

LITERARY JOURNALISM AT *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*:
DAN JENKINS, FRANK DEFORD AND ROY BLOUNT, JR.

By

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis will examine the work of the writers Dan Jenkins, Frank Deford and Roy Blount, Jr., primarily at *Sports Illustrated* in the 1960s and '70s, and, secondarily, after they moved on and made their mark in fiction, essay and commentary.

Each of these writers influenced American journalism in a profound way, through innovation and experimentation, and each will be evaluated in comparison to those writers of their generation that are credited with developing the journalistic style known as Literary Journalism. This project will define each writer's unique and important contribution to journalism and to modern literature.

Sports Illustrated, which reached its peak of creativity and financial success during the time of these writers' rise to fame, played a vital role in the growth and development of Jenkins, Deford and Blount. This thesis will place the writers' work in the context of the growth of a magazine that was at the time considered by many the finest weekly publication in America.

In conclusion, this thesis will show that great journalism was being produced at a magazine devoted to sports, and these three writers used the vast subject of sports in America to create journalism that left an indelible mark on both their contemporaries and on writers of future generations.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* AND LITERARY SPORTS
WRITING

We have made some changes, and we will make more. But Sports Illustrated is an institution, and we don't want to tamper with an institution.

–Gilbert Rogin, Sports Illustrated Managing Editor, January, 1981¹

By 1981, Sports Illustrated had indeed become an institution in the magazine-publishing world. At the time, it was the fifth largest magazine in the country in terms of revenue, and the second most profitable entity in the Time, Inc. behemoth. It was playing in an open field, with little or no direct competition. The monthly magazine Sport was losing more than \$1 million a year. The start-up Inside Sports had lost \$12 million in its first year and was showing no signs of making a dent in the market. And with the explosive growth of spectator sports in America, fueled by the skyrocketing influence of television across American culture, there seemed to be no ceiling to success of the little project that had once derisively been referred to as “Muscles” around the halls of the Time, Inc., headquarters.²

The journey from “Muscles” to becoming a force in American publishing with legitimate financial and editorial muscle was not a foregone conclusion, nor was it a rapid ascent to the forefront of the Time, Inc. empire. In fact, the idea of a publication that was entirely devoted to sporting pursuits had been attempted in the past enough times to be deemed by most in the industry an unworkable and unmarketable endeavor. But, at the

¹ Daniel Machalaba, “Sports Illustrated Runs Hard to Keep Ahead of the Field: Thrown for a Loss for 10 Years, It Now Clobbers Rivals; Big Rush at the Super Bowl,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 23, 1981, 1.

² Machalaba, 1.

time when the idea began to circulate at Time, Inc., circumstances in the United States had transformed in a way that only a few visionaries were beginning to acknowledge. Sports Illustrated came into being as a way for the Time Inc. to capitalize on the newfound leisure time and changing lifestyle in post-war America, but, from early in its existence, it acted as an engine to elevate the field of sports journalism, and out of it came a stable of writers that did as much to bring the techniques of literary journalism to mainstream America as any other publication in operation during its era. The magazine happened to come along at the very time that New Journalism was in fact new, and its writers and editors sensed that they had the opportunity to use the world of sports as their ticket onto the train. In 1954, the idea of a national magazine about sports was laughable. Ten years later, Sports Illustrated was producing literary journalism that rivaled Esquire, the New Yorker, and the rest of the publishing world, and it was doing so on a weekly basis. And three writers in particular who were to emerge during this time, Dan Jenkins, Frank Deford and Roy Blount, Jr., were an important part of the engine that drove Sports Illustrated to the success that it eventually achieved.

A Magazine About Sports

In the 1950s, sports writing and the coverage of sporting events were not only considered lacking in importance in most circles, they were tied to a tradition that had little to do with journalism. “What little sports writing there was (in the early 20th century) was either accidental, derivative, or mired in the lustful muck of adventure stories. Sports, at least in a contemporary sense, was still new. Hunting and fishing were the province of either the genuinely hungry or the gentile. Participation or attendance (in

sports) was not without a certain kind of social risk. ... Reading and writing about sports was absurd.”³

Throughout the early 20th century, the importance of sports in American culture grew, and newspapers were dragged along for the ride. During the prosperous 1920s, spectator sports grabbed the imagination of the American consumer, reaching heights of popularity that heretofore had not been seen. The advent of larger-than-life sporting heroes such as Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Red Grange and Bobby Jones increased public awareness of sports, and at the same time increased the appetite among readers of the nation’s publications for information on the sporting life. “By 1920, sports writing was regularly appearing in the general-interest magazines of the day, and sports magazines were common. ‘Serious’ writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Jack London, and others embraced sport as part of their creative landscape, while sports writers like Damon Runyon and Ring Lardner crossed over into literature. By the 1930s, sports writers were becoming celebrities and serious writers of other genres were making regular forays into the sports pages in search of subjects.”⁴

Newspapers were the primary source of sports-related news and writing, but sports-related publications had existed in a number of different areas throughout the early part of the century. Sports-specific publications, such as *The Sporting News*, dedicated to baseball, had thrived regionally, and magazines dedicated to more participatory sports such as hunting, fishing and golf had also found a market at various times and in various

³ David Halberstam, *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), xiii

⁴ Halberstam, xiv

regions. Two magazines had even been in existence under the name *Sports Illustrated* in the 1930s and 1940s, but each had been short lived.⁵

Time Magazine came into existence in 1923. Founded by Henry Luce and Britton Hadden, the publication pioneered the weekly news magazine form, and quickly developed into a leader in the world of magazine publishing. By 1927, the magazine had a respectable circulation of 175,000. Hadden died in 1929, and *Time* continued to flourish under the leadership of Luce. In the 1930s, Luce built the successful title into a media empire, adding a business magazine, *Fortune*, in 1934, and a photojournalism-based publication, *Life*, in 1936. *Life* began as a novelty featuring much more photography than was common for magazines at the time, but by the 1950s, it had become Time, Inc.'s most popular title, with an enormous impact on American culture during the post-World War II period. "*Life* sold over 5 million copies a week in 1953. Far more, counting the pass-along factor, actually looked at the magazine. Each week about 26 million read the magazine; over six weeks some 60 million examined, however casually, at least one issue."⁶

Around 1950, Time, Inc. was experiencing the same boom that was being felt throughout post-war America. In the previous 10 years, the company had doubled in size and now employed more than 5,000 workers. Luce and his lieutenants wanted to capitalize on the expanding U.S. economy and continue to grow the company and fledgling empire that was Time, Inc. In the early '50s, the company began examining the possibilities for the next big venture, and a number of Luce's advisors began to point out

⁵ *St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture*, (Farmington Hills, MI, Gale Group, 2000)

⁶ James L. Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1987), 165.

that, while news, photography, home improvement, business, etc., were topics that already had national magazines with a large portion of the American market, there was no such competition in the world of sports. As the question of the next venture moved forward at Time, Inc., Luce became convinced that the subject of sports was the direction the company should take. Despite his lack of interest in the subject, his personal experience instilled in him the idea that the appetite for sports coverage was much greater than the market supply. “As he met more and more political and business leaders around the world, he realized the common fascination with sports. Many, to Luce’s discomfort, preferred to discuss boxing to the Marshall Plan. At the very least, publishing a sports magazine would render for him socially useful what Luce had regarded as journalistically irrelevant.”⁷

There were a number of detractors to the venture within Time, Inc., many who agreed with the prevailing belief in the publishing world at the time: there was a limit to the number of stories and ideas that editors could dream up about the subject that would appeal to a large section of the national readership. Ernest Haverman of *Life Magazine* was one of the executives involved in the planning and execution of the as-yet-untitled sports magazine. In 1953, as the planning period was progressing, Haverman authored a memo which laid out the problems he saw with the venture: “The world of sports covers a multitude of subjects, and there is less interest and good copy in any of them than one would first suppose. Here I think is the heart of the dilemma. In practically all participant sports there is a definite limit on the number of stories you can dream up without getting detailed and technical. Yet as soon as you get at all technical, you find yourself writing to

⁷ Baughman, 167.

a mere handful of people.”⁸ Though the tone of his memo was negative and he continued to lobby for the dissolution of the project, Haverman did point out that the area where most of his concerns might be alleviated was if the magazine was to focus entirely on spectator sports. In this area, there was a larger base of interest, and the popularity of baseball, football and boxing was unquestioned. However, the idea of aiming the magazine in the direction of spectator sports was hampered by advertising concerns. Sports fans were overwhelmingly male, and there was the belief on Madison Avenue that the majority of them were working-class, not the market that most advertisers in Time, Inc. products were after.

Establishing a Foundation

With Henry Luce behind it, however, the idea moved forward, and in 1953 and early 1954 Time, Inc. began moving from the research and development phase and began assembling a team that would develop the tone and substance of the product. When the project was moving closer to the launch stage, Luce appointed the first official editor of the publication, Sidney James, who had been assistant managing editor at *Life* for the past few years. James had little background in covering sports, having worked his way up through news reporting at St. Louis newspapers and then covering national affairs for *Time*. During the 1940s, he worked at both *Time* and *Life*, climbing the ladder of responsibility through a series of editorial positions. But in the early 1950s, his career was at an impasse, stuck under longtime *Life* editor Ed Thompson in the Time, Inc. food chain. Over the years, he had gained the respect and admiration of Luce, and the relationship caused Luce to ignore detractors within the company that questioned James’

⁸ Michael MacCambridge, *The Franchise: A History of Sports Illustrated Magazine* (Hyperion, New York, 1977), 21.

expertise and leadership ability. James would run the magazine for its first six years. The magazine would lose millions of dollars during James tenure, but his optimism and belief in the long-range success of a national sports magazine was instrumental in maintaining the progress of the project. But James' lack of sports knowledge and inability to set a clear vision for the magazine and motivate and develop talent were handicaps that kept *Sports Illustrated* from achieving the level of quality that Henry Luce had envisioned in the early years.

A Visionary Leader

The man who would eventually be credited with leading the magazine around the bend and help *Sports Illustrated* achieve the position of the preeminent sports publications was Andre Laguerre. Laguerre, who had been Time's senior European correspondent, came aboard in 1956 as assistant managing editor, widely viewed as the eventual successor to James. "Laguerre, an expert in foreign news, had no special interest in sports. But he was the kind who could never easily be an assistant to anyone except Luce himself, so the struggle for supremacy between James and Laguerre became itself a week-after-week Time, Inc. sporting event with a large if discreet audience."⁹ Laguerre was a Frenchman who was educated in England and served as press officer for Charles De Gaulle. He had joined *Time* in 1946 and had ambitions of one day taking over the magazine. But he also had a thorough knowledge of sports, which Luce was aware of, and led the Time, Inc., chairman to begin to believe that he was the man to lead the fledgling sports magazine.

⁹ W.A Swanberg, *Luce and His Empire* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1972), 406.

Since many within Time, Inc. saw the pathway to success was to cover sports in a way that would appeal to the upper class, the idea of a *New Yorker*-style magazine for the sports crowd continued to crop up among the original editors. That vision ultimately did not take hold, but the feeling that literary quality was part of the general ingredients for success remained. In the early year, the use of celebrity bylines, a practice that top general-interest magazines of the time employed regularly, was a staple at *Sports Illustrated*. James had been a champion of this practice while at *Life*, and had been the architect behind the magazine's publication of Ernest Hemingway's "*Old Man and the Sea*" in its entirety. In its first three years in existence, the magazine ran pieces by Hemingway on hunting, John Steinbeck on fishing, James T. Farrell on the World Series, Robert Frost on the Baseball All-Star Game, and William Faulkner on the Kentucky Derby, and the magazine published pieces by many other notable literary names.

