

INTRODUCTION

Although the idea of travelling around the world to cover your favourite sport, meeting stars and occasionally writing incisive articles, is very appealing, the reality of high-level sports journalism is that it's a deadline-filled, nit-picking and lonely profession in which your whole life has to be dedicated to sport. It can be great fun, but most of the time there has to be such an attention to detail that you spend as much time worrying about exactly who the replacement scrum-half used to play for than you spend extolling the virtues of a timely drop goal!

Sports journalism is a specialism. It is taken seriously by newspapers and magazines because it sells. You have to be utterly professional to cover it properly, because there is nothing in the world that's more 'newsy' and up-to-the-minute than a sports event. If you're an athletics correspondent covering a race, you have to know as the first runner hits the tape whether his time is better or worse than the last time he ran, whether it's good enough, whether there are any surprise finishing positions and how the results compare with the results from Zurich the week before. At the back of your mind you need to have a list of key questions to ask him at the interview after the event, when you'll have about 15 other journalists to fight through for a 20-second quote. Throughout most rugby and football matches, there will be sports writers constantly on the phone, filing their stories at 15-minute intervals. They then have 15 minutes after the final whistle to file an introduction to go on the top of the piece, before rushing to the press conference to get some quotes for the second edition.

The best sports journalists are extremely knowledgeable, have brilliant contacts and an over-riding passion for the sport that they are covering. They will tend to be cynical, but deep down they believe in what they are covering – they have to, in order to do it any justice at all. Their job can sometimes be wonderful and brilliantly fulfilling; it is always taxing; and – like in most areas of journalism – the low points can be dreadful.

Whether you're interested in winning the Sports Journalist of the Year award, or just in putting together a match report about your local team that will get into the local paper, there are the same key rules to follow and the same advice that is relevant. If you approach the subject rationally and are determined enough, getting yourself on the sports journalism ladder in some way is not too difficult. Because of the profusion of publications which now touch upon sport in some way, there should be some avenue that you can explore to get yourself published.

This book looks at how you can get started, where you go from there, and how you can reach your goals in the simplest but most effective way possible.

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Sports Writers
AAC Black
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1 • HOW TO START

The life of a sports journalist is one full of colour, excitement and constant challenge. The variety is immense – from the very grand and glamorous one day, to the downright dull and uninteresting the next.

Unfortunately for would-be sports journalists, it is the glitz and glamour that attracts all the attention, so thousands of people hanker after jobs as sports journalists. This can make the task of getting work in sports journalism (and ultimately making the transition from interested and knowledgeable fan to inspired and respected sports writer) extremely difficult.

Most frustrating of all, there are plenty of people around who are happy to work for nothing, just to get their name in print or to get a break in the profession. In the low-budget world of local newspapers, these people will often be doing the work. Since local newspapers are the stepping stones to top journalism jobs, it can be very annoying when you are trying to get started and need to make some money from the profession. Added to this is the fact that jobs come up very rarely. You will often find that the same person has been doing the local hockey reports for the past 10 years and that he has become something of a local institution, making it difficult for anyone else to 'muscle' their way in.

However, don't despair completely. Every year, hundreds of new journalists join the profession. The media generally is expanding all the time, making room for far more writers and broadcasters. So how do you succeed? Obviously luck and good timing can play a part. If you happen to send a letter off to an editor just as the newspaper is looking for a freelance football writer, you may find it the easiest move in the world to start your career. But luck and good timing are in the hands of the gods – what is in your hands is the opportunity to make sure that you have done all you can to prepare yourself properly before you set out. This is where this book will help you. There are not too many short cuts if you want to maximise your chances of success, and much of it depends on hard work.

If you are already a journalist or writing a great deal in your current profession, then much of this chapter will contain information you are already familiar with. If, however, you are starting from scratch with no experience in the profession, it's worth reading through to give yourself an idea of what will be expected from you, and the different ways in which you can acquire the necessary skills to get started.

If you think you already have these skills, chapter two will outline how you move on, and plan your campaign. Chapter three shows you

how to contact an editor. Chapters four and five look at the profession in more depth, then the rest of the book is devoted to looking at the market place, and at what areas of the media are available to the sports journalist.

