

Adam Leitch



Sports Journalist

Name

Adam Leitch

Job title

Chief Sportswriter at The Daily Echo, Southampton

Qualifications:

National Council for Training Journalists (NCTJ) Diploma

Introduction

Adam is the chief sports writer at the Daily Echo where he has reported on Southampton Football Club matches for over 16 years. He also lectures in Sports Journalism at Southampton Solent University.

How did you get into journalism?

I got into it through a mixture of hard work and luck. I went to college to study for A-levels and thought sports journalism was something I would like to go into. It seemed like it might be quite fun and being from the Southampton region the Daily Echo was my local paper. I came and did some work experience.

You need to bear in mind that now sports journalism is a big industry with numerous sports journalism degree courses. For example, Southampton Solent University has a degree programme with around 100 students coming in a year but when I started out sports journalism wasn't a thing and you couldn't get qualified specifically in it. It was viewed that you went through the traditional route of becoming a news journalist and the sports journalists were not seen as previously being 'proper' journalists. It seems to me that sport is a specialist area of journalism and often it seems that it has overtaken news in importance because of the massive presence of sport online. It is arguably seen to be as big as news so is a speciality now and there are specialist qualifications.

When I came on work experience I was thrown into general news but wanted to work in sport. Afterwards I was able to stay in touch with the paper and got involved in covering Southampton youth football matches for free to get some publications. I was going to study journalism at Bournemouth University and as luck would have it a job became available on the sports desk and after a year I was pretty much a full-time writer. I said I've either got to go to university now or you need to train me, so they put on an NCTJ (National Council for the Training of Journalists) qualification. I was packed off for six months to get qualified and when I came back several of my colleagues had moved on and I was almost last man standing in the sports department at the age of 21. It was more that I happened to be in the right place at the right time that I got to cover Southampton Football Club which was the biggest job on the paper.

Do you think work experience is still important to gain job opportunities?

I lecture at Southampton Solent University as well and always say that if you are really serious about journalism I can't emphasise enough the importance of work experience. I think five of the last six people we appointed had done work experience with us. They are people we know, we know they are good, and we can trust them. If we were advertising for a senior role it may not be the case, but most jobs are entry level roles. We are looking for someone who is enthusiastic and capable so if you have already proved this it puts you in a good position. Even if you are not fortunate that a vacancy comes up during that time then the fact you have been in that environment is very important.

Some people love the environment of the news room while other people are horrified by what it is like, so their experience pays off as they can go away and work somewhere else. You wouldn't buy a car without test driving it first so why would you choose a career before you had tried it out and thrown everything into it? There's nothing worse than studying for three years and finding out you don't want to work in that industry.

How many sports journalists are there at the Daily Echo?

We have five full time members of staff on our sports desk, so we take the bulk of sports coverage and have a few freelancers who have been with us for many years and they cover some of the other things we can't get out to, such as local rugby, cricket and hockey teams. We just don't have the numbers to cover it all. In terms of other sports, we rely on people from the leagues sending reports in. Southampton football, Hampshire cricket and major non-league football clubs are covered by in-house staff.

The impression of journalists can be that you need to be quite pushy to be successful – is this the case?

In my role in the regional press I deal with one football club and that has been central to my working life for 16 years. Being too pushy, annoying, or in your face is not a great way to maintain relationships with contacts. I am reliant on a small pool of people that I deal with on a daily basis. Getting on with people whilst trying to do your job is the balance you are trying to strike. Your personality style has to be that you are friendly, reasonable and approachable to speak to. If you want to discuss something with

a contact, you need their trust. If you work for the national press you probably worry less as you are dealing with a number of clubs. You may worry less about upsetting or burning contacts to get a good story. If you are dealing with one club and you upset them then your contacts will dry up fairly quickly.

Can you describe a typical working day?

That is difficult as there are three types of day. Firstly, a day in the office, secondly a day doing pre-match reports and thirdly, a match day and they are all entirely different. We deal with a couple of types of story. There are stories that are event driven such as a game or a quotes piece from someone you have spoken to. That might be a pre-match interview, press conference or post-match interview. That forms the bulk of our stories and these are fairly straightforward. Or there may be a story from a contact that you have to chase and research. These situations can be more complicated when you have to run a difficult story as you want to keep everyone happy – the readers, the paper as well as being fair to the people involved in the story and present it in an appropriate manner. You've got to make sure you have got the facts right and are satisfied it is not a story that will cause you undue problems. If it is going to cause you undue problems you've got to be sure it is worth it.

Is there any other advice you would give to students who want a similar career to yours?

You have to think what it is that you can offer to people that is different. There are so many people coming out with journalism degrees and you need to be able to offer something unique. In your year group there may be 100 other people after the same job as you. You need to be able to show that you understand something in a way that is different to other people. It is an industry where there are jobs, but you need to do something that makes you stand out – what is different about you? This is the first generation of people that have grown up with the internet, social media and mobile phones. Most of the people who employ today's graduates won't understand technology the way you do. The world has changed since those people qualified and have been in the world of work. Young people are much more qualified than they may think as they take it for granted that Google and Facebook have always existed, but we know that they haven't. It means you have a set of skills and instinctive knowledge of technology to utilise and that is where the future lies. There is a greater appetite for good journalism now and a far greater potential audience for journalism thanks to the internet than there has ever been before. So think about things that you can do and specialities that you have. It's great to cover football but everyone wants to cover football, so you may be better off if you know a lot about sailing, motor cycle racing or another niche sport. Think about specialities and niches and be prepared to explore. Make sure you get as much work experience as you can as well as having a degree. A week's work experience is not going to be enough.

This is an abridged version of an interview in *Careers in Sports Science*.