In the early years, the magazine continued to wrestle with the question of whether to focus its energies toward spectator sports and the general-interest sports fan or toward participatory sports and the more well-to-do readers. One is not likely to open a copy of *Sports Illustrated* in the 21st century and find a lengthy article on the virtues of pheasant hunting, but that was a popular topic in the 1950s, one of many the magazine pursued despite a small audience. In those early days, beginning in August 1954, the magazine covered the full spectrum of sports -- rodeo, canoeing, trapshooting and, yes, baseball, football and golf. "Eddie Mathews may have been on *Sports Illustrated's* first cover, but he was quickly followed by a grouping of colorful golf bags, a woman knee-deep in the ocean surf and, in time, the Yale bulldog. It was Sidney James' belief that something in

sports touched everyone.”¹⁰ Eventually, it was the bottom line that pushed the magazine in the direction of spectator sports. The evidence began mounting early on that circulation was being driven by coverage of the major sports. “Analysis of single-copy sales showed that the best-selling covers are those which have a leading personality of the season’s major sport or sports, rather than ‘esoteric’ sports like mountain-climbing, fencing, horse riding or skin diving. And an April 1956 memo on ‘Why Subscribers Cancel’ noted that nearly half of the cancellations complained about a lack of major sports coverage. In the words of one reader, there were ‘too many safaris, bullfights, birds and fashion’.”¹¹

Despite the lack of focus, the magazine continued to gain circulation in the 1950s (though it remained in the red for Time, Inc.), and began to accumulate a stable of writing talent that would drive the quality of the magazine in the coming years. Jim Murray, who had been the Hollywood correspondent for *Life*, but had a vast knowledge of sports, had been with *Sports Illustrated* from the beginning and established a tone of sports writing early that went beyond event coverage and profiles. Murray became the magazine’s West Coast correspondent and continued in that position until 1961, when he joined the *Los Angeles Times* as a columnist. In 1955, *Sports Illustrated* brought aboard Roy Terrell, a sports writer from Corpus Christi, Texas. Terrell would be the first in a series of Texas writers who would infuse the magazine with the Texan attitude toward sports, far more obsessive and emotionally charged than the detached, observant attitude put forth by James and many of the Northeastern writers that he brought in. Terrell would be one of

¹⁰ Walter Bingham, “Walter Bingham Remembers SI’s Rirst Managing Editor,” *Sports Illustrated*, Mar 22, 2004, 27.

¹¹ MacCambridge, 90.

the early writers for the magazine who would play a large part in developing a distinctive *Sports Illustrated* voice.

The turning point for the magazine came in 1960, with the ascendancy of Laguerre to the position of managing editor. Laguerre had tired of being James second-in-command, and had eventually pushed the issue which Luce. With him, Laguerre brought a distinctive personality that attracted Luce and would eventually command enormous respect among *Sports Illustrated's* writers and editors. "Laguerre had many of the qualities that somehow attracted Luce. 'He was grumpy and never went out of his way to kiss Henry's ass or be in any way congenial,'" said *Time* correspondent Frank White. 'He was a medium-sized guy, not particularly handsome, kind of flabby. He drank whiskey all the time. But he was so smart.'"¹²

An Emphasis on Writing

Laguerre immediately went to work making changes at the magazine. *Sports Illustrated* underwent a redesign in 1960 that would give it a structure for the first time, and that would put in place features that would last for decades. In addition, for the first time, editors established a permanent place within the design of the magazine that would become a home for the literary works of sports journalism that was to be associated with *Sports Illustrated* and would establish its writers as talents throughout the industry. This feature was to become known as "the bonus piece." "The bonus piece, *Sports Illustrated's* showcase for its most literate and accomplished writing, anchored in the back of the magazine. Laguerre viewed this last piece as crucial. The bonus piece, 52 weeks a year,

¹² Ralph G. Martin, *Henry & Clare: An Intimate Portrait of the Luces* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1991), 327.

would provide a longer, literary minded takeout on some person in or aspect of the sports world, often running between 6,000 and 8,000 words, sometimes longer.”¹³

The bonus piece immediately began producing dividends, drawing stronger writers with literary aspirations to submit ideas for the features. Under Laguerre, writers were freed from their regular assignments and allowed time to devote to the more in-depth bonus pieces. First-person pieces were encouraged. George Plimpton, a freelancer at the time, pioneered a form of participatory sports journalism for which he would later become famous. In 1961, two of the most widely quoted bonus pieces came out in the magazine, within the space of a month. “This Is Cricket” was a piece by Terrell that was “an example of *Sports Illustrated* at its anthropological best, widening the horizons of its readers, striving toward a greater understanding.” And “12 Days Before the Mast,” a piece by writer Gil Rogin, was a humorous first-person account of a long-distance yachting race.¹⁴

A New Movement

The rise of *Sports Illustrated* on the playing field of magazine publishing in the United States coincided nicely with the coalescence of an emerging movement in the field of journalism, that of New Journalism, or as it became to be referred to in later years, Literary Journalism. At the time that Laguerre was enhancing *Sports Illustrated*'s bent toward a strong writing emphasis, other top general interest magazines in the United States were beginning to publish writers that were incorporating the use of innovative techniques in their writing and creating a hybrid style of journalism that crossed the

¹³ MacCambridge, 108.

¹⁴ MacCambridge, 114.

boundaries into the domain of literature. The *New Yorker* had long been the standard bearer for literary-tinged journalism, but now publications such as *New York Magazine*, *Esquire* and, later, *Rolling Stone* were jumping into the fray and enhancing the style of journalism, pushing it beyond what had been heretofore seen in the *New Yorker* and in American newspapers. In the 1960s, “a group of writers emerged, seemingly out of nowhere – Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, John Sack, Michael Herr – to impose some order on all of this American mayhem, each in his or her own distinctive manner (a few old hands, like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer chipped in as well).¹⁵

The style that is now referred to as Literary Journalism did not emerge from thin air in the 1960s; in fact, it has a long history that reaches back to the beginning of newspaper’s themselves.

This journalism in fact has a proper pedigree. Daniel Defoe, writing just after 1700, is the earliest cited by Norman Sims, one of the few historians of the form. The roster also includes Mark Twain in the nineteenth century and Stephen Crane at the start of the twentieth. Before and just after the Second World War, James Agee, Ernest Hemingway, A. J. Leibling, Joseph Mitchell, Lillian Ross, and John Steinbeck tried out narrative essay forms. Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Joan Didion followed, and somewhere in there, the genre came into its own – that is, its writers began to identify themselves as part of a movement, and the movement began to take on conventions and to attract writers.¹⁶

In general, the style of writing that is referred to as Literary Journalism includes a few distinct tenets: the writer’s immersion into his or her subject and extensive background investigation, an informal voice that gets beyond the authoritative nature of newspaper journalism, a narrative structure that often employs techniques of fiction and

¹⁵ Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn’t Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion and the New Journalism Revolution*, (Random House, New York, 2006), 6-7.

¹⁶ Mark Kramer and Norman Sims, *Literary Journalism*, (Random House, New York, 1995), 21.

eschews inverted pyramid and other newspaper-journalism methods, and a style and purpose aimed at discovering deeper meaning and eliciting strong emotional reaction on the part of readers.¹⁷ The writers who began to gain notoriety using these techniques during the 1960s produced a wildly divergent collective body of work, but as a whole set a standard for an entire generation of writers and editors that came under their influence, and changed the expectations of readers of American journalism in the era.

The names most associated with the Literary Journalism movement didn't often appear in the pages of *Sports Illustrated* (though Hunter Thompson's original assignment to cover the Mint 400 in Las Vegas in 1970 originated at *Sports Illustrated* and eventually turned into the seminal work of the movement, "*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.*"¹⁸) But the writers that are examined in the following chapters used the subject of sports and the freedom and vision granted by Laguerre at *Sports Illustrated* to make their own significant contributions to the movement and to the advancement of the craft of journalism.

¹⁷ Kramer, 21.

¹⁸ Weingarten, 247.

CHAPTER 2
DAN JENKINS: VOICE, HUMOR AND ATTITUDE IN SPORTS

Literature is writing that usually appears in books, but it can also appear in magazines and newspapers, although this is over the objection of most college professors, who do not believe that magazine and newspaper writing is as vague, oblique, pretentious, or experimental as it should be.

–Dan Jenkins¹

In September of 1951, *Life Magazine* published Ernest Hemingway’s “*Old Man and the Sea*.” The publication was announced months prior and was much anticipated. At the time, Dan Jenkins was a 21-year-old college student at Texas Christian University and a sports writer at the *Fort Worth Press*. A pool was organized within the sports department at the *Press*, with participants taking guesses at what would be the first word of Hemingway’s story. Jenkins’ guess was “It.” When the September issue of *Life* hit the streets, fellow *Press* sports writer Bud Shrake took the pot with the winning guess: “He.” In the *Press* sports department in those years, under the leadership of sports editor Blackie Sherrod, the likes of Hemingway, Chandler and Pereleman shared mantle of import with Ben Hogan, Otto Graham and Bud Wilkinson, and Jenkins was already on his way to developing a writing style that had one foot in the world of literature and the other firmly planted on the field of play. To Jenkins and his cohorts, “literature wasn’t something to be enjoyed at a distance remove, under a reading lamp in an overstuffed

¹ Dan Jenkins, *You Call It Sports, But I Say It’s a Jungle Out There: Classic Pieces By One of the Most Famous Sportswriters of All Time*, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989), 341.

chair. It became part of their days, another element in the seamless mix of serious fun and enjoyable work that made up their lives.”²

The style and voice that he began to develop in those years served Dan Jenkins well over the next half century. He nurtured his skills in the talent-rich sports department at the *Press* (a writing corps that, combined, published more than 40 books and a number of best sellers in the ensuing years), and then moved on to *Sports Illustrated* at the dawn of the 1960s, unveiling his sharp-edged, opinionated, humorous style to a national audience just as the magazine was taking hold and becoming the nation’s publication of record on the topic of sports. It was a marriage that blossomed quickly, and Jenkins became the most influential sportswriter in the pages of *Sports Illustrated*, and, indeed, in the country, at the same time bringing to the world of sports writing a style and flair that changed readers expectations for a sports article. A Jenkins article, readers came to learn, not only told you what happened, but pointed out the good and the evil, the triumphant and the incompetent, and, most importantly, let you know how Jenkins felt about what had transpired and what was to come. His unique skill was managing to steer clear of editorializing or pretension (the cardinal sin in his eyes), while still remaining front and center in his own writing.

Dan Jenkins despises pretension, and, in turn, would likely be diametrically opposed to an examination of the literary merits of his work (of the type that will be presented in the following pages.) But by changing the landscape of sports writing through his 50 years of football and golf writing, and by publishing novels that penetrate

² MacCambridge, 54.

the culture of sports in America as no other writer has been able, he's made himself and his work fair game for dissection and analysis.

Biography

Though his parents were divorced before he reached the age of one and he was raised by his grandparents, Daniel Thomas B. Jenkins describes his childhood as free of angst.³ He was born on Dec. 2, 1929, in Fort Worth, Texas, to Elzie, "Bud" Jenkins, a salesman who made a good living in the furniture and carpet business, and Catherine O'Hern, an antiques dealer who was often ill.⁴ He was raised primarily by his paternal grandparents, Elzie and Sally Jenkins. "I was raised by a grandmother and an aunt. I had the best of all possible worlds, because I was an only child. So much love you couldn't believe it, and so much humor," Jenkins said of his upbringing.⁵ An avid sports fan from a very young age, young Dan read the *Ft. Worth Press* religiously, creating scrapbooks of his sports heroes. Movies such as "The Front Page" and "His Girl Friday" imbued him with an interest in the mythology of the newspaper world, and slick magazines and radio broadcasts opened his mind to sports and the world in general outside of the confines of Ft. Worth, Texas.⁶ Early on, he was firmly set on the path toward writing and literature.

"My grandmother bought me a typewriter. It sat on the kitchen table. I would take the paper every day, put a piece of paper in and start copying the newspaper story word for word. One day, I started trying to improve on it. I thought 'This guy's an idiot. I can do better than this.' It hasn't stopped since."⁷

³ MacCambridge, 50.

