

SECOND EDITION
FIELD GUIDE TO
COVERING
SPORTS
JOE GISONDI



PREFACE

I'll never forget the anxiety I felt writing my first few stories for a daily newspaper—and the kindness shown to me by the sports editors on those late Friday nights. At the time, I was a cocky 17-year-old who had already covered games and written features for two weekly newspapers, and I was sports editor of my high school newspaper—making me a grizzled veteran. Or so I thought.

That first Friday night, I struggled for 15 minutes to craft a lead before an editor told me, "Just write anything. You've got about 20 minutes before deadline." I started to sweat—the warm kind you feel when you've forgotten to study for a test or are about to ask someone on a date. The kind that portends failure. I kept plugging away on that electric typewriter, fumbling over notes and writing play-by-play filled with way too many adjectives and far too few details, with quotes that were generic, and a lead that was barely palatable.

Joe Arace, the longtime prep sports editor at *The News-Press* in Fort Myers, Florida, told me to sit next to him while he edited the story. He deleted adjectives, asked me questions so he could add vivid descriptions, inserted transitions, and moved up key plays and stats. Each keystroke was an execution. Each revision a slap in the face. Each edit proof that I had chosen the wrong career.

Like other kids, I had grown up idolizing sports figures, watching games, reading the sports pages to relive these moments, and dreaming of making it to the big leagues. I hadn't yet accepted that if I got there, I'd be sitting in the press box. And during my early newsroom nights, even that scenario seemed unlikely.

After Joe sent the story to the copy chief, he turned to me, smiled, and said, "Good job. See you next week." What? They wanted me to write again? I was shocked. Clearly, I had done something right. But what?

The next morning, my spine tingled when I read the byline: Joe Gisondi. I was a little ashamed that I hadn't written every word myself. I hadn't realized yet that journalism is a team game where everyone—assignment editors, copy editors, designers, proofreaders—contributes to a story's success. That doesn't mean sports reporters should blithely expect others to correct their mistakes. But it's nice to know you have that support.

I determined not to repeat the same errors. So I made new ones, which were corrected and revised by editors while I sat and watched, listening to their suggestions

and explanations as they worked on my copy. And each week I heard, "Good job. See you next week."

As I write this book, I hear those editors' voices, their suggestions, and their encouragement. I hear the voices of the 120-plus sports journalists and coaches who offer advice in these pages on how to cover more than 20 beats, from auto racing to field hockey to wrestling. These voices come not just from *The New York Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, ESPN, MLB.com, Yahoo! and *Sports Illustrated* but also from respected, nontraditional media outlets, such as Bleacher Report, FanGraphs, baseballHQ.com, @RotoGraphs, @Sportsmanias, and from smaller news organizations that employ the majority of sports journalists. In places like Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Kennebec, Maine, sports coverage means local coverage, and local coverage means kids and schools.

For students and beginning sports journalists, this field guide serves as their portable editor: posing questions, suggesting new approaches, and summarizing the basics needed to cover any game. It offers hands-on, practical advice, the kind given in sports departments across the country. Like the one I sat in so many years ago.

TRAINING NEEDED

Although Americans play dozens of sports, just a few—football, baseball, basketball—get most of the media coverage. Millions of people follow those sports, but that doesn't mean either fans or sportswriters understand them expertly. Teachers and editors know that their students and new hires know far less than they claim. Even so, few sports journalists receive formal training. So many young reporters cover games more like fans than professionals. They fumble through statistics, struggle to take proper notes, mishandle interviews, and settle for both clichéd language and the same old leads. They're not sure how to identify or write about the most significant plays, trends, or moments in a game.

This book provides even the most basic writers with the tools they need to succeed on their first assignments. It trains writers to answer, in advance, the questions their editors and readers will ask: What happened? How? Why? The running back ran for 200 yards. Any fan can see that, but a journalist needs to explain why. Did the offensive tackles drive back a smaller defensive line? Did the offensive coordinator scheme so well that the defense was confused? Did this running back follow his blockers well or display amazing athleticism?

A track runner broke the county record in the mile. How? Did she take the lead early, have to kick it in for the final lap, or get pulled along by a competitive field? And how did she train to prepare for this meet?

