

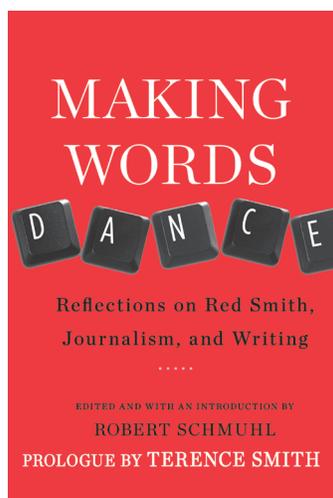
*The Red Smith Lecture in Journalism*  
*John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy*  
*University of Notre Dame*

# **SPORTSWRITER IS ONE WORD**

*Frank Deford*

## Red Smith Lectures in Journalism

- James Reston, "Sports and Politics" (1983)  
Murray Kempton, "Finding an Authentic Voice" (1984)  
James J. Kilpatrick, "The Art of the Craft" (1985)  
Charles Kuralt, "The View from the Road" (1986)  
Art Buchwald, "While the Gipper Slept" (1988)  
Robert Maynard, "Red Smith's America and Mine" (1989)  
Dave Kindred, "90 Feet Is Perfection" (1991)  
Eugene L. Roberts Jr., "Writing for the Reader" (1994)  
Georgie Anne Geyer, "Who Killed the Foreign Correspondent?" (1995)  
David Remnick, "How Muhammad Ali Changed the Press" (1998)  
Ted Koppel, "Journalism: It's as Easy as ABC" (1999)  
Jim Lehrer, "Returning to Our Roots" (2002)  
Frank McCourt, "From Copybook to Computer: What You Write On and How You Do It" (2003)  
Ken Auletta, "Whom Do Journalists Work For?" (2005)  
Judy Woodruff, "Are Journalists Obsolete?" (2007)  
Tim Russert, "When Politicians Meet the Press" (2008)  
Frank Deford, "Sportswriter Is One Word" (2010)
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Red Smith Lectures delivered from 1983 through 2008 are collected in *Making Words Dance: Reflections on Red Smith, Journalism, and Writing*. Information about the book is available at [www.andrewsmcmeel.com](http://www.andrewsmcmeel.com).

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# **SPORTSWRITER IS ONE WORD**

*Frank Deford*



# THE RED SMITH LECTURE IN JOURNALISM

Introduction  
By Robert Schmuhl

SPORTSWRITER IS ONE WORD  
*By Frank Deford*

## UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy  
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

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The Red Smith Lectureship in Journalism is sponsored by John P. and Susan McMeel and Universal Uclick. The Lectureship seeks to foster writing excellence and to recognize high journalistic standards.

In the words of John P. McMeel, chairman and president of Andrews McMeel Universal, “Red Smith’s writing continues to offer lessons about stylistic and professional accomplishments that remain valuable to students and to journalists.”

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## Introduction

**A**t the gift shop of the Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, the likeness or signature of America's most American author decorates every imaginable *objet d'art* and tourist trinket. You can also peruse a harvest of the writer's books, biographies about him, and volumes featuring his words.

Among the collections of compositional chestnuts, a visitor not long ago discovered *The Quotable Writer*, a compilation (edited by Lamar Underwood) of wise or wisecracking *bons mots* about the mysteries and vagaries of literary life. The first "quotable writer" named on the volume's cover is Red Smith.

Though Mark Twain doesn't merit the book jacket's honor roll—five of his wry remarks appear in the text—Smith shares featured billing with Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, E. B. White, Gustave Flaubert, even Aristotle.

"Writing is easy," Smith asserts on one page. "All you have to do is sit at a typewriter and open a vein." For a later quotation, he eschews irony: "The columnist tries to capture the color, flavor, and electricity of an event. It's not an easy assignment."

In a career encompassing over a half-century, Smith bled prose that earned a 1958 cover story in *Newsweek*, headlined "Star of the Press Box," and a 1981 profile on the CBS program *60 Minutes*, calling him "America's foremost newspaperman." While a columnist at the *New York Times*, he won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1976.

After his death in 1982, the University of Notre Dame—from which Smith graduated in 1927 and received an honorary doctorate in 1968—inaugurated the Red Smith Lecture in Journalism. The series recognizes Smith's accomplishments and introduces new generations to his work and to abiding issues in the craft of journalism.

On April 14, 2010, Frank Deford came to Notre Dame as Red Smith Lecturer. In the 776-page opus *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century* (1999), Smith and Deford are among a choice few of the forty-eight contributors with more than a single selection—and Smith exceeds all others with five stories deemed "best" by the book's editor David Halberstam.

