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# The Sweet Script: A Critical Analysis of American Sportswriting

Jonathan Schreiber

*university of connect*, [jonnyschreiber@gmail.com](mailto:jonnyschreiber@gmail.com)

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The Sweet Script:  
A Critical Analysis of American Sportswriting

Jonny Schreiber

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Professor Hufstader

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Sportswriting often explores controversy to capitalize on the drama and give the author a forum for moral expression. Yet the genre itself exists at the center of debate. For some, “sportswriting by journalists in the United States is abysmally low,” rife with “the worst tendencies of academic writing – tortured syntax, cant diction, passive voice, grammatical conjunctivitis . . . hedging, indirection, obfuscation . . . a bedraggled stock of clichés” claims George Core in an issue of *The American Scholar* (Core 282). Numerous others share his opinion if not his passion that “there is little place in sportswriting for the academic mind” (Core 286). Despite the sports section “[accounting] for more than 20 percent of editorial content in metropolitan daily newspapers – more than any other category of news” (Anderson 355-356), its practitioners are accused as cheerleaders and hero-worshippers. They face “more lenient standards than reporters on other beats” (Anderson 356) since general fandom forgives their myriad of sins out of blithe ignorance (academics draw a clear line; PhDs over here, simpleton chest-painting-beer-swiggling-hooligans over there) or fervor (fans *want* to read articles root, root, rooting for the home team).

Most critics pause to agree on a shift in modern sportswriting. It has changed with the emergence of television. Writers have less of a reporter’s role and create more for either analytical or pure entertainment purposes. This movement only sparks new debates. Critics describe how modern sportswriting is “becoming serious” (Garrison and Salwen 57). As “sports journalists have become more skilled and better educated” they have included “business, legal, social, and other considerations” along with “tackling formerly taboo subjects such as drug use, the politics of sports, sports agents, fan and athlete violence, homosexuality, and gambling” (Garrison and Salwen 57-58). Just like fans at a hotly contested match, some cheer for this shift, celebrating “the ‘new breed of sportswriters’ with their ‘quality of writing,’ ‘questioning minds,’

and ‘master’s degrees’” (Garrison and Salwen 58). Others fear that such “increased professionalism” and “new seriousness in sports journalism has sapped the writing of its past religious fervor” (Garrison and Salwen 58). They hurl barbs at “writers who seem not to love their subject” (Garrison and Salwen 58), who have “nothing to do with athletes or actual descriptions of what sport is all about” because of preoccupation with “lawyers. Contract negotiations between millionaires. Sexual abuse. Tax savings about new stadiums” (Fotheringham 88).

For all the criticism or praise, neither side offers much in the way of proof. Broad generalizations dominate the sportswriting debate, and as accurate as some may be, they are never the rule. Is there bad sportswriting around? Without a doubt, but no genre is perfect. If anything, sportswriting most likely catches so much negative press because of its popularity.

Critics often support oppositional extremes. Cheerleading writers are insulted, and then missed. Some decry the lack of “serious” stories; others plead, “no mas.” So what is the winning formula? Just as every gymnast and figure skater knows, judging is subjective. However, there are some techniques common to the best sportswriting, aspects of finely bred stock that have evolved over time.

I have always enjoyed reading sportswriting. Well, allow me to restate that: I have always enjoyed good sportswriting. As a sports player, spectator, and avid reader my fascination with the genre comes as no surprise. However, much as I discovered when rooting for a favorite team, I quickly realized that not all sports writing is created equal when, this year, I started to study the genre. Yet I found a dearth of formal critical evaluation. I believe this lack bespeaks a common misconception and general dismissal of sportswriting as simplistic reporting in an isolated niche market on the outskirts of the authorial profession: a self-serving trumpeter of

common stereotypes, metaphors, didacticisms, and cheers written by one sports fan for others. Under this construct, there is no need for criticism. Sportswriting is not an accepted literary genre but rather a writing sideshow seeking to capitalize on fans drawn to subject matter over writing style or quality.

I disagree with this assessment. Sportswriting merits a critical analysis: it is a form of the writing art. While this art inherently requires an aspect of reporting, the same exists for any other form of writing dealing with modern events, such as politics or fashion. My interest in fine writing however, moves me away from such journalistic sports coverage towards sportswriting as a form of the personal essay, as a means of expression for both the authorial self and his subject. I attempt to prove this by critically examining the biggest names in American sportswriting over time. To accomplish this feat I read numerous articles by each writer, drawing mainly from their self-anthologies and from articles included in larger sportswriting collections. I would also like to thank Mr. Frank Deford for granting me a personal interview; his expertise helped me form many of my arguments. I begin with Red Smith and track the art through A.J. Liebling, Roger Angell, George Plimpton, Bart Giamatti, Frank Deford, Rick Reilly, anthologized works from 2008, and blogs. I look at both stylistic technique and subject matter to give a complete expression of each writer's essence, facilitating comparison and contrast between writers and eras. In the end, I conclude that sportswriting; even in the contemporary is often fine art.

Red Smith, one of the best-known and most celebrated sportswriters, rose to prominence during the 1950s. His daily newspaper articles offered a picture of the previous days' athletic happenings. What set Red apart was his writing's universality. He appealed to an enormous readership with his humbly informal conversational style, using simple language and humor. He

used vivid imagery and creative metaphors to show his audience the story behind the black and white photo, or radio broadcast in the toddling days of television. A.J. Liebling wrote at about the same time, making use of many similar techniques. His long works on boxing for *The New Yorker* demonstrate a flair for storytelling with advanced language and dialogue, often reading like a novella or journal instead of report. Smith and Liebling set a precedent for the genre.

Sportswriting expanded from these two. Roger Angell took their imagery, metaphor, and storytelling to his pieces for *The New Yorker* on baseball. He increasingly used sport as a means of exploring life. George Plimpton took their observational journal-like reporting style, added his own participatory aspect, and updated their jokes for his era. He inserts his own attitude and voice into the pieces, infusing them with a foppish persona. At the same time, literary scholar Bart Giamatti rose to the office of Major League Baseball Commissioner and examined the philosophical implications of sport. Rick Reilly and Frank Deford changed the game again. They modernized the humor, morals, and stories for the age of ESPN, internet, and cell phones. While some of the jokes may be hackneyed from age, less universal, or lamely exploitive of stereotypes, the concept remains largely the same. The human-interest story takes on a new importance as do tales offering larger meanings or providing moral lessons as sportswriting becomes less about factual reporting and more about entertainment, revelation, and opinion. For modern sportswriting, abstraction and curiosity become the “go-to” stories and a new metaphorical vision of the athlete emerges as superhuman robot.

This modern era features a diluted market. For every Reilly and Deford there is a hack lurking around the corner, a contemporary writer who turns the traits of the profession’s finest practitioners into mockeries. Stories of sports curiosity move to the fringe and beyond as writers search for the latest fad that hasn’t yet appeared on SportsCenter. Humor falls victim to

hyperbole, and tiresome moral judgments become a calling card for some authors, especially as huge contracts separate players from the rest of the world, forcing them into the cult of celebrity, and arousing jealousy. Furthermore, modern scandals sell, such as investigations of gambling, illegal substance abuse, and athletes' wanton off-field lives.

However, just as dilution may hurt the game, it also opens up more roster slots. A new age of sportswriters from the very fringe itself is emerging as internet blogs provide a forum for anyone to reach a wide audience. The quality of writing from this "league with no referees" ranges widely, but there are a number of highlights, often featuring a return to the "author as cheerleader" role, original humor, and a voice for people who lack a press pass, but possess a passion.

Through examinations of critically acclaimed sportswriters from previous decades, I hope not only to prove the existence of fine sportswriting, but that it is still being written today. Although the definitions and forms may have changed over time, modern sportswriting is just as successful as its predecessors. By examining style, syntax, and techniques of authors from different decades, I will show this evolution of the genre over time. In my reading, three to four main groups emerge. Red Smith and A.J. Liebling are the inventors. They write in a new style for an emerging golden age of sports and an underserved public. Roger Angell, George Plimpton and Bart Giamatti usher in a second round, revolutionizing their profession by markedly building off their predecessors with concerted efforts to use sport as a metaphor for life, display their finely honed formal techniques, and, for the latter two, act as both journalists and participants. A few decades later, the modern and contemporary writers emerge. Rick Reilly and Frank Deford create new types of pieces for a radically different era, culture, and world of sport while remaining true to the sportswriting fundamentals. They establish the human-interest

piece as the leading style of the genre and emphasize language and emotion. While the “Reilly and Deford school” continues to dominate the field, sometimes with success, increasingly with hyperbolic banality, another new age is emerging as contemporary sportswriting moves out of the press box and into the living room, where bloggers offer fresh voices and new perspectives. While each era has its own characteristics, they all closely relate to each other and the period of their creation.

## I

### Red Smith

In the beginning, there was Red. Widely declared the “best sportswriter who ever lived,” by 1954 (Fotheringham 88) “Walter Wellesley (“I hate the name”) Smith” was “the most widely syndicated sports columnist” (Berkow 315). Smith founded a new style of writing. “He avoided the clichés and flowery approach that many sportswriters had adopted, and he tried to cover games and people with the accuracy and insights of a good reporter” (Berkow 316). In his own words, he claimed he always ““tried to become simpler, straighter, and purer in [his] language”” (Berkow 316). However, simplicity may be the wrong word, because it connotes shallow ease. Red’s writing is anything but, as he explained ““Writing is easy . . . I just open a vein and bleed”” (Berkow 312). As Smith gained loyal readers he also picked up some literary hardware, winning the 1976 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary, and a hall of fame selection of sorts when

the college textbook *A Quarto of Modern Literature*, between an essay by Winston Churchill and a short story by Dylan Thomas [included] an example of spot-news reporting by Red Smith. It is a column on a heavyweight fight between Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano, written on deadline. It is the only piece of journalism in the anthology, and the only sports story (Berkow 312).



The Associated Press awarded him the first Red Smith Award in 1981, a yearly honor in his name for “major contributions in sports reporting” (Associated Press Sports Editors).

He was the biggest sportswriter in sportswriting’s golden years. Frank Deford wistfully recalls Smith’s heyday when “Sportswriters ruled once upon a time” before television reduced authors to “handmaidens” (Deford, personal interview). Smith is known for having done one thing and having done it well. In Frank Deford’s words: “All he ever wrote was that little column . . . He perfected one thing, and I think he’s the best columnist that’s ever been. I’m not talking about sports columnist. He was the perfect columnist” (Deford, personal interview). He wrote “beautifully and perfectly” with the qualities of Vermeer, always on the same small canvas (Deford, personal interview).

Smith’s stature as writer and sports reporter is unsurprising. His work establishes the hallmarks of modern sportswriting by combining humor, colloquial slang and simplicity, and poetic techniques in his pieces. Today, the design of sportswriting has largely changed, and Smith’s writing; “the column in that form, has pretty much gone out . . . A lot of Smith’s stuff was storytelling, but today it’s all opinion” (Deford, personal interview). Yet, the writing style he establishes remains the standard. First, his works are eminently readable. Even today, although the games, jargon, and humor have changed, Smith’s works are accessible. His humor is always lightly refreshing; any bitterness is tempered by joking self-deprecation. Smith is careful not to take his subjects or himself too seriously. The combination of conversational prose and humorous punch lines creates a late-night-variety-show-host effect. Syntactical dexterity in the form of figurative language and imagery, alliteration, literary allusion, simile, and metaphor provide elements of complexity, creativity, and depth, raising his articles to artistic works of literature.

One of the greatest strengths of Red Smith's writing is his ability to involve the reader. His simple colloquial language makes his articles quick and easy reads. His informality allows a humble character to emerge and foster a personal relationship with the reader. Lines such as "this was the spring of, let's see, 1944" (Smith 25), or "the score was tied. It was a new ball game. Wait a moment, though. Here's Pee Wee Reese . . ." (Smith 31-32) have a conversational feel. Smith consciously involves his readers, his audience, sometimes directly referencing them to take the reader into his personal experience. While this happens naturally in a friendly face-to-face exchange, in writing it must be consciously inserted. Smith's small additions of "let's see" and "wait a moment, though" eliminate the cold distance between words on a page and reader. They not only put him into the article and thus the readers' consciousness, but they put the reader into his story.

The reader is there, experiencing the events with him, as in the 1951 article "Miracle of Coogan's Bluff" in which Smith describes Bobby Thomson "weaving out toward center field, where cheering thousands are jammed beneath windows of the Giants' clubhouse. At heart, our man is a Giant, too" (Smith 30). Similarly, from the article "Pattern of Violence" in a boxing play-by-play Smith writes, "Turpin dropped on his back, but at the count of two or three he rolled over, brought up his head. His eyes were clear, and you knew he was going to get up" (Smith 113). Smith carefully includes the reader in his descriptions, acting as if he is speaking to someone in the seat next to him. Perhaps he is trying to show that, just like sports, the events he depicts belong to all of us. Smith writes alone, but he records as if the reader is there with him, in spirit if not body. These phrases are also examples of familiar conversational expressions. In everyday speech the phrases ". . . our man . . ." and "you knew . . ." are conventional slang. Smith uses them to lessen the distance between author and reader. Their commonality makes

Smith seem more familiar, helping to temper both his bookish or stuffy seriousness as well as his silliness. Because he establishes himself as a humble friend, Smith makes his readers, at least subconsciously, judge him with affable partiality.

The “Miracle of Coogan’s Bluff” quote uses another of Smith’s fan-friendly devices as well, his consciousness of the common man. His style reveals a tacit understanding (and even participation within) “everyman’s” life and his writing demonstrates sensitivity to the role of the spectator in spectator sports. The fans’ reaction to, and interaction with, the events on the field play an intimate role in his descriptions. In “Pastoral,” after an exciting horse race “practically everybody in Orange County, and certainly all the children swarmed onto the track . . . now rain broke suddenly, heavily. Everyone ran for cover” (Smith 91).

In another article on the same subject “The Horse at the Table,” Smith describes the home stretch with fan interjections

Then Ferman Hanover ranged up alongside Good Time, locking him in.  
“They got him pocketed,” a man cried. “That’s all for tonight.”  
“Don’t underestimate him,” his companion said.  
They went down the far side again, and now you could see Mickey Walker  
battling. Good Time finished off Ferman Hanover, which dropped back.  
“That’s all for Good Time,” the first man cried.  
“Watch,” his companion said (Smith 96).

Good Time wins the race, and Smith wins the fans’ hearts. Did this exchange really even happen? It just as easily could have been two voices inside his head, but Smith hands the voice over to the fans. He does not pretend to be displaying anything profound; he is simply replaying a scene and including a little part of “everyman” in it. The quote is small but the effect is large. As Frank Deford notes, writing dialogue demonstrates keen ability. “I like dialogue. Most journalists, you know, are satisfied with just quotes . . . Dialogue to me is much more interesting. It tells the story in a better way” (Deford, personal interview). It is also a temporal convention,

more common in Smith's era. "There was more dialogue I think in the pre-television days . . . And Smith . . . [was] very good" (Deford, personal interview). Smith's use of "overheard dialogue" to tell a story endears him to the critic who recognizes this convention as subtle genius, and to the reader who can identify with both the characters speaking and the experience of overhearing a conversation at a sporting event.

In another article, "F.O.B. the Big League" Smith includes quotes from "a guy who keeps pretty well informed on sports" and a "guy who'd been studying the box score" (Smith 25-26) who simply converse about baseball. They could be anyone, the common fan, and indeed, they appear to be. That is, until the end of the article when Smith reveals "they didn't know there was an eavesdropper. And the eavesdropper wouldn't have known who they were except for the names on their lockers. One name was Art Houtteman. The other was Billy Pierce" (Smith 27). Smith makes the "everyman" into a ballplayer and the professional athlete into "a guy."

A section of "Department of Injustice" describes the crowd reaction following Kid Gavilan's shocking decision over Billy Graham.

In the tunnel beneath the seats on the Fiftieth Street side, somebody belted somebody else. Customers funneled down to ringside, yelling and brandishing fists, and two or three burst into the ring to cuddle and comfort Graham, and in the aisle near his corner cops struggled with a large howling man who threshed and kicked out wildly in their embrace (Smith 108).

The fans do not simply reflect on the injustice done to Graham, they take action, becoming more than simply fans or spectators. In this scene, they are "customers." Not only is the "customer always right," and Smith undoubtedly agrees with the fans' take on the match, but the word connotes a certain status as well. Whereas the post fight pandemonium could be dismissed were it perpetuated by a mob of unruly fans, instead, it is a group of dissatisfied customers, rightfully offended that the product they esteem is tainted by a shocking judgment. Despite their

displeasure at the result, the final description declares, “the crowd loved the fight” (Smith 109). Smith accurately recognizes the audience’s fervor is an act of loving and supportive passion. They are genuinely concerned for the athlete and integrity of the sport, not just angry that their man lost.

The effect of Smith’s concern for and intimate understanding of the crowds, both at the event and reading about it in his descriptions the next morning creates a transcendental view of sport. The game becomes more than an abstraction or isolated incident. The result, statistics, play-by-play, and story unfolding on the field tie to the man in the stands and the man reading the paper over his morning coffee. Just as spectators become “customers” readers are “clients” (Smith 150). Smith’s writing becomes a string to tie them all together, binding athlete and game, customer and fan, reader and client in a similar fashion as his writing mixes colloquial and technical devices, reporting and entertainment, and humorous punch lines and professional dignity. This combination of sport and transcendence becomes one of the hallmarks of modern sportswriting and is a common theme today.

Smith’s “everyman” demeanor owes at least some of its origins to his incorporation of humor into his works. Paradoxically, his comical writing may be more of a demonstration of traits that would seem to set him apart from the rest of the world, a blade sharp wit and creative Lamborghini of a mind. Yet in his writing, easily accessible comic asides, ironic punch lines, and self-mocking help contribute to a conversational and entertaining feel. Smith clearly relishes the comical in his writing, and intends many of his pieces to be funny. Articles such as “Stengalese,” “A Boy’s Best Friend,” or “The Judicial Memory” rely on events and quotes from others for their comic effect. Smith does an excellent job of relaying the stories to minimize his

presence and maximize the punch line's effect. However, his own sense of humor shines in other articles where he shows off his talents of creative interpretation.

In 1952's "The Horse at the Table" Smith describes the horse Good Time's experience at a farewell luncheon held in his honor. Already comical from the title and subject matter, Smith cannot help but poke fun at a world where a horse receives an honorary luncheon. He refers to his fellow humans as "two-legged guests" who are "enchanted" since "for the first time in uncounted public gatherings, there was an entire horse at the dais" (Smith 94). He hilariously personifies the horse who

ate carrots and apples and sugar and, for dessert, toyed with Mike Lee, the toastmaster, but left him unfinished. He gazed around the room . . . with an expression of deep inward amusement and kept his opinions to himself. One could wish that every individual who stands up at a speakers' table was as brief and intelligent.

"He's always a champion," said Bill Cane who owns part of Yonkers and all of Good Time. "Give him sugar and he still bites you."

Possibly this is the mark of a champion. Somehow it seems an apter description of a politician (Smith 95).

Smith continues his description with Good Time's earnings explaining how "at the age of six he holds two world records for avarice, having won \$110,299 this year and \$318,792 altogether . . . In spite of the presence of several sports writers, this made him one of the richest individuals at the luncheon table" (Smith 95).

The last part of the preceding quote raises one of Smith's most prevalent strategies, self-deprecating humor. This technique, while funny in its own right, also helps to soften the pokes Smith makes at others. After a page of teasing the wealthy horse-people at Good Time's luncheon, giving readers a laugh over their absurdity, he slips in a little sarcasm about sportswriters' salaries.

Another article "And a Grasp of Millionaires" more explicitly teases Smith's profession. He introduces the piece by explaining his purpose; he wants a day off.

Every now and then one of the brothers in this lodge, generally a rod-and-gun editor because they are the most erudite, manages to fill a column with a glossary of sporting terms and thus gets a day off so he can go shoot a fox or dynamite a trout. This is a harmless dodge that deceives nobody and often entertains the reader, especially if the discussion concerns those agreeable collective nouns applicable to the animal kingdom (Smith 198).

Smith declares that he will do the same for sports terms “at considerable expense” (Smith 199).

He then pokes fun at each collective. A “team or squad” of basketball players becomes “a sniggle, or fix” because of their physical awkwardness and infamy for actively determining point spreads. Sports broadcasters compose a “yammer,” a group of baseball players is a “grouse” because they complain so much and managers are a “conceit” for their general aloofness (Smith 199). Umpires are called a “Braille” by sport partakers and a “guilt” by fans (Smith 199). The list goes on and on, and while comical can often be somewhat acerbic such as when “college football coaches, athletic directors, and presidents” are all covered by the single phrase: “a flatulence of educators” (Smith 200-201). However, just as before, Smith manages to avoid offense by having a little fun at his own expense, ending the article saying, “As everybody knows, sports reporters in bulk constitute an indigence of writers. A friend insists that at certain seasons this species should be described as a bibulation of sports writers. As to that, deponent cannot testify” (Smith 201).

At other times, Smith’s humor is less strategic. He simply points out the hilarity of certain situations for the reader’s amusement. Some of his funniest pieces come from his reports at the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki. During the field events, he writes how “uncommon congestion” forces a photographer dangerously close to “the javelin of a Russian broad (the term is purely descriptive, not un gallant)” (Smith 143), punning on the slang term for woman and the thrower’s stout figure. Describing the Czechoslovakian runner Emil Zatopek, Smith writes that he “had the running form of a zombie” and

witnesses who have long since forgotten the other events still wake up screaming in the dark when Emil the Terrible goes writhing through their dreams, gasping, groaning, clawing at his abdomen in horrible extremities of pain. In the most frightful horror spectacle since *Frankenstein*, Zatopek set an Olympic record for 10,000 meters . . . (Smith 143).

After descriptions of Zatopek's victories, the article returns to the field events where "a little later in the day, Mrs. Zatopek won the javelin throw in the doll's department. Czech and double Czech" (Smith 145). Four days later Smith writes about his opportunity to ride in a bus amongst the distance runners. He masterfully uses irony to explain the situation,

as the journalists jawed, a guide instructed them on manners. "Don't shout out the windows to the runners," he said. "We don't want to disturb them." This wise precaution would keep everybody silent except the population of Finland, which made a howling canyon of the whole route . . . Whole families gave up the day to see a flock of underclad noodniks run past once, and an hour later stagger back (Smith 151).

As previously demonstrated, Smith carefully keeps his sarcasm fair teasing equally the guide, the Finns, and the runners. No one is roasted; instead, each comic jab pushes the overarching situational hilarity into the spotlight.

Red Smith's mastery emerges upon a technical examination. He uses many and varied syntactical devices to give his writing a poetic effect. Alliteration, intense imagery, metaphor, and various literary references dress up his prose, adding depth and creating new ways to describe standard events. That final idea is extremely important, especially in sportswriting where clichés often rule and adjectives become tired. For example, take entering the batter's box for some practice swings. The action is simple and routine, and the description boring, until Smith gets a hold of it describing Phil Rizzuto "kneeling in the chalked circle where the next hitter waits" (Smith 28). By refraining from using the standard "on deck circle" Smith forces the reader to think about the action and location, creating a mental image of the scene. In the same article he describes how Yogi Berra "[waddled] under his catcher's armor" (Smith 28) giving the



reader an entirely different understanding of the scene than if Berra had jogged or walked in pads or gear. Smith captures his ungainly stride and the weight under which he toils giving Berra's action a much more awkward and utilitarian feel than would be expected of a graceful and powerful athlete.

“Dream's End” describes the enthusiasm of pinch hitter Sal Yvars who “hurdled the bull-pen gate and came running. It was only his forty-second chance to bat since this scatterbrained rigadoon began last April. He lashed into the first pitch and drove a hard liner into right field – straight for the yawning glove of Bauer” (Smith 34). Smith sets up a dichotomous relationship between Yvars and Bauer; one, the “third string catcher” on the underdog Giants, the other a star outfielder on the powerhouse Yankees. Yvars is fervor embodied, “[hurdling] the fence” and “running.” In his brief career thus far he has only proven himself a caricature of a man, a “scatterbrained rigadoon,” and he anxiously attacks the first pitch, “[lashing] . . . a hard liner.” All of the verbs around Yvars are quick and harsh. He sounds like a frightened squirrel caught amongst traffic, he doesn't know exactly what is going on, he just knows he needs to move as fast as possible. Then everything comes to a screeching halt: “- straight for the yawning glove of Bauer.” Hank is a professional, the catch routine, he coldly puts Yvars into his place, countering the catcher's jittery enthusiasm with half-interested execution. Not only does he catch the ball, he does not need to try. The word yawning suggests both that his glove is a bottomless pit, the ball never has a chance, and that he is lazily disinterested.

Smith's vignette of this exchange in his article about the series fits well as a metaphor for a bigger picture. The Giants, like Yvars, come out “hurdling.” Against seemingly insurmountable odds, they take two of the first three games from the heavily favored Yankees. Yet, their glory cannot last and they fall to a machine-like Yankees team. As Smith puts it, after

the Giants' hot start, "then it happened. They lost on Monday. They lost on Tuesday. Here came Bauer, and now they were losing on Wednesday. There'd be no game Thursday. Nobody told the Giants, but it was all over" (Smith 34-35).

Other times Smith's imagery creates emotional reactions. One of his most powerful articles "Now it Was Night" describes a broken down Joe Louis after his defeat at the red-gloved hands of Rocky Marciano.

Joe Louis lay on his stomach on a rubbing table with his right ear pillowed on a folded towel, his left hand in a bucket of ice on the floor. A handler massaged his left ear with ice. Joe still wore his old dressing-gown of blue and red – for the first time, one was aware of how the colors had faded – and a raincoat had been spread on top of that . . . this time he was lying down in his dressing-room in the catacombs of Madison Square Garden. Memory retains scores of pictures of Joe in his dressing-room, always sitting up, relaxed, answering questions in his slow, thoughtful way. This time only, he was down. His face was squashed against the padding of the rubbing table, muffling his words. Newspapermen had to kneel on the floor like supplicants in a tight little semicircle and bring their heads close to his lips to hear him (Smith 120).

Smith paints a vivid picture of a man beyond his prime. Every tiny detail adds to the image of a broken down old fighter. His "pillowed" ear holds double meaning as the cushion for his head and the cauliflower swelling from receiving so many punches to the side of his face. Louis's attire suits his physical state being not only "old" and "faded," but also hidden by a raincoat as if in shame. The scene fittingly takes place in "catacombs," since such a pathetic picture would be out of place anywhere else within "the world's most famous arena." Smith once again sets up a division, comparing a younger triumphant Joe Louis, "sitting up, relaxed . . . thoughtful" across from today's "down . . . squashed . . . [muffled]" man who, despite his prodigious size and athletic gifts, needs the normally dwarfed reporters to kneel close to his mouth so they can hear him. Smith ends the article graciously removing the focus from Louis, widening his lens until the lessons from defeat and impending retirement become universal, taking on biblical proportions. "An old man's dream ended. A young man's vision of the future opened wide.

Young men have visions, old men have dreams. But the place for old men to dream is beside the fire” (Smith 122).

Smith uses other literary techniques for varying effects. Alliteration is common in his articles, drawing attention to highlight certain phrases. He calls devotees of Yankee’s manager Casey Stengel’s “live language . . . students of Stengalese” (Smith 3). “Czech and Double Czech” contains descriptions of Emile Zatopek as a “gaunt and grimacing . . . comical contortionist” (Smith 143). In each case, alliteration has a comic effect, drawing attention to something funny and helping in that interpretation, the repetition of letter sounds adding to the portrait’s absurdity.

Smith uses the same technique at other times for a different outcome. In “Department of Injustice,” he describes how “Billy Graham whipped the whey out of Kid Gavilan” (Smith 107). Not only does this description serve to mean “easily beat,” but the repetition of the “wh” sound mirrors the championship class (welterweight) for which they fight. In “Day Nursery” Smith writes about the “fourth and final match of the struggle for the pitch-catch championship of the world” (Smith 14). The repetition of “f” in “fourth” and “final” draws the reader’s attention to the magnitude of the event, the last game of the World Series. The repeated “ch” sound in “match,” “pitch-catch,” and “championship” has an interesting double sided effect. On the one hand, the alliteration draws attention to the term and stretches “world series” into the much more involved “struggle for the pitch-catch championship of the world.” The game attains heightened importance since Smith refuses to use its standard name, opting instead for a lengthier and more poetic original title. On the other hand, the alliterative word choice also simplifies and “colloquializes” more technical sport terminology. Baseball becomes “pitch-catch,” a game takes on the deeper and more intellectual connotation of a “match” and the final “championship

of the world” a phrase more common in boxing heightens the power of the overall phrase. The sum of these meanings helps Smith make a point about the dominance of young Whitey Ford. Intelligent pitch selection creates a “match” of “pitch-catch,” as he removes hitters from the game, making the team sport into more of a one-on-one contest like a boxing match. Aurally, repetition of “tch” sounds onomatopoeic, imitating the smack of the ball against glove-leather, uninterrupted by any hard consonants of wood contacting ball. Smith’s alliteration adds immensely to the complexity and depth of his articles.

