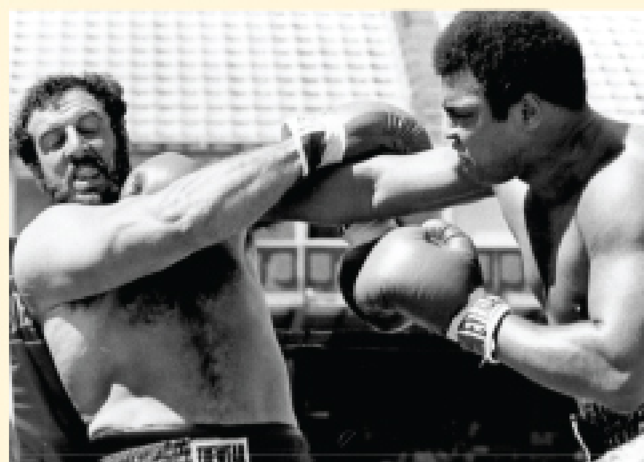
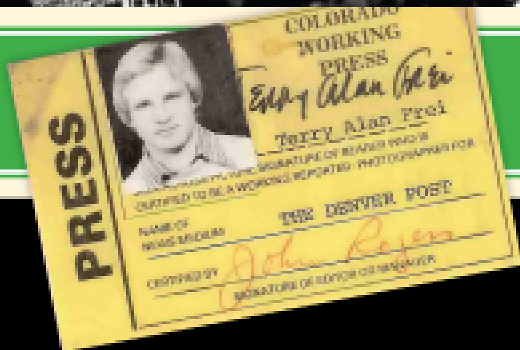


TERRY FREI



A SPORTS JOURNALIST'S ODYSSEY

PLAYING PIANO in a BROTHEL

PRAISE FOR TERRY FREI

HORNS, HOGS, AND NIXON COMING

"We had a few friends over who thought we had lost our minds as we whooped and hollered through a football game so exciting it was billed as the Game of the Century. For a few hours, we were innocent again, totally caught up in the contest. The game and its cultural contexts have been beautifully chronicled by Terry Frei in his book *Horns, Hogs, and Nixon Coming.*"

— Bill Clinton, from *My Life*

THIRD DOWN AND A WAR TO GO

"Many times you hear athletes called heroes, and their deeds and accomplishments on the field are characterized as courageous. After reading *Third Down and a War to Go,* I am embarrassed to have ever been thought of as brave or courageous. . . . Enjoy this adventure in history, life, and courage and take it from a so-called tough guy—keep the hanky close by."

— Dan Fouts, Hall of Fame quarterback and CBS sportscaster

"*Third Down and a War to Go* will put you in the huddle, in the front lines, and in a state of profound gratitude."

— Neal Rubin, *Detroit News*

"Brings to life, in shades of black and blue and blood red, the idea that certain things are worth fighting for."

— Rick Morrissey, *Chicago Tribune*

'77: DENVER, THE BRONCOS, AND A COMING OF AGE

"Ahh the memories. And they all happened right here in the forgotten time zone. Those magical moments came back with a rush last week reading *'77: Denver, the Broncos, and a Coming of Age.* What a fantastic read . . . *'77* is more than just a Bronco football memoir. It was a time when our Centennial State exploded on the national scene. . . . [T]hanks to Terry Frei's wonderful work, we get to live that magical moment all over again."

— Dick Maynard, *Grand Junction Sentinel*

"A must-read for fans of the NFL, of the 1970s, and of the American West. You didn't have to live through it in Denver to appreciate this account of the flowering of a franchise and its love affair with a town, but this book

takes those of us who did straight back to those thrilling days of yesteryear in unforgettable fashion."

— Michael Knisley, senior deputy editor, ESPN.com

THE WITCH'S SEASON

"Events carry the story forward swiftly, and that alone would make it a good read. But Frei has a larger point to make. It's during times of upheaval, when the very foundations of normalcy are being shaken, that personal courage, honor and the willingness to stand fast on principle matter most. All of the central characters in Frei's story will have to decide whether to make that stand, and if so, how to make it. Frei has written three nonfiction books, most notably *Horns, Hogs, and Nixon Coming*. This book proves he can write fiction too."

— Ken Goe, Portland *Oregonian*

"Frei combines his passion for college football, politics, and the turbulence of the 1960s into a classic. The recipe works, as *The Witch's Season* is a compelling page turner."

— Doug Ottewill, *Mile High Sports* magazine

PLAYING PIANO IN A BROTHEL

PLAYING PIANO IN A BROTHEL

A Sports Journalist's Odyssey

TERRY FREI

TAYLOR TRADE PUBLISHING
Lanham • New York • Boulder • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

Published by Taylor Trade Publishing
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
http://www.rlpgtrade.com

Estover Road, Plymouth PL6 7PY, United Kingdom

Distributed by National Book Network

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Frei, Terry, 1955–
Playing piano in a brothel : a sports journalist's odyssey / Terry Frei.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-1-58979-459-7 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58979-460-3 (electronic)
1. Frei, Terry, 1955– 2. Sportswriters—United States. 3. Sports journalism—United States. 4. Sports—United States I. Title.
GV742.42.F74 2010
070.4'49796092—dc22
[B]

2010008847

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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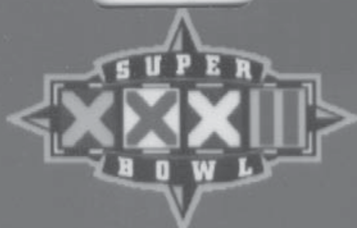
PART ONE

PLAYING PIANO IN A BROTHEL

It is partly on account of last summer that I am writing this book for the benefit of the 100,000,000 boobs and flatheads that swallow down everything they read in the papers, in particular the writing of Krazy Kress in *The Star-Press*.

—New York Mammoths pitcher Henry Wiggen in *The Southpaw* by Mark Harris

MIKE TYSON
FRANK BRUNO
Saturday • February 25, 1989
LAS VEGAS HILTON
MEDIA
PORTLAND OREGONIAN
TERRY FREI



PRINT MEDIA
TERRY FREI
DENVER POST
DENVER, CO

GAME 1
The 1992 NBA Finals™
TERRY FREI
OREGONIAN
WORKING MEDIA

A PAIR OF TWOS

WHEN MY FATHER, Jerry Frei, finished up his seventeen-season stay at the University of Oregon as the Ducks' head football coach from 1967 to 1971, he and my mother, Marian, hosted social receptions at our home for assistant coaches, boosters, university officials, and members of the media after games in Eugene. I was twelve when they began, and that's the way I met most of the major members of the Oregon sportswriting community.

