

**SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION**

**JOUR 432 Sports Commentary
Fall 2007
4 units**

Schedule/Syllabus

Day/Time: Tuesdays, 6:45 – 10:05 p.m.
Classroom: GFS 207

Instructor: J.A. Adande

Course Purpose

The only thing fans like better than watching sports is arguing about sports. Who's the best? What team got the better of the trade? Should the coach be fired?

Even today, when every game can be watched or listened to somehow, somewhere, and every statistic is available online for all to see, fans still hunger for more analysis. The challenge is to have a distinctive voice that stands out from the cacophony of opinions, to create commentary that is informative, thought-provoking and entertaining. Another crucial skill is the ability to adapt the message for delivery across multiple media platforms: print, Internet, television, radio and podcasts.

Sports are more than just home runs and touchdowns. Collectively, they're part of a \$200 billion industry. And within this realm all of the elements of our society are displayed: heroism and failure, racial harmony and discrimination, drugs, religion and crime. That's why it's so important to be aware of all current issues, not just the latest sports results.

Students will learn to coalesce their observations, opinions and experiences into compelling arguments that reflect the essence of the sports column: "I'm right, and this is why."

Course Objectives

- To develop the ability to present logical, well-informed, entertaining sports columns
- To develop the ability to write columns on deadline
- To be able to convey these opinions on radio and television
- To approach games and news events with a critic's eye

Course Description

The ability to write clearly and persuasively is the core of sports commentary and will be the central element of this class. There will be weekly written columns (usually on a topic of the student's choice) as well as in-class written exercises. Each week the class will analyze at least one student's work; one of the requirements of issuing criticism on a regular basis is the ability to handle it in return. We will focus on writing compelling, well-researched columns that grab the reader's attention and give an unambiguous take. We then will utilize those skills while working on the presentation that is so crucial to television and radio commentary.

Students will be expected to read sports news sites daily and be prepared to discuss the issues of the day and how the media analyzes them. Each week they will choose a story that grabs their attention and be ready to share it with the class. The professor will also distribute noteworthy stories in class or via e-mail.

While keeping up with current events, students will learn the historic context of all forms of sports media so they can appreciate and build upon the groundwork laid by the pioneers of the field. Students will also hear from current working professionals to learn their techniques and advice for advancing in the business. Students will be quizzed bi-weekly on their knowledge of current sports news, course content and the information from the guest speakers.

Textbooks

The following books are required:

Jim Murray: The Last of the Best, Los Angeles Times Books, 1998, 334 pages.

The Best American Sports Writing of the Century, Houghton Mifflin, 1999, 760 pages.

Grades

Grades will be determined as follows:

Weekly Assignments	45%
Quizzes	10%
Midterm	15%
Final	20%
Participation	10%

Midterm

The midterm will have multiple choice and short-answer questions based on class/speaker discussions and an essay question based on the book *Jim Murray: The Last of the Best*.

Final

The final will be cumulative, covering all class discussions and guest speakers, in addition to a column on a timely topic.

Attendance and Participation

Because the class only meets once a week and will be the basis for most of the course material, attendance is a top priority. Religious holidays and medical/family emergencies will be excused with advance notice and/or verification. Students will be expected to participate in class discussions and ask questions of the guest speakers.

Academic Accommodations/Statement for Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is 213-740-0776.

Plagiarism/Academic Integrity Policy

The two greatest sins of journalism are fabrication and plagiarism. All work will be based on real events except for certain exercises designated by the professor. Students will use their own ideas and words and not appropriate the ideas and writings of others while passing them off as their own, or failing to properly attribute. Even self-plagiarism is not allowed; students who work for campus or professional media outlets may not utilize stories for class assignments. All work for class must be original.

The following is the Annenberg School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the university catalogue: "Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will receive a failing grade in the course and will be dismissed as a major from the School of Journalism. There are no exceptions to this policy."

Internships

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course who undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to one percent of the total available semester points for this course.

Instructor bio

J.A. Adande recently became a senior writer for ESPN.com, where he will give his opinions on the NBA and other topics for the country's largest sports Web site. He sampled life in Chicago, Miami and Washington, D.C., before he returned full time to his native Los Angeles, where he was a sports columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* from 1997-2007 and an "Around the Horn" panelist for ESPN since 2002.

