistently have to weigh their own commercial interests against what stories possess the biggest news value (Cohen, 538).

Research is mixed on whether audience interests influence gatekeepers. A 2002 study by Tai and Cheng showed that American editors did not give audiences what they wanted (McQuail, 311). Another example that editors’ decisions aren’t always consistent with news consumers’ interests is a study of four large online newsrooms by Boczkowski and Peer. The researchers found that journalists often
lean toward news stories that are “soft,” but not in terms of how they’re told, whereas consumers like harder stories told in a softer way (867).

Despite research suggesting that the audience’s wants aren’t being met, there is other research that contends that audiences wield significant power in helping determine what makes news. “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” (Shoemaker and Vos, 76).

With uncertainty flooding the industry, journalists are being urged to pay more attention to the audience. “Online interactivity has been touted as a way journalists can connect with audiences, and industry analysts have advocated reaching out to ‘citizen journalists,’ conversing with readers, responding to feedback from online audiences and working closely with the marketing/business sides of their organizations” (Lowrey and Woo, 42). The presence of citizen journalism, in which the public has a role in the typical duties of a reporter, represents another way gates are being circumvented.

Gatekeeping is changing in the digital age. Some researchers, like Bro and Wallberg, suggest that the “Mr. Gates” example is outdated because of the changes in the industry brought on by technology (93). Deciding what’s in or out is no longer a binary decision made by a wire editor.

Bro and Wallberg suggest that the change in the delivery of information — from physical newspaper to digital content, gives a new definition to gatekeeping.
They illustrate three models of gatekeeping in the digital era: “process of information,” “process of communication” and lastly, “process of elimination,” where gatekeeping takes place outside the newsroom (See Figure 1 below):

![Figure 1: Models of gatekeeping in the digital era. By Bro and Walling](image)

At first, decision-makers needed to use journalists as intermediaries to get their messages out to citizens. Then, decision-makers could directly communicate with citizens, and vice versa, but often still used journalists for specific functions. Now, with social media allowing for direct access, technology has reached a point in which decision-makers and citizens might not view journalists as being necessary at all. This decline in the journalists’ role, Bro and Wallberg note, has been documented by various scholars over the past few years (99).

Now that the Internet makes stories from across the world accessible, some of the tallest gates have been removed.

“What’s the most amazing thing about the new media world? Its low barriers to entry,” Rosen said in the same Post article. “Thanks to the Internet, it is cheap and simple to launch a site that, theoretically, the whole world could be watching. Yesterday there were a few dozen providers; today news, views and attitudes stream through millions of gates. And the Web accepts all kinds of gatekeepers, each with unique rules for what matters, rather than the rules adopted by a class of professionals with set journalistic principles. For the old gatekeepers that’s a big disruption.”

While gatekeepers used to be required in order to pass along information, “the Internet promoted the elimination of the middle man,” Jones and Salter wrote (45). “The right to be a gatekeeper was partially revoked when the news product went online.”

The gatekeeping role, some posit, belongs to technology producers who determine the ways in which information flows to consumers. Search engines, app stores and social media are now considered gatekeepers (Foster, 48).

LITERATURE REVIEW

What makes something newsworthy?

As displayed in the eminent “Mr. Gates” study, what is newsworthy is a subjective question that’s answered with a value judgment. Myriad influences come in to play when news distributors decide what to cover (White, p. 384).

Timeliness plays a huge factor in what news is selected (McQuail, p. 315). In the study of Mr. Gates, timeliness meant the point in a day that a story crossed the
wire. If it got late in the night and there wasn’t room for a story, it wouldn’t run (White p. 386).

Gatekeeping can take many other shapes. News can also be trapped and amplified in a metaphorical echo chamber. Editors often make content decisions based on other newspapers’ decisions. The larger, more powerful papers so influence the smaller ones that they effectively determine what’s newsworthy for another publication. The larger papers become “opinion leaders,” for the smaller ones in a phenomenon described as the “arterial effect” (Breed, p. 281).

Consistency among numerous studies in the field is that newspapermen often read newspapers (Breed; Sumpter). Some editors use social media as a news-gathering tool — combing through other distributors’ content to develop a broader view of a story (Reed, p. 560).