While Smith concentrated on newspaper columns and the occasional magazine article, Deford is among America's most versatile writers. A senior contributing writer at *Sports Illustrated*, where his work has appeared since 1962, he is also a weekly commentator on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* (an assignment that began in 1980) and senior correspondent on the HBO program *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*.

Author of sixteen books, including ten novels, Deford is a member of the Hall of Fame of the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association. On six occasions, his peers voted him U.S. Sportswriter of the Year, and the magazine *GQ* summarized his career in a four-word phrase: “the world’s greatest sportswriter.”

Introducing *The Red Smith Reader*, the editor Dave Anderson observes, “If you blindfolded yourself, reached into Red Smith’s files, and yanked out 130 columns, *any* 130 columns, you would have a good collection.”

A similar sentence, with a like-minded opinion, could be written about Deford. His 1987 collection, *The World’s Tallest Midget*, is subtitled *The Best of Frank Deford*. Thirteen years later, a new volume of assembled prose carried the title *The Best of Frank Deford*. But this time the subtitle got personal: *I’m Just Getting Started*.

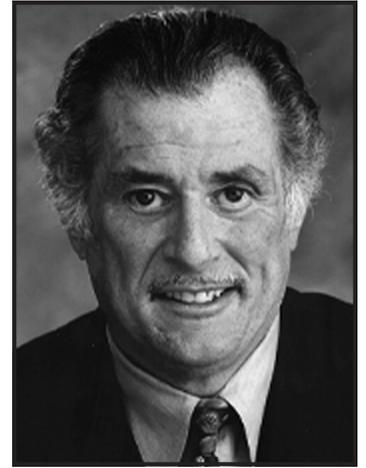
Deford is both personal and at his pedagogical best in his Red Smith Lecture, “Sportswriter Is One Word,” which follows. A consummate storyteller considers the journalistic environment of today and tomorrow that can conspire against well-crafted word-portraits so common in sportswriting’s earlier decades.

The Smith Lecture series—the activities at Notre Dame as well as the subsequent publications—flourishes because of the continuing generosity of John and Susan McMeel of Kansas City, Missouri. As chairman and president of Andrews McMeel Universal, John McMeel is at the center of contemporary multimedia communications, and Universal Uclick, in particular, is a principal provider of columns, features, and comic strips for journalistic outlets around the world.

Like Red Smith and Frank Deford, John and Susan McMeel know the value of writing that endures—and its importance for the future.

—Robert Schmuhl, Director  
John W. Gallivan Program in Journalism, Ethics & Democracy  
University of Notre Dame





## FRANK DEFORD

# SPORTSWRITER IS ONE WORD

Sportswriting is so often, so blithely criticized, but, of course, Red Smith was a sportswriter, too, so that's always given me a certain amount of cover.

I have, however, been conflicted, because here I am, almost fifty years into my profession, and I'm still not quite sure what I am. I'm too much of a hybrid.

Well, certainly I do know I'm a writer, but only part of me is a journalist. I have my tenth novel coming out in a couple months, a good old-fashioned love story titled *Bliss, Remembered*, and it's written by me as a woman. Whatever that may be, I don't think it's journalism. And most of my pieces, both in magazines and on television, are really more storytelling than reporting—as, indeed, so many of Red's best columns were.

I take a certain amount of pride, though, that I have somewhat succeeded as a writer despite having so very much to overcome.

First of all, I had a wonderfully happy childhood.

This is a terrible handicap for a writer.

Ideally, you want to have grown up in poverty, with a father who beats you, and with a mother who is a prostitute . . . but saintly.

Secondly, I am not a minority.

I was always especially so jealous of those Catholic writers who could dine out for years on the idiosyncrasies of parochial schools, of nuns rapping them on their knuckles with rulers. I had no such quaint tales to play with.

In fact an agent of mine once said, "Frank, you are the last of the tall, white, WASP, heterosexual, Ivy League writers."

Yes, there's been so little disadvantage for me to fall back

on. The best I could ever come up with in the minority line is that I am a Huguenot, but it's been three hundred some-odd years since you Catholics were burning my crowd at the stake, so it's been hard for me to gin up much sympathy for myself along those lines.

Yes, for me, as a writer, it's been a tough row to hoe.

In keeping with this struggle, like Red Smith, I never set out to be a sportswriter. It was something that I fell into after college—providently—but it always leaves me with the sense that someday . . . someday I will grow up and become a real writer.

After all, there is no good sportswriting, you know.

Whenever I happen to write something that may find some favor with someone, invariably he'll say, "Frank, that was good. In fact, it was so good, it wasn't sportswriting."

Ergo, if it's bad, it's sportswriting. If it's any good, it must be something else.

