

SAY IT AIN'T SO

GEORGE VECSEY

Sports of the Times

Byline or Not, All Were Stars On Our Team

THIS has been a wretched summer for New York teams.

The Yankees stink. The Mets' ownership quit on the team and the fans. And The New York Times is shutting down its sports department.

I've lost other precious institutions in my life: the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants, rabid opponents, went west.

I take The Times's closing personally because for decades I was a loyal member of the sports department. I can understand the changing conditions that crowded the sports section: this great newspaper covers Ukraine, climate, politics, around the clock. But why garrot the sports section, produced by Times employees, conditioned by Times standards, aimed for literate adults?

I don't know if it showed, but for many decades, The Times's sports section was a team, in the best sense of the word — the girls and boys of summer, in a "clubhouse" where clerks and specialists worked with editors and writers, in some semblance of teamwork.

Byline types popped into the office but more likely filed from distant locales or convoluted crannies of our heads. The actual clubhouse



It ain't over till it's over. And now it is.

was a genteel place under sports editor James Roach, who hired me in 1968. Under subsequent sports editors Le Anne Schreiber, Joe Vecchione, Neil Amdur, Tom Jolly and Jason Stallman in my final year, the section adjusted to the computerized online world, but it never lost a family feeling.

In my years, the NYT sports clubhouse bustled with specialists like Elena Gustines, who created clever graphics

and later acting as a page designer and at the same time suffering with the Mets along with Jay Schreiber, the deputy sports editor.

Jay recalls being in the office during a Mets-Yankees game when Elena began cheering "as K-Rod got A-Rod to pop up for the last out — except that Castillo then dropped the ball. And Elena, as always, went on to make a lot of jokes about what happened."

We had office managers/caretakers — like Fern Turkowitz, Gloria Bell and recently Terri Ann Glynn, so valuable and personable that editors sent her to Olympic Games to keep order.

There were too many editors to name, but I must describe how deputy sports editor Bill Brink ("Mister Bill") came up to me, writing on last-second deadline in the office after the New York City Marathon, and asked me about my first paragraph, describing Fred Lebow, the maestro of the marathon from his perch in the open pace car as it sped around the city.

"Umm," Mister Bill said softly. "Did you really mean Lebow was 'like Charlemagne crossing the Alps?' I flushed a deep purple and thanked him profusely and said maybe I meant Hannibal. My faux pas would have earned me a snarky paragraph in The New Yorker. Forever.

Mister Bill saved my ass. They all saved our asses, including editors in my time like Ray Corio, Arthur Pincus, Susan Adams and Patty LaDuca (I can't name them all) — plus my first assignment editor, Frank Litsky, known by me as "Four Fifty" because that was his unbending ration of words for my precious Yankee and Met game stories.

And then there was Carl Nelson, late-night negotiator with the sports-savvy bosses at the printing plant in Queens, with trucks ready to roll as soon as Sports closed. With terse Clint Eastwood poise, Carl would tell me I had two more minutes. Maybe three. We were always safe with Carl.

I want to note that three of our best high-up editors eventually left the NYT on their own volition: Kathleen O. McElroy and Lawrie Mifflin became stars in forms of education, and Jill Agostino followed a long ambition and became a nurse, just in time for the pandemic. Bless their hearts.

Again, writers get the bylines and the notoriety, but the office had superstars with rare public notice: Jay Schreiber, the editor who understood soccer as well as baseball; Adrienne B. Morris, whose laugh was the soundtrack of deadline; Joe Ward, a lead graphics editor; Bedel Saget, a graphics editor (and curious traveler in his spare time during an Olympics); Wayne Kamidoi and Lee Yarosh, page designers; Joe Brescia, an office-fixture clerk with opinions and quips about everything. And Jim Luttrell, who taught a whiny sports columnist how to use links online (turning me into kind of a links freak).

They all were stars but, in recent years, space shrank, and games went too long, and deadlines got too early, and priorities changed. And a winning team was dismantled.

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*Everything dies, baby, that's a fact
But maybe everything that dies some day
comes back*

— Bruce Springsteen, "Atlantic City"

There Used to Be a Sports Department Right Here

What strange, inflationary times we live in. Remember when it cost a fraction of \$550 million to expand sports coverage and create an esteemed national brand in the process?

Such was Neil Amdur's mandate in the spring of 1991 after inheriting The Times's smart, literate reporting staff from Joe Vecchione, his predecessor as sports editor. Then management had the good sense to hand him a freestanding section, seven days a week.

More column space, more local and national coverage, and no more rifling through the metro or business news to locate the Vecsey and Anderson columns, Berkow and Moran features, the latest M.L.B. servings from Chass and Smith.

I suspect Amdur would have loved 400 new hires, but he managed just fine with a couple of muckrakers from The Daily News, the return of Lipsyte and a self-possessed young media business reporter named

Sandomir. The basic infrastructure, so to speak, was already in place.

