
SPORTS WRITING AND EDITING

An Address by
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BY J. G. TAYLOR SPINK

DEAN MOTT INVITED ME to speak to you today about sports writing. Sports writing might well be regarded as a combination of not only a knowledge of what takes place on a field, in a stadium or in an arena, but also the fundamental rules, the ability of the various participants, then reporting what one sees for the benefit of thousands of sports followers, some of whom have witnessed the event.

In order to be a good sports writer a man must be a student of the game he covers; he must not only be a keen observer but an analyst—and also a first-class writer. It is only by acquiring and developing these talents that a man can rise to the top and stay there. While it is necessary to know one's subject in order to write about it, it is not necessary to be a participant. Some of our greatest writers never played, just as some of our greatest dramatic critics never wrote a play. However, where a dramatic critic is expected to give only his views, some of them make a career of being severe critics. The sports writer must not only know all the rules of the sport he reports, but exercise judgment in his observations.

It is the man who reads what the sports writer writes who is the most critical and believe me, he

is the best-informed reader in the world. A follower of baseball especially will spot a mistake quicker than the keenest and most sensitive radar can detect an enemy plane.

You would be surprised at the number of readers who soon shake a writer off as ignorant and ignore what he writes.

We on *THE SPORTING NEWS* learned that long ago. As a result, we check, double-check and triple-check on copy and proofs. Even then, some reader out in the sticks will discover where we made a mistake and write to us with fiendish glee in pointing it out. You wonder how he knows, but he does. It is, therefore, vitally important that you be more than slightly acquainted with the sport you are covering and don't mistake a Texas Leaguer for a bunt, or a safety for a touchback. You have heard about radio announcers who have made ridiculous statements and have balled up situations. There is one man now, for instance, on a National League baseball hook-up who will make at least a dozen slips per game, but goes merrily on without any attempt at an explanation, or apology for his error. I know many who ignored his program a week after the start of the season.

While accuracy is essential, something more is needed than the bare recital of facts. Look for the reason behind the key moves of a baseball manager or a football coach, and explain them to your readers. Use a few quotations, if necessary, but not too many. Quote marks stand out in a news story like raisins in a pudding.

Avoid too many adjectives. Use your verbs to give

action and color to a story, whenever possible. That is a successful device so often used by *Time* magazine.

Sports writing permits greater freedom of expression than ordinary news writing. You have a chance to develop an individual style. However, good sports writing also demands simplicity.

In fact, the simpler you write, the better. After all, a majority of your readers will not have a college education. They don't want to go hunting in the dictionary for the meaning of words. Keep your sentences short and snappy. Slang is all right, if used correctly. But remember, what is familiar slang in college, for instance, may be just so much foreign lingo to the ordinary reader and it is to the ordinary reader you must appeal.

I know the young writers coming up today are better educated—or at least more of them have college diplomas—but it seems to me we have lost something through the years. With more space devoted to sports in the daily newspapers than ever before, there is less originality, scoops are fewer, ingenuity has disappeared, the spark and life have gone out of the columns. Instead nearly all sports pages have come to look the same and read the same. Everything is standardized and, instead of digging up their own facts, too many writers are standing around waiting for the publicity man's handout.

It is up to such young fellows as you to revive the sparkle that once shone on the sports pages and to restore the originality, freshness and devotion to work that characterized such old masters as Hughie Fullerton, Ring Lardner, Abe Yager, Ed Bang, Joe

Jackson, Jack Ryder, Bill Phelon, Bill Hanna, Sid Mercer, Damon Runyon, Heywood Broun, Charles Dryden, John Foster, Joe Avila, to mention only a few who flourished during the previous decades. Only a few still seem to carry on the tradition of those glorious days.

Here, let me say that Bob Broeg of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a graduate of this school and a speaker here today, is regarded as one of the best of present-day sports writers. He is constantly improving his work. He is a good reporter and a good writer, and will go far in his field.

Every sports writer should learn to spot unusual angles in a story. Often, this will help to make your story distinctive as compared to routine accounts of the same event by other writers, who cover only the obvious features. If you can pick out some incident or bit of strategy that is less obvious, but more interesting, it will make your story all the more readable.