But I, deluded as I am, I do believe that sportswriting, amongst all the subsets of journalism, offers the best opportunity for good storytelling and for good writing on a regular basis.

It's also, although I probably should keep this secret to myself, the easiest territory for a writer to romp around in. First of all, simply: it's a subject your readers *want* to read about. Sports, after all, are dramatic—somebody wins, somebody loses. Sports are glamorous and vivid, and the athletes are performers—so a lot of them are extroverts; many are young and handsome and even more are young and foolish, and so they say foolish things, which is the dream of every reporter.

Perhaps because all other journalists reluctantly recognize this, we've always been something of a breed apart—

viewed within the profession with equal parts disdain and envy.

It says something that alone in the canon, *sportswriter* is one word, as if we press box inhabitants cannot be separated from that which we professionally embrace. Everybody else in the business is two words, modifier and noun, discreetly separated: editorial writers, foreign correspondents, movie critics, beat reporters, and even—yes—sports editors.

But sportswriters: one word. The assumption, I suppose, is that we do not stand apart and clinically observe so well as our more respected brethren who better keep their distance from their subjects and are properly, clinically *objective*.

Apart from the fact that we alone in journalism are crammed into one name, the other thing that distinguishes us is that we dress terribly. Have you ever seen a clutch of sportswriters, *en masse*? We are the anti-*GQ*. Most sportswriters don't know how to mix and match, only to mix and mix.

When he was a player with the Phillies, John Kruk once allowed, "It's easy to be a sportswriter. All you have to do is put on forty pounds and then wear clothes that don't match."

Now Kruk's on ESPN, himself a journalist (after a fashion), and he proves his point every time we see him on the air.

But it is indeed true that back in the day, a great many sportswriters were more interested in simply being involved in sports rather than in reporting on them. And, yes, there certainly is a long history of perfectly dreadful sportswriting.

Jonathan Yardley, the critic, once said that old-time sportswriting was "like a bad dream by Sir Walter Scott." For some reason, too many of us, even now, have always tended toward the florid, the rococo. But, indeed, there were always some good sportswriters midst the hacks, and it is fun to look back on the carnival I hitched a ride onto in 1962—at the very time, by the way, when Walter Wellesley Smith reigned supreme as lead columnist in the wonderful sports section of the *New York Herald Tribune*.

The sports columnist was the high priest of games then, often less a journalist and more sort of the athletic director of the local chamber of commerce. They were

the cheerleaders, often caravanning together to the annual rota of approved events: spring training, the Masters, the Kentucky Derby, the Indianapolis 500, and so on through the athletic liturgical calendar. It was a drummer's life, with deadlines and whiskey and wonderful camaraderie.

But a few of the columnists—Red most prominently—did take literary advantage of the luxurious sports landscape that was presented to them. What always amazed me about Red, the columnist, was how he made such a piece of art out of this small, discrete slice of one newspaper page. For people who discovered him, it must've been like living in Delft around 1660 and chancing upon those little prizes a man named Vermeer was dabbling in. Both the Dutchman then and the Badger from Green Bay three hundred years later always got it just so, with the proper amount of balance and character and shafts of light shining through in all the right places.

Like the sports-page columns themselves, that world of sports journalism was compact, with neat boundaries. Why, *Sports Illustrated*, from the mighty Time Inc. stable, had a devil of a time getting permission to enter baseball press boxes when it came into business in 1954, and it was years later before women were allowed to soil these bastions. For that matter, as late as 1973, a female colleague of mine, Stephanie Salter, was thrown out of the huge annual baseball dinner in a New York hotel ballroom. Yet as defensive as this may sound, it wasn't so much that we were misogynistic as that women simply had no place in the natural order of our things.

To understand that, you must appreciate what a neat, absolute universe Red not only inhabited but also wrote about. No institution had remained so incredibly static as had American sport, for a whole half a century, from 1900 till the end of World War II.

By comparison, say, during this same period, show business went from music halls, to vaudeville, to nickelodeons, to Follies, to movies, to radio, to sound movies, to Technicolor, to television.

But in sports everything was played in all the exact same places, while the distinct pecking order remained, as if ordained. Baseball and its same sixteen major-league franchises ruled supreme. Then came boxing, horse racing, and college football, with golf and tennis popping up

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periodically throughout the year on weeks specifically assigned to them, when they were allowed prominence. Basketball and ice hockey were pretty much afterthoughts to contemplate occasionally round a roaring fire while waiting for the pitchers and catchers to report to the Grapefruit League.

Everything else was bush. *Bush*—that word profligately employed to describe just about everything in sports except that which had forever been inscribed in the athletic Book of Kells.

