THE MEDIUM IS THE MONEY
The Accidental Sportswriter. This is how I have long viewed the job that became my career. Then again, I suppose the true beauty of sport is happenstance. No matter how coaches and managers try to organize, control, and dictate their games, they cannot know the outcome until it arrives.

I had played sports, coached sports, and even dabbled in writing about sports—several magazine profiles, even a novel about a hockey player in his last season—but my beat was the country and, more specifically, Parliament Hill. I had been on the Hill for fourteen years when my editor, the late Jim Travers, asked me to lunch to discuss a note I had sent him regarding the Ottawa Citizen’s decision to have its reporters abandon the Hill’s free parking and start paying regular downtown fees. Fine, I said, so long as the newspaper allows me to expense it.

“I have solved your parking issue,” Travers told me over coffee. “How’s that?” I asked. “From now on you’ll be parking at the Civic Centre—you’re going to be covering the Ottawa Senators.” So began twenty-plus years in what each newspaper along the way—the Citizen, National Post, Globe and Mail—has jokingly referred to as the “toy department.”

It has had its moments of great fun. The first year of covering the hapless Senators was, simply, a delight. Most of the players were new to the National
Hockey League. One, Darren Rumble, showed up at the airport for his first road trip carrying a pillow and a brown paper bag filled with ham-and-cheese sandwiches, as had become his habit on minor-league bus trips. When thieves broke into the team’s offices and stole $20,000 worth of new video equipment, leaving behind the team’s game tapes, assistant coach E. J. McGuire quipped: “Imagine that, burglars with taste.” I could go on and on, but if sports journalism has taught me one thing, it is that sports readers have a limited attention span that continues to shrink.

Sports fans are, however, keenly interested in their games and their teams. This discovery goes back, one might argue, to Homer waxing poetic about wrestling, but sports reporting as we know it had its birth in the 1800s, with coverage of horse racing and boxing, and soon included coverage of new team sports—in particular, baseball. Basketball, football, and, in Canada, hockey soon followed. 

Newspapers like the New York Herald and publishers like Joseph Pulitzer were quick to see that baseball accounts could draw readers to their pages, and, given the glut of newspaper available at the time, offered a cheap attraction that remained inexpensive, especially as early baseball teams began including reporters on their road trips, with the teams usually paying the full ride. This, and the fact that sports did not advertise—there was no need to, with the newspapers so eager to promote upcoming games—may well have sown the seeds for the continuing conflicts of interest between those who cover sports and those who play for and own sports teams.

If sports journalism had its “Golden Age” in the early years of the twentieth century—when the likes of Grantland Rice were defining sports coverage for all the years to come—then perhaps the early years of the twenty-first century could be seen as the “Fools’ Gold Age.” This is a time when forces far more powerful than Rice’s descriptive talents with words—the reach of television, in particular—have begun moving certain segments of sports journalism back to its very roots: beholden to the very subjects they are paid to cover.

This should be of grave concern to sports journalists, editors, readers, and viewers—yet it seems to be of precious little, if any, concern at all. It appears that the rules of sports journalism—if, in fact, there are rules at all—are not necessarily the rules of journalism.

What has happened in hockey, the sport that is of greatest interest to readers and viewers in Canada, is that the pendulum that usually rests between storytelling and minutiae has swung dramatically in the direction of minutiae in recent years. It is the “triumph of trivia” over all else. So powerful have the various “panels” of television “experts” become that they have created an almost bizarre inverse world where the celebrities are the panelists and the players are all but unknown. So little
storytelling—profiles of new players, in-depth reporting of real issues—is done by these sports networks that storytelling today exists more in memory than in reality. Instead, “news” has become such matters as how a contract breaks down, how long a suspension might be, who is first with a trade rumour that may or may not happen.

This is not mentioned as a condemnation of such small news or, indeed, of the conveyors of such information. It is merely an observation shared by those who wonder what has become of television’s old role of taking us inside the players’ world and making young, unknown faces household names. Today’s television sports fans will know the player’s name, but not much else. But they will know even the nicknames of those on the panels.

It makes good sense for Canadian sports networks like TSN and Sportsnet to employ what they call the “hockey insider.” Some of these insiders—TSN’s Bob McKenzie comes first and most easily to mind—are indispensable to sports fans who wish to know what is going on behind the scenes. When virtually every hire, however, is touted as an “insider,” the question arises as to where “inside” is and how one gets inside. If “news,” therefore, becomes specific information controlled by a singular source, usually the NHL head office, then having access to such information is vital. When someone like McKenzie breaks details on, say, the length of a suspension, then that is to be admired, the insider doing what he does best. When so many others are expected also to be insiders, competing daily for those small tidbits controlled by head office—in political coverage, we used to call this the “daily Gaines-Burger”—then you have a situation where the journalists are, by necessity of the demands placed upon them by their network, embedded.