⁴ Scott A.G.M. Crawford, *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 241: American Sportswriters and Writers on Sport* (The Gale Group, 2001), 137.

⁵ Stephanie Mansfield, "Dan Jenkins, All Tough," *Washington Post*, Nov. 10, 1984, D1.

⁶ MacCambridge. 51.

⁷ Mansfield.

Jenkins played basketball and golf at Paschal High School in Fort Worth, graduating in 1948, moving onto Texas Christian University and a part-time job writing sports at the *Fort Worth Press*, where he would work for the next dozen years, as a reporter, columnist and editor. (His friend Shrake also graduated from Paschal and embarked on a similar course.) It was at the *Press* where he came under the tutelage of legendary Texas sports writer and editor Blackie Sherrod. The *Press* was an afternoon paper competing with the larger morning paper, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, so Sherrod drove his writers to eschew straight game stories and write in a feature style and with voice. He introduced his writers to John Lardner, S.J. Perelman, Damon Runyon and many others, at the same time that Jenkins was deeply involved in the study of literature.⁸ While at the *Press*, Jenkins honed his skills and began to produce comedic essays and satirical pieces, which attracted much attention, not all of it positive. He also began to take on points of view that were often contrary to the common opinion among sportswriters of the day.⁹ In 1960, he moved to the larger *Dallas Times-Herald*, where he spent two years before accepting a position at *Sports Illustrated* in 1962.

Sports Illustrated

Jenkins joined the staff of *Sports Illustrated* as the magazine was still in the process of defining its niche and had not yet achieved the national prominence that was to follow in the next decade. Jenkins had already written some freelance pieces for the magazine, and was hired after taking a freelance assignment to contribute some material for a golf piece a staffer was writing on putting. Instead, Jenkins wrote the piece on his own and submitted it. The 3,000-word piece, titled “Lockwrists and Cage Cases,” was accepted

⁸ MacCambridge, 53.

⁹ Scott, 139.

and ran on July 16, 1962.¹⁰ In the piece, Jenkins uses humor and self-deprecation, attacking the subject from the point of view of the everyman, and widening that view to encompass the experiences of the pro athlete.

The devoted golfer is an anguished soul who has learned a lot about putting just as an avalanche victim has learned a lot about snow. He knows he has used putters with straight shafts, dull shafts, glass shafts, oak shafts, and Great-uncle Clyde's World War I saber, which he found in the attic. Attached to these shafts have been putter heads made of large lumps of lead ("weight makes the ball roll true," salesmen explain) and slivers of aluminum ("lightness makes the ball roll true," salesmen explain) as well as every other substance harder than a marshmallow. He knows he has tried 41 different stances, inspired by everyone from the club pro to Fred Astaire in *Flying Down to Rio*, and just as many different strokes. Still, he knows he is hopelessly trapped. He can't putt, and he never will, and the only thing left for him to do is bury his head in the dirt and live the rest of his life like a radish.¹¹

Jenkins came aboard shortly thereafter, and began to establish himself as a premiere writer in the areas of golf and college football. In the summer of 1963, Laguerre gave Jenkins the college football beat for the magazine, and it was there that he was first able to develop a national following and reputation as the leading chronicler of the sport. Soon thereafter, he took over the magazine's golf beat as well, covering the majors annually and nurturing a legion of sources and contacts that made him a fixture on the professional golfers' tour. His influence grew in both sports through the '60s – he was regularly assigned to cover the most important national "event" games, and made his reputation by his ability to capture the essence of events and deliver an interpretation that would be relevant when the weekly magazine reached readers' mailboxes five days later.

By the early '70s, now the most recognizable American sportswriter, Jenkins increased his profile with the publication of his first novel, "Semi-Tough," which became

¹⁰ MacCambridge, 121.

¹¹ Dan Jenkins, *The Dogged Victims of Inexorable Fate: A Love-Hate Celebration of Golfers and Their Game* (Little, Brown, Boston, 1970), 51.

a best-seller and was made into a major motion picture soon thereafter. His career and writing flourished under the editorship of Laguerre, who gave Jenkins the freedom to cover Super Bowls, Olympics and whatever suited him, and also allowed him extensive leeway in his writing. Laguerre stepped down as managing editor of *Sports Illustrated* in 1974, and Jenkins had a less congenial relationship with subsequent editors at the magazine. Under the leadership of Gilbert Rogin, who succeeded Laguerre, Jenkins wrote less frequently, and the magazine reduced its golf coverage in an effort to place more emphasis on football, baseball and basketball. He eventually left in 1984 after feuding with the senior editorial staff over the quality of his golf coverage.¹² His distinctive writing style, however, remained in the DNA of the magazine through his tenure and beyond and continued to flavor sports writing at the highest levels. His *Sports Illustrated* legacy, along with his later writing, was, according to his daughter Sally Jenkins, a sports columnist for the *Washington Post*, instilled with the “constant stripping away of pretense, and of the profligate excesses of feeling that surround sports, to find the real people and truths underneath. An unwavering effort to think about things plainly and thoroughly, the better to describe them. Sound judgments, about what's funny and not, what's poignant and not, what's worthy and what is not. Constant restless experiments with form, and a lifelong refusal to go with the crowd, or to mail one in.”¹³

Golf Coverage

Golf is most likely the sport nearest to Dan Jenkins' heart. He was a skilled golfer himself in his youth, and began covering majors while working at the *Fort Worth Press*.

¹² Crawford, 9.

¹³ Sally Jenkins, “Another Side of Dad: The rest of the World has its view of Dan Jenkins, and I Have Mine,” *Golf Digest*, July 2, 2005.

He first covered the Masters in Augusta in 1951, and covered it every year thereafter. He developed an extremely deep and wide-ranging network of relationships throughout the sport, and eventually became nearly as much of a celebrity within golf circles as the leading professionals. But much of his success stems from his ability to sheer back the excesses of professional golf and lay bare the humanistic elements of the sport. Golf had always been an endeavor rich in literary elements, and writers of renown had taken it up as their canvas throughout the 20th century. Jenkins assumed the mantle of leading voice of the links during the 1960s, and in the process changed the style of golf reportage. “Jenkins eschewed the approach of Herbert Warren Wind, Alistair Cooke, P.A. Ward-Thomas and Henry Longhurst, who wrote paeans to the glories and traditions of the game. Jenkins dissects golf good-naturedly . . . happily trapped in a love-hate relationship with the game of golf.”¹⁴

Indeed, Jenkins golf coverage would seem to be the polar opposite to the high-minded, erudite writing that historically follows the sport (and appears annually as the players approach the first tee each April at The Masters). His take on the game is deeply rooted in the experiences of his Texas youth, spent on the courses of North Texas with an array of colorful characters that were far removed from the country-club elements of the sport. In 1965, he revisited the golf of his youth in “The Glory Game at Goat Hills,” a bonus piece that introduces readers to the amateur golfing subculture of Forth Worth and the denizens of their favorite public course, Worth Hills:

When the truck was there, out of sight of passing cars, one of which might have Grandma in it, you could be pretty sure that not only was Cecil out on the course, but so, most likely, were Tiny, Easy, Magoo, and Foot the Free, Ernie, Matty, Rush, Grease Repellent, Little Joe, Weldon the Oath, Jerry, John the Band-Aid and Moron Tom. And me. I was called Dump, basically because of what so many

¹⁴ Crawford, 5.

partners thought I did to them. There would be an excellent chance that all of us would be in one hollering, protesting, club-slinking fiftensome, betting \$800 million. Anyhow, when Cecil the Parachute had the truck hidden, you knew for sure that the game was on.¹⁵

His work is replete with examples of this passion for the human elements of the game, and similarly, in his outrage toward the creeping commercialization of the pro tour and the separation from the common hacker. Jenkins is also well known for his work throughout the careers of Jack Nicklaus and Arnold Palmer, both of whom he formed a lasting relationship with and wrote about extensively.

College Football

In the 1950s and '60s, when Jenkins began his career as a sportswriter, college football dominated the American sports landscape in the fall. Professional football was popular in metropolitan areas in the North, but barely on the radar screen across the South. Jenkins was raised on college football. On Nov. 30, 1936, at the age of six, his father took him to one of the biggest football games of all time, when Texas Christian University, with Sammy Baugh, and Southern Methodist, both undefeated, played for the Texas crown.¹⁶ The college-football beat was Jenkins' first assignment upon coming aboard at *Sports Illustrated*, and he took the post with a vision toward changing the magazine's approach to the sport. *Sports Illustrated*, less than a decade old at the time, was still struggling to shed its Northeastern smoking-jacket sensibility, a sin that was especially evident to a Texan, where college football was a singular obsession. As the national sports weekly, Jenkins said, the magazine needed to give its coverage a national flavor. The year he took the beat, 1963, was the first year *Sports Illustrated* chose a

¹⁵ Jenkins, *Inexorable*, 29.

¹⁶ MacCambridge, 50.

national college football champion. By the mid-1960s, it was accepted in college-football circles that wherever Jenkins was that Saturday, that was the most important game of the week. And what he delivered in the pages of the magazine was far from what was found in Sunday morning sports pages. “His stories read like a combination between a column and a game story, with more analysis than the former and more humor than the latter. Implicit in any of his pieces was that it was the definitive, last work on whatever event was being covered.”¹⁷

In addition to bringing the magazine in tune with the national pulse of the sport, Jenkins’ writing examined the personality and culture of college football and its most colorful characters. The majority of his stories during this era glowed with genuine affection toward the sport and its inhabitants. He wrote profiles with an enlightening, not revealing, style that captured the spirit of the icons of the day, from Bear Bryant to Joe Namath to Darrell Royal, and delighted in reporting on the excesses of college-football fandom. A 1963 bonus piece, titled “The Disciples of Saint Darrell,” is a narrative that follows a group of obsessed Texas fans as they drink their way from game to game over the course of an October weekend. Jenkins uses dialogue and a scene-by-scene structure, and what emerges is a dead-on portrait of 1960s Southwestern culture, complete with big cars, big hats and big oil, placed within the context of sports.

Joe Coffman was a modern Texan. This meant that Mary Sue was a pretty, loving and understanding wife, that his sons, Bobby, six, and Larry, four, were healthy and happy, that his business was successful, that his ranch-type home was comfortable, with all the built-ins manufacturers sell these days, that he had an Oldsmobile Starfire and an Impala (both convertibles.) Being a modern Texan also meant that Joe Coffman might not recognize a cow pony if it were tied on a leash in his backyard, that he despised Stetson hats, that he liked cashmere sports coats, pin-collar shirts, Las Vegas, playing golf at Colonial Country Club, Barbra Streisand

¹⁷ MacCambridge, 148.

(“Think she can’t sing?”) good food, good booze, Barry Goldwater and, more than anything, the Texas Longhorns.¹⁸

In 1970, Jenkins published a collection of his work on the sport while at *Sports Illustrated* in the book “Saturday’s America.” The book encompasses probably the most influential writings of his career, during a time at which his distinctive voice reverberated throughout college football, and before the National Football League usurped the spotlight and shifted the national focus of the football weekend from Saturdays to Sundays.

Humor and Voice

Jenkins’ use of humor is central to his style. David L. Vanderwerken, writing in *Modern Fiction Studies*, said “Jenkins has become our Mencken, outrageously and unabashedly prejudiced, jaundiced, eccentric, ornery, taking well-aimed slapshots at all sorts of tomfoolery across the spectrum of contemporary sport.”¹⁹ His sense of humor is rooted in his Texas background, and he delighted in good-natured comedy aimed at the inhabitants of his home state. His satirical use of Southwestern dialect is common throughout his *Sports Illustrated* writing, a defining element of his style, and also became prevalent when he began publishing fiction.

