

Sportswriting: little more than h

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"Thousands of people who don't know me use my participation on a Sunday afternoon as an excuse for non-action, as a fix to help them escape their everyday problems and our society's problems. The toll of providing that experience is beginning to register on me."

—New York Knickerbockers forward Bill Bradley, May 28, 1971.

Although journalism reviews rarely spend much time analyzing the sports page, it is there, as much as anywhere else, that the average newspaper reader acquires his general world view and values.

Indeed, surveys in the United States, Canada and Europe have repeatedly shown that roughly one third of the readership (and more than half of the male newspaper readership) reads

little more than the sports page.

Some analysts have claimed that our modern pro football and hockey spectacles are becoming a modernized version of the Roman gladiator shows. A sort of bread and circuses for the masses—a new opium for the people.

Sports news never has really been much more than a bit of razzamatazz for promotional purposes, and the bribery of the media men by professional promoters has long been institutionalized. (In fact, listening to the sportscasters, it is impossible to differentiate them from sports promoters.)

In his excellent book, *The Jocks*, the late Leonard Shecter remarks at one point the so-called "Golden Age of Sport" in the '20s was a golden age of payola. He gives the example of Madison Square Gardens impresario Tex Rickard who used to hand out \$100 bills to deserving sportswriters. And he says, if things are less "golden" for sportswriters these days, it is only because the team owners realized they could be had for virtually nothing.

"To hell with the newspapermen," ex-Mets boss George Weiss used to say, "you can buy them with a steak."

In the March 5, 1932 issue of *Collier's* magazine, heavyweight boxing champ Gene Tunney wrote that he paid five per cent of his fight purses to newsmen for publicity. He said that it was the custom of most fighters to do likewise. And it is still commonplace for promoters to "hire" newsmen to their press agents, often without even the knowledge of the newspaper editors.

Shecter said one reason reporters "easily become what are called "house men" is that those (very few) who occasionally tried to criticize a home team have suddenly found themselves out of a job. He cites various specific examples of this.

Schechter says that the wedding of media sports departments and sporting organizations has been so thoroughly consummated that the two are often "partners."

In the case of pro football, this gives the owners a free multimillion-dollar propaganda machine with an influential voice in 24 major cities and population centers in the country.

National Football League Commissioner Pete Rozelle once remarked, "Whatever success the NFL has had is due, in no small measure, to the wholehearted support it has received through the years from newspapermen, radio announcers and commentators, and more recently, television announcers and commentators."

Over the years one of the newspapers most friendly to the sports establishment has been the *New York Daily News*, America's largest-selling paper. The *Daily News* is also the long time owner of television station WPIX, which has televised *New York Nets* basketball games as well.

Thanks in part to sympathetic news coverage in the *Daily News*, the Yanks and Nets can draw big TV audiences on WPIX, which can then raise its advertising rates for the games. Which means more money in the bank for the *Daily News*.

This is not to say that the *Daily News* doesn't treat the Mets and Knicks every bit as good as the Yanks and Nets. After all, the paper's main sports "interest" is not its WPIX ad revenue, but its daily circulation of approximately a million, including people it

has trained to be good "fans" (and hence good readers of the *News* sports pages).

The TV commentators are not far behind: "In recent years, the trend has been toward the professional team selling radio and TV rights to a network, and in the process, having the privilege of selecting the announcers. The result has been the "All-America" announcer phenomenon (who, they say, is a "roofer," not a reporter) which, subtly or otherwise, promotes the home team and frequently reminds the listener to get his tickets for the next home game.

"I'm a house man," sportscaster and ex-catcher Joe Garagiola reportedly used to say. "That's what they're paying me to be."

But neither has the relationship between sportscasters and advertisers been anything other than loving. It wasn't long ago that everytime a home run sailed out of the park, the announcer would come on to tell you that the batter had hit a "Ballantine Blast," or a "White Owl Wallop," or a "Case of Wheaties," or a "Case of Lucky Strikes," or whatever the sponsor happened to be that day.

An article in the *Financial Post* of November 11, 1974, quoted John Bassett, publisher of the defunct *Toronto Telegram*, owner of the *Toronto Argonauts* and chairman of *Maple Leaf Gardens*: "You must educate your audience and merchandise your product, and this can be done through television."

Of course, we should not delude ourselves that it is all a case of greedy promoters "using" the media. If anything, the symbiosis cuts mainly the other way. Schechter remarks, "Television buys sports. Television supports sports... So, slowly at first, but inevitably, television tells sports what to do. It is sports and runs them the way it does most other things, more flamboyantly than honestly."

In 1964, the *Columbia Broadcasting System* outbid its rival networks for the rights to televise *National Football League* games, and it seemed it would be beating the *National Broadcasting Company* in the battle for Sunday afternoon viewers for year to come.

So NBC "created" the *American Football League*. The AFL at that point was mainly a collection of inexperienced younger players and NFL discards, who seemed to be unable to play

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