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What the kid from Trenton writes, the sports world likes

An interview with legendary sportswriter Bob Ryan

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Bob Ryan began his sports writing career in his hometown of Trenton, New Jersey, when, at the age of 11, he wrote “The Sportster.” With “a circulation of one” the self-published column was a preview of a career that made him one of the most influential sports writers in America.

After attending prep school then graduating from Boston College, Ryan began his professional career as an intern for the Boston Globe in 1968 (legendary baseball guru Peter Gammons started on the same day; that’s a pretty good draft class for the Globe rivaled maybe only by the Celtics getting Bill Russel, Tom Heinson and K.C. Jones in 1956) before becoming the paper’s Celtics beat reporter a year later. Through the ‘70’s and ‘80’s he rose to national prominence in an era of sports writing when he went out to lunch with players and often closed the bar with them after the game.

Despite working tirelessly to build relationships and learn the personalities and quirks of the coaches and players he covered—in the “1976 Complete Handbook of Pro Basketball” he noted that Cazzie Russel “introduced fuschia-colored underwear to the NBA”—he never let personal connections compromise his responsibility of bringing readers (and eventually radio and TV audiences) the story that needed to be told and the opinions he wished to share. Always liked? No. Respected? Yes.

“You don't want 100 percent approval,” Ryan said. “You want the right people approving it, and the hell with the others. And some people are afraid of that. I make no pretense about so-called objectivity. The only thing you strive for is fairness.”

Game Plan sat down with Ryan to learn his perspective on the future of sports journalism,, see what he has learned from over 50 years on the job, and question the importance of journalism’s “traditional path.”

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You've mentioned it's important to have an edge, grit and attitude [working in sports journalism]. What does having an attitude look like to you both in terms of the person and his or her writing?

It comes down to a case of you know it when you see it and you know it when you don't see it. I don't know how to explain it. Being forceful, being assertive, perhaps. The classic column when you're trying to make a point, not every column.

There are the facts from games and then you've got the columns. It seems like the facts are becoming a commodity.

Everything's changed. The classic game story is on its way out. It's disappeared in many papers already, including my own. I think some games deserve to be commemorated for posterity and they're really good games. I'm sure around the country you're going to see the end of the old-fashioned game story. Sad for me, because that's the thing I prided myself on most. Of all the things I did, game stories on deadline—that really got the job done. It gave proper justice to that game. That's something I was proud of. Very proud of.

You have talked about sites like Barstool Sports. What's your take on where sites like this are headed?

Well, it's the direction, it's not reversible. To me, they're molding it with the National Enquirer approach to sports if you will. I'm not interested, so I just work around it. I don't pay any

attention to it all. Nobody has enough time to do everything. I'm making my choices and my choice is that I don't need that.

Another thing that's happening quite a bit is the use of data.

I wrote a column about [sabermetrics guru] Bill James in 1984 saying that the most important people in baseball prior to him were Alexander Chadwick or Henry Cartwright, whichever one I chose, and Babe Ruth.

Now we've got a third category, that's transforming the way we look at the game and looking at it from the outside in and codifying it was Bill James. That was 36 years ago and look what's happened. Look what he spawned.

You mentioned that the rules [of sports journalism] are different with social media. What were the old rules and what are the new rules?

I used the word “rules” but “methodology” is probably a better word. They don't watch the game the way I watched the game. I would always have little categories—I had my own shorthand of describing shots and keeping track of runs and stuff. I doubt very much that anyone keeps a running sheet anymore because they're watching the game and they got the computer in front of them and they're tweeting the whole game. To me, they're obviously not watching it the way I used to watch the game. In baseball I always had a notebook, and I kept pitch by pitch. because of the detail. I love details. But this is the writer in me thinking.

You often talk about building relationships. We live in a world where access is difficult. So how does a young writer get access?

I don't know now. It's scary. It's totally different now. You have to be a salesman. And I believe firmly in that. So how does a young person get there? You earn it. You earn credibility by everything you do. How you act one-on-one or in a group, and how you write.

Everything you're describing, everything we talked about, has very little to do with writing.

It's a very interesting observation.

But journalism school is one path into this world, right?

I never took a journalism class. I can see a class. I can see a semester. I don't see a major. I don't understand it. What do you do? You've got to go out and do it. What do you need to know? I think you should be polishing your writing and doing your homework. What else do you need to know? I don't get it.

Work for your school paper. If you can, work at your hometown paper in the summer or whatever, get as much practical experience as possible. When you get to work for somebody, they'll train you the way they want to train you.

So, don't go to journalism school?

I see no reason. What do you do for a year? What do you do? You've got to go out and do on job training. Learn how to ask questions, do your homework, all the stuff. *Be that salesperson.*