

## Conference 2005: Sports Reporting

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### *The changing world of the sports reporter*

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#### **Abstract**

The JTO's Jim Tucker identified 'lack of knowledge' as a journalism training issue for serious research. This is now more true for sports reporters. Rapid and bewildering change in the sports field means professional reporters, trained in a simpler age, struggle to develop a knowledge base to meet the expectations of a new and more sophisticated sports reader/viewer.

New areas worthy of study include:

1. management of collective agreements including salary caps. The National Basketball League in New Zealand (NBL), Australian National Basketball League (ANBL), National Rugby League (NRL) and Australian Football League (AFL) all operate salary caps in Australasia. The New Zealand Rugby Union operates a graduated salary structure as does New Zealand Cricket.

North American sports (National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), National Basketball Association (NBA) operate extremely complex agreements with players unions including salary caps and a range of free agency arrangements for players. Major League Baseball (MLB) operates a 'luxury tax' to redress imbalances between the richest and poorest clubs. European sports, particularly soccer, face European Union employment legislation in cross border transfers.

2. Medical change including the powers of the World Doping Agency and recent Congressional investigations into steroid abuse in baseball. Baseball has been dumped as an Olympic sport in part because MLB and the Players' Union will not meet Olympic standards for performance enhancing drugs.

3. Market forces and financing of sports teams and the negotiation of television rights have become more complex with the recent European Union signal that television rights for English Premier League soccer must be shared out. The American Glaser family's purchase of Manchester United put the team ownership financial situation in the UK public eye.

4. Sport reporters now must cope effectively with the media trained coach or athlete and still get a story.

5. Sport is now more subject to employment and even criminal law than ever before. The cycling case in Christchurch is an example.

Overall it takes more expertise to do the job and there is less room for fluff and local cheerleading. Audience expectations have changed with the growth of the internet and the globalisation of interests and expectations.

#### **Full Paper**

It has become a commonplace among media academics and critics that "sports journalism is an oxymoron". In my JEANZ paper in December 2000 I made a number of observations and assertions to support this point of view. The paper asserted that "journalism and sport

journalism are two separate areas of media work which demonstrate, to a certain degree, incompatible values, work cultures and professional outlooks.” (2000,p.1)

Now I am not so sure. The conclusions of 2000 were based on media developments of the 1980s and 1990s such as developing media conglomerates seeking sports properties to achieve synergies between content and delivery. Sports reporters, already in ‘cheerleader mode’ came under additional pressure to hype the local (corporate) team.

The paper also suggested that sports reporters operating under a round system tended to become too close, or to use an Iraq War term, ‘embedded’ with teams, players and management.

I argued that the sports media audience was largely passive and “marketers will tell us that public demand is theirs to create”.(Mason 2000) In the past decade rugby league, soccer and basketball have supplied the Auckland/New Zealand sports audience with franchises in Australian competitions with almost uniformly disastrous, if not laughable, results. The oft-argued case for sports writer as cheerleader has taken a hammering in markets (sic) such as this. It’s easier to lead the cheers in Boston, Toronto or Vancouver where the home teams are pretty good.

There is a real change coming for sports journalists and they had better be ready. The days of nostalgic trips to 1905, “what happens on tour, stays on tour” and *faux* debates about who will play second-five are coming to an end. We will still get hysteria about ‘that tackle’ but the learning curve will be steep for sports reporters because so much is demanded by a newer, younger, better-educated and increasingly fragmented audience/readership. Both major television channels in New Zealand are pitching for the 18-54 demographic or what a wag once described as “the young and the neo-young”.

This audience of the much heralded Gen X and Generation Y will demand better writing, better analysis and a worldview unknown by previous generations. ESPN’s *Sportscenter*, BBC World, Sky News and a host of other providers have revolutionised the audience’s knowledge base and increased expectations exponentially. The old term *minority sports* hardly applies when Sky Network Television beams ice hockey, American football, lacrosse, Australian Rules, WNBA and X-Games to more than one quarter of the population.