Starting at the beginning

If you have never written a word before, but have always wanted to be a sports writer, start by thinking through what the key characteristics of a sports writer are. Think too about what qualities you will need to acquire and display in order to succeed.

There are lots of criteria for judging whether a sports journalist is good or bad – no two journalists are the same, they all have very different attributes (indeed, it is often individual flair that marks a journalist out). But the following characteristics are common among all sports writers, whether freelance or full-time, and whatever area of the industry they are working in. These skills are best remembered by the acronym: WUCKNUPA, which stands for:

- Writing skills
- Understanding your publication and the market that it exists in
- Contacts
- Knowledge of your chosen sport
- Nose for a good story
- Uniqueness – do you stand out from the crowd?
- Passion for the sport
- Accuracy, fairness, responsibility and reliability

Having read through all these attributes, you need to decide whether or not you think you have any of them before you start. Or do you at least have the ability to acquire them? If you work to try and understand all of these areas you will have a much better chance of being able to answer an editor's complicated questions at interview; you will also have the skills to succeed when you get a job. The wider your vocabulary of skills, and the more holistic your approach to sports journalism in the early stages, the better your chances of getting involved.

Obviously, journalists divide according to which of the above skills they specialise in. Someone who really understands the market-place, writes well and has an enormous passion for the sport may well end up with a senior job on a specialist publication; whereas those writers who have great contacts and can always spot the angle might write for tabloid papers. If your writing skills are not great but you have a passion for a sport and great contacts, you might end up as a researcher on a specialist sports television programme.

We will take the above skills one at a time and look at them in more depth:

Can you write?

This seems like an obvious question to ask someone who wants to be a sports journalist. Of course you think you can write, or you wouldn't be reading this book; but have you ever tried writing a match report or doing an interview with restrictions on time and space? You may have been able to reel off wonderful essays when you had a month to write them, but what if you've only got an hour? And what if your piece is for hundreds of thousands of readers and not just one teacher?

Being able to write is the most obvious asset for a sports journalist, or indeed any journalist – but it's amazing how many people think they can become sports journalists simply because they enjoy sport and read a lot about it.

You don't have to be Shakespeare to write match reports, but you do have to be able to write coherently and logically. The first step is simple: have a go at writing something and see whether you can do it. An easy way to start is to choose a local sporting event. It can be anything at all, but it's vital that you watch the whole event and that the local paper also covers it (if you go regularly to a particular match or event, you will know whether the press is usually there – you could even call the club and ask them if the press will be there, or just call the paper themselves). Then watch the event with a pen and paper and make notes throughout. Write up a report afterwards (see chapter five for help in structuring a match report). You can then see exactly how your report compares to the one that appears in the papers. Obviously, if the paper you are monitoring yourself against is the one you are keen to write for eventually, this is the best test of all.

Try to write within set time-scales like the journalists on the paper do. If you give yourself hours and hours to put it together, it won't be realistic. Chances are that if it's a Saturday match, the journalists will have to file their reports first thing on Monday morning. It's therefore important that you don't leave the writing too long – put it together when you're as fresh as possible, and can remember clearly what happened.

This book will give you lots of ideas about making it in sports journalism, and lots of tips for putting sports stories together, but it can't actually teach you how to write, or how to put the effort and thought into writing a piece – that has to come from you. Writing can be an intensely personal occupation, and it can be difficult to be honest with yourself and unbiased about what you've achieved. At the end of the day, however, you have to look at what you've written and make an honest judgement. Try to work out where you've gone wrong and how you can improve. Are all the facts right? Are all the names spelt properly? Have you told the story accurately? Is the report interesting? It's much easier to read someone else's match report and think you can do better than it is to write the thing from scratch yourself, so have a go at writing a report from the beginning, and see how you cope.