These practices make editors prone to the influences of competitors or of the massive publications, which have gained the reputation as opinion leaders. This development is only exacerbated by the lifestyles of some media members. In a study of a large daily newspaper’s audience construction routines — the routines editors use to combat their uncertainty of what audiences want — half of the organization’s editors worked in the newspaper industry for 20 or more years. Because of their tenure, the editors were engrossed in the industry, thus limiting their scope of their overall communities. Most of their acquaintances were also in the media industry. The editors further entrenched themselves in media during their rare free time. They scouted other publications before logging 10-hour days, including weekends, in the office. (Sumpter, p. 336).
“Defining what constitutes news is problematic for editors and reporters, whose work is not governed so much by straightforward rules as by routines designed to manage or to reduce uncertainty” (Sumpter, p. 334). Editors were rewarded for “instinctive” judgments (p. 339), which referred to decisions made based on what worked in the past at the same newspaper.

Conversations at daily planning meetings could often boost a story’s chances of running. And that was another case of editors’ tastes winning out. Sometimes the food-chain-like arterial affect model is reversed. If a big story happens in the backyard of a small paper, that paper can become the opinion leader. There are also cases when newspapers will downplay a story because a competitor broke it. (Sumpter, 336).

Despite all these factors, there’s clearly still a bit of guesswork to the inexact science of determining news. In the newspaper industry, researchers have found a practice of making value judgments based on what editors perceive an audience to want. Does that change when the editors can find out exactly what an audience really does want?

**Market-driven journalism**

In 1980, Gans said that journalists are reluctant to consider audience feedback due to their fear of the power that such a massive body of people might possess (p. 234). His study of major national TV and print media found that editors rejected feedback from “unknown” sources, such as market surveys, unsolicited letters and phone calls. The reason? Editors did not trust the statistics, nor did they believe that this unknown audience was capable of determining what type of news it
needed. The sources of feedback editors did value were more personal and less quantifiable. They were from a “known” audience that consisted of friends, family and other familiar acquaintances and a “near” audience of colleagues and others within the industry. (Gans, p. 124-25)

Twenty-plus years and an Internet later, some journalists still harbor adversarial relationships with their audience. “I hate the commenters. I find myself doing things now because I know it’ll piss them off,” one writer said in a 2013 study of online journalists. Another writer in that study described user comments tacked on to web stories as “worthless” (Agarwal and Barthel p. 384).

While comments are worthless to some, studies have shown that “flak” or negative feedback can sway news decision-makers (Herman and Chomsky, p. 26). Even a passive audience impacts the gatekeeper because of its presence in the news-exchange relationship. “Expectations of audience reactions, instead of the audience itself, may drive decisions; further, gatekeepers may project their values and feelings on audiences or follow personal judgments, assuming audiences will concur” (Hardin, p. 65). In audience routines research, editors realized they were in their own media bubble and tried to adjust. Self-aware enough to understand their susceptibility to pack reporting, the editors created an imaginary local readership they tried to satisfy (Sumpter, p. 337). One editor even told his reporters to eat lunch with a new, unconventional source once a month to hear what other people in society were talking about (Sumpter, p. 338).

Analytics has eliminated some of the guesswork. In the digital age, with analytics to track audience behavior, there is more precision in tracking what an
audience reads. And editors are becoming more and more receptive to using audience behavior metrics to steer editorial decisions (Lee et al, p. 505). Web analytics have created a climate where the audience has considerable pull in determining what news gets chosen (Tandoc, p. 559).

“One of the most important questions for journalism’s sustainability will be how individuals and organizations respond to this availability of data” (Bell p. 48). Web data from journalism, barely touched as of 2007, is now more readily available to companies through Chartbeat and Social Flow. Even Twitter features analytics that its everyday users can track at no extra cost. Javaun Moradi, a digital strategist and product developer for NPR, noting all the inexpensive ways in which journalists can now track their own data, sees more and more using it (Bell, p. 49). Analytics also influence a new form of gatekeeping called “deselection,” the event when an article is taken off the homepage in favor of another because it is not generating high web traffic. (Tandoc, p. 568)

Web analytics isn’t the only way that numbers creep into journalistic decision-making. Money is a factor, too. Journalism is susceptible to economic factors such as supply and demand; “Media content can be modeled as if the ‘five economic Ws’ are driving news decisions” (Hamilton, p. 7). Those five Ws are:

“1. Who cares about a particular piece of information? 2. What are they willing to pay to find it, or what are others willing to pay to reach them? 3. Where can media outlets or advertisers reach these people? 4. When is it profitable to provide the information? 5. Why is this profitable?” (Hamilton, p. 8).
With uncertainty flooding the industry, journalists are being urged to pay more attention to the audience. “Online interactivity has been touted as a way journalists can connect with audiences, and industry analysts have advocated reaching out to ‘citizen journalist,’ conversing with readers, responding to feedback from online audience and working closely with the marketing/business sides of their organizations” (Lowrey and Woo, p. 42).

With many options to choose from, news managers “pick those issues and events that have the greatest ratio of expected appeal for demographically desirable audiences to cost of news-gathering” (McManus, p. 114). That means editors must consider the cost of producing a piece of journalism and assess whether the benefit of the finished product outweighs those costs.

In addition to audience members influencing content based on their sheer readership, they can also sway the media with negative feedback or “flak,” in the form of phone calls and letters (Herman and Chomsky, 26). Presumably, that applies to modern-day communication like emails, online comments and tweets, too.

Although journalists may be “ambivalent” regarding online commenting, the emphasis placed on moderating these comments ensures they are being viewed by content distributors (Singer, et al. 78). “If flak is produced on a large scale, or by individuals or groups with substantial resources, it can be both uncomfortable and costly to the media” (Herman and Chomsky, 26).

Even a passive audience impacts the gatekeeper because of its presence in the news exchange relationship. “Expectations of audience reactions, instead of the audience itself, may drive decisions; further, gatekeepers may project their values
and feelings on audiences or follow personal judgments, assuming audiences will concur” (Hardin, 65).

Analytics has eliminated some of the guesswork. In the digital age, with analytics to track audience behavior, there is more precision in tracking what an audience reads. And editors are becoming more and more receptive to using audience behavior metrics to steer editorial decisions (Lee et al, 505). Web analytics have created a climate where the audience has considerable pull in determining what news gets chosen (Tandoc, 559).

**Technology affecting gatekeeping**

Audience engagement and technology are inexorably linked, thanks to all the ways digital technology has made it easier for consumers to interact with producers. Still, in a world with so much user-generated content, the element of gatekeeping remains one of the distinguishing factors of journalism (Boczkowski, p. 207). Citizen journalism is becoming a very real variable in the industry. Instead of fully embracing it, though, many news distributors have rebuffed it due to credibility concerns. There’s a disconnect where “the majority of online news producers believe the future of journalism lies within its interactivity, [but] few are taking the necessary steps to create such a functional environment. Because interactivity runs against the grain of the traditions of journalism, producers are often unwilling to explore it” (Domingo, p. 681-682). Decisions are often made based off routines.

There are three key elements that determine how interactive a website becomes: 1.)
the organizational structures of a producer, 2.) the representations of the user, and 3.) the newsroom’s work practices (Boczkowski, p. 208).

The technology itself is not enough to create change. True innovation is when these tools are utilized properly. The agency of a news organization is more powerful than the technology itself (Boczkowski, p. 211).

There are seeds for a change, though. For instance, young reporters see Twitter as a necessary tool, while old reporters often struggle to adapt to it, and therefore minimalize it (Schultz and Sheffer, p. 236). If young journalists value and emphasize new technologies, it suggests a sea change when that group becomes more established and eventually controls the gates. Online journalists are “forming new norms [and] emphasizing transparency, individualism and risk taking. Overall, a ‘new normal’ appears to be coalescing” (Agarwal and Barthel, p. 376). For these online reporters, it was the writers who typically came up with story ideas and then pitched them to their editors — not the editors pitching to writers. In place of budget meetings (where many newspapers plan and discuss upcoming content), these online journalists maintained a consistent and fluid conversation with their editors via web communication tools. The online journalists also used web tools to find their story topics. One investigative reporter used Facebook as a digital suggestions box. The editor created a new account, posed questions on it and generated story ideas that eventually made it to publication (Agarwal and Barthel, p. 386). This appears like a worthwhile strategy, as users are seeking interactivity that goes beyond clicking a button and consuming a piece of media (Boczkowski, p. 206).
It also could have positive implications on the financial bottom line. The better the journalism, the more a newspaper will profit (Chen, et al, p. 526). What does better mean? While “quality” journalism can’t necessarily be defined, content that can “serve the needs and wants of readers” is good for circulation and therefore good for business (Chen, et al, p. 516). That applied to small and medium newspapers, characterized by a circulation of less than 85,000.