Playoffs for example: bush.

The NBA: bush.

Bill Veeck and his popular antics: bush.

Soccer: bush.

(Well, all foreign sports: bush.)

Women trying to get into press boxes: bush.

Handsome and well-paid sports announcers: bush.

That was the world Red thrived in, no less than Jane Austen so beautifully worked her little circumscribed tableau. And it was still pretty much the world I stumbled onto, just out of college and the National Guard in 1962.

I was precocious in one way. Already, as a writer, I had come, as most writers will, to absolutely despise editors. But notwithstanding, I had hero worship for my first editor at *Sports Illustrated*, a man named André Laguerre, who had been de Gaulle's press secretary during the war. Yes, it was a Frenchman who saved America's only sports weekly shortly before it would have gone under. (André also created the swimsuit issue, but that's another story for another time.)

In any event, André spent a great deal of time at the bar in those days, as every man who dared called himself a sportswriter was then wont to do, and it was there one night, after being fortified by two bourbons, that I told him I was getting married.

He put down his Scotch, drew on his cigar, and uttered these precise words of congratulations: "Frankie, that's the worst news I've heard in weeks."

Thereupon, he offered me a \$3,000 raise not to go through with it. I was making \$9,000 at the time—one-third raise. Tex Maule, the pro football writer, who had

obliques into sportswriting after being the catcher in a trapeze act, was standing next to André. Tex was on his third or fourth marriage. "I'll throw in another \$1,000 myself," he said.

And he would have. There was honor at the bar.

But, I'm a romantic. I married the girl.

That was a momentous year for me in another respect, too, as it was, as well, when I first came here to Notre Dame. I was to do a story on the basketball team. Johnny Dee was the coach—a wonderful guy. I walked into Johnny's house, and, without asking, he immediately mixed up a batch of martinis. He called them martoonis. He insisted on calling me Francis, which I'm not, but after a couple of martoonis I let it go.

I traveled with the team to Evansville. Also along was the team chaplain, Father Tom Brennan, who, according

to campus legend, rivaled St. Thomas Aquinas in the marks he received for graduate study in Rome. Father Brennan described to me fascinating conversations that he reported he had with the devil. Then, when the game began, almost immediately he started getting onto the officials. Understand, it's a good cop/bad cop arrangement with Johnny Dee . . . and the *priest* is the bad cop.

Finally the lead ref came over to the bench and threatened to give a technical to the priest. "Father," he said, wagging a finger at him, "I call the game, you call the

Mass."

I always had a fond spot in my heart for Notre Dame after that.

But I was fortunate. Unlike Red's generation of sportswriters, which had to chronicle such a limited realm, I came into the vestibule just when the whole enterprise was being turned upside down.

Jackie Robinson, of course, was the first rent in the curtain, but then, a few years later, the NFL exploded, basketball wasn't bush anymore, hockey moved below the DEW Line, franchises shifted into erstwhile bush towns; then entire new leagues were created out of whole cloth, free agency blossomed, players went on strike, collegians turned pro, Title IX was signed into law, and Billie Jean King took the women's movement into sport; stadiums

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grew domes, AstroTurf replaced God's green earth, the Olympics were politicized, amateurism cratered, agents surfaced, money proliferated, and television brought it all to you live right there in your family room . . . often as not with Howard Cosell himself at the microphone.

What a bonanza for a writer!

In fact, to be a sportswriter today isn't nearly as engaging. The revolution is over. There are just more teams, more standings, more players, more numbers, more agate type. There's even more soccer.

Still, while it's not just nostalgia and the sappy memories of an old man to say that sports was a better canvas to paint on then, nonetheless, when talking about the changes in sports *journalism*, it's so hard to distill it from the rest of the discipline. That world I stumbled into in 1962 was already on the cusp of being manhandled by technology.

The late Neil Postman, who was a brilliant social observer, once wrote: "Education as we know it began with the printing press. It ended with television."

So now, I suppose, we could say: Journalism, as we knew it, began with the printing press. It ended with the Internet.

Some of you may recall that twenty years ago I left writing and became what I hated—an editor. Temporarily as this apostate, I ran a newspaper I imagine many of you—those of you known, I understand, as "millennials"—many of you whippersnappers have never heard tell of: the *National Sports Daily*. It was the only such thing of its kind in America—although sports dailies are most common abroad.

And hear, hear: the *National* was a huge critical success.

It was also ahead of its time, in that it was a newspaper which went out of business before so many others began to fold. We lasted a year and a half and lost \$150,000,000—leaving me with the per capita money-lost record for editors in chief.