Humor was also his number one weapon as a satirist, skewering his chosen villains, from bowl officials to television to boosters to spoiled athletes with broadly drawn caricature. A fellow Southwestern humor writer, Larry L. King, observed “There is social comedy in Jenkins’ work, delightful airings of the latest cultural absurdities, and some of the funniest one-liners since Mel Brooks or Woody Allen sat down to tickle the

¹⁸ Dan Jenkins, *Saturday’s America: The Chronic Outrage and Giddy Passion of College Football*, (Little, Brown, Boston, 1970), 64.

¹⁹ David L. Vanderwerken, *Dan Jenkins Needle*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 33, 1 (1978: Spring), 125.

typewriter.”²⁰ Jenkins sees humor as an essential component of his work, but emphasizes that, for it to be effective, it must not be the sole purpose. “It ain't funny if it ain't grounded in truth. Anybody can read a joke book. True humor comes out of accuracy,” he said.²¹ Golf, being his sport of choice, offered Jenkins endless opportunity as a humorist. On such opportunity was “Out There with Slow-Play Fay and Play-Slow Flo, in which Jenkins had some fun with women golfers before “making his peace” with women pros:

Where I came from, a so-called lady golfer was always something to be hollered at, like an overheating '53 Buick blocking traffic, or a sullen waitress who couldn't remember to put cheese on the burger and leave off the onions, the dummy. Hey you. You up there on the green with legs like tree bark, and the schoolteacher skirt and the one-foot putt. It's *good*. I give you that putt, all right? So take your 135 shots back to the Mixed Grill and jump into your vodka martini with your nitwit husband who took you father's thieving money and built the country club and won't let you play here but once a week – in front of *me*. Go shell some peas or crochet an afghan or do whatever women ought to be doing instead of cluttering up a golf course. Fore! *Fore, Agnes Zilch!*²²

Literary Journalism

Jenkins career at *Sports Illustrated* coincided with the advent of various forms of experimental magazine writing that was beginning to have a significant effect on American journalism. At the same time that both he and the magazine began to solidify their positions and American readers became accustomed to a national sports weekly with writing standards far superior to that of daily sports reportage, Jenkins' contemporaries at institutions such as the *New Yorker*, *Esquire* and *New York Magazine* were transforming the standard approach to non-fiction periodical writing. And whether he was reporting on

²⁰ Crawford, 4.

²¹ Interview, Dan Jenkins, Sept. 30, 2005.

²² Dan Jenkins, “Out There with Slow-Play Fay and Play-Slow Flo,” *Sports Illustrated*, Aug. 9, 1971, 50.

or previewing sporting events, profiling athletes or examining more arcane aspects of American sports culture, Jenkins' employed many of the techniques that were being developed by the best writers of his generation. In fact, one of the most identifiable aspects of "New Journalism" was the writer's use of voice and perspective in pieces that previously would have adhered to strictly objective newspaper style. Blackie Sherrod, Jenkins' editor at the *Fort Worth Press*, noticed this technique in Jenkins' work years before he even got to *Sports Illustrated*. "Dan was doing something when he worked for the *Press* that later became very popular with Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese and Hunter Thompson – the New Journalism," said Sherrod. "Dan Jenkins was doing that when he was 19 years old, and he didn't know it. It was new and different. It's a trait of transporting himself into the person he's writing about. He doesn't have to say 'He thought...' He becomes that person."²³

Writers such as David Halberstam have suggested that the roots of New Journalism were in the sports pages, where writers and columnists had the latitude to use innovative techniques, and that freedom manifested itself within Jenkins' work at *Sports Illustrated* in the area of style, but he also used methods that would become associated with literary journalism and its purveyors. "The exaggerated nonfiction was ascendant at the time – Tom Wolfe was defining the genre and Hunter Thompson would take it to a different realm years later in *Rolling Stone* – but it was nonetheless a groundbreaking advance in sports journalism, which was energized by the transfusion."²⁴ Jenkins himself tends to view the very idea of New Journalism or Literary Journalism as another example of the pretension that he so passionately abhors:

²³ MacCambridge, 57.

²⁴ MacCambridge, 153.

"New Journalism" is bullshit. There was always good journalism, and still is. Tom Wolfe was a Gotham friend, and I knew Gay fairly well. They were simply good journalists, nothing new about them, except Tom popularized sticking brand names into pieces, which, by the way, really seem dated later on. If you want to talk about good journalism, you don't need to go past Runyon or John Lardner's columns in *Newsweek* in the fifties, which were pure gold. I'll let any Talese or Wolfe try to top Runyon's lead on the Capone trial, 1930: "Al Capone was quietly dressed when he arrived at the courthouse yesterday morning, except for a hat of pearly white, emblematic, no doubt, of purity."²⁵

Fiction

In July of 1972, Jenkins published his first novel, "Semi-Tough," a gritty, closet-exposing yet humorous account of professional football that immediately caught the attention of readers, not just those already aware of his sports journalism, but many from outside the orbit of spectator sports. The book is written from the point of view of pro football veteran Billy Clyde Puckett, and written in an irreverent, straight-forward tone that regularly veers into locker-room racism and misogyny, and became, for the time, the type of eye-opening peer-behind-the-curtain experience for professional football that Jim Bouton's "Ball Four" had been for professional baseball just two years prior. The genre of fiction allowed Jenkins to use the methods of caricature and parody to create a commentary on the excesses of the American spectator sports. The book was praised for its skillful writing and Jenkins' ability to recreate the Southwestern dialect and attitudes, but was criticized for the non-judgmental tone taken in regards to some of those very attitudes. Halberstam, reviewing the novel for the *New York Times Book Review*, took note of the subversive facets of "Semi-Tough": "It mocks contemporary American mores. It mocks Madison Avenue. It mocks racial attitudes. It mocks writers like me. And it even mocks sports writers for *Sports Illustrated* like Dan Jenkins."²⁶

²⁵ Interview, Dan Jenkins, Sept. 30, 2005.

The book was extremely successful, eventually being made into a profitable motion picture, and it launched Jenkins' career as a sports novelist, which would continue through the remainder of his writing career. Through his fiction, Jenkins began to establish himself as more of a social and cultural critic, an extension of what he had been doing through his sports writing at *Sports Illustrated*. He began to reveal himself as an American satirist in the grain of Mark Twain and H.L. Mencken, aiming his invective at the numerous targets that continually showed themselves on the spectrum of contemporary sports.²⁷ As a novelist, he stayed in the venues where he had spent the most time writing non-fiction, setting his work in the golf and football communities, venturing outside of sports only for 1981's "Baja Oklahoma," which deals with country music. His fiction leans heavily on humor and one-liners, and for all the emphasis placed on his skill in this area by the devotees of his work, critics often found Jenkins had the tendency to go for laughs while ignoring the annoyances of plot and characterization. Of "Semi-Tough," long-time *Washington Post* book reviewer Jonathan Yardley said "No one disputes that football players can swear with the best of them, but locker-room lingo hardly compensates for slipshod plotting, clichéd characterizations and slick sentimentality."²⁸ Others felt Jenkins meandering plots and over-populated narratives filled with disconnected scenes and activity fell within the tradition of American satirical fiction from Twain to Faulkner.²⁹ Indeed, he seemed to use the outlet of fiction to expand

²⁶ David Halberstam, "Semi-Tough" review, *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1972, BR2.

²⁷ Vanderwerken, 126.

²⁸ Jonathan Yardley, "Super Studs, Super Bowl, Super Bummer," *Washington Post*, Sept. 17, 1972, BW8.

²⁹ Vanderwerken, 129.

upon the threads of satire and commentary that had always found their way into his sports journalism.

Rebel at Heart

Within Dan Jenkins' work is a constant underlying strain of subversion, and both in his writing, and in his life, he placed the blame for much of his misfortune at the feet of the incompetent, meddling, and, above all, pretentious editors who dared block his path. He dedicated his 1989 compilation of columns and sports writing, "You Call it Sports, But I Say It's a Jungle Out There," to "all the poets who've had their funniest leads rewritten by imbeciles, their best quotes killed by quote Nazis, their favorite kicker lines chopped off by mysterious phantoms, and their expense accounts chewed on by eunuchs who've never been to Beverly Hills."³⁰ His career was marked by relationships with two legendary editors who were renowned for their support and encouragement of writers: Blackie Sherrod and André Laguerre. Under the tutelage of these two, Jenkins style was allowed to develop and flourish; other editors, in his eyes, did not measure up, and run-ins were frequent. At *Sports Illustrated* in the '60s and '70s, Jenkins said, "Andre let us write. Writers were kings, editors were to be tortured and punished, the poor bastards. They carried clipboards, wore three-piece suits, hid from Andre, didn't hang out at the bar with Andre, and rode trains. It was as it should have been."³¹

Eventually, it was his deteriorating relationship with editors that lead to his departure from *Sports Illustrated* in 1984. With Laguerre long gone, there was a faction of editors at the magazine that believed Jenkins was devoting more energy to fiction than to his work for *Sports Illustrated*. The issue came to a head over his golf coverage.

³⁰ Dan Jenkins, *You Call It Sports*, Dedication.

³¹ Interview, Dan Jenkins, Sept. 30, 2005.

Shortly after his resignation, Jenkins characterized the break-up: “I got mad at them after 22 years. I didn’t like the managing editor. We had a big difference about the quality of my golf writing, and since I knew a whole lot more about it than he did, and since I had as much journalistic experience as he did and because I’d written more than 500 stories for that magazine, I didn’t think I ought to take that.”³² Upon his exit, he wrote a resignation letter that would become legendary around *Sports Illustrated*: “I’m going to relieve you the worry about what to do with your golf coverage, because I shan’t be writing that for you anymore.”³³

Of course, by that time, Jenkins was established as one of the greats of his chosen profession, and he moved on to other publications and devoted himself further to fiction. And as he resists intrusion in his work by editors, he seems to have a similar distaste for academics and any sort of analysis of his work in this vein. Nowhere in his work will you find Jenkins’ own description of his style or his place in the pantheon of sports writing. His daughter Sally attempted it in a tribute she wrote for him upon the presentation of an honor for him from the Golf Writers Association of America in 2005, writing that she took three lessons from him as a writer: “the absoluteness of his concentration, the contrariness of his thinking, and the depth of his respect for good writing. All of which together can only be called a kind of integrity.”³⁴ Jenkins view of all attempts to analyze his work, and all academic evaluation of sports writing in general, can be characterized by an anecdote he used to introduce “The Best American Sports Writing of 1995”

³² Mansfield.

³³ MacCambridge, 265.

³⁴ S. Jenkins.

compilation, of which he was guest editor. He tells of a sportswriter friend of his who was invited to a symposium that was to answer the question “Why are sports important?”:

For a couple of hours, he did his best to listen to the professors and psychologists as they fell deeply in love with the sound of their own voices. Finally, the question was put to my friend, the sports writer. Why did he think sports were important? “I really don’t know, he said. “Can I go home now?”³⁵

³⁵ Dan Jenkins, Glenn Stout, editors, *The Best American Sports Writing*, (Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1995), xxii.

CHAPTER 3
FRANK DEFORD: NARRATIVE JOURNALISM IN SPORTS

It was a wonderful era. There was extraordinary freedom. And we were very lucky, which is why I stayed in sports. I didn't stay in sports, I stayed at Sports Illustrated.
–Frank Deford, March 23, 2006¹

In the spring of 1962, Frank Deford was a graduating senior at Princeton University. He had been the editor of the *Daily Princetonian*, and, benefiting from the tendency of Time, Inc. properties to give preferential treatment to Ivy League graduates, arrived at the Time & Life building for an early morning interview, ostensibly with all of the magazines under the *Time* umbrella. Before an hour had passed, the 23-year-old Deford had made it clear to his suitors that he had no interest in even speaking with representatives from *Time* or *Life*. “(*Time* and *Life*) were sort of the stars back then, but I said I was just not interested in it. They couldn't understand it,” Deford said. “I didn't think the writing was very good. *Life* was just picture captions, and *Time* was very stylized. I didn't like it that it didn't have any bylines. I said, ‘Why do you want to go write somewhere where you're anonymous?’ I guess I had great vanity even then.”² The choice, though not a “Machiavellian” one, paid dividends. Before lunch, the editors at *Sports Illustrated* were attuned to the fact that an undergraduate job candidate had turned down *Time* and *Life* flat, and had picked the fledgling sports magazine as his one and only option.

