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**Box Scores and Bylines: A Snapshot of the Newspaper
Sports Page**

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Overview

The sports sections of America's newspapers are a passive and reactive space, one dominated by game previews and recaps with little room for enterprise reportage, a new study of the sports section fronts finds.

The definition of "sports" on the section fronts of America's newspapers is a narrow one, focused less on breaking new ground and seeking new topics than on mining well-trod territory set by team schedules. Their primary mission seems centered as much on commenting as reporting, telling not just what happened, but offering theories of why, complete with heroes, goats and victims. All the while they offer a consistent point of view – generally a "homer's" perspective – in their accounts.

These findings are not inherently good or bad, but they stand in marked contrast to the kind of journalism found on other section fronts of the newspaper, according to the study released by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Planned events dominated coverage, making up 88% of all stories examined (with games making up 70% of that total, while press conferences, press releases and the like comprised the other 18%). Newsroom-initiated stories or enterprise pieces, in which reporters conceive a topic, investigate or study trends, made up only 10% stories on the sports front.¹ That's half the amount of enterprise reporting that appears on page A1 of the papers (21%) or on the front of the Metro sections (20%), the Project found. What's more, this lack of enterprise holds true for papers of all circulation sizes, from national papers like USA Today and the New York Times to papers as small as the Hanover (Pennsylvania) Evening Sun and McAllen (Texas) Monitor.

The study, conducted by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates, is based on an examination of roughly 2,100 stories from the sports section fronts of 16 papers over 28 randomly selected dates in 2004.

Some of the key findings from the study:

- Sports stories were overwhelmingly one-sided – only 12% presented a mix of viewpoints versus 61% for A1 stories and 43% for Metro front-page pieces.
- The big three sports (baseball, basketball and football) made up a full 65% of the stories covered on the front pages. Sports "issues" made up less than 4% of stories.
- Female athletes were the main character in stories only 5% of the time. Female teams only 3%.
- Opinion and speculation from journalists appeared in 17% of the sports stories studied, far more than on A1 (6%) or the front of Metro (2%).

¹ Just 2% of the stories came from unscheduled events.

The findings suggest that while sports sections may have been among the first parts of the newspaper to react to television in the 1960s and 1970s, they may not have broadened their style dramatically since, perhaps not even as much as other parts of the paper. Sports is still largely focused on day-to-day of coverage – things like profiles, game results and upcoming opponents – than with larger thematic issues – such as “women in sports” or “performance enhancing drugs” or “the role agents play in the sports business world.”

The reasons for this fairly traditional approach are harder to pinpoint, especially when one considers all the changes impacting sports coverage in the past 20 years. Note that in just two decades, we have seen the rise of the 24-hour ESPN highlight machine, plus specialty channels, sports talk radio and more recently, the rise of the Internet, where game scores and recaps are readily available in minutes from anywhere.

Certainly some of the style of analysis found in this sports formula has changed. Sports writing, for instance, has become more focused around statistics over the years, just as sports management has, a move made possible by computers. Yet the larger formula of the sports section is steady.

It may even be that the familiar, perhaps even ritual, nature of the sections is part of their allure. Sports, after all, occupy a special place in many communities. Hometown teams may not have the economic impact of a big local business, but they can play a larger role in representing the local residents. The teams wear the name of the community they represent. They fly the flag – sometimes literally. And the sports page offers a comfortable place where readers can check in with their local heroes.

Public survey data show that the sports section remains an important stop for the daily newspaper reader. It ranks second, behind only “General News” as the section most read by adults.²

Whatever the reason, there seems a common form to the pages. The stories we saw were largely straightforward, one-sided accounts dealing with a limited number of topics. Take, for example, the front page of sports in the Dallas Morning News on April 15, 2004. It featured two stories on a Stars (hockey) playoff loss, a preview of the Mavericks (basketball) playoffs opponent, a short piece on the Houston Astros (baseball) sweep of St. Louis and piece on a Cowboys (football) lineman looking for a new team. Or look at the stories on the front of Philadelphia Inquirer sports section on the same day: two stories on a Flyers (hockey) playoff win, one story on a 76ers (basketball) loss, one story on the Eagles (football) schedule for the next season and one story on a rainout at the Phillies (baseball) new ballpark.

The stories themselves follow the classic approach to sports writing – tell the result and find the hero. Consider the lead of one of the Philadelphia hockey stories:

² A Mediamark Research chart, “Section Readership by Gender,” from Spring 2003 shows 70% of adults read General News, followed by Sports at 43%, Editorial Page at 42% and Business/Finance at 40%.