Those experiences were the basis for a scene in my novel and screenplay, *The Witch's Season*. A 1968 college football team's radical linebacker goes to the post-game reception at the coach's home to apologize for an antiwar protest at the game that got out of hand and embarrassed the university, and the linebacker discovers that the embattled university president is at the party. There's another scene in the novel where the coach eloquently philosophizes to reporters after a bitter loss as his young son sits in a corner listening. The words the coach uses in the novel are word for word from a clipping detailing my father's reaction to an especially heartbreaking defeat, and in reality I was indeed sitting in the corner of the tiny coaches' dressing room at Oregon's Autzen Stadium that day, glaring at reporters' backs and waiting for them to leave my father alone.

I now understand that the sportswriters respected my father and generally were fair and sympathetic. My father considered many writers who covered the Ducks to be his friends. One of the "worst" things they and others said about my father was that he sometimes seemed "too nice" to be a head coach. I'll trade that for knowing at the time and also being told later how influential he was in the lives of so many young men—stars and scrubs alike—and in the development of many young assistant coaches who went on to great accomplishment. He was not just a coach; he also was an educator, earning roughly the same money as an English professor. I still remember being startled when his head-coaching salary—$17,600—was

published in the paper, for all (including *my friends!*) to see, and his perks included $100 a week during the season for a television show and the use of an Oldsmobile.

He was in the local spotlight and with it came scrutiny. I understood that. At my own football, basketball, and baseball games, I was "Frei's son." Intensely loyal, I had a low tolerance for anything remotely critical of my father, his coaches, or his players. Simply stating that Oregon lost was "negative" enough to make me mad. And fans? My parents finally decided I would be better off standing on the sidelines than sitting in the stands, because I argued with those critical of the players or the coaches. At a 1970 game in Corvallis against Oregon State, I sat in the designated visitors area of Parker Stadium, and it wasn't easy for me because I had just had anterior cruciate ligament surgery and was in a cast from toe to hip and on crutches. Down the row, an obnoxious guy—I'm guessing now he was in his mid-thirties—spent the entire game, a wrenching Ducks' loss, blasting the players. Several times, I told him to shut up and said such things as, I bet he had never put on a jock in his life and the players on the field were better men than he was. Yes, that's how naive I was. Near the end of the game, he walked down the row, where he had to pass me. He said something about hoping that my recovery went well. Next, I did something I regret to this day. No, I didn't haul off and punch him. I said I was sorry for mouthing off at him. As he passed me, he said, "That's okay. You'll understand someday."

I have to concede he was right. I understand. That's the way it is. What my father and his family went through is mild compared to what coaches and their families experience today. Fans pay their money or support sports in other ways, and they passionately follow them. Criticism, even bitter denunciation, is part of the dynamic that fuels American sport. There are many more outlets for that now. The media are not just a part of that but also at the leading edge. Sportswriting is parasitical; I wish we would acknowledge that more often.

In speeches, I often have told a fact-based joke about how those young assistant coaches on my father's staff who were barely making a living wage scrambled to get to our house to play poker with the reporters.* I explain that the off-season card games were designed to be relationship-building experiences for the coaches and influential writers who, along with many folks who bragged of being "influential boosters," sometimes questioned

* By "fact-based," I mean it's closer to the truth than most "true" sports-themed movies. Which isn't saying much, I know.

whether the Oregon staff was too inexperienced. When the young assistants left, one by one, counting their winnings, I asked each why they were so eager to socialize with the writers. In succession, each of them laughed and said to ask the next coach coming out of the door.

The first was John Marshall, as of this writing a veteran NFL defensive coordinator with the Oakland Raiders.

The second was Ron Stratten, who became the head coach at Portland State, a respected NCAA executive, and finally a highly successful businessman.

The third was Gunther Cunningham, who went on to be the Kansas City Chiefs' head coach and the defensive coordinator for the Chiefs and several other NFL teams.

The fourth was Bruce Snyder, who later was the highly successful head coach at California and Arizona State University and who came within one play of winning a national championship at ASU.

The fifth was George Seifert, later the head coach of the Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49ers and Carolina Panthers.

Only one assistant coach remained. That was John Robinson, eventually the head coach of a national championship team at the University of Southern California and of the Los Angeles Rams. When I told Robinson he was my last chance to find out why the young Oregon coaches so enjoyed socializing with the sportswriters, he—"Robbie" to all of us—laughed and put his hand on my shoulder. He looked me in the eye and said, "Terry, here's a lesson to remember. Always make room at the poker table for the guys who keep raising with a pair of twos."

Telling this story was more about poking fun at myself for being in the profession than about criticizing the writers who had preceded me.

When I worked part time at the *Rocky Mountain News* while attending the University of Colorado, and after when I joined the *Denver Post* following graduation, I was in the final days of rattling typewriters and wire-service teletype machines*; pneumatic tubes carrying copy from the sports department to the printers in the back; headline "counts" to determine if "Buffs Rout Huskers 28–27" would fit in the allotted number of columns, and, yes, the occasional Jack Daniels bottle stashed away.

I've witnessed the changing sports journalism scene in my two separate stays at the *Post*, at the *Oregonian*, and in an enjoyable hiatus from the newspaper business at the *Sporting News*. Much of the change in the business

---

* When the bells rang, it meant somebody better run over there immediately and see if Mickey Mantle had been killed in a car crash, although there wasn't a lot we could do with breaking news, other than put it in the next morning's paper.

has been for the better. Much has not. When I told friends that I would include a frank assessment of my own profession and express some disagreements with my own newspaper in this book, I was asked variations of, "You sure you want to do that?" One reason I got into the business was that I took seriously newspaper journalism's reputation as a marketplace of ideas, not just in the newsprint pages, but also in the workplace. That's a reputation its leaders courted and bragged about. I make no pretense that this is anything other than one man's opinion. I know that some will conclude that I am a traditionalist resistant to change who also probably believes that we should go back to typewriters, 33⅓ rpm albums, and rotary phones. That's not true. Yes, I would prefer that baseball players wear their pants as something other than full-length slacks and that NBA players actually move without the ball, but I do have a cell phone, iPod, and computer, and I embrace most modern advancements. Why, just the other day, I learned how to text! (I think.)

So here goes.

Nationally, in sports and the other sections, reporters, writers, copy editors, layout designers, and especially editors have become specialists. Sports editors at major papers usually don't write and are office-bound administrators with little contact with the teams and people we cover, and their decisions and expectations sometimes reflect a lack of understanding about reality in the field. They do get out to the Associated Press Sports Editors Conventions, but that's where they compare notes and come back with copycat ideas that tend to make sports sections look alike from coast to coast.