Just like athletes, journalists need training. The introductory chapters of this book start that training by providing the big picture, with tips on interviewing sources, writing game stories, acting professionally. Chapters on blogging and covering high school sports prepare writers for two areas that are booming as news organizations focus even more on local action and interactive approaches to news.

The core of the book, the middle section, takes beginning journalists step-by-step through every one of the 20 sports they're likely to be sent out to cover. Within each sport, four sections provide tips on how to prepare for the game, what to look for while you're watching, whom to interview, what to ask and finally, how to write up what you've seen. **PREPARE—WATCH—ASK—WRITE:** You'll see those four sections in each sports chapter. In addition, experienced sports journalists chime in with their own advice, sharing what they've learned about how to observe events, take notes and keep score, and interview players and coaches.

Of course, no book of field-guide size could possibly fit in every rule and every term for every sport a journalist might need to cover. Instead, these pages contain the basics a young reporter is most likely to need. Reporters will learn the following:

- Keep score accurately and effectively. Illustrated scorecards show how to record scores and take notes on auto racing, baseball/softball, basketball, bowling, and football.
- Understand the rules when covering an unfamiliar sport. Can golfers flick bugs off balls before hitting them? Are stock-car drivers legally allowed to bump other cars? How much tailwind nullifies a record-breaking track performance? What's the purpose of a drag flick in field hockey?
- Understand the necessary terminology. What's a "near fall" in wrestling, and what does a coxswain do in rowing? What does 6-4-3 mean in baseball? How many pins are recorded in a frame after a spare?
- Ask more informed questions after games. Did the safeties stay back, trying to prevent the deep pass? Did the pitcher have more spin on the ball?

USES FOR THE CLASSROOM

This field guide is designed as a companion "un-text" for sports-writing classes. Teachers can use the introductory chapters to review the basics: research, observation, interviewing, and writing game stories. This new edition adds a new Section II on multimedia, with new

chapters focused on social media, mobile media, visual storytelling, writing for television, and writing for radio. There is also an entirely new chapter on using advanced statistical metrics in sports journalism. In addition, you can go over chapters on specific sports before covering a local or college team as a class. Do make sure to let the college sports information director or high school athletic director know before doing this, so they can assist. These hands-on activities strengthen students' abilities to take notes, keep score, and focus on the most significant angles.

Inviting coaches to class to speak about their specific sports gives students not just good information but a chance to practice interviewing in a relaxed environment. Students can review the appropriate chapters before listening to a speaker, then ask questions and write up the session on deadline as if it were a press conference.

Since this book is devised as a practical guide, ask students to apply what they've learned, assigning them to cover games or beats. You can even set up a blog to cover college or high school teams in your region.

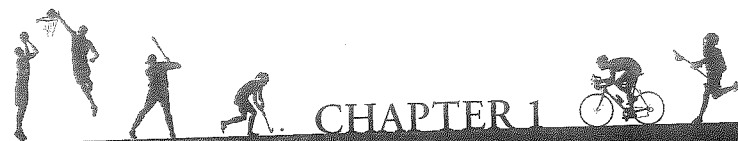
Reading great sports stories is the best way to provide a sense of options and inspire students to write better. Readers such as the *Best American Sports Writing* series or *The New York Times Sports Reader* acquaint students with the best of the best. Local and national newspapers, on paper and online, show how professionals in markets large and small go about their jobs.

Students, teachers and advisers can also regularly check in to my sports blog at either sportsfieldguide.org—which has been favorably reviewed by Poynter's NewsU, Cyberjournalist, American Press Institute and College Media Advisers—or follow me at @joegisondi on twitter for additional tips and insights into sports journalism issues.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Years ago, I learned that sports reporting, like anything in journalism, is a team effort. More than 100 professional journalists and 20-plus college coaches generously shared their considerable experiences for this book, receiving nothing more than a thank-you and a chance to help others become solid journalists.