We use a lot of so-called angle stories in *THE SPORTING NEWS*, because, as a weekly publication, we cannot concentrate on spot news. Of course, we have more time to develop angle stories than a daily paper.

However, even daily papers are placing more emphasis these days on sidelights. Because of radio and television, fans usually know the principal details of an ordinary sports event before the newspaper reaches them. As a result, some newspapers are giving their readers merely the bare bone of the play-by-play, beefed up with three-dot paragraphed notes—and the more the better. *New York Times* base-

ball stories usually have several paragraphs of news notes. The New York *Daily News* runs news notes about each of the major league ball clubs in separate columns, written by the reporters traveling with the clubs. The *Journal-American* and the *World-Telegram and Sun* carry notes on each team in the form of long boxes. All these are in addition to the daily story on the teams.

On THE SPORTING NEWS, we ask our correspondent with each major league club to wind up his weekly story with breezy notes in three dot style. In addition, we carry many one-paragraph news items about the majors and minors elsewhere in our paper. In spite of the fact that these one-paragraph notes are carried in small type, due to space requirements, we find they have a high degree of reader interest. You can't give fans too much of this type of material.

Humor is a big asset to a sports writer, but genuine humor is one of the rarest of talents. If you have a knack for humorous writing, cultivate it. It will add to your value as a sports reporter. Humor can give spice and sparkle to the dullest sports event.

To give you an idea of how some people find it difficult to find themselves, Ring Lardner came to THE SPORTING NEWS in 1912. He was made editor of THE SPORTING NEWS after being recommended by Ban Johnson. Lardner was a young writer then, just beginning to develop his famous style of humorous baseball writing. As the editor of THE SPORTING NEWS he was a flop. It was suggested that he write a series called "Pullman Pastimes" in which he related humorous incidents about members of

the Chicago Cubs and White Sox when he traveled with those clubs for the *Chicago Tribune*. That series was a forerunner of his famous Alibi Ike stories dealing with rookie players, and which projected Lardner into national recognition as a humorist.

Every sportswriter believes he would make a good columnist. And nearly every sports writer has at least a few good columns in his system. It's the ability to bat .300 every day, 52 weeks a year, that is difficult. I have found that the best columnists are good reporters first, good writers second.

Too many columnists have become simply wise-crackers. Too many spend their time fishing or golfing and fill their columns with attempted humor, philosophic dissertations or, worse, with handouts that enable them to prepare their stuff for several days ahead so that they can play the rest of the time. Too many are jealous of their prerogatives and spend more time belittling some one else than in developing something constructive.

They have lost that personal contact which enabled them to dig up interesting personality tales, inside stories and real scoops. All the real scoops dug up in the past ten years you can count on your fingers. It used to be the ambition of reporters to uncover exclusive stories and beat the other fellow. Now they work in packs, interview the same people en masse or come up with the same handouts. So much so, that if one paper should happen to come up with an exclusive story, its representative—one of these en masse individuals—is charged with having violated "ethics," whereas he was not even aware of what had happened—in fact, had not

known about the scoop until it had been called to his attention by an irate pal.

Just think what a few original ideas will do. Arch Ward, sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, thought up having an All-Star major league game to go with the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. The all-star game has become the highlight of mid-season in the big leagues and nearly every minor league has one each year.

Twenty-four years ago the same Arch Ward started the ball rolling for the Golden Gloves tournaments that have brought boxing competition among amateurs from all over the country and produced Joe Louis and a host of other top-notch fighters.

One of the Hearst sports editors, Max Kase of the *New York Journal*, originated the idea of a sandlot baseball tournament that would put the best in the metropolitan center against the pick of other cities in which Hearst newspapers are published. The *Denver Post* became a power in its own community through the promotion of baseball on the sandlots.

Thus, from the well known acorn, so to speak, some great oaks grew.

