Sports Journalism

A Practical Introduction

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SAGE

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SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

First published 2005

SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
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London EC1Y 1SP

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Thousand Oaks, California 91320

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B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 1 4129 0270 3
ISBN 1 4129 0271 1 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004099433

Typeset by C&M Digitals (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Athenaeum Press, Gateshead

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1 The best job in the world?

It's the best job in the world, isn't it? Travelling the globe, watching the big sporting events free from the best seats in the stadium, mingling with star players and athletes, seeing your byline in the newspapers or broadcasting to millions on radio or television, and being paid a lot of money for the privilege. That's the way many people see a sports writer's job. The reality can be rather different. Hard and demanding work to tight deadlines, long and unsocial hours (most of them worked in the evenings or at weekends), a lot of time spent in research and preparation, acquiring the same depth of knowledge about the sports you cover as the most fanatical of your readers or listeners, earning the trust of a wide range of contacts among players, coaches and administrators, and the skill to write accurately and entertainingly at great speed and often under difficult conditions.

Nevertheless, there is no shortage of people willing to put up with all that for the undoubted rewards and satisfactions sports journalism brings. Jobs in the media, and in sports journalism in particular, are more avidly sought after than almost any other. Fortunately, the opportunities are expanding, too – though there will never be enough seats in press boxes to accommodate every aspiring sports journalist.

Sport is the fastest-growing sector in the British media, and the same applies in most other English-speaking countries. Not long ago, the exploits of muddied oafs and flannelled fools were confined to two or three pages at the back of newspapers, and to weekend afternoons on radio and television. Today, sports men and women are among the best-known and best-paid people on the planet. The world wants to read and hear about them and the ranks of those who are paid to satisfy that demand are expanding

accordingly. Sports people now feel the glare of the media spotlight more powerfully than almost anyone else in society. It's not unusual to find a hundred journalists covering a single match in English soccer's Premier League, and the jobs of national team managers are second in importance, in media terms, only to those of the head of state.

Sports coverage is vitally important to the health and prosperity of the print and broadcast media. The British newspaper market is the most competitive in the world, and increasingly, that competition takes place on the sports pages. From two or three pages at the back of the paper a few years ago, many national daily and Sunday newspapers have now expanded their sports coverage to daily, separate sections of up to 28 broadsheet pages – more space than they devote to general news or the arts.

In broadcasting, sport has spawned new radio stations in both the public and commercial sectors – BBC 5Live and Talksport. It's also in the vanguard of the battle for television ratings. The rights to cover important sporting events are fiercely contested between both terrestrial and satellite and cable channels. The success of Sky TV as a satellite broadcaster has not been built on the first television run of feature films, as originally intended, but around its acquisition of the rights to cover major sporting events live. As a consequence, the demands of the broadcasters have reshaped the sporting calendar, fragmenting the traditional Saturday afternoon hegemony in soccer, encouraging day/night cricket matches and converting rugby league from a winter into a summer sport.

The growth of the internet has generated a huge variety of websites devoted to sport, operated by media organisations, sports clubs and organisations, and fans. This new technology also means job opportunities for sports journalists because it offers an extra source of income to the media by providing sports updates and reports on the web or by mobile phone. In addition to their websites, the biggest clubs now also have their own television channels, a trend that is likely to expand as more sports organisations wake up to the commercial possibilities.

It's not difficult to see why sport is so attractive to the media. They have the same number of pages and the same amount of airtime to fill no matter what is happening (or not happening) in the world, but hard news is an unpredictable commodity. What's more, stories generated by governments and politicians are often found boring by many people and, as the political parties huddle together in the middle ground for popular support, have lost their power to generate controversy and debate.

Sport is the exact opposite. It is predictable in the sense that the media know months in advance when the big events are going to happen, it has its own in-built excitement and drama, and a cast of stars. Hollywood should be so lucky.

The international sporting calendar goes from World Cups to Olympic Games to Test matches to Super Bowls to Grand Nationals and Boat Races without cease. Sport could have been invented for an industry selling a daily dose of sensation.