Metaphors and similes play a similarly diverse role in Smith’s writing. Like alliteration, they can heighten comedy or provoke contemplation. When Zatopek possesses the “running form of a zombie” (Smith 143) or an ambulance follows the last runner in the Helsinki Olympic marathon, “stalking him as though ready to pounce” (Smith 152), the reader has to smile. At other points, as in “Pattern of Violence,” similes describe boxing action more vividly than any standard description. When Randy Turpin is quickly losing ground to Sugar Ray Robinson, but refuses to give up, “he did raise his eyes and you could see them following Robinson’s gloves as he rolled and ducked and bent away from the blows. He was weaving like a cobra dancing to a flute” (Smith 114). Not only does the description yield an exotic flair to the image, but it also helps to refine “[rolling] and [ducking]” for the casual sports fan who may not be sure what such actions look like, lending them a much more tenuous air. Whereas description prior to the simile makes Turpin’s dancing sound strong and efficient, “weaving like a cobra” implies that he may just be a little tipsy too, although still dangerous since just like the snake he can strike at any time.

Smith’s readership extended beyond sports fans, forcing him to overcome unique challenges. Frank Deford can relate from in his work at NPR, about which he explains, having

such a broad audience makes the “job tougher. It’s a lot easier when you’re writing for a bunch of dyed in the wool sports fans, you know, because they’re all personally engaged” (Deford, personal interview). At the same time both men embraced the challenge, and as Deford notes, their situation doubles as “a tremendous luxury to write for people who don’t normally care about sports and read sports” (Deford, personal interview). Smith’s writing style was so enjoyable that all levels of sports fans read his works. His descriptions were so interesting and visual that he was able to maintain the interest of the “dyed in the wool” addicts and entice the non-sport fan literary enthusiast.

Another common technique Smith employs is historical or literary allusion. In “Day Nursery” Smith depicts Whitey Ford’s outstanding pitching performance in the final game of the World Series, recounting his accomplishment along the lines of the Bildungsroman.

The story of the Phillies this year was a story of bright kids. The story of the final game is the story of an extraordinary kid. This extraordinary kid, Ford, might have had butterflies in his bosom when he opened his first World Series game by walking the first man he faced and yielding a double to the third. But he pitched out of that first inning, and never allowed another base on balls (Smith 16).

Ford enters the series a question mark and proves his mettle, taking on not only his peers (“bright kids”) but after initially faltering against a grown man, dominating that group as well, to lead his team to victory. Smith demonstrates his familiarity with common literary themes more explicitly in “Miracle of Coogan’s Bluff.” Explaining the 1951 National League Championships between the Giants and the Dodgers, when the Giants appear to be facing a 1-0 defeat Smith recalls nursery rhymes and fairy tales. He laments that “the story was winding up, and it wasn’t the happy ending that such a tale demands. Poetic justice was a phrase without meaning” (Smith 31). A third form of literary citation features direct mention of history or ancient tales. This

technique appears in “Department of Injustice” when Smith cites his article previewing the fight in which

it said here yesterday in a line of pulsing prose composed before the fight that no matter who won, there wasn’t going to be any great commotion about it. Like Gavilan, the Delphic oracle retains his title. Lady Godiva could have ridden through the ring without causing such commotion as the decision created (Smith 108).

Smith parallels the situation that just as Gavilan won without meriting the honor, so he can remain the mythical “Delphic oracle” although his previous article predicted the exact opposite of what ended up occurring. Smith even jokes further that Lady Godiva, a character of legend famous for riding naked on horseback through the streets of England, would have caused less of an uproar than the scorers’ seemingly arbitrary decision. These allusions not only demonstrate Smith’s obvious scholarly intelligence, but also highlight his wit as the formal air of historical reference parodies the absurdity of the crazed boxing fans.

Red Smith’s writing created a new standard for sportswriters to follow. He used humor, common language, and advanced literary techniques to create works ranging from sad to thought provoking to hilarious, but always a daily pleasure for any reader. His style was original. He established the sportswriter as a common man, making him colloquial, humble, unembellished, and self-deprecating, earning him the love and respect of the masses. At the same time, he subtly employed the hallmarks of fine writing to merit critical acclaim. Smith moved away from the standard fact reporting, setting the human-interest piece as the pinnacle of storytelling and the standard for future generations of sportswriters. Thematically he tells stories of the people and events of sports, stylistically he writes for “the people,” his massive and diverse national audience. In his sports stories he gives equal weight to the most noteworthy sports happenings, and the most thought provoking obscurities. In his writing, he balances advanced technique with colloquialism. Smith deftly maintains equilibrium between the contrasts within both his stylistic

and thematic elements, forcing together these unlikely pairings to become the founder of modern sportswriting.

## II

### A.J. Liebling

A.J. Liebling's writing resembles Smith's style. He is one of Red's few peers of the sports page. While Smith wrote daily articles, Liebling's best-known sports works appeared in *The New Yorker* during the 1950s. Between 1951 and 1963 "he churned out thirty-four pugilistic masterpieces" for a literary magazine "that cared little for the 'sweet science of bruising' but appreciated Joe Liebling" (Anasi IX). He is famous, like Smith, for breaking with conventions. His works "avoid the dazzled mystification of much "literary" boxing prose and the hard-boiled sentimentality of the sports journalism of [his] day" (Anasi X). He used almost all of the same techniques as Smith, the hallmarks of great writing, including advanced syntactical methods, humor, and intense language and description. Liebling's articles differ from Smith's mainly in their length and breadth. While Smith's dailies offer quick hits—the story, facts, brief (although intricate) images, and one-liners—on diverse subjects, Liebling's longer articles, all about a single sport, provide room for more depth and detail. "Like a man out for a weekend stroll, Liebling takes his time" (Anasi X), providing the reader with not only a story, but also a meandering account of the surroundings, the actors, and common people. Furthermore, Liebling's singularity of subject creates common themes that "evolve and intertwine throughout" (Anasi XI). Perhaps this tempo results from his upbringing. His parents were wealthy, and he lived "a comfortable life, but . . . seemed aimless" (Baker). After expulsion from Dartmouth, he graduated from Columbia's school of journalism, and began to make a name for himself with his

World War II reporting. After the war, he returned to America to create his most famous works: his monthly *New Yorker* feature “The Wayward Press” on reporting and his boxing pieces.

Perhaps it is this meandering spirit, and wayward entry into sportswriting that allows Liebling his broad perspective and leisurely approach. He writes in the “modest style” on subjects that are “anything but serious . . . [assuming] that life itself, while serious enough . . . was too intractable a subject for journalism’s paltry tools” (Baker). Boxing gives him an avenue to offer life reflections outside of standard reporting. His stories were not directly about life; rather they were about the world of boxing. His works demonstrate a deep familiarity with the rhythms, language, and culture of gritty New York street culture, often capturing its voices, in not only subject, or philosophy, but also dialect. He celebrates boxing as a “sweet science” which must be learned through discipline from wise teachers.

In fighters, “he preferred technicians to sluggers – a suitable predilection for one of the greatest stylists of his generation” (Anasi XII). Just as in his “Wayward Press” column “his highest respect was reserved for the ‘careful reporter,’ and his cruelest mockery for those who wrote in the overblown style descended from Hearst and Pulitzer” (Baker). For him, boxing was less about strength or even victory and more about the struggle, the artistic aspects of the fight, and the training beforehand. He staunchly believed that the only true way to appreciate such subtleties was to witness them firsthand at the fights, and decries television’s emergence.

Television, for Liebling, had strangled boxing by taking audiences from the boxing clubs and paydays from club fighters. As he put it: ‘Television gives so plausible an adumbration of a fight, for nothing, that you feel it would be extravagant to pay your way in . . . Men are becoming slaves of their shadows’ (Anasi XII).

Although wary of his beloved sport’s decline, “Liebling took the long view ‘ . . . the desire to punch other boys in the nose will survive in our culture . . . [Boxing] is an art of the people, like



making love” (Anasi XV), and writing about it an art-form as well, through which A.J. Liebling created some of his most immortal works.

Liebling uses numerous stylistic techniques in his writing, including alliteration, metaphor, literary and historical allusions, and unique word choice. Repetition of sounds helps lend his works a poetic aspect. Euphonious descriptions such as “a **d**ropsical old **G**erman **g**entleman” (Liebling 193), “his face was **p**uffy and **i**mpassive . . . his muscles had always **b**een **b**uried **b**eneath his smooth **b**eige skin” (Liebling 25), “**j**utty-**j**awed” (Liebling 26), “**d**ark” and “**d**andified” (Liebling 201) and “**b**rown **b**oy from **B**ermuda” (Liebling 38) roll off the tongue while helping to paint a picture of physical aspects of characters. Descriptions of action benefit from the same strategy with fighters “**j**abbing” and “**j**olting” (Liebling 43), “**b**attering at his **b**ody” (Liebling 44), “**w**hacking away” (Liebling 133), “**f**licking **f**ast” (Liebling 134), and taking “every **e**vasive move” (Liebling 204) or a “**d**eep, **d**ancing-school bow” (Liebling 197). Audiences “stamped, clapped, and **w**histled **w**hile the **w**elters **w**orked out their tense little problem” (Liebling 201). Beyond giving the work a deeper feel, such alliterative descriptions begin to take on a “visually-onomatopoeic” effect by which the phrases transcend words for mental images.

Language plays a key role in establishing Liebling’s literary mastery. “From time to time [his] erudition will send you running for the dictionary – choice mots include *pyknic* and *succedaneum* . . . the intent, however, is not to overawe but to entertain” (Anasi X). His unique descriptions force visualization not only for their imagery but also because of their individuality. In one scene,

the time for the main bout arrived and one of the principals hadn’t. The other fighter sat in the ring, a bantamweight with a face like a well-worn coin, and the fans stamped in cadence and whistled and yelled for their money back . . . The little fighter kept looking at his hands, which were resting on his knees in cracked boxing gloves, and every now

and then he would spit on the mat and rub the spittle into the canvas with one of his scuffed ring shoes (Liebling 20).

The account is so arresting that it creates a dramatic image. A passage such as “face like a well-worn coin” evokes a mental portrait and feeling of nostalgia while neglecting to describe any actual details of facial features. Sentences later, extremely detailed observations of the fighter staring down at “cracked boxing gloves” and rubbing spit into the mat not only vividly depict a physical action, but also paint a pathetic picture of a boxer disappointed in both his physical desire and economic need for a fight and ensuing paycheck.

Liebling describes the crowds in similarly unique fashion. For a Madison Square Garden fight “they were dressed as if for a levee, the men in shimmering gabardines and felt hats the color of freshly unwrapped chewing gum, the women in spring suits and fur pieces . . . and what seemed to me the prettiest hats of the season” (Liebling 23-24). Another spectator is a “small, frail colored man in wine-red livery” (Liebling 24). Formal language such as “dressed as if for a levee,” “shimmering gabardines,” and “wine-red livery” could have come from a fine novel or fashion article, yet Liebling contrasts these lines with the less conventional, although highly visual, “color of freshly unwrapped chewing gum” and his own interjection, “what seemed to me the prettiest hats of the season” adding in the classic sportswriting elements. The former shows the reader the author’s voice and fine writing ability, the latter provides an entry for “everyman.” While the reader may have to look up “gabardines” to find that they are either a garment of gabardine cloth or “a firm hard-finish durable fabric (as of wool or rayon) twilled with diagonal ribs on the right side” (“gabardine”), anyone can picture their pink color.

Other lines provide similarly arresting descriptions of commonplace happenings. For Liebling, a chat with Joe Louis and his friend Reed about “prices we had paid in London” becomes “straining the elastic of credulity with each tale – a kind of auction” (Liebling 37). Joe

Gannon, a smug looking fighter, appears “spindly, and determined, knobby of knee and elbow, bristly-jowled, and wearing the expression of a ventriloquist’s dummy who knows a secret and won’t tell” (Liebling 201). Other descriptions include double meanings such as George Araujo who during a fight “was on his toes all the way, bouncing wastefully, but his legs were marvels; that kind of underpinning is an asset to be exploited, like reach or hitting power” (Liebling 135). Araujo’s strong legs provide him with not only a powerful physical foundation, but also a strong basis for a boxing strategy. Manager Al Weill, “a man of weight and profundity,” is deeply thoughtful and heavysset. He may be

of the build referred to in ready-made-clothing stores as a portly, which means not quite a stout. There is an implication of at least one kind of recklessness about a fat man; he lets himself go when he eats. A portly man, on the other hand, is a man who would like to be fat but restrains himself – a calculator (Liebling 31-32).

Thus from a man’s build, Liebling infers a piece of his essential temperament, a part of his metaphysical character signified by his physical character, in a somewhat comical, but also intriguingly deep commentary.

Metaphors are one of Liebling’s common devices. He often uses flowing extended metaphors. Some even extend across multiple works to become themes. Others highlight literary and historical references. The simplest metaphors in his writing focus on physical descriptions. A fight between a short and stocky fighter and a tall and skinny one becomes a “contest between a vertical line and a cube” (Liebling 134). A boxer’s fast jabs are “like a cat striking twice at a butterfly” (Liebling 134). In a fight between Joe Louis and Lee Savold, “Louis swung like an axman,” while Savold’s “head must have felt like a sick music box.” Unsurprisingly the fight ends with Savold “rolling over and over on the mat, rolling the way football players do when they fall on a fumbled ball” (Liebling 28). The same fight inspires three distinct and drastically different metaphors. In the first, the fight is an execution. For the

second he likens extreme pain and an impending knockout to a personified music box. For the third, he not only includes the physical action of a football game for its imagery, but also uses the sport as a contrast to boxing. The shamefully defeated boxer would be a hero on the gridiron, so that once again according to Liebling's rubric, boxing reigns supreme.

The boxer Rocky Marciano brings out Liebling's poetic side. On the involvement of his family in his career, "Marciano is, in effect, a kind of family enterprise, like Rockefeller Center." On his build, Liebling writes "Marciano looked like the understander in the nine-man pyramid of a troupe of Arab Acrobats . . . bull-necked and wide-shouldered" (Liebling 39). Fittingly he works out "in a head guard that was a cross between a gladiatorial helmet and race-horse blinkers" (Liebling 39), an apt description in which Liebling captures the physical appearance of the helmet but also connotes the dichotomy he sees in Marciano as an impressively strong fighter but one who wins despite lacking fine technique. Liebling respects Marciano's build, but cannot let the reader forget that his helmet needs "long leather wings at the sides of his eyes" because he is as dumb as a horse. The punning use of "understander" furthers this conclusion. Liebling means that Marciano is the base of the pyramid, the "stander" underneath it. Ironically, an "understander" is also a "person who comprehends," the "mastermind" of the pyramid. Marciano is definitely no engineer, but his extreme physicality allows him to be the genius behind something as silly and trivial as the corporal spectacle of the nine-man pyramid.

Extended metaphors are another of Liebling's recurrent techniques. Sometimes these are confined to a single article. In "Wunderkind" Liebling describes a match between Joe Gannon and Floyd Patterson. While Patterson is the current "wunderkind," Gannon "must have been something of a prodigy himself in his time. He was national amateur welterweight champion in 1944, when . . . he was seventeen. Subsequently, however, he renounced his art to become a

policeman in Washington” (Liebling 199-200). From this point on Liebling subtly works in references to Gannon’s other profession. When he returned to boxing, he “retained a coppish gloom” (Liebling 200). At the start of the fight, “he walked out bravely at the bell, as if resolved to make an arrest” (Liebling 202). In the ring Gannon “[sticks] out his left, as if to halt traffic” but he is too slow for Patterson who lands punches “throwing them in quick, sharp sequences and driving Gannon in front of him” (Liebling 202). Even Patterson becomes part of the police metaphor, ignoring Gannon’s traffic signals; he is the officer in control, driving the car. The fight quickly turns into a “grim assault” (Liebling 203): “the eighth was a case of assaulting an officer” (Liebling 204). Eventually Gannon “disdained to get back on his motorcycle” (Liebling 204). Liebling latches on to this tidbit of Gannon’s history and uses it effectively in his description of the fight. He provides comedy as police terms seem out of place in a boxing match. Their use also suggests that although Gannon may have been a boxer once, he is not one anymore. When he “renounced his art,” to follow the institutions and conventions of society, not only getting a job, but one that literally stops fighting, he also lost something more – a deeper part of his identity now possessed by the art’s current virtuoso, Floyd Patterson.

Other metaphors extend across works. It seems fitting given their similar violence that boxing and warfare often intertwine in Liebling’s writing. A Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano fight follows “a pattern of battle.” At the beginning “the two factions were in the ring” at opposite corners like armies on the battlefield, and Marciano is armed with an “overhand right, thrown in a rising arc like an artillery shell” (Liebling 38). In another article Liebling quotes his peer Mike Thomas who describes George Araujo’s plan to defeat titleholder Jimmy Carter as “speed first and then explosion . . . He figures to start bombing by the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup>. By then the champion ought to be set up for the kill” (Liebling 133). During the fight, Liebling describes

Araujo's "[opening] up with his heavy guns" (Liebling 136) in his own words. This metaphor, while effective at times, and repeated in multiple works, is also limited. Liebling believes fine and technical boxing to be more an art than a fight. He uses war imagery only for particularly brutal fights marked by their lack of skill and evasion and more for their heavy hitting. In the Araujo, Carter battle he even explains that the spectators "roared approval" because they "always [prefer] slugging to boxing" (Liebling 137). While he aptly acknowledges that boxing at its most vicious can devolve into warfare, he prefers a strategic contest of diplomacy.

Another extended metaphor that Liebling uses extensively is boxing as the "sweet science." Gyms are Universities; boxers are "pupils," trainers "pedagogues" (Liebling 40) in Liebling's world. Matches are exams or experiments where learned practitioners carry out their mutually oppositional art. He also uses literary and historical references to help push this point, attributing to boxers the qualities of academia and its scholars.

One of the challenges in fight preparation is "keeping the fellow entertained while enriching his curriculum" (Liebling 198). Floyd Patterson's trainers choose opponents "each picked to contribute something to his education" (Liebling 198). They fear that bringing him along too quickly could result in failure. He could end up like Young Montreal who "never held a title – something like Gustave Flaubert's failure to receive an invitation from the Académie Française" (Liebling 128). Or he could turn out like Jimmy Slattery who "was made overconfident by adulation. Slattery, like Icarus, made a great splash, though. He was a boy Mozart, a honeydew melon" (Liebling 198). Patterson's trainers carefully instill patience.

His TV fees served as a kind of scholarship for him . . . His graduation exercises took place in June, 1954, when he went eight televised Eastern Parkway rounds with Joey Maxim . . . Patterson had proved he could no longer be considered an undergraduate. After these commencement exercises he knocked out a fellow named Tommy Harrison (Liebling 198-199).

He fights Joe Gannon for “a refresher course in the rudiments” using a “mathematically superior strategy of the inner lines” to achieve victory (Liebling 201).

One of Liebling’s most famous articles, “The University of Eighth Avenue,” makes this comparison explicit. He transforms Stillman’s Gym on Eighth Avenue into a college. “It has a quiet academic charm . . . A careful etiquette reigns in this student quarter, as it is impossible to know if you can lick even the smallest man” (Liebling 151-152). The building is “covered with soot instead of ivy,” but as “in the great schools of the Middle Ages, scholars came to sharpen their wits by mutual disputation. Prizefighters do likewise” (Liebling 152). Running exercises are “roadwork . . . the ring is a continuum with fixed values and built-in cultural patterns like Philadelphia or the world of Henry James” (Liebling 153-154). To bolster his claims, Liebling uses many literary and historical references in this article, comparing boxers and their settings to famous intellectuals. He mentions a trained fighting monkey with “a standing challenge to kill any 20-pound dog in Jane Austen’s England” and who possessed “a considerably greater public reputation than Wordsworth” (Liebling 154).

The training boxers are “members of the academic community” (Liebling 154). They are led by “Dr. Stillman” who

like so many college presidents nowadays, is not himself a teacher but rather an administrator, and the smell in the hall makes him feel there are limits to academic freedom . . . Stillman excels in insulting matriculants so casually that they don’t know whether to get sore or not. By the sixth time Stillman has insulted a prizefighter the fighter feels it would be inconsistent to take offense at such a late stage in their personal interrelationship . . . Occasionally Dr. Stillman has a problem student who does not know when he is being insulted and then he has to think up some more subtle psychological stratagem. Tommy (Hurricane) Jackson, a heavyweight who has to be driven out of the gymnasium at the end of every session because he wants to punch the bag some more, has been a recent disciplinary challenge. Jackson who is 6 feet 2 inches tall and of inverse intellectual stature would occupy a boxing ring all the time if Stillman would let him (Liebling 155).

Despite his size and zeal Jackson is a “purely imitative boxer” and during each fight tries to copy his opponent by “systematic plagiarism” (Liebling 156).

To gain access to the hall of academe you must pass a turnstile guarded by Professor Jack Curley, the assistant to the president who the sign says is the fellow to see about boxing instructions . . . The sign is as sensible as one would be on the door of Yale saying ‘Instruction in reading and writing, see Professor Doakes.’ Old Stillman is no elementary school (Liebling 156).

Dr. Stillman “doubles as the bursar,” collecting boxer’s fees, and the trainees are counted as “the enrollment” (Liebling 157). “Trainers, like the teachers in medieval universities, are paid by their pupils . . . If they cannot teach, they get no pupils and go emeritus without salary” (Liebling 159).

The most troubling problem facing “the campus on Eighth Avenue” (Liebling 160) is the dearth of fighters and money as television increasingly controls the market, eliminating all but the most important matches from public consciousness and pocketbook. “All the great minds of the university have gone a few rounds with this problem, but none has come up with a thesis” (Liebling 161). “Boxers are in the same predicament as the hand-loom weavers of Britain when Dr. Edmund Cartwright introduced the power loom” (Liebling 158). Liebling hates the idea that “any electronic gadget that peddles razor blades” (Liebling 158) threatens his beloved academy.

He complains that

television gives you so plausible an adumbration of a fight, for nothing, that you feel it would be extravagant to pay your way in. It is like the potato, which is only a succedaneum for something decent to eat but which, once introduced into Ireland, proved so cheap that the peasants gave up their grain-and-meat diet in favor of it (Liebling 21)

He responds by exploring all aspects of a fight. The fighters in the ring often play a secondary role to the human interaction of actually attending the contest. He explains in professorial terms



that “there is nothing less agreeable than having to turn my attention from the ring to explain the rudimentary principles of the sweet science to my fellow customers” (Liebling 135).

Through the exploration of this theme, Liebling consciously includes his audience. This addition helps him reach out to readers and fans, as it helps Red Smith, yet Liebling also has other purposes: to celebrate the relations formed from attending a live sporting event as well as to belittle television. His articles often include his trip to and from the venue when he interacts with cabdrivers, the “everyman” of Liebling’s proletarian New York street world. Liebling recalls entering a cab to go home after Joe Louis defeats Lee Savold. “‘Fight over?’ the driver asked. If there had been television, or even radio, he would have known about everything, and I wouldn’t have had the fun of telling him” (Liebling 29).

After another Joe Louis fight, Liebling uses his crowd observations as a means of self-expression. In the same fight Smith described, Louis’s loss to Rocky Marciano, Liebling celebrates a feeling of connection with Louis and praises the fighter’s “resistance to the erosion of time. As long as Joe could get by, I felt I had a link with an era when we were both a lot younger. Only the great champions give their fellow citizens time to feel that way about them” (Liebling 30). Although generally not sentimental about human interactions, Liebling “[can’t] help but [hope] that Marciano was still too far away to demolish Louis” (Liebling 41). He can accept that Marciano is younger, stronger, and one day may be better, but he hints that Louis is a sounder technical fighter and would have beaten his opponent in a bygone era. “In the sixth, things started to go sour. It wasn’t that Marciano grew better or stronger; it was that Louis seemed to get slower and weaker” (Liebling 44). In the seventh, when Louis is taking a brutal beating, Liebling’s heart skips a beat when “Joe threw the hook. It was beautiful. It hit Marciano flush on the right side of the jaw, but it didn’t seem to faze him a bit. I knew then that

Joe was beaten, but I thought that it might be only a decision” (Liebling 44). Although he knows Louis has lost, Liebling prays for him to lose with his pride intact, but not even this is spared in a “pitiful finish,” Louis knocked cold (Liebling 45).

Yet in the tough New York City streets, Liebling cannot complain. He may want to cry, but he cannot even talk. Instead, he slyly switches his observation from Joe Louis lying unconscious in the ring to a woman sitting near him. “The tall blonde was bawling, and pretty soon she began to sob. The fellow who had brought her was horrified. ‘Rocky didn’t do anything wrong,’ he said ‘He didn’t foul him. What you booing?’ The blonde said, ‘You’re so cold. I hate you too’” (Liebling 45). Liebling’s academic and emotional sides play out in this scene. In his head, he is the man. He knows Marciano won fairly, but in his heart he wishes Louis could have remained ageless, could have won one more time, for both of them.

Liebling comes from a supremely masculine world. His New York streets and characters are coarse. They celebrate unaffected pragmatism and toughness. His beloved sport reinforces the same beliefs. It requires years of university study and extreme mental and physical discipline, disregarding danger and pain. Both arenas, the high rises of the city and the boxing rings, for Liebling are heartless places where only the strongest and best survive, requiring a commitment to an ideal of hard work. His view is of the “greatest generation,” whereby men do not act to pursue fame and fortune, but rather to “do the right thing.” As beautiful and selfless as this patriarchal utopia appears, it leaves little room for the self, and no opportunity for emotional expression, especially for sadness or disappointment, and especially by a man. Therefore, Liebling uses dialogue and a female character to show his true emotions. He and the blonde cannot logically explain their disappointment. They know, as the date says, that there was no “foul,” that “Rocky didn’t do anything wrong,” but that is not the point. Louis’s loss means

more to Liebling than “just another knockout.” It makes Louis upsettingly human and kills his “resistance to the erosion of time,” his “link with an era when we were both a lot younger” (Liebling 30). When Rocky Marciano defeats Joe Louis, Liebling’s childhood dies and he subtly uses the blonde to show how profoundly he is affected.

At other times Liebling’s relation to his fellow man helps to display the New York boxing culture from which he emerges. During the Floyd Patterson and Joe Gannon fight, Liebling recounts his experience sitting in front of Gannon’s fans. Comically, every shout of support from the men seems to contradict Liebling’s observations. With Patterson “driving Gannon in front of him,” a voice yells, “‘Come on, Joe! . . . You got him wobbling!’” (Liebling 202). Moments later he hears “‘I wonder if he can reckernize our voice? . . . In da breadbasket, Joe! He don’t like dem deah!’” (Liebling 202). When Patterson punches his “glassy-eyed” opponent in the stomach the fan “bellowed,” “‘You got him holding now, Joe! . . . When the round ended, the left-ear voice said, ‘He’s doing good’” (Liebling 202). Even when

Gannon staggered away and Patterson did jump after him . . . the two enthusiasts convinced each other that their friend was far ahead on points. “He looks good,” left-ear voice said after the fifth round. Gannon had lost four, according to all the officials, and five by my count.

“But he gotta knock him out,” said right ear voice. “If he don’t knock him out, they’ll give it to Patterson. Joe gotta use his right.” Joe was already using it, to protect his poor, battered noggin, but left ear-voice and right ear-voice were relentless.

“Hey, Joe, trow your right, huh?” yelled right-ear voice.

“Connect wi’ one, Joe, will ya?” concurred left ear.

And they began to chorus, “Trow your right, Joe! Trow your right!” (Liebling 203).

Liebling pokes fun at the fans’ unreasoning fervor and street-wise accents explaining “in the seventh, Joe reckernized the voices, or else had got bad advice in his corner. He trun rights . . . but they were a force incommensurate with their purpose” (Liebling 203-204). Even when Gannon’s “nose was a red circle on his face . . . one row behind me he was still winning. ‘Trow

da right, Joe!’ the voices were yelling in chorus. ‘You’re in front!’ (Liebling 204). Moments later “a blow with all the finesse of a pickax” (Liebling 205) silences both Gannon and his fans.