A member of the National Association of Black Journalists, he received his Bachelor of Science degree from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. After internships with the *Los Angeles Times'* Westside edition in 1990; The *San Bernardino Sun* and *The Washington Post* in 1991; and *The Miami Herald* in 1992, he became a full-time staff writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

In 1994, he moved east to *The Washington Post* as a staff writer. Three years later he returned to Southern California to become a sports columnist for the *Los Angeles Times'* Orange County edition. In 1998 his column began running in all editions. Other media experience includes "The Paper Boys" show on FSN West from 2002-2004 and the "Celebrity Sports Talk" radio show in 2001.

SCHEDULE

All readings and speakers are subject to revision and rescheduling as news develops in the covered subject areas.

WEEK ONE - AUG. 28

Course Overview and Introduction

An introduction to the course, with an overview and the logistics. We will start with a discussion of the core of this course, the sports column. What makes a compelling column? What should it set out to accomplish?

We also will review some cautionary tales from the real world, with examples of simple mistakes, lapses in judgment or ethical shortcomings that can afflict even the nation's best columnists.

For next week: and "Oh, No! Not Another Boring Interview with Steve Carlton," by Diane K. Shah, p. 181-183, and "Medora Goes to the Game," by George Plimpton, p. 466-477, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

Written assignment: Column one.

WEEK TWO – SEPT. 4

Research and Resources

The foundations of any great columns are ideas and information. This week the students will learn what information is useful and relevant for sports arguments and where to find it, starting with a list of suggested web sites from "Around the Horn" research director Mark Hancock. We also will discuss practical tips for gleaning information the old fashioned way: from interviews.

Group discussion of a student's written assignment.

For next week: Read Bill Plaschke's columns at www.latimes.com/plaschke and read Jimmy Breslin's "Racing's Angriest Young Man," p. 289-303, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

Written assignment: Column two – cite sources for research material.

WEEK THREE – Sept. 11

Guest speaker: Bill Plaschke, sports columnist, *Los Angeles Times*.

The Internet and Blogging

They say everyone has an opinion, and these days it seems every opinionated person has a blog to spout them off. Even mainstream media figures maintain blogs. We will look at how blog writing differs from the traditional sports column, how to make a blog stand out – mainly by remembering to be a reporter first.

Group discussion of a student's written assignment.

For next week: Read “His Touch Made Dodgers Special,” p. 35-38, in *Jim Murray: The Last of the Best*, Phil Mushnick's sports media column at www.nypost.com and Larry Stewart at www.latimes.com/sports.

Written assignment: Column three. – find an off-beat topic, something away from the limelight.

WEEK FOUR – Sept. 18

Mock Television Shows

Students will be given topics and then prepare for a rapid-fire television debate show. We will videotape them for review. Points of emphasis include hitting key facts, on-air presentation, how and when to interrupt another speaker.

Quiz.

Group discussion of a student's written assignment.

Guest speaker: Rick Jaffe, Fox Sports

For next week: Read “The Boxer and the Blonde,” by Frank DeFord, p. 499- 524, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*. Read Jon Weisman's work at www.dodgerthoughts.com

Written assignment: Column four.

WEEK FIVE – Sept. 25

Podcasting

Sometimes the difficulty is how to make more out of less – distilling your arguments to bite-sized pieces that best fit the format of podcasts or parting shots/closing thoughts on TV shows.

In-class assignment: Students will prepare and perform one-minute “podcasts.”

Guest speaker: Jon Weisman, www.dodgerthoughts.com.

Group discussion of a student’s written assignment.

For next week: Read “Miracle of Coogan’s Bluff,” by Red Smith, p. 150-152, and “Louis Knocks Out Schmeling,” by Bob Considine, p. 138-140, in *The Best American Sports Writing* and “Tyson’s a Two-Bit Fighter,” p. 251-253, in *Jim Murray: The Last of the Best*.

Written assignment: Column five.

WEEK SIX – OCT. 2

How to Write a Game Column

At its essence, sports writing is still about writing from the game. That’s where the great plays and memorable action occur, and it’s the columnist’s job to put it all in perspective in a matter of minutes.