It could also have been devised as a ready-made source of material for those who enjoy writing. That is just as important an element in successful sports writing as enjoying sport. 'Sports writer', as the term suggests, is made up of two words – 'sports' and 'writer' – and to succeed you will need to be enthusiastic about both. It's not enough merely to enjoy football or athletics or racing: you must be able to convey your knowledge and enthusiasm to others in a lively and entertaining way, and to be willing to devote as much time to practising your writing skills as the sports people about whom you are writing spend practising theirs.

Sports journalism is a specialist form of writing, and it is broken down into narrower specialisms. The major sports, such as soccer, cricket, rugby, racing, golf, tennis and athletics, are usually covered by specialists in these fields. Why? Because fans know their sports and their teams inside out, and unless sports journalists want to look foolish and ill-informed, they need to be equally knowledgeable. Keeping abreast of the daily developments in a major sport is a full-time job. Only a few journalists are able to pick and choose the sports and events they cover. These are usually the brightest, wittiest or most incisive writers – columnists or feature writers with a roving brief to provide 'colour' pieces about the key moments in the world of sport.

But sports writing consists of more than just covering the big events. The media have space to fill, no matter what is going on, and they do so by whetting the appetites of their consumers with pieces building up to events, profiling the participants, and analysing performances, as well as with a steady flow of background news and features. And sport often bursts out of the sports pages when the activities of high-profile people hit the front pages or the top of the news bulletins, or cross over into other specialist areas such as fashion, business or medicine.

To cover sport successfully, you need to know the requirements of the medium for which you are working, and you need to understand the audience who will be consuming your work. Serious and popular newspapers and specialist sports magazines have unique styles, and sport is covered differently by print journalists and broadcasters. Radio demands a different set of skills from those of television, while internet journalism is a whole new ballgame. This book will help you to acquire those skills. The craft of the sports journalist *can* be learned. Indeed, beginners have a head start over those seeking to acquire almost any other skill. Many of us consume the work of professional sports journalists every day, and will have

absorbed some of their skills unconsciously. What's more, the tools of the trade are cheap and readily to hand: pen and paper and access to radio, television and newspapers are all that is required.

The following chapters break down the job of the sports journalist into its component parts, and look at every aspect of the skills required in detail. They also offer exercises designed to help you internalise those skills and hone them to professional standards.

The book ends with advice on how to get started in a very competitive field. That is something which often demands great perseverance and a long apprenticeship. But if you're prepared for all this, sports journalism *can* be the best job in the world.

2 Context setting: media environments

Summary Chapter Contents

The media's influence on sport
Sport's influence on the media
Organisation and practice of sports departments and sports journalists
Media markets and audience awareness
Sport's cultural significance

Learning Objectives

- To understand the organisation and needs of the media
- To recognise the importance of sports journalism to the media's commercial success
- To identify the constraints within which media organisations operate in the sports market
- To understand what determines the sports agenda of news organisations in different markets
- To recognise how media audiences determine content and style

The media has an important and growing role in the culture of developed countries. As leisure time has expanded and access to radio and television has become almost universal, not only in the home but also in cars and in pubs and clubs, so the demand for material with which to fill the

burgeoning number of media outlets has grown. The expansion of leisure has also led to an upsurge in public interest in sport, and a corresponding growth in the commercial success of major sports clubs and organisations. Manchester United, Real Madrid and the New York Yankees are no longer simply sports clubs but global brands.

If media organisations are to remain successful in an extremely competitive market, they must reflect such movements in our culture and in the interests of their consumers. Indeed, the media not only reflect the culture in which they operate and the interests of their readers and viewers, they also help to form that culture and those interests.

The media's influence on sport

Much of the recent growth of interest in sport has been driven by the media, in particular satellite television, which has bought the rights to major sporting events and promoted them vigorously as one of the most effective ways of selling subscriptions to its services. To compete, terrestrial television (and radio) channels have had to follow suit. This has driven up the cost of media rights and vastly increased the income of sports clubs, governing bodies and professional sports men and women. It has been the major factor in turning many sports clubs into big businesses.

