What The Washington Post Could Learn from Sports Illustrated

(And vice versa)

by Matthew Cooper

If you haven't read John Feinstein, you're missing a lot of fun. He's one of those writers who loves something so much, and talks about it so vividly, that you can't help but find yourself caught up in the excitement. This kind of infectious enthusiasm has made him rich in acclaim as the country's best college basketball writer. It's made him rich, too. *A Season on the Brink*, his story of Indiana University coach Bob Knight, rode the *Times* bestseller list for 25 weeks.

This time Feinstein takes on a broader subject—an entire season of college basketball.* By weaving together profiles and you-are-there accounts of games into a diary, he tries to capture what he calls the unique "culture" of the game. During the 1987-1988 season, Feinstein went native. He hung out in motels and locker rooms with officials like Rusty Herring, whose license plate reads "Luv2ref." He went court-side with lesser players and with stars like Steve Kerr of the University of Arizona whose father, the president of American University in Beirut, had been assassinated; the 22-year-old then had to endure chants of "PLO, PLO" when his team took on rival Arizona State. He studied how Danny Manning's metamorphosis from great player to *great leader* took the Kansas Jayhawks to victory in the national championship.

But while Feinstein lauds what's lovable about college basketball, he barely mentions what ails it—the abysmal SAT scores; the abysmal graduation rates; the drugs; or the insidious effect that big money has on 18-year-old kids and dollar-starved colleges. It's not that Feinstein is blind to the seamy side of college ball. He covered it for 11 years at *The Washington Post* and is currently a special contributor to *Sports Illustrated*. But here he's chosen instead to celebrate the sport rather than give it the warts-and-all treatment.

Even if it is a one-sided view, other journalists, including those beyond the sports desk, can still find a lot to learn from Feinstein's dogged reporting, lively style, and, perhaps above all, his acute sense of organizational culture. These qualities are what mark top-notch sportswriting like his—a genre too quickly dismissed by other writers. The condescension toward sportswriters as a gang of good-timin', would-be jocks found typical expression recently in

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an editorial in *The New Republic.* Criticizing the sportswriters' coverage of the protest of NCAA rules by Coach John Thompson of Georgetown, the magazine opined that recent columns served as "a reminder of why society generally confines sports writers to the sports page." This back-to-your-locker-rooms-boys view is ironic not least because the qualities that sportswriting embodies—vivid prose, deft narration, point-of-view—are precisely those that good political writers, from *The New Republic* to the newsweeklies, have increasingly displayed. And others could stand to display it more: even greats like David Broder could learn a trick or two from Feinstein. The opposite is true as well—Feinstein and his sports-desk colleagues could learn from political skeptics too.

The one lesson political writers *don't* need to heed might be called the George Will Fallacy—the idea that sportswriting is best when elevated to the level of parable. ("Life is vain, the world a moral void, the universe an empty shell," Will writes, in a self-mocking style he can ill afford, since it comes so close to the real thing. "Then proper Americans look toward April, the horizon where the sun will rise. The sun is baseball.") Will's baseball chauvinism—flaunted, paradoxically, to prove both that he's a regular guy and smart—gets impossible to swallow after a while. By writing more about the symbolism of the game than the substance, Will and other intellectuals miss the point about sportswriting: it doesn't need embellishment to be sophisticated.

Hurling panties

The most obvious thing that grabs you about Feinstein's book is the sheer number of great lines. "Rollie Massimino of Villanova is known as the Danny DeVito of coaches," writes Feinstein. "It doesn't matter how many thousands of dollars he spends on clothes, he always looks like an unmade bed by the end of the game." And this nuanced notion: "Because basketball is still a newfound obsession in the desert, the crowd at Arizona games is still more innocent than those back East or in the Midwest. . . . Fathers take their sons instead of their bosses."

Lines like these are part of a rich tradition of colorful sportswriting—a legacy of metaphor and narrative that was a bellwether for the New Journalism. Before there was Tom Wolfe or David Halberstam there was Red Smith, the *New York Times* sportswriter, who didn't just describe a deep catch but wrote that the outfielder "stayed aloft so long he looked like an empty uniform hanging in its locker."