¹ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

² Deford.

Though he would spend the next 28 years writing about sports for the magazine with which he chose to pursue employment that day, his decision had nothing to do with a love of sports. In fact, it had everything to do with writing style. Deford, even at that early age, knew he wanted to the opportunity to try to write long-form, narrative journalism, and he was aware that *Sports Illustrated* was a venue that would eventually allow him to practice that craft. Later that spring, he embarked on a journalism career during which he would define a new style of reporting on sports, a style that mirrored the type of journalistic innovation that was occurring at a select group of American magazines. Once he became established at *Sports Illustrated*, he became synonymous with a type of reportage that was rare at the time: long, in-depth, analysis-drenched narrative writing that, over the years, became a signature of the magazine and of Deford. He would go on to earn a string of Sportswriter of the Year awards and become the name in the byline that was most associated with *Sports Illustrated* during the years when those words held their most influence over the literary and sports communities.

Biography

Frank Deford was born December 16, 1938, into an upper-class Baltimore family with a history of wealth and achievement. His grandfather had owned the Deford Tanning Company in the late 19th century, distributing leather products on the East Coast. His father, Benjamin F. Deford, Jr., a 1926 Princeton graduate, worked for Bell Telephone in New York after graduation, and eventually moved south to Richmond, Va., where he met and married Louise McAdams, a banker's daughter, in 1934. The family ended up back in Baltimore, where Frank spent most of his childhood. His father never achieved much

financial success, but Frank and his two brothers lived a comfortable life and all attended private school.³

As a child, Deford harbored no deep-seated ambition to be a sportswriter, but as far back as he can remember, he knew he wanted to devote his life to writing.

I knew I wanted to be a writer. When do you write, when you're 7 or 8 years old? As soon as I could write, I wanted to be a writer. There was no question about it. I remember putting out a newspaper when I was 12 years old, mimeographing it for the class. As soon as I got old enough to be on the paper at high school, I was. I won a national short story award when I was about 13 years old. I wrote everything, I wrote short stories, I wrote for the newspaper, was eventually editor of the newspaper, I would write all sorts of columns and funny things. I just wrote.⁴

At Princeton, he spent a good portion of his time working for the *Daily Princetonian*, first as a reporter, covering sports and other assignments, and later as the managing editor of the paper. He was expelled for a year from the university and took another year off, during which he put in six months of military service.⁵ In Baltimore, he had grown up reading the columnists in the Baltimore papers, and had always admired them, but felt that sports writers imposed artificial limits on themselves. In fact, while at Princeton, he was accepted to a prestigious writing class taught by writer-in-residence Kingsley Amis, then one of the top English novelists. Amis asked each member of the class to list three writers that have had a profound influence on them. Deford wrote down Shakespeare, J.D. Salinger and sports columnist Red Smith. Amis voiced his displeasure, and later used the story of Deford's selection as the basis for an article in a British newspaper on the ignorance of American students.⁶

³ MacCambridge, 119.

⁴ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

⁵ MacCambridge, 119.

⁶ Frank Deford, *The World's Tallest Midget: The Best of Frank Deford*, (Little Brown, Boston, 1987) 10.

Though Deford began to envision a career in sports writing for himself and considered himself a student of the craft, he correctly observed that the focus of the sports writing profession and the focal point of the sports page was the daily sports column. Deford never believed that he had the necessary skills to be a successful columnist – to turn out a set piece of a few hundred words every day that would enlighten and enthrall a regular readership, as Red Smith, whom Deford admired greatly, did through his career.

I didn't aspire to be a columnist, which, if you were going to be a sports writer, you wanted to be a columnist. The way it worked then, the hierarchy was, the top reporter on the staff covered the baseball team. That was the biggest assignment. I guess maybe in the South it was different. But where I grew up, that was it. That was the top beat. And then, beyond that, you were the columnist. And I didn't want to cover baseball or any sport, and I didn't want to be a columnist. So I thought that magazines were probably better.⁷

Sports Illustrated

That prophetic interview session in April of 1962 did indeed lead to an offer of a position as a *Sports Illustrated* reporter/researcher for Deford, an offer which he eagerly accepted, and when his Princeton graduation took place later that spring, he was already settled in Manhattan and settling in at the magazine. At first, the majority of his time was taken up with his responsibilities as a researcher, but he took any opportunity that availed itself to get his writing into the magazine, often contributing to the back-of-the-book features such as Basketball Week and Baseball Week when regular staffers were on vacation. "It gave me a chance to show my stuff, to show that I could turn a phrase and that sort of thing. And then I sort of agitated for stories. You sort of had to push for them," Deford said.⁸ In his second year, he got the chance to write a cover story on

⁷ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

⁸ Deford.

Princeton basketball star Bill Bradley, whom he had known from his days as an undergraduate, and began to pick up more writing assignments as time went on. Early on, he was considered by many of his peers to be a lazy and undisciplined writer, prone to mistakes and lack of precision in his writing. During his formative years at the magazine he came under the tutelage of editor Jerry Tax, who recognized Deford's talents and worked with him to harness his skills.⁹

Tax encouraged Deford to apply for the basketball beat, which had come open, and championed him to the magazine's top editors. During those years, *Sports Illustrated* assigned a single writer to cover both college and professional basketball. "I had college and pro, which speaks more to the way that basketball was viewed in those days . . . Nobody else wanted it. It was going to be me, or they were going to ask somebody to do it who didn't really want to do it . . . All the sudden I was in the magazine all the time," Deford said.¹⁰ While covering basketball, Deford, like the rest of the magazine's national beat reporters, began to reap the benefits of the *Sports Illustrated* growing reach and popularity, covering the most significant games and figures of the day. He also began to make inroads into what remained his eventual goal as a writer: working on long, in-depth feature pieces. During the basketball off-season, he was often asked to pitch in with baseball coverage and assist with other beats, but he also got the chance to pitch his own feature stories, which occasionally ran as bonus pieces. He made an effort to choose extremely off-beat subjects: a basketball coach who left the game to become a shoe

⁹ MacCambridge, 167.

¹⁰ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

salesman, an inveterate handicapper/gambler from Rhode Island, Little Irvy the 20-ton frozen whale carnival exhibit:

Little Irvy weighs twenty tons, most of it blubber, the rest meat and oil, and he reclines at something more than thirty-eight feet long. He has been dead – or more euphemistically, refrigerated – for more than two years now, and more than half a million people have seen him, including at least 50,000 underprivileged children that Jerry has let in on the cuff. All other are separated from 35 cents for the privilege.¹¹

“In those days at *Sports Illustrated*, it was a much broader canvas that you were allowed to paint on. We did travel stories. We did off-beat stories. They don’t do off-beat stories anymore. If it’s not on ESPN, it doesn’t get into *Sports Illustrated*, at least not very often,” he said.¹² A few years after covering college and pro basketball, the editors decided to break up the beats, and Deford was to concentrate on the professional game. He continued in that capacity until 1970, covering the New York Knicks unlikely championship that year, and then requested reassignment. He thoroughly enjoyed his years covering basketball, visiting 48 of the 50 states before the age of 28 and gaining a measure of status on the national sports media scene, but he felt at the time his commitment had run its course. By that time, he had developed a characteristic style of profile writing that gleaned insight into his subjects that few writers would approach, a skill that would propel him to literary success in his next endeavor.¹³

Master of the Bonus Piece

Deford approached the editors around that time and requested to be assigned to a full-time feature writing position, his long-time ambition and the area of sports

¹¹ Deford, *The World’s Tallest Midget*, 276.

¹² Deford, 276.

¹³ Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2004. Farmington Hills, Mich., Thomson Gale. 2004. <http://galenet.galegroup.com.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/servlet/BioRC>.

journalism which he would find most suited to his talents. Set free to devote all his time to examining the forgotten fringes of *Sports Illustrated's* area of purview, Deford started “an extended tour of the margins of American sport, defining the breadth of *Sports Illustrated's* coverage as he went. ... In a short time, Deford became *Sports Illustrated's* most reliable choice for an out of the way (which meant, at the time, a typical) bonus piece or a penetrating profile. In Laguerre's complex story mix, Deford's pieces often served as a counterpoint to the harder sports coverage that increasingly dominated the front of the book.”¹⁴

With his reassignment away from game stories and the coverage of the day in, day out developments of a particular sport, Deford began to define his writing style, and to develop a way of telling a story that separated him from the traditional techniques used to write about sports. The tools he used in tackling a story about, say, Roller Derby, or a profile of a lesser known sports personality, were many of the techniques used by the writers that were defining the field of New Journalism at the time. He began to craft his feature articles in the form of short stories, allowing them to develop toward a conclusion, and eschewing the use of linear structure. “I don't even think I have a distinct style, but if, in fact, I do, I would still believe that constructing and pacing a story would be my strongest assets. Those qualities are usually lacking with most American sports writers, too. Our stories tend to be more comprehensive than well formed, and we put too much emphasis on compiling facts, rather than on how we choose to dole them out.”¹⁵ Certainly, Deford had a gift for longer pieces, and a feel for structure that fit perfectly

¹⁴ MacCambridge, 167.

¹⁵ Deford, *The World's Tallest Midget*, 10.

with the weekly stage for writers that Laguerre had created at the back of his magazine. His stories were meticulously crafted, and importance placed on structure and the building of emotional resonance over the course of 5,000 words ultimately delivering an affecting conclusion.

The trick with longer pieces is you've got to have structure. A lot of people think a long piece is just a short piece that's written longer. Having a dramatic structure to it is very important. And I've had a knack for that. I could put stories together, I could make them work. I remember a guy named Tom Callahan once said (he was a pretty good newspaper writer), Tom said, "Deford in his stories strings up a bunch of bells, and then at the end, he goes along and rings them all." And that was, first of all, very complimentary, but it was pretty accurate. I knew how to tease."¹⁶

During this time, he settled into a pattern of devoting most of his time to feature pieces, while keeping his hand in event coverage, handling occasional assignments on the tennis, horse racing, and other secondary sports that tickled his fancy. His long features became an anticipated facet of the magazine's menu, and he began to graduate from finding the wacky, unusual people and phenomena on the fringes of American sports to tackling serious issues on the sporting scene and profiling the more complex and intriguing personalities. A 1975 profile which delved deeply into the life of controversial 1920s and '30s tennis star Bill Tilden, who suffered through an ignominious post-tennis descent into poverty and humiliation, marked a turning point into more serious subjects for Deford. The story was expanded into the book "Big Bill Tilden: The Triumphs and the Tragedy," published the following year, to positive reviews. In the *Washington Post*, reviewer Jonathan Yardley wrote that Deford "does not overdo the amateur psychology,

¹⁶ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

but makes some judgments, that seem, on the evidence, sound.”¹⁷ Psychoanalysis began to seep more and more into Deford’s work; he even acquired the moniker “Frank DeFreud” in the halls of *Sports Illustrated*. As his own profile widened, he was afforded the latitude and time he needed by the editors to fully investigate his subjects and round out his material. On a typical piece, he would spend time researching before beginning his primary reporting, spend a week or more with a subject or topic, and then spend a week or more writing the article. When he became more sought after for book-length projects (and also because of an attempt by the *New York Times* to hire him away from *Sports Illustrated*), Deford struck a hand-shake deal with *Sports Illustrated* management that allowed him to work nine months a year for the magazine and have three months to pursue personal projects.