Martin Brodeur has won three Stanley Cups. He recognizes when a goalie steals a game in the postseason.

Last night after the Flyers pushed the defending Stanley Cup champion New Jersey Devils to the brink of first-round extinction, Brodeur paid 26-year-old Flyers goalie Robert Esche his highest compliment.

“The only reason they won this game is because of Esche,” Brodeur said.³

It’s possible this more traditional approach to coverage survives because the sports section had less to change to begin with in some ways.

The sportswriter’s role has traditionally been to not only to explain what happened, but also why. And a steady stream of highlights and instant scores doesn’t change that mission. In any game, where there are potentially countless reasons why a team won or lost – a missed opportunity, an error, an outstanding performance by one player – the sportswriter is one of the first to offer a semi-official accounting of the most important why. Websites may offer scores and the game story from the Associated Press faster and ESPN may have the highlights, but the local sportswriter is still a critical actor in the local mythmaking process, using beat knowledge to lay out in print the basic accounting for the fans and media to discuss.

Nonetheless, this traditional formula still raises some journalistic issues, particularly about what is absent. The range of subject matter is narrow and the coverage of those subjects is similarly limited in voice, style and viewpoint. In many ways, the fronts of America’s sports pages are a kind of theater criticism.

This study, of course, only examined the sports front pages and it may be that much of this kind of coverage lives inside the section. But that choice reflects the decisions of editors and managers that keep the range of topics limited on the front page of sports – the home for what is ostensibly the most important sports news of the day.

It may be that as other sections of the paper have broadened their topic base – into things like business and entertainment – they have absorbed aspects of sports into their sections. Labor disputes may have migrated, in part, to business. Legal battles have made their way into the A section as have doping allegations. Stadium deals are part of Metro. But the data shows these migrations have not been large in scale. Only 4% of all the sports stories we examined were not in the sports section – 3% were on A1 and 1% were on the front of the Metro section. (This particular study did not examine the Business page.)

Even if some of this broader reporting appears elsewhere in the daily newspaper, however, this study suggests that much is simply not getting to the front of sports.

³ Tim Panaccio, “The Edge: Esche,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 15, 2004, D01

Story Selection and Hometown Teams

Obviously when one studies content, the outlets examined play a role in the findings. Newspapers from rural areas may focus more on agriculture policy than papers from large urban areas. A good geographic sample can help correct for these problems. But even beyond these kinds of local biases, sports pages present special issues. Sports coverage tends to focus on local teams, therefore the kinds of teams represented in the area (i.e. baseball, basketball, football, etc.) can be crucial as well as what kinds of other institutions are nearby – is there a motor speedways in the area or a large university?⁴

Enterprise Reporting, Recaps and Profiles

The sports page's reactive nature, its focus on the game of the day, may be best understood by looking at the number of stories that are initiated by reporters rather than events. Enterprise reporting was in short supply in the pages we examined. Overall only one in 10 (10%) stories on the front of the sports page came from newsroom-initiated reporting.

A full 88% of the stories were accounts of planned events – games, press conferences, etc. – mostly drawn from team schedules. The remaining 2% came from unscheduled events.

And in the area of enterprise, the smallest papers scored particularly low. The papers with circulation of 100,000 or less did significantly fewer newsroom-initiated stories (4%) than the other papers. This may have as much to do with staffing at small papers, where one reporter often has several beats, as it does the will to do such work. A full 95% of the sports stories examined at these smaller papers were coverage of planned events.

⁴ For this study, we categorized each of the sixteen newspapers that we studied into three circulation categories: large circulation (over 750,000); medium circulation (100,001 to 750,000); and small circulation (100,000 and under).

The sixteen newspapers were classified accordingly:

Large Circulation: Los Angeles Times, New York Times, USA Today, Washington Post

Medium Circulation: Albuquerque Journal, Asbury Park Press, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Dallas Morning News, Kansas City Star, Philadelphia Inquirer, Sacramento Bee, San Antonio Express-News

Small Circulation: Bloomington (Illinois) Pantagraph, Hanover (Pennsylvania) Evening Sun, McAllen (Texas) Monitor, Vacaville (California) Reporter. Three were from cities that have professional baseball, basketball, football and hockey teams (New York Times, Dallas Morning News and Philadelphia Inquirer). Three papers had three major pro teams in town, the Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and the Cleveland Plain Dealer. One had two teams, the Kansas City Star. And two papers had one major professional team, the San Antonio Express-News and the Sacramento Bee. Six had no professional teams in their cities – the Albuquerque Journal, Asbury Park Press, Bloomington (Illinois) Pantagraph, Hanover (Pennsylvania) Evening Sun, McAllen (Texas) Monitor, Vacaville (California) Reporter. Several of the papers – the Los Angeles Times, Dallas Morning News, even arguably Philadelphia – have NASCAR raceways nearby, though not in the immediate city limits. And one paper, USA Today, is truly a national newspaper with no actual “home” teams, schools or tracks to cover.