The separation of duties also has encouraged a blinkered attitude among writers, who have little clue about how difficult it is to get a newspaper out every day—especially in the sports department.* We also used to be "sportswriters," or generalists who not only accepted but also sought periodic shifts from beat to beat or covered them all, at least to some extent. Now, while there is some shifting—and we do occasionally help out on all beats—specialization is the norm. We have "football writers" or "baseball writers" or "hockey writers." That can lead to increased familiarity and knowledge about the specific teams and sports, but less rapport with the general sports fans who follow all sports and teams.

This is an issue on all the beats, but especially so in pro football, where the one-game-a-week routine means there are six days of "off-day" stories.

---

* Every Election Night, you can count on the city room congratulating itself for handling a huge rush of copy and live news on deadline. There's a saying in sports departments: *Every night is Election Night.*

Beat writers know that the way to gain favor and get the so-called scoops about signings, player moves, or other details is to make tacit deals. Some have allowed coaches and team officials to dictate when a story will be written, how the story will be spun, and what will be underplayed or swept under the rug altogether. A few reporters around the country whom I personally like made those deals, flourished, and moved on to bigger things. Those deals probably even can be justified because of the scoops they produce—even if involves merely being tipped off about what is about to become public knowledge anyway. The reporters who don't make those deals can find themselves at a competitive disadvantage in multiple newspaper markets or when NFL coaches find sycophants in the national media to feed this information. While often stonewalling the Colorado media after Denver became a one-newspaper market, Josh McDaniels, after taking over as the Broncos' head coach, quickly developed that knack for locating sympathetic national reporters to feed material that served his purposes.

In baseball writing, we unquestionably buy into the modern devotion to pitch counts; the division of relievers into long, set-up, and closer roles; ridiculously detailed statistics that increasingly prove little except that computers are amazing; and the premise that as long as managers memorize the "book" and can pull off the double-switch in the National League, they're brilliant. Too often, seamheads are writing for seamheads. I love baseball, but we've turned the diamond into an Excel spreadsheet.

An alarming number of NBA beat writers are "house voices" for the league and teams and are far too close to the players. Editors don't seem to mind the all-too-common occurrence of NBA beat writers high-fiving and embracing players on teams that they cover or coming off as star players' personal press agents.

The NHL? Like other leagues, the NHL has an obsessed wing of fandom that thirsts for minutiae—who's playing left wing on the fourth line tonight?—rather than human-interest stories the general sports fan also would read. In no other sport does the print media now cater to the fringe as much as we do in hockey coverage. Yes, even more so than in baseball.

The coverage of college sports, especially football, is increasingly formulaic and predictable. Newspaper beat writers or national college sports specialists learn quickly to fixate on whether a coach is "safe" or "in trouble," to write about quarterbacks whenever possible, and to consider handicapping the Heisman race more important than assembling a delegate count during the presidential primaries.

On all beats, we've too often forgotten that the best stories often are profiles that let our readers learn about the players and coaches they're watching: *What's his (or her) story?* Editors would counter that they ask for them and want them and even come up with the ideas for subject matter at times, but they generally want them in nice little formulaic packages.

It also is true that sportswriters sometimes are allowed to tackle big subjects beyond profiles. The catchword of the past few years in sports departments has become "enterprise." They must have talked about it at the Associated Press Sports Editors Convention. The definition is vague, and it's difficult to come to an agreement on what's interesting. Editors are big on "concepts" and "trends"—anything that is fodder for a few charts or lists. They *love* charts and lists ("Three Things to Look For" "Ten Key Plays" "Five Key Dates").

Regardless, major profiles and enterprise stories are more frustrating than fulfilling for the writers and readers, because each year, sports editors are more reluctant to clear the space to do them right. Narrative journalism—creating scenes and telling a story from interviews, research, and observation—is virtually impossible. It's not only space, either; it's also philosophy. The trend is toward using snappy, "sound bite" quotes, rather than allowing those whom we're writing about to actually *talk*. Editors tend to think a perfect sports profile is one that quotes the main figure, a coach or two, a couple players, a network game analyst, and a family member for one or two sentences apiece, and all in a story that runs less than a thousand words—but preferably shorter.

Many of those stories *can* be told well in today's desired lengths, especially if reporters know how widely to cast their net when interviewing. With limited available space, reporters can let only the most important figures actually speak without crowding the story with too many other "voices." Conducting eight hours of interviews with sixteen people in order to pick eight great quotes from four people and using some of the rest as background sounds possible in theory, but it's a great way to anger everyone and also a waste of time for all involved. It's also maddening because so much good material ends up on the cutting room floor.

Many of those stories *can't* be told well in those desired lengths. But every story is subject to the one-size-fits-all and one-approach-fits-all standards. An "enterprise" story touches up the formula only slightly. (But don't forget the charts and lists!)

"Writing coaches," whether in-house or independent consultants, emphasize the formula also should include a summary "nut graf," which

essentially means readers must be told very very early in the piece why this is an important story.* If it's allowed to be only artful foreshadowing that helps draw readers deeper into the story, it can work. More often, though, the formula leads to an insulting spoiler that implies that readers are so impatient and unintelligent that they need to be told what they're about to be told or they won't keep reading.

I don't completely buy the industry excuse that "the news hole has shrunk," meaning we have less space and every inch is precious. We do have less space and every inch is precious, but if it means getting away from the daily formula approach and leaving out one or two of the eleven stock elements on the baseball team's eighty-seventh game of the season, that's a small price to pay to clear room for exceptional stories. I don't mean to make light of human suffering, but every sportswriter will nod in agreement to this: Our best shot at getting more space is if a player's family member has a life-threatening illness. Editors also *love* those kinds of hooks. I wish they were as open-minded about clearing space for exceptional stories that don't involve tragedy.

For many years when I spoke to high school and college classes or at conferences, I emphasized that writing is largely a self-taught and intuitive craft, and it also requires ancillary skills—such as observation, curiosity, and interaction—that are sharpened through a broad base of life and educational experiences. I told many young men and women that although some might consider a journalism degree to be essential on a resume for those seeking a newspaper writing position, they would be better off carrying double majors—I ended up with degrees in journalism and history—or possibly not majoring in journalism at all. But if young men and women said they hoped to go into the newspaper business, I said, "Go for it."