If you can't think of a local event that would be suitable for you to experiment on, but would quite like to have a go at writing up a match report, then you could try reporting on a live event on television. Make sure you turn the sound down so that you're not influenced by the commentators' views and opinions. Take notes throughout the match, then write up a 500-word match report afterwards and compare what you have written with what appears in the papers the next day. It may help to give you an idea of what your writing skills are like, and how you cope under the pressure of writing a stated number of words by a given time. Many local newspapers coach their new reporters by sending them to events with a trained reporter, getting them to write up a story afterwards which they then compare with that of the experienced reporter. It can be a scary feeling for the new journalist, and it feels very much like 'sink or swim'; but it does give you an instant impression of how near the mark you are.

If you're full of confidence about your writing ability, you could go along to a local football match and watch, then write up a report. If you submit it to a local paper and request any comments, you may find some kindly soul who remembers what it was like when they first started and who is willing to help you by giving you key pointers. Don't send the report for the personal attention of the editor, because he won't have time to help. Instead, write in requesting information and help from any journalist on the sports desk.

The only way of knowing whether you're on the right track is to read other journalists' reports and analyse your own work as carefully and dispassionately as possible. The other way of knowing whether you're on the right track is to research carefully.

Understanding the publication and its market

There is a big difference between preparing an article for the editor of *The Telegraph* and writing a piece for the editor of a local paper. The latter requires a strong local angle and information that is relevant to local residents; whereas the former has to interest people all over Britain, so it has to focus on much wider, national issues.

You need to understand the specific demands of the publication you want to write for, and exactly what they want from their journalists. Can you expect your introductory letter and ideas to be appropriate if you don't even know who the magazine is targeting itself at? Of course not – you need to have a clear idea of who the magazine's targeting before you can effectively target the magazine.

In addition to understanding who the publication is targeting, you also need to understand the complexities of the market-place in which it is operating. For example, who is its keenest competitor and how does it compare to its rivals? Is it the market leader? How is it positioned in the market? It's useful to think of these things in terms of style, design, price

and content. Look at things like the cover of a magazine or the front page of a newspaper. The advertisements will also give you an idea of where the newspaper is pitching itself. What promotions do they run? What pictures – are they all stock photos, or is every photo shoot specially commissioned? Do they do any branding or merchandising? Try to get an impression about the whole package and who they are gearing themselves to.

The most common cry from editors as they receive feature ideas is, "Don't they read the publication? We'd never run something like that," or "We did that two weeks ago". The very least an editor expects is that you will know about the publication that you are aspiring to write for. You will instantly alienate an editor if you write to him suggesting an interview with a player if it turns out that the player is a columnist for the magazine, and has been involved with them for years!

So study the publication or publications you want to write for in great detail. You have to be sure to understand exactly who they target, what areas they cover and what their aims are.

Have you got good contacts?

Do you have a little black book brimming with telephone numbers? Or, at the very least, do you know whose numbers it would be useful to have, and how to get hold of them if you need to? Do you know who you should be cultivating a friendly working relationship with? You must be fairly involved in sport, or think you would like to be, to have bought this book in the first place; but do you know the people who make the decisions in your chosen sport? Could you call on them for quotes? Interviews? News and views? At any time?

Having contacts does not always mean having a direct line to Alan Shearer's house. It means knowing how easily you can get hold of the key people in your particular area when you need them. It may be the case that becoming friendly with the chairman of the local club is all you need, because he has so much influence that the players and the other club officials do what he says. Alternatively, you may have to make an effort to get to know every individual player from the youths to the vets, and regularly make time to renew your acquaintances. Having lots of contacts is obviously better than having one main contact – that person may leave!

Every time a new person joins the club, or a new manager, coach or official is appointed, you will have to make yourself known to them. Most journalists have a bugling contacts book, and know who all the key people to get to know are. No-one will expect you to arrive for an interview on a local paper with fantastic international sporting and media contacts, but if you want very quickly to become a correspondent for a particular sport, you will have to develop contacts rapidly. If your aim is to write for a bigger paper or specialist magazine, you will be expected to arrive with an impressive list of contacts. The only way to develop contacts is to keep going to sports events – and to keep talking to people.

