A perfect symmetry

There are times when life and sports can be as one

Steve
MARANTZ

There is a beautiful symmetry to baseball that does not often exist in our personal lives. But sometimes we are surprised.

In 1963 my family moved from Weirton, W. Va., to Omaha. The move took us out of the media orbit of the Pirates, my favorite team, which I sorely missed. One of my new acquaintances was 12-year-old Steve Nogg, a genial boy with a flappy jaw that enabled him to get his mouth around an orange. Steve Nogg not only had a big jaw, but he also had a big heart. One day he walked out of Chris' Rexall at 50th and Dodge and handed me THE SPORTING NEWS.

"Here, read about your Pirates," he said.

An enduring friendship was born, built on baseball and the weekly journal that delivers sports news to remote places.

Today, in writing a column for THE SPORTING NEWS, I can imagine the voice of the magazine's legendary publisher, the late J.G. Taylor Spink, who was described by the Saturday Evening Post as "an energetic, plumpish, bull-voiced man of excellent digestion." Other descriptions of Spink, who died in 1962, emphasize his "strong-willed personality." Judging by photographs, Spink was not a man to whom you would give an exploding cigar. His bull-voice is in my ear.

"Young man?" I hear the voice say.

"Yes, Your Gruffness?"

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing in the Bible of Baseball?"

Fair question. As a roundabout way of explaining, let me first recall another legend, the late House Speaker Tip O'Neill, whose admonishment, "All politics are local" is the basis for many well-nourished careers at the public trough. Tip meant that people care most about what happens in their backyard, not in the next county or two states over. There is a sports corollary: "All sports are personal." It means that sports interest us to the extent that they touch us personally. If China's top female runner sets a world record in the 1,500 meters in the Outer Mongolia Invitational, you shrug. If your neighbor's daughter wins a high school cross-country event, you become a fan of her team. It's that simple.

This is another summer of baseball's labor discontent. I can mark my career by the chronology of baseball's labor strife. When the baseball players struck for the first time in March 1972, I was in journalism at the University of Missouri in Columbia. The world already was thought to be beyond shock, but I was shocked. Of all the radical notions of the era, this seemed the strangest: that baseball players could strike, as if they were, well, steelworkers. I thought about the steelworkers in Weirton, a mill town, and how as a child I watched them play in their mill leagues. I wrote an overwrought paean to those millworkers and their selfless love of baseball, contrasting them to "baseball players who aren't satisfied with the richest pension plan in the world" and "tight-fisted, profit-crazy owners."

The story was published in the Columbia Missourian, the university's daily newspaper, and launched me as a sportswriter. One of the Missourian's student reporters was John Rawlings, a dry-witted cherubic Texan who now sits, also with excellent digestion, at J.G. Taylor Spink's desk. Another student reporter was Neil Hohlfeld, a TSN correspondent who covers baseball for the Houston Chronicle.

In 1976, the year Andy Messersmith and Peter Seitz unchained the players, I had the good fortune to work for Joe McGuff and Fritz Kreisler at the Kansas City Times-Star. They taught me to get details right. One evening another sportswriter filed a story about a local golfer who had won an award. The golfer's name was Dutch Stamberger. Unfortunately, the story that came out in the next day's Star was about another golfer: someone named Stan Dutchberger. Sputtering over his morning coffee, McGuff caught the mistake and corrected it for later editions. The sportswriter went on to a better-paying job — in TV.

In 1977, as baseball's first wave of free agents scattered to the winds, I landed on the Boston Globe, then the Bloomsbury of sports journalism. Surrounding me in the newsroom were Peter Gammons, Bob Ryan, Leigh Montville, Will McDonough, John Powers, Mike Madden, Lesley Visser, Larry Whiteside, the late Ray Fitzgerald and Alan Richman, now the food writer (and eater) for GQ Magazine. Other departments joked that the floor under the sports department would collapse from the weight of its egos, but it never did. What occurred almost every day was a sports section of sublime sensibility. In their pre-TV days, Gammons and Ryan had energy to burn, which they did by talking sports to each other, on the telephone, and to innocent passers-by: custodians, student co-ops, delivery persons, indigent homeless, etc. The Globe's late hockey writer, Tom Fitzgerald, supposedly fed up with their incessant chatter, is said to have snapped, "Is my typing disturbing you?"