My position has evolved, and not only because of newspapers' endangered status and the shrinking of the job pool. Now I tell sharp young men and women that even if newspapers survive, they might be too smart for the business—perhaps now, but certainly in the future, if the dumbing-down trends continue. Sadly, the industry's status as the great nurturer of writing talent in this nation already is waning, and talented young writers are ill-advised to consider the business as even a temporary stepping-stone avocation. The industry soon will be—and in many ways, already is—best suited for those who consider 300-word stories, 140-character Tweets, and lightweight blogs to be fulfilling.

* For some reason, whenever I hear the term "writing coach," I think of Robert Preston in *The Music Man*.

Newspapers' online sites raise interesting possibilities, and we're still feeling our way. Currently, the usual (but not universal) practice is to simply transfer the print story to the online site, where it joins all online-only bells and whistles, including blogs, slideshows, and video. In theory, it would be great to run two versions of ambitious stories—a short version in the newspaper and a longer, more comprehensive version online, where there are no space limitations. Yes, we have added additional online-only coverage for beats in blogs and stories. But we accelerated the abandonment of the paid print product by not only giving away the online product, but putting more resources and energy into it long before it made financial sense.

I've stopped counting the number of people who have told me that they stopped subscribing to or buying their local paper because they read it online. For free. The newspapers that tried to make their online sites fee-based—including giving it free to paid subscribers—encountered great resistance, in part because they were in the minority. There are indications that there might be another wave of newspapers trying to charge for "premium content," but I wonder if the precedent needed to be set years ago. The hope is that increased online advertising will bring us closer to the free but profitable television and radio models. As of this writing, we're getting there. When that corner is completely turned, if it ever is, I will acknowledge that those who decided to invest so much money and energy in the Web version of the newspaper had foresight. I also will continue to argue for making online the outlet for not just additional minutiae and bells and whistles but also for longer and more in-depth stories that can't be wedged into the paper.

The other extreme is riskier but also worth considering. What about making the print product a daily magazine with longer, high-quality stories, plus only news digest material? The news digest approach is close to what we're doing anyway, so it wouldn't be a drastic change to relegate the more detailed news stories to the Web. You can't get everything in the paper anyway, so why even try—and why not use the limitless online space that way? I realize that one's a long shot, but newspapers should take better advantage of the Web's limitless space one way or another.

What has happened now, though, is that many writers have stopped asking the sort of questions that could lead to bigger stories and instead just focus on the daily grind. That's too bad, and it's our fault, too.

Here's one on me. Defenseman Alexei Gusarov, a Leningrad native, played several seasons with the Colorado Avalanche before I finally got around to asking him about the horrific Siege of Leningrad during World War II. As it turned out, his parents went through it. His father was in his

early teens; his mother was a young girl. Although Gusarov's English was limited, he related what he knew of their experiences. In all his years in North America, nobody had ever asked him about it. Until that point, I had been more worried about how he and his defensive partner, Adam Foote, did on the penalty kill.

In the *Post* sports department, the last outlet for stories of exceptional length and outside-the-envelope subject matter was the excellent, beloved, and a bit quirky *Baseball Monday* section, which was killed several years ago. Now even the separate NFL and college football preview sections each week are subject to length and subject constraints that aren't much different than those in the daily section, and that's a lost opportunity. For the most part, we're just giving readers more of the same. That's at the *Post*, but it's my impression that the pattern is repeated at most major sports sections.

Granted, the newspaper business always has been about grind-it-out, nuts-and-bolts news stories as well as ambitious pieces, whether profiles or narrative journalism. It's hard to craft something memorable in 250 words and on deadline about city council meetings or a high school basketball game. I concede that. Plus, looking back over newspapers from the "old days" in my book research, I've been reminded that the general quality of writing and certainly the depth of reporting in sports sections significantly improved in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet it's sad that many of the men and women who had a hand in that or who got into the business because of that chance to do quality work now are made to feel like typewriter repairmen. Their skills are obsolete. And almost as unfortunate, others have completely abandoned that quest to produce memorable work and now are more concerned with their next Tweet or getting to the radio or television studios on time.

I still believe it's a pragmatic goal to occasionally set aside our preoccupation with the daily grind and to give a niche of our readership an exceptional story, one they'll remember, as often as possible. If it deeply affects a portion of our readership—the segment not prone to react with e-mails or letters to the sports editor or comments online—and lives on through Google and other means, it's important in other ways.

Here's an example of the philosophical gulf. I recently did a feature on former major league first baseman Mike Epstein, who owns and runs a hitting school in the Denver area. Ted Williams was one of his managers when he played for the Washington Senators. Epstein was a member of the 1972 World Series champion Oakland Athletics in their brawling days and was their leading home run hitter that season with 26—one ahead of Reggie Jackson. He told wonderful stories about Joe DiMaggio, Ted Williams,

Charlie Finley, Reggie Jackson, and others. The story was transformed into: *Hey, this former major leaguer has a hitting school!* One anecdote that bit the dust in the original story: Epstein played in the Yankee Stadium Old Timers game on the fiftieth anniversary of Lou Gehrig's "Luckiest Man" speech, and he spoke of the emotionalism of lining up on the foul lines with so many great players. As the Yankees played the film of the speech on the scoreboard, Epstein realized that he was standing a few feet away from where Gehrig spoke. Epstein said that in the clubhouse, Joe DiMaggio looked down the hallway and told Epstein that he could still see Gehrig walking down the corridor with a towel around him and smoking a cigarette, as if it were yesterday.

I damn near cried when I transcribed the tape and then typed the passage in the story. I could *see* DiMaggio looking down that hall. I could imagine him seeing Gehrig. I regretted leaving out a lot of other great material, but not even that anecdote made the paper. I was given the impression that I should have gotten Epstein to talk more about techniques for hitting the curveball up the middle and then asked three local high school coaches for comment to make it that tight story focusing on the present and avoiding historical anecdotes. I would like to think that baseball also is figuratively sitting around the cracker barrel and telling stories, not just pitch counts, OBP, batting averages with RISP,* and dissecting inside-out swings. I bring up the Epstein story not to antagonize those who made those decisions—they're entitled to their opinions, too, and they are in positions of power—but to emphasize that such decisions are typical of the philosophies gaining influence in the business. And that's everywhere, not just in Denver.

I'm often asked about the perceived "liberal bias" in the media or in the newspaper business specifically. I'm convinced that major newspapers strive to be objective with such issues as covering political races, and they try to have a balance of views on the op-ed pages and other sections. What's more striking to me than the liberal/conservative distinctions, which have become harder to define, is the unmistakable acceleration of the trend for writers and editors to prove how "sensitive" they are. The beliefs behind that stance can be sincere, but unfortunately it also frequently involves calculated devotion to Political Correctness, not because all wholeheartedly subscribe to the beliefs involved, but because anything else can stamp you as "insensitive" in

* On-Base Percentage and Runners In Scoring Position.

the newsroom—and that's a damning label in internal office politics and maneuvering. If that's a liberal bias, yes, major newspapers generally have a liberal bias, and those who try to say it's not true are not being honest—even if that means they're not being honest with themselves.