But the *National* was popular. Well, after all, we had terrific sportswriters. We told good stories to go along with the plethora of statistics we provided. We even had—and I confess this was my idea—the first sports gossip column. I introduced an old college phrase from my generation to journalism: "the skinny." Forgive me, but I had opened Pandora's box.

But, still, even today strangers come up to me and say

how much they loved the *National*, and invariably then: Wouldn't it have been great for the Internet if the *National* were still around today?

It amazes me. People still don't get it. Yeah, you bet we would've been great for the Internet, but the Internet wouldn't have been great for us . . . anymore than the Internet would've been great for any newspaper. The Internet leeches off newspapers.

For that matter, the Internet is no friend of magazines or local television, either. Radio alone—and this means a great deal to me since I'm on National Public Radio—is not quite so threatened by the Internet because most people listen to the radio in the car, where, at least theoretically, you're not supposed to read online or Google while you're steering a vehicle going many miles per hour in traffic.

While writing for radio is not so much unlike writing for print—the only difference, really, is that I read what I've written to you, as opposed to you reading what I've written—radio writing does so often mean that you are *not* getting the undivided attention of your reader.

Your precious words must be divided in the listener's consciousness as part of . . . multitasking. In my specific case on NPR, early in the morning when my Wednesday morning sports commentary comes on, I know that while I am brilliantly and intricately explaining, say, how the NFL medical plan works vis-à-vis concussions, that devoted listener of mine is also probably performing his or her morning ablutions and may miss some of my particularly wonderfully salient points.

I should say more seriously, though, that as newspapers fail and as magazines and television news shrivel before the Internet, we can take some consolation that National Public Radio—which is least the victim of the new competing technology—has ascended to an eminent position in serious journalism in this country. It has assumed the role, perhaps, that *Newsweek* or *Time* or any number of important newspapers used to fill alongside the *New York Times*. NPR, I believe, truly has become an American BBC.

Of course, the codicil to the will is that while my program, *Morning Edition*, now has the second-largest radio audience in the country, the largest belongs to . . . Rush Limbaugh.

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*The Internet  
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Ah, but it's a fine *silver* medal for *Morning Edition*. And for me, as a sportswriter, it's a marvelous personal luxury to be able to address such a large and educated audience, including so many who do not give a whit about sports. When you think about it, that's very unusual.

The sportswriter—the sports journalist—has always been put over here, in a low-rent gated community for sports fans. Even when Red Smith's column ran in the premier newspaper of the world, the *New York Times*, with an audience any writer would die for, still, every reader had to *turn to* him to get his take on sports.

So as a sportswriter on radio, I really have a gloriously unique position. The NPR listener doesn't even have to make an effort to be able to listen to me talking about sports. Rather, he has to make the effort to *turn me off* if he can't bear the thought of listening to me. Huge difference. I profit by being in a default position—rare for a sportswriter.

Of course, as a novelist friend of mine, Michael Mewshaw, says, "Deford, you've had a fascinating career. You've spent much of it writing about people—athletes—who are too dumb to read you, and then you've spent much of the rest of it speaking on the radio to people who don't know what you're talking about."

But, of course, in the new journalistic world, this brings us to precisely what it is that we are losing, which is serendipity. The newspaper, the news magazine, the network news have all operated, going back to the nineteenth century, on the principle of smorgasbord. That is, what we now call "the mainstream media" said—We're going to give you a full arc of the goings-on: politics, foreign affairs, and local reporting, plus entertainment, sports, science, religion, business, and so forth.

So even if you wouldn't go out of your way to read about, say, education, you might bump into it, unawares, as you searched for the movie listings. Or, come the cocktail hour, there Walter Cronkite or Peter Jennings would be, telling you about some education item, and, despite yourself, you'd learn a little something about another subject.

Of course, education may be a poor example. It's interesting isn't it: that about 95 percent of what is written

about schools and colleges in this country is written about school and college *sports*. A survey has revealed that in the newsholes of major newspapers, only 1.4 percent of the available space was devoted to the subject of education—the nonsports variety.

This helps explain, in some measure, why we don't build nearly so many nice classrooms as we do stadiums and arenas.

But now, of course, people in this century are growing up with a predilection only to read about what already interests them. Actually, I'm ahead of this curve, because I discovered this luxury years ago when researching novels. You only have to cherry-pick precisely what you need for your novel. You come across something you don't understand, well, you just skip it and say, "No need to put that in the novel." Because, you're making it up! It's great.