Liebling’s description of the match in tandem with Gannon’s supporters paints a vivid picture of a certain spirit of the New York boxing fan culture. Part of boxing is the fans and their participation in the event. As Liebling says of himself,

watching a fight on television has always seemed to me a poor substitute for being there. For one thing, you can’t tell the fighters what to do . . . Before television, a prize-fight was to a New Yorker the nearest equivalent to a New England town meeting. It taught a man to think on his seat (Liebling 17-18).

Furthermore, their accents suggest that they are immigrants and at home on the New York streets. They have no pretensions and are crassly self-expressive. Regardless of the action of the fight, of Patterson’s relentless pounding, they see Gannon in the lead. Only when he loses consciousness do they accept his loss, even then revealing a hint of genuine disbelief. “. . . The bell rang. Right-ear voice said, ‘Well, howdaya like that?’ Left-ear voice said, ‘It’s all over, huh?’ And a minute later, when I turned around, the seats behind me were empty” (Liebling 205). These men reflect a culture of ultimate loyalty. Gannon is their man, Patterson simply his invisible opponent. Even though he may poke fun at this quality, Liebling’s “drollery is never malicious. As often as he satirizes fight people, he credits them with shrewdness and insight . . . Liebling writes with bemused tolerance” (Anasi X) which allows the reader to laugh at the “left and right ear voices” but also recognize their undaunted spirit as living models as members of the greatest generation. Their commitment to an ideal is supreme and “hope springs eternal in the human breast.”

A.J. Liebling uses literary techniques such as metaphor, alliteration, and advanced imagery and language for poetic results. His extended metaphors and colloquial language capture deeper meanings and essential truth in boxing, its immediate surroundings of the New

York streets, and even the broader world. He uses humor along with literary and historical references to further these ends and reach out to all potential readers, so that everyone can see humanity and society through his lens of pugilism and the academy of the sweet science.

Liebling takes Red Smith's finely balanced scale and casts it in gold. Like Smith, he brings together potentially contrasting elements. The war and brutality of boxing becomes the sweet science. A sweaty old gym becomes a university, its trainers are professors, and its young fighters are students. Liebling elevates boxing beyond merely a sport to a way of life. The qualities inherent in boxing are the same as the ethics of his generation. At the same time, stylistically his works contain both scholarly phrases and the most uneducated dialogue. "From time to time [his] erudition will send you running for the dictionary" (Anasi X), however, at others you must pause to decipher the most unrefined street slang, such as "'in da breadbasket, Joe! He don't like dem deah!'" and "' Hey, Joe, trow your right, huh?'" (Liebling 202, 203). Another sentence from the same piece, "Wunderkind," sums up his style well when Liebling combines his ruffians' slang with the veritable authorial-slang of dense polysyllabic words in a single phrase, writing, "He trun rights . . . but they were a force incommensurate with their purpose" (Liebling 204). Liebling makes ostensibly paradoxical language and ideas work together for mutual reinforcement whereby the rare becomes common, the ordinary is elevated, and the world of boxing helps us to understand the world.

### III

#### Roger Angell

Roger Angell quite literally picks up where A.J. Liebling leaves off. His baseball writings started appearing in *The New Yorker* where he had been an editor since 1956 ("Roger

Angell—Biography of Roger Angell”), just one year before Liebling’s death in 1963. His employment followed a family tradition: his mother, Katharine S. White, and his stepfather, E.B. White, both preceded him as *New Yorker* editors and well-known authors. Yet Liebling set the stage for Angell’s profession, conditioning the magazine’s fine literary critics for sportswriting. Angell uses many of the same techniques as his *New Yorker* predecessor and numerous other previous sportswriters, adding his own touch. He writes about baseball, the “national pastime.” While Liebling’s articles are recognized as fine literature, he writes poetically about boxing, a contest on sports’ periphery that features an inherently profound one-on-one battle of physical supremacy. One man wins, one loses. The only statistic is whether by knockout or decision. As Frank Deford explains, “writers love to write about boxers. Movies love to do boxers because it’s very simple. It’s one guy versus another, and the boxers tended to be ethnic, and they were characters . . . it’s very much of a niche sport” (Deford, personal interview). Baseball is a more involved team sport as well as one with a larger following. Liebling’s readers could easily accept his work as fine writing, even if they weren’t sports fans because he had such an arresting and easy to understand subject, the exotic netherworld of pugilism. Angell has a tougher task. For one, baseball is a game of strategy and statistics, none too poetic features. Furthermore, its established history as “America’s game” challenges writers to create anything new, and avoid age-old clichés. Yet Angell succeeds by making the most of metaphor and imagery.

He continued to write baseball articles for *The New Yorker* and over the years, his selected articles have been compiled into seven bestselling volumes. He uses his writings as a platform for his greater message of baseball’s transcendence beyond a game to become an element of humanity. While for Liebling boxing is more than two men pounding each other, it only ever reaches the level of academia or fine art, the “sweet science.” For Angell, baseball

helps to define identity. Baseball becomes “the austere sport” (Angell 29), his job as reporter the “sweet franchise” (Angell 76).

This “sport as life” metaphor became one of the most common in sportswriting, and Angell was among its first and most eloquent proponents. He sums up his own works by saying “it seems to me that what I have been putting down for a quarter of a century now is autobiography: the story of myself as a fan. I have tried to do this seriously, because fans matter, but with a light hand, for baseball has brought me much pleasure” (Angell IX). This dual sense of serious attention and personal pleasure abounds in Angell’s writing. While baseball is involved and subtle, possessing “layered substrata of nuance” (Angell 76), it is also the familiar friend to which Angell can sigh, “Ah, baseball” (Angell 59). The sport’s place in life begins with warm nostalgia for bygone days. Angell can still remember being

ten or eleven, with my ear next to the illuminated, innerly-warmed gold celluloid dial of the chunky, polished-wood family radio . . . The front door slams – my father home from work, with the New York *Sun* under his arm (and the early-inning zeros of that same Giants road game on the front page, with the little white boxes for the rest of the line score still blank), and I get up to meet him with the . . . news (Angell 9).

The scene comes right out of 1930s America, and evokes simpler times, a longing for youth and innocence. Baseball is not only entertainment, but also something more, almost a religion, following the game on the family radio a ritual and father-son bond.

At the same time, baseball can provide transcendence beyond the game. While sitting at a contest Angell describes in Whitman-like terms, “my attention was taken by a spider I happened to notice . . . inning by inning, the creature persisted, laying out struts and cables, catwalks and connectors” (Angell 1). Angell is transfixed like the speaker in “A Noiseless Patient Spider” who describes that an arachnid

launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;  
Ever unreeling them – ever tirelessly speeding them” (Whitman).

Whitman's speaker wonders about his own soul

Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,—seeking the spheres, to connect them;  
Till the bridge you will need, be form'd—till the ductile anchor hold  
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my soul (Whitman).

Angell's "somewhere," the connector for his soul's thread, is at a baseball game. The game experience transcends sport, connecting with the natural and even spiritual world of the spider and soul so that a superficially insignificant "noiseless patient spider" building its web, "made you glad you were there and no place else in the world just then" (Angell 13).

During a game between the Athletics and Brewers, Angell describes a baseball epiphany in lofty terms.

We sounded like children, boys in a tree house. At last, we fell into silence – a prolonged daze of sleepiness and exhausted speculation – and into a sense of wonder, too, I think, at the endless variety and stubbornness and perfect unpredictability of this sport . . . All of us there in the park – the sixty-odd players and coaches on the field; the weary grounds crew and security people and ushers and venders; the burned-out, crazily remaining handful of fans and their sleepy-eyed children; the writers, whose unfinished stories had been re-warmed for several successive deadlines; and the waiting owner and attendant executives and strategists for the A's – all of us had wanted the ridiculous party over and done with long before then, but our skills and wishes and plans and hopes meant nothing, of course. The difficulty of baseball is imperious, and prevails ever (Angell 119-120).

The reader sees through Angell's discovery of baseball universality. He begins with nostalgia, "children, boys in a tree house," and moves to "wonder." Baseball shifts with him from a topic of conversation, to an "[unpredictable] . . . sport," finally transcending to eternal imperiousness. The game becomes the strongest force. It makes no distinction from the poorest vendor to the wealthiest owner, and even though every person may harbor a singular wish, no one can influence baseball's godly power. Angell takes on the task of defining and explaining this impact in his essay "Gone for Good."



Professional sports have a powerful hold on us because they display and glorify remarkable physical capacities, and because the artificial demands of games played for very high rewards produce a vivid response. But sometimes, of course, what is happening on the field seems to speak to something deeper within us; we stop cheering and look on in uneasy silence, for the man out there is no longer just another great athlete, an idealized hero, but only a man – only yourself. We are no longer at a game (Angell 443).

Thus, sport becomes a forum for reflection on the world, a medium for “everyman” to get in touch with himself.

Fittingly, baseball’s impact leads Angell to curiosity. Natural inquisition on the human condition moves Angell to

become engrossed in the craft and techniques of the game; not just how the runs were scored but why. I have talked for hours on end with catchers and pitchers . . . and infielders, hitters, coaches, managers, scouts, executives, and owners, and most of the time I started with the same question: “How do you do what you do?” They responded with floods of information and instruction, example and anecdote, all put forth with an intensity that confirmed my belief that this placid, easy game is in fact a thing of such difficulty that it easily holds off our wish to master it and bend it to our desires . . . We are baffled but still learning, and we keep coming back for more (Angell IX-X).

Although the game, as indeed life, often has no answers, what emerges from Angell’s attention is a common theme and extended metaphor of baseball as work. The ballplayer becomes just another “everyman” toiling at his daily job. Because of professional sports’ popular glorification, it is easy to forget that players are people too. Angell’s articles focus on the humanizing blue-collar aspects of sport, showing that ball players have jobs just like everyone else. Although baseball may be an “extremely difficult public profession” (Angell 424), it still cannot transcend vocation, one of the most common unifiers of the human condition. From a conversation with Tom Seaver, Don Sutton, and Reggie Jackson, Angell is struck that the three similarly express “absorbed pride in work that accompanies, and sometimes even exceeds the self-pride and love of challenge that lie somewhere near the center of every professional athlete” (Angell 86-87). Whereas some see baseball as a game played by grown children, Angell reveals

a job worked by devoted men. He notes that Carl Yastrzemski embodies a “web of concentration and pressured shyness and pride in work” (Angell 52). Tom Seaver is “all concentration, caught up in his craft” (Angell 81).

Angell singles out catchers as baseball’s proletarian workers. Bob Boone’s “thoughtful elegance of . . . execution . . . helps you appreciate the work” (Angell 21). Gary Carter does not receive a contract or salary but rather “dollars per annum for his work” (Angell 22). Writing on this position, Angell refers to the “theorems of their profession,” “remedial sessions,” and “a body of skills” all phrases of double meaning for the working class and the “work-worn” (Angell 47) pro ballplayer. The catchers he interviews are more than happy to speak about the finer points of their jobs: “if you want an earful, go to a man in a highly technical profession who feels he is underappreciated” (Angell 22). Answering questions they “grew more serious as they went along . . . as if the burden of anecdote might distract them (and me) from a proper appraisal of their hard calling” (Angell 22-23). “There are so many little things to the job” and they all need explanations for full effect (Angell 35). Kids growing up discover that, as is often the case with the hardest work, catcher is the least envied position, “none of the rest of us wanted the job, most of us couldn’t have done it anyway” (Angell 35).

Even those that take the job stand to gain little glory in a position where steady predictability trumps exciting flashes of brilliance. “Every catcher exudes stability and competence – there’s something about putting on the chest protector and strapping on those shin guards that suggests a neighborhood grocer rolling up the steel store-front shutters and then setting out the merchandise to start the day” (Angell 34). Although the glory may belong to an outfielder, even if he only catches a couple of flies, Carlton Fisk explains that he would shun such a role, saying, ““then I wouldn’t have anything to hang my hat on that day”” (Angell 41).

At first Angell is puzzled by the number of catchers whose sons go on to similar success, but then he decides that this trend is “maybe *not* so [odd]: perhaps years of serious baseball talk at the family breakfast table adds a secret something – a dab of sagacity, say – to the Wheaties and thus turns out good catchers down the line” (Angell 31). The idea of sons following their fathers into the workplace persists in society, as the shopkeeper’s store passes hands through generations, so in baseball, catching runs in families. Even today, a number of recent or current high profile players are the sons of famous fathers such as Ken Griffey Jr. and Barry Bonds. With five All Star catching appearances between them, recently retired Todd Hundley and current Milwaukee Brewer Jason Kendall may have their catching fathers Randy and Fred, who spent a combined twenty years in the majors, to thank. Angell uses this metaphor again when he describes an exchange between Earl Weaver and Jim Palmer, writing,

they remind me of a father and son who have been forced to spend too many hours together behind the counter in the family stationary store or delicatessen . . . [squabbling] . . . about business strategy and comportment . . . They care about and count on each other more than either one can admit (Angell 8).

While such images of fathers and sons, baseball and work, can be nostalgically warm, they are also in Angell’s eyes a reflection of the social occupation of sport. Although the trend of baseball towards workplace may simply be reflective of a larger social context in which every profession is work today, it also means that now, like any other job

the heart of the game is not physical but financial. Sport is no longer a release from the harsh everyday American business world, but its continuation and apotheosis. Those of us (fans and players alike) who return to the ball park in the belief that the game and the rules are unchanged – merely a continuation of what we have known and loved in the past – are deluding ourselves, perhaps foolishly, perhaps tragically (Angell 443).

Such statements add to Angell’s contemplation of baseball mirroring life. He laments that sport’s commercialism deprives everyone of a potential escape from routine. Baseball blends into every other profession, its focus on cold capitalism and not love of the game. Everyone

from players to fans loses. Corporate, monetary, and selfish interests taint the game's purity and kill its spirit.

Angell's vision of baseball is too vast for a single metaphor. He uses many to demonstrate the sport's weight. Like Liebling, Angell writes extended comparisons of sport to battle over a number of works. Leaders of teams become generals. Billy Martin is "bitterly driven" to lead his "troops" to victory (Angell 100). An old pitcher returns to the Mets to be "the steadfast elder leader of a corps of shining young Baldurflingers" (Angell 79). Catchers fittingly assume the role of warrior, the hard working muscle in battle, unafraid of getting dirty. "Armored, he sinks into his squat, punches his mitt and becomes wary, balanced and ominous" (Angell 19). The catcher "[deploys] fielders" observes "the state of the world" and must exude the qualities of a great warrior or general, "he must be large, brave, intelligent, alert, stolid, foresighted, resilient, fatherly, quick, efficient, intuitive, and impregnable" (Angell 19). He must be able to "violently and stubbornly, at whatever risk to himself" stop the "onthundering base runner" while catching "with delicate precision" the throw from the outfield "[gazelle] or [bombardier], or [demigod]" (Angell 20).

Seasons are "long campaigns" (Angell 53) of "bullpen [operatives]" and "platoon [systems]" (Angell 69). Playoff series are "dangerous," "disheveled," "[alley-fights]" where the winner lives on, but the loser "fell dead" amongst "the little popping sounds of solo home runs," (Angell 53) or "bulletlike line [drives]" (Angell 7), descriptions like wartime gunshots. In a "contretemps" between the Phillies and Pirates "the lead or tie was repeatedly surrendered, bitterly won, then lost again" (Angell 59) until the Phillies "capture the flag," (Angell 60) only to face the "patient and combative" (Angell 61) Orioles, who fittingly win the World Series. In such "stirring uphill [fights]" (Angell 423) players must sport expressions of "armored blandness

that suggest a failure of emotion” (Angell 439), else they risk injuring their team as in a game where a base-running error “amputated an Oakland rally” (Angell 109).

The fans take part in the war metaphor too. Angell describes how he can walk in on a game and after comparing the teams pick one to root for since any two “offer a visible, almost moral, clash of styles and purpose” (Angell 14), just like opposing armies. In his case he supports “frail, popeyed, and apologetic looking” Willie McGee over “frowsy . . . hulking, raggedy-ass veteran Brewer” and “walking strip mine” Gorman Thomas (Angell 14). Angell demonstrates the universality of choosing sides. In his case, it seems trivial and comical to mention a “moral clash of style and purpose,” but writing in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s during the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, war and contemplation of its moral implications occupied such a primary place in the American psyche that it is only natural baseball terminology would follow.

Like Hemingway, Angell finds relief from war in slowing down to enjoy the natural world, which also has a home on the diamond. He describes the imagery of “dew-dappled outfield lawns” (Angell 75) which provide a “delicious whiff” (Angell 94) of freshly cut grass. At times Angell’s descriptions of baseball conditions recall heaven, as for a Yankees and Athletics game “the sun shone, and the soft winds blew” (Angell 109).

Natural imagery abounds in metaphors in *The New Yorker* articles. The end of the baseball season “explodes into thrilling terminal colors, leaving bright pictures in memory to carry us through the miserable months to come” (Angell 53)—a passage of double meaning expressing both the excitement of the World Series and lonely offseason as well as the brilliant autumn leaves of October which are quickly followed by stark winter. At this time of year, fizzling out can be beautiful as the Brewers seasons ends “like an ember in a snow bank” (Angell 55). The very rhythm of innings becomes a body of water as “the stream of the game became a

brook, then a trickle” (Angell 119). Natural metaphors extend to players and their actions. Willie McGee makes a catch “all in one flowing water-like motion” (Angell 14). Roberto Clemente possesses “eagle-like pride” (Angell 424), and a pitcher’s injured arm is a “damaged wing” (Angell 76).

In “La Vida” Angell rejoices in the physical and biological world of spring training. He writes that the camps “should be like our vacation cottages at the lake or the shore – a fusty familiar vicinity in which we discover, every year, the sparkle and renewing freshness of another summer . . . baseball bivouacs” (Angell 11). In this article, he describes his delight at watching a spider build its web. During the day “dazzling desert sunlight” (Angell 9) lights the games. At sunset, the stadium transforms, “its pole a startling pink. The right-field bleachers are bathed in pastel” (Angell 3). He laments the loss of “the old fragrant orange grove out beyond” the stadium (Angell 11) and rejoices in “two nesting ospreys . . . in their big, slovenly nest on top of the light pole in short right-field foul ground” (Angell 11). After hearing that a fly ball landed in their nest he jokes, “someday soon, I decided, we would hear about the first confirmed sighting of a young red-stitched osprey (*Pandion ueberrothiensis*) here, hard by the banks of Lake Lulu. I cheered up” (Angell 12).

Spring training baseball may not be as polished or intense as the regular season, and though he may wish for a game “to get on with itself,” he admits that he is “in no hurry, really. No place to go, no place I need to be. Midsummer” (Angell 3). He likes that “there was no hurry about the game’s starting, of course, and nothing to worry about even if I did miss a few pitches and plays while I lingered over my lunch” (Angell 10). “Citified” Florida, exuding a “sense that the regular season impends, and that these humid, sunny afternoons are just postcards, to be glanced at later on and then thrown away” does not suit his fancy (Angell 10).

Instead he prefers Arizona training where the “baseball is slower, sweeter, and somehow better fixed in memory” (Angell 10). Natural imagery again extends to metaphor when Angell describes a rainy afternoon at the ballpark when he feels as though he “had found [his] way into a large henhouse somewhere and was surrounded by elderly farmyard fowls. We perched there together, smelling the aroma of mixed dust and rain, and waited for the sun to come out again” (Angell 12). Although the encroachment of civilization detracts from his haven, (“spring training is ‘in’” (Angell 11)), he still finds enlightening relaxation in the juxtaposition of baseball, nature, simplicity, all accompanying leisurely life rhythms.

Roger Angell uses lofty descriptions, stirring images and complex extended metaphors to raise baseball from a game to a reflection both on and of humanity. The sport is a business, its players, hard workers. Thankfully, spring training still offers a small refuge from the “American business world” (Angell 443), a place where people can enjoy nature and the slow passage of time, but even this world is annually shrinking, beholden to monetary greed and violent warfare. His jaded side calls baseball merely a “continuation” (Angell 443) of these ugly traits, fittingly so since they are a part of humanity, and baseball reflects all human aspects indiscriminately. Yet, Angell shows that there is another more optimistic side of both civilization and its chosen sport. Even if baseball rarely gives “everyman” an escape from his daily doldrums, at least it can still occasionally provide him a rare glimpse of his true self, at which point “we are no longer at a game” (Angell 443), but rather at a metaphorical mirror or well peering into our own souls.

Angell is the first to admit that baseball is tainted. He celebrates baseball’s ability to transcend sport. It becomes more than just a game. Baseball becomes a way to understand the world. Through memories of the game we can understand familial relationships, nostalgia for shared events, and also the ways that sons take after their fathers. Through its confrontations we

can consider the morality of warfare. Through interviews with catchers we can understand hard work and a blue-collar ethos. Through games, especially during spring training, we can even take a moment to enjoy the natural world.

Unfortunately, Angell laments, baseball's universality increasingly extends indiscriminately to the more negative aspects of society as well. Rampant commercialization attacks the game's foundations. The pursuit of money destroys so many of these aspects. Fewer people can afford to enjoy the games. The toughest positions become more finessed and less laborious. Even nature faces destruction as Angell notices one year at spring training, the

orange grove . . . was gone, replaced by a cluster of low, not quite finished white buildings with a drooping banner out front that said 'LAKEFRONT CONDOMINIUMS.' I gestured miserably at this phenomenon, and my seatmate, a Boston writer, said, 'Yes, I know. Remember when we used to write 'and Yaz hit it into the orchard?' Now what do we say' (Angell 11).

With these changes the beautiful moments of self-realization Angell describes, the times when watching a game turns to "uneasy silence, for the man out there is no longer just another great athlete, an idealized hero, but only a man – only yourself" (Angell 443), are harder and harder to find. It is easier to see baseball's detached mercantilism than the universality of its message or the "everyman" nature of its players. Baseball no longer exists as a separate world to reflect and reveal society or provide a welcome means of escape. Rather, it is an intimate and self-perpetuating part of civilization, merely another aspect of the dominant social order stressing dollars over humanity to the degree that "sport is no longer a release from the harsh everyday American business world, but its continuation and apotheosis" (Angell 443).

#### IV

George Plimpton



During the 1970s and '80s when Angell was writing about baseball for *The New Yorker*, George Plimpton and A. Bartlett Giamatti were dabbling in sportswriting. While both are sportswriters, neither writes exclusively within the genre. Plimpton wrote multiple non-sport biographies and Giamatti often focused on Renaissance literature. Even when writing about sports, their style is different. Both take part in a new form of reporting known as “participatory journalism.” This style creates an almost exact opposite effect when compared to Liebling’s “modest” fashion. The writer becomes the focal point of the piece, its subject, shifting from passive observer and reflector, or semi-passive fan, to active participant and recorder, changing the reader’s perspective, repositioning their point of reference as author and athlete collide, emphasizing authorial presence. When he takes part in the action on the field, the author gives an account in which his own exploits are the subject. His analysis is firsthand reaction instead of post-event contemplation.

The convention of participation originates with George Plimpton’s book *Out of My League*, chronicling his attempt to pitch during a 1960 Major League Baseball All-Star Game. A few years later, *Paper Lion* recounts his experience in the 1963 Detroit Lions training camp, becoming one of the most famous sports books of all time. Trading on his success, Plimpton went on to write *Mad Ducks and Bears* a decade later about his experiences with the Baltimore Colts, *Open Net* about training as a goalie for the Boston Bruins, and *Bogey Man* describing his efforts to make the PGA tour. Other magazine articles and television specials feature his attempts at everything from sparring with Archie Moore and Sugar Ray Robinson to tennis against Pancho Gonzales even to top level bridge and high-wire circus stunts. In each case, Plimpton has to fail. He is not an athlete despite his intense desire and his accounts often feature self-deprecation to temper the embarrassment of failing miserably against the top performers in

their respective sports. These retellings not only give the reader a sense of spectacle and a voyeuristic peek into a world generally closed off from the average person, they also provide a sort of spectacle, capitalizing on sports fans' desire to play professionally and their secret suspicion that they could do it better than the pros.

Plimpton's participatory journalism took advantage of recent movements within sports. By the 1960s, sports had started to enter into a modern era. Players were no longer the 'man next door,' but rather the greatest physical specimens. Sports' immense popularity and rapidly rising remuneration, endowed it with new seriousness. Youth leagues allowed children to grow up playing sports. For the professional, competition increased as fewer avenues offered such lucrative rewards. They were encouraged to train year-round, not only because summer jobs were no longer required to live comfortably, but also because they needed to maintain their edge. These developments affected the fans too. Ironically, despite more children playing sports in their youth, the potential for becoming a pro rapidly shrunk as the amount of competition skyrocketed. Only the greatest athletes could become professionals, a job increasingly representing elite status, wealth, celebrity, and the accompanying popular wistful envy. In spite of (or perhaps because of) these conflicting desires and limitations, hope sprang eternal, and Plimpton let the fans live out their fantasies, as he mingled with the pros in their natural habitat. Try as he might to blend in, he was simply not the right species and he always had to accept, as every fan, that the pros were there for a reason, and that our proper mode of athletic participation was in the bleachers.

As famous as Plimpton became for his sports participation and writing, he hardly fit the pedigree. He graduated from Harvard and earned a masters degree in English from Cambridge University in England. Upon graduation, he joined *The Paris Review*, rising to the position of

editor in chief of what would become “America's most renowned quarterly magazine of writing and the writing life,” known for introducing readers to such writers as Philip Roth, Adrienne Rich and others, as well as offering interviews with the most renowned writers, many conducted by Plimpton himself (*The Paris Review*). He wrote numerous articles for a number of publications ranging from *Esquire* to *Playboy* to *Sports Illustrated*, on countless topics. Other works included a 1955 children’s book, “The Rabbit’s Umbrella,” as well as biographies of Robert Kennedy, Edie Sedgwick, and Truman Capote. He became an actor, appearing in movies and television shows. In his *New York Times* obituary, his multiple life roles of gallivanting explorer and urbane literary critic acquired Superman and Clark Kent-like proportions as “alter [egos]” (Severo).

In this description, the latter word, ego, is, perhaps, most important to Plimpton. Participatory journalism, while exploring sport and giving fans an inside look at the pros, is ultimately about the author. It moves Plimpton’s sportswriting role from cogitator to physical actor, making these works roughly autobiographical, as much about Plimpton the writer and Plimpton the (wannabe) athlete, as they are stories on athletes.

In his article “My Olympic Trials”, appearing in 1990’s *The X Factor*, Plimpton assumes the air of an arrogant oaf. He has decided that he must possess some god-given ability to be a great athlete, that it needs only be discovered, so he decides to undergo a series of scientific examinations to determine at what sport his hidden gifts will offer the greatest advantage. Like a modern day fop, his overbearing innocence is comically endearing. He is so self-assured that he would be exasperating, if only he had any self-awareness or actual chance to succeed. Instead, the reader knows from the start that he is doomed to failure, that sports simply don’t work that way, and that he is no athlete, but still roots for Plimpton because his spirit and affability are so

affecting. His fine writing and academic background helps to heighten the situational hilarity and reader's acceptance of his "stock character." Plimpton's assumed role is just what the reader would expect from one so successfully involved in erudition. His conceit is a trait assumed for most ivy-leaguers and art critics, and his faith in his own athletic ability reflects the naiveté of a spoiled scholastic genius who has never had to accept the idea that a dream may not come true; an idea familiar to nearly every adult who played youth sports.

Plimpton begins by reaching out to his audience. "Everyone must wonder wistfully if there isn't something other than what they actually practice in their lives at which they would be incredibly adept if they could only find out what it was" (Plimpton 177). His very first word includes the audience, or at least presumes to, as Plimpton takes his own "[wistful] wonder" and justifies it as a universal generality, one that may indeed have some truth. Yet his ego soon takes over and suddenly "wistful wonders" turn into jealousy of an "idiot [savant's]" ability to "sit down at a piano and suddenly bat out a Chopin etude." "[W]asn't the same sort of potential," Plimpton haughtily asks, "locked up somewhere in all of us?" (Plimpton 177).

With this hook, he has the audience's attention, but with the next sentence, "everyone" and "all of us" take a secondary role to George. "I have always wondered if there wasn't some extraordinary athletic skill lurking within my body of which I was not aware" (Plimpton 177). Now, of course, this idea is ridiculous, perhaps even more so because while some hidden talents could have a greater mental focus, sport's physicality requires visible gifts, ones Plimpton and everyone else could see that he did not have (height, weight, build) as well as physical and technical (not to mention strategic) training. However, Plimpton sucks the reader in with his supposedly shared desire; our curiosity gets the best of us.