Gammons has become baseball journalism's divine diva; however, buried in his past is a football story. It occurred during his brief stint as a general columnist and mine as the Patriots' beat reporter. On a pre-playoff December morning I invited him to ride with me to Foxboro. In the clubhouse, I pointed him toward a nervous young kicker, David Posey, who was trying to put out of his mind the last-second failure of another kicker. In capturing Posey's anxiety, Gammons fell back on a comfortable frame of reference: "If it all comes down to Steve Grogan and John Hannah and friends maneuvering into position in a 21-23 game with 14 seconds remaining, then out will trot David Posey, alone. He is the assumed part of the two-minute drill. He doesn't hit anyone. No one takes him one-on-one. He's supposed to kick a dumb ball through the uprights, like an extra point or catching an infield popup." Baseball or football, Peter could bring it.

Sports sections abhor a vacuum. The Globe's boxing post was deserted, like a cruise ship in port. Vince Doria tapped me to write boxing when (pre-Marvelous) Marvin Hagler began to establish himself as New England's fifth major league sport. In the summer of 1981, the baseball players struck again, upsetting almost everybody. Everybody except Ray Leonard and Tommy Hearns, two dazzling young warriors whose first bout was scheduled for September. Baseball's strike gave the bout center stage. I wrote a column contrasting their public images and ring styles, concluding: "When the perfect foils climb into the ring, the battle may still be raging between those imperfect foils, the baseball owners and players. If so, Leonard-Hearns I will be our World Series this year." It did not turn out to be the World Series, of course. It was merely the best boxing match — and one of the best sporting events — of the decade.

Some sportswriters experience sensory overload and a crisis of purpose after too many years of games, airplanes and brown iceburg lettuce in pressroom salads. Fans have difficulty comprehending this syndrome because they get their sports in a smaller proportion. By the mid-1980s, I was convinced that America was dangerously awash in spectator sports and that the country's mental health was being impaired by sports talk-radio. It was only my mental health, though.

When the baseball strike of 1985 occurred, I had one foot in the news department and the other in boxing. Following Hagler's retirement in 1987, the year of baseball's collusion, I packed away my sportswriters' wardrobe of pastel Izod golf shirts and Sansabelt slacks. A few instructive years passed at Boston City Hall, where the reigning mayor was Hizzoner Raymond L. Flynn, now U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican. On our first meeting, Flynn, a streak-shooting forward at Providence College who failed a tryout with the Celtics in 1964, said to me, "You got out of sports for this?"

He was right. No matter how bad things seem in sports, they're worse on the outside. In sports you get youth, heat, light, noise and a level playing field. In the real world you get death, taxes, fascists of all stripes and city-council meetings. In 1944 and 1945, pre-Jackie Robinson, the Boston City Council tried to force Tom Yawkey to integrate the Red Sox. In my era, it tried to save whales. At their best, politics are rock-and-roll. But so are sports, and the speeches are shorter.

Not long ago, I called up my friend Steve Nogg, who runs a moving-van business in Omaha. He brought me up to date on the College World Series, an Omaha event at which as teen-agers we both worked. He told me his 16-year-old twins, Jeff and Brian, subscribe to THE SPORTING NEWS.

"They look for your byline," he said.

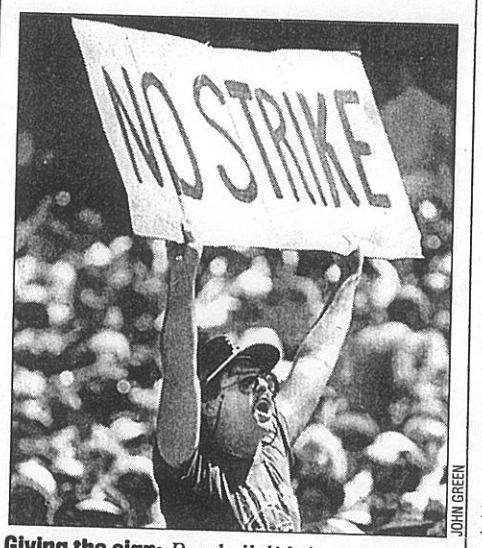
"Did you tell them you introduced me to THE SPORTING NEWS?"

"I told them what my father told me," Nogg said. "That if they'd stick their noses in their school books half as long as they bury them in THE SPORTING NEWS they'd be straight-A students." ◆

Senior Writer Steve Marantz, who covers baseball for THE SPORTING NEWS, *writes a monthly column.*

TSN ARCHIVES

A bull pen: *J.G. Taylor Spink had a voice to match the way he looked. "Bull-voiced," as the Saturday Evening Post put it.*



JOHN GREEN

Giving the sign: *Baseball didn't get it.*

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