## the BEST AMERICAN SPORTS WRITING

## RICHARD BEN CRAMER editor

GLENN STOUT, series editor

# The Best AMERICAN SPORTS WRITING™ 2004 江苏工业学院图书馆 Edited and with an Indiodution章 by Richard Ren-Cramer

Glenn Stout, Series Editor



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON • NEW YORK 2004

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ISSN 1056-8034 ISBN 0-618-25134-0 ISBN 0-618-25130-1 (pbk.)

Printed in the United States of America

MP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 -

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## The Best American Sports Writing 2004

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#### **Foreword**

SPORTSWRITERS have never had a higher profile. Although most of us dwell deep within the nether reaches of the field, a great many are "famous," and a few are six- and even seven-figures rich, autograph-scrawling celebrities nearly as well known as those they write about.

But, generally speaking, not because of anything they have written.

Over the last two decades or so, as the really big money has come into sports and helped spawn things like cable channels, Internet sites, and all-sports radio, there has been a lot of spillover for those who write about sports for a living. There may not be more jobs or more markets, but there is unquestionably more opportunity to become famous and make money. Not too long ago, the only sportswriters whose names meant anything away from their home territory were those on staff at a certain few magazines, the handful whose work was widely syndicated, the strays who crossed over into network broadcasting, and the odd duck or two who managed to write a best-selling book.

All those rooms are crowded now. This is not altogether bad, for in the past few years blockbuster books by sportswriters have become something of a staple of the best-seller list, and there is a steady market even for those books that don't reach blockbuster status. Nothing wrong with that, particularly for those of us who try to eke out a living in the book world. A generation ago, that was all but impossible. Now it is only implausible.

xii Foreword

Oddly, though, many of today's best-known sportswriters are not celebrated for the quality of their work on the page, but for the volume of their words spoken on the airwaves. Off the top of my head I can name a couple of dozen whose fame — as far as I can tell — stems neither from their written words nor even from anything specific they have ever said. Their notoriety comes almost entirely from the fact that they seem to appear on cable or radio twenty-four hours a day and apparently never shut up. I'm not sure if some of these writers were actually any good at their initial craft to begin with, or in some cases if they even write at all anymore.

But I do know this — they may have become famous and they may have become rich, but very few have become better writers. More successful? Perhaps. Richer? Certainly. But better? Not many.

To be fair, there are some distinctions in broadcasting media—it is not all the same. Sometimes the broadcast media serves the written word, as in documentaries, which are scripted so that a writer either reads what he or she has written, reports, comments about his or her own work, or is asked to comment on a topic on which, clearly, he or she has a certain specific and unique expertise. But the real glory in the industry today seems to stem from something else entirely—personality-based punditry, or the ability to yammer on endlessly about whatever happens to be coming down the pike.

I must admit that despite my personal appearance and tendency to cough at inopportune times, I have been on television and radio myself, both as a true contributor and as one of these amorphous pundits. It is difficult to say no to the broadcast media, particularly because exposure on the airwaves can help sell books or promote one's writing, and when one has a particular expertise about a given topic, such appearances are totally appropriate. But I'm no innocent. On a few occasions I have also been asked to appear on television or radio because — well, I'm not sure exactly why I was asked. As far as I could tell, (a) there was airtime to be filled and (b) I answered the phone when called by some twelve-year-old producer who didn't know better. Fortunately, talking is not very hard — ask any two-year-old.

One is understandably flattered to be asked, and when the invitation comes with the promise of a check, there is added motivation to accept because talking generally pays a great deal better than Foreword xiii

writing. The last time I was asked to talk on air it was at the exorbitant rate of about \$1,200 per hour — most writing pays closer to minimum wage. There is also a certain cachet that comes along with such requests. A great many more people, particularly players and athletes, watch TV or listen to the radio than read newspapers, books, or magazines. Incorrectly, however, the writer who regularly appears on TV or radio is assumed to be both better and more important than the poor scribe who appears only in print, rearranging the same twenty-six letters over and over again.

But for some this creates an awkward dilemma. I know a few writers who are contractually required by their alphabet employers to make appearances on other media, even though they hate it, aren't very good at it, and would prefer not to. They look and sound like they detest every moment and resent the time and energy it takes from their primary job as a writer. I know others for whom such appearances are not required yet they are nevertheless pressured to accept them, no matter what effect it might have on their writing responsibilities.

At the same time, there are others — and more of them every day — for whom talking is the end goal of their writing career. They remind me of the kid who abandons the classroom for the gym in the wan dream of becoming a superstar. Rather than spending time on the craft, there are many in this industry who write only because of the dim hope that it will allow them to pole-vault into the easy money and celebrity benefits that come from making it on television and radio.