This situation in Canada worsened considerably in 2012 with the ownership transfer of hockey’s most valuable franchise—the Toronto Maple Leafs, estimated by Forbes magazine to be worth US$1.3 billion. In a landmark deal, Bell Canada (which owns the TSN channels) and Rogers (which owns Sportsnet) jointly acquired a 75 percent share of Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment (MLSE). In other words, the two main sports television outlets, TSN and Sportsnet, now own the team. Then, in 2014, Rogers paid an astonishing $5.2 billion (Canadian) for the rights to NHL coverage in Canada, the most valuable broadcast property in that assemblage being the Maple Leafs. One can only imagine what the reportage on these two outlets might be like if, say, a push was on to locate a second NHL team in the vicinity—Markham, for example, where plans are underway for an NHL-viable new arena—and MLSE decided that this was a development it did not wish to see.
Such problems of at least the perception of conflict of interest are now everywhere. The National Hockey League, following Major League Baseball’s lead, today employs journalists in every franchise city. NHL.com has professional writers, some superbly talented, who provide content on a variety of platforms. Their game descriptions and post-game interview coverage is often as good as any of the independent journalists working the beats. Again, though, the question arises: Will they criticize when criticism is due—even if that criticism is not wanted?

What is needed, obviously, is at least an equal number of “hockey outsiders.” Newspapers supply some, but their reach, especially in social media measures, is miniscule by comparison, and they are easily dismissed as curmudgeons or contrarians and as being long past their shelf life. Social media itself supplies some value, which was evident in the recent NHL lockout, where the anger and contempt for the behaviour of the league and its players was far more visible than could ever be found on the networks, with their various ties to the NHL, NHL Players Association, and individual teams.

This is not the raging of a complete Luddite. Back in 1983, I was the Toronto Star’s experimental guinea pig for the Tandy TRS-80 (“Trash 80”) computer that transformed sports filing and had no small part in killing off afternoon newspapers. I love what the Internet makes possible, admire those who use social media effectively, and appreciate the power of Twitter, even if I refrain from using it to tell followers what I am eating. But that power of Twitter, and the drive to be first above all, can have terrible repercussions, as was seen a few years ago when former NHL coach Pat Burns was declared dead while still very much alive. It can also cause embarrassment and confusion, as in the case of the 2013 “confirmed” trade of Jarome Iginla from the Calgary Flames to the Boston Bruins, when in fact he had been traded to the Pittsburgh Penguins.

There is also great confusion among tweeters who believe that simply by typing and sending, they become journalists. One pitiful example of this occurred in 2012, when some anonymous tweeter posted information claiming that Toronto Maple Leafs general manager Brian Burke was about to be fired for an “extracurricular affair” and then went on to say: “For ethical reasons, I will not divulge the exact information I received from an insider.” Some ethics, some journalism. In April 2013, Burke launched defamation proceedings against eighteen anonymous tweeters and bloggers.

This essay is intended as a cautionary flag raised by someone who sees the sports world marching into a journalism trap where Gay Talese’s monumental study of Joe DiMaggio, *The Silent Season of a Hero*, would have to be delivered in
140 characters or less. What it means for the future of sports books—think of authors like Roger Kahn, George Plimpton, Ken Dryden, Roger Angell, Earl McRae, and A. J. Liebling—is even more disturbing.

This conveyance of trivia, quick speculation, and rumour is called, derogatorily, “BlackBerry journalism.” Television, ironically, is the worst offender: with the most visual of tools, it reduces much of sports journalism to talking heads reading off their various crumbs of minutiae that have been handed to them by those who control such information. Do those who exchange the insider minutiae get anything in return? That is for the viewer/consumer to decide, and, so far, the viewer/consumer does not appear particularly bothered by any such concerns.

The obsession with “content” has meant, sadly, next to no time for “substance.” In far too many cases, tweeting and blogging have become forms of public masturbation, where size—as in the number of hits or followers one can attract—matters. Hits, newspapers will one day realize, are not circulation. In many instances—particularly those involving very established institutions such as the CBC or the Globe and Mail—it can be argued that a great many of the hits and “comments” are inspired by those who dislike the product and would never be counted among paid circulation anyway.

Jonathon Gatehouse, a Maclean’s writer, expresses a common concern about this pressure on sports reporters to be “first” above all else in his 2012 book, The Instigator: How Gary Bettman Remade the League and Changed the Game Forever. Such pressure to deliver, he suggests, leaves sports reporters vulnerable to coercion “or blandishments—a good pipeline to the league is the easiest path to a fat TV contract.” Gatehouse also quotes the CBC’s Hockey Night in Canada host Ron MacLean, who has his own concerns about the invisible but undeniable strings running between the league that runs the sport and so many who report on the sport on television. “Not only is there pressure,” MacLean told Gatehouse. “There is an absolute temptation to sell your ability to think for yourself for the ability to be told. You’ll live the high life, you’ll be travelling, staying in five-star hotels, and be famous and making good money.”

