

# JRNL 309: Sports Writing

## **COURSE GOALS:**

**This is a sports writing and reporting course that introduces students to the theory and practice of covering athletic events and sports controversies, interviewing players and coaches, and writing under deadline pressure.**

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

Students who complete this course will be able to:

1. read and evaluate sports writing by leading sports journalists, critiquing writing style, fairness, and approach;
2. discuss major issues surrounding sports today and explore newspaper/magazine coverage of controversies such as steroids, gambling, and student athletes turning professional, and understand the implications for sports journalists;
3. discuss ethical issues concerning coverage of sports, from sports columnists fabricating coverage to sports journalists being fed (both food and perspective) in team press boxes, and their implications for sports journalists;
4. master the conventions of various kinds of sports stories (such as hard news, features, columns, etc.);
5. understand, articulate and practice the connections between hard news and sports stories;
6. practice sports journalism on deadline, with attention to such issues as covering athletic events, interviewing players and coaches in locker rooms, writing at the game, and responding to criticism from coaches, players, owners, and fans;
7. recognize messages sent by sports pages in terms of societal values (i.e. highly paid athletes vs. Little Leaguers, men's teams vs. women's teams, athletes vs. valedictorians) and identify what stories sport pages might be missing.

## **TEXTS:**

Daily newspapers across the country, available online.

“Associated Press Sports Writing Handbook” by Steve Wilstein, McGraw-Hill, 2001 (required).

“Sports Writing Handbook,” Thomas Fensch, (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), 1995 (optional).

## **GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS:**

Midterm and Final – primarily short answer based on in-class discussions and readings – 100 points each

Writing assignments – Weekly response papers (2-3 pages) related to readings and discussions, several game and interview stories — 25-50 points each as announced in assignment handouts

Final Project — a critique of a day's News and Free Press sports sections — 100 points

Total points = 1,000

**English Department Class Participation Requirement.** Students enrolled in the English Department classes are expected to participate in daily interactive activities. They will, for example, routinely discuss reading assignments, write in class on impromptu topics, participate in collaborative activities, or engage in peer review of drafts. Students who miss these activities cannot reasonably make them up. As a result, students who miss more than the equivalent of two weeks of class should consider withdrawing and taking the class in a future semester. Students who know that other commitments will

make it impossible to attend at certain times (early mornings, nights, Fridays) should enroll in classes that do not meet at these times. Absences are noted.

### **Assignments:**

Assignments are due at the beginning of the next class period unless otherwise noted. It is expected all items will be handed in on time. No more than half credit will be given for work that is turned in late.

Please double space all assignments, putting in the date and a brief description of the assignment (game story, feature, story ID, etc.).

All game stories must have the accompanying summary or statistics attached. At least three people should be quoted in game stories and in features. Please follow AP style and Echo suggestions and tips when you write your stories.

NOTE: There will be some weeks when we'll be going to games, so that week's class schedule will be altered. Pay attention. If you cannot make the scheduled basketball, hockey or baseball games, you are responsible for submitting a written note on which game will be substituted, as well as being under the same constraints for turning assignments in as you would have had you been there with the group.

PLEASE NOTE: Any assignment calling sports plays "bombs," "blasts," "attacks," "assaults," or "invasions" will get a ZERO. ANY ASSIGNMENT WITH A NAME SPELLED WRONG OR A WRONG STAT IN A GAME STORY ALSO GETS A ZERO.

### **Additional readings to be announced.**

## **WEEK ONE:**

### **Opening Day**

Discussion: Introductions, course plans.

Assignment: Sports writers often must access facts and statistics immediately via the Internet. A 25-pointer — Find out: How many homers did Al Kaline have? What is Scotty Bowman's hometown? Where did Joe Dumars play college ball? Where did Steve Mariucci play in college and what was his position? What was Chris Webber's regular-season scoring average last season? What did Bobby Higginson bat in 1999? What is Tiger Woods' real first name? At what school did Kevin Jones play?

Discussion: Relying on Chapters 1 & 2 of Wilstein, describe the types of stories you'll find in a sports section (such as game, news, column, sidebar, feature, advance, notebook, roundup), identify the types of writers (beat, columnist, feature, investigative) and talk about their responsibilities and problems.