And why not, apart from the deception and desperation inherent in such a quest? After all, each of us has bills to pay, families to take care of, and retirement to think about. While those motivations are understandable, there is still something unseemly, even disingenuous, about abandoning the written word in favor of the spoken while still flaunting one's chops as a writer. It is reminiscent of the ill ease one experiences in the presence of a former athlete who demands to be recognized or shills autographs and anecdotes at a card show, cashing in on what he used to be. So, too, for many a writer-turned-pundit. It is a crude admission that writing, well, just isn't that important, and that attitude often shows in the print work of the professional pundit, who isn't a writer anymore so much as some inarticulate kind of "authority." From my experience, I un-

xiv Foreword

derstand that to mean a person who answers the phone when it rings and afterward is recognized at the bar.

Many seem either to forget or to be completely unaware that there is an enormous difference between writing and speaking. On the airwaves — deservedly — the words just disappear. They are rarely, if ever, recalled. To read the transcribed words of a pundit is like eating air. There isn't a collection entitled *The Best American Sports Smack*, and I don't think there ever will be. Most of it comes off as so much verbal dog-paddling — a loud splashing of one-liners on the surface of things. A day later — hallelujah — it is gone for good. But writing, particularly good writing, lasts here and elsewhere. Last time I checked, the public library wasn't collecting punditry and no one was clamoring for it to do so.

None of this would matter if not for two factors. One is that both television and radio try to get our attention by any means possible, usually by gravitating to the outrageous. Far too often the speaker blabbers on out of ignorance or lets slip some crude and pathetic comment with racist or sexist overtones that embarrasses not only the reputation of the speaker but the entire profession. The issue is not one of political correctness but of public stupidity. Yet even worse is the influence this has on writing, and writers, particularly those who are too young to know better or too ambitious to care and far too eager to listen rather than read. Instead of looking to other writing as a model, too many ape the worst qualities of "sports-talk" in print, presumably with the goal of making the transition from the page. The result is writing that aspires to have the same effect — writing informed not by language or literature but by schtick, by the not-so-comic or clever monologue that attempts to shock, provoke, or otherwise exhibit "edginess." Far more often than not such work is neither shocking nor edgy nor provocative but sophomoric, gossipy, trivial, predictable, disposable, and utterly forgettable, as entertaining as watching someone else's child in a pool trying to learn to swim and blubbering, "Look at me!"

From where I sit the best writing — regardless of style or approach — is essentially a search for the truth, however ephemeral that may be. I think one becomes a writer because putting words on the page is a document of learning, the consequence of hours and days and sometimes years of inquiry presented in a clear and coherent form that reveals something valuable, lasting, and previ-

Foreword

ously unknown. As the poet Jack Spicer wrote, the best writing "has an infinitely small vocabulary" — every word matters and is necessary. Punditry, on the other hand, is usually whatever temporarily sticks when thrown against the wall — unedited thinking that would have been best left private. Elevating that into a kind of public discourse considered more consequential than writing is both to abandon learning and to diminish the craft.

This book tries to serve as a small antidote to all that. Writing remains the best way to communicate, and the best writing is far better at drawing and holding an audience than the most prolific or profound punditry. Readers of this book can and do sit and listen to the words of writers for hours, longer and far more carefully than they listen to anyone on radio or television — there are reasons apart from safety you can't read and drive a car. When the author has done his or her task well, those careful words are heard and returned to again and again, informing and illuminating our lives.

A long time ago I received perhaps the best single piece of advice I have ever received about writing. I was complaining ad infinitum to a friend about a writing project, about the ten thousand problems I had with both the project and the demands of the subject. When I finally finished my screed, my friend — a writer — waited a moment to make sure that I was done, then scrawled something on a napkin and pushed it to me across the table.

It read, "I think you need to shut up and write."

Every season I read every issue of hundreds of sports and general interest magazines in search of writing that might merit inclusion in *The Best American Sports Writing*. I also contact the sports editors of some three hundred newspapers and request their submissions. Similarly, I ask hundreds of magazine editors to provide complimentary subscriptions and/or submit individual stories.

But I also encourage writers, readers, and all other interested parties to send me stories they've written or read in the past year that they would like to see reprinted in this volume — please feel free to alert me to either your own work or that of someone else. Believe me, for reasons I'm not privy to there are more than a few publications that purposely withhold one writer's work in favor of another's. A good description of the selection process can be

xvi Foreword

found in the December 2000 issue of the Associated Press Sports Editors newsletter.