He poses the javelin as his potential hidden talent, poetically writing a scenario of “startling alchemic convulsion” creating “titanic tosses,” at which point he will humorously “call the U.S. Olympic Committee. ‘Ahem,’ I planned to say when I got an authority on the line, ‘I’ve just discovered the most extraordinary thing about myself. I am a javelin thrower’” (Plimpton 178). Even Plimpton acknowledges his absurdity, morphing into his formally proper Cambridge “ego” (Ahem . . .) when informing the Olympic Committee of his chance finding.

Humbling humor does not dampen his vanity. Plimpton decides to leave nothing to chance. “Unlike others who share such absurd Walter Mitty daydreams, I had actually done something about it” (Plimpton 178). Plimpton often refers to Mitty, a character from a James Thurber short story, who possesses a wild imagination for heroic deeds, but can never escape his mundane life. The name has become a metaphor for dreamer, and an insult, as Mitty accomplishes little in either the real or the fantasy world. Plimpton describes his exploits in Major League Baseball from *Out of My League* as “the dark side of the moon of Walter Mitty,” but as the *New York Times* notes in his obituary, and as Plimpton points out in his article, his “exploits really were not analogous to those of Mitty. . . Mitty only imagined he was doing all manner of dashing and swashbuckling. Mr. Plimpton wasn't imagining anything; he was doing it” (Severo). Thus in 1984, Plimpton went to Pikes Peak, Colorado to the Olympic Training Center to “be tested in the sports physiology laboratories to see if by chance there was a particular event (after all, there are over two hundred of them) for which I was perfectly adapted” (Plimpton 178).

Often curious, and always cocky, Plimpton cannot resist a dig at the number of Olympic events, confident that there will be one for which he is especially well matched. He even goes so far as to observe with contempt athletes training at the center. Always self-centered, he watches

them not out of curiosity or fascination but rather “speculatively” to see which sport best suits him (Plimpton 178). Yet not one lives up to his standards. Judo is “too specialized,” boxing has too many “wrong-shaped [noses],” and race walking is “not dignified enough” (Plimpton 178). He only pauses contemplatively when he “[spots] the occasional arc of a javelin on the wing” (Plimpton 178). Although his athletic skills may make him the proverbial “beggar,” Plimpton will accept nothing less than being a “chooser” too.

He describes the various procedures he undergoes, focusing more on the advanced and technical machine names than on what they test, how he does, or understanding results. As if he anticipates the outcome, Plimpton emphasizes the scientific complexity of his assessment. A rowing machine is a “Concept II rowing ergometer,” running on a treadmill becomes “[performing] on a Quinton 18-72 treadmill” (Plimpton 179). He uses a “Biokinetic Pacer” and is “strapped into the Cybex II isokinetic dynamometer” (Plimpton 179). All the while, “computer screens glowed with figures and printouts emerged, many with finely etched graphs” (Plimpton 179). Although he gives a bare description of the appearance of each machine, the complex names impart images of a mad scientist’s laboratory, space-age equipment and wires all around, with Plimpton, probed and prodded, as if undergoing inspection aboard an alien spacecraft. They also enhance his ironically inflated ego, helping to create the effect of a haughty bumbler suddenly in far over his head when faced with the reality of his situation, sort of like a Maxwell Smart or Ricky Bobby character.

True to form, even this environment cannot stifle his dimly arrogant self-image. During his “Cybex II isokinetic dynamometer” analysis to measure “muscle imbalance,” he freshly informs his expert tester, ““This will tell if I tilt when I walk”” (Plimpton 179). Later Plimpton regrets opting out of a test requiring a small muscle sample to analyze composition of fast and

slow-twitch fibers. Understandably, he shies away from the “guillotine-like contraption that snips off a piece of muscle” which “leaves a small scar, perhaps a centimeter in length” (Plimpton 180). Indeed, logic says that this fanciful experiment is not worth a permanent blemish. However, Plimpton writes, “I have since regretted not having this done – if only for the scar. A scar, even a small one that must be searched for, is worth having for conversational gambits. ‘See this here. Got it trying out for the Olympics’” (Plimpton 180). His argument saves him from facing the potential embarrassment of admitting that the test frightens him. Here this man purporting to be a great athlete is too afraid to have a tiny cut because “I didn’t like the looks of the instrument . . . a cylinder about the size of a large fountain pen” (Plimpton 180)?! Why no, no, he assures the reader, that was a temporary lack of judgment, a mistake. In fact, he is so tough that he wishes he had undergone the test, gotten the scar if for no other reason than to show off as a curiosity, and indeed such action in the interest of future flaunting seems most Plimptonian.

In the end, Plimpton has no choice but to swallow his glorified pride in self-deprecation. The doctors and scientists gather around a conference room. When they mention “two interesting oddities about [his] charts . . . [his] heart jumped” (Plimpton 180-181). Could it be true, the reader wonders? Does George Plimpton possess secret physical ability? Can his dream come true? They explain to him in technical terms, that his hamstrings are stronger than his quadriceps, “Very unusual,” (Plimpton 181). Plimpton, like the rest of us asks,

“What does it mean?”

“It means you can kick backward more powerfully than you can kick forward.”

“Oh” (Plimpton 181).

The other oddity shows that he is “very adept at expelling air swiftly. Snorting” (Plimpton 181). The reader can imagine Plimpton’s face falling as he desperately asks, “What is this good

for? Does an Olympic event come to mind?” to which the doctor, after taking the opportunity to return Plimpton’s impudence by suggesting backward field goal kicking were football an Olympic event, responds “I’m quite at a loss, frankly” (Plimpton 181).

The scene shifts to an anecdote “some months later,” when Plimpton takes the self-mocking to heightened levels, verging on arousing pity, when he tells of a “somewhat caustic friend” suggesting that his special abilities “[bring] only one thing to mind. And that’s the bullfight.’ He paused. ‘That’s where you belong, the bullring, and it’s not the matador I have in mind!’” (Plimpton 182). While the friend’s suggestion is funny and clever, by telling the story in this way, Plimpton not only gets a chuckle, but also portrays himself as more of an innocent dreamer than a conceited fool. Whether or not the anecdote is true, Plimpton could easily have written that he considered the findings on his own and come up with being a bull. Such a self-discovery could have had just as much, if not heightened comic effect. However, the reader, seeing his friend’s remark, at once recognizes the quick-witted jab and pities Plimpton, whose created character is too comically conceited to realize the hilarity of the entire situation. In spite of his silly arrogance, Plimpton’s character is endearing. All he wanted, as he tells us, was the same thing we all want, to discover a hidden talent. He is brave enough (somewhat ironically, again, as *he* tells us) to pursue his dream through a trip to Olympic facilities and submission to physical testing. On top of all this, they find abnormalities. Just what he wants, special talents! But his triumph quickly sours when his abilities are useless, most likely a greater hindrance than an aid in sport. The reader sees his dream, no matter how ridiculous or arrogant, die, and his friend’s callous suggestion wipes Plimpton’s slate clean, returning the reader to the start, on his side, “everyone . . . [wondering wistfully]” (Plimpton 177).



Another article, “Wish List,” from a 2002 *Men’s Journal*, gives Plimpton a forum for his desires, mostly sports fantasies. He longs for Tiger Woods’s “insouciant skill of hand” to “pop a ball up and down off a pitching wedge over and over” (Plimpton 183). He wants to goof around on a basketball court, throw a ball over his shoulder and have it go in the hoop. He wants to have a “snappy moniker,” a nickname for the games, to “throw a perfect spiral . . . so the front of the ball is a dot, the leather revolving around it,” to bowl a perfect game, dive a perfect dive, and swim like Mark Spitz (Plimpton 184). He wants to ski down a dangerous slope, be on a hockey breakaway with only the goalie to beat, and discover the ability to throw a perfect knuckleball while playing catch with his son, an idea prompting visions of a scene nearly identical to his javelin discovery. “I’d like to have it come to me one afternoon . . . a ball without motion so that it ducks and dances . . . and take that thing to spring training. ‘Ahem. I have something I think you might like to take a look at’” (Plimpton 184). Each revelation is another indulgence, a personal longing Plimpton shares. As universal as some of his desires, they all have only one thing in common; they are his. While “My Olympic Trials” describes Plimpton’s actions, “Wish List” reveals his thoughts, and in each, he is not only the actor but also the subject. Yet this piece ends more abstractly than “Trials,” perhaps because a dozen years later his sports dreams have grown ever fainter, as he notes in the 1990 piece that he “wondered (less so, I must admit, as the years have gone by)” (Plimpton 177). In 2002, Plimpton’s wishes “are all available – as soon as the hour is late and the fire has gone down and it is time to drift off into sleep. It’s only a matter of picking one before the sweet darkness arrives” (Plimpton 184). His ending suggests maturity and adulthood. Whereas earlier he held out hope for accomplishing his athletic desires, he is now content to live them out in dreams.

In a slight change of pace, one of Plimpton's most famous works appeared in *Sports Illustrated* on April 1, 1985, a fictional article entitled "The Curious Case of Sidd Finch." As the preface to the article in *Sports Illustrated's Fifty Years of Great Writing* explains, "the straight-faced publication of this fabulous tale – the greatest stunt in SI history – created enormous buzz among credulous baseball fans across the country. The tip-off to observant readers: The issue's cover date was April Fools' Day" (Plimpton 323). Plimpton reuses his understanding of reader fascination with secrets, this time to an even greater degree. While the other articles examined the possibility of possessing hidden ability or undiscovered physical gifts, this article has a more corporeal enigma and, as the first line tantalizingly claims, "the secret cannot be kept much longer. Questions are being asked . . ." (Plimpton 323). Just as he firmly grounds "My Olympic Trials" in reality, using actual places, people, and including minute details – the trade names of equipment, and scientific titles of muscles, and tests, so this legend is grounded in truth. Plimpton knows that deception, be it the self-deception of athletic ability, or an outright lie like Sidd Finch, is most believable when anchored by fact. Thus, the "Curious Case" takes place in a real and detailed place, St. Petersburg Florida at the Payson Field Complex where the Mets actually hold spring training. He includes numerous people within the Mets organization describing their actions, and even conducting phony interviews with the likes of players Lenny Dykstra, Dave Cochrane, John Christensen, and Ronn Reynolds, Coach Mel Stottlemyre, managers Frank Cashen, and Bob Schaefer, and from owner Nelson Doubleday, down to Jay Horwitz, the Mets head of public relations. At the end, he includes a fake interview with Peter Ueberroth, baseball's commissioner.

To remove any doubt about the off-the-charts measurement of Finch's fastball Plimpton takes great pains to describe the radar gun.

The model used was a JUGS Supergun II. It looks like a black space gun with a big snout, weighs about five pounds and is usually pointed at the pitcher from behind the catcher. A glass plate in the back of the gun shows the pitch's velocity – accurate, so the manufacturer claims, to within plus or minus 1 mph. The figure at the top of the gauge is 200 mph. The fastest projectile ever measured by the JUGS (which is named after the old-timer's descriptive – the “jug-handled” curveball) was a Roscoe Tanner serve that registered 153 mph. The highest number that the JUGS had ever turned for a baseball was 103 mph, which it did, curiously, twice on one day, July 11, at the 1978 All-Star Game when both Goose Gossage and Nolan Ryan threw the ball at that speed. On March 17, the gun was handled by Stottlemyre. He heard the pop of the ball in Reynolds's mitt and the little squeak of pain from the catcher. Then the astonishing figure 168 appeared on the glass plate (Plimpton 325).

The account of the real JUGS Supergun II distracts the reader, and the calm intertwining of fact and fiction does not raise any alarm. Fact: Roscoe Tanner held a record for the world's fastest tennis serve at 153 mph. Fiction: most everything else. Nolan Ryan, an eight time All-Star, and game participant in 1977 and 1979 was not in the game in 1978. Goose Gossage, although in the game, had more of a negative impact than record setting performance. Coming in to pitch in the eighth inning for the American League, the score tied at three, he gave up a leadoff triple to Steve Garvey, threw a wild pitch to Dave Concepcion, and allowed two more hits, the game ending in a 7-3 National League victory. The official fastest baseball pitch ever recorded is 100.9 mph by Nolan Ryan in 1974 (“Guinness Book of Baseball World Records”), although rampant rumors exist of him and others throwing unrecorded pitches of every speed from 102 to 110 mph. Yet, Plimpton knows these are minor details. All-Star Games, for all their fanfare, are rarely memorable, and he alludes to one from seven years previous. It had been eleven years since Ryan's record setting pitch and casual fans would simply know that Gossage and Ryan were likely candidates for 103 mph since they both possessed renowned fastballs.

Plimpton builds a similarly tangled foundation for Finch. He is educated briefly at both the Stowe School in Buckingham, England, and Harvard University, two most real and sturdy institutions. He appears as the stereotypical “everyman-young-ballplayer,” a “nice-looking kid,

clean-shaven, blue jeans, big boots” (Plimpton 326), a “tall, gawky player” (Plimpton 324). Yet he is eccentric, a quiet recluse, a world-class French Horn player, and most notably in appearance for “wearing a heavy hiking boot on his right foot” when pitching (Plimpton 324) and wearing a glove that “looks like it came out of the back of some Little League kid’s closet (Plimpton 327). These seemingly unimportant physical observations lessen the sense of mystery. Someone could be a great pitcher wearing a boot or having a ratty glove. Plimpton uses other players and metaphors in his descriptions of Finch, a common sportswriting technique, which makes the article more realistic. When Finch pitches, he “sways way back like Juan Marichal,” his motion is “like a catapult. The ball is launched . . .” (Plimpton 324). He quotes Bob Schaefer, a manager for the Tidewater Tides, an AAA Mets farm team as saying, ““Nolan Ryan’s fastball is a changeup compared to what this kid just threw”” (Plimpton 327).

Even Finch’s mannerisms and behavior have essences of fact. He “said his Sidd came from ‘Siddhartha,’ which means ‘Aim Attained’ or ‘The Perfect Pitch’” (Plimpton 327). Siddhartha is a reference to the symbolic novel of the same name by Herman Hesse, and the name does mean “Aim Attained.” His favorite greeting “*Namas-Te*” (Plimpton 330) is an Indian word, a formal greeting to show respect which translates to “I bow to the divinity inherent in you” (Namaste). The “*rkang-gling*” and “*dung-chen*” (Plimpton 331, 332) are real instruments, the French horn aficionados all real people. These tiny and accurate details about the foreign and exotic make the reader believe first in the commonality of Finch, that such a man wearing blue jeans could exist. Then, his eccentricities make him even more believable, coordinating with his amazing baseball ability and the reader’s gullibility for the bizarrely fantastic.

The rest of the Sidd Finch mystery is pure poppycock. Plimpton writes about Sidd’s foster-father, Francis Whyte-Finch, an archaeologist who dies in a plane crash in the Dhaulagiri

Mountains of Nepal. Real mountains, fake person. He invents interviews with real people, quoting Reynolds, Stottlemyre and many others about their observations of and interactions with Finch, creating their voices and personalities. Reynolds vividly describes Finch's "windup like a pretzel gone loony" and how his "catching hand feels like it's been hit with a sledgehammer" (Plimpton 329). He even invents a "specialist in Eastern religions, Dr. Timothy Burns" who explains facts about Tibetan monkhood to the Mets' brass (Plimpton 331). Although these aspects of the piece are false, Plimpton bases them so firmly in reality that the reader hardly stops for a second to question. Real people give fake quotes. Fake people give factual information or die in real mountain ranges a world away. Like a house of mirrors, truths and lies appear so distorted that the reader simply surrenders to acceptance.

Aside from his tricks, Plimpton uses this article to make a veiled statement about baseball and professional sports in general. He raises sport to the level of religion, claiming through Dr. Burns that "all acts (even throwing a baseball) are connected with the highest spiritual yearnings" (Plimpton 331). Like Finch, Plimpton believes in the spirituality of pure athletic competition, that "Perfect Pitch" can be a synonym for "Aim Attained" (Plimpton 327) and that "the two religions (Buddhism and baseball) are compatible" (Plimpton 332). Yet modern baseball is the anti-Christ, as Burns explains

"The biggest problem Finch has with baseball . . . is that *nirvana*, which is the state all Buddhists wish to reach, means literally 'the blowing out' – specifically the purifying of oneself of greed, hatred and delusion. Baseball," Burns went on, "is symbolized to a remarkable degree by those very three aspects: *greed* (huge money contracts, stealing second base, robbing a guy of a base hit, charging for a seat behind an iron pillar, etc.), *hatred* (players despising management, pitchers hating hitters, the Cubs detesting the Mets, etc.) and *delusion* (the slider, the pitchout, the hidden-ball trick and so forth). So you can see why it is not easy for Finch to give himself up to a way of life so opposite to what he has been led to cherish" (Plimpton 331).

The Mets' reaction to Finch's reluctance to sign a contract is even more telling of baseball's fallen stature. In spite of all that Burns explains, they still insist on trying to lure Finch with "all conventional inducements – huge contracts, advertising tie-ins, the banquet circuit, ticker-tape parades, having his picture on a Topps bubblegum card, chatting on *Kiner's Korner* (the Mets' postgame TV show) and so forth" (Plimpton 333). Finch's polite refusals puzzle ownership. Plimpton shows that modern sport has become so commercialized, so celebrity and monetarily obsessed that it has lost all contact with playing for the love of the game or personal fulfillment, as Finch desires.

In another way, "The Curious Case of Sidd Finch" reacts to the constant barrage of sports information. It is nearly impossible for anyone to be undiscovered. The only way to relive the wonder of finding a special player Plimpton says, is through fiction. As Frank Deford explains, in a bygone time "you were not completely under the microscope the way you are now if you are any kind of a celebrity whatsoever" (Deford, personal interview). Today "everything has been revealed" (Deford, personal interview). The only way Finch escapes discovery is to hide away in the mountains of Nepal. Plimpton wants to capture what Frank Deford calls "a blessing," to write about a player, "somebody young who came out of nowhere . . . nobody [knows] who he [is]. He [is] just this god that came out of the heavens" (Deford, personal interview). Today "we know people better, but we know them too well. Take your choice" (Deford, personal interview). Plimpton has taken his.

Plimpton's piece for April Fools' Day, like his other sports works, returns to its author. Not even Sidd Finch can take the spotlight off Plimpton. The reader is briefly distracted, fooled by trickery, but upon realization sees Plimpton's impish grin as a mysterious and incredible

pitcher with the Mets becomes nothing but a figment of his imagination, and a testament to his mastery of the pen.

Plimpton's works reveal his fascination with the extraordinary. From biographies on quirky pop-art figures such as Edie Sedgwick and Truman Capote to his hands-on explorations of professional sports, he seems to have been searching for a means to understand the intersections of enlightened entertainments—sport, art, and literature—with the social conventions of commercialism and “celebrity.” Somewhat ironically, he attained his own degree of celebrity and literary acclaim for his investigation of these issues in sports, and created his own written “pop art.”

The visual pop art movement “[used] the imagery of popular or mass culture” for a “witty and ironic” effect (National Gallery of Art), similar to Plimpton's writing, which uses the mass culture of sports as its subject-matter, and the author's witty and ironic (downright foppish) humor to evoke the same emotions from the reader. While pop art is a “return to representational art, the artist returns to the world of tangible objects in a reaction against abstraction” (Glossary of Art Movements), Plimpton's use of participatory journalism can be viewed in the same way. He moves away from writing about the players' feats or athlete and media observations, and reactions. He wants to have the most “tangible” experience, to write about sport from playing it. Pop art was inherently ironic. It used everyday images and objects as part of fine art pieces. Plimpton recognizes the inherent irony in his form of journalism. Deep down he knows that he will never be a professional athlete, but that does not dull his dreams. While his participatory pieces are the more obvious examples of this idea, even “The Curious Case of Sidd Finch” can appear in this context. Andy Warhol had shop workers mass produce prints of his pop art paintings, doubling the irony back on itself, as his ironic portrayal of consumer culture in art then

became a consumer good. In this spirit, George Plimpton creates “Sidd Finch,” a short fictional story, believable because of its strong ties to reality and published in the world’s foremost non-fiction sports magazine. George Plimpton creates written pop art expounding on the movement’s hallmarks of consumerism, irony, humor, and celebrity by hands-on exploration. Just as Andy Warhol makes a statement on culture through painting soup cans, Plimpton makes a statement about sport through his participatory journals and even fictional characters. Pop art glorifies every day images and Plimpton gains similar understanding, realizing, through failed attempts at participation, the incredible ability of professional athletes. He glorifies their ability to make sports look easy and reveals (as he finds out himself) that what often appears effortless to spectators actually requires an amazing amount of precise skill, hard work, and natural gifts that most people do not possess.

## V

### Bart Giamatti

Angelo Bartlett Giamatti has a number of ties to George Plimpton. He too possessed a fine education, earning a Bachelor of Arts in English and a doctorate in Comparative Literature, both from Yale University. He pursued a career in academia, first teaching at Princeton and later returning to Yale, whose president he eventually became in 1978. After ten years in this role, Giamatti switched careers, becoming National League president for two years before rising to Major League Baseball commissioner. During his employment in sport, he “earned a reputation for preserving baseball's traditions, values and integrity. . . [placing] an emphasis on the need to improve the environment for the fan in the ballparks” (“History of the Game: A. Bartlett Giamatti”). Most famously, in his brief stint as Commissioner before his premature death in



1989, Giamatti presided over Pete Rose's voluntary agreement to permanent baseball ineligibility.

Like Plimpton, only a sampling of Giamatti's works focus on sport. Ironically, one of his pieces "Win one for the Buddha" is a review of Plimpton's attempt at turning his *Sports Illustrated* article "The Curious Case of Sidd Finch" into a novel of the same name. Giamatti eloquently captures Plimpton's aims, writing that the Major League

culture is splendidly rendered with an experienced insider's knowledge, and the whole saga of Finch's brief, astonishing passage through big-league baseball is at once a parody of every player's as-told-to biography, a satire on professional sports, an extended (and intriguing) meditation on our national pastime and a touching variant on the novel of education as Sidd learns of the world (Giamatti).

Bartlett displays both his and Plimpton's depth, their ability to pack a great punch. Plimpton's myriad meanings are as impressive as Giamatti's perceptions, and the two share similar ideas on sport. As Giamatti's review concludes,

by the end, writing baseball and Buddhism are revealed as discrete rituals about the art of connecting us each to each, rituals that may strike the uninitiated as inane or merely esoteric but that, for the adept, carry the significance of the sacred, that is, the force of life itself . . . Over such serious, off-speed stuff, Mr. Plimpton's control is masterly (Giamatti).

Few know more about masterful control of the pen than Giamatti, whose posthumously published, 100-page treatise on sport in America, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and their Games*, offers a scholarly look at many of the same themes. The connections (as he includes for Finch) between baseball, Buddhism, and ritual, comprise the focus of his first section entitled "Self-Knowledge." He writes that life is a breakdown of time spent in work, a "daily negotiation with death," and in leisure, the "occasional transcendence of death" (Giamatti 22). Given these definitions, work is simply an avoidance of dying, or life without meaning. Leisure is much more complex. Unlike the standard conception of time-off from labor, true leisure, in Giamatti's

definition, requires exceeding the usual human limits. One common way Americans accomplish this feat is through sport.

Giamatti creates an extended metaphor, by which sport becomes near-religion. Fans are “true [believers],” their intensity mirroring that of religious followers (Giamatti 23). Sporting events are rituals. As he questions: “is it not true that transcendent values arise in relation to fishing or golf or the Washington Redskins because people invest those activities or groups with [such] values?” (Giamatti 23). American sport takes on a “creedlike quality” (Giamatti 24), and its participants seek godlike immortality “by way of ritual or of record” (Giamatti 15). He writes that agnostics and worshippers alike should see the potential good sport can provide. At worst, sport is “a kind of nontoxic pollutant, junk food for the spirit, without nourishment, without history, without serious purpose. At its best, sport is the remnant of an Edenic world, now gone . . .” (Giamatti 25-26).

Giamatti takes an individual’s experience, a form of personal worship and expands the spirit outwards.

Our football fan is going to watch a game he loves, because he has played it. It reminds him of his best hopes, when he was young and supple. There is a ritual to how he dresses and to where he parks or eats or sits or what he drinks, small, homemade rituals but in their way important to his pleasure, which is after all the purpose of the whole afternoon – as pleasure might be the goal of life as well.

His rituals are part of larger rituals: of sharing a fine, clean, snapping autumn afternoon, of hearing some favorite music, as evocative in its own powerful way as football is for him but now just another pleasure in the whole pageant of pleasures, a pageant that also includes the crowd, its clothing, its colors, its rivalries, its common joy, the comradeship of competition. Very soon the crowd is no crowd at all but a community . . . (Giamatti 32).

The football fan going to a game is no longer Joe Schmo but a religious follower searching for the goal of life, or at least some leisure. Just as each family has its own religious tradition, so each fan has his personal ritual, before coming together in the place of worship, a stadium in this

case, to share emotion. Even the day, “fine, clean, snapping,” suggests pure perfection, a pathetic fallacy to match the fan’s ceremony. By forming a congregation, fans seek a collective experience “when people win together, the joy is more intense than when any of us wins alone, because part of any true pleasure is sharing that pleasure, just as part of the alleviation of pain is sharing the burden of pain” (Giamatti 32).

Roger Angell claims that sometimes “what is happening on the field seems to speak to something deeper within us; we stop cheering and look on in uneasy silence, for the man out there is no longer just another great athlete, an idealized hero, but only a man – only yourself. We are no longer at a game” (Angell 443). Giamatti takes this thought a step further, explaining why such epiphanies occur. “The spectator invests his surrogate out there with all his carefree hopes, his aspirations for freedom, his yearning for transmutation of business into leisure, war into peace, effort into grace” (Giamatti 34). Given his earlier definitions of work and leisure, such a transmutation, their union, would be the ultimate attainment, the ultimate transcendence of death, and the achievement of the professional athlete. Sports are the only peaceful war, and fine athletes routinely turn effort into grace. Plays such as turning a double play, juking for an extra yard, or catching an alley-oop, when well executed make the viewer forget the exertion these plays require; instead, they see only elegant physical motion.

Yet, as close as it may come, “whether celebrated by Pindar or Roger Angell,” (Giamatti 37), sport can never be religion; such a hope is too idealistic. “Sport cares not for religion’s *consequences*” (Giamatti 37). Using personification, Giamatti writes that sport “cares for itself, in that uniquely free, ceremonial, and subversive way . . .” (Giamatti 37). It can provide ceremony, ritual, and a congregation, even momentary transcendence, but in the end lacks quite the weight of religion. There is no final judgment, no hell beyond a punishing fine or

suspension, no heaven aside from the Hall of Fame. There is a greater world outside of sports in which such conventions are only trivial fun.

The next section, entitled “Community,” explores sport’s implications within society. Here some of the uglier consequences arising from sport emerge. In the social sphere, sport can become a cult, especially dangerous for the young, gifted athlete who can become “totally absorbed, some feel invulnerable, invincible, completely exempt from conventional expectations and from the demands of other conventions, and completely protected from sanction” (Giamatti 56). Even if they are able to keep their head above these negative aspects, there is “no place in the general culture for them when they no longer fit in the cult . . . they are profoundly innocent. . .” (Giamatti 58, 59). All of these issues - innocence, feelings of invulnerability, blindness to the fact that games rely on conventions, and perhaps even fear of the onslaught of “general culture” push athletes to immorality. They cheat, driven by the “hunger to win at any cost, even at the cost of destroying the game” like “Odysseus . . . in the Funeral Games near the end of the *Iliad*” (Giamatti 63). The use of classical reference not only suggests a history of cheating as old as that of games, but also the seriousness of the problem. Cheating is timeless. It will persist as long as the cult of sport.

In his final section, “Baseball as Narrative,” Giamatti looks at the sport closest to his heart. Baseball is more than a game, and unique in sport. “Baseball is part of America’s plot, part of America’s mysterious, underlying design – the plot in which we all conspire and collude, the plot of the story of our national life” (Giamatti 83). He then makes a very technical examination of baseball, its field, layout, and design. He comments on the game’s “Symmetrical demands in a symmetrical setting” which “encourage both passion and precision” (Giamatti 84), the latter referencing W.B. Yeats’s “Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation.”

How should the world be luckier if this house,  
Where passion and precision have been one  
Time out of mind, become too ruinous  
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun? . . . (Yeats).