Another conscious choice Deford made was to concentrate on subjects that did not overlap with the more current subjects that dominated the front of the magazine (and which everyone at *Sports Illustrated*, from editors on down, understood drew the majority of the magazine’s readership.) Deford also avoided athletes in the spotlight because he was often bored by them, and felt while they were “fabulous to watch,” they were less so to write about. With those he did choose as subjects, he developed a strategy for combining elements of exposition and narration with anecdote to go beyond what had previously passed for sports features. Deford searched for subjects that came ready made with the dramatic structure he craved. Though he abhorred violence, boxing often lent itself to the type of story arc he was trying to create, as in “The Anglo Meets the Indian,” which chronicled a boxing death:

¹⁷ Jonathan Yardley, “In Sunlight, In Shadow: Big Bill Tilden: The Triumph and Tragedy,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 1976, B5.

The problem is, very few poor young fighters ever do grow up to be Leonard or Holmes. Instead, every year, a number of them grow up to be corpses, to be Andy Balaba or Maxwell Myaica or Charles Love or Duk Koo Kim or Naoki Kobayashi. Or perhaps as bad – who know? – they grow up to be Shin Hee Sup or Chris Naidoo or Darryl Stitch or Boom Boom Mancini or Yoshimu Oyama. They grow up with blood on their hands. On Lincoln’s birthday 1982, under the photograph of Vito Romero, Benjamin Davis and Louis Wade walked into the Civic Auditorium in Albuquerque to fight each other in the semifinals of the New Mexico Golden Gloves, 132-pound novice class. You could not hope to meet two nicer boys. One would help kill the other in the ring that night.¹⁸

“After a while, some of the newspapers began to assay features in the *Sports Illustrated* fashion, and now even many of the morning papers run long sports articles – what are known as ‘takeouts’ in newspaper terminology.”¹⁹ Deford never lost focus of the fact that his unique contribution to *Sports Illustrated* was secondary, but believed at the same time, as did Laguerre, that his work had the capacity to offer something lasting to readers. “Laguerre said to me once, ‘All you’ve got to do is have one good story in a magazine. If a person reads a magazine, and there’s one good story in it, they’ll come back, Deford said. “I never forgot that. And it’s true.”²⁰

Beyond *Sports Illustrated*

By the late 1970s, Deford was the most recognizable name on the *Sports Illustrated* masthead. He would earn the title of National Sports Writer of the Year, voted on by his peers, six times during the 1980s. His gentleman’s agreement with *Sports Illustrated* management allowed him to pursue a number of book projects while he remained on the masthead at the magazine. Along with the Tilden book, he co-authored a number of books with top athletes, including Billy Jean King, Jack Kramer and Arthur Ashe. At the

¹⁸ Deford, *The World’s Tallest Midget*, 90.

¹⁹ Deford, *The World’s Tallest Midget*, 10.

²⁰ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

beginning of the 1980s, Deford embarked on a second career as a writer of fiction, and has continued to pursue that path, publishing half a dozen novels over the course of the last 25 years, and generally garnering positive reviews. In 1981, he published his first novel, the football-themed “Everybody’s All-American,” which told the story of a former college-football hero in the aftermath of a failed professional career. Reviewing the book in the *Washington Post*, Charles Trueheart wrote “Deford, to his great credit, betrays neither the condescension for (his protagonist’s) delusions nor contempt for the system that betrays him.”²¹ The book was later made into a motion picture. In the years since, Deford has tried his hand at a number of fiction genres, including mystery, war and historical fiction. In addition, he became a regular contributor to National Public Radio, delivering regular commentaries on sports and culture. Some of the best were published in the collection “The Best of Frank Deford” in 2000. Deford eventually left *Sports Illustrated* in 1989 to become managing editor of *The National*, a short-lived daily sports newspaper financed by a Mexican media mogul. Though the split was rather contentious and devolved into personal disputes between Deford and some *Sports Illustrated* editors, he returned to the magazine years later and has continued to contribute on and off throughout the years.²²

From his earliest writing experiences, Deford has engaged in an inner struggle common to accomplished sports writers concerning the merits of devoting their talents to the subject of sport. As a writer whose name became most associated with the magazine he worked for, he has reaped the benefits of prominence on the sports scene, but has also

²¹ Charles Trueheart, “Novel Reading,” *The Washington Post*, Oct. 4, 1981, A1.

²² MacCambridge, 306.

striven to make an intellectual mark outside of that realm. In recent years, he has veered away from the subject of sports in his fiction. He makes a point of defining himself as a writer who chooses sports as a subject, and not a sports writer.

When it began to occur to me, seven or eight years into the profession, that I was beginning to look like a lifer, I did spend agonizing hours at the bar, staring into another disappearing bourbon or talking over the quandary with other sportswriters of like conflict. I could visualize grandchildren coming up to me during my dotage and saying “Big Daddy, what did you do during the Vietnam War?” And I would reply that I had been at the NBA playoffs ... But finally, I resolved the issue with myself: that I am a writer, and that incidentally, I write mostly about sports, and what is important is to write well, the topic be damned.²³

Literary Journalism

Frank Deford’s rise to prominence as a journalist came during the 1970s, a time when the influence of the New Journalists, especially in the realm of magazine writing, was difficult to escape and unquestionably influential in determining the style and attitudes of emerging writers. The technique that Deford adopted that is most closely associated with the Literary Journalism style is that of narrative writing. As he graduated toward straight feature writing and began to limit his regular event coverage at the magazine, he gravitated toward stories that would allow him to employ a more narrative structure. The magazine’s bonus-piece venue was specifically appropriate for this type of writing, and Deford took advantage of the opportunity to create a specific style of sports writing that would have far-reaching influence in the field. Though he recognizes that sports writers who followed him were influenced by the choices he made, he spurns the idea that a single style defines his work at *Sports Illustrated*. “I write very differently depending on what piece I’m doing. I think you could take two or three pieces by me and

²³ Deford, *The World’s Tallest Midget*, 5.

not know it was written by the same guy. I don't know what my style was. It would change depending on the subject matter," Deford said.²⁴

Other aspects of Deford's work seem to deviate from the accepted tenets of Literary Journalism. Much of this is related to the editorial policies of *Sports Illustrated* and the culture that had developed at the magazine by the time Deford reached a certain status within its confines. "Nobody sent down a memo on it, but we didn't write that kind of personal journalism that those guys did. We did not place ourselves in the story. Every now and then there was a first-person piece. But essentially, ours was a little bit different."²⁵ In the same vein, the writing that was being done as *Sports Illustrated*, though it often rose to the level of what was in *Esquire* or the *New Yorker* at the time, did not receive the same recognition that was given to general interest or news-focused publications.

We were aware of them, but the trouble was that nobody paid any attention to *Sports Illustrated* because it was just sports. You write something for *Esquire*, and everybody would go crazy. There was just as good of stuff in *Sports Illustrated* every week, but it was sports, so nobody paid any attention. Every now and then somebody would say "the best written magazine in the country is *Sports Illustrated*." But the intelligencia didn't pay any attention to us. But by the same token, we were allowed to develop our own styles.²⁶

More than anything for Deford, the style that developed was the ability to expand the meaning of sporting events, personalities and subjects, and to use the topics to say something deeper about American culture and history. Deford calls this time his "Americana phase." With the stories he chose to pursue and the way in which he

²⁴ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

²⁵ Deford.

²⁶ Deford.

approached them, he increased the expectations for both sports and magazine journalism. Reviewing Deford's 1987 collection "The World's Tallest Midget: The Best of Frank Deford," author Michael M. Thomas wrote: "Frank Deford's real subject, like all the best American writing, is about being human, about being specifically American in ways that have made this land and its denizens the joy and despair and curiosity of the universe."²⁷ In Deford's best work, he was able to infuse his subjects with insight and weight that delivered an emotional impact on par with the best of American literary fiction. His work "comes alive from art and conviction that transcends recollection and turns it into myth. An example of this is likely his best known piece written for *Sports Illustrated*, "The Boxer and the Blonde," which ran originally in 1985 and tells the story of the 1941 Joe Louis-Billy Conn heavyweight title match, and was anthologized in "The Best American Sports Writing of the Century":

There was bedlam. It was wonderful. Men had been slugging it out for eons, and there had been 220 years of prizefighting, and there would yet be Marciano and the two Sugar Rays and Ali, but this was it. This was the best it have ever been and ever would be, the twelfth and thirteenth rounds of Louis and Conn on a warm night in New York just before the world went to hell. The people were standing and cheering for Conn, but it was really for the sport and for the moment and for themselves that they cheered. They could be part of it, and every now and then, for an instant, that is it, and it can't get any better. This was such a time in the history of games.²⁸

²⁷ Michael M. Thomas, "Games People Play," *The Washington Post*, May 17, 1987, 11.

²⁸ Halberstam, *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*, 499.

CHAPTER 4
ROY BLOUNT, JR.: DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN HUMORIST

The job (at Sports Illustrated) got me into fancy hotels and people's mamas' houses all over the country and taught me that if you have to write 5,000 words in a night, you can.

–Roy Blount, Jr.¹

Early in his tenure at *Sports Illustrated*, Roy Blount, Jr., had the occasion to interview his boyhood idol, Willie Mays. The legendary San Francisco Giant was notoriously disinclined to show any respect whatsoever to sports writers, and, at the time, Blount was severely limited in experience in that particular profession, having come to *Sports Illustrated* from the news and editorial department of a newspaper and having never before been assigned to a sports beat. During a post-game interview session with Mays, Blount recalled asking “Willie, do you realize that the last eight innings you lead off, you’ve gotten on base seven times?”

“Man,” Mays responded dismissively, “I don’t keep up with that shit.”²

The experience, and others like it that the sports writer inevitably encounters during the course of covering big-ticket professional sports in America, colored Blount’s experience at *Sports Illustrated*. But his reaction to such experiences and the unique lens he developed with which to examine the sports landscape speaks to why his contributions to the genre stood out. “I will never quite get over the sensation of realizing that my boyhood idol Willie Mays disliked me on sight ... All I want to happen to me in heaven

¹ Jerry Elijah Brown, *Roy Blount, Jr.*, (Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1990), 36.

² Roy Blount, Jr., *About Three Bricks Shy ... And the Load Filled Up*, (Random House, New York, 1980), 6.

is for Willie Mays to come up to me and say, by no means humbly, but appreciatively, ‘Do you realize that in the last eight descriptive sentences you written you’ve used only one adjective?’ ‘Man,’ I will say, ‘I don’t keep up with that shit’.”³

Blount’s response to the Mays incident is typical of his writing style. He is able to withstand the embarrassment that comes with subordinating oneself to a subject, as sports writers must do on a daily basis, and draw humor from it, bringing the reader into the writer’s tent. In this instance, Blount allows the reader to “identify with the writer, to realize that however great Mays may be, he still needs that writer, and to be grateful that the writer is in the social and rhetorical position to absorb the rebuke for the reader.”⁴

Blount’s contributions to *Sports Illustrated* and to American sports writing centered on his ability to maintain the outsider’s viewpoint, to find a way to get beyond traditional sports rhetoric and “angles,” and to deliver articles that rose above the genre of sports reportage and entered the realm of literary entertainment. His period as a sports writer was a short one, and, when viewing his distinguished career in hindsight, it is interesting to observe what elements of his now clearly defined style emerged while on the sports scene. He has been an extremely prolific writer with a massively varied output, from humor to fiction to screenplays to songs and beyond. And as a writer, he seems endlessly driven to expand the scope of his contributions, as he was while as *Sports Illustrated*. In 1988, he summarized his work in the *Playbill* for “Roy Blount’s Happy Hour and a Half: “For *Sports Illustrated*, where he was a staff writer from 1968 to 1975, he has rafted down the Amazon (attacked by a piranha, played baseball with the 1969 Chicago Cubs

³ Blount, 6.

⁴ Brown, 50.