The best seventy-five stories or so go to the guest editor for the final selection. Richard Ben Cramer approached his duties this year with enthusiasm, and the result is a volume of which we are both justifiably proud.

To be considered for inclusion in *The Best American Sports Writing* 2005, each nonfiction story will have to have been published in 2004 in either the United States or Canada and be column-length or longer. Reprints or book excerpts will not be eligible. All submissions must be received by February 1, 2005.

Submissions must include the name of the author, the date of publication, and the publication name and address. Photocopies, tear sheets, or clean copies are fine. Readable reductions to 8½-by-11 are best. Submissions from online publications must be made in hard copy, and those who submit stories from newspapers should submit the story in hard copy as published. Since newsprint generally suffers in transit, newspaper stories are best mounted on 8½by-11 paper, and if the story also appeared online, with the appropriate URL. There is no limit to the number of submissions either an individual or a publication may make, but please be reasonable and use common sense. Owing to the volume of material I receive, no submission can be returned or acknowledged. I also believe it is inappropriate for me to comment on or critique any individual submission. Publications that want to be absolutely certain their contributions are considered are advised to provide a complimentary subscription to the address listed below. Those that already do so should make sure to extend the subscription.

Please note that all submissions should be sent by U.S. or Canadian mail to this exact address:

Glenn Stout Series Editor The Best American Sports Writing PO Box 549 Alburg, VT 05440

Those with questions or comments may contact me at baswed @sover.net. No submissions of material will be accepted electronically.

Foreword xvii

Copies of previous editions of this book can be ordered through most bookstores or online book dealers. An index of stories that have appeared in this series can be found at glennstout.net.

Thanks again go out to those in the front office of Houghton Mifflin who allow me to continue to work on a project of a lifetime, particularly my former editor Eamon Dolan and my new editor Susan Canavan, Sarah Gabert, and Larry Cooper. Thanks also to Richard Ben Cramer for his gracious effort, the Web site sports journalists.com for posting submission guidelines, and Siobhan and Saorla for sharing me again with so many words. Most of all, however, my gratitude extends to those who still find writing and reading of unceasing value.

GLENN STOUT

#### Introduction

AT LAST, in my mid-fifties, I have the answer to a question I used to mull as a boy: what is the one thing I would need to abide on a desert island? I thought about this not well but often, and with a calisthenic seriousness — part of my program for misspending my youth. I don't mean this was obsessive — let's be clear about that — it was just a game.

See, you had to imagine how you would get to the island with the one thing—how, for instance, you would swim ashore with dry matches when your whole ship was scuttled in the watery deep... though magic was permitted: it could be an endless supply of dry matches. The problem was, if you went for something useful, like fire, then you had an endless supply of boredom—and a future in an asylum should you be rescued. So sometimes I'd struggle ashore with the corpus of Roman literature (magically restored in its complete variety), which guaranteed my sanity and a post-rescue future as the world's unchallenged Latin savant. Then again, I couldn't boil water...

So too often, alas, I'd have to cheat: the real question was the two things you'd need... At that point I'd have to start over of course—to reimagine how I'd swim ashore with the matches and all of Roman literature. (No! Even better! I swim with the matches, see, but the island used to be a Roman island—the literature is squirreled away there. They sent out the emperor's whole library when the Visigoths were beating at the gates!)

Okay, maybe it was a tad obsessive.

But that doesn't matter now. Now I have the answer. One great

xx Introduction

thing — and our island a paradise! . . . It is the satellite dish with the sports-pack subscription. I know, I know — there's a little problem about the electricity. If you must get *technical*, there's a shortage of desert islands these days, too. But it's the why, not the wherewithal, I mean to discuss here.

After all, what's the one thing needful at our new beach place once we've mastered, you know, the beginner's stuff: shelter, fire, desalination, and the finer points of cuisine (the coconut goulash, the coconut soufflé). What we need is a sure and ample connection to our fellow beings, to the human condition, to the drama (could I say meaning?) of life.

I don't mean to rewrite Genesis — to suggest that God worked for six days so Detroiters could root on the Red Wings. (Though it's tempting: how else to explain the peculiarly hurlable physiognomy of the octopus?) And I won't sell the snake oil that sports is life — or the best part of life, or life writ small, or life lived large, or life as it should be (if life had rules). Forget that hooey. It's only sports.