Larger papers had somewhat more enterprise reporting, but the numbers were still small over all. In the biggest papers, 14% of the stories came from newsroom-initiated reportage. That number was 12% for mid-sized papers, those with circulations of 100,001 to 750,000.

Types of Sports Stories				
	Large Circ.	Medium Circ.	Small Circ.	Total
Enterprise Reporting	14%	12%	4%	10%
Scheduled/Planned Events	83%	86%	95%	88%
Spontaneous Events	3%	2%	1%	2%

But regardless of the newspaper’s size, the sports page has less enterprise reporting than other sections of the paper by far. In fact the other sections of the papers often had twice as much enterprise reporting as sports. On A1 21% of all the stories were the result of enterprise reportage. And on the front of the Metro sections, that figure was 20%.

The finding on enterprise reporting may strike some as particularly surprising where the largest papers are concerned. All of them have larger staffs that arguably should enable them to reach beyond the preview, recap, profile style of reporting that is generally associated with sports sections. And at least two of them – USA Today and the New York Times – are national publications that generally have an eye toward larger national trends, at least in other sections of the paper. In the case of the USA Today, the paper is even freed of the responsibility of covering a home team. Where sports are concerned, however, there simply seems little interest.

Topics Covered

If the schedule dominates front-page sports coverage, what are the schedules followed the most closely? The big three sports – baseball, basketball and football. Two of every three stories on the front of the sports page were focused on these games. Of the big three, basketball led the way as the topic of 29% of all stories. Baseball was next with 20% of the stories. Football stories garnered 16% of the coverage.

To a certain extent those numbers may be explainable. Basketball season is lengthy (82 games and seven months) and basketball teams were the most common pro sports franchise in the cities we covered – eight of the 16 cities had pro teams. Major League Baseball with 162 games and its close to game-a-day, six-month schedule, had teams in seven of the cities. The National Football League has franchises in fewer cities, six, and the NFL’s shorter schedule – 16 games and five months – may have led to fewer stories.

Sports Story Topic				
	Large Circ.	Medium Circ.	Small Circ.	Total
Basketball	32%	32%	22%	29%
Baseball	19%	19%	24%	20%
Football	12%	18%	15%	16%
Golf	6%	5%	5%	5%
Hockey	5%	6%	3%	5%
Olympics	7%	3%	2%	4%
Auto Racing	*	2%	3%	2%
Other Sports	4%	7%	17%	9%
Sports issues	6%	3%	3%	3%
Other Topics	9%	5%	6%	7%

After the big three sports, the smaller sports battle pretty fiercely for that remaining space on the front of sports. The National Hockey League had franchises in only five of the cities and didn't play games in the fall of 2004, and hockey only got 5% of the coverage. Golf also received 5%. Auto racing, which is popular but has no "home town" since the venue moves from city to city, received only 2% of the stories. The Summer Olympics in Athens was the topic of 4% of the stories. Other sports got 9% of the coverage.

Which topic area was the hardest to find? "Sports issues" coverage, such as those on the impact of Title IX or doping or crime and athletes, was limited to just 3% of stories overall. Even among the biggest newspapers where bigger staffs and national readerships would seem to argue for different kinds of coverage, issues only made up 6% of all the sports stories.

Reporting Style

Opinion

A big issue in journalism today is the level of subjectivity that creeps onto the page, the concern that the distinction between news and opinion has become increasingly hard to make. The front of the sports section seems to contribute to this blurring. The sports reportage here, the study found, is considerably more likely than stories from other sections to include opinion and speculation. Removing opinion columns from the mix, seventeen percent of sports stories contain opinion and speculation, double the numbers for A1 stories (6%) and front-page Metro news stories (2%) combined.

There is without question a unique attitude to the sports page. A Penn State University survey of sports editors in the Southeast found that 39% believed it was okay to lean toward the hometown in its coverage – be something of a "homer."⁵ It is unlikely that other parts of the paper would condone such a rooting interest for a privately-owned city business.