Giamatti's reference could simply be a coincidence; "passion and precision," like "time out of mind" have become common phrases in the American lexicon. However, given Giamatti's classical background the possibility seems unlikely. If this is true, the poem suddenly takes on new meaning. The house is a ballpark, and Giamatti, celebrates baseball through Yates's verse, but fears its demise, as the poem continues on the house's collapse

. . . Although  
Mean roof-trees were the sturdier for its fall,  
How should their luck run high enough to reach  
The gifts that govern men, and after these  
To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech  
Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease? (Yeats)

In his poem, Yeats celebrates the "house" of the Irish aristocracy. The "mean roof-trees" represent the cottages of the estate's farmers (Jeffares 93-94). He argues that although these poor workers may profit a small amount with the fall of the "Big House," at least in the short term, the aristocracy provides more benefits than they realize, and their "Land Agitation" movement is doomed to failure. In the end, their shortsightedness will only lead to loss.

Giamatti includes a vast array of references to literary and historical texts in his work, most more blatantly than the previous poem. However, Yeats's work appears to hold a special place for Giamatti as his title *Take Time for Paradise* is a reference to another Yeats poem, "Running to Paradise." Both the poem and pamphlet rejoice in "self-liberation from the world of bitter experience" (Rosenthal 102). Yeats's beggar envisions a world where all his needs are provided and he is equal to royalty, "and there the king is but as the beggar" (Yeats). For

Giamatti paradise is leisure time spent in and around sport, especially baseball, his romantic ideal.

Baseball becomes a metaphor. Home plate is the center of the universe. The “catcher and batter, siblings who may see the world separately but share the same sight lines, are backed up and yet ruled by the parent figure, the umpire . . . this tense family clusters at home, facing the world together” (Giamatti 87).

As a narrative function, baseball is a Romance. “Home is the goal – rarely glimpsed, almost never attained – of all the heroes descended from Odysseus. . . In baseball, the journey begins at home, negotiates the twists and turns at first, and often founders far out at the edges of the ordered world at rocky second – the farthest point from home” (Giamatti 92). Shortstops are mythical beasts attempting to foil a return and even though at third base the end is in sight, it is still rarely attainable. Indeed “often the effort fails, the hunger is unsatisfied as the catcher bars fulfillment, as the umpire-father is too strong in his denial, as the impossibility of going home again is reenacted in what is often baseball’s most violent physical confrontation swift, savage, down in the dirt, nothing availing” (Giamatti 93). Should the runner succeed, he “is a returned hero, and the teammates are for an instant all true family. Until the attempt is tried again” (Giamatti 93-94). The home run is the ultimate success, akin to a one-shot kill, providing the runner freedom and protection from harm, a sure trip home. Finally, if baseball fits this construct, “if baseball is a narrative, an epic of exile and return, a vast, communal poem about separation, loss, and the hope for reunion – if baseball is a Romance Epic – it is finally told by the audience. It is the Romance Epic of homecoming America sings to itself” (Giamatti 95).

Baseball’s relation to literature extends beyond mere form. Giamatti writes that “serendipity is the essence of both games, the writing one and baseball. But is not baseball more

than *like* writing? Is not baseball a form of writing?" (Giamatti 82). He notes that sport preserves our memories. In this way, he explains Plimpton's obsession with pursuing any opportunity to create a life in sport, writing that

much of what we love later in a sport is what it recalls to us about ourselves at our earliest. And those memories, now smoothed and bending away from us in the interior of ourselves, are not simply of childhood or of a childhood game. They are memories of our best hopes. They are memories of a time when all that would be better was before us, as a hope, and the hope as fastened to a game. One hoped not so much to be the best who ever played as simply to stay in the game and ride it wherever it would go, culling its rhythms and realizing its promises. That is, I think, what it means to remember one's best hopes, and to remember them in a game, and revive them whenever one sees the game played, long after playing is over (Giamatti 82).

Similar to Liebling's idea that watching a great boxer over time creates "a link with an era when [they] were both a lot younger" (Liebling 30), Giamatti upholds sport as both a form of writing and memory, creating a metaphor where sport becomes a diary recording our lives for posterity.

Bart Giamatti formalizes many of the notions commonly expressed in sportswriting. Ideas of sport offering transcendence, freedom, self-expression, and ritualistic joy are nothing new. However, few others have so imaginatively probed these subjects or defined exactly how they fit into both the world and the world of sports. Giamatti teaches the reader sport's religious and social aspects, and examines baseball as a form of expression, at once America's Romance Epic, and each individual's diary. His unique roles in academia and as baseball commissioner make him more than a journalist in the press box. He can observe, but he can also act, he is an insider, and his more technical breakdown demonstrates reasoned reflection as well as expertise, making his writing a more subtle form of participatory journalism. His participation is not like that of Plimpton or Rick Reilly, who go on sports excursions and describe them for readers. Giamatti is an observer, critic, and philosopher, yet he experiences sport too: playing in youth, watching as an adult, and finally through formal employment as baseball commissioner. By the

end, sport is not only his hobby, passion, and object of scrutiny, but also his job. He, like the athlete, combines work with leisure, allowing him to transcend and be both a participant and an observer. This quality sets Giamatti apart from all the other writers. While they possess various styles, levels, and qualities of writing, Giamatti is the only sportswriter I examine who is a true “participant.” While Reilly, Plimpton, and Deford get the chance to be a player for a day, or even part of a season, they are still simply writers and observers, their work is separate from their leisure, their participation is temporary (and scheduled to be so from the start). Bart Giamatti’s observations are different, not only because of his genius and philosophical ability, but because he transcends the bounds of sport and writing. He gains a unique perspective because he “participates,” and for him baseball is writing. *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* is the literal transcript of this relationship, published in 1991, Giamatti wrote it during his brief stint in baseball, just before his death in 1989.

## VI

### Frank Deford

Frank Deford is one of the most famous modern sportswriters. He takes the genre from the hands of Plimpton and Angell and paves the way for Rick Reilly and other contemporary writers. Deford mostly shuns participatory journalism, reestablishing the human-interest story atop the sportswriting genre. Yet he is far from one-dimensional; “among the most honored and versatile writers in the country, his work [appears] in virtually every medium” (“SI.com – Frank Deford Writer Archive”). He wrote primarily for *Sports Illustrated* from 1962 to 1989, and then returned to this periodical in 1998. He is one of the most prolific sportswriters, and not only in his articles. He is the author of fifteen books, two of which have been made into movies, while



one is currently being adapted for a Broadway show. Although many of his books are novels in the sports world, his subjects range from a murder mystery in *The Other Adonis: A Novel of Reincarnation*, to *Alex: The Life of a Child*, a memoir chronicling his daughter's cystic fibrosis-shortened life. He led the way in establishing a place for sportswriters in other media. Today he has a popular show on NPR and contributes to HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" as well as other television productions. Remarkably, he has won critical acclaim wherever his work appeared. His sportswriting, which earned him the titles of "the world's greatest sportswriter" from *GQ*, and "the most influential sports voice amongst members of the media" from *The Sporting News*, has also resulted in six U.S. Sportswriter of the Year awards, two *Washington Journalism Review* Magazine Writer of the Year awards, a "National Magazine Award for profiles, a Christopher Award, . . . journalism Honor Awards from the University of Missouri and Northeastern University, and. . . many honorary degrees" ("Frank Deford: NPR"). His television work resulted in an Emmy, a Cable Ace, and George Foster Peabody awards. All told, his contributions to sportswriting have earned him a seat in the National Association of Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame.

Deford takes pride in his authorial diversity. His works exhibit a wide variety of techniques and approaches. As he willingly admits,

I vary my language and my style and my tone a great deal depending on the subject matter. I've always done that. It's a great challenge to me not to write the same . . . I would prefer if I'm writing a serious subject to maybe have more poetical allusions, or historic allusions, or whatever, and then when you're writing another subject to use everyday language, to use colloquialisms. I'm never afraid to drop big colloquialisms though into any article if it suits the purpose . . . I'm writing books and novels, and long stories; commentary. . . I'm eclectic (Deford, personal interview).

While so many of the previous writers perfected a singular technique or style, Deford defines himself more by his miscellany. He is quick to note that Red Smith is his foil, comparing him to

Vermeer, a master, but one so focused on a single method that he never paints on a bigger canvas. Even A.J. Liebling, although “only a small part of what Liebling did was sports,” confined his subject matter to boxing (Deford, personal interview). Deford challenges the reader, and even more, the critic, by varying not only his subject matter but also his approach.

As he explains,

I always try to write differently depending on whether I’m writing a certain subject or another to keep the writing in the context of the subject matter. So I would write differently if I was writing humorously as opposed to something more serious. I think I’m very hard to peg. . . I think anyone who read a bunch of my articles would find there’s a tremendous variety in the tone of those articles (Deford, personal interview).

Yet, perhaps in spite of himself, Deford’s pieces show some continuity, perhaps merely as a result of their outstanding quality, as all fine writing (“ . . . writing in sports, in writing fashion, or politics, or religion, or anything. It’s all the same.”) has the same “hallmarks . . . simplicity, and clarity, and cleverness . . . and of course substance” (Deford, personal interview).

Deford’s articles demonstrate other common traits beyond these enumerated characteristics. He explores language, not only as other writers do, as the tool of his craft and means of expression, but also as a construction. Words and phrasing are examined so that his pieces comment not only on their subject matter, but also on the American lexicon. Less obviously, he uses sportswriting to share some deeper thoughts. He is especially concerned with temporal changes and their effect on human “roles,”—how people relate to each other and interact in the world. From this general principle he delves deeper into more political issues surrounding sports and society such as the rise and significance of athlete-celebrities coupled with monetary concerns in the relationship of sports and socio-economic status. While his articles exhibit variable tones and subject matters, Deford returns to these same themes, demonstrating their universality as he shows how they relate to all aspects of sport and life.

Frank Deford's writing reveals a deep concern for the details of his craft. He somewhat takes for granted the common techniques of fine writing used by his predecessors. Whereas extended metaphor or unique imagery dominates others' writing, Deford effortlessly includes examples of these techniques. He writes "Hoop Geography" as a transcript of a college anthropology lecture where teams are "tribes" (Deford 67-68). Generalizations about play, style, and success appear as geographic metaphors. "Basketball New York is France. It amuses itself, eats and drinks with gusto, but seldom wins" and despite "many nice vineyards" they "only occasionally produce a vintage crop" (Deford 67). To comment on UCLA's recent demise he writes, "it is easier for archaeologists to uncover Etruscan villages from 2,500 years ago than to unearth any evidence that UCLA only recently scorched arenas across basketball land" (Deford 68).

Other articles use literary and historical references for effect. Everything from *Gone with the Wind* quotes ("Worth"), to biblical insinuation ("The Lost Generation," "Hooked on Golf," "The Cult of Celebrity"), to legal references ("Bad Boys," "The Not So Sweet Science"), to allusions to famous characters such as Rip Van Winkle or historical events such as the sinking of the Titanic ("Frank Deford Goes Bowling") add depth and often a comic appeal to his works. From one of his few participatory pieces, aptly entitled "Frank Deford Goes Bowling," he is upset that so many people focus more on bowlers' hardware than skill, writing "imagine if you were there when Robin Hood split the other guy's arrow, but then all anybody talked about was the type of arrow Robin used and the consistency of the wood, and how much deer grease he used, and scintillating stuff like that" (Deford 79). To express his disgust at the excessive noise and false institutionally-promoted bravado at events, in "We Will Rock You," he jokes that

“guys averaging five points a game are brought on with more excruciatingly loud fanfare than Cecille B. DeMille ever gave God or Caesar or even Charlton Heston” (Deford 145).

In “The Lost Generation” he raises Tiger Woods to metaphorical Jesus or God, repeatedly referencing the golfer as “HIM,” stripping away the PGA tour for “HIS show . . . There is no second best golfer in the world . . . there is no golf anymore. It is just HIM, playing around. It is just Tiger Woods. Alone” (Deford 25). Ironically, despite his admiration for Mr. Woods, he writes of his tendency to become “The Sports Curmudgeon” upon hearing announcers “refer to the Augusta National Golf Course in the sacred tones usually reserved for Bethlehem, Mecca, the Wailing Wall and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” (Deford 93). Although awed by Tiger, Deford is generally critical of his sport. Regardless, all of these hyperbolic metaphors are entertaining and comical for the reader, and often help to express Deford’s exasperation.

He expresses his admiration for Johnny Unitas in “The Best There Ever Was” with similar gusto. Unitas is compared to “Paul Bunyan and Horatio Alger” (Deford 554). His anonymity makes Deford think of “Athena springing forth full grown from the brow of Zeus, or . . . Shoeless Joe Hardy from Hannibal, Mo., magically joining the Senators, compliments of the devil” (Deford 554). His physical appearance is reminiscent of a certain president, as “he looked *crooked* . . . jagged. Sort of a gridiron Abraham Lincoln” (Deford 555). The allusion also works favorably to cultivate Unitas’s auras of mystery and esteem, as the sixteenth president was an icon of both. Unitas becomes a war hero since “in those days, quarterbacks were field generals . . . I never saw war, so that is still my vision of manhood: Unitas standing courageously in the pocket . . . down amidst the mortals. Lock and load” (Deford 557). Unitas even enters into Deford’s visions for the future so that “if there were one game scheduled, Earth versus the

Klingons, with the fate of the universe on the line, any person with his wits about him would have Johnny U calling the signals in the huddle” (Deford 557).

More seriously, the same technique has a sobering effect in “The Not So Sweet Science” where Deford directly challenges Liebling’s boxing preference with the hope that someday the sport will be recognized along with “medieval institutions as segregation and child labor” as a form of “cruel and unusual punishment” (Deford 111). Using backwards social policies and direct legal reference to the eighth amendment Bill of Rights protection, Deford gives his opinions about the “barbarism of boxing” (Deford 111), adding gravity and a tangible metaphorical comparison for readers as a means of understanding the evil he feels the sport represents.

Deford uses other technical apparatus in his writing as well. Alliteration gives his writing a poetic sound. Joe DiMaggio is described in “A Man for his Times” as “pinstripes elegantly patrolling – *patrolling* that wonderful outfield world” (Deford 135). The angler in “Gone Fishin’” is “nature’s noblemen” (Deford 142). “We Will Rock You” repeatedly uses delicate alliteration to show ironically the subtlety beaten out of modern fans, since games have become “single-sense experiences” where they can no longer hear the “ball bouncing,” “sneakers squeaking,” or the coach “bellowing instructions off the bench” (Deford 144). The words he uses for these auditory sensations also have onomatopoeic effects.

While the ease he demonstrates in using these techniques show off Deford’s agile linguistic ability, his exploration of language often extends beyond a form of expression. Similar to the sentiment of Red Smith’s piece on sports groupings “And a Grasp of Millionaires,” Deford writes about writing. He consciously examines the language that makes up sports clichés not only to avoid them, as the best sportswriters do, but also to explain them to his readers. “Words

to Play By” cleverly expounds on the “baseball patois,” an often-puzzling prospect since there is “no logic to baseball argot” (Deford 21). He points out the odd usage of fielders playing “deep” and “shallow,” the terms being used in a lateral instead of their typically vertical terms. The words “off” and “on” offer a similar predicament, since baseball terminology employs both uniquely, in the “qualitative sense. He took a little off that pitch. He put something on it” (Deford 21). Words normally used as nouns such as “shade” and “range” become verbs to help describe the locations of fielders (Deford 22). The home run description, giving the ball “a good ride” makes little sense. “You should send a long ball on a trip, rather than give it a ride. In this regard, don’t forget that a home run became a ‘round trip,’ but a double never is called a one-way trip” (Deford 21). He reveals other paradoxical terms, a “*breaking pitch*,” hitting to “*pull the ball*,” “*fighting the pitch off*,” and the action of “taking” a pitch contrasting with the passivity the act actually requires (Deford 22). In the end Deford deftly combines his phrases. “To take a pitch should mean to rip into it and give it a ride . . . excuse me, take it on a trip. But in baseball, take means not to take. Take that” (Deford 22). Throughout the article he rather dryly and scientifically picks apart word usage and qualities. He selects common baseball words and phrases, but turns them upside down, revealing to the reader their inherent absurdity, and in the end his playful intent of linguistic tongue and noggin twisting.

While other writers are conscious of their words for the idea of the effect they can create, Deford shows he is interested foremost in words themselves, and their definitions. He touches on the idea that such baseball-specific expressions had to develop over time since they use everyday speech in abnormal ways. In “Gamesmanship” he looks at another saying, writing, “*edge* has become a much more important word in our language. Everybody is looking for an edge” (Deford 141). He uses the shift in language as further proof of the decrease of ethics in

sports. The “edge” reference continues as he comments “whereas it used to be cagey to stretch the rules, to see how close you could come to skirting the line, now we feel less compunction about stepping over the line” (Deford 141). Thus “looking for an edge” becomes “stepping over” the edge, into a pit of depravity.

At other times, Deford puts his linguistic explorations to work for a comic effect. In “The Sports Curmudgeon,” to express his displeasure at long and exaggerated pre-game entertainments he calls the following contest as “post-introductions . . . or “games” as we used to call them” (Deford 93). By flipping the language around he emphasizes that the pre-game activities have become more important than the game itself. He also dislikes the overuse of the catchphrase “show me the money,” saying, “next would-be funny guy who says “show me the money,” The Sports Curmudgeon says: Show him the door” (Deford 95). By recreating the same phrasal beginning and construction, Deford counters the first with the second bluntly and with comic effect. He holds his strongest complaints for “announcers in any sport who say that the – choose one: shooter, quarterback, hitter – had “a good look.” Fine women have good looks. The Sports Curmudgeon says: Keep good looks out of sports” (Deford 94). Deford plays on the double meaning of “look,” replacing the sports meaning of “scoring opportunity” with the general culture definition of “physical appearance.” He ends the article as he does “Words to Play By” by comically returning to a previous linguistic breakdown, in this case with the line “and to you and yours . . . Have a good look!” (Deford 95).

Word connotations are another aspect of Deford’s language study. He directly addresses the effect words can have. In “Frank Deford Goes Bowling” to help show the inherent down-to-earth friendliness of bowling he notes that “gutter” and “alley” are “good, honest [words]” (Deford 77). He even uses this connotation to rebut an attempt to officially substitute “channel”

for “gutter.” The sport’s authorities wanted to avoid the negative “gutter” connotations of dirt and disrepair. Deford rejoices that they were unsuccessful, celebrating the word’s ethical insinuation instead. In the same piece he poetically avoids descriptive language, opting instead for visual description of pins falling, writing “all the pins tumbled down l i k e t h i s” (Deford 80). He uses language not only to describe, but also to show, as both words and illustration of the bowling pins.

In “Own, Owner, Own!” he breaks down the connotations of the piece’s subject matter. He writes “how awful the word ‘owner’ sounds in modern Americanese. It’s worse even than such other prime antidemocratic words like ‘boss’ and ‘landlord’ or ‘tax’ . . . Do we ever even use the word ‘owner’ outside of sports anymore?” (Deford 98). By referencing “Americanese” instead of “English,” Deford refers to contemporary, everyday speech. This word use also sets up contrasting word connotations. Deford is annoyed by the modern fan’s dislike of owners for what he feels is a false negative perception of their office and team role. “Americanese” makes everyday slang into a foreign language, the very same slang that makes owners “antidemocratic” and anti-American. Therefore, following the double negative, owners are the *biggest* patriots. They are actually the holders of “the ultimate twentieth-century-capitalist dream” (Deford 98) who have every right to run their teams as they see fit – to actively own. Sour Americanese speakers are merely confused new-age-foreigners to their country’s firmly established ideals, and rightly so. They can’t even speak the language.

The temporal change of word connotations is also picked up briefly in “Down in Front” in which Deford notes that teams never take “time-outs” anymore “just to give everybody . . . well, time out” (Deford 107). “Modern Americanese” uses the time out as a break in action to



discuss a play or “ice the kicker.” Deford cites its most literal and original meaning, by which it simply offers players a respite from action, a second to “take a breather.”

“The Boxer and the Blonde,” one of Frank Deford’s most anthologized works, displays all aspects of his literary mastery. He uses multiple techniques to describe the setting, the summer of 1941. Directly, images such as “bright ripe summer, the last one before the forlorn simplicity of a Depression was buried in the thick-braided rubble of blood and Spam,” (Deford 10), provide feelings of perfection from words like “bright,” “ripe,” and “simplicity.” In contrast, “depression,” “buried,” and “thick-braided rubble of blood and Spam” create images of foreboding, terror, and destruction, as America’s entry into World War Two looms. He pushes the image from purely visual to auditory, describing the “slurred argot of the community. In a city of neighborhoods, before automobiles begat suburbs, ‘Sliberty was known as a very busy place” (Deford 13). He gives a hint of the time-period and community structure, as well as the slang name in local dialect for the Pittsburgh section of East Liberty. Deford claims “I love to write dialect” and it shows (Deford, personal interview). He lovingly helps the reader get a feel for the Pittsburgh auditory experience, writing that

in Pittsburgh, nobody ever said “carbarn.” They said “coreborn.” In Pittsburgh, even now, they don’t know (*sic*) how to correctly pronounce any of the vowels and several of the consonants. Even more than the a’s, they mess up the o’s. A cawledge, for example, is what Pitt is; a dawler is legal tender; and at that time, the most popular bawxer at the Duquesne Gardens was a skinny Irish contender from ‘Sliberty named Billy Cawn, which despite the way everybody said it, was, curiously, spelled Conn (Deford 13).

He uses colloquialisms to further set the time and place. The blonde is “cute as a button,” and “schoolgirl cute” (Deford 10). Conn is “the cat’s meow” (Deford 14). He sees the blonde and “had just fallen for the kid doll like a ton of bricks” (Deford 14). In Pittsburgh, “men were tough and the skies were mean,” an atmosphere breeding fighters as “it was every mother’s son

scuffling, on the street or at the bar rails” (Deford 16). Deford’s use of period-phrasing and dialect-writing place the reader in the era and location of his writing.

He further enhances the setting through nostalgic historical reference. The story takes place during

the last summer that a boy hit .400. It was the only summer that anyone hit safely in 56 straight games. A great beast named Whirlaway, whipped by Eddie Arcaro, the little genius they called Banana Nose, ran a derby so fast that the record would stand for more than 20 years and he finished up with the Triple Crown in June. That was when the Irishman and the Brown Bomber were poised to do battle in what might have been the most wonderful heavyweight fight there ever was. And all this as the Nazis began their move toward Russia and Yamamoto was okaying the attack on Pearl Harbor (Deford 25).

Throughout the rest of the piece, each of Conn’s actions, leading up to and shortly following, the fight is marked by DiMaggio’s night in the streak. Five different references use DiMaggio’s 56 game hitting streak as a timeline for the summer of 1941, for Conn’s actions, as well as American diplomacy until “that was it, really. DiMaggio’s streak ended the night of July 17 in Cleveland. Churchill and Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter four weeks later, and on Nov. 26 the first subs pulled away from Japan on the long haul to Pearl Harbor” (Deford 30). The overall effect of this technique is to create a snapshot of a moment in time, as Deford sums up, “that last indelible summer when America dared yet dream that it could run and hide from the world, when the handsomest boy loved the prettiest girl, when streetcars still clanged and fistfights were fun” (Deford 33).

Sentimentalizing DiMaggio is no coincidence. In “A Man for His Times” Deford notes that the Yankees star is “more cultural a figure than he is merely athletic . . . he represents very well . . . a place and a moment – the fabled New York City of the middle of this century” (Deford 135). Even his moniker is transcendent, “the Yankee Clipper. Not a nickname. Oh, God no. More a title. DiMaggio was *the* Yankee” (Deford 135). DiMaggio is also significant

for his personal life. Running in sharp contrast to Conn's idyllic love, DiMaggio's only appears flawless. His marriage to his own "blonde," Marilyn Monroe, creates the "perfect physical union for our age, the best since Venus and Adonis" (Deford 136). Yet their inability to coexist creates smug satisfaction since "we as imperfect human beings took some naturally mean-spirited comfort that even gods and goddesses can fail too. It is the tragedy of the hero that yet entralls us as much as the glamour ever did" (Deford 136). DiMaggio's heroism derives as much from his celebrity as his on-field actions; he is a romantic hero of society as well as the "romance epic" of baseball (Giamatti 95). Through language and historical reference, Deford tells the specific story of Billy Conn's fight against Joe Louis in the summer of 1941, while at the same time expanding the reader's view to the universality of the human condition. The story ceases to be about only a boxing match and instead nostalgically wends through Conn's idyllic love, the summer only a distant memory, foreign today in nearly all aspects but living on in the boxer, Billy's, and, the blonde, Maggie's, unwavering mutual love.

During the fight, "the people were standing and cheering for Conn, but it was really for the sport and for the moment and for themselves that they cheered" (Deford 28). Even in this character study, Deford includes his sense of sport's relation to society. All of the drama and nostalgia in Conn's story suddenly seem one-dimensional compared to the effect of his fight. The fans come together and, as Bart Giamatti writes, "soon the crowd is no crowd at all but a community" (Giamatti 32), collectively realizing, in the words of Roger Angell, that "what is happening on the field seems to speak to something deeper within us. . . We are no longer at a game" (Angell 443). Rather, these "true [believers]" (Giamatti 23) attend a religious event as a congregation. Deford recognizes this concept in "What is a City Worth?", likening a stadium to a church offering a "place to congregate – to commune – in a public place . . . no less than what

cathedrals used to do in another time . . . How else do we celebrate the city in our society if we don't have cathedrals to share?" (Deford 12).

Yet, Deford is wary of dissenters. While the stadium upholds his moral values, emerging doctrines hold different conflicting beliefs. He admits that he once

thought that the cathedrals of fin de siècle America were our sports arenas. However, I have come to believe otherwise: The monuments that will be remembered most from this time will be our golf courses, delicately carved out of the most prized earth even as the suburban citizen fights in vain for a small plot in hopes there to raise a family, But: priorities. Be honest – does America want houses or fairways in the 21st century? (Deford 70).

Although he willingly admits that stadiums have their flaws, namely in their massive expense, burdening taxpayers instead of “robber [baron]” team owners, and the class-consciousness arising from “ornate, cloistered boxes for the wealthy,” (Deford 12) golf courses are even worse. They lack the redeeming quality of community. As “golf is becoming a form of religion . . . golfers are truly a different race,” their game a “parallel universe” where it is acceptable to spend an “excessive amount of time at massive outdoor temples” (Deford 72). The courses harm families seeking shelter, the land “imprisoned,” and “[gobbling] up” natural resources – “enough water every day to keep the Brazilian rain forest from burning for another 37 years” (Deford 70-71). Yet Deford's biggest complaint is that golfers are “on the course instead of in the world” (Deford 73). Stadium sports worship connects people, forming communal bonds. Golf serves only the individual at the expense of society, as well as highlighting socioeconomic disparity. Its parishioners form an elite and selfish congregation with no openings for dissimilar converts.

Perhaps intentionally, Deford follows “Hooked On Golf” with “Frank Deford Goes Bowling,” setting up a dichotomy of games. Golf's jaded self-interest contrasts with bowling's nostalgic naiveté, the latter comparable to

senior prom and the church fair and trick or treat and buying a new bathing suit and Jujufruits . . . Bowling is a microcosm of life, an ongoing daily battle of greed versus generosity, knowledge versus ignorance, promiscuity versus moderation, darkness versus light, hard versus easy, evil versus good (Deford 75).

Even though bowling, like golf, creates its own world, bowling exists in a harmless “peculiar little universe” and is even self-conscious, “so very embarrassed about itself” (Deford 91).

Although this trait creates an inviting atmosphere for would-be bowlers, Deford wishes he could raise the sport’s figurative self-esteem. He is worried that its attempts at imitation will have a negative effect. Bowling should “just [let] itself be bowling. We don’t need another pseudo-golf or –tennis. We already have golf and tennis for that” (Deford 91). While the country club sports are coldly isolationist, bowling reaches out, “advertising that anybody can bowl” (Deford 81).

He compares old and new alleys, along similar lines. The former may be old and approaching disrepair, but are friendly institutions providing indiscriminate social interaction. The new alleys become “huge suburban alcazars . . . amusement cathedrals . . . owned and run by sharp businessmen” that extract the soul of the game for their upper-class players, eliminating bowling’s rough but proletarian appeal. Shunned by golfers, bowlers represent the most pious congregants of sport-religion. Even for other sports

the best thing you can say about an athlete is that he’s a blue-collar player. Today blue-collar means a day’s work for a day’s pay. It means hustling, dependable, devoted, honest as the day is long. It means: America. Or anyway the way America was supposed to be when we were taught about America (Deford 92).

Bowlers may be nothing more than “recreathletes” (Deford 83), but they demonstrate enlightened transcendence through outdated values of hard work and open-minded acceptance.

