Sports Journalism

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Introduction

Sports journalism is the disciplined craft of watching people compete. It’s the informed and educated ability to watch that competition at both the grand and atomic level, distill it into a meaningful contemporary and historical context, and report it briskly and clearly in ways that are insightful, informative, entertaining, and memorable. It is a pressured joy—the job that everyone seems to want but few seemingly can do expertly.

At the highest level, professionals in the sports-journalism industry travel great distances to witness monumental games broadcast to an international audience keenly interested in athletes or teams representing the hopes and dreams of a peculiar, but passionate, group of invested individuals known as fans. At the atomic level, sports journalists chronicle the private and quiet, but equally important, hum of everyday competition. They report from Little League baseball stadia, pee wee football fields, city basketball gymnasiums, community soccer pitches, municipal golf courses, middle-school tennis complexes, town bowling alleys, neighborhood swimming pools, and far-flung volleyball courts in county seats an hour away from the news bureau. The essential role of the sports journalist is to go to an event, watch it, and tell everyone who was not there what happened.

But there is so much more to it.

The modern sports journalist is a walking, talking, and critically thinking Swiss Army Knife. He or she covers games, breaks emerging news, profiles personalities, documents regular events such as the Olympics, chronicles entire seasons, narrates nonfiction literary journalism, investigates corruption, explains complex issues, reports business transactions, produces series, parses data, requests open government records, attends public meetings, builds graphics, hosts radio programs, records audio, shoots video, edits video, blogs, maintains multiple Twitter accounts, collates pictures on other social media such as Instagram, and effectively manages a broad definition of news on many different platforms. Sports journalism is no longer about merely writing words. It’s about executing news distribution in every form imaginable.
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According to the American Press Institute:

*Journalism is the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. It is also the product of these activities …Journalism can be distinguished from other activities and products by certain identifiable characteristics and practices. These elements not only separate journalism from other forms of communication, they are what make it indispensable to democratic societies. History reveals that the more democratic a society, the more news and information it tends to have. (API 2015)*

This applies to sports as much as it does civic life. But how and why? What makes the subject of sports worth reporting with the same vigor as, say, government, culture, the economy, or Hollywood?

People pay attention to sports. They expect their media outlets to keep them informed about the games they watch, the people who play those games, and the myriad issues surrounding those people. For example, in Gallup Poll surveys conducted between February 1993 and December 2013, at least 32% of Americans self-identified as fans of baseball. Those same surveys found that 42–63% of respondents identified as fans of American football; 32–49% considered themselves fans of American college football; 24–38% identified as fans of professional basketball; 29–38% considered themselves fans of college basketball; 18–24% identified as professional ice hockey fans; 24–31% identified as fans of automobile racing; 13–19% as fans of professional soccer (European football); and 69% as fans of the Olympic Games.

Sports represent an enormous, powerful industry. Estimates from Plunkett Research indicate the international sports market could be worth as much as US$1.5 trillion a year; the four major professional leagues in the United States—the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, the National Hockey League, and Major League Baseball—account for $23 billion of the nation’s $485 billion industry. More than 133,000 people in the United States worked in spectator sports in 2013, according to the US Department of Labor Statistics. The global sports market produced revenues of $46.5 billion in 2005. Projections indicate that total will reach nearly $91 billion by 2017. Sports-centric companies are among the largest in the world, registering more than $44 billion in revenues. Nike, the Oregon-based sports-equipment company, exceeded $27 billion alone in 2014. Fans of sports are willing to spend considerable personal wealth on closer proximity to their favorite athletes and teams.
On December 12, 2014, Richard Sandomir of the New York Times reported on the policy of some American universities to sell to the highest bidder access to press boxes, seats behind the team bench, and space in the end zones of a football field. In one case, the University of Southern California sold access to a party for $15,800 before its football game in 2008 against Ohio State University. Rutgers University in New Jersey, for instance, has expanded its revenue stream by selling opportunities to associate with members of other athletics programs:

*Although most experiences revolve around football and basketball, Rutgers has tried to diversify its offerings. Geoff Brown, the marketing director for the university’s athletic department, recently initiated a program to create experiences in other sports. Among those currently accepting auction bids: a swimming lesson from that team’s coach, Phil Spiniello; a ride with the women’s rowing coach, Max Borghard; a private hitting lesson from the softball coaches; and a one-hour practice run with the women’s soccer assistant coaches. (Sandomir 2014)*

Sports matter. They factor into the economy and culture. People unite behind sports, just as they separate in the spirit of team alignment. Sports give to people friendly—and sometimes less-than-friendly—sides to choose. They form and maintain communities that last lifetimes. They establish identities. Sports are critical to the human experience. The role of sports journalism therefore transcends the matter of who won, who lost, and the score.

**General learning outcomes**

After you have studied this course, you will be able to:

- Discuss the historical, societal, and cultural elements of sports journalism.
- Differentiate the many faces of its audience.
- Understand the range of platforms, their differences, and their similarities.
- Analyze sports as news, entertainment, and culture.
- Consider sports topics in proper context and perspective.
- Explain the essential elements of effective professional reporting, execution, and finding a home for sports journalism.
- Identify story ideas in sports.
- Shape, report and research, outline, and prepare those stories.
Chapter 1: Sports and sports journalism

Learning outcomes

After you have studied this chapter, you will be able to:
- Define sports journalism as a distinct profession.
- Discuss the evolution of that profession.
- Identify the themes behind the human motivation for competition.
- Qualify specific topics for sports journalism.
- Compare sports journalism to other forms of journalism.