A previous study determined that “Greater newsroom investment for larger news staffs, more and improved local coverage, and more and better in-depth coverage were types of newsroom changes that were related to the circulation increases” (Chen, et al 518).

Even though newspapers are actively distributing content through social media, they are not finding ways to monetize this practice — the same problem news sites went through when the web gained prominence. A study analyzing the 66 most-read newspapers in America showed that users are accessing newspapers at significant rates compared to circulation size. These newspapers are not reaping financial benefits off these high social media numbers, according to the study (Ju et al, p. 1-2).

**How sports come into play**

When Sumpter visited a large daily newspaper’s budget meeting, the sports editor did not want her section to write stories broad enough to appeal to a larger demographic. She contended that her niche audience demanded more specialized information (p. 337). Sports journalism can differ from other sections of a
newspaper or website; at times, sports journalism is even belittled. “Sports journalism has been described as a part of journalism ‘conceived out of journalistic wedlock.’ Sports journalists have been accused of hackneyed writing, cheering for the home team, unwillingness to report critical issues, serving as a source of scrapbook clippings for the stars, gladly accepting ‘freebies’ and engaging in other questionable activities” (Garrison and Selwen, 77). Gatekeeping within sports journalism is a relatively untapped study, as researchers view sports journalism less seriously than public affairs (Garrison and Selwen, 78). In some ways, sports journalism is just like all other journalism; in some ways it’s a different animal.

“Sports journalists have developed a set of conventions that suit the needs of the profession but also seem to distance them from ‘normal’ journalists” (Oates and Pauley, p. 336). How did it get this way? “Sports journalism’s credibility problem lies in part with the (quite accurate) perception that narrative invention is central to the enterprise” (p.336). Much of sports journalism is storytelling — and the most obvious stories to identify are the ones that sports writers choose to explore. As an example, Oates and Pauley mention Muhammad Ali, the outspoken and flashy boxer who converted to Islam, changed his name and resisted the draft. He created plenty of storylines, so the preeminent journalists of his time — the 1960s and 70s — pounced on stories about Ali. Another boxer with a less interesting backstory would not have received as much coverage. There’s an inherent “conflict of interest” within sports journalism (p. 338). The success of media outlets hinges on that of the sport. So it’s in journalists’ best interests for figures like Ali to be glorified and relevant.
Still, the overarching point of Oates and Pauley’s paper is that “sportswriting fundamentally resembles other forms of reporting and that journalism should not use sports as an ethical straw man against which to defend the virtue of its serious work” (p. 340). Their jobs consisting of both breaking news and feature stories, sports journalists see themselves as reporters who possess the skills and professional traits of both hard and soft news journalists (Garrison and Salwen, 82).

And in a changing media landscape, sports writers have been receptive to reaching their readers in new ways. Sports journalists have the capacity and platform to connect with their audience and often do so in creative ways on Twitter and Facebook. Fans seek access and reporters are finding new ways to give it to them (Shultz and Sheffer, 230).

Sometimes the less serious work is what works. The website Grantland — an arm of ESPN launched by the ultra-popular Bill Simmons — is reinventing literary sports writing online (Vogan and Dowling). Simmons, who worked as a bartender in Boston before hitting a home run as an ESPN columnist dubbed “The Boston Sports Guy,” boasts nearly 3.5 million Twitter followers. He notes that he got his start writing “about things my friends and I were talking about, arguing about sports movies, talking about players, not in the way reporters were doing it, going into the locker room, getting quotes” (Vogan and Dowling, p. 5).

Though Simmons is now established and backed by a media empire, traditionalists might not appreciate the type of journalism produced by him and those cut from his casualwear cloth. “In the context of sports journalism, traditionalists have charged that digital media – and the sports blogosphere in
particular – lower journalistic standards by allowing anyone with an Internet connection to disseminate their opinions anonymously and without editorial oversight or access to sporting events” (Vogan and Dowling, p. 2).

**METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

To get to the heart of how writers and editors choose the news that’s worthy of larger feature coverage, I will interview these decision-makers. I want to use the existing literature as background to frame my questions regarding what these news producers value and why. I’d like to find out how they weigh the time and resources to report a story; if informing the public of an issue is their responsibility; what stories might sell papers (or generate unique page views); and how much influence readers — on social media or in letters to editors — influence decisions.

My research methodology will be semi-structured interviews with sports writers and sports editors. I will select five from each category, giving me a sample of 12 respondents, though I’m willing to expand my data set if I have not hit a point of conceptual saturation. Sears (2011) interviewed nine newspaper reporters in his study on Twitter’s effects on sports reporters — research that shares many similarities with mine. Berglez (2013) used 14 respondents in his study of climate reporting, another recent study that used semi-structured interviews (Hiles and Hinnant). Agarwal and Barthel (2013) used 14 in-depth interviews with online journalists to learn more about their professional identities. Part of the reason they selected that method is because “the work routines and norms are likely to be relatively novel” (p. 380), just like they will be for some of my sample that’s now embracing new forms of digital journalism in order to make decisions.
I plan to ask a similar batch of questions to each interviewee, but want the freedom to improvise. Structured interviewing affords “very little flexibility in the way questions are asked or answered” (Fontana and Frey, p. 363). Unstructured interviewing, meanwhile, is a bit too freewheeling for a study in which I won’t be embedded in the field. That’s why I’ve chosen semi-structured interviewing, where I believe I can hit a sweet spot. Semi-structured interviews are “conversations with a purpose” (van Teijlingen, p. 29). They begin with a basis of key questions that can be modified depending on the respondent or the flow of the interview. Semi-structured interviewing is useful when trying to extract somebody’s views toward a subject. They allow for a fluid, unrushed discussion (van Teijlingen).

The use of semi-structured interviews can both leave room in the research for variation while also bringing myself, the researcher, into the subject’s world (Fontana and Frey). Through observations and respondent interviews, Tandoc found “the extent of influence web analytics (has) on traditional gatekeeping processes and on a new gatekeeping practice online” (p. 559), an aspect I plan to explore as well.

I will interview a sports editor at six different news outlets, and also interview a reporter at each of the same six publications. The news outlets will vary in type from traditional newspapers to web-only operations. I will select the outlets based on my knowledge and research of which ones consistently produce narrative feature material. My interviews with the editors will be in-person at the 2015 Associated Press Sports Editors Conference from June 24-27 in San Diego, or by telephone/Skype. I will contact the editors beforehand and arrange for a time when
we can meet for a scheduled 30-45 minutes. My interviews with reporters will likely be conducted over the phone or on Skype. While in-person interviews are preferred because they allow the interviewer to pick up on non-verbal cues, this project does not require the same level of detail as an ethnographic participant observation (Fontana and Frey, p. 364). Regardless whether they are conducted in person or not, the interviews will be captured with a digital voice recorder and transcribed entirely.

Here’s a list of news outlets I plan to explore, and the people from them I’d like to interview.

**ESPN:** Mary Byrne (editor) and Coley Harvey (reporter). Byrne, formerly the managing editor at USA TODAY, is now at ESPN serving as a senior deputy editor overseeing NFL, NHL and NASCAR. She is a Missouri graduate who as been a professional for 25 years. Harvey is one of 32 writers ESPN.com has hired to cover each team. He covers the Cincinnati Bengals.

**BLEACHER REPORT:** Bill Eichenberger (editor) and Jason King (writer). Eicheberger is a veteran editor who worked at the Wall Street Journal for a year and a half but now heads Bleacher Report’s relatively new Longform feature section. How he chooses stories is of great interest to me. King is an APSE-award winning reporter whose feature topics sometimes border on obscure, like his story on former professional wrestler and double amputee Kamala.

**GRANTLAND:** Andrew Sharp (editor) and Bryan Curtis (reporter). Sharp is an editor who also blogs frequently for the sports/pop-culture website. Curtis is a feature writer with a magazine background at Slate and The Daily Beast. Like many
Grantland writers, his stories often touch on sports but include a larger cultural bent.

