

Ron Shelton on the Image of the Sportswriter in Popular Culture

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Ron Shelton knows plenty about the art and culture of sports writing.

The acclaimed screenwriter and director of such popular sports films as “Bull Durham (1988),” widely considered to be one of the handful of greatest movies of its genre, “White Men Can’t Jump” (1992), “Cobb” (1994) and “Tin Cup” (1996), has always had a special appreciation for how sports are covered, the words used to describe sports heroes and villains, the interaction and dance between athletes and the media, and the evolution of storytelling in sports.

He’s lived it, too, having been interviewed numerous times as a minor league baseball player in the Baltimore Orioles’ farm system. Shelton was signed to a pro contract after a stellar amateur career at Santa Barbara High and Westmont College. One of his first heroes growing up was Milwaukee Braves future Baseball Hall of Fame slugger Eddie Mathews, who also grew up in Santa Barbara.

“My father worked in P.R. and hung out at the Santa Barbara News-Press a lot, and I loved when he used to take me there as a kid,” Shelton recalled. “I could watch the noisy teletypes spitting out the news amidst the clacking of upright Underwoods, all in a big chaotic room filled with the overwhelming smell of paste. As a boy, I figured if I couldn’t be a professional baseball player, I’d be a sportswriter.”

One of the memorable scenes in any sports film is the bus ride sequence in “Bull Durham,” where aging catcher Crash Davis, superbly played by a young Kevin Costner, schools

the brash, young and wildly talented pitcher Ebby Calvin “Nuke” LaLoosh (Tim Robbins) on the importance of knowing the right cliché to use during interviews so you don’t reveal too much to the media -- and your words don’t come back to haunt you later.

“You’re going to have to learn your cliches,” says the wily veteran Davis, a career minor league slugging star with only a cameo lifetime appearance in “The Show,” the major leagues. “You’re going to have to study them, you’re going to have to know them ... they’re your friends.”

During the bumpy ride along a winding North Carolina highway, and while chugging a beer, Davis insists that LaLoosh write all of the clichés down for future reference: “We gotta play ‘em one day at a time,” “I’m just happy to be here, hope I can help the ballclub,” “I just want to give it my best shot,” and “The Good Lord willing, things will work out.”

When LaLoosh protests that the statements are “pretty boring,” Davis answers quickly: “Of course they’re boring, that’s the point. Write it down!”

Sure enough, when Nuke gets called up to the big leagues later that season, he’s shown doing a TV interview with a female reporter in the home stadium, reciting the cliches as precisely as they were introduced to him by Davis. Brilliant.

Shelton, 77, hatched the idea for the scene from personal experience. After being selected player of the game one night while in the minor leagues at Dallas-Fort Worth, he was interviewed by the team’s radio announcer. As he discussed his interests beyond baseball, Shelton mentioned having been an activist opposing the Vietnam War among a few edgier topics.

According to Shelton, the broadcaster looked mortified thinking about his audience’s reaction to the rather sensitive subject matter in conservative Texas, and suggested to Shelton

that if he was ever interviewed again, he should just talk about interests such as hunting and fishing. So when he got another chance later in the season, Shelton did just that, even though he didn't hunt or fish!

Shelton's book about the making of "Bull Durham" – "The Church of Baseball: Home Runs, Bad Calls, Crazy Fights, Big Swings, and a Hit" – was released in July (Alfred A. Knopf) to glowing reviews and brisk sales. He is currently juggling multiple writing and film projects, including a movie about the legendary Baseball Hall of Famer Ted Williams, based on Richard Ben Cramer's iconic article about Williams' after-baseball life as a fisherman. Cramer was a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer who wrote about politics and sports, and the intentions of Shelton's movie include an investigation of the often-complex relationship of the sports journalist to his subject.

Shelton offered a few thoughts about the image of the sportswriter in popular culture during an interview from his office in the Santa Monica building he shares with the award-winning film producers Kathleen Kennedy and Frank Marshall. *Note: Remarks have been edited for length and clarity.*

Question: What's your general impression of the image of the sportswriter as portrayed in popular culture?

Ron Shelton: I think it's a mixed bag. They're portrayed as annoying, necessary evils ... and that's informed by the obnoxious questions most of them ask at press conferences. Or they're portrayed as cynical drunks [laugh] ... and there's a lot of reason for that. The press wants the athlete to say something well-thought-out and provocative, moments after the competition is over. I didn't want *anybody* to talk to me right after a game. Why am I supposed to be articulate, and not emotional, at that point? I understand [New England Patriots Coach Bill]

Belichick]; I just wish he wasn't such a jerk about it. In narrative, sportswriters are almost always the adversary, the counterpoint to the athlete. They're criticizing performance or trying to find dirt.

Q: How do you think the image of the sportswriter has evolved over the years?