You will have to be fairly pushy and go round introducing yourself, and asking questions and names (be sure to remember them!); but the more people you know, the more stories you'll get and the better journalist you'll eventually become. The usefulness of your contacts depends on them as individuals and what their attitude to the press is, as well as on what your relationship with them is like and how effectively you can 'court' them. Good contacts are invaluable – never underestimate them.

Knowledge of the sport

It's no good aspiring to be the world's leading golf correspondent if you don't really know much about the sport. Being able to play off an impressive handicap is all very admirable, but the reality of sports journalism is that at midnight in the office you have to be able to recognise the 14th-placed Scottish golfer by the back of his head for a picture caption.

Whether you're keen to become the greatest sports writer in the world, or just to write for the local paper, you need to understand the context of the sport you're writing about. How much of an expert are you? *Make yourself an expert* – it's vitally important. Have opinions, feel passionate. Know the characters, know the news stories, understand the politics, or you'll come unstruck.

It's not just basic information that you need at your disposal. Knowing who is the best squash player and which racquets you think are the best will not give you enough knowledge to head up a squash magazine. Who are the best players and why are they the best? What are their major achievements; why are these achievements so important? As a journalist you will have to delve far deeper into the sport than knowing about an individual race or event. You will need to know the 'ins and outs' of a player's route to the event: for example, when did they win certain matches? What were the scores? Ask yourself too how the sport is developing and who makes the decisions.

Do you think you're an authority on your chosen sport? You really need to be able to impress with your understanding of it if you want to be taken seriously.

It's not just the top sportsmen and women that you have to know about. Discover the ones coming up the ranks – the players of the future. For instance, you may know what time Linford Christie completed his last eight races in, and what his World Record is, but do you know who finished further down the order and how he has been progressing since? If you write to a national newspaper and tell them you'd like to do a feature on Linford Christie, they're not going to take you seriously. It's something they've already thought about and done a million times. Their athletics correspondent probably knows him personally and there's no way that they would use you to write an article rather than him. If, however, you research carefully and discover that there's a youngster coming up through the ranks who is emulating Linford Christie's times, you may be able to

sell a feature on him to an athletics magazine or to a local newspaper. However, remember that it's likely the paper will have covered your story already unless it's a really radically new idea; specialist titles in particular tend to cover stories from all angles.

Thinking of ideas for stories can be one of the most difficult parts of being a freelance journalist, but if you really understand your sport and are enthusiastic and eager to find out more, you will find that there are dozens of unexplored avenues. Talk to people, read all you can and watch all you can. Keep your eyes and ears peeled at all times. I got a piece into *The Times* about the England rugby doctor after I discovered that he was practising in the area I had moved to, and I decided to register with him. Over a period of time I managed to get him to talk about life behind the scenes with the team. If I had not known his name, I would never have got the story. Do you know the names of all the ancillary staff in your sport?

Have you a nose for a good story?

Will a newspaper be able to rely upon you to come back with all the information if a story breaks when you're at a match? If your club's longest-serving player gets sent off for abusing fans, will you spot that it is an interesting angle for your local paper? Are you prepared to fight through other journalists to get an interview with him after the game?

In addition to being able to write coherently – and, most importantly, to a set brief and a set number of words by a set time – you also have to know enough about the sport to be able to come up with plenty of ideas all the time that no-one else has thought of. You won't always be contacted by the paper and commissioned to do things. Sports journalism can be as tough as any journalism, despite the perception that the political and 'hard news' journalists are taken seriously on newspapers, whereas the sports pages are written by enthusiasts in clubs. This is simply not true any more. The sports journalists are as passionate, enthusiastic and committed to writing about sport, uncovering the truths about sport and exposing malpractice in sport as the current affairs reporters are.

There are always contemporary politics which affect sports, and sports issues tend to reflect the general issues of the time. For example, while the South African apartheid problem was being examined on the front pages, there was a very real overlap into sport. As sporting teams refused to tour there, and players who went over there were black-listed from competing for Britain, sport found itself dragged into the major political debate of the day.