**BOSTON GLOBE**: Joe Sullivan (editor) and Adam Himmselsbach (writer).
Growing up in Boston, I read the Globe's sports section daily. Sullivan's tenure dates back to then. Himmelsbach, who came from the Louisville Courier-Journal last winter, is a newer hire who covers the Boston Celtics.

**RICHMOND TIMES**: Mike Svetitz (editor) and Mike Barber (writer).
Richmond is the largest newspaper in Virginia, where I used to work, a couple hours north of the capitol city. Svetitz, recently moved up from a smaller gig in Alabama. I'm interested in how a new editor quickly learns an area and makes decisions based on his research of the guidance of his employees. Barber is a former co-worker of mine who's now covering various college sports for the Times. He lives remotely, though, and covers those teams in his area. That aspect, of remote working, adds an interesting wrinkle to my discussion, I believe.

**KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL**: Phil Kaplan (editor) and Dustin Dopirak (writer). Kaplan is a former APSE president and one of the most respected sports editors in the industry. The biggest beat at his paper is Tennessee Volunteers football, which is manned by indefatigable reporter Dopirak, a past APSE-award-winner himself.

For a tentative list of questions I'll use during the interview, please see the appendix at the bottom of this document (page 30). That list is only a starting point; I intend for a conversational session that allows for follow-up questions and exploration of new discoveries.
It will important to fully understand the terms my respondents are using — and make sure they understand the terms that I suggest. Of course, it can be quite embarrassing if there’s a misunderstanding: Fontana and Frey cited a 1977 ethnographic study by Douglass and Rasmussen in which the researchers had to learn the term “nude beach virgin,” which meant nothing about somebody’s sex life but instead that a beachgoer had a white butt, and was therefore a giveaway for somebody who had not visited the nude beach before (371). For the purposes of my research, I will immediately ask the interviewee for clarification on any terms he/she uses which I don’t fully comprehend.

Once the interviews begin, a consideration of mine will be my “personal front,” as Goffman calls it (p. 15). Included in someone’s personal front is his/her gender, age, size and race — all uncontrollable — but also several factors one can adjust, such as posture, speech patterns, facial expressions. In job interviews, each of these cues can be scrutinized and used to tell one side something about the other (Goffman, p. 144). In this semi-structured interview setting, I’m not trying to secure a job, but I am trying to generate a casual but professional environment and make my respondent comfortable enough to provide detailed and accurate responses.

Upon completion of my project, I will aim to have my professional analysis published both on the Missouri Journalism School’s website, as well as in a professional publication. American Journalism Review, Columbia Journalism Review and Poynter are all possibilities.
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Proposal appendix

Questions for writers

- Bio boilerplate
  - Age? Education? Experience?
  - How long have you been at this job?
  - What other jobs did you hold before this?

- What's the genesis of a story idea?
  - What/who are your main sources when trying to generate ideas?
  - What elements or themes are you looking for when determining what to cover in depth?

- What publications do you read, beyond your own?
  - How often do you draw inspiration from those stories, and in what shape does that inspiration take?
  - Do you read other publications with the intent of doing one of its stories “better?”
  - Are there writers you try to emulate?

- How do you pitch a story to your editor?
  - Explain the back-and-forth that goes on in that process.
  - What challenges do you face when getting a story sold?
  - What consistent themes are there in the stories that your editor has green-lit?
  - How much does your reputation open doors in the pitch process?

- Of the stories you’ve written, what’s the ratio of stories you pitched compared to stories your editor assigned?
  - Which method do you prefer?
  - When it’s your own story idea, do you feel more invested in it?
  - When an editor assigns a story, at what length do you two discuss the specifics?

- How important is it to develop a storyline aside from what’s happening on the field?
  - When you cover games, what types of things do you look for when thinking of long-term feature ideas?
  - What strategies do you use to report out a feature story?
  - What do you think you do different than your competition?

- Do you view analytics of your own coverage?
  - What types of analytics do you most value?
  - How do you use those analytics to steer future coverage?
  - Can you think of a story that — readership-wise — did better than you thought it would?
  - What story did worse than you thought?
What do you believe are the reasons those stories over- or under-performed.

• How often do reader suggestions turn into stories?
  o How do readers contact you (email, Twitter, phone)?
  o When a reader proposes an idea, what steps do you take to research it further?
  o Do you actively seek out ideas from readers, and how?