But novels are one thing, a vocational bagatelle, and being an informed citizen is quite another. Unfortunately, you can't make up the prevailing news menu. If you avoid reading about the bad news, it's still out there, looming. You can't escape global warming and Afghanistan simply by turning over to *Access Hollywood* or *SportsCenter*. Not surprisingly, every study and every bit of common sense tells you that if you give people a choice between watching news or entertainment, an awful lot of them are going to choose the fun.

But, guess what? This is wonderful for my crowd. This is absolutely terrific for sports journalism. We're the winners. Because people do like sports—and in fact, especially as more and more women get involved in sports, more and more people of all stripes are going to want to read about sports, and this link of sports leads to that link and on and on and on, and soon we know more and more and more about draft prospects and recruits and possible trades and schedules and point spreads and polls and more polls and statistics and statistics and more statistics. Who cares that it's bush? It's fun.

The end of journalism as we know it is only the beginning of better things for sports journalism.

With two caveats.

First, who's gonna pay for it? Nobody's yet figured that little niggling detail out. The generation growing up seems

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to believe that all news—sports and otherwise—is free, droppething from the heavens.

Download! What a wonderful concept to grow up with. Let's just *download* it!

Only, of course, what comes down free must first get paid up.

And number two, what's good for sports *journalism* is not necessarily good for *sportswriting*.

The Internet—or, to be kind, the influence of the Internet—is reducing the amount of storytelling in sports journalism. The increased interest in reading and hearing about sports is all too often about minutiae: the statistics, expertise, Xs and Os, the skinny.

The feature story—the “takeout” as it is known in newspaper parlance—is being taken out of newspapers. Not enough space. Too expensive to take all that time to research and write it. People don't have the attention span to actually read paragraphs anymore. Alas, that's pretty much an article of faith now. Pitchers can suddenly only go six innings, and readers can only go six paragraphs.

The story, which was always the best of sportswriting, what sports gave so sweetly to us writers—the sports story is the victim. Sportswriting remains so popular—one word. Sports stories—two words, are disappearing.

So while we may properly bemoan the loss of newspapers and magazines, have no fear, sports fans. There will be no dearth of easy access to box scores and statistics and dugout gossip. Or celebrities walking down the red carpet or getting caught in bed with the wrong people. And now, of course, that includes sports celebrities getting caught in bed with the wrong people.

No, no need to worry, fans: All that stuff will continue to be well covered. It is the good stories, and, even worse, the good investigative journalism, that we will lose.

It was only a few years ago that two reporters on the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Lance Williams and Mark Fainaru-Wada, worked for more than a year on the story—BALCO—that essentially fully exposed steroids in baseball and other sports. Phil Bronstein, the editor of the *Chronicle*, told me not long ago that today the paper surely couldn't even begin to consider such a risky expenditure of time and human resource.

And, of course, it is the printed press which has traditionally done almost all that kind of dirt-digging journalism. A survey of fifty-nine local television stations found that 90 percent of the news put on the air was about accidents, crimes, or staged events. And other surveys show: the less news about government, the more corruption.

Just think what percentage of local television news time and resources are devoted to the weather—which we can't do anything about anyhow. Cumulatively, in a lifetime, all Americans now spend more time learning about the weather on TV, than we do engaging in sex . . . or even playing golf.

Now, no, there is no question how convenient the Internet has made our lives. But, even in sports, as in the more important areas of news, we face the prospect of trading the power of the press for the convenience of the press—and we will all be so much the poorer for that.

Certainly, as the presentation of news becomes more visual, it is impossible not to conclude that language has been so devalued. This is said, of course, by a man who makes a large portion of his income from television, so forgive me, but still, pictures have replaced words to such an extent, that although we may

use the written word more than ever, as we communicate *conveniently*, by e-mail, it's a snappy, cut-rate argot that we employ—merely a modern sign language.

Lost is the weight of the written word. Instead, the images that flicker before us are so ephemeral, it's hard for us to grasp much of anything—and because there are no movies of the distant past, soon there is no past. Sometimes I think that all that remains of history that anybody cares about anymore are home-run records.

So, if we have not actually regressed to illiteracy in these digital times, we are, increasingly what may be fairly called a nonliterate society. We risk becoming optionally illiterate.

Those of us in journalism love to quote . . . and quote and quote again . . . Thomas Jefferson's famous remark: “. . . were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Hooray for our team. Thank you, Mr. Jefferson.

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*Lost is the weight  
of the written  
word.*

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But it is necessary to appreciate that that thought so appreciated by journalists was bracketed by two others. First of all, Jefferson had begun with: “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right . . .”

Only then did he get into the business about needing newspapers. And Mr. Jefferson concluded: “But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.”

So Jefferson was really talking primarily about how important it was for Americans to be educated. Journalism was merely something an educated person could employ to form an educated opinion.