I've learned that a writer needs an equally dedicated team to create a large project such as this. Thanks to Earl Pingel, who encouraged me to create the initial outline; Aron Keesbury, who helped develop the initial project; Charisse Kiino, who continued to support the project; Christina Mueller for keeping everything organized; Jane Harrigan, who brought it all together by keeping me on task and vastly improving the copy;



CHAPTER 1

FROM SPORTS FAN TO SPORTS REPORTER

You're a lifelong football fan who can recite the names of every single Super Bowl champion. You also know the intricacies of baseball's infield fly rule and the difference between major and minor penalties in hockey. Ty Cobb's lifetime batting average? Please. You can even name the Maple Leafs player in 1951 who scored in overtime to hand Toronto the Stanley Cup.

And now you've landed your dream job, covering sports. First assignment: field hockey. Suddenly, you don't have a clue. Can't tell the difference between a penalty shot and a penalty corner. You'll have to do some reporting, relying on your skills to learn more about this sport, these teams and the key players. Nobody, no matter how big a sports fan, is a born journalist. The transformation from fan requires training and education.

You don't need a license—or even a degree in the field—to be a journalist. But you do need to act like one. And journalism is a profession that requires reporters to seek truth and report it; to provide a fair, comprehensive account of events; and to verify information, act independently and be accountable for mistakes. In addition, sports journalists research, interview, and observe thoroughly.

THERE'S NO CHEERING IN THE PRESS BOX

So how do fans and sports journalists differ? In more ways than most people realize.

For example, fans can make unsubstantiated comments without consequences, the kind that can be unjustifiably critical of those who coach and play. A sports fan can say the goalie sucks. But a sports reporter needs to be more detailed and more diplomatic. Had a defender moved out of position? Maybe the goalie's been playing hurt, diving at pucks despite a broken finger or severely sprained ankle. Or maybe the goalie has just

had a few bad performances. That happens to all of us—even those who write for a living. Sources won't trust someone who's unwilling to verify the facts. And you'll lose sources rather quickly by making mean, lazy comments.

Fans can openly cheer for their favorite teams and players, high-fiving friends and joyously screaming after a game-winning score. But there's no cheering in the press box. Or in game stories. Or while interviewing players and coaches after a game. Cheering clouds perspective, preventing a sports reporter from discerning the plays, trends, or strategies that enabled a team to win. In addition, you could lose sources, who might refrain from speaking with someone spinning everything for the home team.

In addition, sports reporters need to abide by professional codes of conduct, such as those outlined by the Society of Professional Journalists and the Associated Press Sports Editors (published later in this book). They can't accept free tickets or eat the free food that, as fans, they'd happily scarf down.

Fans can steal others' work, taking credit for a phrase or key argument when talking with friends or while tweeting. Sports journalists, though, must find new information and attribute older information, often offering this other information through embedded links.

Fans can skip a game for inclement weather, if the team is hopeless or when they have something else to do. Beat reporters faithfully cover games at night, on weekends, during holidays, and even when the job means missing important family events.

Fans can complain that nothing interesting happened in a midseason baseball or basketball game. Sports writers need to find something unique about a minor league baseball game in late July, an NBA game in mid-February, or a minor league hockey game in April, by taking detailed notes, asking precise questions, and keeping score. They must know the game well enough to find these new angles and write a comprehensive account of the game.

Fans prepare for games by listening to talk radio, watching pregame shows, and reading preview stories for their information. Sports journalists supply this information through exhaustive research and reporting.

Before behaving like a professional, you'll need to look like one, by dressing properly—wearing slacks and collared shirts instead of T-shirts and jeans. For outdoor summer events, you can wear a nice pair of shorts or a skirt instead. Obviously, don't wear any clothing that represents a school or team, something that destroys credibility.

Being a fan doesn't qualify someone to be a sports journalist any more than enjoying *Judge Judy* qualifies someone to be a lawyer. Dress and act professionally and learn your trade, if you expect sports information directors, coaches and players to take you seriously.

ON GETTING HOOKED

I actually wrote my first sports story when I was in high school for the *Daily Transcript* in Dedham, Mass. I went to Westwood High School, and our girls' teams were exceptional, but the local paper seemed to only cover the boys' games. I was very frustrated by this and complained about it often. My dad, Fred MacMullan, finally said to me, "Stop complaining and do something about it. Call

the sports editor." He stood over me until I did. The sports editor was Frank Wall, and he very nicely explained he'd love to cover the girls, but he didn't have enough manpower and would I like to write for him? So, I started covering high school sports, often games that I was actually playing in myself. It was an amazing thrill to see my byline for the first time. I was only 16 years old, and it was every bit as exciting as I imagined it would be. I was hooked from then on.