(hit a baseball 350 feet) became (all but athletically) a virtual member of the Pittsburgh Steelers, and hung out with Reggie Jackson, Wilt Chamberlin, Yogi Berra and the world's oldest living lifeguard.”⁵

Biography

Though he was most definitely a child of the South, Roy Blount, Jr., was actually born in the Midwest, in Indianapolis, on Oct. 4, 1941. His father, Roy Sr., was born in the town of Hosford on the Florida Panhandle and his mother, Louise, spent her youth in Mississippi. Both attended Andrew Jackson High School in Jacksonville, Fla., and met at the Main Street Methodist Church in Jacksonville. The family moved around during Roy's early years, transferring through a series of sales jobs, before settling in Decatur, Ga., when Roy was still a toddler. His father moved through sales, banking and government positions, and the family ascended to an upper-middle class suburban existence throughout Roy's adolescence.⁶ Blount wrote for the school newspaper at Decatur High School and began to cover high school sports for the community newspaper, as well. When he 12-years-old, his father gave him a copy of “*Bury Me in an Old Press Box*,” by Nashville Banner sports editor Fred Russell, and he read the autobiography of legendary sport writer Grantland Rice when he was 13. Ironically, during his senior year of high school, he applied for and won a four-year scholarship to Vanderbilt University in Nashville that was named for Rice and judged by Russell.⁷

⁵ Brown, 36.

⁶ Brown, 8.

⁷ Brown, 8.

Blount attended Vanderbilt from 1959 through 1963, majoring in English and writing mostly news and editorials for the university newspaper, the *Vanderbilt Hustler*. It was at Vanderbilt that Blount began to develop his a seemingly contradictory outlook which encompassed deep respect and esteem for the traditions and mores of the South and steadfast liberal opinions concerning integration, which was the touchstone issue of the day, and politics in general. He grew to be a “slow-drawling paradox, a take-no-prisoners civil-rights advocate and unreconstructed liberal who found pleasure in the very institutions ... that were being savaged by the left-wing deconstructionists of the period.”⁸ During his years at Vanderbilt, Blount also began to be drawn more toward humor writing, and the traditions of the great Southern humorists. As he rose to the position of editor of the *Hustler*, he divided his writing between personal columns presented in a humorous vein and straightforward editorials championing civil-rights causes and taking the administration to task for lack of expediency in that area.⁹

At some point Blount decided to take the path toward a career in academia, and after graduating from Vanderbilt, attended Harvard University and obtained a Masters degree in English. His experience at Harvard was unrewarding, and after a stint in the Army, he chose to explore a career in journalism, taking a news writing position at the *Atlanta Journal* newspaper. There, his talents were recognized early, and he quickly rose to a position on the editorial page where he was able to both put forward controversial opinions on the issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War and also return to the first-person style he had began to develop during his undergraduate years. “He wrote with

⁸ MacCambridge, 170.

⁹ Brown, 18.

panache,” said Reese Cleghorn, Associate Editor of the *Journal* at the time. “He invaded the pages.”¹⁰ Blount enjoyed the *Journal*, but within two years tired of the repetitive nature of the job: “I wanted to go to New York. Writing for a Georgia outlet is like putting on skits for your parents: you can only go so far. I would sit there at my desk and pound out things which, though I knew they were insufficient to the historical moment, would elicit hysterical phone calls anyway.”¹¹ A friend from his Vanderbilt years was currently at *Sports Illustrated*, and, though he had never been a sports writer, he was offered a job at the magazine in 1968. Blount summed up his strange path to *Sports Illustrated* thusly:

Raised in South by Southern Parents. Couldn't play third base well enough so became college journalist. Ridiculed cultural enemies. Boosted integration. Decided to write, teach. Went to Harvard Graduate School. Didn't like it. Went back to journalism. Liked it. Got a column. Ridiculed cultural enemies. Wrote limericks. Boosted integration. Wanted to write for magazines. Took writing job at *Sports Illustrated*. Have seen country, met all kinds of people, heard all different kinds of talk. Like it.¹²

Sports Illustrated

Unlike most of the young writers who joined the magazine, Blount arrived at *Sports Illustrated* already a fully-formed writer with a distinctive voice. Though he had written only three magazine articles to that point, his writing approach and style was perfectly suited for the requirements of weekly-magazine journalism. He counted himself among the original subscribers to the magazine at which he now found himself employed, but he acknowledged his command of sports, both in information and style, was lacking.

¹⁰ Brown, 18.

¹¹ Roy Blount, Jr., *Crackers: The Whole Many-Angled Thing of Jimmy, More Carters, Ominous Little Animals, Sad-Singing Women, My Daddy and Me*, (Knopf, New York, 1980), 23.

¹² Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2004. Farmington Hills, Mich., Thomson Gale. 2004.

After a short stint writing for the magazine's up-front Scorecard round-up section, Blount began to receive more substantial assignments that allowed him to begin to adapt the first-person style he had developed in his newspaper work to the less conspicuous third-person style while maintaining his voice and wit. In his first year, he was sent to cover baseball spring training, and in March of 1969 penned a profile of Cincinnati Reds catcher Johnny Bench, then all of 21 years old.

For a catcher to rise up amidst his grotesque impedimenta as Bench does, cock his arm like a flash and shoot a ball out with enough velocity to beat a runner to second without either attaining appreciable loft or tailing off at the end is one of the wonders of cultivated nature. The only comparable thing would be a bear that really danced well.¹³

Blount took the life of a sports writer and recognized the talents of the writers on the masthead at that time, but also maintained a healthy individualism. Since he was usually free of a specific beat, he was allowed to concentrate on profiles, off-beat stories and longer pieces. The freedom made the transition to the job a pleasurable experience: “When I first got to *SI*, in 1968, we all flew first class and spent as much on food, drink and lodging as we could. Pretty soon we were flying coach, but we still lived a lot larger on the road than we had on newspapers, and we could pretty much go wherever we needed to, to pursue a story . . . The late '60s and the '70s were a much looser time than now, you could have a great time and also come up with a great story.”¹⁴

Blount has described his perception of the overarching *Sports Illustrated* writing flavor as “Timestyle infused with personal Texas,” and he learned to incorporate that feel into his pieces, while adding lyrical and humorous elements that stamped his work with a

¹³ Roy Blount, Jr., “The Big Zinger from Binger,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 31, 1969, 27.

¹⁴ Interview, Roy Blount, Jr., April 9, 2006.

tang of eccentricity. Blount articles varied widely in terms of both approach and subject. After a few years on staff, he had become recognizable enough that the 1971 Baseball Preview issue, to which in years previous he had been asked to contribute reports from Spring Training, included a 4,000-word piece titled “And Now for the Resurrection,” in which he examined the sport of synchronized swimming, through the lens of a San Antonio youth team. The writer managed to find the humor and uniqueness in the unusual pursuit; the piece is absent any heavy-handedness or mocking, instead imparting the feel of admiration:

Synchronized swimmers scream at each other underwater, and they are sick and tired of hearing about Esther Williams. People don't realize these things about synchronized swimming. In fact, a lot of people who don't know anything about synchronized swimming, and even some who do, feel the sport could stand an injection of something. A man who ran into synchronized swimming in college one evening right after biology lab says that it inspired him with great ambition. He had what amounted to a vision: some night when the lights went out for a climactic floating-torches-in-the-darkness number he would slip down the side of the university pool and spike it so heavily with Gentian Violet, a dye used to stain slides in biology labs, that when the lights came back on, the girls would resurface purple.¹⁵

By the first years of the 1970s, Blount was contributing long features to the magazine regularly, and was a fixture in the back-of-the-book bonus feature section. His proclivity for all things Southern often drew him assignments that sent him back to his home region, from standard fare such as Southeastern Conference football to off-the-beaten-path subjects such as coon hunting or chewing tobacco. In these pieces, his strategy seemed to be to draw out the texture of the region through anecdote and quotation, while managing to maintain the standard, non-regional *Sport Illustrated* style

¹⁵ Roy Blount, Jr., “And Now for the Resurrection,” *Sports Illustrated*, April 12, 1971, 96.

in his own writing.¹⁶ Like Deford, Blount benefited from the wide scope of the magazine during that era, and the penchant of the editors to include subjects and angles not found on the sports pages or on television. His choice of subjects was a precursor to the type of topic he would choose in his post-*Sports Illustrated* career, when he more directly pursued the path of a traditional humorist. His profiles leaned more and more toward the peculiar, such as his extended study of “the world’s oldest lifeguard,” and his angles on traditional sports took a more canted view: the colors of baseball accoutrements; the repetitive routines of base coaches.

Though he found thorough enjoyment in the life of a sports writer and the autonomy that was granted him by *Sports Illustrated*, Blount was highly protective of his writing and often clashed with editors at the magazine. The feeling that he was forced to compromise the ownership of his work weighed heavily on him. After one particular hockey article, he remembers being told by an editor, “You give me the lumber, I’ll build the house.” That was, clearly, not the writer-editor relationship under which a writer such as Blount could flourish. “That really pissed me off. I just don’t like to be fiddled with. It’s like sending your kids off to school and they come back the same kids with different haircuts.”¹⁷ His up-and-down relationship with editors and his need for independence eventually coupled with a growing sense of stagnation, heralding the end of his career as a *Sports Illustrated* staffer:

“SI editors were generally less respectful of personal style than I wanted them to be. It was good to have them to bounce off of, while I was developing a personal

¹⁶ Brown, 34.

¹⁷ MacCambridge, 171.

style ... but if I had stayed on the staff forever I wouldn't have been able to develop into whatever it is that I have developed into.”¹⁸

“About Three Bricks Shy”

Before Blount’s 1974 departure, *Sports Illustrated* and managing editor Andre Laguerre would give him an assignment that was unique in the history of the magazine and a godsend for a writer of ambition such as Roy Blount. He was offered the opportunity to spend an entire 1973 football season covering a single professional football team. Colleague Frank Deford recalls the excitement generated by the idea: “I remember Laguerre sent him out to Pittsburgh. Well, he let Roy pick the town. He said ‘I want you to cover a football team this year. But I don’t want you to write during the season.’ My God, they would never do anything like that today.”¹⁹ Blount threw himself into the assignment, and used the rapport that he had been able to develop with athletes in his years at *Sports Illustrated* to forge relationships with players, coaches, administrators and the various peripheral figures that fall into the orbit of a professional sports organization. The vague nature of his assignment allowed him to pursue the story outside the normal parameters of the journalist-athlete association. Blount: “By just sort of drifting around, and not having any readily discernible immediate objective, I became more intimate than a press person, more detached than a football person, and possessed of a certain amount of gossip from all angles.”²⁰ The writer joined the team from the first days of training camp and was given access that allowed him a season-long glimpse behind the veil, and along the way he interacted with his subjects in ways that went well

¹⁸ Interview, Roy Blount, Jr., April 9, 2006.

¹⁹ Interview, Frank Deford, March 23, 2006.

²⁰ Blount, *About Three Bricks*, 4.

beyond the standard practices of journalism. “Pro football players are adults who fly through the air in plastic helmets and smash each other for a living,” Blount wrote to begin the book. “I now know a bunch of them, and I think they are good folks.”²¹

The relationship Blount chose with his subjects and how he translated that relationship onto the page is one of the keys to the success of “About Three Bricks Shy.” Blount’s work is no expose, nor is it a play-by-play account of a football season. Instead, it is an examination of the players, their lives in the violent, claustrophobic world of professional football and the football-mad city of Pittsburgh, told through anecdote and observation. Though Blount uses the first person, he is not thrust into the center of the action, instead placed in a context of observer with whom the reader can share a point of view. “The structure and style depend on the tensions between the subject and the writer; the book succeeds because Blount was able to use those tensions to depict ... how a professional football player’s life differs from Everyfan’s.”²² The form that Blount chose also differs from the standard sports book. Though generally adhering to chronological order, it actually breaks down to a series of essays dealing with certain characters or aspects of the players’ existence. The focus tends toward the social interactions of the players with their coaches, players with their fans, players with each other, and characterization is the overriding component in building narrative. “The sense of time and place present in the writing transcends the superficial and provides the serious, hidden foundation for essays on names, principal players, Pittsburgh itself, the coach, fans, the owner, the premises, race, scouting, money, and hands. Even cryptic chapters

²¹ Blount, *About Three Bricks*, 4.