It is difficult to analyse your own ability to assess what is the main angle in a story. Certainly, anything in the national news that finds itself reflected in sport is automatically a 'good angle' for your story; but in every match, interview, feature or news item there will also be an individual 'angle' which you will have to learn to spot. If you miss an obvious 'hook' for an article, this could result in the whole piece looking flat and untimely so that it may not make it into the paper. If you have never

written for a news publication before, the best way to work on looking for angles is described earlier in this chapter in relation to writing skills. Have a go and compare your results with those of a professional. Watch a match and decide what you think was the most important factor in that match. Then have a look at a printed match report, and see whether the professional journalists agree with your decision.

Chapter five looks at how you put a sports piece together and so might help to head you in the right direction. However, being able to spot what is the most important angle can depend as much on your knowledge of the sport and its participants as on your news sense. It might be worth emphasising this if the subject of your lack of news experience ever comes up at an interview – for example, if an editor asks you at interview whether you think your lack of news training will make it harder for you if a story breaks when you are out covering a match or event (i.e., crowd violence or drugs).

You should be aware that many newspapers are happier employing journalists who have been on a news training course of some description rather than journalists who come into the profession totally 'cold'. They think that the former will at least have some knowledge and experience of what is 'newsy', especially since journalism courses often ask you to spot the 'angle' in a given series of scenarios. What is considered 'newsy' depends as much on the publication you're writing for as the story itself. Like most things in journalism, the bottom line is common-sense, but you do also need to understand the sport to spot opportunities. For example, if you go to a rugby match and see the man with the No. 1 shirt on his back kicking, you may not be particularly interested if you don't know very much about rugby. If you understand the sport, though, you'll realise that No. 1 is a prop and one of the most unlikely candidates for a kicker. The fact that the prop was kicking would definitely be worth investigating with the club afterwards – ask them if he always kicks; if not, where's the usual kicker?

The more knowledge you have and the more research you do, the more unique angles you'll spot immediately. For example, a few phone calls after a match in which someone called Liam Botham was playing informed a key journalist that Liam was indeed a relation of Ian Botham – a nice angle, and one which others did not pick up on. Liam went on to become a good rugby player, but in the early days a quick-witted reporter got a good story which made all the nationals in addition to television and radio news.

What's your USP?

In business it's known as a USP – a Unique Selling Proposition. It describes what it is about a business's product that makes it unique in the market. As you try to sell yourself to an editor, you too should have a USP. What makes you stand out from the crowd? Why should anyone employ you when there are so many aspiring writers around?

In journalism, you may find yourself being asked to sell yourself more than you would in most job interviews. This is because you will not just be having a 'loose connection' with the product which your employers are selling – in journalism, unlike in most industries, you *are* that product. You're not going to be tucked away in some back room with no public contact; you are vitally important, because your words will make up the product and will therefore help to decide whether the product sells, whether advertisers are interested, and whether the company makes money or folds!

You create the whole purpose of the magazine's or newspaper's existence; therefore they have to make sure you're right and worth using. It's about more than the money they're paying you – it's about the publication's whole prestige. They're not going to let you loose on their readers if they can't trust you – and like every other industry in the world they haven't got time to waste – so they want to make sure that you know what you're doing, and they want to be able to let you get on with it without them having to check everything you write.

In order to convince people that you are unique and worth investing in, you have to have the WICKNUPA characteristics in abundance. Ideally, too, you should have a specific area in which you feel you are unique or at least have enormous experience. Perhaps you're a former top-class player, or a coach at a leading club; or perhaps you can also take photographs, do cartoons, or sketch. Make sure you promote this as much as you can. Anything you can utilise to sound 'different' will help – your experience, the fact that you know everyone at the local club or used to serve on a committee, the fact that you once wrote a novel – anything at all. Then, when you talk to editors, it gives you something positive with which to sell yourself and it gives you a promotional tool when you come to write your letter. The newspaper or magazine may use your uniqueness when they come to use your work, for example: 'by former international hockey player, Jane Sixsmith'. They get reflected credibility, and you get work. Find yourself a USP – it definitely helps!

Do you have a real passion for the sport?

Playing a sport and enjoying it socially is very different from committing your working life to it. If you work full time on a particular sport it can soon lose its charm, especially if every phone call, every conversation and every picture you see, and every word you read or say revolves around it.