Questions for editors

• Bio boilerplate
  o Age? Education? Experience?
  o How long have you been at this job?
  o What other jobs did you hold before this?

• Take me through a typical day as sports editor
  o What are your roles and responsibilities?
  o Can you explain your newsroom’s construction and how stories go from ideas to products?
  o What do you accomplish at budget meetings?

• What's the genesis of a story idea?
  o What/who are your main sources when trying to generate ideas?
  o What elements or themes are you looking for when determining what to cover in depth?

• What publications do you read, beyond your own?
  o How often do you draw inspiration from those stories, and in what shape does that inspiration take?
  o Do you read other publications with the intent of doing one of its stories “better?”
  o If a competitor breaks a story, how do you proceed with coverage (downplay it, find another angle)?

• How do you assign a story to a writer?
  o Explain the back-and-forth that goes on in that process.
  o What pushback, if any, do you get from reporters?
  o How much does a writer’s reputation play into whether you assign it to him/her?

• Of the stories you’ve published, what’s the ratio of stories the writer pitched compared to stories you assigned?
  o Which method do you prefer?
  o When it’s your own story idea, do you feel more invested in it?

• How important is it to develop a storyline aside from what’s happening on the field?
  o What is the expectation you relay to your readers in terms of capturing a narrative story?
  o What do you think you do different than your competition?
Does your section have a responsibility to report on the political and moral issues involved in sports?

- How closely do you look at analytics of your section’s coverage?
  - What types of analytics do you most value?
  - How do you use those analytics to steer future coverage?
  - How do you value analytics in concert with personal preference?
  - Can you think of a story that — readership-wise — did better than you thought it would?
  - What story did worse than you thought?
  - What do you believe are the reasons those stories over- or under-performed.

- How often do reader suggestions turn into stories?
  - How do readers contact you (email, Twitter, phone)?
  - When a reader proposes an idea, what steps do you take to research it further?
  - Do you actively seek out ideas from readers, and how?

- How much does the financial health of your outlet contribute to the decisions you make on story selection?
  - If you know something is a vehicle to sell ads
    - Opportunity to attach videos, which are lucrative

- How do you request resources for a project or larger feature story?
  - What are examples stories you invest resources in?
  - What stories do you wish you could publish but don’t because the resources you need are too much to justify?
  - How much of your budget do you reserve for special projects and features?
  - What do writers need to show you to justify that work?
Changes to the proposal

The most significant changes to my proposal is the group of writers/editors I interviewed. I knew going into the proposal that my list was tentative, and I made significant changes based on availability and an aim for diversity.

At ESPN, I interviewed Leon Carter and Ian O’Connor, rather than Mary Byrne and Coley Harvey. Byrne hadn’t yet worked there long enough for me to dive into her routines, so I chose Carter instead. My interview with Carter led me to have questions of O’Connor, so I subbed him in.

At Bleacher Report, I interviewed Lars Anderson instead of Jason King. I didn’t know at the time of my proposal that King was a freelancer rather than a full-time writer. Anderson is the Longform section’s only full-timer, and a logical choice.

At Grantland, I swapped Sean Fennessey and Robert Mays in for Andrew Sharp and Bryan Curtis. I did not receive responses from emails to the initial two, whereas I had contact information for Mays. Fennessey was his editor, so I wanted to keep that consistent.

At the Boston Globe, I spoke to Shira Springer in lieu of Adam Himmelsbach. This was at the suggestion of editor Joe Sullivan, who told me Springer would be the best person to discuss takeout features.

Instead of the Richmond Times, I interviewed a writer/editor pair from the San Diego Union-Tribune, because it gave me perspective from the opposite side of the country.
Other small changes to the proposal: I published fewer blogs per week but more lengthy ones than I planned. I found early in the process that my quick-hitting pieces without talking to anybody were not rewarding, so I made each blog more thorough and based off at least one interview with a writer or editor. I also started the blog in June, rather than July. I was excited about the project and wanted to get going on it. Lastly, I did not have my blog regularly published on the Associated Press Sports Editors’ website. The people I spoke to at APSE were receptive about the idea but not particularly responsive when it came to actually putting the blogs on the site.