

## Conference 2002: Sports Writing

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### *The Future of New Zealand Sports Writing*

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This presentation aims to make some general points about the state of sports writing in the New Zealand print media, to point out some current trends and to make some recommendations to improve the quality of sports writing.

In previous papers to JEANZ conferences (2000, 2001) I have pointed out some disturbing issues for sports journalism. I attempted to make the case that sports journalism is an oxymoron brought on by the trends to tabloid news values, large transnational media corporations, integrated sport and media ownership patterns and boosterish editorial policies designed to maximise circulation. Far too much sports journalism (if that is the term) is little more than cheerleading.

I also investigated the reaction of major New Zealand print media to the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. To my surprise and disappointment my preliminary conclusion was that the New Zealand print sports media in the three largest metropolitan areas failed to be pro-active preferring to wait for the news to come to them rather actively seeking stories relevant to New Zealand sports section readers.

There were plenty of snippets from the major wire services regarding the impact of the attacks' aftermath on American, British and Australian sport but little or no coverage or commentary about the changed international context of New Zealand sport. Cricket was the exception since there was a tour on and the Black Caps were recalled from Singapore rather than travel to Pakistan on the fringe of the likely war zone. My investigations concluded that the link between sport and journalism was largely ignored by the major New Zealand newspapers in the days following the attacks. Even an upcoming All Black tour was largely ignored until it was virtually about to leave. There was eventually some concern that Tiger Woods might not travel to New Zealand in the new year to play in the New Zealand Golf Open at Paraparaumu.

A further investigation of sports department attitudes and work practices is needed to assess why this situation exists. New Zealand sports journalists showed little initiative in chasing the NZRFU or top players for reaction, opinion or policy. The link to mainstream journalistic values needs to be much more effectively established or perhaps, re-established.

One point begging investigation is the lack of cross fertilisation between sports journalists and academics with an interest in sport. New Zealand universities and major polytechnics offer a number of sports degrees and conduct a comprehensive range of research into the psychology, sociology, physiology and business of sport. Yet how many sports journalists have investigated the academics' findings or assessed their value for their readers?

It would be worth knowing if many sports writers actually know the work of Steve Jackson (Otago), Nick Perry (Auckland), Wayne Hope (AUT) or Clive Gilson and Toni Bruce (Waikato). Women's sport, other than netball or rugby, is still largely ignored despite the academic work of Professor Judy McGregor at Massey University over the past decade.

David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson's *Sports Stars: The cultural politics of sporting celebrity* (2001 Routledge:London) deserves a place on sports editors shelves. Maybe it is the sub-title which puts them off.

There is a developing culture of knowledge, research and application coming from the tertiary sector which can not be dismissed as too 'academic' in the developing knowledge economy. Surely the 'knowledge wave' may lap at the shores of sports journalism.

Too many good sports stories are broken by non-sports reporters. The Bulldogs salary cap scandal in the NRL was broken by two economics reporters at The Sydney Morning Herald.

Far too many intelligent New Zealanders regard sport and the sports pages as shallow trivia or a brainless diversion. Who can blame them when the NZ Herald devotes an entire front page to a club match in a secondary code? Should we be concerned that sport should be so used as trivial circulation fodder rather than a field for serious journalism?

The failure of the sports media to reflect the intelligence of sport ought to be a major concern to people concerned about media's role in a democracy. The current cricket spat between the players and NZ Cricket demands research into context.

The 1994 Major League Baseball strike and the 1994-5 National Hockey League player lockout are obvious examples but seemingly beyond the interest and ability of New Zealand sports writers. There were some signs that this situation may be improving. Richard Boock of the NZ Herald rose above the emotion of the moment to provide context and balance in an emotionally charged historic moment. Boock, to his credit, was threatened with being ostracised by New Zealand Cricket a couple of years ago when he showed his journalistic credentials by digging too deeply into the Black Caps failures.

Small wonder then that American journalism professor Bruce Itule refers to the sports desk as 'the toy department'. Itule actually lives in a culture where great sports writers are celebrated and even revered yet he can still see the dangerous currents gnawing away at an honourable tradition. How much more damaging are these trends in a culture with no such tradition?

What would Itule think about the Tony Iro being dropped from the Sky TV for observing that every NRL club tried to get round the salary cap. Mick Watson, Warriors chief executive immediately complained and Iro had to apologise on air. Apparently Sky will take Iro back next year but the lesson is clear. Don't criticise the hometown team when you have a financial interest in its success.

Just who, one might ask, was serving the interest of the sporting public? Not Iro whose off the cuff comment provided more heat than light. Not Watson nor Sky who censored legitimate comment.