RS: At one time they knew everything ... but printed nothing. Hollywood movie stars and politicians were also routinely protected by the press. Sportswriters looked the other way. It was just how things were when they traveled with their teams by train, covering baseball. They were house writers. You see it in the Babe Ruth movies and "Pride of the Yankees" [1942], when the sportswriter [Sam Blake, played by Walter Brennan] kept Lou Gehrig's illness out of the paper to protect his friend, which was understandable. Today the relationship between athletes, coaches and the media has become much more adversarial. In the "Ted Lasso" streaming series, the sports reporter [Trent Crimm, superbly played by James Lance] is downright indignant, reflecting most of the soccer club's supporters, that the new manager [Jason Sudeikis] knows nothing about the sport. His questions during press briefings reflect that hostility. The questions were definitely fair to ask, though.

I think the image of the sportswriter started to shift when television took over, and of course Watergate. But some in sports media are still afraid to go down roads that might turn dark. We saw how slow so many of them were to uncover steroid use in baseball ... and sports. Everyone knew players were juiced, but the press covered it up by sticking their heads in the sand. Sports media has definitely become more adversarial today. I don't read it as much anymore.

Q: Does it seem like sportswriters in film have traditionally been represented almost always the same way?

RS: Well, they are rarely portrayed as heroic. But then again, why should they be? They're reporters doing their jobs. In "Eight Men Out" [1988], the key newspaper reporters [played by the film's writer-director, John Sayles, as Ring Lardner, and Studs Terkel as Hugh Fullerton] who identified the Chicago White Sox [later referred to in infamy as the "Black Sox"] players throwing the 1919 World Series and then broke the story, faced criticism from angry fans. One of the reporters [Terkel] was told by the other that he might not be able to show his face again in his own city after the story was published. But he didn't flinch and the story ran, which was admirable.

It reminds me of Ibsen's [1882] play "An Enemy of the People," a classic tale of the truth-teller being vilified. The doctor inspecting the public spas decides to tell the truth about the water being contaminated, which threatens the town's economy. He becomes the enemy of the people.

Q: One of your most intense and darker movies, "Cobb," has a retired but highly accomplished sportswriter, Al Stump, played by Robert Wuhl, at the heart of a true story. Stump is conflicted after spending a year on the road with Baseball Hall of Famer Ty Cobb, brought to life by an animated Tommy Lee Jones, near the end of Cobb's tumultuous life, about whether to tell the truth or protect the legend, as Cobb strongly insists early in the film. What drew you to Stump's book and story?

RS: I portrayed Al Stump as I knew him. He took on an assignment to tell the truth about Ty Cobb, but he can't tell the truth because Cobb had the final cut. Sportswriters I know who saw the film really like it because they've all covered athletes who are brilliant but flawed. Roger Kahn, author of the great book, "The Boys of Summer" [1972], told me he loved the movie because he got into a similar predicament that Stump was in when he signed onto a deal to write

the Pete Rose story without knowing that Rose had, in effect, final cut. Stump is being vilified today by another sportswriter who claims much of Stump's writings about Cobb are unverified, but in my opinion the writer attacking Stump has an agenda to resuscitate Cobb's reputation at all costs, and Stump is the collateral damage. In truth, there are still many star athletes today who are protected by journalists, and many who are unfairly attacked. Everyone has a point of view, but everyone doesn't have a moral compass.

Drama is based on characters in conflict. The basic rule of writing is: Desire meets opposition. Every scene I write, I look at what is the want, what is the opposition. The sportswriter in film – or any journalist – is a useful antagonist to provide the opposition, although the opposition can be something used for good, such as opposing the company lie about, for example, steroid use in baseball. Or it can be used to pry unnecessarily into an athlete's private life ... such as the conjecture about Tom Brady and Gisele, for example.

Q: Does the use of real-life sports media members enhance the credibility of a film or TV show?

RS: There's a long tradition of using real sportswriters to play themselves, and I've embraced that at times. TV broadcasters, for example, are recognizable to a broad public audience, and enhance a sense of verisimilitude. I've had Jim Lampley, Gary McCord and Jim Nantz in my movies. I've also used print sports journalists, from Allan Malamud to Jimmy Roberts to Bert Sugar and dozens of others.

Q: Thinking about your Ted Williams film project, didn't Williams always have a contentious relationship with the press?

RS: Ted Williams hated sportswriters and didn't want to meet with any of them. Not surprisingly, the sporting press didn't like Ted, either. The film I'm working on comes out of a 1986 Esquire magazine issue devoted to "The American Man," including Ted Williams, who retired after the 1960 season after hitting .316 with 29 home runs at age 42. Richard Ben Cramer, who won a Pulitzer Prize for international reporting in the Middle East, wrote the piece about Ted, and it eventually turned into a [2002] book, "What Do You Think of Ted Williams Now? A Remembrance." Ted was greatness personified, someone who did a lot for retired ballplayers who were struggling, but he never wanted anyone to know about it; no publicity at all. Cramer set out to do what a serious sportswriter does—try to get to the bottom of the complexity of their subject. My film is based on events in the book, and might be the best answer of all to the question about a sportswriter's relationship to his subject.