Bowling is only one example of a larger principle by which “you can tell a great deal about a whole culture from its behavior toward sports” (Deford 60). Unfortunately, applying this idea to American society, in the article “Cheatin’ Refs,” reveals “that we place little value on the

whole of personal character anymore, and are only concerned with specific results” (Deford 60). In “Gamesmanship” he states that “values have changed” to explain the increasing proximity to and outright disregard athletes have for the moral “edge” (Deford 140). He creates a dichotomy of the moral “sportsman” contrasting with the win-at-all-cost “gamesman,” concluding “winning is not as important as caring *how* we win” (Deford 141).

Confused priorities create, in the article “Bad Boys,” “victory hungry coaches who pose as humanitarians” (Deford 64). Congruently, “Tough Love” shows that the “mythic image” of the “tough coach with a heart as big as all outdoors” is doomed in this society as well (Deford 133). “What many boys and young men used to accept as fair discipline they now reject as harsh disrespect” (Deford 134). Rampant divorce means children “grow up in broken homes, where there is no father to encourage the son, to tell him to tough it out and endure the coach’s insults and fulmination” (Deford 134). Likewise, young men lack perspective, once accepting coaches because they “were patty-cake next to what awaited you at basic training. . . but now the ideals of family and service have grown unfashionable” (Deford 134). In the end he concludes that “coaches will never again mean quite what they did. Whether they can still matter so much – ah that answer must await us” (Deford 134).

From the relationship of sport or sport-groups and society, Deford narrows his focus to individuals. Whereas in the past “there prevailed the view then that we were all sort of in this together, player, team, league, fan, sport,” today sports are selfishly individual (Deford 103). Exorbitant player contracts display this shift most dramatically. While at one time the idea that “we were all sort of in this together” meant “that if somebody made too much it would somehow throw this whole delicate mechanism off balance,” today that balance is gone and each faction

exists in separate and often competing worlds. Fans, having no way to relate, are pushed away from professional sports. As Deford notes

when somebody asks me if I think Alonzo Mourning is worth seventeen million dollars a year, I have no more response than if somebody requested my views on whether or not they should raise import taxes in Luxembourg a quarter of a percent . . . What is Michael Jordan worth? What is a breeze worth on a hot summer day? What is a smile worth? Who knows? (Deford 104).

Even when appalled fans complain, “it’s hollow carping. Our hearts aren’t in it anymore.

Neither, even is our bile. We don’t know if Alonzo Mourning is worth seventeen million dollars, and frankly, my dear, we don’t give a damn” (Deford 104). Just as Roger Angell disgustedly notes “the heart of the game is not physical but financial” and “sport is no longer a release from the harsh everyday American business world” (Angell 443).

The business of sport alienates fans. Growing up idolizing Johnny Unitas, Deford in “The Best There Ever Was” notes why all of Baltimore rejoices in the Colts’ success. They “were real people, so we loved them even more as they went on their merry way to becoming champions of the world” (Deford 556). Yet sports stars and fans increasingly lose touch. Athletes become celebrities, “a fact in the world today” where the rich and famous are “completely under the microscope” (Deford, personal interview). Deford is careful to blame both parties. While Alonzo Mourning’s salary makes him more remote from common experience, fans often forget that athletes are human. In “The Cult of Celebrity” he writes how sports stars are accessible enough to avoid the constant paparazzi harassment facing other celebrities, but have only autographs as their “safety valve” (Deford 286). “Athletes are asked – expected to stop and sign autographs. Everywhere. Yes, even standing at urinals . . . Pause and sign your name over and over, so that whenever you dare step out into public, you ransom an escape” (Deford 287). Athletes must face a challenge of grace, “give unto us that little piece of

you that is your name or we will steal your face again and again . . . and maybe, steal even more” (Deford 287). The conclusion alludes to Princess Diana’s untimely paparazzi-related death.

Deford notes that in spite of their separation from athletes, fans still find connections to sport. Even the “cult of celebrity” has two sides; “we know people better, but we know them too well. Take your choice” (Deford, personal interview). In a way, increased distance from athletes actually increases the fan’s relation to sport because athletes are less human, more symbol. Deford observes in “The Best There Ever Was” that “when most of us from the 20<sup>th</sup> century reminisce about growing up, we right away remember the songs and the athletes of any particular moment” (Deford 557), and uses this device in “A Man For His Times,” naming Joe DiMaggio a “[representation]” of “a place and a moment” (Deford 135). Liebling and Smith write similarly. Seeing Joe Louis lose to Rocky Marciano, each examined the relationship between athlete and fan. Smith realized the fleeting nature of time and aging. Liebling identified with the extended period of Louis’s dominance, noting that only the greatest fighters gave fans the opportunity to connect with them on this level. Deford explains that “unlike songs, athletes, inconveniently, get on. They grow old” (Deford 557). He is happy to not meet or write about Johnny Unitas in his professional life explaining, “that was good. I could keep my boy’s memories unsullied” (Deford 557). When the two meet, Unitas is an old man, as Deford relates

when we were introduced he said, ‘It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Deford.’ That threw me into a tailspin. *No, no, no. Don’t you understand? I’m not Mr. Deford. You’re Mr. Unitas. You’re Johnny U. You’re my boyhood idol. I can’t ever be Mr. Deford with you, because you have to always be number 19, so I can always be a kid* (Deford 558).

Unitas dies within a few years, taking a piece of Deford’s childhood with him. “Johnny Unitas is dead now, and I can’t be a boy anymore” (Deford 558).

At least Deford gains some consolation thinking back over Johnny Unitas’s long life and his own boyhood memories. In “Athletes Dying Young” he describes the fans’ reaction to



untimely sports figures' deaths. "Athletes are such amazing physical specimens. Their death too soon makes us even more – and hopelessly – vulnerable" (Deford 273). When mourners claim the deaths of the "strong and beautiful" such as Wilt Chamberlain or Walter Payton as "unfair," "it is really not unfairness we are dealing with. It is powerlessness" (Deford 274). Even when they do not reach old age we maintain an image of the athlete on the field.

Athletes connect us to youth – ours and theirs alike . . . we watch them grow old . . . Athletes though, remain singularly in our memory, always doing the glorious physical things that only the young can. Suddenly then, when we hear that some sports hero is *dead* it forces us, so very dramatically, to confront the uncomfortable inevitable . . . The athlete dying young is a tragedy . . . for him. The athlete dying too soon is an anxiety . . . for us (Deford 274).

Therefore, both aspects of sports identity work together for maximum effect. Exorbitant paychecks make athletes seem remote, yet this distance only heightens the fan's identification with the athlete for a singular moment, frozen in memory at the height of their athletic prowess. The athlete's death destroys our innocence. When he is old, a part of our childhood dies; when he is young, he takes our assumption of invulnerability.

This article is starkly oppositional to A.E. Housman's 1896 poem, "To An Athlete Dying Young." Where Housman stresses the fleeting nature of athletic glory, Deford celebrates the untarnished memory of eternal youth. Even when athletes grow old, he claims, we keep the memory of their youthful performance alive, making them ageless, their success eternal.

Housman says it is in the athlete's best interest to die young, writing

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honours out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man (Housman).

Deford does not believe the athlete has anything to fear: he is already an ingrained part of the sports fans' psyche, not to mention through Deford's art. Sportswriters assure the lasting

recognition of athletes by recording their acts for posterity. Therefore, Deford and his peers render Housman's notion, that "the name died before the man" obsolete. Rather, Deford notes the true fear is that of the surviving fans, who had identified with the fallen hero and measured their age by his survival, making the death both a "[tragedy]" and "anxiety."

Frank Deford carves a unique niche in the sportswriting genre. He moves beyond other writers' linguistic experiments to a more scholarly breakdown of language, often focusing entire pieces on words and their uses. English shifts from simply a form of expression to be also the subject of expression. Even in pieces not explicitly about language, Deford uses it in unique ways to help the reader understand his moral principles of sport, especially focusing on temporal shifts. In language "Americanese" is more common than English. In sport, he worries that the purity is leaking out of games, that golf trumps bowling in modern America, that "gamesmanship" succeeds over "sportsmanship," and that "meaning" is an excuse for "mattering." These dichotomous relationships are only possible because of Deford's linguistic dexterity, whereby he uses words and their connotations to sum up his broad principles into good-versus-evil arguments. The same technique helps the reader to grasp the ideas of the cult of celebrity where the athlete must "give unto us" or "we will steal" from you. Even athletes' deaths are a "tragedy" for the afflicted and an "anxiety" for the fan. Deford uses language in unique ways not only to entertain and tell stories, but also to show to the reader sport's relation to life, and the athlete's relation to society. He is an observer, recorder, and analyst of life, sport, and language, combining his message and technique into a single form. Words and sport are at the same time both "the story" and a means of telling a story, and life is the greater context for both. Sport gives Deford a reflection of and means to understand life, while language gives him a form to discuss, analyze, and describe it.

## VII

### Rick Reilly

Rick Reilly is the quintessential modern sportswriter. He has dominated the field in recent history claiming eleven National Sportswriter of the Year awards. From 1985 to 2007 he wrote for *Sports Illustrated*, holding sole possession of the back page for ten years with his “Life of Reilly” column, a wildly popular “show” he recently took “on the road” to *ESPN The Magazine*. Reilly is the popular culture face of sportswriting, extending his reach to television “essays” on SportsCenter and ABC-TV’s golf coverage, as well as publicly schmoozing with the stars in forums such as the ESPY Awards or celebrity golf tournaments. His novel *Shanks for Nothing*, as well as compilations *Who’s Your Caddie*, *The Life of Reilly: The Best of Sports Illustrated’s Rick Reilly* and *Hate Mail From Cheerleaders*, the latter two featuring his “Life of Reilly” articles, are all New York Times Bestsellers. Critics call him “the Tiger Woods of sports columnists,” “one of the funniest humans on the planet,” and “an indescribable amalgam of Dave Barry, Jim Murray, and Lewis Grizzard, with the timing of Jay Leno and the wit of Johnny Carson” (“Rick Reilly, 11 Time Sportswriter of the Year – Sports Illustrated -- ESPN”). His stories range from Plimpton-esque participatory accounts to reflections and judgments on all things sports, including human-interest stories solicited from readers. As he explains, “Over the years, readers have provided a boatload of ideas and insights that have helped me write about human joy, sorrow, religion and politics as it weaves itself through sports” (“Rick Reilly . . .”).

He even co-wrote the movie script for 2008’s “Leatherheads” starring and directed by George Clooney. The movie received lukewarm reviews, summed up well by the New York Times’ A.O. Scott who named it a “tonally incoherent piece of work. ‘Leatherheads’ lurches

hectically between Coen brothers-style pastiche and John Saylesian didacticism” (Scott). As Todd McCarthy of U.S. News writes, it is “arch and funny in equal measure” (McCarthy). Although these reviews reflect the final production including issues far beyond the script (acting, directing, and filming to name a few), they present a nice summary applicable to Reilly’s immense body of writing. He ranges from laugh-out-loud funny to poignantly emotional at his best, to exhausting, didactic, and melodramatic at his worst (or sometimes simply in large doses).

Reilly emerges from the lessons of the past. He often takes readers along for wild sports-related experiences in the participatory style popularized by George Plimpton. As his online biography touts:

Probably too curious for his own good, Reilly has flown upside down at 600 miles per hour in an F-14, faced fastballs from Nolan Ryan, jumped from 14,000 feet with the U.S. Army Parachute Team, driven a stock car 142 miles per hour, piloted the Goodyear blimp, competed against 107 women for a spot in the WNBA, worked three innings of play-by-play for the Colorado Rockies, bicycled with Lance Armstrong, anchored a half hour of ESPN NEWS, driven a monster truck over six parked cars, worked as a rodeo bullfighter, competed in the World Sauna Championships, tried his hand at women’s pro football and played 108 holes of golf in one day (“Rick Reilly . . .”).

At other times, his writing is moving, demonstrating a remarkable ability to relate to the reader. As Frank Deford observes, “Rick is a storyteller, he’s a very, very good storyteller,” (Deford, personal interview) going on to name him the closest modern equivalent to Red Smith. Although he notes that Smith’s style, the “column in that form, [the storytelling column] has pretty much gone out . . . Reilly [still] does it to some degree” (Deford, personal interview). Perhaps most notably, Reilly’s columns feature humor, a sports columnist staple, but Reilly’s style is different. He takes advantage of a more popular modern form of laugh-inducement, namely through clever sarcasm and hyperbole. While previous writers tend to use more subtle humor based on irony, wit, or pun, Reilly takes his jokes to the absurd. Where others may make a subtle note of irony,

Reilly lashes out with sarcasm, often entwined with intentionally wild exaggerations, serving both the statement he is trying to make as well as his comic effect.

This penchant for hyperbole can be both funny and exhausting. Reilly walks a fine line of comical near-sense and obnoxious nonsense, flirting with political incorrectness, or poking fun at celebrities. Sometimes his humor seems oddly out of place, as if he is stretching to assure he maintains his “funniest human on the planet” tag. Yet more often than not, he succeeds, juggling biting wit with unassuming self-deprecation to achieve his desired amusement.

Reilly’s humor can be tamely quaint. He masterfully uses the “comic reversal” technique especially through parallel constructions, where the reader, following a pattern, expects one thing, only to be “thrown a curve.” In his article “Superspectator: My Olympic Feats” he describes his task: “I was to do it in 13 days. I was to keep a diary as I went along and take my own photographs to prove I did it. I was to go out of my mind” (Reilly 61). He ends this article’s introduction hoping, “this might not be so bad after all.” A blank line signals a pause before the reader comes to “**Day I**” in bold, and the first sentence, “This *is* going to be very bad after all” (Reilly 61). He describes his dumpy hotel room, “it is no bigger than a Volkswagen and has one tiny bed with a mattress that is nearly two inches thick and one window the size of a toaster oven in the corner.” “It makes up for that, though,” he says, setting the reader up for its redeeming quality, “with a lack of amenities,” instead giving them a classic reversal-one-liner (Reilly 61). Similarly, while exploring the events, he finds horse dressage which “is an acquired taste that I hope I never acquire,” although, “if I’m a horse, I’m asking where the line forms” (Reilly 71).

In “On a Wing and a Prayer,” chronicling his flight with a Blue Angels pilot, he writes “I was thrilled. I was pumped. I was toast” (Reilly 209). When “the canopy closed” the flight

begins. “In minutes we were firing nose up at 600 mph. We leveled out and then canopy-rolled *over* another F-14. Those 20 minutes were the rush of my life,” he claims, setting up the reader. “Unfortunately, the ride lasted 80” (Reilly 210). In “Funny You Should Ask,” Reilly writes beautifully responding to his son’s inquiry, “Why are we here?” (Reilly 118). He paints a dramatic picture of sport and life, exploring their shared meanings and mutual enrichment, closing the monologue profoundly.

“ . . . We’re not here to find a way to heaven. The way is heaven. Does that answer your question son?”  
And he said, “Not really, Dad.”  
And I said, “No?”  
And he said, “No, what I meant is, why are we here when Mom said to pick her up 4 minutes ago?” (Reilly 120).

While comic reversal entertains, Reilly’s true medium is sarcasm. He uses the technique lightly in “Let’s Get World Serious.” The article compares his coaching methods, teaching children to embrace fun in baseball and life, with Phenix City’s coach Tony Rasmus’s devotion to winning at all costs. Reilly uses sarcasm to offset his lovable losers with Rasmus’s detestable winners, showing the reader that Little League should be about having fun. When Rasmus “said his third pitcher had a ‘good fastball and a good changeup’” Reilly responds, “But what would he give to have my third pitcher, whose fastball *is* his changeup?” (Reilly 124). He continues in this vein

Yeah, his outfielders go down on one knee for every grounder, but so what? My outfielders go down on one knee, too (but only for worms). I bet his kids don’t steal bases like we do. Of course we *have* to steal. We only have two helmets. Can Phenix City players hit while backing out of the batter’s box? Can they field line drives matador style? Can they apply a tag with both feet in the air, eyes closed? (Reilly 124)

In “Perfect Pard,” Reilly’s description of a round of golf with then President Bill Clinton, he writes that Clinton

took the team part of golf to heart and often stood close to me on shots. One time, I stepped back to take a practice swing and nearly brained him. He flinched and hopped back quickly, and the Secret Service guy gave me a little dirty look. That would be nice. Nuts turning the White House fence into a steeplechase, maniacs opening up with semiautomatic guns on Pennsylvania Avenue and people throwing Cessnas at him, and he doesn't get a bruise, and then I knock him cold with the dreaded TaylorMade Bubble Shaft driver (Reilly 171).

In "He Needs a Dream," Reilly rants about Jesse Jackson's ridiculous injection of race to defend inappropriate behavior. He uses sarcasm for comedy, but also to point out the absurdity of Jackson's allegations. Reilly's phrasing is funny because Jackson's take is so opposite the "correct" moral the article shows. After a fight in the stands of a high school football game results in the expulsion of six black students, Jackson takes offense and "pooh-poohed the melee, calling it a 'silly thing. Something children do.' Except video showed these children rampaging through the stands, beating the bejesus out of each other and terrifying fans. The little darlings" (Reilly 46). Reilly sarcastically takes Jackson's side with greater effect than simply railing against him.

Reilly's sarcasm for "The Inconvenience of Being Human," becomes less comic and more cynical, in technical terms, less humorously Horatian, more biting Juvenalian. The title itself, repeated in the piece, is ironic as its subject must deal with this puzzling expression. It is also a reference to Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" as the titles are similar and the message—be true to oneself—is the same. It could also reference Gerald Stanley Lee's bestselling nonfiction book from 1913 *Crowds: A Moving-Picture of American Democracy*, which includes a chapter with the very same name as this article. In "one of the most quoted business books of all time" he notes that "'A man's success in business today turns upon his power of getting people to believe he has something they want. . . Business today consists in persuading crowds'" ("Crowds"). Doug Flutie's life mirrors this principle. As a football player,

he must constantly prove that he can overcome his small stature to make it in the NFL. He has to show the crowds that he has something to offer before they accept him. Off the field, he struggles to reach people on a deeper level to inform them about the struggles of having an autistic child.

Reilly's piece focuses on Doug Flutie's challenges. His ability to overcome adversity in his football career pales compared to his triumph over personal struggle. He copes with his wife's miscarriage and helps raise a severely autistic son along with awareness and research funds for the disorder. Reilly lashes out at a public trying to turn Flutie into a "cuddly American hero people want to hang from their rearview mirrors" a "good little legend," and "football's favorite lawn gnome" (Reilly 115-116). These would-be flattering titles of affection are instead attacks on shallowly curious hero-worshippers who only pay attention to Flutie's unexpected NFL success for entertainment value as the "feel-good story of the season" (Reilly 116). Reilly knocks the fan who wants to ignore the personal story and the critics who repeatedly dismissed Flutie as too small. Now these parties are too eager to jump on the "cuddly American hero" bandwagon. Reilly, sensing their disingenuousness, writes of their sudden overtures to Flutie in sarcastic terms.

Sometimes Reilly's wit can be over-the-top. He uses hyperbole, outrageous metaphors, and risqué celebrity references in attempts at humor. When these techniques appear, their effectiveness depends on the reader. While they may be some of his funniest moments, they also run the risk of audience alienation. Some readers may be turned off because they take offense, others because they get lost in the metaphor's unusual complexity, and still more because they simply dislike the strategy. Reilly's intentional overstatements began as some of my favorite lines and ended as the most annoying.



With blatant exaggeration, excessiveness looms close by. In “Glory to the Gridiron,” Reilly declares his preference for football over baseball bombastically. Noting the taboo of his opinion, he writes

if you tell people you would rather be stripped naked, covered in tuna oil and lowered into a tank full of barracuda than watch an entire baseball game on TV, they give you the standard, “Well, you’re not *sophisticated* enough to appreciate the *subtleties* of the game” (Reilly 21).

Describing his disdain for the exorbitant cost of attending a professional basketball game in “National Bunco Association,” Reilly suggests

instead of watching some of the ball hogs in the NBA, you could enroll in the Swine Production and Management class at Des Moines Community College (\$109.20) *and* buy eight doses of swine semen (\$64) from Premier Swine in Michigantown, Ind. You talk about family fun! (Reilly 44).

The article continues with outrageous scenario upon scenario of ridiculous things on which a person could waste the amount of money equivalent to going to an NBA game.

Upset about athletes praying on the field in “Save Your Prayers, Please,” Reilly expresses his annoyance.

What I resent are elaborately orchestrated 50-yard-line religious sales pitches. I believe in my God as surely as you believe in yours, but I don’t use my last paragraph to mention it, and my plumber doesn’t inscribe it on his U joints. He simply fixes my sink and lets me worry about going down the spiritual drain . . . promotional prayer is wholly inappropriate . . . (Reilly 48).

He makes a strong point, but his long-winded sarcastic tirade could have the opposite effect. At least here he grounds his argument in reality, comparing football to writing and plumbing.

Other allusions are farther-fetched. A night in the dingy hotel room during his Olympic adventure is “like sleeping in Saran Wrap under the engine of a Chevy Blazer in Americus, Ga.” (Reilly 62). While the passage offers a unique and comical simile and an image to which readers can easily relate, at least imaginatively, such absurd references soon become tiresome.

Complaining about the heat again, Reilly uses the temperature as his excuse for skipping a tennis match writing, “I would not watch tennis in 108° if it were Bush-Clinton, loser shaves head” (Reilly 64). He uses the same appeal of outrageous metaphor to describe the lopsidedness of a Spanish and Philippine jai alai match that is “like the Washington Redskins playing Jake’s Auto Parts of De Kalb, Ill.” (Reilly 65), and to relate the boredom of field hockey, it becomes “an event on the thrill scale equal only to watching Irving R. Levine get his ear hairs clipped” (Reilly 70).

Reilly’s golf outing with the President inspires more “creative humor.” About his companion’s fitness, “this was not a guy who looks as if he IV’s from a McDonald’s fry vat” (Reilly 169). Their sport of choice, “golf is like bicycle shorts. It reveals a lot about people” (Reilly 168). On his partner’s game: “I’d also heard that the 13 was phonier than Cheez Whiz and that he would probably go out and shoot himself a radio station – a Magic 102 or a Zoo 105” (Reilly 168). To say that golf is a telling game, Bill Clinton is fit, and rumored to be a weak golfer, Reilly touches on bicycle shorts, McDonalds fried food, radio stations and fake cheese products. When he flies with the Blue Angels, Reilly’s pilot is not simply tough or fearless, but rather “the kind of man who wrestles dyspeptic alligators in his leisure time” (Reilly 209). Such passages are funny in small doses. Taken together they have a numbing effect and start to run together as obnoxious displays of an author shouting for recognition of his cleverly deft pen, rather than comical descriptors.

Sometimes Reilly’s creative streak can turn malicious, especially when he makes popular culture references. From “An All Consuming Hunger for Victory,” an article extolling the competitive eating prowess of Hirofumi Nakajima, he jokes about the awe of watching him pick up chopsticks to eat. “This was Ted Williams with the pine tar. Horowitz warming up on scales,

a Kennedy fingering the drink list” (Reilly 85). In “On a Wing and Prayer” Reilly suddenly becomes overtly sexual. The F-14 Tomcat has “nearly as much thrust as weight, not unlike Colin Montgomerie” (Reilly 210). When he approaches the plane he thinks, “If ever I had a chance to nail Nicole Kidman, that was it” (Reilly 210). In mid flight “I felt as if 6.5 times my body weight was smashing against me, thereby approximating life as Mrs. Colin Montgomerie” (Reilly 210). Even when he lands, the innuendos continue to fly. Reilly claims, “I wouldn’t go up there again for Derek Jeter’s black book,” but warns, “don’t you *dare* tell Nicole” (Reilly 211). Although he intends for both of these articles to be somewhat ridiculous, his metaphors teeter on the balance beam of poor taste. In the first, he pokes fun at alcoholism in the Kennedy family, while in the second he pokes fun at Colin Montgomerie’s sexual prowess and insinuates that Derek Jeter is a “man about town.” Each of these references shows questionable taste, potentially coming across as crude and potentially offensive.

In his somber but warm article on Doug Flutie, “The Inconvenience of Being Human” Reilly tries to lighten the mood saying, “the league has treated Flutie the way Calista Flockhart seems to treat a ham sandwich: 1) ignore it, 2) maybe nibble at it or 3) spit it out entirely” (Reilly 1167-117). In a similarly toned article “Just Trying to Make an Indecent Wage” he spouts angrily about wealthy NBA stars, comparing them to the piteously locked out Peterbilt factory picketers. He severely chastises NBA callousness while sympathetically supporting the poor workers, who grow so thin, he writes, their ribs are visible. Then Reilly includes the line, “I think for most of us, the most difficult part of the NBA lockout is deciding which side we’d most like to see crushed by a comet. It’s like a death match between Michael Bolton and Julio Iglesias. It’d be wonderful if, somehow, both sides could lose” (Reilly 114-115).

Both quotes seem sorely out of place. Like the overzealous fan who shouts encouragement to the team during the National Anthem, such metaphors could have their properly intended effect in another time and place, yet the serious nature of both articles does not work with either line. The first article celebrates Flutie for his perseverance both professionally and personally and writes glowingly of his and other athletes' work to cope with and seek cures for the debilitating illnesses suffered by their children. Then he explicitly compares the NFL's treatment of Flutie to a skinny actress's eating habits. Flockhart, in particular was suspected of having an eating disorder, although at the time she maintained "that she has never been diagnosed with either anorexia or bulimia, nor has she been a user of illegal drugs. She did remark, however, that while starring in the show she refrained from eating sweets, retaining her slim figure by working out. She has now admitted that she had a problem at the time, and was 'exercising too much' and 'eating too little'" ("Calista Flockhart Biography"). In his second reference, he likens the NBA's lockout to a duel between two oft hated (and oft beloved, if record sales be any indicator) musicians, Michael Bolton and Julio Iglesias, where the audience hopes both will die. Both allusions try to use popular perceptions for comic effect. However, neither one fits the piece in which it appears. They are too silly and unrelated to be effective given the surrounding story, feeling, and tone, not to mention that each demonstrates questionable taste. Furthermore, they make Reilly look hypocritical. He so often likes to judge athlete's ethics based on their acts and words, yet these articles demonstrate his own moral shortcomings.

Rick Reilly's use of hyperbolic humor, while sometimes unsuccessful, is a risk that seems to have paid off. He has after all gained critical acclaim specifically for his humor. Part of the reason for the success of this style is a comic shift as writers and other pop-culture humor-

shapers including movies and comedians change as Reilly emerges. The “cult of celebrity” intensifies, making Reilly’s teasing references not only more universally understandable, but also socially acceptable. As Frank Deford notes, in his youth “you were not completely under the microscope the way that you are not if you are any kind of celebrity whatsoever . . . it’s a trade-off. We know people better, but we know them too well” (Deford, personal interview).

Reilly acknowledges this dimension in “The Longest Yard for Doak Walker” writing that “before there was *Dateline*, *Nightline*, *Outside the Lines*, *Inside Edition*, *60 Minutes* and *48 Hours* there were heroes. They were handsome and swift, and we knew just enough about them to keep them as gods” (Reilly 96). Yet he uses this modern dynamic to his advantage to poke fun at celebrities and ironically to achieve a degree of universality by referencing specific individuals in the all-revealing public spotlight. Somewhat hypocritically he decries the “cult of celebrity” while constantly using it to his advantage.

The other dynamic unique to Reilly’s comedy, his hyperbolic irrationality, emerges as a written reflection of the increasing popularity of the comic technique of nonsensical bombast, whereby seemingly random, unusual, and exaggerated use of language and metaphor elicits audience laughs. Will Ferrell is a master of acting out this technique, Adam McKay of writing screenplays for it. McKay is best known for his work as a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, and *Talladega Nights: The Legend of Ricky Bobby*, all three featuring Ferrell in a lead role (“Adam McKay”). In *Anchorman*, random exclamations “by the beard of Zeus!” or “great Oden’s raven!” both express Will Ferrell’s character, Ron Burgundy’s, feelings of shock in such a unique and unexpected way that they are funny. Ferrell excels at playing the overly confident bumbler. While Reilly would definitely not like to have this role, he does sometimes play the part as he tries to integrate the arrogance of Plimpton and

participatory journalism with the innocence and humility of the typically self-deprecating “everyman sports reporter.” Reilly uses metaphor for the same effect, so that preferring football to baseball turns into a description of swimming naked slathered in fish oil amongst barracudas. Only sometimes, he gets his roles confused and his comic exaggerations hurt the tone of his moralistic pieces, or he becomes carried away, resulting in the mockery of an alcoholic politician or anorexic actress. Whereas Plimpton plays the part of the fop on purpose, out of intentional self-deprecation, Reilly assumes the role by accident.