The globalisation of world media and the links of ownership and control which so exercised Herman and Chomsky in the 1980s and 1990s (Herman & Chomsky, 1994) have changed direction somewhat in the last five years. Disney has sold its Anaheim Angels baseball team. News Corporation has divested itself of the Los Angeles Dodgers. These were prime examples of synergies of content and programme delivery in the 1990s. Things have changed.

Convergence has become ‘deconvergence.’ Sumner Redstone of Viacom recently signalled the beginning of a trend when he announced he would break up the media giant. (Maich, 2005, p.33). Steve Maich, writing in Canada’s *Maclean’s* magazine, reports on the ‘deconvergence’ of media giant Time Warner (selling Warner Music for US\$2.6 billion) and CanWest Global marking off its newspaper assets. As Maich puts it “these lumbering giants are worth *less* than the sum of their parts.” (p.33). We can argue that convergence is over and it’s time for academics to get over it too.

Some of the sports products have simply morphed in terms of demographics or the economics of collective bargaining agreements. At least 2 Canadian cities look like regaining a place in the National (ice) Hockey League since the year long lockout changed the economics of players’ pay (Shoalts, 2005). NFL Europe (owned by the NFL and BSkyB) has consolidated 5 of its 6 teams in Germany where the game has a real fan base. The rest of Europe could care less.

Major League Baseball still hasn't got its salaries under control with the New York Yankees paying US\$200 million per annum while lesser lights in Pittsburgh and Kansas City pay less than a quarter of that to *compete* in the same competition.

The New Zealand Rugby Union and the Players Association recently inked a three year deal establishing "a significant new partnership" with a "revenue sharing agreement, guaranteed retainer for players" and "a provincial union salary cap." The complexities of this will keep the lawyers, agents and sports reporters busy for the foreseeable future. (TVNZ 2005)

Sports reporters are expected to be up-to-date with trends on their reporting patch but many still fail to see a wider picture. Their readers will want that worldview.

- What are implications for the Rugby Union's new salary cap for provincial teams chances of signing quality players? (Robson 2005)
- Is All Black Rico Gear playing for Nelson Bays an exception or the start of a trend?
- If Jonah Lomu was the exception (exceptional salary) which launched rugby professionalism who is next?

Performance-enhancing drug scandals surrounding baseball stars such as Barry Bonds and Raphael Palmeiro have brought US Congressional attention and lots of highly technical evidence for sports reporters and their readers to mull over, analyse and develop a stand about. The unwanted attention has brought a bill to the US House to standardise and toughen penalties (AP 2005) but too late to save baseball from being expelled from the Olympics (CTV.ca 2005).

My USA Today source alluded to anti-American feeling and a lack of top players at the Olympic baseball while my Canadian source (CTV) drew attention to the drug issue. The BBC site mentioned the London Games organisers would save 50 million pounds in renovation costs for the Regents Park baseball field.(BBC.co.uk 2005). Reporters need to find, analyse and make some sense of competing information to give readers/viewers the full picture.

The sports pages read more and more like high finance when it comes to collective bargaining agreement and ownership arrangements. Intricate tax and governance arrangements combined with big egos, national or regional interests and fan interest combine to make a reporter's job much more complex than just "Tinker to Evers to Chance". The best recent example is the Glaser family takeover of iconic soccer club Manchester United. The American family own the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the NFL. They had shown no previous interest in soccer at all.

So why buy the team if not to make money? A sports reporter might seem ill-equipped to explain it. The new readership/viewership has higher expectations that the reporter can explain or least provide the information the audience needs to make up its own mind.

A sports reporter has to gain and then share insight into the European Commission's requirement that the English Premier League sell its broadcast rights in a "fair and transparent way" which will certainly "end BSkyB's exclusive 13 year hold on live coverage of top-flight English football (soccer)." (Conlan 17 November 2005 ) Financial and football implications, what is available to fans and the fallout for Rupert Murdoch's power and income are all key points to be covered.

Someone has called it the "new honesty". Media trained sports managers, players and executives showing a new and apparently heartfelt openness to the media.

Grizzled veteran Kevin Costner's advice to young up and coming player, Tim Robbins in the baseball film *Bull Durham* was just the start. When he gets to the major leagues just say "I'm just here to help the team. It's an honour to be here."

