

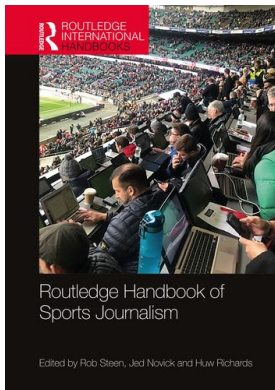
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The art of sportswriting

Rob Steen and Huw Richards

When aspiring sports journalists seek guidance on how to improve their writing, we can be relied upon to reply with a four-letter word: read. When they ask how to improve their journalism, the recommendation is precisely the same. Given the intense subjectivity involved in assessing literary style, let alone the accuracy of the facts conveyed or the quality of views expressed, this is not necessarily straightforward.

While encouraging students to build an extensive vocabulary and vary the length of sentences to enhance rhythm, clarity and impact, personal experience dictates that any attempt to lay down rules beyond the barest necessities – never plagiarise, patronise, browbeat, hector, fabricate or miss a deadline – is doomed to confuse. Everything we've learned stems from appreciating, analysing and understanding the methods, tics, thought processes and (apparent) beliefs of those who were already doing the job we craved: bombarding readers with our –not-necessarily humble opinions on music, cinema or sport – ideally, all three.

The essential difference between good journalism and good sports journalism is that while both must inform, the latter, because of its traditionally lighter, fluffier, more celebratory nature, often demands an ability to entertain. By the same token, not all the best sportswriters achieve this blend, a reflection of the increasingly serious and complex issues that were largely ignored before newspapers began expanding sports coverage in the 1970s but now find unprecedented space in print and on the web. This chapter unashamedly celebrates the cornerstones of good sportswriting: art, craft, wit, passion, proportion, commitment, honesty, wisdom and vision.

Transatlantic connections

When Robin Daniels was writing his 2009 memoir of his fellow Lancastrian Sir Neville Cardus, renowned music and cricket correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* from the 1920s until his death in 1975, the subtitle he finally plumped for was nothing if not apt – *Celebrant of Beauty*. Sportswriting's priorities have undergone enormous changes since Cardus's heyday, not least in the premium placed on reporting the politics and business of sport, but thanks to the trail blazed by Cardus as well as Americans such as Paul Gallico, Damon Runyon, Ring Lardner Sr. and Jr., sports journalism remains, for many, the most literary branch of the profession, concerned as it still is with celebrating human endeavour, teamwork and the art and craft of both competition and language.

Aside from a mutual fascination for bats, balls, nets and points, British and American sports-writers might appear, at first glance, to have precious little in common. Soccer, rugby and cricket are the focal points on this side of the Atlantic; baseball, basketball and American football on the opposite bank. American sport is largely insular, almost devoutly anti-internationalist (save when it comes to importing talent); Britain has been sending its representatives on tour since 1860. Indeed, cricket would die out as a desirable profession if it were purely a domestic activity.

Burrow a little further and the stereotypes become cloudy. While Americans may have perfected the art of turning sport into a profitable industry, you won't find a vast sponsor's logo daubed into the middle of the field at Joe Robbie Stadium or Fenway Park, nor a sponsor's insignia emblazoned across a single player's shirt. America may be capitalism's citadel, but it is also the home of free agency, revenue-sharing, powerful unions, players' strikes and an unquestioning insistence on the virtues of "competitive balance". Britons may be renowned for their steadfast adherence to tradition, but it is baseball that resists any attempts to abbreviate the game to suit modern attention spans. Moreover baseball's regard for its history has been enshrined since 1939 in its Hall of Fame.

In baseball and cricket, moreover, Americans and Britons are united by a common affliction. Both are strictly summer games. Both revolve around bats and balls, swings and hits, runs and outs, fielders and catchers. Both are besotted with records, statistics and decimal points, to an extent no other sport would dream of venturing. Both, more potently, are held up as symbols of their country of (purported) origin – or, rather, its finer traditions and nobler aspirations. Cricket stops for lunch and tea. Baseball games pause three-quarters of the way through, allowing the crowd to sing its song of praise, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame". For an Englishman, captaining a men's national cricket team on a losing streak can be akin to simultaneously taking on the posts of prime minister, ambassador to Russia, chairman of the BBC and National Scapegoat-in-Chief. Not so much because cricket is so crucial to the national identity – though the sport is still paraded, however erroneously, as the embodiment of Englishness – more so because the tasks he faces are so diverse and demanding. And in cricket, as in baseball, a reporter's duties are daily. Major League Baseball teams play a minimum of 162 games a season; their counterparts in county cricket are onstage for around 100 working days per summer, with winters to add. The microscope is accordingly intense.