I'm a Democrat and generally (though not always) vote a straight ticket. Under most standards, my beliefs—both in years past and current—would qualify me as a card-carrying liberal. *The Witch's Season* has what most would consider a definite left-wing bent. Many of the Oregon football program's critics in Portland during my father's coaching tenure were racists and believed he was too "permissive" with his black players. The truth was, he treated them as adults and with respect—as he did all his players—in part because he had been flying an unarmed P-38 fighter reconnaissance plane over Japanese targets at their age. When you've flown in combat at age twenty, are you going to treat twenty-year-olds as "kids"? At least in my father's case, the answer was an emphatic "no." I used my father's philosophy about that "kids" issue as the basis for one of the novel's plotlines. The book also has an anti–Vietnam War theme, although it is tempered by the implication that the 1960s activist movement's lack of civility was both polarizing and counterproductive. I was barely a teenager at the time, but that radical linebacker on the 1968 football team in the novel has a lot of me in him.

My major problem with mainstream media newsroom sensitivity is that it's so selective. For example, if you snidely mention spaghetti and checkered table cloths and use wise guy vernacular in a passage about an Italian American such as troubled NFL lineman Richie Incognito—no problem. Hey, that's funny. If you use corresponding food references and vernacular in a discussion of Hispanic or African American athletes, the paper is being picketed in the morning and your coworkers are demanding an apology. I can argue this both ways, saying: (1) The former is just as offensive as the latter, and one of the weaknesses of conventional liberalism is this tendency to divide society into those we can poke fun at with impunity and those we can't; or (2) Everybody needs to lighten up and learn how to take a joke. I'd also argue that we should pick one of those stands as the societal standard and lobby for its consistent application. We can't tell Italian Americans they need to lighten up and take a joke and then react to a parallel insensitive remark about another ethnic group as if it's an affront that should cause the writer or broadcaster to be fired.

That desire to be stamped "sensitive" shows up in many other aspects of media coverage. The most glaring example in sports is the discussion of the racial makeup of the coaching community. There haven't been enough

football coaches of African American descent. That's a given. But the coverage and discussion of the issue highlights how so much phony sensitivity comes into play and how the standards of assessment often are presumptive, inconsistent, and cynical.

Richard Lapchick is chair of the DeVos Sport Business Management Graduate Program in the College of Business Administration at the University of Central Florida. He also is director of the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.* He has made much of his reputation by categorizing, counting, and issuing annual report cards about the percentage of minorities in coaching. I agree with his basic point but not with his reliance on presumptive racial categorization and measuring "fairness" with numbers. Lapchick wrote pieces in the past for the *Sporting News* and has become a frequent contributor to ESPN.com. He states his case in such predictable terms that it can come off as satire, along the lines of *Politically Correct Fairy Tales*. This was in his ESPN piece after Louisville hired Charlie Strong as head football coach in December 2009: "With several coaching positions remaining to be filled, there are 11 African-American head coaches, and 13 coaches of color among the 120 (Football Bowl Subdivision) schools."

On the surface, that might seem reasonable. I still identify men and women as African American or black if it seems pertinent, but I have done so less frequently as time went on. Now I wince when it gets into official categorization and scorekeeping, because it's insulting and condescending to those being "counted." I believe that's the prevailing attitude, even among liberals, and they're not ashamed to admit it—except perhaps if they work in newsrooms. Plus, it's tricky: if we're counting, what *officially* qualifies as an African American or a minority (a term Lapchick also uses), especially in a quickly evolving and changing American society? Who decides? Is self-declaration enough? Don't you have to have some standards if you're trying to neatly categorize? And if you do, doesn't it begin to sound more like the Nuremberg Laws than the basis of justice? Why isn't an Eastern European immigrant a "minority"?

Wait. It all comes down to *color*? Doesn't anyone else find that offensive? Isn't that what we were trying to get away from?

Tough-guy winger Sandy McCarthy, who played for six teams in an eleven-year career, often was included when well-meaning journalists compiled lists of black NHL players. In fact, as a member of the Mikmaq First Nations Tribe in Canada, McCarthy considered himself an indigenous North American. The eyeball test didn't work.

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* I wonder if he ever considered becoming a writing coach.

I'm all for proudly declaring your own heritage and reveling in it. But there's a difference between that and others making presumptive judgments for you. There's a difference between that and officially bringing self-declaration into scorekeeping and preferential hires, which opens the doors for opportunistic ethnic elasticity. We were reminded of that by notorious University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill, who would have been anything he needed to be. Another of our weaknesses has been our fear of challenging the phonies, opportunists, and those who want to manipulate the system and play whatever "card" seems likely to work. The "race card" is the most obvious, but only one of many available.

I was an advocate of affirmative action as a means of compensating for past exclusionary policies and of gathering momentum for fairness. I still am in favor of it, as long as it's allowed to evolve into an instinctive concept. I'm proud that my father hired Ron Stratten as his defensive line coach in 1968, both because Ron was and is a terrific man but also because he was the first African American assistant coach in a major program on the West Coast. That was more than forty years ago. I believe that we're past the point of needing to officially define everyone and, more so, past the appropriateness of counting. I can't tell you *when* we got past that point; I just know that we have.

If I were an employer or a supervisor making hiring decisions in either the public or private sector, I would define diversity myself by feel—and not through questionnaires, categorization, and percentages. I know what diversity is, and I know it by instinct not by counting on my fingers, assessing pigment, or asking questions about family trees. Diversity is energizing, educational, and smart business, because I'm convinced it makes everyone better. Diversity means a cross section of personalities, of beliefs, of background, of everything—but not just of what you see when you look at a person.

That's where we should be by now. Including in the discussion of the heritage of major college football coaches.

Put away the questionnaires and calculators.