Assignment: A 2-page essay: "The type of writer I'd best like to be and why" (25 points).

Due: Information forms, Internet fact-finding.

## **WEEK TWO:**

### **Problems and Advances**

Discussion: What makes a good sports writer? Read Chapter 3 of Wilstein.

Assignments: From the football notes, write an advance (include three questions you would have asked the coach) and a facts box (25 points).

DUE: "The type of writer I'd best like to be and why" essay.

### **Game Stories**

Discussion: What are the types of game stories and what goes into them? Wilstein, Chapter 5.

Write a 2- to 3-page analysis of one day's News and Free Press game stories based on assigned readings

in Fensch.

Assignments: Two EMU game stories, not on men's basketball or hockey, with the accompanying summary or statistics. Write leads from notes.

DUE: Football advance from notes.

## **WEEK THREE:**

### **Hoop It Up**

We'll go to the Miami of Ohio-EMU game at the Convocation Center at 7, stories (40 points) due in class the next day. Also, come up with a subject for a sidebar, two people you'd need to talk to and at least one question for each.

Read Wilstein Chapter 6, "Quotes and Misquotes."

### **You Be the Judge**

Please buy Wednesday's News and Free Press. We'll do an in-class version of what will be your final project, comparing and critiquing the sports sections.

Due: Hoops story, leads from notes.

## **WEEK FOUR:**

### **Visiting Professionals**

Two writers from The Detroit News will sit in with us, telling you about their jobs and answering your questions. Please have a lot ready for them to make their visits worthwhile. Hopefully, it will be Angelique Chengelis, who covers mainly Michigan football, and columnist Bob Wojnowski.

Injury handouts and famous sportswriters handouts will be distributed.

### **Cover Game**

Drop off game story by noon.

## **WEEK FIVE:**

### **Drop the Puck**

We'll go to the Western Michigan-EMU club hockey game at 7:30 at the Ann Arbor Ice Cube. Stories (40 points) due in class.

### **Football**

Discussion: Some formations and terms, basic play-by-play. Read Wilstein Chapter 5.

Assignment: Two ideas for EMU features, including why the story is worth doing (i.e., its news value) and two or three people you would need to talk to. Not for credit, but write a short item on your choice for the Super Bowl (and why) and the score. The person closest without going past the actual score will win a book.

Due: Hockey story.

## **WEEK SIX:**

### **Features**

Discussion: Analyze sports features. Use the Internet to find two sports features you love and at least one you think is flawed. Write an analysis of why you would publish each story (or not).

Assignments: Two EMU features (20 points each) that have to have a minimum of three people quoted, with one being a personality profile with an accompanying facts box.

DUE: Feature ideas, Super Bowl picks.

### **More hockey**

We'll go to the Iowa State-EMU game at the AA Ice Cube.

## **WEEK SEVEN:**

### **Covering sports scandals**

Discussion: From steroids to gambling, sports stories sometimes jump off the sports pages and onto Page One. Are we too slow (or too quick) to cover these stories? Why every sports reporter is a NEWS reporter.

Read Wilstein Chapter 8, “Beyond the Fields: Features, Enterprise and Investigative Reporting” and write a 3-page response.

### **In-class interview**

Football coach Jeff Genyk will be interviewed by the class, and you will write a story based on that (25 points). You can write this as a news story, column or feature. Questions for Thursday’s discussion will be handed out.

DUE: Game story.

## **WEEK EIGHT:**

### **No such thing as a free lunch?**

Discussion: Press Box ethics. Whose side are you on? Is it root, root, root for the home team?

Read Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics handouts.

### **Questions**

We’ll go over the handout questions, getting your thoughts and viewpoints. Hand out abbreviations handout and News column.

DUE: Coach in-class interview story. One feature.

## **WEEK NINE:**

### **Sports Columns**

Discussion: What makes a good columnist? Wilstein, Chapter 4.

Due: One feature.

Assignments: Explain what you would do in this situation: You’re planning to write column on how one of EMU’s team is struggling. The coach gets wind of it and says you better not write it because it will make him look bad. Discuss the pros and cons of this situation.