But the money television has put into sport has also given it the power to shape sports to its own ends. Beginning with the introduction by the Australian media mogul Kerry Packer of floodlit international cricket in the 1970s, television went on to fuel the massive growth of interest in soccer worldwide and the expansion of competitions like the European Champions League. It has even turned the traditions of some sports on their heads. Rugby League, a winter game in England for more than a century, has now become a summer sport, for the benefit of the broadcasters. Television has turned sport into a commodity and a sales tool.

Sport's influence on the media

Media organisations have grown and adapted accordingly. New radio stations and television channels have been set up devoted specifically to sport. They have developed radical new programmes such as sports phone-ins and rolling results services to attract and maintain viewers and listeners. There has been a similar growth in specialist and lifestyle publications aimed at specific sections of the media audience, such as young men. They have carved out niche markets, either by covering sport in general or by devoting themselves to individual sports.

Newspapers throughout the developed world are devoting more and more space to sport. This is partly in response to the general upsurge of interest in sport, which is common to all socio-economic classes, and partly because newspapers recognise the influence of television on people's lives, and try to reflect it in there own coverage. The fact that multi-national media organisations like Rupert Murdoch's International Media Group own both satellite television networks and newspapers has undoubtedly influenced the promotion of televised sport in those newspapers. And even those newspaper groups which do not have a stake in television have been forced to pay greater attention to televised sport because their readers subscribe to satellite television channels and have come to expect that service.

With the arrival of the internet, a number of websites devoted to sport were set up by organisations who sought to support them through advertising and by selling online services. As with other online ventures, many of these proved to be unsustainable, and the bursting of the dot.com bubble was followed by a period of consolidation. Many of these sites are now in the ownership of online betting companies, who use the sports content of the sites as bait to attract customers.

The best and most successful websites are those operated by established media organisations such as the BBC, and by sports clubs and organisations which use the web as a marketing tool.

The sports department

Sport is so important to media organisations that all but the smallest operate sports departments as part of their editorial teams, staffed by specialist sports journalists. In the newspaper sector, at both national and regional level, sport is one of the three traditional departments – news and features being the other two – which make up the editorial team.

The sports department is allocated its own section, either free-standing or at the back of the publication, and is responsible for filling its own pages. The department is normally headed by a sports editor, who is responsible to the newspaper's editor, and who is expected to attend editorial conferences alongside the news and features editors, assistant editors and production executives.

The editorial conference determines the news agenda for the day and the space to be allocated to each department in the following day's paper. The number of pages allocated to sport tends to vary from day to day, depending on the day of the week and the sporting agenda on any given day. The sports editor must know what he intends to fill these pages with (normally a combination of news, match reports, features and opinion

pieces) and who is going to provide the copy – staff reporters, freelances or agencies.

The sports team

Most sports departments will have a relatively small team of staff journalists. In addition to the sports editor there will often be a chief sports writer, whose role is normally to provide a descriptive COLOUR PIECE on the major event of the day, and who will therefore cover a wide range of sports. There may also be two or three reporters covering the dominant sport in the area, such as soccer, and perhaps a reporter covering each of two or three other major sports, such as rugby union, cricket and horse racing. Some national newspapers will have reporters covering major sports like soccer based in specific cities or areas of the country so that they can build up close relationships with clubs and individuals in the area they cover.

Other leading sports, such as rugby league, golf, tennis and athletics, may be covered by FREELANCE reporters who have contracts with individual newspapers to supply daily coverage of their particular sport. A number of other freelances, some of them perhaps former professional sports people, may have contracts to provide opinion pieces or expert analysis. Many sports desks will rely on agencies for coverage of minority sports like hockey, ice hockey and basketball. And at weekends or for significant midweek sports programmes, STRINGERS will be asked to provide additional match reports.

