

Julian Stello

JOR 210

Professor Meagher

December 10, 2015

Research Paper

A History of American Print Sports Journalism

Sports have been a staple amongst American culture historically bringing hope, pride, and unity to citizens who share an affection for their team or favorite sport. Sports coverage has always been created to give fans information about their beloved professional sports team or favorite player. The affluent growth in sports has caused the industry to possess power and influence on the American public. Sports writing dates back to the earliest days of competition in 850 B.C.E. when the famous Greek poet Homer wrote about a wrestling match. The sports covered in Early Greece were wrestling, throwing, boxing, and racing. Early American print sports journalism began as a vulgar hobby for upper class Americans in the 1850s into the time period of Yellow Journalism (1895-1898).¹ The early worldwide view of America being a powerful nation athletically increasingly grew in due part to sports writing, and the way American sports were depicted. Sports are linked in with every countries cultural make-up serving to a valuable audience. The industry of print sports journalism has gone through drastic transitions to continue growing with the times. Where and how exactly did sports writing begin and become accepted in America? You may wonder what the earliest sports covered in America are, or how the popular American sports of today became popularized through sports writing. American sports writing's history is best explained by gonzo journalism founder Hunter S. Thompson who said, "I have learned, in my life and work

¹ http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sports_journalism

as a sportswriter, that big-time Sports and big-time Politics are not so far apart in America. They are both a means to the same end, which is victory... And why not? Victory is good for you, and don't let anybody tell you different".²

During the middle 1800s in America is when writers first began to be covering sports exclusively. There was only a handful of writers who believed in the future of the sub-industry. The pioneering period of sports writing dates back to the general time period between 1785-1835. Benjamin Franklin was one of the first well known journalists of the time that included quotes in his publications regarding sports, in his case swimming in 1790. *The New York Magazine* was one of the first news publications to ever use sports writing in sections of their papers. *The New York Post*, *Charleston Courier*, and *Richmond Enquirer* are a few of the newspapers that included sports writing in their issues. The invention of the penny press was a major component to the growth of sports writing. In a section of John A. Dinan's book *Sports in the Pulp Magazines* (1998) he describes the time period of growth for print sports journalism. "Over the period 1865-1885 American interest in sports grew steadily. *Increasing leisure was a factor and magazine coverage of spectacle sports (racing, baseball, and boxing) and recreational sports (bicycling, hiking, fishing and baseball) increased accordingly"³.

The development of increased interest in sports led to approval amongst readers in America, sports writing began to find its niche in the news publication world. As the 1900's approached in America the significance of news was steadily increasing, which caused the coverage of American sports to grow as well. Famous journalist Joseph Pulitzer purchased the

² Hey Rube: Blood Sport, the Bush Doctrine, and the Downward Spiral of Dumbasses; Hunter S. Thompson (2011)

³ *Sports in the Pulp Magazines*; John A. Dinan (1998), p.4

New York World on May 10, 1883, which was a morning paper. This was significant to the development of sports writing because Pulitzer was the first to appoint a sports editor. Pulitzer started a trend with his decision, and by 1892 every major city with a newspaper and a following also had appointed a sports editor. In a University of Central Lancashire study published in May of 2007, author Stephen Tate goes in depth understanding how sports writing went from an industry that once scoffed at to an accepted part of the press. "This thesis examines the development of sports journalism as a career between 1850 and the 1930s. The gradual emergence of the sports journalist as an accepted and necessary press figure over that period is traced against a background of an expanding newspaper industry that, in part, adapted to the growing popularity of organized sport and adopted the sporting subculture as an integral part of its own expansion. The thesis will assess to what extent sports journalism could be said to have displayed the characteristics of a 'professional' occupation throughout the period under review. The career of sports journalist James Catton, whose working life stretched from 1875 to 1936, will be used as a case study, a contemporary voice to help illuminate, illustrate and interpret the human aspect as two dynamic and controversial forces, the newly-professionalized and codified world of late-Victorian sport, and the newspaper industry" ⁴. The year 1890 is widely considered the greatest year of development for sports journalism. Many spectacle sports were introduced and growing in popularity amongst the American public. Basketball was born in the year 1891, and in 1890 baseball became known as America's "national pastime".