## **MIDTERM (100 points)**

Short answers, some fill in the blanks, covering readings and class discussions.

DUE: Essay describing how you would handle the column the coach does not like.

## **WINTER BREAK --**

### **Remembering the Titans**

Watch “Remember the Titans,” a 2000 movie with Denzel Washington about a high school football team in Alexandria, Va., in 1971. Turn in a review (25 points) that addresses issues raised by the assignment handout.

## **WEEK TEN:**

### **The Business of Sports**

Discussion: Discuss coverage of sports hiring, firing, trades, business and court stories, as well as obits. Read Wilstein Chapter 8.

Assignment: A 50-point response to coverage of any recent sports business story.

DUE: Column.

## **What Happens After You Write?**

Discussion: An overview of the inside, or desk operation, of a sports department. Budgets, news meetings, the slot man and the rim, duty rosters, staging sheets, paginating, deadlines, changes from edition to edition, dealing with unplanned happenings, proofs and makeovers.

Assignments: Please bring two questions you have on anything related to sports journalism. Also, pretend you are at The Detroit News and are making a story budget for the day after the Super Bowl at Ford Field. List five stories you would need for your section (25 points).

DUE: Column likes-dislikes, new coach questions.

## **WEEK ELEVEN:**

### **The Pressure's On**

You will have 10-15 minutes to interview your teacher as a new EMU coach being introduced at a news conference. Write a story (25 points) by the end of class.

### **Sideline pressures**

Discussion: Criticism of sports pages – from fans, players, owners, coaches, and parents. What are they saying and why? What should the sports writer's response be? Read Fensch.

## **WEEK TWELVE:**

### **On Top of the World**

Discussion: What messages do sports pages send when celebrating teen athletes?

Assignment: Rely on your texts, as well as assigned journal articles, to write a 3-page paper on the pros and cons of making heroes out of young athletes. (50 points).

### **Reconstruction**

You will have to unscramble into coherent form several jumbled leads.

Due: A sports column on the topic of your choice.

## **WEEK THIRTEEN:**

### **You Rule the World**

Assignment: You're one of four club execs of a Detroit team – Tigers General Manager Dave Dombrowski, Pistons President Joe Dumars, Red Wings General Manager Ken Holland or Lions President Matt Millen. If could make one trade for a single player, who would it be? Explain why, backing with stats and analysis; say who you would give up and why; why you went after the guy and how he'd help.

### **Diamond Doings**

Discussion: Some basic baseball statistics and scorekeeping.

Due: Trade analysis story, final project, Titans review.

### **Even More Pressure**

You'll have to write a game story from a handed-out summary and notes from an EMU event, plus come up with at least three questions you would have asked the coaches and players (20 points).

## **WEEK FOURTEEN:**

### **A Day at the Ballpark**

We will go to the Michigan State-EMU game at 5 p.m. at Oestrike Stadium. Stories (50 points) will be due the next day in class.

### **Detroit News Visitors**

Lions beat writer Mike O'Hara and U-M basketball beat writer Jim Spadafore will be with us.

## **WEEK FIFTEEN:**

### **Wrap-Up**

It's time for another Internet hunt, finding out: What school did Coach Merchant play for? At what school did Coach Boone coach in Pennsylvania? For which team was EMU's Bob Welch the National League rookie of the year? What was EMU product Chris Hoiles' lifetime batting average? How old is Sammy Sosa? What was Steve Yzerman's first season with the Wings? What was Rasheed Wallace's regular-season scoring average last season with the Pistons? Where were Venus and Serena Williams born? What was Carlos Pena's college? For which teams was Dave Lewis a defenseman? How many interceptions did Joey Harrington have in his first pro season? How many yards rushing did EMU have against Florida last season?

### **Titans Time**

We'll talk over "Remember the Titans." Some singing will be required.

Due: two of three -- EMU game story, column or feature;  
WMU-EMU baseball story; assistant coaches interview story.

### **Final Exam (100 points)**

You will critique sports stories, as well as provide short answers to questions on a variety of topics from the semester.