The copy provided by these writers is handled by sub-editors. Their role is to check copy as it comes in for factual, spelling and grammatical errors, to make sure it fits the space allocated for it in the paper and to write headlines and picture captions. Some sub-editors may also be involved in page layout and design. The staff team of 'subs' will be supplemented at busy times, such as Saturday afternoons, when a great deal of sport takes place, by 'casual', freelance sub-editors.

Writing standards

Sports writing once had the reputation of being clichéd prose churned out by lazy hacks. If such journalists ever existed, they would have difficulty getting a job today.

The quality of a newspaper's team of sports writers is a significant factor in maintaining audience share in a competitive market. The standard

of writing in sports sections has risen enormously in recent years, so that it now bears comparison with the best of any other forms of journalism. This is as true at the popular end of the market as it is in the 'quality' press. Some forms of sports writing, such as the contributions of writers like Neville Cardus and Alan Ross on cricket, have a long and distinguished history. Now writers on others sports have caught up, and the best modern sports journalism is among the finest writing available anywhere.

Radio and television

The sports team in a radio or television newsroom will operate in a similar way to that in a newspaper newsroom, although the number of staff will usually be smaller. The major difference between the broadcast and print media is that radio and television cover sporting events live. This not only calls for a different range of skills; it also means much more time and effort has to be devoted to organisation. A newspaper can cover a game by sending a journalist and possibly a photographer. Radio can often get away with a commentator and summariser. But live television coverage of a sporting event is a major operation. In addition to a commentator and summariser, journalists and sports professionals may be needed to provide expert analysis, and camera operators, technicians and a director are needed to provide and mix sound and pictures. The appropriate number of outside broadcast vehicles is also needed. Much of the time of producers and researchers working in television, who often work for companies set up to provide sports outside broadcasts, is spent in organising all this.

Filling space

Journalists see themselves in many lights, from guardians of the truth and public watchdogs to entertainers and prose stylists, but the reality is much simpler than that. The basic task of any journalist is to fill space. Newspaper pages and radio and television bulletins have to be filled every day, no matter how many or how few significant events are happening in the world. Sport is a useful commodity for organisations which demand to be fed as regularly as the media because it is, in one sense at least, predictable.

We may not know when or where the next murder or terrorist outrage is going to happen, but we know well in advance exactly when and where sporting events will take place. We know they will provide the copy or pictures to fill a certain amount of space on a given day. Indeed, one of the

reasons satellite television has restructured the sporting calendar is to make sure its schedules are always filled. Not all media organisations have the power to reorganise the sporting calendar to fit their needs, however.

Newspapers are the most demanding of all the media in terms of the quantity and range of sport they need to consume. But the cyclical nature of sport means that most of it tends to take place at weekends or on mid-week evenings. There is rarely much live sport taking place on a Thursday, for instance, but newspapers still need to fill their pages on Friday mornings. To make sure they achieve this, they have to vary the type of sports story they carry according to the day of the week – the emphasis being on match reports after a busy weekend of activity, but with space for more news and features on 'slack' days.

Exercises

1 Collect a week's editions of your favourite newspaper, from Monday to Sunday (including a similar Sunday newspaper if there is no Sunday edition of your chosen paper). Analyse the content of the sports sections, paying particular attention to:

- the number of pages devoted to sport on each day of the week. (Some broadsheet newspapers run tabloid sports sections on certain days. Count two tabloid pages as one broadsheet page.)
- types of story – reports of events, pre-event pieces, news stories, features and profiles
- whether the proportion of each type of article varies according to the day of the week

When you have collated the information, decide whether the day of the week influences the amount of space devoted to sport, and the types of piece used on any given day.

2 Look at the sporting calendar for the coming week. This can usually be found in the sports sections of Sunday newspapers. Try to decide how the fixtures and forthcoming events will affect the number of pages devoted to sport on each day, and how the proportions of reports of events, pre-event pieces, news stories, features and profiles are likely to vary day by day.