⁵Marie Hardin, "Survey Finds Boosterism, Freebies Remain Problem for Newspaper Sports Departments," *Newspaper Research Journal*, Volume 26, No. 1, Winter 2005, page 70.

Columns are by nature opinionated and it is hardly surprising to find that nearly all (90%) sports columns studied contained some belief and speculation.

What may be more striking is the number of columns that appear on the front page of the sports section, especially in comparison to other section fronts. Eighteen percent of all front-page sports stories were opinion columns, a considerably higher number than on A1 (1%) or the Metro front (10%).

Sports columns were most likely to appear on the front pages of large and medium-size circulation newspapers where there might be more resources to hire full-time sports columnists. Those papers also tend to cover large markets where sports columnists often become local celebrities who appear on radio and television and help publicize their employer.

Thus, not only are the sports stories themselves more opinionated than those found on other section fronts, but the overall impression of the front page is one defined by a higher level of belief and speculation.

Gender on the Page

One of the most notable trends in sports over the past thirty years is the increasing prominence of women in sports at the amateur, collegiate and professional levels. In 1971, the year before Title IX was passed, there were fewer than 30,000 women competing in college sports. Today, there are nearly 150,000. Professional leagues like the WNBA and WUSA have created superstars such as Diana Taurasi and Mia Hamm. Despite this growth, it appears individual women as well as female teams are still relatively marginal in the world of newspaper sports reporting.

Men overwhelmingly dominate sports-page coverage. This was true for stories on sports teams as well as individual athletes.

The study first looked at stories on individual athletes. These included both stories on athletes as performers as well as personal profiles. Both were disproportionately male-dominated. Overall, 35% of all stories on athletes were devoted to men and just 5% covered women.

The study also examined stories on men's and women's sports teams. The gap between coverage of male and female sports teams is also striking. While a third (33%) of the stories we looked at covered men's teams, a mere 3% dealt with women's teams.

The light coverage of female athletes varied little across the different circulation categories. Regardless of circulation size, men consistently dominated.

Main Characters in Sports Front Stories				
	Large Circ.	Medium Circ.	Small Circ.	Total
<u>Athletes</u>	39%	39%	41%	39%
Male	35	35	34	35
Female	4	4	7	5
<u>Sports Teams</u>	33%	38%	38%	36%
Male	31	35	33	33
Female	1	3	5	3
<u>Coach</u>	5%	7%	7%	7%
Male	5	7	7	6
Female	--	1	*	*
<u>Administrator/Management</u>	4%	4%	2%	4%
Male	4	4	2	4
Female	--	*	--	*
<u>Other</u>	19%	12%	12%	14%

When it comes to who is providing the news to reporters and the public, sources appear heavily slanted towards men. Only 14% of front-page sports stories had at least one female source while 85% of sports stories used a male source. On A1 (50%) and front-page Metro (58%), women fared better though this was considerably less than the rate of men. Again, no circulation category was significantly more likely to use women as sources.

This dearth of reporting on women’s sports, we should note, is not limited to newspapers. Other research finds that the percentage of sports stories and airtime dedicated to women’s sports on television is now as low as it was in 1989.⁶

We can only speculate as to why there appears to be so little gender diversity on the front page of America’s sports sections. As noted earlier, the big three sports—baseball, basketball, and football—dominate the sports section’s front page. Women have yet to be given the opportunity to participate in football and baseball at any level, and while the WNBA and NCAA women’s basketball tournament have become increasingly popular, there were few front-page stories dealing with women’s basketball leagues.

Another explanation could be that sports journalism departments have generally been reluctant to hire women for their desks. One estimate is that women only make up approximately 13% of sports departments, and that less than 6% of the Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE) members are women.⁷

One final point, however: the ratio of men to women as the primary newsmaker in all the categories we studied—including politicians, professional individuals, and citizens—was overwhelmingly in favor of men. So sports reporting is hardly an exception to a broader trend.

⁶ “Gender in Televised Sports: News and Highlights Shows, 1989-2004,” a study commissioned by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.

⁷ Leah Etling, “An Uphill Climb,” APSE Newsletter, June 2002.

Sourcing, Viewpoints and Stakeholders in Sports Reporting

One way to assess the quality of journalism is to look at sourcing. Specifically, the critical questions are how transparent is the sourcing, how deep is the sourcing, and what is the range of views offered in the story?

To better understand sourcing, we took several steps. First, we looked at how transparent the sourcing was—has the story identified the source and its relationship to the story. Next, we looked at the story’s source depth, or how many identifiable sources the story contained. Thirdly, we measured the number of viewpoints in the story. And finally we looked at the number of stakeholders—groups or individuals with a particular interest in the story—that the reporter consulted.