²² Brown, 48.

describing game action function primarily as narrative transitions between expository essays.²³ As his *Sports Illustrated* colleague Dan Jenkins did in his novel of two years earlier “Semi-Tough,” Blount makes use of the language of the locker room to limn his characters. Blount, however, interweaves the jock-speak and behavior with a certain level of literary reach in exposition and analysis. Head Coach Chuck Noll is discussed in terms of Henry Adams “The Virgin and the Dynamo.” Chapters are introduced with quotations; a chapter introduced by a Dallas Cowboy cheerleader is followed by one introduced by a quote from Boswell’s “Life of Johnson.”

Another way the book distinguishes itself from traditional sports coverage and, indeed, even from the type of reportage found in *Sports Illustrated*, is in the discursive assessment of the basic foundation of sport and human nature. Blount manages to maintain casualness and avoid heavy intellectualism while examining aspects of the football life with extraordinary depth. From the chapter titled “Contact”:

When a batter hits a baseball on the nose, he says “I got it all.” But the hitting I observed on the sidelines went beyond, or fell short of, that kind of gratification. Sometimes it sounded like bags of cement being dropped from the top of a cab of a truck. The percussion of a bag dropped from the cab’s top sounds uncalled for, perversely bad. “Oh, come on, you guys, that’s not necessary,” I felt like saying sometimes on the sidelines, as if the game were a scuffle turned ugly.²⁴

Sports Illustrated began publishing excerpts from the book in the summer of 1974, and it was published in December of that year with a unwieldy title with a New Journalism flavor: “About Three Bricks Shy of a Load: A Highly Irregular Lowdown on the Year the Pittsburgh Steelers Were Super but Missed the Bowl.” The book garnered significant praise and at the same time paved the road out of *Sports Illustrated* and sports

²³ Brown, 51.

²⁴ Blount, *About Three Bricks*, 96-97.

writing for Blount. Reviewing the book for the *New York Times Book Review*, the author Robert Creamer wrote “I have never read anything on football, fiction or non-fiction, as good as this, nothing that explains the paradox of the brutality and subtlety of this repelling and fascinating game, nothing that brings alive so brilliantly the people who’s lives are so enmeshed in it.”²⁵ Reviews across the nation were similar, and the book has had a remarkable longevity considering the breadth of sports publishing. It has been republished several times, and in 1989 was published with nearly 100 pages of subsequent writing by Blount about the Steelers, under the title “About a Few Bricks Shy And the Load Filled Up.” In the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley included it in his list of the 10 best sports books of all time: “Blount’s portrait is raucous, affectionate, bawdy and hilarious, not to mention proof that losing is considerably more interesting than winning.”²⁶ In the years that have followed, Blount has continued to touch on the subject of sports, but “About Three Bricks Shy” remains as his crowning achievement in the field of sports writing. The book both glorifies and unmask, allures and repels, and definitively crosses into the realm of literature.

Steelers were running off the field with snot on their mustaches and glee and strain and grass blades in their eyes, and Craig Hanneman, a reserve defensive end from Oregon with whom I had often chewed snuff, turned to me on the mushy sidelines and cried: “You picked the right team! Oh, a great bunch of guys! And a bunch of crazy fuckers! I’m crazy, too! We’re all about three bricks shy of a load!” Hanneman’s last sentence – as an expression of wild approval, which I shared, tinged with then-unintended undertones of fallibility, which I tried to register as the year went on – summed up my six months with the Pittsburgh National Football team better than anything else.²⁷

²⁵ Robert W. Creamer, “The Games People Watch,” *New York Times*, Dec 1, 1974, 490.

²⁶ Jonathan Yardley, “The Ten Best Sports Books,” *The Washington Post*, Jul 18, 1982, BW13.

²⁷ Blount, *About Three Bricks*, 3.

Literary Journalism and Post-*Sports Illustrated*

The elements of literary journalism work nicely as a description of much of Blount's body of work, from the use of fiction-writing techniques to the inclusion of the writer both experientially and through point of view. Throughout his life, he has seemed to gravitate toward writing over reporting, marginally while as *Sports Illustrated*, and, to a much greater degree, in his wildly varied and prolific output since then. In fact, Blount has crossed so many genre boundaries, that he seems to have a place in a number of separate and distinct "schools" of writers, from the Southern satirists to the modern literary humorists. "His essays in *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire* invite comparisons with those of Hunter Thompson, Tom Wolfe, and other New Journalists, who use the techniques of prose fiction to depict fact."²⁸ Blount both takes pride in the diversity of his work, and recoils at attempts at classification:

I don't think any writer, while he or she is writing, thinks in terms of the Capital-Letter Categories that people come up with later to group writers into Schools. I'd like to think that anything I write has some literary value, which is to say that it will be worth reading, will be an intelligent pleasure to read, independent of the facts it conveys ... I admired the work of Talese, Thompson and Wolfe. It was in order to get the sort of free rein they had, that I gave up the *SI* staff job to free-lance and take on other aspects of the world. But Joseph Mitchell and A. J. Liebling of the *New Yorker* were the literary journalists I read when I was a kid and wanted to be like when I grew up.²⁹

Blount left *Sports Illustrated* in 1974, and his subsequent career, it is safe to say, is unlike the path taken by any other former *SI* writer. In his 1998 memoir "Be Sweet: A Conditional Love Story," he describes himself as a "humorist-novelist-journalist-dramatist-lyricist-lecturer-reviewer-performer-versifier-cruciverbalist-sportswriter-

²⁸ Brown, 51.

²⁹ Interview, Roy Blount, Jr., April 9, 2006.

anthologist-columnist-screenwriter-philologist of sorts.”³⁰ Of that impressive list of descriptives, humorist is the one most often associated with Blount. After *Sports Illustrated*, he free-lanced for a wide array of magazines, from *The New Yorker* to *Esquire* to *Rolling Stone* to *The Atlantic*, and many, many more. As he became more established and his name more widely recognizable, his writings were published regularly in book-collection form. He wrote plays and songs, performed in his own one-man Broadway show, became a regular on the talk-show circuit, wrote and acted in movies and wrote fiction. “Every time I get a niche, I get an itch. Because I am terrified of getting trapped in a nurturing (by the environment’s standards) environment ... The upshot is that I never know what hat, if any, I may be wearing in a given person’s eyes.”³¹ Blount has continued to write occasionally for *Sports Illustrated* and on the subject of sports, and though he never fully allowed himself to embrace the acceptance into the culture of sports writing, his work during those years has left an imprint on the profession.

I was only spottily competent to cover the sports scene, kept getting lost in vast stadia between press boxes and locker rooms, so to compensate I tried to write every story as if it were my last. Then I felt myself starting to get sort of established as a sports writer, so I moved on to other areas where I could feel insecure.³²

³⁰ Roy Blount, Jr., *Be Sweet: A Conditional Love Story*, (Knopf, New York, 1998), 290.

³¹ Blount, *Be Sweet*, 30.

³² Interview, Roy Blount, Jr., April 9, 2006.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION: WHERE SPORTS MET LITERATURE

We treated sports seriously. We gave sports a new respectability.

–Andre Laguerre, former *Sports Illustrated* Managing Editor, December, 1975¹

When Andre Laguerre left *Sports Illustrated* in 1974, he had the distinction of not only turning a financial money pit into the jewel of the Time, Inc. empire, but also, in the course of pulling off that trick, raising the level of writing and editing at the magazine, and, in turn, throughout the culture of sports in America. During his reign at the top of the *Sports Illustrated* masthead, dozens of writers were propelled into the national consciousness, and the magazine itself took a spot in the exclusive club of general-interest publications with legitimate household names. The magazine and the people who ran it had the good fortune of catching a rising tide of interest in the subject of sports across North America, a phenomenon that had everything to do with the surging influence of television and that medium's ability to bring spectator sports into the living rooms and bars of the average American. *Sports Illustrated* skirted the crest of that wave, and in its wake left an indelible mark on American journalism.

The distinctive writing style that evolved at the magazine grew out of the need for the writers and editors at *Sports Illustrated* to interpret an ever-changing and expanding terrain in American popular culture and make it palatable to a weekly audience. “The classic *SI* piece ... was designed (by Laguerre) to push writers beyond the stats and

¹ Bob Oates, “Sports Illustrated Makes a Fortune for Time: \$3 Million Photo Budget, Emphasis on Major Sports Have Turned a Financial Loser Into a Big Money Maker,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 25, 1975, D1.

clichés that filled most newspapers, and now loop in numbering rotation on sports television. It wasn't that *SI* didn't care about scores or that these pieces weren't fundamentally about winning and losing; they were. But they were also about context, using sport as a prism to view a much wider world of experience and emotion."² And as the audience expanded exponentially and tastes evolved, the dedication to writing and storytelling paid dividends in that it created the type of loyal readership that allowed the entire enterprise to flourish.

As the years accelerated and sports (and life) became more complicated, certain *SI* writers began to adopt the techniques of fiction. Read Deford ... to see how narrative and scene became more and more important; likewise dialogue and even informed speculation about what was going on inside a subject's head. Everything fit, or almost everything, within the "third-person, keep it hopping" style that Roy Blount Jr. described as "good for my chops." Much has been made of New Journalism, and *SI* was one of its important cradles. True enough, but the goal was simply great storytelling, pieces that hit something inside people and moved them.³

In the intervening years, sports media, along with rest of the media, has been swept up in a technological revolution that has led to around-the-clock cable television and Internet coverage and has pushed weekly magazine journalism to the back of the bus in terms of influence. *Sports Illustrated* has struggled along with the rest of the print media to stay relevant, and some of the ideology that the magazine drew upon to build its reputation has changed with the times. But, despite the inevitability of change, what remains is the fundamental belief, fomented during those tumultuous years when the magazine ascended to the forefront of American consciousness, that sport is a worthy subject upon which to create literature, and to do so is an admirable endeavor. "Laguerre

² Rob Fleder (editor), *Sports Illustrated: Fifty Years of Great Writing*, (Sports Illustrated Books, New York, 2004), 6.

³ Fleder, 6.

assembled a terrific staff of writers at Sports Illustrated in the '60s," Deford wrote. "He pampered us and humored us, and when his magazine started showing up in mailboxes all around the country, for the first time people understood that sports writing could be a craft of quality and substance."⁴

⁴ Deford, *The World's Tallest Midget*, 8.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ted Geltner was born in Brooklyn, NY, and spent most of his childhood in McLean, VA. He earned his bachelor's degree in political science at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA in 1990. For the past decade and a half, he has worked as a journalist in Washington, D.C., California, Pennsylvania and Florida. He has been a reporter, editor, page designer, columnist, on-line content producer, radio host, television correspondent and critic. He has written about politics, sports, television, film, the environment, crime, travel and, once, mule dancing. In his free time, he enjoys filmmaking, golf, running, and *Magnum, P.I.* He lives in Gainesville, FL, with his wife, Jill, and his daughters, Cassie and Bethany. Upon graduation, he will begin doctoral studies at University of Florida.

Sports Illustrated (SI) is an American sports magazine owned by Authentic Brands Group and published by Meredith Corporation. First published in August 1954, it has over 3 million subscribers and is read by 23 million people each week, including over 18 million men. It was the first magazine with circulation over one million to win the National Magazine Award for General Excellence twice. It is also known for its annual swimsuit issue, which has been published since 1964, and has spawned other Advocacy journalism Citizen journalism Civic journalism Gonzo journalism Investigative journalism Literary journalism Narrative journalism New Journalism Visual journalism Watchdog journalism. Social impact. Fourth Estate Freedom of the press Infotainment Media bias News propaganda Public relations Yellow journalism. The early times of Sports Illustrated were anchored by the outstanding sports journalist of Dan Jenkins, Tex Maule, and Robert Creamer. More recently the great work of writers such as Rick Reilly have helped keep Sports Illustrated as a popular source for sports news. Fox Sports. Fox broadcasting company entered the world of sports journalism in 1993 when in bid 1.58 billion dollars to be the NFC conference television carrier in 1993 for the NFL.