1.1 A brief history of sports journalism

The first recorded moment in organized sports dates to 776 BC, when games organized on the plains of ancient Olympia and dedicated to the gods christened what we now know as the Olympic Games. The early Games included two major events: equestrian and pentathlon. Running, jumping, wrestling, javelin, and discus were soon added. The games were staged every four years until 393 AD, when the Roman emperor Theodosius instituted a ban, citing their pagan nature.

The ban failed to last.

In the new United States of America, Southern landowners cheered crude boxing matches between African slaves. However, the history of organized sports in the United States began with the creation of the New York Knickerbockers in the 1840s. The social club, composed of doctors, lawyers, and other distinguished professional men, formed the first known baseball team. British colonists brought their own sporting pursuits, notably individual sports such as rowing. The first intercollegiate sporting contest, a rowing competition between Harvard and Yale, occurred in 1852. Seven years later, Amherst and Williams met on a baseball field. Princeton and Rutgers debuted college football a decade later.
Chapter 2
The critical identities of sports journalism

Learning outcomes

After you have studied this chapter, you will be able to:

- Consider sports events, issues, and personalities in distinct ways that merit different journalistic approaches.
- Understand when sports topics require treatment as news.
- Identify sports topics as entertainment, their most common form.
- Embrace the cultural implications of sports.
- Approach sports and sports journalism with context and perspective.

2.1 Sports as news

Hours before dawn one morning in February 2014, a famous football player for the Baltimore Ravens of the National Football League entered a casino elevator with his wife. Ray and Janay Rice had been drinking. They also had been arguing. Neither of those is necessarily newsworthy—even for a public figure such as a celebrity athlete.

But then Ray Rice knocked out Janay with a right fist to her jaw. A security camera inside the elevator recorded the act. That’s when it became news.

Sports journalists must be absolutely prepared for those inevitable moments when their work broadens in scope. It could be when a blockbuster deal sends a star player to another team—that’s a story about business and finance, which are two subjects sports journalists need to study. It could be when the Boston Marathon becomes the target of two young men with homemade bombs—that’s a spot-news story, which requires a skill set demanding nimbleness, quick and clear thinking, absolute accuracy and the ability to follow a fast-moving story as it unspools. It could be when the University of Texas and Texas A&M University end a century-old rivalry because one of the schools moves to a new conference—that’s a story with
Chapter 3: Forms of sports journalism

Learning outcomes

After you have studied this chapter, you will be able to:

- Define the five essential principles of sound sports journalism.
- Apply those principles to other platforms.
- Discuss sports journalism on broadcast platforms (i.e., television, radio).
- Analyze sports journalism on the internet.
- Understand the risks and promises of sports journalism in weblogs.

3.1 Sports journalism in print media

Sports journalism began, in an abstract way, as an oral platform. People were telling each other about the games they saw long before Johannes Gutenberg invented moveable-type printing in the 15th century, an innovation that made print journalism possible. Early newspapers allowed wide distribution of print stories which described sporting events for a general audience. Niche magazines such as Sports Illustrated, the Sporting News, and others focused on well-defined audiences with particular interest in sports. Print stories, the foundation of sports journalism, continue to tell the world about what happened, where, when, why, and how. They make up the soul of sports journalism.

Sports journalism for print—defined here as general-interest newspapers and niche-interest magazines—involves five basic but essential principles. These principles are relatively important to any work of journalism. They matter more to print—or written-word—journalism because print is a more permanent, lasting form than broadcast, which long ago supplanted print as the authority in fast-moving breaking news (this will be discussed later).

1. The most important conceptual principle is focus. A winning sports story is about something specific. It includes detail that is relevant to that focus. It requires a level of discipline from the journalist, who in the best of circumstances defines a story before a single word is committed
Chapter 4: 

Sports journalism as craft: 
Doing the work

Learning outcomes

After you have studied this chapter, you will be able to:

- Formulate proven to find potential sports stories.
- Watch sports as a journalist, not just a spectator.
- Plan interview questions.
- Understand concepts such as depth of reporting and control of story focus.
- Incorporate effective levels of detail, using the Ladder of Abstraction, into your writing.

4.1 Searching for ideas

We have thus far discussed the origins and evolution of sports journalism in the United States. We have considered the themes of sports and how they apply to sports journalism. We have identified the differences between sports as news, entertainment, and culture. We have pondered the importance of context and perspective. We also have learned the basic distinctions between print, television, radio, and internet sports journalism.

The final section of this course will prepare you to do the work we have discussed in the abstract. It might be helpful to think about the previous three sections as ideas. The fourth section is about the skills. It’s about how to do the level of work necessary to get noticed—from how to look for stories to how to pitch them for broadcast or publication.

It should be noted here that much of what constitutes sports journalism worldwide is known as commentary or opinion. This is the kind of work famous columnists, from Dan Jenkins to Rick Reilly to Christine Brennan to Sally Jenkins, are paid handsomely to provide from international locations—wherever big sporting events are being played, from wherever important sports news is developing. Commentary requires the same levels of clarity of thought, depth of reporting, and precision of execution that
Bibliography


About the author

Kevin Robbins is a senior lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches sports journalism and feature writing. He spent 22 years working for American newspapers such as the Austin American-Statesman, the Memphis Commercial Appeal and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. He also has written for Sports On Earth, Kansas City Magazine and Travel + Leisure Golf magazine, and his first book, a biography of the late golf professional Harvey Penick, will be published in 2016 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Robbins has two Bachelor of Science degrees, in psychology and journalism, from the University of Central Missouri, and a master’s degree in journalism from the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University.
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