⁴ The professionalisation of sports journalism, 0850 to 1939, with particular reference to the career of James Catton. Tate, Stephen (2008) p.10

The 1930's executive sports editors began to overview all of the sports writing content of their specific newspaper. Sports was never deemed capable of being front page newsworthy due to the stigma that not much regarding sports was professional. This changed in 1945 with the creation of the Associated Press sports wire that helped give sports writing more national respect. The introduction to television in the 1950's forced sports writers to ensure the quality of their publications. This was because television gave the sports fan everything sports writers gave them in a newspaper column, except with pictures and a voice behind it. In Mark Douglas Lowes book, *Inside the Sports Pages: Work Routines, Professional Ideologies, and the Manufacture of Sports News* he explains the value of how sports and the coverage that comes along with the profession. "Sport is sold as an entertainment product. Yet insofar as sport is a commodity, it is not the actual content of the sports pages being sold- rather it is the audience for that content, the sports fan" ⁵. An ongoing issue at times, but a major component of sports writing was the access of sports journalists'. Sports teams and organizations have not and still are not always accommodating to the sports journalist. In the United States, sports organizations are more accommodating than in other countries allowing journalist access in their locker rooms to ask players and coaches questions that may not always showcase them favorably in the public eye. In his memoir "No Time Outs," Christopher Walsh described what it was like to work as a newspaper sports reporter in the United States in the 1990s and 2000s. Walsh writes a chapter in his memoir discussing contrasts of stigmas that are formed regarding the profession of sports journalists'. Walsh writes about how sports fans view sports writers as having dream jobs, but the job is tougher than most realize, filled with many hours and tedious work. Walsh also mentions sportswriters

⁵ Lowes, Mark Douglas. *Inside the Sports Pages: Work Routines, Professional Ideologies, and the Manufacture of Sports News*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1999. Print. P.14

are looked on with skepticism by their sources although the same sources often need the coverage for their own mainstream advancement.

As any industry sports writing had a handful of pioneers who paved the way for sports writers of the future with their word, and creation. Grantland Rice avant-garde of sports journalism, who is most remembered for his work covering college football beginning in 1925. Rice's sports writing work helped make some of the well known athletes he covered into folk hero figures long beyond their lives duration. Leonard Koppett is famous for his work in The Sporting News, New York Times, and New York Post along with other publications. Koppett was primarily a baseball writer he helped further create the reputation of baseball being "America's pastime" with his storytelling. Henry Chadwick was also one of the most notable forefathers of sports writing. Chadwick created the first ever guide on baseball that fans could purchase entitled The Beadle Baseball Player. Chadwick helped promote and professionalize sports writing during his time as a sports writer, and helped created the National Baseball Club.

Since the 1990s investigative sports reporting has become an increasingly major component of the sports writing industry. A journalists job regardless of the genre of journalism represented is to provide the public with information that is deemed newsworthy. In the 1990s was the time when the O.J. Simpson trial, steroid era in baseball, and numerous other instances of newsworthy material occurred in sports. All of these events happening in this decade increased the need for investigate sports reporting and further popularized sports writers position in journalism. Today ESPN, and Sports Illustrated are at the height of the sports writing and sports media worlds. ESPN began in 1979 and since have grown to be one of the most notable sports networks in the world. Sports Illustrated surfaced in August 16,

1954 and remains as one of the most well read sports magazines and sports coverage publications in America. Sports writing has grown tremendously since being the joke of many early newspaper publications.

Sources

Websites/ Online Articles:

1) "Sports journalism." New World Encyclopedia, . 17 Oct 2015, 15:13 UTC. 24 Nov 2015, 16:40

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Sports_journalism&oldid=991392

2) Tate, Stephen. "The professionalisation of sports journalism, 0850 to 1939, with particular reference to the career of James Catton." (2007).

3) Moritz, Brian Peter. "Rooting for the story: Institutional sports journalism in the digital age." (2014).

Books:

1) Steen, Rob. Sports Journalism: A Multimedia Primer. London: Routledge, 2008. Print.

2) Dinan, John A. Sports in the Pulp Magazines. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998. Print.

3) Conrad, Mark. *The Business of Sports: A Primer for Journalists*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2006. Print.

4) Lowes, Mark Douglas. *Inside the Sports Pages: Work Routines, Professional Ideologies, and the Manufacture of Sports News*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1999. Print.

5) Walsh, Christopher J. *No Time Outs: What It's Really like to Be a Sportswriter Today*. Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Pub., 2006. Print.