Chapter 53: Sport Basics

This is the first of three chapters on the coverage of sport. In this chapter, we look at how to plan for good sports coverage in your newspaper, radio or television station and how to gather information for people who are interested in sport. In the next two chapters we discuss how to present sports news and results and the challenges of different media.

Readers of the sports pages of a newspaper are generally the most knowledgeable and critical readers of all. They know a lot about sport themselves and they expect a sports reporter to know at least as much. This is also true of people who listen to sport on radio or watch it on television.

So, while it is true that everything you write as a journalist should be accurate, you will never get away with inaccuracy in sports reporting.

What do sport audiences want?

Sports readers and listeners demand accuracy and sound judgment. They expect the sports reporter to know when to praise a performance and when to criticise; when to offer support and when to call for changes.

Sports enthusiasts like to play sport and they like to watch sport. They also like to discuss past performances and future prospects; they like to talk about the decisions which the team manager or coach has made and should make; they like to pass judgment on sports administrators, referees and umpires.

Sports enthusiasts are dedicated. They often read the sports pages before any other part of the paper. That is why street sellers often display one pile of papers showing page one and another pile showing the back page or sports section.

Sport is an important part of most societies, whatever they are like. It is a way of stimulating the development of people's bodies in the same way that education stimulates the development of their minds.

Do not forget sports which are traditional in your society, as well as introduced western sports, when thinking about sports reporting.

The content of sport reports

Sports pages need to contain a great deal of information. To do the job well, you should try to cover all the following areas.

Results

This is the most important part of any sports coverage. People will buy a newspaper or listen to a sports bulletin just to find the results of games in their sport, so you should try to carry the result of every sporting event which may interest some of your readers or listeners, as soon as possible after the event.

League tables

If the sport is organised in a competitive league, then each week's results will affect the league table. A team which has won may move higher up the league table, while another team which has lost may slip down the league table. It is important to followers of any league to know the latest position of each team.
Reports

A report of a match is a description of what happened, together with an analysis of why it happened. The sports reporter can often explain the way in which one team's tactics prevented the other team from playing well. In this way, the reader or listener comes to understand the sport better.

There would not be room for a full report of every match in every sport, so less important events can have just the result published. However, it is possible to compromise, and have a very short report, followed by the full results. Even two or three sentences of report on the week's matches, followed by the results, will make the people who support that league feel cared for.

Analysis and previews

This is discussion of a sporting fixture which is about to take place, considering what is especially interesting about it and what is likely to influence the result. It is only for the big teams and big matches. Their fans will eagerly read or listen to anything that is written or broadcast about their team. People often identify strongly with the team which they support.

Sports news

This may include injuries to top players; changes in personnel - a player changing teams, a coach being sacked, a manager retiring; plans to build new facilities; a new sponsor or other financial developments in the sport; or changes in the rules or administration of the sport. Sports reporters should be warned, though: if you get a really good sports news story, it may well be taken away from you to be published on page one.

Sports features

Top sportsmen and sportswomen are people, and each one may be worth a feature. You can talk to them about the sacrifices which they have to make to become so good, and the kind of training schedule they have.

Even the humble performers may provide good features. What about the soccer goalkeeper who lets in an average of nine goals a match? Or the prop forward who weighs 280lbs? Or the club golfer who has just reduced his handicap from 28 to 27 after seven years? You could write a feature about any of these. Many amateur sportsmen and sportswomen would identify with them.

Racing

This is a separate area of sports journalism, because people interested in horse racing may not be interested in other sports, and people interested in other sports may not be interested in horse racing. For this reason, racing is dealt with separately at the end of Chapter 54.

Who are the audiences for sport reporting?

There are four categories of people who read sports pages or watch and listen to sports programs, and they should all be catered for.

Participants

People who play sport, even at a fairly low level, want to see the results of their own team and of their future opponents published or broadcast, and the league tables published, so that they know how good their next opponents are likely to be. They also want to read or hear reports of their matches, especially when they have just won.
**Spectators**

People who regularly watch a sports team want to see the results and reports of their team's matches, and information about the team. They want to see reports of matches even if they have already seen the match themselves, especially if their team won. They can then enjoy the victory all over again.

**Casual readers and listeners**

While most sports readers and listeners are very keen and knowledgeable, you should remember that there are also people reading or listening in a casual way. They may not have any strong commitment to sport, but will read the occasional report if it looks especially interesting.

These people will require more information than the average reader or listener, if they are fully to understand what is being reported. The keen golfer will know what a birdie, an eagle, a chip and a putt are, but the casual reader may not. Newspapers in particular may consider carrying a panel occasionally, alongside a sports report, explaining the terms used in that sport.

**Punters**

Some people like to gamble on the outcome of sport, especially on horse racing. They want facts and analysis to help them to increase their chances of winning.

**Which sports are popular?**

A newspaper, radio or television station should cover the sports in which the public is interested. As far as possible, it should give most space to the most popular sport, the next most space to the second most popular sport and so on, deciding cautiously which sports are not popular enough to be covered at all.

This is easier said than done. It is not always easy - especially in a developing country - to obtain accurate figures on the number of people who play or watch any particular sport. You can try to obtain them from the relevant Government department or from a national sports institute, if your country has one.

Even if you can obtain precise figures, you have still to decide whether to give more coverage to participant sports or to spectator sports. You also have to think about the coverage you will give to sports which are played mostly by only one section of the population, such as golf or squash, which tend to be expensive sports and limited to a socio-economic elite.

Generally speaking, in developed countries more people watch sport – either on television or at games – than actually participate themselves, while in developing countries there is still a tendency for more people to play sport than watch it.

Try to find statistics for your country on who plays sport and who watches it. You may find that the government’s national census or researchers at sports institutes can help you access statistics. They should provide you with the basis for some good decisions on what sports you will choose to cover.

**Organising sports coverage**

Once you have decided which sports are popular and therefore which sports you will cover, you must arrange for people to provide you with information. Sports journalism is 20 per cent reporting, 80 per cent organising.
Find correspondents

Arrange a correspondent for each sport you want to cover, perhaps through the organising body of the sport. This will make sure that you get someone who understands the sport, cares about it and is close enough to the people involved in it to get the information.

Tell them what you want from them, and the deadline by which you need it.

For example, you may say that you want all the results by Tuesday lunchtime each week, together with three or four short paragraphs of report at the top. This could be a comment on the most newsworthy result - if the top team has been beaten, or if there has been an unusually high-scoring game, for instance; or it could draw attention to an outstanding personal performance.

You will need to stress the importance of the deadline. Your correspondent may spend Tuesday morning chasing up all the results, and not bring them to you until 4 pm, too late for the page they should go on.

Explain that it is better to have an incomplete set of results on time than to have a complete set of results late.

Brief them

As we have just seen, you must brief your correspondents on precisely what you need.

They will need to know the style in which the report should be written and how to present the results. If the correspondent is a member of one of the clubs or teams, warn him or her not to write biased reports.

They will need to know the sort of thing you want reported - the most interesting result, or the outstanding personal performance, for instance - and the number of words it must be written in.

They must know the deadline by which you must receive all this; old news is dead news and old sports results are even worse.

They must understand that there is no guarantee of their report being published, although you will hope to use it every time.

Organise pages and air time

Allocate regular space or air time to minor sports, on specific days if possible. Establish the idea that Monday is darts day, for instance, that Tuesday is netball day, that Wednesday is shooting day, and so on. This will encourage a group of regular readers or listeners.

TO SUMMARISE:

Find out which sports are popular in your country, and try to cover those

Arrange for expert correspondents

Get the right balance of results, reports, previews, sports news and sports features for your media