Rick Reilly further modernizes sportswriting through his language. While each writer to this point uses colloquialisms and mostly common, if sometimes poetic, language, Reilly’s style reflects the increasing “casualness” of social interaction. As the hats and sport coats at stadiums make way for team gear and the workplace shifts from suits and ties to jeans and polos, Reilly leads the move to informal sportswriting. He regularly uses contemporary slang and pop-culture references. Dollars, one of the most synonym-ized words in today’s English can be bucks, dough, moolah, Benjamins or any of a host of others, including most any random sound used in context. For Reilly in “National Bunco Association” they are “zops” (Reilly 43), in “Speaking of Class to the Class of ‘98” they are “jing” (Reilly 73). Of players’ unreasonable salary expectations from the former article he asks “Are they buggin’?” and refers to ticket costs as the “price of sucking” (Reilly 43). From “He Needs a Dream” he uses the slang word “canned” for a layoff, puns on the famous “Crack is Wack” campaign with the line “not because he was black but because he was wack,” and cites a 1990s alternative music star to add emphasis, “wrong” not being sufficient it becomes “140-decibel-Limp-Bizkit wrong” (Reilly 45). He also uses the popular modern colloquialism “I love it,” not a modern phrase but one used in an increasingly wide range of situations, from sarcasm meaning “I hate it,” to any degree of enjoyment. He

repeatedly uses “blow” to mean “ruin” as in “blow the whole message” and “Is praying for someone to blow it very Christian?” in “Save Your Prayers, Please” (Reilly 47, 49). From the same article he uses “tight” to mean closeness of relationship, in the phrase “just because you rant and rave about how tight you are with God, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s true” (Reilly 49). He advises the graduating class of 1998 to “never rip a teammate” (Reilly 73), and tells the reader he “[*doesn’t*] want any guff” for his ranking of “The Heavenly Hundred” (Reilly 75). “When Your Dream Dies” uses the authorial aside and colloquial exclamation “for crying out loud” (Reilly 101). The earlier-noted line about “13” being “phonier than Cheez Whiz” also fits well into this category as contemporary slang encourages the use of random food articles for self expression such as from the 1990s classic “all that and a bag of chips,” which, of course, is the superlative form of “all that.” While these expressions can be dismissed as reflections of Reilly’s period, he uses them at the height of their popularity in youth and often urban culture, as words like “buggin,” “wack,” and “tight” rarely appear in any form of writing (at least with their slang definitions), even during the modern era, existing almost exclusively in oral communication.

Aside from his humor, as Frank Deford notes, Reilly is a gifted storyteller. He demonstrates technical abilities rivaling all of the sportswriting greats, even if sometimes in pursuit of a laugh they take a back seat to his various forms of humor. However, in his human-interest articles, Reilly demonstrates a propensity for telling a story in fascinating and creative ways. He often uses parallel constructions, metaphors and puns to evoke emotion. He describes the NBA elites riding on a “river of corporate ooze” (Reilly 44), an image with heightened negative connotations from the “v” sound in “river,” working with the inherently disgusting “ooze,” painting a picture of liquid money with the consistency of pus. Other images have

positive connotations. In “An Easy Choice,” an article celebrating a boy’s kidney donation to his grandmother, Daniel is described as “the screamer . . . the human pep rally,” a youth full of life (Reilly 79).

The god-like Doak Walker had a “jaw as square as a deck of cards” and “made girls bite their necklaces. . . After a game he’d come out of the locker room in a coat and tie, hug his girlfriend who really was the homecoming queen, and take her for a malted. Thirty million mothers sighed” (Reilly 96-97). Walker becomes an idyllic angel, his facial shape denoting strength, good looks, and even moral uprightness. In “A Paragon Rising Above the Madness” John Wooden assumes similarly idyllic stature. He is “quiet as an April snow and square as a game of checkers; loyal to one woman, one school, one way; walking around campus in his sensible shoes and Jimmy Stewart morals . . . he believed in hopelessly out-of-date stuff that never did anything but win championships” (Reilly 242). Although these lines are melodramatic from the theatrically repetitive parallel construction, and overbearing sense of unrealistic perfection (“quiet as snow,” “square as checkers”), they do have some nice images. Some of the similes don’t even make much sense such as an “April snow” but all together they work. The double meaning of “walking around campus in his sensible shoes” adds to the image twofold as Wooden may have a pair of shoes that are comfortable and good for the feet, but shun style—they are sensible. At the same time, the phrase recalls the idea of “walking in another man’s shoes.” Wooden walks in his own. He is intimately familiar with himself and not easily influenced (or as Reilly might suggest, tainted from perfection) by others. The irony of the final sentence also helps the description. Reilly commonly uses the technique, but usually for comic effect. Here it comes across as a knock on Wooden-doubters. Reilly refers those who complain he is slow or old-fashioned, to the coach’s success. These lines also use parallel construction,



first with short descriptors, and then with repetition of the “ones” to whom he is loyal. For Wooden this technique reinforces his “square-ness.”

Reilly uses repetition and parallel constructs in other articles for similarly dramatic effects. “Two Men, Two Flips of Fate,” uses the technique in its title, its first sentence: “Two NFL stars. Two days. Two seat belts unbuckled. Two horrible accidents,” and continuing throughout the piece as the opposite stories of Isaac Bruce and Derrick Thomas offset one another. Each man is “covered in hugs” (Reilly 50,51), Bruce when he leads his team to victory in the Super Bowl, Thomas as he tries to recover from his paralysis. Bruce earns his team a championship banner, Thomas is “in a room papered with banners from well-wishers” (Reilly 50). Bruce celebrates victory with his teammates while Thomas lies in a hospital bed “surrounded by his new teammates—his mother, his surgeon, his therapists” (Reilly 50). Reilly builds up sympathy for Thomas. He is a good man who made an accident and suffers to become some semblance of whole again. Bruce meanwhile is a lucky wild man who denies that he could have been like Thomas. The contrast is blatant, one man learning the hard way he made an error, the other blindly ignoring his risky behavior, and despite their similar accidents, their stories drift apart, until Reilly reconnects them in the end, saying “two men. Pray for them both” (Reilly 52).

The same technique has a greater comic effect for “Perfect Pard” where Reilly depicts the President’s golfing actions in terms of his governmental abilities. On carrying a bag with more than the permissible number of clubs, “apparently he has vetoed the 14-club limit” (Reilly 170). The President’s illegal club “hook-faced to correct his slice . . . apparently fell under the assault weapons ban” (Reilly 170). After his own bad shot, a “serious sportswriters snap slice,” Reilly receives a “1<sup>st</sup>-tee mulligan, which as we all know, is provided for under the Constitution” (Reilly 171). When Clinton’s own play lags “he never invoked the Executive Privilege Redo or

even the Presidential Override. He could have. Who was going to stop him? Lito?” (Reilly 171). Even when “he three putted . . . [he] never quite pardoned himself” (Reilly 173). In the end Reilly turns to himself, and his role as American citizen, claiming that he let the President win, accepting a loss “I feel very patriotic about. I feel it’s every citizen’s duty to lose to his president by two shots” (Reilly 173). Yet as their lives come together, each playing not only golf, but his role as American in Reilly’s parallel construction, unlike the football players, in the end they must break apart. Reilly observes President Clinton “put away his smile and he went back to his life, trying to decide whose lives are worth risking in a spiral staircase of a war 5,000 miles from home, and I went back to mine, trying to fix the wife’s passenger-side window” (Reilly 174). In this article, parallel construction has a comic effect as presidential power and citizenly duty, come together for a game of golf.

Finally, like his predecessors, Reilly addresses sport’s transcendence. His articles celebrate its aspects of wholesome morals and honest fun, as well as the characters best representing these qualities. He decries coaches, players, and owners who lose hold of these ideals, and especially despises the emphasis on monetary compensation. “When Your Dream Dies” describes Kenny Wilcoxon’s journey from personification of these ideals to his suicide attempt when he forgets them. His recovery is a return to original goodness. Kenny is a gym teacher who teaches his students to enjoy their games. In his free time he referees football games, passionately following his father’s hobby. He takes sports seriously only to the degree that he is a perfectionist of his craft, “[pursuing] officiating with every ounce of obsession inside him” (Reilly 107). After making a controversial call in an important game, “refereeing finally followed Kenny home” (Reilly 105). He is harassed by parents and local media, driven to the brink of insanity by their taunts and threats, along with his own dismay at failing at something he

holds so dear. After days of trying to cope, Kenny attempts suicide. He buys into the opinions of others.

The ref is a bum. He is a sightless, soulless, gutless bum who needs to be told that One Hour Optical stays open late now. You pay for your ticket, you get to scream at the ref. That's half the fun. He is a brainless oaf who ought to move around a little out there because he's killing the grass. He should be booed when he walks on the field, and he should leave under a shower of ice cubes. He is a no-good wannabe jock who usually requires a state-trooper escort off the field and into a little room somewhere, where we forget about him until the next time (Reilly 106-107)

Luckily, Kenny is saved, not only by prompt medical care, but because the ambulance attendant asks him "*Don't you know what you mean to this town?* He had seen himself as a ref, the 250-nights-a-year man, the son of the great ref. He had forgotten what else he was – a teacher, a coach, a father, a friend to nearly every kid in town" (Reilly 110). Only from his near-death do townspeople realize "there are real men under those black-and-white stripes, and they hear everything you say and feel every ice cube your throw. There are real hearts under there too. Some are even breakable" (Reilly 112). With that, Reilly sums up his opinion, sports are important, but must remain in perspective. He believes people too often lose sight of this fact. Even for Kenny he writes, "maybe everybody just forgot that Kenny Wilcoxon was more than just something attached to a whistle. For sure, that is what they forgot" (Reilly 112). By anticipating the excuses of those hecklers who drove Kenny to lose his grasp of life's priorities, Reilly shows that their actions are inexcusable; they forgot humanity.

Yet Reilly's tale ends with uplift. Kenny survives and returns to doing what he loves and having a positive impact on a now more appreciative town. He looks more explicitly at the positive side of sports in "Funny You Should Ask;" his answer to the question "why are we here?" (Reilly 118). Reilly describes glorious things to see, try, and do in sport, finally boiling them down to a single transcendent thought. As he tells his audience "see, grown-ups spend so

much time doggedly slaving toward the better car, the perfect house, the big day that will finally make them happy when happy just walked by wearing a bicycle helmet two sizes too big for him. We're not here to find a way to heaven. The way is heaven" (Reilly 119-120).

Reilly's writing is in many ways representative of modern sportswriting. As Deford writes, he is like the "girl with the curls." When he tells stories such as "When Your Dream Dies" or "Let's Get World Serious," and when he avoids melodrama in his feel-good pieces, such as "Funny You Should Ask," Reilly is one of the finest modern sportswriters. At times, he masterfully evokes emotions from happiness or sadness to anger at injustice, nostalgia, or a laugh from his jokes.

However, "when [he is] bad, [he is] horrid" (Deford, personal interview). He tends toward hyperbole, obnoxious preaching, moralization, and tiresome humor. In articles such as "Glory to the Gridiron," "National Bunco Association," and "Save Your Prayers Please" his extreme metaphors turn angry rants to annoying whines. In "Just Trying to Make an Indecent Wage" and "The Inconvenience of Being Human" he fails at attempted humor because it does not fit the context.

Sometimes Reilly's exaggerations and puns can be witty such as in "Perfect Pard." However, his humor quickly gets old. He tries to be funny by playing off a stereotype of the sports fan as a chauvinistic, beer-drinking, un-athletic, sport-obsessed, jolly numbskull, with an adult's "boys will be boys" idea. He attempts to appeal to this element, by bludgeoning good and moderate tastes. I often found myself offended by the perception it seemed Reilly had of his readers. To make matters worse, when he is not writing down to the quaint-sport-fan-morons through moral didacticism, or beating them at their supposed level, he is attempting to write from the perspective of this stereotype. Articles such as "Quick, Before You're 30" "Hey, This

Turning 40 Ain't So Bad After All," and "On a Wing and a Prayer" celebrate these "stereotype ideals," many of which he hypocritically raves *against* in some of his more sensitive pieces. "Quick Before You're 30" highlights the need to "[have] ruined at least one promising relationship over sports," "attempted a putt for more than \$100," "a good explanation for why the only time he watched figure skating is when Katarina Witt is on," "a line to lay on an umpire," and "been shown the exit by an usher" (Reilly 55-57) before turning 30 years old. His piece for the next decade describing "The Perfect Day" features waking up next to Heather Locklear, having "Gabrielle Reece [bring him] breakfast in bed – wearing only [the] sports page," driving a fast car, gambling, and having "swimsuit model Heidi Klum" give him a "foot massage in [a] par-5-length limo" and play "strip poker. She's not holding any cards" (Reilly 58-60), amongst other adult references. Not only are these articles tiring and lame, but their assumption of the sports fan's ideals and priorities (or lack thereof) is downright insulting. Thus, Reilly is at the same time both an example of the greatest contemporary sportswriting and the author of some of the most clichéd and hypocritical works of the genre. When he follows the conventions of his predecessors and tells stories in unique, moving, and even lightly humorous ways he is king. But, when he tries to push their bounds, he too often resorts to extremes of either moral didacticism or immoral stereotype that overshadow his immense ability as a fine writer.

## VIII

### Blogs

No discussion of contemporary sportswriting would be complete without mentioning the internet. Although the most pronounced shift for sportswriters may have come with the

emergence of television, the World Wide Web creates its own pressures on sports reporting. Namely, instantly-accessible and constantly-updated scores, stats, and videos, heighten the effects of television by decreasing the need for fact reporting. Furthermore, the internet has established its own branch of the genre through fan websites and blogs.

Sportswriting is no longer practiced only by those carrying a press pass. Today anyone can write his or her opinions and ideas and post them to a global audience. The most popular form of such grassroots reporting is in the form of “blogging.” A blog, short for “web log” is, according to Princeton’s “WordNet,” a “shared on-line journal where people can post diary entries” (“Blog”). Sports blogging has opened up a new class of participatory journalism. Instead of the journalist taking part in sports, the fan takes part in journalism. Sometimes, even more paradoxically, athletes themselves become journalists. Numerous professional athletes now have their own websites, many incorporating blogs. Still others run blogs through collective sites such as [yardbarker.com](http://yardbarker.com). Many of these entries provide little more than short updates or personal notes, and often appear to be ghostwritten and maintained by fan clubs or agents rather than the actual player. Some star athletes though, actually do write their entries. Curt Schilling even used his “38 Pitches” blog to announce his retirement. Some athletes, such as Ohio State basketball’s Mark Titus (Club Trillion), or the National Basketball Development League’s Rod Benson (Too Much Rod Benson – TMRB) are actually more famous for their online journalism than their athletic prowess.

Other blogs are written by established sportswriters such as ESPN’s Bill Simmons, a.k.a. “The Sports Guy,” who began his career from his home but today, without any formal journalism training, is a published author, on the staff of one of the biggest sports enterprises in the country and “among the most popular sports columnists in the country” (St. John). He is known for a

“casual and intimate writing style” and “writing from the perspective of an unabashed partisan” for his hometown Boston sports teams (St. John). “John A. Walsh, the executive editor of ESPN, said he believed Mr. Simmons came to his . . . writing style precisely because he never had training at a newspaper. ‘He would not have had his voice in a traditional medium’ . . . ‘His entry point allowed him to be himself’” (St. John). Simmons began his writing after growing unhappy with existing sports journalism. He saw traditional sportswriters as “‘an old-boys network’” (<http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/article/121796>). “‘The main thing I noticed was none of them were writing about the stuff I talked about with my friends,’ he said of traditional newspaper columnists. ‘The stuff we were doing – going to Vegas, watching football for 10 hours, playing video games – and the stuff we noticed, like the ugliest player in the NBA, wasn’t represented’” (St. John). As his writing and that of others emerged, it became increasingly popular. For the “old-boys,” Simmons explains, “‘the free ride was over’” (“Sports Blogs Continue to Evolve as Popularity Grows”). Yet unlike their brethren during the advent of television, Simmons says of contemporary sportswriters “‘I don’t think they really adjusted . . . From the standpoints of creativity and immediacy, the Internet has crushed newspapers (sports-coverage-wise), whether they want to admit this or not’” (“Sports Blogs . . .”). Ironically, Simmons is now more a member of the sportswriter’s world than not. His column

on ESPN.com these days is somewhere between a freewheeling blog and a traditional newspaper column. While the format is still loose, ESPN is owned by the Walt Disney Company, and Mr. Simmons has had to make adjustments to his style to please his corporate bosses. He reins in his impulse to mock television announcers, for example, a staple of his old BostonSportsGuy persona, because many of those announcers are now his colleagues at ESPN (St. John).

Frank Deford draws the line with financial compensation. Talking about Bill Simmons he relates, “you know he gets paid for it now. He’s not a blogger anymore. You know, he gets paid

by ESPN.com. He's no different than Rick Reilly who came over from *Sports Illustrated*. They're side by side. They do the same thing" (Deford, personal interview).

Still the most prevalent and controversial blogs are those maintained by fans. Established journalists are overwhelmingly negative in their fan-blog opinions. Rick Reilly notes that "there's some good journalism, and some really horrible crap on there from guys holding down the couch springs in their mother's basement that have never been in a locker-room but are pining on this and that" (Magary). Frank Deford is puzzled.

I don't understand them. I don't understand how people write things without getting paid. It confounds me . . . I have nothing against blogs. I think often the people who write blogs . . . forget that the reason they have these opinions is because basically they read them in newspapers and magazines by people who are doing journalism. And so they're dependent on other people, blogs are. And I think sometimes they forget that. They're very, sort of, supercilious and arrogant, almost like, we're smarter than those people out there. But I don't know how there's going to be any blogs if there aren't going to be any newspapers, because newspapers are where the facts come from. But if people want to write blogs, hey, God bless 'em (Deford, personal interview).

Bloggers argue that Reilly and Deford miss the point. They are a part of Simmons's "old-boys network" and out of touch with a sort of "blogging spirit," as Drew Magary explains in his blog post, "Rick Reilly, Billy Simmons, and the Follies of Privileged Sportswriting." Magary looks at Reilly's articles, especially many of his participatory pieces and names him a

privileged sportswriter . . . Reilly has access to privileges that you or I, as normal sports fans don't have . . . He gets to go golfing with Bill Clinton. He gets to ride in an Indy 500 race car. He gets to walk up to Sammy Sosa's locker and dare him to pee in a cup for him. He gets to do all that. And that's why he sucks. If you're a privileged sportswriter, you're experiencing sports in a completely different way from normal, everyday fans. They don't get to do any of that shit . . . They watch sports at home, or in bars, or at house parties (Magary).

Magary highlights the reason why Reilly's "guys holding down the couch springs" have become so popular, explaining that their style of sportswriting

has value to me, as a fan, *specifically* because the people writing are non-credentialed jackasses, just as I am. They experience sports the same way I do, so I'm more apt to



connect with what THEY'RE saying than with the dude who gets to hang out with Phil Mickelson at the pitch and putt. They're talking about sports WITH me, rather than trying to lecture me about whatever unique, enlightened perspective they discovered watching from their privileged viewing platform (Magary).

Simply put, Magary argues, blogs are fun to read, "I relate to that guy . . . I like reading it. I don't always want to hear from an expert" (Magary).

Magary also touches on one of the biggest current sportswriting controversies, access.

He complains that established sportswriters are privileged by their access, yet it also creates an

inherent catch-22 . . . You can't brutally criticize athletes and expect them to give you any access. But, if you go the other way and soften your treatment of athletes in order to maintain access, then you end up looking like a jocksniffer . . . Most sportswriters get around this by mixing and matching. They're effusive in their praise for the handful of guys that give them decent quotes. They save their most gleeful invective for the handful that don't (Magary).

To bloggers, who have no access save for established media outlets such as newspapers or television, this issue is of no concern. Although they lack the ability to get a player's direct opinion, or see things up close, they are free to say whatever they want. As blogs have gained both popularity and credibility, they have also begun to broach the issue of access, and today

tension over sports blogging is one of the strains between sports franchises, leagues, and reporters . . . The dispute has grown lately between the press and organized sports over issues like how reporters cover teams, who own the rights to photographs, audio and video that journalists gather at sports events, and whether someone who writes only blogs should be given access to the locker room. . . At the heart of the issue, which people on both sides alternately describe as a commercial dispute and First Amendment fight, is a simple question: Who owns sports coverage? (Arango).

These issues are still under debate, but one thing is for sure: "In locker rooms and press boxes across the country, the new media are redefining relationships between the press and pro sports, including the issue of how a journalist is defined" (Arango).

In terms of literary analysis, blogs are a challenge to pin down. There are an infinite amount of them, all of varying levels of style, professionalism, journalistic integrity, and writing

ability. My observations come from a sampling of some of my favorites across the web, but can hardly be taken as representative of all, or even a majority of sites in this genre. Most notably, blogs tend to be extremely colloquial. They are written in a conversational style, much as the original definition suggests, as log entries. Most blogs read like a diary or stream of consciousness. Spelling and grammar are secondary to the idea being expressed, and they are often only loosely focused, frequently jumping from one subject to another. As they are very personal, these works tend to be emotional. Strong language is commonplace and they often read as insult-filled rants. Magary's piece on blogs works in this manner where he calls Rick Reilly "Mr. Punderful" and warns at the start that his entry will "*be like an SI Point After column, only with dick jokes. Enjoy*" (Magary). While humor depends immensely on the author's ability and the reader's perception, many blogs attempt to include this convention, often with sarcasm, hyperbole, and colorful (and sometimes adult) language and sport or pop-culture references. Magary provides numerous examples in his work, perhaps least appropriately while railing against Rick Reilly's quote about bloggers when he explains

Reilly assumes that, if you haven't been in a locker room, if you've never had access, then you can't possibly have any sort of valuable insight to offer on sports. This is wrong, of course. I'm pretty sure Bill James didn't set foot in a locker room before changing the fundamental nature of baseball scouting forever. He didn't need to see Rich Garces' tits in order to glean insight as to how he pitches (though I've heard Rich Garces' tits are AMAZING). Shit, he didn't even need to see him play on TV (Magary).

Blogs also, as Simmons and Deford both note, tend towards fan observations. While not everyone offers the impassioned partisan take such as Simmons's first works, they are generally based on sports media. Bloggers often comment on the media itself: reporters, articles, or television coverage. Even when describing the game, bloggers write as outsiders, often resulting in simplistic, or simplified (depending on your opinions and the writer's sophistication) breakdowns. There are few "human interest" blogs. Frank Deford explains the contrast between

print and web journalists by comparing Rick Reilly and Bill Simmons. Although he relates them because each receives an ESPN paycheck, he sees inherent differences in their works. “Rick is a storyteller, he’s a very, very good storyteller, he tells stories. Simmons doesn’t tell stories, he says . . . here’s five reasons why Sacramento is better than the Utah Jazz . . . If that interests you, fine, but that’s not storytelling. It’s ‘opinionating’” (Deford, personal interview). While this distinction may ring true, I believe that Deford, Reilly, and many established sportswriters miss Magary’s point. Even if this “opinionating” does not include the conventions of access—athlete quotes or “insider knowledge” (an idea becoming increasingly obsolete anyway thanks to the proliferation of television and internet media)—it is a form of storytelling. Although the majority of blogs may not be as polished or moving as a Rick Reilly article, they do tell a story. They tell the story of their author who, as Deford notes, does not write for remuneration, but rather out of a somehow purer wish to share his thoughts with the world and connect with fellow fans. They also tell the story of the reader, who must intentionally “go” to the site because they wish to read the entries. Reilly’s pieces are included as part of a larger package. Every subscriber to *ESPN The Magazine* gets a copy of his article, whether they want to read it or not. Although payment and a subscription are required in Reilly’s case, reading a blog seems at least as active a pursuit, and the fact that it is such a common and popular one demonstrates the need for blogs to be recognized as a niche in the sportswriting genre.

## IX

### 2008 Sportswriting

Contemporary sportswriting struggles to attain the quality of its predecessors. In fact, it is surprisingly different, perhaps because as Frank Deford notes, writers “have to adjust and

accommodate” (Deford, personal interview). In the days before television “sportswriters ruled once upon a time. We don’t rule any more, television rules. We’re the handmaidens” (Deford, personal interview). Yet he believes that after this television-shift, sportswriting settled into a new and comfortable niche. He says, “I think the change has been made. I can’t see something happening in the future. Yes, there’s more media. The internet changes things a little, but the great change was made when television came to power. Sportswriters had to adjust. We have adjusted. That game is over” (Deford, personal interview). Yet when asked specifically about sportswriting’s deterioration he admits “yeah, I think the quality of writing probably has [declined]. The value of the quality of writing probably has been diminished” (Deford, personal interview), but left some wiggle room saying, “I still think there’s a good market for it. I think that quality is still out there. . . And yes, maybe the philistines are in command, but there’s still a place for good writing” (Deford, personal interview).

Major challenges confront both today’s sports writers and readers. Twenty-four hour sports coverage on television networks such as ESPN and on the internet offers constant exposure and a sparsely regulated forum for articles. Authors struggle to come up with anything new. Subject matter becomes more abstract and remote. Fewer articles focus on sporting events as they are replaced by human-interest stories and an increasing emphasis on the fringe of sports. Descriptions, images, and metaphors become clichéd, or in an attempt at originality are instead frustratingly hyperbolic. Given these issues and the glut of sportswriting in general, the reader’s quest for good articles becomes more trying. Deford is quick to reference Bart Giamatti’s ideas on sportswriting to say that

the best writing in the newspaper . . . is on the sports pages. The best columnists are on the sports pages, the best reporters are on the sports pages. But he also said, when it’s bad, it’s very bad. It’s like the little girl with the curls. When she’s good she’s very, very good, and when she’s bad she’s horrid, and that’s what sportswriting is. The worst

writing is sportswriting when it's bad. And when it's good it sings (Deford, personal interview).

When asked to explain this situation, Deford says that so many of the best writers choose to write about sports

because there's so much there. The drama is there, the grit is there, the characters are there. It's an absolutely marvelous canvas to paint on, and so it attracts good writers and the reason it attracts good writers is because it's good to write about. So you're going to get better writing because the subject matter is good, and the people who are writing about it, generally speaking, are better than the guys writing on other subjects (Deford, personal interview).

Yet his statement ends dubiously. "I hope that stays. I hope we're not going to lose that" (Deford, personal interview). Although Deford's fears have not yet come true, the risk seems closer than he may wish to acknowledge. Reading the articles anthologized in *The Best American Sports Writing 2008*, the series widely acknowledged as "keepers of the canon" (Kram Jr. 36) for sportswriting, one sees that the genre's struggle to find a place in contemporary sports media results in a marked decline in quality. Syntactical techniques are hackneyed and the articles lack the depth of the genre's classics, substituting hyperbole for any true expression of sport's transcendence.

The most notable and general decline is the subject matter. The book screams "it's all been done," as not a single article features true participatory journalism or a well-known sporting event as its subject. The human-interest piece, long a sportswriting staple, takes on new significance as the most common form of writing. This shift reflects the modern movements to which Deford alludes. With increased game coverage, writers shy away from describing them. What can writers tell the reader that they didn't already get by watching the detailed coverage on television and the internet? Furthermore, as athletes become more distant from fans, more enveloped by the "cult of celebrity," there may be a perceived need to attempt to close the gap.

Ironically, though, these articles tend to focus more on the superhuman aspects of their subjects than on their humanity, decreasing the athlete-fan human connection. Athletes increasingly take the role of cultural icon, as described by Deford and Liebling. In this construct, spectators do not identify with athletes' humanity, but rather with their accomplishments as markers of age and time. Even more notoriously, the attention of contemporary sportswriters' pieces focuses on the fringe of the sports world. Human-interest pieces heighten this effect as they replace sport as subject with human protagonist. Yet even in these cases, the core sports – baseball, football, basketball, and hockey or even Olympic events receive less coverage. Instead, the articles are about a myriad of subjects. "Forgive Some Sinner" is about a sportswriter. Many look back on or catch up with retired athletes such as Bo Jackson in "The Legend of Bo" and "Bo Knows Best," Doug Atkins in "Atkins a Study in Pride and Pain," and Hank Aaron in "Hammering on Hank." Others describe activities related to sport, "para-sports," such as cheerleading in "G-L-O-R-Y," and Parkour in "No Obstacles." While this search for original subject matter is commendable, helping writers avoid cliché, it hurts sportswriting's credibility and can easily turn off a reader who, as a fan of sport, actually wants to read about a *sport* in their sportswriting.