I did one of the very first stories in the 1980s about how Tony Dungy, then the Steelers' first-year defensive coordinator, was clearly NFL head coach material. By 1994, when he still hadn't been hired as a head coach and was the defensive coordinator of the Minnesota Vikings, I brought him up again in a couple of *Sporting News* stories—one in January about the pool of hot head coach candidates and one in November about Dungy specifically. We talked about his long wait to be a head coach and how long I had been writing about the issue, and he joked, "At least you've still got your hair." The

point was that he was a great coach waiting to happen. It demeaned him to make race the primary issue. I concluded, "Expect him to be the head coach at Carolina, or Detroit, or Houston, or Tampa Bay, or Somewhere in 1995." I was off by a year. He went to the Buccaneers in 1996. Was racism involved in his long wait? Probably, but it's impossible to state that as fact because of the myriad factors—not all of them sensible—that go into coaching hires. By now, we should be beyond an insipid scorekeeping paragraph in every story about the hiring of a perceived minority coach. Taking the lead from Lapchick, often before also quoting him in the story, writers give us: "Jones becomes the XXth African American head coach in NFL history. . . . The XXth current African American coach in the NFL. . . . The XXth African American coach in the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision."

Yes, I know that some argue that the reason we're not beyond that kind of scorekeeping is because there haven't been enough black coaches. But wasn't our goal as a society to reach the point where we didn't need to officially classify people for purposes ranging from who could sit at lunch counters, be considered for jobs, or even have a realistic chance of being elected president, *because it shouldn't matter?*

Another deterrent to media members taking carefully reasoned, non-bandwagon, sincere, and fair positions on diversity matters is that they're scared to death that moronic, hateful, ignorant racists might voice agreement without being intelligent enough to understand the distinctions. We're paranoid about knowing that if racist scumbags are among those who praise a stand, some will consider us racists by association. Political writers can shrug it off and plow on; sportswriters tend to self-censor themselves because of that fear. In newsrooms, that increasingly irrational fear of being accused of being insensitive or even bigoted drives our decisions and coverage more than common sense.

This desire to avoid being labeled insensitive is so ingrained in me as a journalist that I often caught myself being careful when typing those previous passages about selective sensitivity. And, yes, I felt the need to establish my "liberal" *bona fides*. I'm laughing at myself, but I'm leaving that in.

Bottom line: I've come to grips with the fact that the way we in the media cover the diversity issue is laughably cynical.

All of that made the coverage of the University of Colorado football "scandals" of the mid-2000s a study in contradictions. We were faced with the dilemma of prioritizing our sensitivities, and we reached the conclusion that it was more important to appear sensitive on gender issues than on race issues—and it affected our coverage to the point of *unfairness*.

As Bruce Plasket pointed out in *Buffaloed*, a book my profession generally ignored, the coverage even had a tinge of racism. The media—including me—botched it, too often assuming the worst about allegations and not backing off or apologizing when they were shown to be overreactions and ultimately unfair. Even looking back at the stories now—about mostly wild allegations that proved to exaggerated or unfounded—I am embarrassed about the assume-the-worst tone of the coverage, locally and nationally. I said "including me," mainly because I wrote an ESPN.com column that, while carefully nuanced, called for Coach Gary Barnett's firing when he was suspended for impolitic—but accurate—remarks about placekicker Kate Hnida, who had been welcomed into the program when Rick Neuheisel was the Buffaloes' coach.* My point was that CEOs commonly take the fall in the business world when they are no longer effective, even for unfair reasons, and that it was time to take that approach with Barnett. I shouldn't have said that. I've admitted my mistake and apologized many times publicly; I'm doing it again here. The posse mentality infected me. Barnett's reputation was unfairly tarnished and, more important, so were the players', because they were all under that blanket of suspicion. CU alum Rick Reilly's *Sports Illustrated* column about Hnida was irresponsible. He allowed her to accuse an unnamed teammate of rape and was unwilling to scrutinize her story or point out how indirectly connected to the football program it was, even if what she said was true. The alleged rape took place at an off-campus apartment during the summer. She never reported it to police or told Barnett about it. Even if it happened, as abominable as that would be, it would be ridiculously unfair and unrealistic to consider it part of his watch, especially when he wasn't aware of it.

There were flaws in the CU recruiting process, and they were addressed, including reforms that other schools adopted. There was an ugly incident at an off-campus party involving prospects on recruiting visits in 2001 that led to a lawsuit. None of it was as simple as the media coverage would have had you believe. Nobody at that party, including the hosts, was wearing a halo, and it's not "insensitive" or "blaming the victim" (if there was a victim) to point that out. It's also not insensitive to argue that the lawsuit against the university—and, by extension, against the taxpayers—that resulted from the party ridiculously stretched the parameters of Title IX, making it a catchall

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* Although she ended up in the University of New Mexico football program, Hnida was not a good enough kicker to be on a Division I-A roster. I'm convinced that in the near future, a young woman soccer player is going to be a star college football kicker. But it wasn't going to be Hnida.

for any perceived transgressions against women. The lawsuit was thrown out, then reinstated and eventually settled because of fear of a runaway jury.

The same men and women who label stereotypes abhorrent see nothing wrong with buying into the jock stereotype, often not even noticing when it has racist undertones, as it did in the CU imbroglio. Crosscurrents were involved in the "sensitivity" issue, but what won out was the ridiculous conclusion that these horrible jocks routinely were running wild and maltreating women—and that it didn't involve the renegade actions of a few but was a program-wide plague and one of the condoned perks of being a CU football player. That was the tone of most of the city room coverage. I believe many of the writers involved in Colorado and national coverage unquestionably bought into every overwrought generalization about those who were talented enough to play major-college football. One reporter covering these issues told me he'd never allow his daughter to go to a university with a major football program. I'm pretty sure his attitude predated his coverage of the story. That's the type of prejudice we wouldn't allow in coverage of anything else; he would have been taken off the story. I assume that meant he would tell his daughter to turn down scholarship offers to attend not just Colorado, but also such terrible universities as Stanford, Duke, Northwestern, Wisconsin, Michigan, California-Berkeley, and Texas, among so many others. It reminded me of when the *Oregonian* ran an editorial about a college football funding issue that included this line: "What about those who go to college for an education?" To its credit, the *Oregonian* ran a rebuttal column written by my father's Oregon predecessor and mentor, Len Casanova, arguing that the editorial insulted the many former Oregon football players who had obtained degrees and gone on to productive careers in such endeavors as business, education, and law—or anything else. The equivalent argument could have been advanced—and still can be—for every football program in the country.

In the CU case, we repeatedly got carried away. My *Post* colleague Mark Kiszla, whose writing and work ethic I respect tremendously, wrote: "But it's pretty difficult to deny women have been served up like steaks on the football training table." There are several ways to interpret that sentence. Many reasonable readers drew the inference that Mark was accusing the coaches of acting as pimps. That was unfortunate.