While British sportswriters have long cast envious if not always appreciative glances at their peers and predecessors across the Atlantic, primarily for the greater freedom they have been afforded by editors, there are exceptions. "Only in America is it possible for earnest young men to major in journalism, whatever that means," claimed the late Ian Wooldridge, one of the most celebrated British sportswriters, ignoring the recent eruption of journalism degrees in his own country. "This explains why much American sportswriting, with a few formidable exceptions, reads as though it has been computed in a word-processing machine."¹ That last statement is not one with which I can concur.

Type until the blood seeps

One of Wooldridge's exceptions was Red Smith, droll yet incisive doyen of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and latterly the *New York Times*, for five decades spanning the Second World War and the Falklands War: an inspiration for several British sportswriters of my acquaintance. Once asked whether his "trade" (Wooldridge's words) was a taxing one, Smith responded with his customary blend of modesty, understatement and graphic description: "You merely sit there at a typewriter and think until the blood seeps out of the pores on your forehead."²

The ginger-mopped, peppery-witted Smith was once instructed by his sports editor, Stanley Woodward, to “stop Godding up those ball players.” Of all the crimes a self-respecting journalist could be accused of, that of bowing and scraping to scantily educated, over-muscled oafs is arguably the most grievous. Unless it is to commit the opposite, as Smith did when he berated Muhammad Ali for taking his stand for Black America and the North Vietnamese (“Cassius makes himself as sorry a spectacle as those unwashed punks who picket and demonstrate against the war”³). For the most part, come adulation or ridicule, Smith subscribed to the Rhett Butler Theory: he didn’t give a damn.

Smith was a master of the drop-intro, the delayed punchline. Wisecracks and perspicacity flowed in equal measure, underpinned by an innate grasp of rhythm. In 1956, he captured the often-contradictory essence of Connie Mack, one of baseball’s greatest managers; the conscious repetition of the word “and” would have been indigestible in less capable or assured hands:

As long as he was Connie Mack he was tough and human and clever. He was tough and warm and wonderful, kind and stubborn and courtly and unreasonable and generous and calculating and naïve and gentle and proud and humorous and demanding and unpredictable.

Many people loved him and some feared him, everybody respected him and, as far as I know, nobody ever disliked him in the ninety-three years of his life. There may never have been a more truly successful man, for nobody ever won warmer or wider esteem and nobody ever relished it more.⁴

Another of Wooldridge’s exceptions was his own journalistic hero, Paul Gallico, whose 14 years as a sportswriter in the 1920s and 1930s culminated in a revealing, humorous and often scathing collection-cum-memoir, *Farewell to Sport*, before he turned his hand to novel-writing. Witness his homage to Babe Ruth, baseball colossus and second, after WG Grace, as a trailblazer for global sporting celebrity. The accent is not on Ruth’s prodigious skills but squarely, refreshingly, unabashedly, on his humanity and fallibility:

I learned to love him because he was all man. In his early days before the great reformation he drank, he smoked, he cursed, he wrenched, he indulged himself, he brawled and sulked, and got the swelled head and got over it. He was discovering, living and enjoying this wonderful thing called life with all of his senses, enjoying it more than anyone I have ever known.⁵

What Gallico and Smith had in common was a fondness for the colloquial and the conversational. Nick Pitt, a London-based sportswriter and former sports editor of the *Sunday Times*, once related that, when he sat down to write a story, he would write it as if telling the story to a friend in the pub. That, though, is far more the traditional American way.

Musical prose

Nearly half a century after his death, the most lauded English sportswriter remains Neville Cardus. A journalist as renowned for reviewing string quartets as cricket matches, he sought, and often attained, beauty; and he saw his job as locating and celebrating beauty. Which is why he thought nothing of heightening facts and embellishing reality.

Here, in a brief paragraph, Cardus expertly conveys the mentality of the sporting winner while distilling the importance to Australian cricket, and Australia in general, of Donald Bradman, who dominated the game between the World Wars to an extent no individual player has ever remotely managed in any other major sport.