There are countless contemporary examples of weeping and contrite heroes such as All Black (and dancer) Norm Hewitt and 'not so sorry really' apologies such as Tana Umaga's to Brian O'Driscoll.

What to do when one of your players is arrested for sexual assault and turns out to be HIV positive? Trot out the chairman of the board of the CFL Saskatchewan Roughriders gridiron team and he will say this: "I think we owe it to ensure that the behaviour, the deportment and everything else affiliated with our club, to its management to its coaches and to its players measures up to the very high standards of ethics and accountability that we have." (Globe and Mail 1 November 2005 )

The New York Daily News reported that Yankee baseball star Alex Rodriguez "was cautioned by the New York Yankees that playing poker in illegal clubs could be dangerous and *harmful to his image*."(Globe and Mail 2 November 2005 )

The effects of poor or no media training became apparent when Andrew Bogut, only the second non-US born player to be chosen Number 1 in the NBA draft showed little class and less judgement in an early press conference. Bogut bagged his Australian predecessors in basketball's bigtime. Media expert Thomas Murrell commented that "his media comments ...were a setback to *his personal brand* and earning power because of the enormous global reach of that media event." ( PRIA Industry News 19 July 2005 ).

Murrell went on to suggest what Bogut needs to learn.

- "Firstly, don't pass judgements on others in public.
- Secondly, compliment don't criticise.
- Thirdly, be humble. Confidence is good but those who are most influential link this with humility.
- Fourthly, let your actions speak for themselves.
- Finally, get good advisors around you. In this case the whole mess could have been avoided with good advice and some clear thinking and coaching prior to his media conference." (PRIA Industry News)

Funnily enough, there's not too much there that your mother couldn't have taught you. We know what his media advisor might want him to say but do we know what he *really* thinks?

The NZ Breakers new signing Brian Green won over the Herald's Peter Jessop with these gems on his first day in the country.

- "Sean (NZer Sean Marks) is an unbelievable guy and a real talent. I cannot work out why he doesn't get more court time in the NBA."
- I can see some athletic players, some talented players. The league must be pretty good given the Breakers position on the table (last)."

The NBA's new dress code is part of this move to manage appearances and sports reporters have to deal with it and perhaps see through it as well. Once the bling and the hoodies are replaced by suits it will be up to reporters to check to see if these are the same 'homies' they were before.

The Indiana Pacers Jermaine O'Neal announced he has "40 to 50 suits already" and teammate Ron Artest says he will "wear purple shoes, yellow shirt, cut-up tie and a lavender sports coat." (NBA.com 2 November 2005 ) So much for keeping the middle aged white business types happy. These two players were involved in a brawl with fans resulting in lengthy suspensions last season hence the NBA's attempts to mainstream (whiten up?) its image.

Journalists have to recognise they are dealing with a new phenomenon, the professional public relations person. In April 2001 The Listener's Bruce Aynsley observed that "journalists have not yet recognised the increasing sophistication of the PR industry" and that "PR people are often better at their jobs while journalists haven't improved." (Aynsley 2001)

The legal questions surrounding sport have surfaced in a number of places in the past year. The leading New Zealand story took place in Dunedin when local players elbowed opposing players Tony Ashton in the head leaving him partially paralysed. Jarvis was charged with injuring Ashton "under circumstances that if death had been caused he would have been guilty of manslaughter." He was convicted and discharged after paying \$10,000 reparations. (NZ Herald 26 October 2005 )

Will we see more of these charges? It seems certain in an era of increased OSH awareness and personal rights interest.

Finally, sports reporters will need to up-skill dramatically in order to cover their chosen field. If they don't then the economics reporters, medical round people and court specialist reporters will get all the plum *sports* stories.

We live in time of dramatic change especially in the mode of delivery of information. Andrew Milner asserts "post-modern global culture is creating new psychological landscapes in which there is movement away from fixed standards and identities and a fragmentation of traditional cultural meanings." (Milner, 1994, p.122) Identity sports such as WNBA basketball and Maori sport will continue to grow along with fantasy sport gaming and extreme sports for the young, urban and cool. This kind of post-modern diversity would be beyond most sports newsrooms at the moment but it can not stay that way for long.

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