Constructing the Sports Community: Canadian Sports Columnists, Identity, and the Business of Sport in the 1940s

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In the mid-1940s, Canadian newspapers reported on the business of sport, a common topic of the sports pages then as now. This writing reflected in part the fundamental changes occurring in sports business at the time. The 19th-century ideals of amateurism had declined in popular journalism between the wars as commercialization had taken hold of society in general and sport in particular. Newspaper pages contained breathless reports of player salaries, the revenues of sports teams, and the high cost of tickets. Yet there was a negative attitude in this coverage as sports columnists complained about the problems caused by the excesses of the business. Sports columnists today express a similar attitude, complaining about the ticket prices at arenas or the high salaries paid to players. This paper examines the sports business writing of two columnists in particular, Jim Coleman of the *Globe and Mail* and Andy Lytle of the *Toronto Star*, as well as their colleagues, to document this attitude. This paper examines sports columnists’ specific rhetoric and, more importantly, positions this rhetoric as part of a greater process of community formation and protection. I argue that the coverage of the business of sport should not be seen simply as a reflection of changes in the business of sport; the coverage of the business of sport should be examined discursively, as a site where sports columnists constructed their own journalistic identities as they policed the mediated sports world on behalf of fans.

Many studies of 19th- and early 20th-century sport in Canada use newspapers as a source for explicit arguments, but rarely is the content seen as structuring the meanings of sport. But authors in any medium use language to encode ways of seeing the world, setting up relations between participants, and these constructions are successful when people accept them.1 Some recent studies of Canadian sports journalism in history have positioned content in this way. For instance, Stacy Lorenz has looked at the symbols and meanings that made up the mediated sports communities so many people joined.2 Newspaper reports served as a site of contestation of meanings surrounding hockey and masculinity in a study by Lorenz and Geraint Osborne, who examined sports narratives.3 Similarly, Daniel Mason and Gregory

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Duquette examined the differing coverage of hockey violence in newspapers to understand the ideologies behind these varying constructions circulated by sports journalists. In these ways, studies of journalism content take into account discourse, narrative, and ideology as a foundation of meaning, rather than simply using that content as a factual source of past events.

Despite the growing popularity of this approach, Canadian sports business writing has never been examined in this way. This study analyzes all articles about sports business published in 1944 and 1945 in the *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star*, two of the largest circulation newspapers of the time. These articles are deconstructed into categories suggested by discourse theorist Norman Fairclough: sports business coverage 1) represented the sports world in a certain way, 2) assigned identities to the people involved in the event or issue, and 3) created a relationship between the journalist and the reader. Sports columnists unconsciously constructed a sense of the sports world that they monitored and regulated, replete with characters such as greedy owners, money-hungry athletes, innocent fans, and watchdog sports writers. The columnists in these two newspapers had a large and wide readership in Canada, giving them notoriety and, in some cases, fame. These two years also represent a large body of writing in an important period that saw the culmination of both the Second World War and the initial stage of sports commercialization, a crisis moment when the value of sport was tested by the seriousness of war. I present this account as a preliminary study and a model for other researchers looking at journalistic content, particularly the business coverage of sport, as an expression of culture.

**Jim Coleman and Andy Lytle**

This paper examines all the writing on the business of sport in these two newspapers, but the work of two leading columnists, Coleman and Lytle, is considered in particular depth here because it appeared regularly, a cause and reflection of their notoriety in Canadian sports journalism in the 20th century. Before he arrived at the *Globe and Mail* in 1941, Coleman (1911-2001) worked at the *Vancouver Province*, the *Edmonton Journal*, and the *Winnipeg Tribune*, eventually receiving an appointment to the Order of Canada in 1974 as well as a number of sports and media halls of fame. He took a particular interest in horseracing from an early age, eventually publishing a memoir, *A Hoofprint on My Heart*, about his association with the sport. He also served as publicity director of the Ontario Jockey Club. The racetrack was his spiritual home, as he said he felt “happier on the racetrack than I could have been in any other environment.”

*Toronto Sun* columnist Jim Hunt called Coleman “the most amusing sports columnist that this country has ever had … absolutely brilliant.” Despite a similar productivity, Andy Lytle’s biography is limited. Lytle (1884-1959) began in the newspaper business with the *British Columbian* in Coquitlam, B.C., where he worked as correspondent and copy reader. Later, he worked at the *Vancouver Province* and *Vancouver Sun* before joining the *Toronto Star* in 1934, where he stayed until 1949. Upon Lytle’s debut at the *Star*, the respected sports editor Lou Marsh told readers Lytle would get in their hair like “coakle burrs to a woolen sock.” Lytle is best known in the sports history literature for his columns that criticized female athletes.