Again, let me reiterate: having a limited number of connected “hockey insiders” is critical to good hockey reporting in this country. But someone needs to tell us about the players. A generation ago, virtually all Canadians knew and recognized the promising youngsters with the Edmonton Oilers; today, it is only their names that are known, since they are mentioned by reporters who have become far larger celebrities. Someone needs to tell us how the game is being played and coached, and how, rightly or wrongly, it is evolving. Many fans actually don’t care all that
much about minor trades, or whether the suspension is four games or six, or how the contract has an average cap hit of $5.7 million a year. A couple of good insiders can handle that role; it doesn’t take all of sports journalism to chase these minutiae.

Today’s sports reporters are not entirely to blame for the confused state of sports journalism. The various “platforms” for which they work treat them like hamsters stuck on an endless wheel, spinning nowhere. They must set up games, tweet from morning skates, transcribe tape, blog from the rink, upload video that no one watches, talk to the endless radio stations that call looking for (usually free) chatter, and file, file, file. There is no longer time for that leisurely chat with players that used to produce such considered thought or insight. Should a reporter attempt such a discussion, invariably hands with small digital recorders will push in—people “quote vacuuming” for Twitter and the Web, the recorder often not even bothering to listen and the athlete instantly falling back on the necessary clichés that render such vacuuming useless for anything but sound clips that add up to nothing.

This is most unfortunate for both sports storytellers and sports consumers. “The secret of good reporting is simply being around,” writes Leonard Koppett, a former New York Times and Oakland Tribune writer. Hanging out is “how a writer learns to know what he needs, what and how to write about it, to evaluate relevance and fairness, and how to distinguish the important from the trivial.” It is a fine sentiment, but it is no longer possible in dressing rooms that are overpacked with credentialed reporters and where every uttered word is considered an animal that must be captured and displayed.

Because content matters more than, and must not be confused with, substance and because content is defined by volume, sports has increasingly turned to statistics, so many of which are meaningless. Hockey, for example, has undergone a “baseballization” since the mid-1990s, when the NHL began breaking down a great variety of numbers within an individual game. Some are of interest and value, such as ice time. Some are dubious, such as faceoffs won or lost: many faceoffs are neither won nor lost—indeed, one strategic move by the centre player is to deliberately move the puck ahead into the other team’s zone. Other stats are simply goofy, such as those that record an individual player’s “giveaways,” when most pucks are lost because another player screwed up, or those that count “hits” when there is no consensus on what constitutes a “hit.” To be fair, analytics and metrics have their place in determining a prospect’s potential, in tracking an older player’s regression, and, most significantly, in confirming what eyes believe they have seen. Furthermore, a
mass of numbers does compensate for the little column space required to explain the reality of most hockey moments: “Shit happens.”

“Excessive use of statistics,” Koppet contends, “if not checked, may turn out to be a fatal malady.” Frank Deford, the great American sportswriter best known for his work in *Sports Illustrated*, would agree: he declared in one interview, “We’ve gotten swamped by the numbers. People have gotten buried under the numbers. Statistics. That has become everything. Pitch count is more interesting than what the guy is made of. I think that’s a shame because so much of sports is drama.” In another interview, Deford called this “the pole-dancing of sports journalism,” demonstrating that he had lost none of his impressive descriptive powers.

Social media has had as profound an effect on sports as on politics in the Middle East, though hardly as pressing, important, or potentially dangerous. Some of the impact has been good and some not so good. Social media has, however, undeniably changed sports journalism. When Deford gave the Red Smith Lecture in Journalism at the University of Notre Dame in 2010, he tried to convey a sense of the change he had seen since he began in 1962.

While it’s not just nostalgia and the sappy memories of an old man to say that sports was a better canvas to paint on then, nonetheless, when talking about the changes in sports journalism, it’s so hard to distill it from the rest of the discipline. That world I stumbled into in 1962 was already on the cusp of being manhandled by technology.

The late Neil Postman, who was a brilliant social observer, once suggested: “Education as we know it began with the printing press and ended with television.”

So now, I suppose, we could say: Journalism, as we knew it, began with the printing press. It ended with the Internet.