But I do contend that, on any given day, sports will offer us stories — the most human stories — in richer supply, and more reliably, than any other branch of endeavor. Stories are how we understand our lives. And if you break down the elements in stories from the sporting life, it reads like the to-do list from a screenwriting seminar. In sports we have heroes — attractive individuals with exemplary talents. By their grace, dedication, courage, and the luck of the draw, they have a chance to achieve, not just for themselves but for something larger — for their families or fans, their team, their town or the nation, or history. They must contend, against long odds and serial difficulties - their own human tendency to weakness or error and the villainy of rivals — to the end of the game, the tournament, or the season, where we have for our story clear winners and losers. Or they contend through a career, which we may see in its birth, its growth and prime, its downslope and demise — a small death for our delectation. But in this regard sports is much better than the rest of human existence; in sports we have stories from the afterlife.

In fact, in this collection we present a selection of treats from the afterlife or its near environs — from a scandal uncovered by the great turf writer William Nack about our equine athletes in hell to

Introduction xxi

Joe Posnanski's visit with Tony Peña at the ball fields of his youth, which is a glimpse of a man who went to heaven. Bill Plaschke (does this guy ever write anything bad?) makes us witness to the moment when an ex-Dodger learns he's gone to heaven. There is also Paul Solotaroff's empathetic portrait of Mickey Mantle's sons, who are trapped in the afterlife of an afterlife. And there's a sweet sharp line drive of a piece by Joan Ryan, who freeze-frames Andres Galarraga gleefully stealing time until his judgment day.

On the subject of sports bending time, there is a strong and rueful look back with Charlie Pierce to the NFL's worst day. And there's a strange, brave essay by Rick Telander, from SI, which is written from a place so deep in the interstice between sports and time (and life in its moments) that I have no words to characterize the story — except to call it one-of-a-kind and magnificent.

I should confess here to some prejudice in the selection of these pieces for reprint. I tend to like stories that treat a whole life, or at least the connection between sports and the rest of life. It makes good sense to me that how a person is—the conditions of his or her larger life—explains, or at least illuminates, how that person plays and competes. I have to call it a prejudice, because art is never plane geometry: I used to think the author of a great book had to be a great person. (It turns out that's not true.)

This book is rich in profiles that straddle sport and the rest of being. There are great examples of life shaping athletic excellence. The starkest is Steve Friedman's wondrous tale of manic-depression fueling a down-and-out Scotsman to ride a bike faster than any man ever had. There are rip-snorting portraits of a camera-loving young bass fisherman and the dame terrible of the WNBA. SI's splendid Gary Smith contributes a better-than-splendid look at why Mia Hamm simply can't think of herself. Peter de Jonge's masterly profile of Amare Stoudemire shows basketball as a life's sense and salvation. And once you read Peter Hessler's study of Yao Ming at home and away, you'll wonder how the man plays basketball with a billion Chinese on his back. One of the strangest and most compelling contributions is this book's only piece of athlete autobiography: Lynne Cox describes her swimming career and its culmination, a swim to Antarctica. The plainest language shows us how hard and cold it was. And it shows us, too, the other side of the xxii Introduction

life-and-sport coin — how a sporting dream can take over and become life.

It strikes me as wonderful what a wide swath of life these sports stories cover. Or you could call this another prejudice of mine for the wide-angle view of what is sports writing. I'm pleased that the book contains some glimpses of the underbelly of sports — in a mordant Sun-Times account of how the Cubs are scalping their own tickets, or in Lisa Olson's sharp-eyed look at the girls who bed the big-time ballplayers. Michael Leahy's Washington Post Magazine piece about the last days of the Michael Jordan Wizards is tight and right on the basketball, but it's also a fine political story. Carlton Stowers, from the Dallas Observer, uses six-man high school football to tell the story of a whole Texas town. When Guy Martin writes about flats fishing, it's sporting for sure (because the fish mostly win), but it's about nothing less than how guys are. And when The New Yorker's Susan Orlean files from the far frontier of taxidermy ... well, I'm not sure if it's sport, but I know it's too good to leave out of the book.

I have a couple more prejudices to explain here — happily without example. There's no gossip. There were a few submissions that attempted to judge the Kobe Bryant rape case, based on stuff his "friends" said. They're not in the book. And there are in this volume very few statistics. Big numbers are the punch line for writers who can't write how it was.

When someone does write how it was, or how it is, it thrills us with the same exultation that we feel when a fellow being excels on the field, the court, the course, or the track. It shows us the possibility of perfection, the hope that we might, through grace and grit, loose the human bonds of error and mediocrity. In fact, you couldn't have one excellence without the other. Of course, sportswriters need great athletes to write about. But it is also true that since the first marathon (from Marathon!), since the days of gladiators and the (Winston?) Chariot Cup, there could be no dream of athletic immortality without somebody to sing of it.

I don't think it's stretching things to say that the writers in this book show, in their field, the same sort of hyper-acuity that athletic heroes show in their games. Like the athletes, most of these writers have been better at their game than their supposed peers for a long