**THE GAME STORY**

By Justice Hill

Nothing the sportswriter does can sate a reader’s appetite more than a story that captures, to borrow a phrase from “The Wide World of Sports,” “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.”

Just ask any veteran sportswriter, and he will gladly tell you the game story is central to what sports journalism is about. It’s always been that way, too – long before the icons of this journalistic era ever wrote a word.

It’s the news, stupid!

As Bruce Garrison, a journalism professor, said in his book “Sports Reporting,” “Game coverage has never been the only aspect of sportswriting, but it continues to be the foundation of most sports sections.”

I’ve quoted Garrison here simply to reiterate my point. Yet as fundamental to sports journalism as the “gamer” is, why do so many sportswriters handle it poorly? Why do so few journalism programs not bother to teach the art of the gamer?

I have no answer for the latter question. As for the former, my theory is that sportswriters today look at the gamer as easy, and they don’t stress it the way they stress the feature story. I also think young sportswriters – and some old ones, too -- don’t show up at an event with a plan of attack or with much research behind them.

Broadly speaking, sportswriters don’t know what the game story is supposed to accomplish, which is a gigantic mistake that all but dooms their work to mediocrity.

And what is a gamer?

Well, the gamer is *not* a blow-by-blow account of what led to victory – or defeat. If anything, it’s an analysis or a think piece.

That’s essentially the philosophy that Thomas Boswell, a gifted sportswriter for *The Washington Post*, espouses. In an essay for Melvin Mencher’s “News Reporting and Writing,” Boswell advises young sportswriters that the best way – or right way -- to see a game is to look at it from a player’s perspective.

Here’s what Boswell says specifically about the art of writing the baseball gamer (his perspective, however, applies to any type of game story):

**Judge slowly:** “Never judge a player over a unit of time shorter than a month … you must see a player hot, cold, and in between before you can put the whole package together.”

**Assume everybody is trying reasonably hard:** “ … giving 110 percent … would be counterproductive for most players. … Usually something on the order of 80 percent effort is about right.

**Forgive even the most grotesque physical error:** “It’s assumed that every player is physically capable of performing every task asked of him. If he doesn’t, it’s never his fault. His mistake is simply regarded as part of a professional’s natural margin of error.”

**Judge mental mistakes harshly:** “The distinction as to whether a mistake has been made ‘from the neck up or neck down’ is always drawn.”

**Pay more attention to the mundane than the spectacular:** “The necessity for consistency usually outweighs the need for the inspired.”

**Pay more attention to the theory of the game than to the outcome of the game:** Don’t let your evaluation be swayed too greatly by the final score. “If a team loses a game but has used its resources properly … then that team is often able to ignore defeat utterly. Players say, ‘We did everything right but win.’ “

**Keep in mind that players always know best how they’re playing:** “At the technical level, they seldom fool themselves – the stakes are too high.”

**Stay ahead of the action, not behind it or even neck and neck with it:** “Remember that the immediate past is almost always a prelude.”

I find no reason to quarrel with Boswell’s perspective. His viewpoints speak well to how a sports journalist ought to approach the writing life in the press box, which can be a pressure-packed place to produce high art.

Yet stylish prose can be crafted from a seat in the press box, particularly when writers have a solid understanding of the ins and outs of their sport.

In my opinion, I also think it’s helpful if sportswriters understood their audience well. While I don’t believe any sportswriter is writing for the readers [a point William Zinsser’s stress in his book “On Writing Well”], I do believe he [or she] must understand whom those readers tend to be.

At MLB.com, for example, the site’s audience is a mix of casual fans, closet historians and seam-heads, and that mix presents a challenge for beat writers in terms of writing gamers.

Overall, the approach to gamers at MLB.com calls for more of a second-day story or, to use a more familiar term, a feature lead. The world of baseball moves too swiftly to saddle finicky readers with play-by-play and a sprinkling of mundane quotes in game stories.

If that's all MLB.com can give its readers, they will stop coming back to the site because they know they can get this nuts-and-bolts stuff on the ESPNews ticker or elsewhere.

One of the senior editors at MLB.com put it this way: “We have to write gamers that put our finger on the pulse of the team and keeps it there. Our gamers need to tell diverse readership: What's going on with this particular team? How did this single game affect the journey it's on through this long, grinding six-month trek?

“Moreover, what is the goal of the season in the broader, deeper journey of a franchise? For a team, say, like the Kansas City Royals, the season's about development, not wins and losses, and identifying key pieces around whom you can build a championship team. For a team like the Milwaukee Brewers and Cleveland Indians, the season's about putting it together after years of rebuilding and breaking through to the postseason. For a team like the Detroit Tigers or Chicago White Sox or St. Louis Cardinals, it's playoffs or bust.”

The editor went on to say that writers at MLB.com should -- in fact, have to -- reflect those deeper journeys in their game coverage. The play-by-play/how they scored stuff is information the reader likely already has. A writer only needs enough play-by-play in his or her story for readers to get the gist of what decided the game's outcome. And beyond that, the writer has to give the readers much, much more insight.

Otherwise, what the writer does is nothing more than what readers can get from an AP story or some other wire service. They have no reason to visit MLB.com regularly if it can offer no more than the pedestrian prose found in an Associated Press story.

More than a decade ago, I ran across a handout that Dan Jenkins, a sportswriter and the author of “Fast Copy,” wrote about covering games. After reading his handout, I was struck by what he had to say. Here’s part of what Jenkins wrote:

*In any sports event, there is always a key moment, a big play which turns the tide. Seize on that moment. Hammer it. Kick it to death. It is worth sacrificing some play-by-play to do this and add ‘depth’ to your story.*

He is right, of course. Essentially, he’s talking about analyzing the game. Take the turning point and make that your story’s angle. Get comments to back up your view of what happened on the field, and, above all, keep your copy clutter-free.

So as you can see, writing the gamer is more than what most sportswriters think it is, and it uses many of the same principles that J-schools teach for writing news stories, says Karen Brown Dunlap, director of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

“The major difference is that sportswriters must stress interpretation, how and why, more than in basic news stories,” Brown Dunlap says in Carol Rich’s textbook “Writing and Reporting News.” “Good sportswriters try to do that by setting the tone and developing their stories with a theme.”