Students will learn what belongs in a game column and what should be left out, plus tips on writing on deadline, such as finding universal themes that hold up regardless of the outcome, running and topping and tricks for surviving last-minute changes.

Quiz.

Group discussion of a student’s written assignment.

For next week: Read “Lawdy, Lawdy, He’s Great!” By Mark Kram, p. 741-746, and “No Mas,” by Tom Boswell, p. 461-465, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

Written assignment: Column six.

WEEK SEVEN – OCT. 9

Live Game Column

In class writing assignment: Column seven – we will watch a game on TV and students will write a column due before the end of class.

Brief review for next week’s midterm exam.

WEEK EIGHT – OCT. 16

Midterm Exam

Group discussion of student columns

For next week: Read a selection of sports TV critics, including the *Times*' Larry Stewart, *USA Today*'s Michael Hiestand, the *Daily News*' Tom Hoffarth and the *New York Post*'s Phil Mushnick.

Written assignment: Column eight.

WEEK NINE – Oct. 23

The Evolution of Sports on Television

With the use of extensive video examples we will study the growth of the TV sports industry, including how the NFL used television to become the most popular sport in the country, the one-of-a-kind sports journalist Howard Cosell, and the growth of sportswriters giving their opinions on television from round-table discussions in smoky rooms to graphic-oriented productions.

Guest Speaker: Jim Hill, KCBS-TV.

Group discussion of student columns

For next week: Read "Pure Heart," by William Nack, p. 548-563, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*. **For next week:** Read Norman Chad's columns at www.chron.com.

Written assignment: Column nine.

WEEK 10 – Oct. 30

Humor and the Written Word

One of the greatest challenges is to be funny in print. We'll hear from one of the few who can pull it off successfully, syndicated columnist Norman Chad.

Quiz.

Group discussion of a student's written assignment.

Written assignment: Column 10.

WEEK 11 – Nov, 6

Lakers Game

The class will attend a Lakers game at Staples Center. We will meet the people behind the scenes, visit with the coach, watch the game from the press box and interview a player afterward. We'll see the difference between having a storyline presented to you by a television broadcast and having to find one yourself while watching an event live.

Group discussion of a student's written assignment.

For next week: Read "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," by John Updike, p. 304-317, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

Written assignment: Column 11.

WEEK 12 – Nov. 13

Sports Talk Radio

There might be only one subject on which coaches and columnists can agree: sports talk radio has changed the nature of the industry. Now every bad decision is grounds to fire the coach and every fan stuck in traffic with a cell phone feels qualified to act as a team's general manager. However, talk radio also has become a lucrative way for columnists – as well as former coaches, and former players – to get paid to talk about sports. We will discuss the history of sports in this medium, including a look at one of the unique voices in L.A. radio history: Jim Healy.

Quiz

Guest speaker: Joe McDonnell, radio show host.

For next week: Read "Tangled Up In Blue," by Peter Richmond, p. 539-610, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

Written assignment: Column 12 – students will write their assignment for the following week based on the game.

WEEK 13 – Nov. 20

Mock Radio Shows

Students will be given topics and take turns hosting 12-minute radio show segments, with the other students serving as callers. Remember, in audio or visual media, presentation is just as important as content

Review of game columns and live game experience.

For next week: Read “Game Called,” by Grantland Rice, p. 140-143, and “The Making of a Goon,” by Johnette Howard, p. 564-573, in *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century*.

Written assignment: Column 13.

WEEK 14 – Nov. 27

Breaking News

Nothing is more stressful than having to form an instant, educated opinion on trades, hirings, firings and “sudden change” while on deadline. And in the 24-hour news cycle, it’s always deadline. This class will discuss how to zero in on the key elements of a news story and translate that to sharp analysis.

In class writing assignment: Students will write a column in class based on a hypothetical news event.

Quiz.

For next week: Read “The Rocky Road of Pistol Pete,” by W.C. Heinz, p. 236-252, in *The Best American Sports Writing*.

Written assignment: Column 14.

WEEK 15 – Dec. 4

Course Review

Summary of course lessons and guest speaker discussions in preparation for final exam.

Group review of breaking news columns.

WEEK 16 – Dec. 18

Final Examination

A cumulative exam covering the entire semester, consisting of multiple choice/short answer questions based on lectures and guest speakers, plus a column on a topic to be given at exam time.