Strong words, yes, but consider for a moment what being able to tweet the first break on some minutiae does to those who must somehow gain the minutiae required in order to maintain their job as an “insider.” One major US newspaper where a good friend of mine works built much of its circulation through sports coverage, which it took very seriously when my friend began his tenure there. It still takes it seriously, but in a profoundly different manner. Sports remains a large part of the paper—now struggling, as are all newspapers, to survive circulation decline—and naturally, the Web is seen as a significant part of any solution. Sports reportage there is now measured by the number of hits a story receives on the Web, with daily discussions about how the number of hits might be increased. Feature stories—old-fashioned storytelling—are considered poor fare for hits in a world
of shrinking attention span and the “triumph of trivia.” Sports reporters are asked to provide short informative hits—none so embraced as quick injury reports. It does not take a rocket scientist to understand that the audience out there for such material is the gambling world, whether by direct betting on real games or through the vast growth of vanity sports leagues. This is not the journalism most of us signed up for.

Yet perhaps we should have seen it coming. It was a generation or more ago that the Chicago Tribune became the owner of the Chicago Cubs and sportswriters everywhere raised their eyebrows, wondering what this would mean to the paper’s reporting on the team. Now, however, the list of broadcasters owning teams and reporting on them is virtually endless. One example among many is an NHL team in California that pays the costs of a reporter coming on the road with them; the newspaper has no problem with this obvious conflict that, sadly, hearkens back to the very origins of sports journalism.

Back in 1985, a young journalism student, Damien Cox—now a sports columnist for the Toronto Star—wrote a piece on well-known sports broadcaster Pat Marsden for the Ryerson Review of Journalism. Cox had the audacity to raise the question of journalistic responsibility in sports broadcasting. What was more important—increasing the audience or informing the audience? A beet-red Marsden erupted in anger in response to Cox:

> Let me tell you what to do with journalism: shove it in your ass because it doesn't make five cents for anybody in this business. If you're in this thing because you want to reform the world or you want to reform sports, then what you should do is, uh, write books about it because you're never going to get mass appeal. We're in the business of mass appeal. We live in a capitalistic society, and that's the way it's got to be."

Time has proven Marsden largely correct. Sports reporting is indeed in the business of mass appeal, and sports journalism is a sidebar at best. Frank Deford says that something that did not exist in Marsden’s time, the Internet, has taken this thinking to yet another level. He argues that the feature “takeout” has largely died because of lack of space, decreased attention span, and high production costs. Minutiae rules instead. “The story,” says Deford,

> which was always the best of sportswriting, what sports gave so sweetly to us writers—the sports story is the victim. Sportswriting remains so popular—one word. Sports stories—two words, are disappearing.
So while we may properly bemoan the loss of newspapers and magazines, have no fear, sports fans. There will be no dearth of easy access to box scores and statistics and dugout gossip. . . .

No, no need to worry, fans: All that stuff will continue to be well covered. It is the good stories, and, even worse, the good investigative journalism, that we will lose.12

Criticism of the toy department is nothing new. Back in 1970, *Globe and Mail* sports columnist Dick Beddoes told the Senate Committee on the Mass Media: “It is unfortunately a fact that the quality of performance on Canada’s sports pages is too seldom on a par with that in Canada’s sports arenas. The profession is still burdened with hacks who make tin-can gods out of cast-iron jerks.”13 Not so much anymore. Today, the profession is burdened by not knowing what it is or what it should be.

What it once was is undeniably gone. “Newspaper people speak of a police reporter, a City Hall man, and a Washington correspondent, but always of a sports writer,” A. J. Liebling noted back in 1946:

> The sports writer is not expected merely to tell what happened. Upon small, coiled springs of fact, he builds up a great padded mattress of words. His readers flop themselves down upon this Beautyrest and escape into a dream world where most of the characters are titanic heroes, devouring monsters, or gargantuan buffoons, and the rest are clean, high-type, aristocratic sportsmen who own yachts, racing stables, or baseball clubs and are occasionally depicted as setting up schnapps for the scribes [sports writers]. The scribe is expected to be entertaining even when there’s nothing to be entertaining about.14

Entertaining is one thing; informing is another. Both should go hand in hand in any type of journalism, not just sports journalism. Much good work is still being done today, although it has to be sought out in locations with holding capacities far beyond that of Twitter. One needs to be aware of the cat’s cradle of strings that exists today between those owning teams and those covering teams, those controlling information and those dispersing information.

If this is not a concern among sports consumers, it should be. As the late David Carr, the esteemed media columnist for the *New York Times*, so chillingly puts it: “What I’m worried about is [that] who is going to tell you about the school system is the school system—and it will be all good news.”15

In sports, we are almost to that point today.
NOTES


6 Leonard Koppet, The Rise and Fall of the Press Box (Toronto: Sport Media, 2003), 30.

7 Koppett, Rise and Fall of the Press Box, 265.


13 Beddoes’s oft-quoted remarks were made in his 1970 “Brief to Senate Committee on the Mass Media: Ghost Writing and Sports Writing.”