Once more Bradman was Australia's spinal column. Had he failed, the rubber would on the fourth evening have been in England's hands. He never fails when he knows a rubber depends on him. Bradman served the cause with an almost moral control of his customary avariciousness. He batted grammatically, committed no vanities. Only once did he attack, and that was while the English bowling temporarily lost certainty of touch.⁶

Note that consistency was a conspicuous asset. In 1934, he wrote of a Bradman inning thus: "Spirit lived in every stroke. Beauty that comes out of life at the crown of manhood." On another occasion he was almost contemptuous: "Bradman was the summing-up of the Efficient Age ... Here was brilliance safe and sure, streamlined and seemingly without graceful impulse. Victor Trumper was the bird; Bradman, the aeroplane."⁷

Nobody took over Cardus' baton with greater gusto than Alan Ross, whose duties as cricket correspondent of *The Observer* in the third quarter of the 20th century also embraced poetry and travel writing. Witness this characteristic description of the Port of Spain ground in Trinidad:

The enclosing mountains, densely wooded, of the Northern Range curve round ahead of the pavilion. The various stands are shaded by vast, scarlet-flowering tulip trees or overhung by the top-heavy filigree spread of samans, always, on account of their shallow roots and bulging superstructure, the first to be bowled over by heavy winds. An enormous, all-informing scoreboard, with COCA-COLA picked out in large letters above it, dominates the mountain end of the ground. But since the sponsors of Coca-Cola, at a reputed cost of \$8,000, built the board and maintain it, who could demur at the disfigurement of natural beauties?⁸

Ross, though, was one of the last of his breed. Like Cardus and early 20th-century American sportswriters such as Heywood Broun and Grantland Rice, he inhabited press boxes before live television, before devoted sports channels and before the internet altered the landscape. He could proffer opinions and depict scenes with freedom and varying degrees of exaggeration, because he couldn't be second-guessed by sub-editors or readers.

Angell of the keys

More recently the style of Roger Angell and Hugh McIlvanney, in many eyes the best British sportswriter in the second half of the 20th century, stood in contrast with the more conversational style practised so eloquently from the early 1980s by the likes of Thomas Boswell and Matthew Engel, who built vividly on the legacy handed down by Gallico, Runyon and other Americans of the interwar years while curbing their excesses. Aided by the fact that neither was fettered by the tyrannies of the daily deadline – the American wrote for the weekly *New Yorker*, the Scotsman for Sunday papers – Angell and McIlvanney assembled articles as if they were constructing palaces to their erudition, or composing symphonies. Each word is a brick or note, each sentence individually designed and designated, each wholly interdependent.

Here, in the summer of 1981, Angell interviews the ageing Joe Wood, formerly known as “Smokey” Joe Wood, one of the greatest of all professional pitchers:

The flow of recollection from Joe Wood was perhaps not as smooth and rivery as I have suggested here. For one thing, he spoke slowly and with care – not unlike the way he walked to the grandstand at Yale Field from the parking lot beyond left field, making his way along the grass firmly enough but looking where he was going, too, and helping himself a bit with his cane. Nothing infirm about him, but nothing hurrying or sprightly, either. For another, the game was well in progress by now, and its principals and sudden events kept interrupting our colloquy.⁹

More so even than Red Smith, Angell has won a number of awards for his writing, many of them from non-sporting panels, including a George Polk Award for Commentary, a Kenyon Review Award for Literary Achievement and the Michael Braude Award for Light Verse, presented by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 2011, with splendid aptness, was the inaugural winner of the PEN/ESPN Lifetime Achievement Award for Literary Sports Writing. In 2015, he won the National Magazine Award for Essays and Criticism for his piece on facing up to death, “This Old Man”. The previous year, stirred by a photo of his boyhood self playing baseball with his mother, he wrote a brief memoir, “Olden Opener”:

I look more like a [centre] fielder trying to cut down a speeding baserunner at third base or home, but give me a break, guys. By the looks of me, I go about eighty-two pounds here, and the angle of my arm shows an instinctive understanding of the physics of the fling. Only the greatest athletes seem to have this somewhere within them, an elegant *je ne sais quoi* that marks the Mathewsons and Mayses of each era and warms the hearts of even the idlest, most distant onlooker.¹⁰

Just as the author’s own liquid, vivid prose will, one can only trust, continue to warm the hearts of generations of sportswriters to come.

The art of writing for publication, to believe that in a competitive world one’s words are particularly fit to be heard and heeded by large audiences, is by definition an act of ego and display. But as with all such matters, it is a question of how much.

The writers who dominate this chapter had more ego than most, not least because to write differently and originally requires the levels of self-confidence necessary to cope with the pushback they invariably receive from more conventionally minded editors and sub-editors. Along with this is the “sliver of ice” famously identified by Graham Greene, the attitude of mind that regards all things – and most of all people – as the material of writing before they are anything else.