The use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' is standard practice for newsreaders in describing New Zealand New Zealand sports teams campaigns. Sports commentator Murray Deaker and the rest of the current Blackheart grouping have tried to create a 'them' and 'us' atmosphere. In reference to New Zealanders in other America's Cup syndicates Deaker told Julie Ash of the NZ Herald. "Their sole objective is to take the cup away from us(sic). My choice is to back my team. I am totally in support of Team New Zealand and totally opposed to all of them."

Thankfully Deaker added this corollary to his previous statement: "I am not going to go soft on this issue. I am certainly not going to act like a journalist (my emphasis) in this. I am going to act emotionally and act like a staunch Kiwi."

If only many sports journalists could develop a similar perspective on their role. We expect them to be journalists: accurate, balanced, fair and insightful. Australian writer and researcher Keith Windschuttle "argues that journalism is committed to reporting the truth, is obligated primarily to its audience and is committed to good writing."(cited in Kenneth Stark's review of Myles Breen's Journalism:Theory and Practice.

Associate Professor David Rowe of the University of Newcastle has identified Australians' developing dependency on sports scandals. A tabloid mentality has led to a fascination with the seamy side of sport. Rowe says, "Sport is now covered less reverentially because revealing its ugly side stimulates viewers, listeners and readers." Shane Warne's stalking phone calls and Mark Waugh's contacts with gamblers are examples which allow tabloid journalists to make a case for newsworthiness whilst allowing for a salacious emphasis which is their real intention.

There is nonetheless a developing trend towards intelligent sports writing in New Zealand. Poet Brian Turner's new biography of rugby icon Colin Meads, Lloyd Jones novel The Book of Fame about the 1905 All Blacks, Joseph Romanos' well researched columns in The Listener and his new rugby book, Ron Palenski's insightful commentaries in The Dominion Post and Marc Hinton's features in The Sunday Star-Times all give cause for hope that a thoughtful and intelligent sports readership exists.

Hinton recently won the top award for sports journalism in 2002. Not only can he write well, he can sustain it for a longer article which provides insights for the thoughtful reader.

These writers are 'reflective practitioners'. They need to be treasured, recognised and rewarded. They are our Red Smith, Grantland Rice, Mitch Albom or Damon Runyon. They seem to understand that sport can be about character as well as characters. They also craft sports writing for an audience which needs much more than cheerleading and jingoism. As Jimmy Cannon, the American sports writer once said, " Sportswriting has survived because of the guys who don't cheer." This aphorism deserves a place on the wall in every sports department in the country.

What indication do we have that the situation can be improved? The late Murray Goston, INL group training manager, indicated to me an interest in developing and supporting good sports writing. It is hoped that someone would like to carry on with this positive approach.

The Hillary Commission developed a sports reporting module online for volunteers and young people wanting to develop a competence in the field.

The journalism training schools do not appear to offer separate sports journalism modules. Perhaps JEANZ conference participants can set me straight on this. In the past cadets worked their way around various departments and learned what the entire paper was about. What happens now?

I was able to find on the web a Professor P. Pierce at James Cook University in Townsville, Queensland who offers a course in Sports Journalism at third year degree level. Are there more? Are more planned?

New Zealand journalists' work practices need to be investigated to find why things are as they are. Is time, resources, staffing levels, editorial policy, self censorship or simple antagonism to sport generally by the intelligentsia the main reason for our general failure to produce good sports writing?

The role of television in creating and focusing on celebrity presents a real issue for sports journalism. Audiences have come to expect this orientation from their televised sport and it would, perhaps, take a supreme effort of will to present serious journalism and its associated values to the sports audience. This is not an excuse for not making the effort but an observation of the difficulties ahead. What do we need to do to develop better sports writing?

1. Media proprietors need to foster the writing. A sports writing coach along the lines of the writing coach at some American newspapers like the Portland Oregonian might fit the bill. Surely each of the two major groups in New Zealand could afford it.
2. More emphasis on studying sport as a business. Much more economic and business perspective.
3. More academic research accessed by sports journalists.
4. Better focus on mid-career training and support for journalists.
5. Rise above the merely parochial at both local and national level. If American Sports Illustrated could recognise Sir Edmund Hillary and Sir Roger Bannister as its favourite athletes of the 20th century surely New Zealand writers and editors can drop some of their Cyclops approach to sport.
6. Lead opinion, don't just reflect it. Do some real journalism.
7. Celebrate genuine talent.
8. Teach sports writing specialist courses at tertiary and NZJTO with an intention to develop research and good writing as hallmarks of New Zealand sports pages.
9. Involve more women in the sports reporting process. This will require a sea change in the sports desk culture where one woman is enough.

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