Jackie MacMullan,
ESPN Basketball Analyst

WHERE DO YOU START?

Glenn Stout was minding his own business, just a fan reading about sports during his gig at the Boston Public Library, when he fell into journalism.

Stout, now editor of The Best American Sports Writing series, had stumbled across an old article about a Red Sox manager who committed suicide in 1908. The article cited the pressures of managing as the reason for the suicide.

"If that were the case," Stout says, "I thought there should be a whole cemetery of dead Red Sox managers."

To satisfy his own curiosity, Stout, a 27-year-old librarian, investigated what really happened by reading old newspaper clips on microfilm. He then reviewed an old book on freelance writing to develop a query letter, which he sent to *The Boston Globe* and *Boston Magazine*. *The Globe* rejected his story idea, but the magazine's editor invited him in.

Stout did not have a single clip, had never tried to write a magazine piece, and had majored in creative writing, not journalism. Yet the editor took a chance, buying the story on the Red Sox manager's suicide for \$300 on spec.

"I still had the idea in my head that I wanted to be a writer, but really had no plan on how to become one, but knew I could write," Stout says. "I'd been reading sports stuff for fun forever. So I worked my ass off for a week at a time when you had to write longhand and then go to the typewriter, and turned in the story. He bought it as is, and asked me what I wanted to write about next. I blurted something out, and he gave me a contract

for another story for \$500. I was their sports columnist for the next three years and have never been without a writing assignment since. I've sold virtually everything I've tried to."

L. Jon Wertheim, now a veteran writer for *Sports Illustrated*, wrote a profile on the New Jersey Nets' Chris Dudley for *Hoop* magazine, an assignment that was a thrill for him when he was a college senior at Yale, partly because he could escape a few nights of scraping uneaten food off plates.

"The pay was something like \$250, which doesn't sound like much now," Wertheim says, "but it was about 40 hours worth of wages working at the dining hall, so I figured I had pulled a fast one." Today Wertheim is an executive editor and senior writer for *Sports Illustrated* and si.com.

Countless reporters enter the profession at high school basketball courts and football fields in small towns, at minor league ball fields, and in hockey rinks. There is no single path to success, although hard work, curiosity, and perseverance are excellent guides.

ON CRITICISM

I've been a full-time writer since 1993 and keep doing this because it beats working. But it is important for young writers to understand that you never arrive—each time you kick in a door there's another one, and no one really cares what you did in your previous assignment. But it is not for everyone, because each minute you spend writing is a minute you spend alone inside your

Glenn Stout,
editor, *The Best*
American Sports
Writing series

own head, and some people can't handle that. And your work is out there forever, and sometimes the object of criticism, so it helps to have a thick skin as well.

At the same time, there is no such thing as the typical sports story. Cookie-cutter approaches lead to stale, uninteresting stories. Instead, take chances and cultivate a voice, as you take readers through sports events.

"You're looking at a game from a point of view," says Bob Ryan, author and award-winning writer for *The Boston Globe*. "That's the key phrase. Why would you send someone to cover a game if you're going to force them into a very rigid box of formality? You could just take the wire story."

Sports writers need to be confident, taking chances like a coach or player. "I think more writing is destroyed by an abundance of caution than by risk," Stout says.

CLERKING IS A GREAT WAY TO LEARN

Many newsrooms have high school or college students working as clerks on the sports desk. They take scores by phone from coaches. They ask questions about key plays and players. And they write. By the end of the night, a clerk may knock out more than 10 short game stories.

And by the end of a month, clerks will have honed their skills and increased their speed, making it much easier to develop a single story on deadline.

Clerking enables younger reporters to write tight, concise stories. "Cover the game or write a feature, but it's tough to do both at the same time," says Jim Ruppert, longtime sports editor for *The State Journal-Register* in Springfield, Illinois.