The possibilities of promotion among the youngsters of a community are innumerable. Many of you will have the opportunity to link your papers to those activities. They pay off in good will for your paper, prestige for you among the youngsters of today who will be the men of prominence in the community tomorrow and give a personal satisfaction that cannot be measured in dollars and cents.

You have learned the fundamentals, but you will have to learn to apply them forever afterward. Many

of you will hope to be great sports writers, but remember there are not many places at the top of the heap and the way is not easy and a national reputation is not made in a day.

My suggestion would be to study very carefully the make-up of the tabloids, their treatments of the stories and their snappy styles.

Above all, be honest with yourself and your readers. Be ever ready to fight any influence that would corrupt sport. Saturate your mind with facts and figures. Be ever alert for new ideas and don't stagnate.

I know you don't expect to become the sports editor or managing editor the first few months you are on the job, but don't envy the other fellow—the fellow who made good and became a success because he worked to deserve the distinction he enjoys. Prove yourself and the rest will come eventually.

You have the instruments—it is up to you to utilize them by applying yourself and you will have to work hard—very hard.

Yet, hard as you work and no matter how proficient you become, you will need help and you will have to develop appreciation of the man who helps you. He is the copy editor, the man who keeps goal for you, the man who has the prerogative of changing anything you have written.

We handle copy for *THE SPORTING NEWS* from many outstanding writers. You would be amazed at the condition in which the copy of many of these so-called experts is received and the attention necessary to edit and put in readable shape. I have heard that Red Smith and Westbrook Pegler have been

known to work on a lead to a column for an hour or more and frequently destroy copy that it may have taken an hour and a half for them to write—and then rewrite it. Naturally, it isn't difficult to edit such copy. Neither is it difficult to wonder why Smith and Pegler are outstanding writers regardless of whether you like what they write.

Why is there so much sloppy copy? In my book, it is carelessness, also laziness.

Some people have an eye on a clock. They will often send in copy that is only sufficient in length, but not passable, and leave it to some poor devil to devote an hour or more to put a story into usable form. Some writers will sit at their typewriters and gallop along with a story and not even take a few minutes to go over the copy when they have finished.

I would like to know some solution for this—other than a good copy editor or rewrite man.

There are few men who are content to sit back and struggle and make reputations for others. So, sooner or later, some of these experts miss the help that they receive from these rewrite men or copy readers.

Habit is a great thing, so when you write your story, keep in mind to write it as if you were not to have the benefit of a good copy reader going over it. There should be no depending on memory when one is not positive of the data. Doubtful records should be carefully checked.

And there is one more thing that I wish to stress, in closing, and that is that years ago there seemed to be an idea among newspapermen, particularly sports

writers, that they had to be charged with alcohol in order that they might write their best stories, or spend a lot of time polishing bars with thirsty gents in the sports world to develop their so-called "friendship." You can take it from one who has gone through the mill that this is all a mistaken idea. A good-fellow Charlie who slaps you on the back and helps to sap that vitality as a result of his companionship in what is laughingly called the "social" use of alcoholic beverages, will be gone when you need the spark that the alcohol burned out. You will be holding a big sack.

You have often heard about the fellow in tough luck referred to as having two strikes on him. No batter was ever in a worse spot with a call of two and nothing than the writer who gets up in the morning after a big night, nursing a hang-over.

With all the conveniences available today, and with all the space being made available for sports writers—telegraph, radio, television and modern press boxes at your disposal, with nearly everybody sports-minded—the world is your oyster, if you want to be a sports writer or a sports editor.

Tim Hurst, the famous umpire, once said about his job as an umpire, "You can't beat them hours." Nowhere do I know of a finer means of making a living at the same time enjoying one's self and seeing the world, than being a sports writer or a sports editor.

Remember, your University has been able to go only so far. Also remember that the field is big and much more profitable than in the olden days when Hans Wagner, Larry Lajoie, Walter Johnson and

Cy Young were paid peanuts compared with today's salaries. However, success is not to be measured only by the number of numerals after the dollar sign.

Look to, and develop your own talents for even something further worth while. Just as a gardener tills his flower garden, use your own hands to develop your future.

The University has done its part and I wish you one and all every success.