But, beyond the prose, Feinstein has a good sense of organizational behavior. Being a basketball writer means you get to write a lot about teams, about how a group of people get along or don't get along and why. This seems like an obvious point, but the ability to capture the personality of organizations is a quality that has distinguished political classics like Timothy Crouse's *The Boys on the Bus* or Teddy White's *The Making of the President—1960,* two of the first books to unveil the workings of presidential campaigns. A lot more of today's political writing has this attention to organizational forces than it used to—think of all the stories about Susan Estrich's feuding with John Sasso. But a scrutiny of organizational behavior—asking not just what happens but probing the institutional whys—can still be put to much greater use by those who cover politics and government.

When I worked at the Civil Rights Commission between 1984 and 1986, I was amazed at how few reporters, even those covering it as part of a regular beat, conveyed any sense of the internecine warfare in our offices—not just the familiar rankling between commissioners appointed by Reagan and the holdovers from Carter but among Reagan appointees. (Some, for example, opposed all race-preference programs; others took a more case-by-case approach.) It wasn't until John Bunzel, a Reagan-appointed commissioner, called on Chairman Clarence Pendleton to resign that people got the idea that the Reagan appointees were not a unified block on issues like the ERA or set-asides. What's more, the palpable tension between careerists and political appointees never seemed to make its way into print.

Feinstein conveys a great understanding of how teams work, especially the intangible, psychological dimensions of the game. Everyone's heard of the home-field advantage, but Feinstein has the subtlety to point out why it's such a big deal in college basketball. For one thing, the sport is played on an intimate scale compared to the stadiums that engulf football and baseball, so the crowd is much more of a presence. In such small confines, the special exuberance of a college mob—its bands, its cheers—can really affect a game. In 1984 at Duke, for instance, students hurled condoms and panties at a Maryland player who had been accused of sexual assaults. Rebuked for that, the students came back against North Carolina—skipping the "bullshit" cheer in favor of "We beg to differ," and, instead of waving their arms at foul shooters, holding up signs saying, "Please miss." One's behavior, group or otherwise, is bound to be affected by flying Trojans.

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Danny Manning's laundry

There's another side to organizational behavior—and that's leadership and morale. A recent example of the sportswriter's sensitivity to this was the *Sports Illustrated* cover story on Mario Lemieux, who's leading the National Hockey League in scoring. "As Great as Gretzky?" the headline asked, referring to the NHL star, Wayne Gretzky. The author, Austin Murphy, resisted the temptation to write a puff piece on Lemieux, and concluded instead that his occasional slacking off and failure to inspire his teammates makes him less of a player than Gretzky, who brings out the best in his teammates. (After he came to the Los Angeles Kings this year, Gretzky helped make the franchise a respectable second place contender in their division.)

During the basketball season Feinstein covered, nowhere was leadership more important than in the case of Danny Manning, the star of the University of Kansas team.

Before his senior year, Manning was already one of the game's greats, but until the last season he had been inconsistent. Back when he was the only starting freshman, Manning didn't take the lead, for fear of riling the older players. And he was easily distracted himself.

By his senior year, the tension between Head Coach Larry Brown and Manning was, as Feinstein describes, almost a Hollywood story of the tough-but-concerned coach who gets his kids to be all they can be. One time Brown came down hard on Manning for not breaking up a locker-room fight. "You sit there and watch like one of the guys," he told Manning. "Goddamn it, when are you going to realize you're *not* one of the guys!"

During the course of the year, circumstances conspired to make Manning a leader. Two of his teammates got hit with injuries, placing even more pressure on him. Also, Manning faced the challenge of playing in the Olympics that summer. And, perhaps most importantly, it was his senior year—the last chance he'd have to take the Jayhawks all the way. What's more it was the last time he would work with his Dad, who was an assistant coach with the team. Feinstein captures the transition to adulthood with a deceptively simple quote: "I think I've grown up a lot," Manning told Feinstein. "Before, when I needed my laundry done, I took it home and let my mother do it. Now, I do it myself. If I ran out of food, I just went home for dinner.