Typical game stories focus on action at the end of the game first, because these later plays are usually most significant or most memorable. Sometimes, writers leap around, focusing on key plays as they relate to trends: a pitcher inducing several double plays or a football team making several defensive stops. Usually, plays are described when they define a trend, spark a rally, address an unusual circumstance, illustrate a storyline, or change the momentum in a game. Writers, though, never record the game from beginning to end.

"The game story should tell you a little about the status of each team and the thoughts and emotions of the coaches and key players who made tonight's events happen," says Art Kabelowsky, assistant sports editor for the *Wisconsin State Journal*. "Anecdotes and good quotes are better than play-by-play."

Tell the story through the eyes of those involved. Interview as many athletes as possible. Let the reader see the plays evolve through the athletes' eyes. And complement these descriptions with your own astute observations. Of course, that means taking detailed and copious notes.

Plus, take chances. Be creative. Borrow ideas from other writers.

Ultimately, your success relies on preparation—research and detailed observation—even if you shift gears to a new main theme on deadline. "Have an idea what might be the story," says Rich Chere, hockey beat writer for *The Star-Ledger* in Newark, New Jersey. "But very often that does not turn out to be the post-game story. Be flexible. You cannot stick with your assumed story if something more interesting or important happens."

ON DRAMA

sports insider I'm something of an accidental tourist in sports writing. I got bachelor's and master's degrees in print journalism but always envisioned myself as a news reporter or perhaps, a business reporter. The first job I was offered was in features copy editing. I took it, because it was at a good newspaper where I had interned as a reporter. Within a year, they offered me a reporting position—covering high school sports. For the first couple years, I didn't see myself remaining a sports reporter for long. But over time I realized I enjoyed the inherent drama involved (someone wins, someone loses), the life stories, and the freedom sports reporters have to really develop their own writing style. These are the things that keep me going still today.

Vicki Michaelis,
USA Today

REPORTING IS ESSENTIAL IN NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The skills you develop clerking and writing will serve you well no matter where technology goes. Reporters now tweet updates at live events, post audio, video, and stories read increasingly on smart phones, and rely on additional social networks, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Snapchat to both report news and interact with sources. These new approaches require that sports reporters blend solid reporting skills, journalism principles, and savvy technical skills. Instead of merely inserting interview responses into print stories, sports reporters now frequently post audio or video clips into digital stories, editing them for length and quality—a common practice for all journalists. Knowing what to ask is valued regardless of whether reporters query sources through traditional methods (face-to-face, phone call) or through newer approaches, such as text message, Facebook, LinkedIn, or e-mail, or Twitter. General questions will usually receive vague responses, regardless of the medium, so be very clear when you use text, and so forth, scripting questions that offer context as well as clear, concise questions. Traditional methods will almost always yield a deeper—and sometimes serendipitous—dive into topics. But rolling deadlines and access issues often force sports reporters to use these other approaches as well. Either way, sports reporters need to understand as much as they can about teams, players, issues, budgets, and games in order to ask intelligent, evocative questions.

As with anything in sports journalism, preparation is essential, whether the end result is a blog post, radio interview, TV game package, or print feature. Even as fans increasingly rely more heavily on new media and technology, journalistic approaches remain as important as ever. The best sports entities offer new information, terrific narratives, unique perspectives, statistical analysis, and beautiful images—not unlike the best print sports sections.

BREAKING A LOCKER-ROOM BARRIER FOR WOMEN (WITH THE HELP OF A LONG NOTEBOOK)

All week long at the *Miami Herald*, there had been a tremendous buildup to the big event. There had been meetings, phone calls, more meetings.

The occasion?

I was to go into my first men's locker room that Saturday night.

The Miami Dolphins were playing the Minnesota Vikings in a 1980 preseason football game at the Orange Bowl. I was a 22-year-old summer intern at the *Herald*, between my undergraduate and master's years at Northwestern, and sports editor Paul Anger assigned me to write a sidebar on the visiting team. That required going into the locker room to interview the players after the game. The NFL still had no policy about women reporters being allowed to go into men's locker rooms; some were open, some were not, based on the whim of the team.

sports insider

The Vikings' locker room was going to be open that night.

The significance of the night was twofold: It was not only going to be the first time I had ever been in a men's locker room, it also was to be the first time a woman had ever been in the Vikings' locker room.