Handling copy

Since hot-metal typesetting, in which each letter on the printed page was manufactured in newspaper composing rooms by printers sitting at vast

machines and headlines were set by hand from racks of metal type, was replaced by computer typesetting, the production of newspapers has undergone a radical change. Restrictive practices under which printers re-set every word written by journalists before newspapers could be printed were swept away in the late twentieth century. Newspapers now operate with a fraction of the staff they once did, which is one of the reasons they can afford to increase the number of pages devoted to sport. One result of this is that the involvement of journalists in the physical production of newspapers has increased.

The typed (and sometimes hand-written) COPY, from which compositors set the printed columns of our newspapers, is now a thing of the past in most newsrooms. The copy which journalists key into their computers is now what appears in the newspaper, but the process by which stories are tracked through the production system, and errors are kept to a minimum, has been largely carried over from the days of copy typed on paper.

Each story is given, by the journalist who writes it, a distinctive one-word CATCHLINE, so that there can be no confusion with other stories in the newspaper's system. Catchlines such as *match*, *race* or *winners*, should be avoided, as these names could refer to a number of events. Instead, specific catchlines such as *Bombaytest*, *Kentuckyderby* or *Olympichammer* should be used. This reduces the possibility of mistakes being made when stories are being collated on the sports desk and headlines or pictures attached to them.

The computer systems of many newspapers provide journalists with templates on which their copy should be written. These may have specific boxes for the journalist's BYLINE, the publication for which the piece is intended and the day on which it is scheduled to appear. Journalists FILING copy from outside the office, by LAPTOP computer, e-mail or by telephone to a COPYTAKER, should include their byline at the top of the copy, followed by the name of the publication the piece is intended for and the intended date of publication.

Production DEADLINES dictate that sports reports are often filed in a number of TAKES (see Chapter 5), so the status of the copy (first take, second take or whatever) should also be indicated at the top of the story. If the story is incomplete, the words *more to come* or *more follows*, should appear at the end of the copy. This is sometimes abbreviated to *mf*. At the end of a complete piece of copy, or at the end of the final take, the word *ends* should appear.

A writer's copy is always processed by a sub-editor, who checks it for accuracy and length, before it appears in the newspaper. To avoid unnecessary queries, the writer should always ensure that unusual names or unusual spellings (Phillip instead of Philip, Macmillan instead of McMillan) are followed by the word (*correct*) in brackets. This tells the sub-editor

that the name has been checked and the spelling is accurate. The sub will then remove the word (*correct*) before releasing the story for publication.

Most media organisations have STYLE BOOKS, which offer guidance on such matters as the preferred spelling of certain words, punctuation (especially the style for quotations and the use of exclamation marks), grammar, and how people and organisations should be described. They may also offer guidance on how issues like disabled people in sport, or racism, should be handled.

For ease of reading copy on screen, in-house computer systems will normally use basic typefaces like *Times* or *Ariel*. Journalists filing copy by laptop or e-mail should use similar typefaces.

Copy is then processed, cut to length, given a headline and placed in the appropriate page using computer software such as QuarkXpress. It is at this stage that the typeface is changed to that used in the printed version of the newspaper. Pages will often have been designed in advance, with specific areas allocated to particular reports, although layouts can be changed if circumstances dictate it. A journalist's story does not become HARD COPY until the paper is printed.

The broadcast media have their own dedicated systems for writing scripts and putting in such information as captions and the names of the reporter, newsreader and cameraman. However, every story in a broadcast news bulletin must also have a distinctive catchline, to make sure that the correct tape is played at the right time. Spelling is less important to broadcasters (except in captions). Instead, they have to worry about pronunciation, and where mistakes can be made, scripts should offer guidance to the person who will be reading them (who will rarely be the writer):

> 'The winner was ridden by John Cholmondley (Chumlee) and owned by Mary Featherstonehaugh (Fanshaw).'

Presentation

Journalists normally write their copy on word processors or laptop computers with horizontal, rectangular screens. The lines of copy that appear on their screens are similar in length to those in this book. The paragraphs are only a few lines long and there is plenty of white space, which makes the screen or the page easy on the eye and attractive to the reader.