The most popular technical conventions of contemporary sportswriting include the staple of metaphor, but add the less common convention of double meaning. Use of these techniques is widespread, especially in styles and contexts. Most notably, athlete metaphors routinely focus on one of two ideas. Athletes are either superhuman or mechanical, perhaps because of the influence of a popular cultural movement returning to comic book heroes as witnessed at the movie box office. In 2008, a year which included the release of "The Dark Night," "Ironman," "The Incredible Hulk," "Hellboy II: The Golden Army," and "Hancock," to name a few, movie protagonists were routinely superheroes. Superhero movies were so popular that in 2008

Dimension Films even released “Superhero!” or “The Superhero Movie,” spoofing the genre of its namesake and grossing almost 26 million dollars in America alone (“Superhero Movie (2008)”). The idea of mechanized athletes also works well for 2008, when jaded fans constantly question their sports figures. The hard work and devotion that used to be taken for granted in athletes has given way to doubts about illegal performance enhancement, making modern athletes less human. Today, society sees athletes as the creations of trainers and technicians, and recognizes that professional sports require extreme repetition and precision, so athletes become robotic. With enormous contracts, advertisers also play a role in athletic creation. Fans recognize their building of athlete personas that widens the gap between athlete and humanity, since they tweak not only the physical, but also the personal aspects of sport stars for maximum effect. Articles highlight various aspects of these ideas. Some focus simply on the non-human, mechanical athlete. Others glorify the athlete as superman. Often these two ideas become intertwined, so that “superhuman” equates to “robotic.” Sometimes super athletes transcend to supermen because of their scientific knowledge, like Kobe Bryant. At other times athletes’ implication with science, such as Roger Clemens’s with performance enhancing drugs, can diminish a superman into a cheating scoundrel. Whatever the case, many sportswriters evoked these metaphors in 2008.

“A Death in the Baseball Family” subtly notes this idea of mechanized objectification. The Coolbaugh boys are driven hard by their father to become baseball players, becoming “his young tools” (Price 6). Later at the end of Scott Coolbaugh’s playing career in the minor leagues, “clubs give him chances well past his sell-by date” (Price 8). Even though each of the Ben-Gal cheerleaders in “G-L-O-R-Y” is a “thoroughbred of a woman” (Laskas 17) they are always hard at work on their physical appearances. Much like Coolbaugh’s “tool” status, “the

cheerleader is an it” (Laskas 19), using everything from “cleavage engineering solutions” to repeated scenes of primping. “Hair is high, broad, glued in place. Makeup is paint, pasted on thick. Tans are air-sprayed, darker in the V to accentuate the total package. Perfect. Exactly perfect” (Laskas 32). All comes together so they “jiggle their pom-poms, shimmer shimmer. They have turned themselves into candles burning flames of hope . . . watch them bounce like balls” (Laskas 33). Even the players they cheer for are machines, running on to the field they “come chugging out like beefy boxcars” (Laskas 32-33). Non-professional athletes partake in the scientific engineering of sports too. Dan Jenkins in “Golf in Geezerdom” describes his return to golf in terms of a greeting, “Hello Rust City” (Jenkins 183). Recalling his stroke feels like “[swinging] six feet of sewage pipe” (Jenkins 183). While these descriptions of his return as mechanical denote his stiffness and the foreign feel of the game, he is also in awe of new technology and its effects, describing “drivers with bowling balls for club heads, and big, fat irons with holes dug out of the backs. I could only watch in awe as seventy-five-year-old midget lepers would out-hit me one hundred yards off the tee” (Jenkins 183). In each of these articles, the engineering aspect of sport connotes disingenuousness. Coolbaugh is dehumanized, and although past his prime, teams give him false hope that he can succeed. The cheerleaders are amazing physical specimens, but not allowed on the field until they falsify their appearance with hairspray, tanning, and makeup. Jenkins witnesses these effects on golf as equipment technology trumps ability, making bad golfers appear good.

Often the mechanical-deception metaphor works together with another common symbol: the athlete as a superhero. This combination, linking dishonest science with super powers, is an idea repeatedly addressed in the media coverage of steroid usage. Thomas Boswell’s article “The Rocket’s Descent” deals with these issues. Roger Clemens’s implication in the baseball



steroid scandal makes him “[come] crashing down the mountain of baseball’s gods” (Boswell 166). He used to be a legend, like Moby Dick until “in a blink, baseball’s blindfolded Ahabs found a whale in their seine” (Boswell 167). Clemens’s nickname, “The Rocket,” plays well as a pun for the mechanical, as the title notes he “[Descends],” as if returning to Earth from outer space, and another line claims “this time the Rocket’s out of gas and the bullpen is empty” (Boswell 167). Steroids are the ultimate form of dishonest scientific engineering, creating players who “showed up for spring training like they’d spent the winter inhaling helium” (Boswell 167). Yet in spite the suspicion that he is a cheat, Clemens’s denial of wrongdoing prompts Boswell to claim, “how like a superman to be above the law” (Boswell 169), bringing together the two metaphors: baseball’s biggest stars are false superheroes manufactured by science-experiments and using their powers to belittle the law. Tommy Craggs writes “Hammering on Hank” to reveal his feeling that baseball and the media are using Hank Aaron as a distraction to avoid the steroid scandal, focusing on his legacy instead of Barry Bonds as Bonds nears his homerun record. “In the midst of the galloping national hysteria over anabolic steroids . . . in Aaron, we have our cardboard hero, propped up in the corner to stand in exquisite counterpoint to Bonds” (Craggs 164). He believes the attention paid to Aaron is immoral, viewing it as simply a tool to hide (and hide from) the true problem. Baseball’s authorities should deal with rampant drug abuse,

instead they summon a hero from the past to redress the supposed sins of the present. . . This is baseball telling fairy tales to itself, pretending the bad things away, using a Hall of Famer as a rhetorical bludgeon and in doing so diminishing the very man it pretends to exalt (Craggs 165).

Steroid abuse in baseball creates a media movement of condemnation relating two of the most pervasive contemporary sportswriting metaphors, scientific dishonesty and athletic

superheroism, in a negative way by which engineering creates false and, when revealed, fallen champions.

Without the negative connotation of steroids, sometimes the combination of scientific and superhuman metaphors works together to create a super-superhero, one who is not only physically, but also mentally dominant. Alec Wilkinson describes the sport and origins of Parkour in his article “No Obstacles.” It is an urban pursuit, “a quasi commando system of leaps, vaults, rolls, and landings designed to help a person avoid or surmount whatever lies in his path” (Wilkinson 264). The athletes act like super-humans, flying over seemingly impossible distances and performing death-defying leaps and acrobatics. No less a hero than James Bond opens up *Casino Royale* with a Parkour-type scene, and the countless videos shot by the sport’s practitioners heighten this image, “[having] the kind of vaudeville improbability of a video game” (Wilkinson 265). David Belle, the sport’s creator, “wanted to be Spider-Man when he grew up” (Wilkinson 265). Wilkinson feels that Belle succeeds, describing an observation of one of the founder’s disciples, “while I was writing “Spider-Man” in my notebook, his shadow as he leaped from one roof to another passed over the page” (Wilkinson 272). Belle, exemplifying superheroism in his sport, is androidal away from it. He “sat quite still, like a machine at rest” and his palms are “as hard and slick as linoleum” (Wilkinson 276, 277). Mike Sagar writes in similar terms about Kobe Bryant in “Scito Hoc Super Omnia.” Bryant is a highly skilled craftsman. He sees his work as his art, his calling. Like Jason Bourne and James Bond, two of his cinematic heroes, Kobe sees himself as an uber-practitioner – a modern warrior able to solve any problem, able to train his way into dominance. He is the self-styled black mamba, known for its striking ability, aggression, and speed (Sagar 304).

In short, he is a super physical specimen. Yet he is also a sport-scholar. “He studies tape of past, present, and world players with the curiosity of a scientist in the lab” (Sagar 304) and “speaks of

his physical self in terms of a finely tuned machine, which of course it is” (Sagar 313). He is a super mental specimen, a super-scientist. Kobe Bryant exhibits both supreme physical and mental powers; he is a superhero. Both authors, Wilkinson and Sagar, combine metaphors of athletes as superheroes and laboratory creations.

Few athletes bring together the mechanical and superhero metaphors like Bo Jackson, whose fantastic feats in the 1980’s inspired awe in all sports fans. In “Bo Knows Best,” Michael Weinreb writes of Bo’s “mythology . . . the myth and the man long ago became tangled” (Weinreb 111, 112) and his feats become “parables” (Weinreb 122). Yet as unbelievable as his accomplishments seemed, sports fans had no choice but to be awed. “There have always been stories . . . passed on in a telephone game from one generation to the next . . . they seemed apocryphal, almost silly in their exaggeration. The difference, of course, was that we actually *saw* Bo part the Red Sea on our televisions” (Weinreb 112). Yet at least a part of Jackson’s mythology also derives from careful calculation. “Bo Jackson’ was manufactured for public consumption. . . In fact, his entire public persona was built upon a perception of omnipotence, upon a polyglottal athletic knowledge that became the basis for the most overused catchphrase in history: Bo Knows” (Weinreb 111). Bo Jackson’s on-field actions and off-field creation make him the contemporary superman-machine.

Joe Posnanski’s “The Legend of Bo” focuses solely on Jackson’s superhero status. He avoids the more jaded machine-like qualities of the myth, creating an unsullied portrait of Jackson as All-American hero. He begins by pointing out that Jackson, in spite of all his accomplishments is not superman. He “couldn’t outrun locomotives, and he couldn’t turn back time by flying around the world and reversing the rotation of the earth” (Posnanski 103). Yet this is where the dissimilarities end. The rest of his article follows Weinreb’s formula almost

exactly. Posnanski mentions that “old-time baseball fans and scouts are always telling tall tales about players” but Bo Jackson is apart since all of his incredible feats are on film (Posnanski 104). “Bo’s destiny was to become a comic book hero . . . he cracked rockets all over the field” (Posnanski 107). An at-bat against Nolan Ryan is a “clash of the titans” and even when he doesn’t mean to, “he sure kept doing superhero things” (Posnanski 107, 108). He likens Jackson to a magician whose history is also held mostly as the stuff of legend, writing, “every game was like a Houdini performance – you expected to see something you had never seen before” (Posnanski 109). Even though he may have been all-natural and truly remarkable, a devastating hip injury reduces Bo to a point where “he wasn’t superhuman anymore” (Posnanski 109), ending his career soon afterwards.

Another article, Rick Bragg’s “In the Nick of Time,” also focuses on the metaphoric portrayal of superman, this time in the form of coaches. The legendary Paul “Bear” Bryant remains a looming past-superhero over the University of Alabama football program. He is “a growling, mumbling golem glued together out of legend, gristle, and a little bit of mean. It was almost like cheating having him on the sideline, like filling your trunk full of cement blocks before a demolition derby” (Bragg 348). Before games a recording of Bryant’s voice plays over the loudspeakers, “god-like” (Bragg 348). His statue on campus acts as an idol. One student, even though never witnessing Bryant’s coaching “places an offering” at the statue’s base because “the image of Bear is alive in his mind’s eye” (Bragg 347). Bragg even jokingly writes that Bryant was so “popular here. They named an animal after him” (Bragg 345). Unsurprisingly, when Bryant retires, the program struggles to find an equally superhuman replacement. After years of hunting and experiencing “everything but locusts” they hire Nick Saban, hailing him from the start as their savior, the new superman, expecting the paradoxically near impossible.

“They have welcomed him as Caesar, as pharaoh . . . Now he will take them forward by taking them back to the glory of their past” (Bragg 345). Both Bo Jackson and Nick Saban are portrayed in contemporary articles with the metaphor of super-humanity, each man exalted and celebrated for his unbelievable ability.

Such an emphasis on athletes transcending the lives of mere mortals pushes contemporary sportswriting towards hyperbole and melodrama. While these techniques appear to be effective, especially for comic effect in fine sportswriting, the 2008 works use the techniques to excess, provoking annoyed indifference rather than the intended awe or catharsis. Just as Rick Reilly’s comic embellishments become tiresome, so the attempt to tug at the heart strings ends up having the opposite effect of revulsion when the author reminds the reader so repeatedly of the emotion they are *supposed* to feel, especially through clichéd avenues. For example, “A Death in the Baseball Family” tells of a freak accident in which Tino Sanchez kills Mike Coolbaugh, a minor league first base coach, with an errant line drive. First, author S.L. Price insults the reader’s intelligence reminding them, I suppose for dramatic effect, “when a bat hits a pitch flush, the ball gains speed” (Price 10). The prose improves when he describes the effect, how the ball’s “impact crushed his left vertebral artery – which carries blood from the spinal column to the brain – against the left first cervical vertebra, at the base of Coolbaugh’s skull. Squeezed almost literally between a rock and a hard place, the artery burst” (Price 10). Using the technical medical breakdown informs the reader of the exact occurrence, providing a disturbing mental image, evoking the proper revulsion and pity. The following colloquial expression, “between a rock and hard place,” seems disrespectfully out of place. Yet not even these emotions are simply allowed to stand alone. Price feels he must remind the reader repeatedly of the challenges of dealing with death. Such a complex and profound subject not

only cannot possibly be solved in a short magazine sports article, but also has no place there. Perhaps the subject can be raised for the reader to ponder, but his direct references come across as inappropriate, melodramatic, and insulting to the reader's intelligence for their blatant tangibility. He notes that "in this dugout, this stadium – in this world, really – there's no one who has the answers" (Price 2). When Sanchez approaches Mike's brother Scott, also a minor league coach, the "two men yoked by tragedy" are "separated by one thin line of chalk" (Price 3). For Sanchez, "his future seems doomed to unfold in the space between two unanswerable questions. 'Why me?' Tino Sanchez asks, "Why him?'" (Price 3). Price explores the clichés of guilt describing how after the incident Sanchez "kept sinking . . . he felt as if he were drowning . . . he wanted to honor baseball and Coolbaugh" (Price 12). Coolbaugh's wife is left "with regret on top of grief" (Price 12). Finally, he ends in similar fashion, this time punning on baseball-lingo for an equally inappropriate and mind-numbing effect.

It seems a brutal trade: a husband and father dies prematurely in return for a little respect. . . Who can say why? It will have to be enough to know that in the most obscure corners, compassion lives and success has nothing to do with fame or money or even greatness. It will have to be enough to understand that such a notion is easy to forget, until a good man's dying forces the world to pay attention at last (Price 16).

The message is supposed to be uplifting, but it is so bluntly shoved in the reader's face that it becomes ridiculous melodrama, turning the reader away from Price's intent of heartfelt prose. The story of Tino Sanchez's hit and Mike Coolbaugh's death is unquestionably tragic, the reader just takes offense at being directly and repeatedly told so.

Jeanne Marie Laskas's "G-L-O-R-Y" is even worse. Not only is it melodramatic, but its subject matter does not merit the importance she ascribes. As a matter of fact, if she didn't take her subject so seriously, the piece could very easily have turned into a Reilly-esque spectacle of sarcasm. Laskas attempts to show the transcendence of cheerleading. Although she may be

doomed given popular “dumb blonde” stereotypes of cheerleaders, she fails to achieve her goal with even the most open-minded readers, because she lacks a constant tone. She begins with a description of a certain Ben-Gal, Adrienne, vomiting. In case the reader may be moved to laughter by such an uproarious image, Laskas thankfully reminds them, “it isn’t funny . . . she vomits. This is not good. Something is seriously wrong with Adrienne” (Laskas 17). Even in spite of the fact that the author clearly regards the *GQ* reader as duller than a hippopotamus’s behind, the image of poor Adrienne and the bustle of other cheerleaders inquiring about her health, makes the reader at least curious if not compassionate. Yet five pages later, when Laskas reveals that Adrienne has butterflies because she is being honored as cheerleader of the week, the reader can’t help but feel cheated and disgusted. Trying to give Laskas the benefit of the doubt, trying to feel upset that “the cheerleader is an it,” trying to dismiss “cleavage engineering solutions” as poor women succumbing to male objectification, the reader cannot help but be disappointed that their genuine concern for Adrienne’s illness is for such a frivolous cause. The reader wants to gag when Laskas shares one cheerleader’s world-view. “Everyone, she thinks, wants to be a Ben-Gal. Pity the president of the U.S., the queen of England, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, for not having the attributes necessary to become a Ben-Gal” (Laskas 28). When another cheerleader describes how her fellow Ben-Gal’s hair “*looks so perfect, and it’s so big and thick. I bet ninety-nine out of a hundred would think it’s fake. It’s that good*” (Laskas 28), her shallow triviality becomes harder to dismiss. Laskas tries to enforce the idea that Adrienne’s “award” is even more special because she was late for the game three weeks earlier when she was originally supposed to be honored, and thus was removed from contention. Thankfully her “sins are forgiven,” “the “tragedy” of “Adrienne’s disaster” only results in a three week extension to her wait for glory (Laskas 29).

Laskas switches her focus to Adrienne's personal life, revealing her trying past. Her mother was murdered by her stepfather and she works at a tough job as one of the few women on a construction site. Just as the reader painfully returns to compassion, Laskas slaps him in the face with more shallow descriptions of the cheerleaders "[gluing] . . . [painting] . . . [accentuating]" (Laskas 32). At halftime they even worship their reflections as they "drop to their knees in front of mirrors waiting like lonesome cousins" (Laskas 33). When it rains: "Wet cheerleaders! The JumboTron appears itself to experience the orgasm. Exploding wet cheerleaders!" (Laskas 33) writes Laskas, followed by an attempt to then show the cheerleaders' deep emotional and spiritual transcendence,

The cameras are all over the cheerleaders. The gals are screaming, laughing, howling, forgetting everything. Forgetting the fucking construction site, the man who murdered your mother, the store calling for more Mountain Dew, the chemical-fume hoods and the smoke-particle-challenge method, the men who don't call, and all those egg whites and protein shakes that have made this moment possible. Forget it all! This is it. This is a rain dance, a joy dance, a jet-propulsion explosion of cheerleader love, love to the crowd, love from the crowd, men in striped pajamas, wigs, tails, painted bellies washing clean , oh, those men are super, super-duper adorable (Laskas 34).

When Adrienne's face appears on the screen marking her award, "in that moment, she doesn't even know she is on the JumboTron. She is damp, out-of-her-mind joyful. Free" (Laskas 34). Laskas tries to make cheerleading into a transcendental experience. In the rain, suddenly Adrienne forgets all the pain of her life and is free!! Hurray! And they all lived happily ever after, except for the first twenty pages where Laskas bashed the reader again and again and again with reminders of the cheerleaders' shallowness and willing objectification, their self-imposed stress over physical appearance and frivolous "honors." The attempted melodrama of this final "rain dance" is not only ridiculous, but also fails to change the reader's preconceived notions of cheerleaders which have combined with Laskas's twenty pages of reinforcement. Unfortunately for her, the two notions at hand are mutually exclusive. The cheerleader is either an enlightened



athlete attaining the freedom of ultimate self-expression, or a shallow and docile sheep of male sexuality. She must either be pitied or celebrated, she cannot be both.

Other articles attempt to set up dichotomies, similar to Frank Deford's technique of language and definition. Yet lacking the surrounding substance, this technique becomes meaningless. Instead of creating a vivid and universal contrast for the reader, the failed attempt at creating simple constructs of deeper meaning only builds melodrama. The writer fails to convince the reader that his point can actually apply in all situations and the attempt turns to exaggeration. Thomas Boswell fails in this capacity in "The Rocket's Descent." Clemens's suspected use of performance enhancers is expanded first to all of baseball, and then all sport. "In baseball a man's triumphs and his sins are immortal . . . How easy to mistake the sins of ego for the virtues of sport. Such men would almost be heroic if they weren't so tragic" (Boswell 166-169). The moralistic tone immediately puts the reader on edge. Steroids are so universally accepted as wrong, dangerous, and immoral, that judging each implicated player becomes a melodramatic exercise itself. Furthermore, Boswell's hero/tragedy formula is underdeveloped, making the construct come across as simply an attempt at sounding eloquent and erudite. Thus the shallowness of the expression, along with the universality of the view he expresses, keeps Boswell from actually creating an insightful opinion. He simply uses elevated language to rephrase conventional tenets.

Alexander Wolff's "No Finish Line" runs into similar problems. The attempt to assign universality and apply virtues becomes a silly exercise of drama rather than an insightful revelation. Past writers avoid this trap by *showing* their moral judgments. Since morality is essentially based on opinion, interpretation, and personal belief it can often be hard or even impossible to explain one's moral stance; the concept is deeply personal. Therefore, previous

authors show their displeasure using various techniques, avoiding direct statement. Boswell, Wolff, and their contemporaries opt instead to tell the reader their thoughts. While their message is more direct, it can only be expressed through fervent outbursts of self-righteousness, almost always becoming melodramatic because there are no logical explanations for their ideas, which are merely personal moral opinions. The authors try to show their passion for the subject to convince the reader to join their team of virtue, creating numbing sensationalism. Wolff fails at his attempts to raise Alberto Salazar's scrapes with death as a marathoner to a level of transcendence. He attempts to claim that while Salazar is a strong runner, he is less successful in living a well-rounded life, writing, "he ran long races, but he wasn't running the long race" (Wolff 320). In the end, Wolff tries to explain the moral of Salazar's story,

so, it turns out that there might be virtue not only in imposing one's will but also in submitting to something else . . . Marathoning isn't life, as Alberto Salazar once believed. Rather life is a marathon . . . You put one foot in front of the other, and by doing so, you signal to the hearts of millions, to say nothing of your own, that you're ready to run into whatever life has left for you (Wolff 327).

Not only are these lines repetitive and unfocused, but their wordplay is out of place. Wolff tries to play on the ideas of "running" as the physical act as well as a metaphorical "living of life." He espouses the cliché idea of the heart as bodily organ and indicator of love and effort because Salazar's heart had stopped due to overexertion during a race. The metaphorical "marathoning isn't life . . . rather life is a marathon" is too cute to achieve the deep reaction Wolff seeks. The phrase comes across as a nice play on words, but operates only superficially without much impact.

Even the great Rick Reilly confronts these problems in his article "Getting a Second Wind." The article is supposed to be heart wrenching; teenager Korinne Shroyer commits suicide. And heartwarming; her parents donate her organs giving new life to needy patients.

Indeed, the bare outline of the story almost creates such emotion without any details. Yet Reilly becomes so concerned with putting his mark on the story, using double meanings, puns, and flowery language that he makes the article almost a joke, a study in melodrama. When he tells the audience that Shroyer's suicide upsets her parents he writes, "that bullet tore a hole in her father, Kevin, that you could drive an eighteen-wheeler through" (Reilly 175). Donating her body to medical causes becomes a decision to "send out her organs like gifts" (Reilly 175). Describing the recipients of her gifts, Reilly moves to puns on double meanings. The man who gets her lungs receives "his second wind" (Reilly 176). Upon his recovery from the transplant, Len Geiger delights at the capacities his new lungs allow, "one man's overflowing joy coming straight from the other's bottomless sorrow" (Reilly 176). To summarize his awe, Reilly returns to the pun on breathing, closing with the sentence "sometimes life just takes your breath away, doesn't it?" (Reilly 177). Regardless of whether he wants to use a colloquial expression or invoke Berlin lyrics, Reilly's closing is undeniably tacky. He tries to close his article, evoke emotion, use a common expression, and play on the idea of lung transplantation all in one sentence, resulting in a comical one-liner chintzy as Top Gun.

Contemporary sportswriting still has its highlights. Rick Telander's "Atkins a Study in Pride and Pain" is striking for its extended metaphor, poetic description, and ability, like the sportswriters of the past, to use subtlety to evoke an emotional response. He describes the setting of Doug Atkins's house in short, simple, almost rhythmic sentences that beautifully illustrate not only the physical scene, but also his trepidation. "I pull into a driveway a quarter-mile farther on. A dog barks somewhere. It's a few days before Christmas. The dog stops. Silence. I turn the car around, drive past the house again. I don't know" (Telander 158). He creates sympathy by contrasting the rundown condition of the house with the eminence of its owner.

The house has its curtains drawn. There are two old cars in the carport, one of them very old, I'm guessing thirty, forty years. Fins. Rusty.

There's a wooden wheelchair ramp that looks weathered and unused leading to the front door . . .

No lights on. No decorations.

Doug Atkins, seventy-six, the legendary Hall of Fame defensive end for the Bears, lives here (Telander 158).

The emotion continues when he describes Atkins's athletic prowess as a young man, his "long-legged, [hickory-toughness]" (Telander 159) and amazing feats of speed, strength, and agility, are distant memories for the man who now lives as a hermit, walks with a cane, and suffers immensely as his body breaks down decades after the weekly poundings received in the name of the National Football League. Telander also uses extended metaphor to heighten his subject, comparing football to art, making it harder for the reader to dismiss Atkins's roughness as simply being a disgruntled old jock. Instead, he is a great master. Professional football is not simply a manifestation of strenuous physicality, but rather "roughness polished bright and turned into performance art, the brutality into religion, the cracking bones into the percussive soundtrack that suits our times" (Telander 159). For Atkins, "all that talent came together on a football field like a rainbow palette," and upon retirement, the "players themselves, the artists, have left the stage" (Telander 159). Telander avoids moralistic writing. Even in spite of its poor treatment of broken-down old stars like Atkins, he celebrates the beauty and majesty of football only hinting, "in the midst of our bounty, I feel lost" (Telander 161). This final line forces the reader to think about Telander's point. He does not force his opinion on the reader, or overtly judge the NFL. He simply tells how he feels, leaving the judgment to the reader, who is at least subconsciously influenced by the inherent exploitation Telander displays. A legend, a master craftsman who once created physical beauty, is now reduced to a poor hermit with countless medical problems. Something is wrong, something needs to be done, the reader senses injustice, and becomes

emotionally involved in Atkins's story. Telander's subtle use of imagery, metaphor, and personal declaration has a far greater effect than the forced moralistic judging and hyperbolic melodrama common to many of his contemporaries' works.

Thankfully Telander is not alone either. A number of modern authors still create fine sports literature. Rick Reilly, Mitch Albom, and Tom Verducci regularly turn out high caliber works. Many other authors, now including the non-professionals of "blogosphere," give it their best shot, on occasion for remarkable results.

Overall, modern sportswriting is the latest manifestation of this ever-changing genre. Writers tend to focus on certain techniques and ideas, most notably metaphorically portraying athletes as superheroes and/or machines. Human-interest stories trump participation or event descriptions and increasingly come from unusual "para-sports." Moral judgments are popular, but tend towards hyperbole and melodrama as authors eagerly criticize unethical athletes and occurrences, often because the superheroes turn out to be at best only human, at worst scientifically engineered machines. Authors look for increasingly abstract ways to write about sport and to express the idea of its transcendence in an effort to set themselves apart from their predecessors. Many fail, becoming overly concerned with puns, moralization, and attempting to create universal themes. However, as Frank Deford points out, when they succeed, contemporary sportswriters still create some of the finest literary works of any genre.

I believe that I have accomplished my original goal for this essay. I assumed the role of literary critic for an underestimated genre. My examination of the works of Red Smith, A.J. Liebling, Roger Angell, George Plimpton, Bart Giamatti, Frank Deford, Rick Reilly, blogs, and anthologized works from 2008 revealed undeniable trends in sportswriting. Fine articles share stylistic points such as humor, colloquial language, unique imagery, and metaphor. Thematically

the works in general often articulate deeper ideas, expressing life through sports, and vice-versa. Specific themes vary by writer, sport, and by era, as 2008 became the year of the superhero for contemporary writers. I believe that sportswriting criticism is a useful exercise, not just to prove the genre's merit as a form of personal essay deserving serious reflection and readership, but also as a policing function. Sportswritings' detractors are too easily able to dismiss the genre because of the cheerleading reporter or the dull analyst. What these "writers" do should not be considered a part of the sportswriting genre. It is strictly journalism, and only nominally related to the literary art of sportswriting. I hesitate even to call them writers. They "write," but as analysts with pens. They are not true authors. Although this may be the dominant form of writing associated with sports today, the artistic sportswriting of self-expression still exists, and is just as good as ever, thanks in part to the rich history and strong foundation provided by the likes of the authors I examined. Frank Deford cites past sportswriting modifications as future predictors of endurance, saying, "I can't see much of a change in the future . . . I don't have a crystal ball . . . But, in so far as the writing itself is concerned, and [the debate on] our ability to tell a story, that's over. We've made that adjustment" (Deford, personal interview). I hope that he is right, and the sweet script continues far into the future.

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