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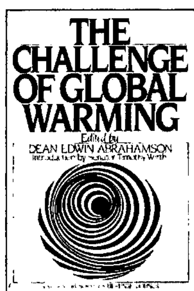

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I don't do that anymore."

By the time the Final Four rolls around, Manning has hit his stride, scoring 31 points in one game and shouting instructions like a field sergeant. By themselves, the points tell only part of the story; in Feinstein's hands, the important thing is that chemistry—between coach and star; between star and teammates—explains more than meets the eye. It was the chemistry that was missing from the coverage of the Civil Rights Commission and that continues to be missed in much metro and national reporting.

Obviously, the importance of chemistry can be overemphasized. This year, two winning teams in the National Basketball Association, the New York Knicks and the Detroit Pistons made big trades at mid-season in the hope of gaining an extra edge. The fear among fans in both cities was that the acquisitions would mess up the chemistry. But the former ball player Jerry West described it best when he said that while chemistry is important, talent is more so. Feinstein has a good appreciation of this. There's a lot of personality in this book, but he's not so enthralled with the psychological dimension of the game that he forgets to tell you basics, like who can shoot and who can't.

The rapid deployment force

Where Feinstein goes wrong is where many reporters in all fields have problems: he is too kind to his sources. Not that Feinstein is a deferential kind of guy. His book on Bob Knight captured his notorious chair-throwing temper. But *A Season Inside* won't earn Feinstein any threats. Aside from skirting the drug and money and race issues—which is a little like saying, "aside from Watergate"—it's hard to see why any coach would take umbrage at what Feinstein wrote.

Amazingly, Feinstein goes easy on Lefty Dreisell, the University of Maryland coach who was forced out after the cocaine-related death of star Len Bias. "Dreisell had made mistakes," is about the harshest thing Feinstein can think to say, adding that the administration shared blame for the abysmal academic standing of players and other problems that emerged after Bias's death. But even if Dreisell is guilty of what Feinstein allows—failing to watch out for his kids' grades and recruiting players who were academically unqualified—this is still a heavy burden that deserves more comment. Yet Feinstein devotes most of his chapter on Dreisell to an account of the two of them bar hopping with a pack of fans. There's no law that says every piece of writing has to be an expose or a hatchet job. (Indeed, most political reporters have become so cynical that they would feel embarrassed turning out a celebratory book like this.) But Feinstein goes too far—not only failing to give a skeptical, hard-news treatment of the issues raised by Dreisell's demise but actually lauding him as "funny and charming and self-deprecating." If you're going to compose a rhapsody, dedicate it to Fenway Park or something unqualifiedly good.

When it comes to saying nice things about the important source, Feinstein's not alone. After she finished her three-year stint covering the Redskins for *The Washington Post*, Christine Brennan wrote a tell-all piece for the paper's Sunday magazine. Readers were treated to great stories, about players coming on to her, about management's attempt to quash her stories, about who was decent and who gave her a hard time. Jack Kent Cooke, the team's owner, sounded half nuts when Brennan tried to interview him about a pending trade. It's not entirely Brennan's fault. Had she run with any of those stories earlier, her access would have shut down. But this pressure toward deference is one of the faults of the beat system, and it makes it clear why it's so important for news organizations to have not only beat reporters but also a rapid deployment force, off the beat, which can burn bridges without regret. Little wonder, then, that *Sports Illustrated* said that David Halberstam's book on pro basketball, *The Breaks of the Game*, "asked the tough questions most NBA reporters are afraid to ask." Questions about money, race, and the impact of television. Questions that Feinstein poses in only the most superficial way. (Feinstein will occasionally make a snide reference to CBS or Dick Vitale, but that's about it for how TV affects the game.)