These attitudes are recognisable to anyone who both possesses an element of self-awareness and writes for a living. Their downside, analogous to those studies of personality that show that many highly successful people are sociopaths, is that they are wont to be cited in mitigation by mediocrities who sow just as much collateral damage to others in their trajectories without offering any of the benefits.

Fine writing is not, though, the exclusive property of the human bulldozer. It can also be informed by empathy, compassion and a belief that the person you are writing about is much more than mere “material”. It is found in many parts of the media jungle, nowhere more clearly than among cricket writers from the West of England.

It had particularly fine expression, on the radio rather than in print, at the England v. New Zealand test match at Lord's in 2004. Mark Richardson, a dour left-hander whose ungainly technique betrayed a tail-end past but whose durability epitomised New Zealand's unflinching gift for extracting the maximum from the talent available, was in the 90s and visibly uncomfortable. A learned discussion among the sages of *Test Match Special* concluded that he had "lost his off stump".

Following a change of commentator and summariser, Victor Marks appeared at the mic, and asked: "Is it just possible that he's close to a century at Lord's and might just be feeling a little nervous?", a consideration his colleagues had not voiced.

Marks (b 1954) sits firmly at the centre of one thread in British sportswriting, the manner in which the final trickle of Oxbridge cricket blues who played for England – himself, Michael Atherton, Derek Pringle, Mike Selvey and Steve James – graduated, almost to a man, to second careers as broadsheet cricket writers. Each has brought distinctive qualities to the role, notably Atherton's rigorous analytical intellect and Selvey's acute understanding of bowlers.

On the first Saturday of his first tour as a writer for the *Observer*, to the West Indies, Marks was scheduled to cover a one-day international. When it was called off, he learnt from his editors back in London that he was still expected to fill the allotted space. The competence with which this forbidding task was fulfilled boded well for the future.

Marks' most consistent quality was epitomised in that exchange with his TMS colleagues – the recognition that sport at any level is played by fallible human beings rather than automata. A former captain of Somerset, it places him firmly in the line of the West of England school of writers epitomised above all by David Foot (b 1929). He is not, as he has doubtless often had to point out, a member of the notable politico-literary clan, which has however produced its own distinguished sportswriter in the academic John Foot, author of notable studies of Italian cycling and football.

David Foot's own literary lineage is more one of association, as the son of the church warden who showed TS Eliot around East Coker church when the notably unsporty Anglo-American poet was working on *Four Quartets*.

In matters of reputation, Foot is wont to defer to his own hero, the Somerset fast bowler turned writer Raymond Robertson-Glasgow (1901–1963), seen at his best in the books of sketches which show an ability to vividly delineate what makes a cricketer distinctive in the space of a few hundred words.

Foot always gave the impression of regarding himself as an artisan – in his own self-description, a "jobbing journalist" rather than an artist in the Robertson-Glasgow mould. This is not mere self-deprecation. There is also a pride in the skills of the trade developed as a reporter on the *Western Gazette* and *Bristol Evening World*, times chronicled affectionately in his *Country Reporter* (1990). "Jobbing journalist" also expressed the reality of a working life around the theatres and sports grounds of the West of England and Midlands, weekly repertory rather than West End, county championship not rather than test matches.

It was a world in which his warmth and decency left a deep impression. Mike Averis, long-time *Guardian* sports editor but before (and after) that plougher of many of the same furrows, has spoken of the way other *Guardian* writers in the region came to expect welcomes in which warmth was tinged with disappointment. "Ah, you're from the *Guardian*. Terrific, good to have you. But does that mean David Foot won't be coming?"

Quite why Foot wasn't used for bigger events is a question only Averis and successive *Guardian* sports editors, none of them ill-served for talent, could answer. A personal memory is of meeting him at the West Indies v. Bristol World Cup match at Bristol in 1999. By some margin the most distinguished writer there, he was still excited at the prospect of reporting a World Cup match, something he had rarely done before.

But then his own interests and tastes tended to the human rather than the exalted. As he once explained, he would far rather interview a young player struggling to break into their county team than the captain of that team. So “jobbing journalist” is a reasonable description, albeit in the same sense that Roger Federer is a tennis pro or Eric Clapton a guitarist.