It was only a century ago when barely 6 percent of Americans had graduated from high school. Now 80 percent are high school graduates and a quarter of us hold baccalaureate degrees. But if we choose optional illiteracy, what does all that so-called higher education matter?

Ah, and sports is so seductive an alternative. So, let’s turn on the big screen HDTV in our home entertainment center and watch another ball game. Better even in 3-D.

Yes, if sports journalism is looking good for the future, the television part of sports journalism is looking fantastic. Consider—if you want to see the hot new movie, unless you’re prepared to wait a few months for your Netflix disc to arrive in the mail, you’ve got to go out to the cineplex and pay to see it. Same with theatre, dance, opera, symphony.

Games, however, are invariably on TV, and as the picture becomes clearer, why go through the expense of buying a ticket and the hassle of traffic and parking and bad weather, in order to try and watch a game from row eighty-eight in the end zone when you can see it even better in your own family room?

Indeed, I even wonder if we will continue to need such big stadiums and arenas anymore now that the younger generations—the millennials and whatever it is that comes after the millennials—are growing up with the entertainment world at their fingertips and their eyetips and their eartips?

You don’t have to go to it. It comes to you. Download.

Jerry Jones bought the Dallas Cowboys a 100,000-seat palace, and then put a monster HD screen up over a large part of the field, which most everybody watches instead of looking down at the real thing in miniature below. Jerry Jones didn’t build a stadium. He built the world’s largest sports bar.

There’s a certain continuity that’s come around, too, for as now television and sports enjoy such a symbiotic relationship, it’s worth remembering that back in the nineteenth century, it was newspapers and sports—especially baseball—that found this brotherhood. That happened as immigrants and farmers came to the cities, and working hours decreased, and these heterogeneous masses needed more elements to give them a sense of community. So often what, commercially, came to identify a city were two enterprises—its teams and its newspapers. The St. Louis Cardinals. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The

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Baltimore Orioles. The *Baltimore Sun*. The paper came out every day, and there was a game every day, all season long. Our city’s team. Our city’s paper. For all the abuses and excesses of sport, it does help provide more of a sense of community, doesn’t it?

Indeed, as more and more Americans dismiss political parties and call themselves independents, as union membership plummets, we can say that today many Americans’ first allegiance is to the sports team, not the political party or the union or the church.

We are so fragmented today—and I don’t just mean the Blue States and the Red States. Ironically, it is our modern communicative technology which, rather than connecting us—as the printing press and the telegraph and the telephone and radio and TV did when they were first invented—dilutes us, separates us into our own little worlds. So many channels, so many Web sites; earphones, so we cannot hear around us. I am standing next to you, but I am calling someone over there on my cell phone, while you are texting someone else someplace else.

In a way, we have never needed journalism as much as we do now, so that it might provide us with some common grounding, yet it is precisely now when journalism is becoming more personal, less embracing, more ego, less -ism. What will hold our polyglot, sprawling cities together if our newspapers and our local television news disappear?

In a way, then, our teams become even more important to the community, for what else is shared?

Then, too, in this world that increasingly is so staged and manipulated, sport is genuine. (I was going to say “pure,” but that would be gilding the lily.) In fact, about forty years ago, Daniel Boorstin, the famous historian, noted that we were already being surfeited by what he so perfectly called “pseudo-events,” so that soon, he postulated, the only real things left in the world would be crime and sports.

He was so very prescient, and we can't punish Mr. Boorstin for not envisioning reality shows to go along with crime and sports . . . or are those song-and-dance competitions just a different kind of sports, like poker tournaments and beauty pageants and elections?

There is also one other reason why journalism will never abandon sports no matter what forms journalism may take. That is because sport is the only form of entertainment where excellence and popularity merge. The best theatre is not on Broadway, the best music is not chosen for most iPods, the best movies don't even make it into the cineplexes, but when you go see a baseball game in Wrigley Field or an NFL game at the Superdome or an NBA or NHL game at Madison Square Garden, the crowd may be rude and raucous, even vulgar, but what you're watching is the best, and that best that you are watching is what the most people care about. And that matters.

In a way, like it or not, that makes sports our most important entertainment . . . even, our most important art. So there will surely always be a demand for sportswriters. Sadly, most of them may be sports jotters, but the material is too rich for at least some good writers—journalists, novelists, screenwriters, playwrights—ever to abandon working the field of play.

There are also two trends, which are occurring simultaneously, and which must have an effect upon sport. First, more women now are involved in athletics and embrace it more. Then, at the same time, coincidentally, higher education is increasingly being dominated by women. As American boys grow up and abandon the classroom, the proportion of women in college in this country is heading past the 60 percent mark. As a

consequence of this greater female presence in both sport and academia, I believe, we will, in the future, look upon sport in a more artistic manner.