Also, the Denver and Boulder papers never sufficiently criticized or scrutinized CU regent Cindy Carlisle for remaining on the board when her husband, attorney Baine Kerr, agreed to represent Lisa Simpson in that Title IX–based lawsuit. They emphasized that they separated their professional and personal lives and that Carlisle wouldn't vote on issues related to the

lawsuit. That was laughably insufficient. As an alumnus, I was offended that Carlisle was in a position to indirectly reap the benefits of her husband's representation of the recipient of a major settlement from CU. As a journalist, I was embarrassed that we essentially shrugged about the obvious conflict of interest. Again, it was a double standard. The merits of the case aside, if Kerr had been representing an athlete suing the university, there would have been relentless examination of the Kerr-Carlisle connection, and Carlisle would have been forced to resign.

The media also let hapless Boulder District Attorney Mary Keenan off virtually scot-free for her ridiculous, agenda-driven statement that the CU football program used sex as a recruiting lure.

What is never brought up when discussing the slide of the CU football program, including during its struggles under Dan Hawkins, is that the Colorado media was culpable in unfairly tarnishing the image of the school and the program, and those effects still are being felt today. The assume-the-worst coverage lives on in Internet searches, and the conclusions drawn from it persist as myths in the minds of many.

It all showed that liberals are capable of virulent racism, cloaking it in sensitivity about other issues.

WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE BETTER THAN THAT

SPORTS COLUMN WRITING can be a craft, involving storytelling, reporting, and versatility of approach. Now, not only is all of that undervalued, it's even discouraged. It's "boring." Today, Red Smith, the great Pulitzer Prize–winning New York columnist, would be told, "Get to the point! Give us opinion!" Jim Murray, the terrific *Los Angeles Times* columnist, would be told, "Those are nice lines, but where's the *attitude?*" Exaggeration and contrived controversy are the trends, and that approach is rewarded.

The explosion of cable television and the Internet has made all of that worse, because now more than ever, the goal is to attract attention in the crowded marketplace and draw as many online hits as possible—by any means possible.

Journalism is supposed to be better than that.

Unfortunately, those who try to treat column writing—and not just in sports—as a craft rather than a sideshow now are considered "soft." (Yes, I have been accused of that, so that's my axe.) Yet the best columnists make readers think, cry, laugh, and, yes, get angry—whether in a single column or, ideally, in columns of different approach throughout the week. They don't write one way; they vary their deliveries. When they seem angry or indignant in print, you know they *are* angry or indignant, because they don't try to manufacture it in every column. Some days, they take you places, tell you stories, introduce you to people. They're supposed to be the best writers on staff, and that calls for versatility—with broad-based knowledge, relentless inquisitiveness, and even a willingness to subjugate their egos and simply tell a story and enlighten when appropriate. If it produces fewer coveted hits online, it also produces more memorable columns that contribute to a writer's and a newspaper's credibility. It's too easy to write column after column that not only cover the obvious subject areas, but also involve the familiar stands.

(*Fire the manager! Bench the quarterback! Steroids are bad!*) That approach produces columns that could have come from fill-in-the-blank templates.

Columnists should be seen everywhere, not just in the press boxes at the games. They should show up on campuses and at team headquarters, not always because they're going to get a column out of it that day. It can be networking and establishing credibility with those we cover. There still are some columnists who do that, but their ranks are dwindling. It's a shame when columnists spouting off about college football coaches, for example, never have had an intimate, behind-closed-doors conversation with the coach they're ripping—or, even worse, are just doing it from the comfort of their homes without having been in contact with him for weeks.* I'm the first to admit—and I've even used this rationalization myself—that skyrocketing coaching salaries have changed the rules of the game; the intense scrutiny, high expectations, and considerable pressures are all part of the system that leads to coaches making ten times more than a tenured physics professor. But that doesn't excuse laziness. *Chicago Sun-Times* sports columnist Jay Mariotti drew the ire of White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen in Chicago for what Guillen perceived as cheap shots, but what was more interesting was that Mariotti's colleagues disowned him—not so much for what he wrote, but because he was such a phantom and minimally accountable.

"Provocative" is the buzzword, but what editors forget is that it can mean provoking something other than anger—including thought. But what we have now is an emphasis on melodrama and "strong stands," and those who are the most proficient have the ability to start with a reasonable thesis, work themselves into lathers as they write, distort that thesis as they go, and believe their exaggerations by the time they're done typing. Acknowledging that everything in the world isn't black or white and that there are gray areas enhances rather than diminishes the credibility of a column or commentary. But that's considered indecisiveness.†

Intelligent readers lose trust in the relentless desk-pounders. Once trust is lost, it's difficult to regain it. When they're tackling the occasional subjects that call for genuine outrage, or they're occasionally skipping the contrivances

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* Almost all major columnists work out of their homes in this era.

† I mostly agreed with Jon Stewart's blistering assessment of the Crossfire format as "partisan hackery" and more theater than journalism. But I will say that staking out extremes in a back-and-forth television format—Hannity/Colmes, Novak/Kinsley, ESPN analyst versus ESPN analyst, or even Aykroyd/Curtin—tends to be accepted for what it is, and it can be more effective and credible than a contrived, extreme view standing alone in print.

and making a very well-reasoned argument, their impact is diluted. Even the reasonable columns can draw this reaction: *There he goes again. . . .*

True, some readers take the bait and make noise about the contrived extreme positions, most recently in the various forms of anonymous "feedback" that we shamefully not only allow but encourage. That gives editors the impression that those columnists are effective. Perhaps when judged in the context of a marketplace jammed with mindless reality shows, they *are* effective, if the only criteria is attention. Loudmouth writing and pandering to the lunatic fringe gets a lot of attention and even praise for "courage," but often it's actually gutless because it takes more courage to say that the loud bandwagon view is wrong.

I had considerable respect for broadcaster Howard Cosell, but it's amusing that although he disdained most sports columnists, his bragging motto ("telling it like it is") has become distorted as a rationalization for laziness in column writing. Any alleged strong stand, regardless of its justification, is said to be "telling it like it is," when it actually can be the opposite. It often is gutless and the easy way out.

Journalism is supposed to be better than that.

This is an outgrowth of my position about longer stories and narrative-style pieces, whether about conventional subjects or something perhaps a bit quirky. I'm in the minority here, but I also think that sticking to that high-minded principle, in all sections, would be a pragmatic business decision. Technologically, we—or the newspaper industry's techies, at least—have done an amazing job of adapting to the 24/7 news cycles and putting together Web sites, essentially by trial and error and on the fly. I marvel at how fast it has happened, and writers and editors have adapted to the need to get news online as soon as possible while still putting out a newspaper. Journalistically, though, we've botched the transition. In the name of "keeping up with the times," including the staggering improvements in communication technologies, newspapers have too enthusiastically lowered their standards and mimicked the "new media" with its fixations on such things as Britney Spears's travails. Newspaper competition has thinned, leading to many single newspaper markets, including in Denver, where the *News* folded in 2009. A better strategy than pandering to the lowest common denominator would be to emphasize the difference between traditional journalism and the new media by zealously maintaining—or reinstating—high journalism standards.