Four years earlier, my moving into a coed dorm at Northwestern University had been a bit of an issue in our household. Now I was telling my parents in Toledo about this new development over the phone.

I asked my Dad for advice.

"Just keep eye contact at all times, honey."

My father always made me smile.

The game was Saturday night, August 23, 1980. I dressed conservatively in a simple skirt and blouse. I purposely wore the skirt. It was the closest I could come to a neon sign: Warning! Here comes a woman!

The Vikings beat the Dolphins, 17-10. As soon as the game ended, a group of reporters was allowed into a room adjacent to the Vikings' locker room to interview their venerable coach, Bud Grant. As he spoke, male reporters peeled away, one by one, to walk into the locker room. Soon, I was alone with Grant. I asked him a few questions about the game. From watching him on TV for years, I expected him to be gruff. I couldn't have been more wrong. When we were finished, I turned toward the locker room.

"Are you going in there?" Grant asked. He sounded sincere, and not at all menacing.

"Yes."

"You really want to go in there?"

"Well, I don't want to go in, but I have to go in there to do my job."

"All right then," Grant said with a smile and a shrug. "Do whatever you have to do."

And with that, I turned around and walked into a room full of naked men.

It was worse than I thought. Not the naked men. Actually, there were very few naked bodies.

The players were in various stages of undress, many still wearing their football pants.

No, I could never have anticipated the problem I was about to confront. It was a preseason game, so there were many extra players on the roster, but no names above the lockers. And even though I was carrying a flip card—the sheet given out in the press box containing all the players' names and numbers—most of the players had taken off their jerseys, so I couldn't tell who anyone was.

To further complicate matters, I also couldn't look around. If I did that, the players could accuse me of being in the locker room for the wrong reason. And that was the one thing I had to avoid.

As it was, as soon as I walked into the steamy, overcrowded room, I heard whoops and hollers from distant corners, from players I could not see:

"We don't go in the women's bathroom!"

"Here for some cheap thrills?"

I took a few tentative steps into the room, then stopped, not knowing what to do. I was stuck. It seemed like a lifetime standing there, but really was only twenty to thirty seconds when, out of the noise and confusion, a player in uniform walked up to me. It was Tom Hannon, the Vikings' fourth-year safety out of Michigan State.

"Who do you need?"

I smiled.

"Tommy Kramer," I said.

Hannon pointed to the quarterback, putting on his necktie.

I mentioned a few other players, and he pointed them out to me.

Then I interviewed Hannon, because he had intercepted two Miami passes. I thanked him for his help and beelined to Kramer and the others. Every one of them was dressed except for one lineman, who obviously desperately wanted to be interviewed buck naked. He didn't even bother to reach for a towel. As I moved toward him, he walked the rest of the way to me with a smirk on his face, enjoying the discomfort he brought with every step he took. I found this awkward, but not awkward enough not to do my job. I was determined to get the quotes, so I interviewed the naked guy. As luck would have it, the notebook I had brought was not the stenographer size, but an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven. With my height, looking the lineman right in the eye, when I looked down as I was writing, I saw only the notebook.

Forevermore when going into locker rooms, I carried an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven notebook, perfectly positioned.

All this interviewing, which seemed like an eternity to me, took about ten minutes. When I burst out of the locker room, I had just thirty minutes until my deadline, so I ran across the field in the now empty Orange Bowl to catch the elevator back up to the press box. I pulled out my bulky Texas Instruments computer, with its scroll of paper coming out the top. I wrote as quickly as I ever had, sent my story, then sat back and looked at a colleague sitting next to me.

"Oh boy," I said, exhaling and forcing a big smile.

Finally, I could think about what I had just been through. "I just focused on the interviews and tried to ignore all the things that were being said," I told him.

I didn't even think to retell the story of the taunts and jeers, or the naked guy. The end result was the important thing for me.

When I got home that night, I pulled out my diary.

"It was tough—not embarrassing though," I wrote. "Just did my job and got out of the locker room and wrote the story."



Christine Brennan is a sports columnist for USA Today, commentator for ABC News, CNN, and NPR, a best-selling author and a nationally known speaker.