It's doubtful that anyone envisioned what the internet would mean for planetary exposure, but it turned out there were countless New Yorkers, among others, across America who were hungry for daily insights from the growing Northeast and national editions on the Yankees and Knicks.

Like The Times's sports section, the '90s turned out to be a pretty good decade for them, too.

I read a recent comment on The Times's Facebook alumni page, in effect asking: What's the big deal about the company's decision to eliminate its sports section when, let's face it, it generally operated in tabloid-imposed obscurity?

Resisting the temptation to profanely respond, I wrote, in summary: With all due respect, and as an alumnus of The Post and The Daily News, if you think we were "outgunned" by our crosstown and downtown competitors, you weren't paying attention.

Across the '90s and into the new century, I can say (because I was there) that many a competitor's wary eye in the Knicks' locker room was cast upon our Roberts, Wise, Robbins and Beck. And Amdur would not have dared underplay the Yankees' run to four World Series titles in five years when the executive editor at the time had an interlocking NY stitched into his heart.

Most Yankees' playoff nights, and certainly during the 2000 Subway Series, three or four of our five (no misprint) Sports of The Times columnists were in the building. It was awkward, on occasion even divisive, figuring out who wrote what. It was the necessary compromise for being part of a section that knew how to do up a big event.

Nor did it require a frenzied pursuit of digital subscriptions for The Times's sports staff to get the importance of the Olympics. My wife, then an ESPN publicist, recalls greeting a small army of Times staffers fresh off a flight from the 1988

Calgary Winter Games while waiting for me, the sole correspondent for The Daily News.

This was the blueprint for the modern sports section to address a diverse and far-flung readership. Go big on Super Bowls, World Cups, tennis and golf majors, and the ambitious enterprise reporting that made a stamp-filled mess of Longman's passports and earned Branch a Pulitzer Prize.

I could fill the whole page with familiar names that have graced this section, Kornheiser to Kepner, but feel compelled to conclude with an appreciative bow to those who toiled inside, and especially Brink, Schreiber and Nelson for how they coped with the maddening stress of deadline, of game-night deliverance, when that was the essential.

Yes, times, technology and reader habits do change, and the masthead has spoken. But the archives give voice to decades of expertise and excellence. May they never be shuttered like the section, or purged.



DATELINE: EVERYWHERE Decade after decade, from one deadline to the next, The Times's sports department went where the story was, whether it was Queens or the Bronx, a mountain range in the Northwest, Atlanta when Hank Aaron made history or the other side of the globe for Olympic Games. We spared no effort and we made it all work. With distinction. Now the end is here, but the words and photographs will live on.

Game Over? Stay Tuned.

By **JENNY VRENTAS**

During a company-wide meeting in July, days after The New York Times unceremoniously disbanded its prize-winning sports department, workers from across the company began chanting in unison: "Sports jobs are union jobs!" This has become a rallying cry for the 1,500 members of the Times Guild in response to the company's attempt to subcontract illegally to itself and replace unionized sports reporters with what it says are non-union employees at The Athletic.

For decades, The Times's sports department has produced innovative storytelling and groundbreaking journalism that earned four Pulitzer Prizes. The journalists behind this sports coverage are union members, with the same wage standards, job protections and working conditions as the colleagues with whom their work appears alongside on a daily basis. The union is fighting to make sure that does not change.

In leading this fight, the sports desk has drawn on the same camaraderie that has propelled us in our coverage of major international events such as the Olympics and the World Cup, and enabled us to meet the tight deadlines particular to live games that end after midnight. When our reporters' dogged instincts uncovered the company's plans to eliminate the department, we collectively demanded transparency and a seat at the table. After the company disrespected us by announcing its plans to the world via a push alert before we had been informed about our own futures, we offered each other the support and career counseling the company seemed disinclined to provide.

We were backed by our colleagues, past and present: More than 1,000 unionized workers across the company as well as alumni signed a petition demanding that the company respect union work. And last month, nearly 200 Times Guild members wrote personal emails to the publisher

A.G. Sulzberger, CEO Meredith Leiven and executive editor Joe Kahn. Many expressed their concern that if the company could shut the sports desk and use non-union copy in its place, they could do the same thing to other departments.

The Guild will continue to pursue every legal avenue available, and last week filed for arbitration after the company denied our grievance, which asserted that The Times had violated our hard-fought labor agreement. But most important is our enduring solidarity, and our will to stop the company's flagrant union-busting and transparent attempts to pit workers against each other.

Today, the day the company chose to shutter the sports desk, nearly 40 Times sports staffers will be moved to other desks in the newsroom. But together, we and our union colleagues will continue to fight for what is a sacred truth: The work of covering sports for The New York Times is union work.

The Bottom Drawer

The new tenants should look around for any leftover brown liquid therapy. It's handy after deadline.

Total Rip

Can there be more postscripts in the future of Times Sports?

Scan This!

Then Tell The New York Times to Stop Union Busting!