It's telling that Feinstein never turns his considerable reporting talents on the policy makers in the NCAA. He fires off a lot of quips about silly rules but never seems as comfortable wrestling with academic standards and other questions of policy as he does with the action going on at courtside. In that way, he seems to have much in common with other sportswriters, who are only now starting to write about business and race and other important matters with the sophistication that the best political writers have long displayed.

Despite these flaws, this is a great time of year to read Feinstein, now that the NCAA tournament is underway. It's also worth picking up because any week now we're going to get a George Will column about baseball comparing opening day to The Resurrection. Feinstein understands that by just writing about the sport itself in a clear and simple manner, by just telling the story—the reader will know how good it is. That's Feinstein's achievement. And it's a big one. □

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When They Forgot the Nuts and Bolts, Everybody Got Screwed

How one American company was killed by greed, incompetence, and Henry Kravis

by Mark Reutter

Fred Burg was an enlightened tinkerer, an inventor, who built his company from nothing into the largest maker of machine tools west of the Mississippi.

Gerald Saltarelli was an auto bumper mogul who folded firms into his conglomerate, confident that he could improve any enterprise. In 1965 he bought Fred Burg's company.

Henry Kravis was a young investment banker who peddled an obscure financial device—the leveraged buyout (LBO). In 1978, a decade before he splashed onto the pages of *BusinessWeek* and *Time* as "King Henry" for his record $24.88 billion takeover of RJR Nabisco (and earned ink for his opulent lifestyle with his designer wife, Carolyne Roehm), Kravis and his associates took Saltarelli's publicly held firm and turned it private. It was the largest LBO to date. Staggering under the load of debt piled on by the financiers, the firm spun out of control after the 1982 recession. Fred Burg's company was a victim of the floundering LBO: drained of its cash—and reputation—it was shut down and its equipment auctioned off.

At the time of Burg's collapse in 1985, the shrinking of America's manufacturing base was seen as inevitable. According to conventional wisdom, machine tools, steel, textiles, and rubber could not compete with more modern foreign mills. American companies were too inefficient, too old, or paid union wages that were too high to make it in the global marketplace.

That was the sad-but-true school. The not-so-sad school said that, while shutting down plants was tough on some companies and workers, it was good for the country. The United States should phase out heavy industry, it was argued, let other nations do the dirty work, and move into high tech and services.

Max Holland's important new book* adds to the growing research that calls into question the view that America's manufacturing woes were the inevitable consequence of progress, or in the words of the famous economist Joseph Schumpeter, "creative destruction." Instead, focusing on the growth and self-destruction of a single machine foundry, Holland draws out in convincing detail how cupidity, short-sightedness, and managerial hubris led to the rusting away of a superior organization.

Today the Japanese—ironically using the blueprints sold to them by Burg and others—dominate the market for the most advanced machine tools. Why is this important? Reliance on foreign know-how is costly. America's trade deficit in machine-related goods is more than $20 billion. More importantly, machine tools are the lynchpin of a nation's industrial base. Without these machines-that-build-other-machines, we can only fall further behind.

The "Hey, Joe" School

For those who believe that steel-based goods belong to the industrial scrap heap, the story of Fred Burg will come as a surprise. A machinist and garage tinkerer, he developed a unique turret drill that reliably combined several steps. His drill permitted other manufacturers to make their products cheaper, quicker, and better.

Borrowing $5,000 from his sister, he went into business in the late 1940s. By 1954, his annual sales were $500,000; six years later they had jumped to more than $4 million. Holland celebrates Fred Burg as an exemplar of the American inventor—a loner "who takes previously disparate elements and fuses them together in a classical and enduring combination." While sounding a bit corny, his characterization rings true. Burg was an unhappy man on the days he couldn't get his hands dirty. His enthusiasm and intimate knowledge of the trade soon attracted

Mark Reutter is the author of Sparrows Point: Making Steel—The Rise and Ruin of American Industrial Might.

* *When the Machine Stopped: A Cautionary Tale from Industrial America.* Max Holland. *Harvard Business School Press, $22.95.*

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