

There's Something About Bill  
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“Only a game.”

Repeatedly shouted as teammates pull apart heated opponents from a scuffle. Accompanying a defeated shrug after a championship loss. Broadcast on Saturdays from WBUR-FM in Boston.

Bill Littlefield's life has been intertwined with this phrase since 1993. The year Michael Jordan retired from basketball for the first time, NPR granted Littlefield the authority to host a show taking listeners beyond the superficial façade of sports and ironically title it “Only A Game.”

For 23 years he has challenged his 344,400 daily listeners to see beyond the game and peel back the layers of sports. To understand “only a game” requires an understanding of the man who has made it his own.

Bill Littlefield, 68, is a New Jersey native but Massachusetts-convert. A graduate from both Yale and Harvard who masks his Ivy League schooling by brushing off a question of legacy with “I'm concerned with getting up and going to work everyday.” A man who reveals the most about himself by saying his favorite sports memories are the day both his daughters scored goals in the Needham, Mass. youth soccer league and “the day I met Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter and learned something about how to avoid bitterness.”

For 39 years, he was Professor Littlefield to Curry College English students in Milton, Mass. But now his classroom expands beyond four walls in a quaint, wealthy Boston suburb. Anthony Brooks said it best when in 2007 he asserted “Littlefield isn't so much a sportswriter as he is a writer who uses sports to tell stories about the human condition.”

“Sometime in the 90s,” Bill Littlefield covered the Bentley College women's basketball team in Waltham, Mass. He found something special in the Falcons and coach Barbara Stevens.

“I believe we made a fan out of Bill,” says Stevens.

They did. Bill Littlefield lists the team as one of his three favorites, along with the Roxbury Community College men's basketball team, and FC Barcelona. Littlefield continues to attend games at Bentley to cheer on Stevens, an “absolutely brilliant coach,” and her lady Falcons. He also sends congratulatory and good luck emails that Stevens “can always count on.”

Over the years the two have become friends. She admires his pervasive sense of humor but also his genuine journalistic interest in her teams.

“He seeks out stories that often go unnoticed that highlight the accomplishments of women in sports when most others in the sports journalism profession overlook those same stories,” says the Bentley coach.

This is something he learned from W.C. Heinz, who wrote his seminal “Death of a Racehorse” the year after Littlefield’s birth in 1948.

“If I had to pick one writer and say ‘hey, you’re gonna be on a desert island, take this guy with ya,’ it would be Bill Heinz. And I like to think that I’ve learned something about writing from reading a lot of his stuff.”

The Bills met in 1999 over the phone and later cultivated a friendship through letters and during visits to Heinz’s home in Dorset, Vt. and eventually at his retirement home in Bennington, Vt. After Heinz died in 2008, his daughter Gayl asked Littlefield to edit a collection of her father’s work, which eventually became “The Top of His Game.” In 2015 Bill Littlefield reflected on the book and his relationship with Heinz in an article “W.C. Heinz Revisited...And Republished.”

“Bill’s sense of humor was sharp... In everything W.C. Heinz wrote, there is evidence that he listened carefully and saw pretty much everything there was to see... [I felt] pride that my name appeared on the cover right under “W.C. Heinz,” and concern that nothing I had written to introduce this collection of his work could be adequate to that responsibility.”

Sportswriter David Davis spent time interviewing both Heinz and Littlefield on separate occasions. In retrospect, the two writers came off much the same.

“Both care deeply about storytelling - quality storytelling - and about the humanity involved in each story,” says Davis. “They find and pursue stories beyond the quotidian headlines, because they know that authentic characters and true drama are best found in quiet, obscure places.”

Heinz famously reported on fringe characters and used nearly every observable detail to show sports beyond winners and losers, as more than “only a game.” Something Littlefield attempts for an hour each Saturday.

Bill Littlefield might be a modern Bill Heinz, but he would never consider that.

“I’m very envious of the epitaph that Rod Sterling wrote for Mountain Rivera in his play Requiem for a Heavyweight when Mountain Rivera learns that he can’t fight anymore; it’s ‘he weren’t no good, but he never took a dive.’”