Sourcing

Withholding columns, sports news stories were less likely than those from other sections of the newspaper to contain the highest level of sourcing. Just 39% of sports news stories had the highest level of transparency—four or more sources. Meanwhile, 64% of all A1 stories and 46% of the Metro front-page news stories used four or more sources.⁸ Again, this may have something to do with how sports are covered in the newspaper. Sporting events may be contests, but the results are not often contested. Sources in stories like game recaps are generally used to punctuate points and drive home the thrust of the writer’s piece, not raise issues.

Sports news stories were also much more likely than all A1 stories to contain no fully identified sources – though they were slightly less likely than Metro front-page stories to do so. About 8% of sports news stories contained no fully identified sources. That’s four times as many A1 stories (2%) but again, less than Metro front-page stories (9%).

Sports opinion columns reflected the general nature of opinion columns: only 15% used four or more sources and 17% did not contain any sources.

The shorter length of stories may offer some explanation for having fewer fully identifiable sources but not the lack of any. Very few sports stories were more than a 1,000 words. Only 11% were in that range, compared to 35% from A1, and 13% of Metro. However, it is more likely that the non-controversial, homer attitude is the critical factor.

Number of Viewpoints in Sports Stories

We also looked at the range of views offered in the sports stories we studied. Overall, sports news articles are overwhelmingly one-sided. Only 13% of sports news

⁸ When we looked at the sourcing for front-page sports and Metro stories, we removed all opinion columns. For A1 stories, totals will include both news stories and opinion columns since there were so few opinion columns on A1 – less than 1 percent of all stories.

stories used a mix of opinions, compared to 61% of all A1 stories and 44% of Metro front-page news stories. Perhaps the low percentage of stories with a mix of opinions can be explained by the finding that eight in ten (80%) sports news stories were defined as “non-controversial” in nature – stories that did not move beyond a basic recitation of what happened. These stories could still hold opinion, but did not delve into debates over why something occurred. Comparatively, just 18% of all A1 stories and 31% of front-page Metro news articles could be considered non-controversial.

[Not surprisingly, sports columns were even more likely to be one-sided. Just 12% of sports columns presented a mix of opinions and a quarter was of mostly one opinion (6%) or all of one opinion (19%).]

Number of Stakeholders

Finally, the study analyzed the stories in terms of the number of stakeholders represented. Stakeholders are different from viewpoints in that different groups of stakeholders might have the same opinion on a particular subject though they arrived at that opinion from a different starting place. For example, teachers and students might agree on a particular controversial issue though they are obviously stakeholders with different interests.

In general, there is less depth in terms of the number of stakeholders sports reporters use when we compare them to A1 stories and front-page Metro news articles. Nearly six in ten (60%) sports stories included two to three stakeholders. However, only 28% had four or more. This is significantly less than all A1 stories (54%) and slightly fewer than front-page Metro news stories (33%) that had at least four stakeholders.

Conclusion

In an age of multi-culturalism and a time of global and national political divide, sports provides Americans with a safe, shared experience. People with seemingly little else in common can bond in St. Louis or New York or Charlotte over a team.

This may lay at the heart of the familiar, even ritualistic nature of sports pages.

Even the changes in technology have not fundamentally altered—or replaced—the experience of the morning sports page. People may know the score on their PDA moments after the game has ended. They may see the 30-second highlights late night on ESPN, and even have heard a discussion of the team on sports talk radio.

Yet there remains something alluring apparently in reliving the experience of the game by reading about it within the reference point of the home-town perspective, through the eyes of the hometown writers, with the small details of your team’s club house only the local scribes can offer and the fan point of view they embody. In an age where geography doesn’t matter, in sports, it still does.

There is something else to the unchanging nature of the sports pages. While interpretative, they are still grounded in reporting. While sports has become a topic for wild speculation and opinion-for-the-sake-of-opinion in some forms of media (Could LeBron James guard Michael Jordan when Jordan was in his second year in the NBA?),

that is less the case on the sports pages, which are thoroughly reported, heavily sourced and highly descriptive.

There are disadvantages to the ritual nature of the pages. Because the coverage is so focused on teams, as members of a local family, larger issues in sport are often missed. Sports remains a journalism apart.

America's sports pages are a lot like a comfortable bar or restaurant you go to before or after the game. You know what you are going to get and it's not going to be spoiled by the latest fad, but you're also not going to see a lot of change on the menu.