It is instructive, I think, that while the Olympics started in Greece, and the Greek influences continued in so many aesthetic areas—in art, in philosophy, in drama—sport was unable to travel with the same esteem down through time. It is likely that this dismissal of athletics may have much to do with the simple fact that even the most brilliant sporting achievement has been transitory—done, gone. By contrast, that of art which is most prized is that which has been saved—can be saved—whether it is the written word, the constructed edifice, the painting, the sculpture, the recorded song.

It's revealing that we used to, in music, most honor the composers, because their work could be saved for posterity, written down, on paper. Now, we most acclaim the singers

because recording preserves their voices.

Performance trumps inspiration.

So I would suggest that now that we possess the technology to retain glorious athletic performance on film, sport should, naturally, gain in stature with the other preserved arts. As we look back at the geniuses of the twentieth century, why shouldn't we celebrate the moves of Michael Jordan as much as the music of Gershwin or the lilies of Monet?

Whatever of sports journalism, in the future I would think that the discipline of sport—the study of it as art, as sociology—may well be emphasized more in the classroom as a significant part of culture—just as sport has, in the past, been emphasized too much in academia as an amusement.

Now, to conclude, I never met Red Smith. I was in his presence on several occasions, but I was too shy to bother him. No idolizing in the press box! But, by chance, on one occasion in my germinating life he played a significant role.

My sophomore year at Princeton, Kingsley Amis, the British writer, the so-called angry young man—which he was not—was a visiting professor, and about a dozen of us qualified for a course in which we would write something original and he would critique it. Pass or fail—my favorite kind of course. It was great to be in it. Freed from the

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impoverishment of England, Kingsley was having a ball in luxurious America, especially, we learned later, since he was also conducting a grand old affair with another professor's wife.

The last thing he cared about was a bunch of college kids giving him pretentious short stories that he had to waste precious time analyzing.

But the first week he met with us as a group, he asked us, as sort of a getting-to-know-you bit, to give him a list of three writers who had influenced us. Now I'm sure the rest of my fellow students laid it on pretty thick: Melville and Faulkner and Ibsen, maybe even Keats or Chaucer to play up to the British writer. But dumb old me, I really tried to think of writers who had seriously influenced me.

I did write down Shakespeare at the top. But hey, Shakespeare—that's like the free spot in the middle of the bingo board. Then I put down J. D. Salinger, because, let me tell you, *The Catcher in the Rye* influenced me. Big-time.

And then, I thought, you know, I don't know whether I'm a literary writer or a journalist, so, I crossed out Dickens and put down a newspaperman: Red Smith. Not because he was a sportswriter, but just because he wrote better and influenced me more than anybody else writing in newspapers.

And I handed those three names in.

Now by dumb luck my kid brother is spending a year as an exchange student in England, and a month or so later he mails me a long article written by Kingsley Amis about his hilarious time teaching the collegiate provincials. My brother has circled a large part of the article. "I think this is you," it says.

Indeed, in the piece, I was the star idiotic American student. I think Kingsley described me as gangly or lanky, and maybe pimply, but certainly vacant and ignorant.

What a bozo, I was. Can you believe this, my dear fellow Englishmen, this would-be flower of the young Ivy League writers actually listed a newspaper sports columnist as one of the most influential writers in the world.

I could practically hear stuffy old Englishmen sitting in their plush London clubs, sipping their brandy, snorting at this young American dimwit. So, for my next session with Kingsley, I begin by saying, "I enjoyed your article."

He looks at me, baffled.

"You know," I said, "the one in the London paper that you wrote about us."

Oh, you could see the blood drain out of his face. Remember, this is an eon before the Internet, before *download*, and, naturally, he had never expected that that article would see the light of day on this side of the Atlantic, let alone at Princeton—let alone in the possession of one of his insulated, callow students.

After that, I could do no wrong. Kid gloves. I think only the professor's wife he was sleeping with got more devoted attention. And then, at the end of the year, I wrote a one-act play, and he told me it was really good, which was nice, but he meant it. And before he went back to England, when he stopped over in New York, he gave it to his hotshot New York agent, and that agent called me, and said he wanted to represent me when I got out of college, and sure enough, about three years later, he got my first book published.

All because instead of writing down Proust or Milton or Henry James, I told the truth and wrote down Red Smith.

You never know. Maybe I wouldn't even be here this evening, at Notre Dame, fifty years later, if it wasn't for Red.

I'm very honored to be speaking at a lecture that bears his name.

Sportswriter is one word. Red Smith is one word: writer.