Consumers have hundreds of media alternatives today. If a newspaper mimics all the others, from the surprisingly good to the laughably amateurish

or outright bad, it cannot claim to be more authoritative and credible than the other media, and we especially have no right to belittle the upstarts. The newspaper industry's survival depends on many things, but I'm convinced that it's crucial, especially for full-size broadsheet papers, to maintain that image of being better and more authoritative. We seem to be trying to imitate celebrity-driven Web media, but we never will be as "good" at that approach, and for newspapers, that's the worst of both worlds. If that's what consumers are seeking, they'll always find outlets better than newspapers for that kind of coverage. We also will be losing the discerning readers who give up on newspapers being above the inanity (and insanity, too). Yes, that's even true in sports coverage, because if we emulate the passionate amateur fans with blogs in the way we cover teams, we're not taking sufficient advantage of our access to coaches and players and seats in the press box.

Standards for filtering comment on newspaper stories posted online vary widely. The *New York Times* attempts to maintain decorum by moderating comments to ensure that what follows an online story amounts to more than drunks screaming at each other in a bar. In the *Denver Post* and other newspapers with lower standards, anonymous comments often make intelligent readers feel stupid or slimy for reading the paper (or at least the online version). Count on finding, among other things, racial stereotyping and mindless and predictable back-and-forth yammering from right and left wings. In any case, anonymity is a great enabler for idiots. Only the most tasteless is censored or eliminated, often after it has been online for a while. Many of the comments that remain online are, regardless of political affiliation or sentiment, moronic. In the newspaper buildings, Web-savvy young men and women with little understanding and appreciation of true journalism too often are making the decisions about online policies.

The inconsistency makes no sense. We have scrupulous standards, including sensitivity parameters, in the stories themselves, but below the stories, despite the requests to keep it civil, virtually anything goes. *And it's still the same site!* If the writers cross the line in the stories, their names are on them and they're accountable. There is little or no accountability at all in the commenting forums, short of programs that reject the words on George Carlin's list.

The articulate comments from either side of the spectrum come from folks who wouldn't mind standing behind them with their real names. It's true that sometimes insiders who are involved in an issue and who have intelligent viewpoints couldn't risk posting under their own names, but raising the bar for civilized dialogue would more than compensate for losing their input.

That's all bad enough. But anonymity has spread into the pages of the newspaper itself. We have the ludicrous contradiction of requiring not only real names on letters to the editor published in the editorial pages, but also phone numbers to confirm the identities, while in other parts of the paper, we routinely have comments attributed to, for example, "Spiked Punch." Again, even if the comments are intelligent, who's to say we didn't just make them up if there's no name attached to them? It's not a "dialogue with our readers" unless we know whom we're talking to and ask them to stand behind what they say with a confirmed identity. It would be easy enough to do that by charging a $5 annual fee for the right to comment online, under a full and confirmed name and city of residence, with the proceeds donated to charity. The quality of the discourse and dialogue would improve immediately, and the ripple effect would be noticeable. Intelligent dialogue begets more intelligent discourse.

In journalism, we used to be good at spotting those spouting off as the lunatic fringe and waving them off as unimportant. Now, we act as if those nuts are the most important voices on the planet. We react to them, giving them far more influence than they deserve, and pander to them.

I admit that not long ago, I tended to be disdainful of much of the new media, including amateur bloggers, writers for specialized Web sites, and especially those gadflies who haunt the message boards. I've come around. There are excellent amateur bloggers and excellent blog sites out there offering opinion but usually without the benefit of official access or accreditation. (Those who write under their own names and provide contact information immediately enhance their credibility.) If generalist newspaper columnists are simply spouting off from an armchair—or from a seat in the press box—without doing their homework, chances are at least one amateur with specialized interest has done a better opinion piece on that subject, even if it's an account manager writing on his lunch hour at the power company. That's the challenge. That's why it's so perplexing to see so many mainstream media columnists backing off from energetic exploration and networking, who see nothing wrong with becoming increasingly lazy after their reputations are established. Of course, many (though not all) of those with television or radio gigs write their columns almost as afterthoughts. But editors increasingly care more about columnists' celebrity status than the quality of their newspaper work.

There often is entertaining banter on message boards, including from those who remain anonymous. On some sites, the discussion can be high-minded, whether analyzing T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or trying to devise

constructive solutions for the Palestinian refugee problem. On others, it's mindless venom, but we don't have to visit those sites, and there is no expectation of quality.

We're supposed to be better than that.

The vast majority of intelligent readers, the constituency we should be seeking to retain, *wants* us to be better than that. But to varying degrees around the country, we continue to pander to that lowest-common-denominator mentality with breathless Twitter and blog updates about such things as which defenseman is going to be scratched from the hockey team's lineup that night, the cab ride in Detroit, the great catch on the sideline in practice, and the food in the Dallas press box. I know some writers, including some who lament the lowering of standards in the business, who seem incapable of functioning for five minutes without Tweeting or blogging. At national events, it's common to hear writers say, "Oh, I'm gonna put that in my blog!" after a mundane conversation about something such as the oatmeal in the coffee shop.

The more blog responses, we're told, the better we're doing in steering readers to the newspaper's Web site. Well, I could post a blog saying, "I think the coach should be fired. What say you?" That blog would generate many, many responses. But then I've become nothing more than a message board administrator. There are plenty of other outlets for that, even on the newspaper site.

We're supposed to be better than that.

Yes, it's our job to cover the news and also to uncover it. But some of it has gotten ridiculous. We have an entire generation of reporters, also outside of sports, who believe that being tipped off about what is going to become public knowledge shortly is a scoop, and they equate this with poring through piles of documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act and then other tireless detective work to discover and document malfeasance. We're racing *ESPN*, *Fox Sports*, and other outlets—both television and Web sites—to claim that we "learned" something first. Sourcing? I'm not saying the standards should be as high as for coverage of national security matters, but in sports coverage, all you have to do is say the tip came from "a league source," (or even just "a source"), which doesn't enlighten readers one iota. Yet that's good enough, even if, as often is the case, the real source is one of the individuals in the story who had no comment on the record. When that happens, it's an out-and-out lie, but it's one of the staples of the business. I'd rather have us write what we know to be fact as fact than to indulge in