Does *every* area of the sport – from new coaching and fitness techniques to the latest wrangles over club finances and fixture clashes – excite you? Are you interested enough to watch everything you can about a sport? And talk to everyone you come across? You really will find yourself living and breathing sport if you pursue your ambition to become a sports journalist.

Every journalist will tell you that they're never off duty. If a local news

journalist drives past an accident he'll always pull over to find out what's going on. He'll look for an eyewitness or get an exclusive 'on-the-spot' report. What is different about sports journalism is that the vast majority of the bread-and-butter, day-to-day stuff takes place in anti-social hours. You will find yourself working evenings and weekends as a matter of course; and that's before you start chasing any specific stories. The hours in sport can be extremely long because whilst the base of your work takes place during evenings and weekends, the mechanics of putting together a publication take place between 9.00 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.

Getting hold of people for quotes and interviews, particularly if you've only got work numbers for them, also takes place during the day. If you're not completely obsessed with your sport, and willing to pour every waking hour into writing and researching, thinking and talking about it, you will find yourself getting very resentful of the enormous amount of commitment that's required.

Accuracy

Getting a 'scoop' once in a while is wonderful, but *accuracy* is the cornerstone of good journalism, and it is absolutely vital that you learn to check, double check and triple check everything.

You can't afford to get peoples' names wrong or use inaccurate statistics. If you're not a perfectionist you may find it difficult to remember the importance of it, but the first time you make a mistake and the letters flood into the newspaper you'll learn a valuable lesson about how carefully sports fans read their publications!

It's not only statistics and names that have to be checked every time you interview someone. If anyone gives you information, you always have to check it because **even though it's not your mistake, if your name's on the piece it's always your responsibility.**

In sport, since much of the information is accrued through phone calls – collating results, getting team news, etc. – you need to make sure that every name you take over the phone is spelt out, and you need to double check any odd-sounding names with a separate source (the club, or ideally the person themselves). Anyone who's been mis-quoted, had their name mis-spelt or been referred to erroneously will know how frustrating it can be. Since in local sport you come across the same people week after week, you can't afford to upset anyone, let alone run the risk of legal action.

2 • PLANNING AND GOAL-SETTING

The planning stage

If you have done all the ground-work, and you think you have both the abilities outlined in chapter one and the confidence and enthusiasm to use them effectively in your work, what editor wouldn't take a chance with you? The answer's very simple – the editor who won't take a chance is the editor who doesn't believe you. It's not that anyone is going to think you are lying or trying to deceive them; it's just that anyone can write off to a magazine or newspaper and sell themselves as the greatest sports journalist ever to exist. What they *can't* do is prove to a busy editor that they are the right person for the job.

Proving yourself is paramount to your success. If you went to a job interview and told the interviewer that you were a brilliant artist, the very least he would expect is that you have a couple of paintings with you to prove it. Similarly, you can't walk into an editor's office and proclaim that you are a brilliant writer if you haven't written anything before.

As you come to the planning stage, and start setting goals for yourself, you must be properly prepared. Whilst working to achieve the goals that you have set yourself, make sure you keep this fact in the back of your mind: you need to be able to prove to an editor that you have the necessary skills.

Plan of action

The best way to start is to draw up a plan of action. Abstractly writing off to every newspaper and magazine without thinking through what you're doing will only lead to disappointment, and it may put you off for ever if your first attempt comes flying back to you with a rejection slip as quickly as you sent it.

It's worth spending some time trying to work out exactly what it is that you want to achieve. It helps if you can get into the habit of writing everything down, remaining completely clear about what your aims are and how you are going to achieve them before you start.

People will tell you that publishing is full of knock-backs and that you have to be fairly thick-skinned to survive. You will definitely be able to eliminate at least some of those knock-backs if you are properly prepared. Even if your aim is just to write a short piece for the local newspaper, it helps if you can be as business-like about it as possible and prepare everything well.

However, if there's just one local paper in your area, and if you only know about one sport, what happens when that local paper writes back