Mundane terminology does not exclude the sublime, offered by Foot in years of finely judged match reports, but to an even greater degree in a series of biographies which showed those underlying qualities of empathy, compassion and perception at much greater length. First came the unrelentingly grim *Harold Gimblett: Tortured Genius of Cricket* (1984), based on his recordings of conversation with the former Somerset opener and published after his death. A much more cheerful tone was set in *Cricket's Unholy Trinity* (1985), a study of three interwar cricketers – Charles Parker, Cecil Parkin and Jack MacBryan – whose careers were limited by obstreperous temperaments. *Wally Hammond: The Reasons Why* (2006), sought to find how a colossally talented, once fairly cheerful cricketer became a distinctly grim human being, and homed in on the character-changing qualities of the mercury treatment Gloucestershire's (and arguably England's) greatest cricketer since WG Grace received for a venereal disease contracted on tour.

There were also the two collections of short biographical essays, *With Bat and Ball* (1993) and *Fragments of Idolatry* (2001), which included a study of Robertson-Glasgow. All are scrupulously researched, beautifully written in a simple, unpretentious style wasting few words and sparing in flourishes, rooted in his deep affection for his native West Country and informed above all by his underlying empathy, compassion and perception. There is a consistent feeling for the underdog – while a man of peace, he leaves little doubt as to where his ultimate sympathies lie in the scene in *Unholy Trinity* where an exasperated Parker assaults Pelham Warner, the epitome of establishment hypocrisy, in a lift in a Bristol hotel.

If there is a unifying argument beyond a plea for human understanding, it is his contention that cricket, which is regularly cited as exposing personality, just as often conceals it. There was never a happier-looking cricketer than Gimblett at his most dashing, nor a county which has more consistently seemed expressive of the joys of the game than Somerset – Foot's own history of the county conveys this in its title, *Sunshine, Sixes and Cider* (1988). Yet the pleasure Gimblett gave to spectators was in inverse proportion to his own feelings about the game, and his name is just one among Somerset's disproportionate contribution to cricket's sad history of suicides, a list also including Robertson-Glasgow and Peter Roebuck.

The biographies came, in differing senses, both late and early for Foot. They were late in that the first of his major works, *Harold Gimblett*, was published when he was well into his 50s, but also too early in coming a little before the creation of the William Hill Prize in 1989. Had John Gaustad and Graham Sharpe had their brainwave a few years earlier, it seems entirely possible that Foot might have anticipated the triumphs of a similarly unpretentious writer, the regional paper veteran Duncan Hamilton.

To read Hamilton and Paul Edwards, the Lancashire-based ESPN Cricinfo writer who offers perhaps the closest echo of Foot among the contemporary cricket press, is to wonder how many other sublimely gifted scribes worked for restricted regional audiences. And it is worth remembering that those qualities are not confined to cricket writers, or men. They are perhaps incarnated best in the contemporary *Guardian* by their north-eastern football writer, Louise Taylor.

While the north-east no longer produces steel, chemicals or ships as it once did, and the lessons offered by its football clubs have been almost entirely confined in recent years to “How not to” parables, it has at least continued to produce prime football writing talent. Jonathan Wilson is the game's leading historian of ideas and the Middlesbrough duo of John Nicholson and Harry Pearson respectively its most effective polemicist and most consistent humourist (albeit one with

a serious side and a hinterland extending well beyond football expressed in fine studies of Learie Constantine and Belgian cycling).

Taylor, like Wilson from Sunderland, had to be durable in an era which routinely placed obstacles in the paths of female writers, and has survived on her considerable merits to reach what may be, because of her regular contributions to *The Guardian*, the largest audience of the four north-easterners. Her virtues were perhaps most obvious during periods when it was weighted with interminable transcriptions from press conferences at Man U and Arsenal, the paper's twin obsessions.

It could be argued that covering three major clubs freed Taylor from the Stockholm Syndrome risks endemic to those focused on a single club. But what really stood out was the knowledge of those clubs she had built up, at both institutional and individual level, over years of coverage; an eye for what really mattered; and a sympathy for the people involved and their aspirations. Where the Arsenal and Manchester United stories had quotes, Taylor's coverage of the north-east had people – recognisable, living, breathing human beings whose lives were entangled, whether by contract or allegiance, with the North-East's leading clubs. North-eastern football has been short on luck in recent years, with Newcastle and Sunderland particularly unfortunate in their ownership. But in this single aspect, at least – outstanding, sympathetic, thoughtful coverage in a national newspaper – it may count itself lucky.

If there is a lesson here for talent spotters, it is a simple one. Your next genius might just be the noisy iconoclast, proclaiming his own talent for all to hear and letting nothing stand in his way. Or it could be the quiet chap or girl in the corner, getting on with the cultivation of sources and getting from them the insights that nobody else quite seems to manage. The sporting world has need of them both.

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