



Chapter 1

TROUBLE IN THE TOY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN LIFE

In democratic societies, news media often take pride in framing journalism as the ‘fourth estate’: An independent power that critically investigates and informs the public about decisions and wrongdoings made by the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. However, as the American reporting legend Howard Cosell (1918-1995) pointed out, sports journalism is an exception. It’s part of what he called ‘the toy department of human life’.

Howard Cosell was a leading voice of corporate America’s early radio and television broadcasting of sports. He was also one of the first gentlemen of the press who tried to change sports journalism.

In the 1950s, when most sports journalists preferred to please athletes, coaches, and sports managers with flattery and admiration, Howard Cosell introduced a new critical approach which he presented in a self-confident style that earned him a reputation for being an arrogant, obnoxious, and cruel personality.

One of the first to report critically on sport, Howard Cosell, stirred controversy by defending the American boxer Muhammad Ali’s right to choose a Muslim name and refuse to join the US troops in Vietnam.

Photo: Focus on Sport/Getty Images

But Howard Cosell's weekly radio show 'Speaking of Sports' on ABC Radio was popular because he combined analytical enlightenment of his audience with an entertaining aggressive style of journalism that made sports journalism look like news journalism.

In 1961, his talent led him to one of the most influential positions in the growing American media industry, as a sports anchor at ABC TV.

During the following decade that was marked by social and racial unrest in the US, Howard Cosell was a strong supporter of athletes' rights and freedom of speech. When American heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay declared that he had converted to Islam and faced criticism for adopting a Muslim name, Howard Cosell was one of the first sports reporters to call the outspoken black boxer by his new name, Muhammad Ali, and defend his right to follow any religion he pleased.

An advocate of athletes' rights

The relation between the white Jewish sports reporter and the black Muslim athlete grew stronger when Muhammad Ali in 1967 refused to serve as a soldier in the US Army during the Vietnam War, and Howard Cosell defended the boxer's right to keep his titles at a time when the public opinion of him was divided.

Being a lawyer by education, Howard Cosell was also a strong advocate of the rights of the Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos, when most American sports journalists condemned the two US athletes for raising their black-gloved fists in a Black Power salute during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City as a protest against social and racial injustice.

To Howard Cosell, though, his greatest contribution to sports journalism came in 1981 when he introduced 'ABC SportsBeat', a weekly magazine that until 1985 dealt with corruption, doping, and other dark sides of sports that traditional news media didn't cover in depth. Over time, the magazine received three Emmy Awards.

Nevertheless, when Cosell passed away in 1995 at the age of 77, many of his critics argued that he had destroyed his legacy ten years earlier when he left ABC Sports and wrote 'I Never Played the Game'.

In the book, Howard Cosell accused old media colleagues, athletes, coaches, managers, and club owners of being a closed shop of insiders who primarily protected their own popularity and financial interests instead of informing the public about all relevant aspects of sport.

The story of Howard Cosell is an example of the opposition many investigative sports journalists have met when they tried to keep a critical distance from sports and act as ‘the fourth estate’.

But the hostility towards the ‘killjoys’ of sports journalism did not scare all of them. Three years before Howard Cosell’s death, two British journalists began to investigate the dark sides of sport and changed the way a new generation of sports journalists dealt with what Cosell called ‘the toy department of human life’.

The Lords of the Rings

On 1 January 1992, Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson published the first edition of their now-famous book ‘The Lords of the Rings’ which deals with power, money, and drugs in the modern Olympics, led by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from its headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.

The British journalists were not coming out of the sports department of the news media. They were investigative crime reporters, who were awarded for their exposure of a corrupt cocaine connection at Scotland Yard in London. They used investigative methods from crime reporting to research the Olympic Games as a playground for political and corporate corruption on a scale most people at the time found hard to believe.

On the eve of the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, ‘The Lords of the Rings’ documented in detail how the Olympic movement under the discreet guidance of Horst Dassler, owner of the German shoe factory Adidas and the Swiss marketing company International Sport and Leisure (ISL), had turned into a global business network led by a club of powerful sports leaders, sponsored by multinational corporations such as McDonald’s and Coca-Cola, and earning fortunes in a growing market of broadcasting rights.

According to Jennings and Simson, Horst Dassler created the structure of the business-oriented modern world of sport that we know today by exchanging favours and money with international sports leaders in return for getting marketing and broadcasting rights.

Key persons in the network of sports leaders were IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch, FIFA president João Havelange, the president of the International Amateur Athletics Association (IAAF) Primo Nebiolo, and the Mexican president of the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), Mario Vásquez Raña.

Horst Dassler was accused of securing international sports leaders' votes to stay in power, by making murky Adidas and ISL deals with national sports leaders in Third World and East Bloc countries.

But these accusations did not cause as much public debate then as the book's documentation of the IOC president's past. Since his youth, Juan Antonio Samaranch had been involved in the fascist Spanish *falangista* movement while building a career in sports leadership. His loyalty to the Spanish dictator, generalissimo Francisco Franco, led to Samaranch's appointment as head of Spain's governing body for sport from 1967 to 1977.



Vyv Simson and Andrew Jennings received a five-day suspended jail sentence in Lausanne for writing about the IOC president's fascist past. Samaranch denied, but in 2009 a photo appeared showing him giving a fascist salute as late as 1974. Photo: Archive photo with permission from Jaume Reixach Riba

The documentation in the book included photos of Juan Antonio Samaranch wearing a fascist uniform and kneeling in the presence of Franco. But in spite of the evidence, the most powerful man in Olympic sport insisted that he had never been an active fascist and started a legal battle with the two British reporters.

The legal case was investigated by the Swiss state attorney in Lausanne with assistance from Scotland Yard in London. Two years later, the investigation resulted in a court case in Switzerland where Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson in absentia were given a suspended sentence of five days in prison with a probation of three years for having broken an old Swiss defamation law.

The sentence did not stop the British journalists from asking questions about the Spaniard's rule over Olympic sport since 1980. In 1996, two years after his Swiss prison sentence, Andrew Jennings published 'The New Lords of the Rings', an edited version of his and Vyv Simson's book. The new version documented more details of how corruption, but also prostitution and drugs, had become a challenge to the Olympic movement at the highest level inside the IOC.

In those days, it was unusual for investigative crime reporters to cover sports. But as Andrew Jennings once wrote of his investigative journalism in the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*:

"Sports organisations are in the public sphere. They are backed by public money. They wield power. Why should they escape scrutiny?"

The joint financial interests

Andrew Jennings and Vyv Simson were among the first European journalists to challenge the tradition that sport and sports journalism are indelibly woven together.

In the 1980s, the cooperation between sports organisations and sports journalism took an additional economic dimension when sport discovered that both commercial and public media companies were willing to pay huge amounts of money for the rights to sponsor and broadcast sports events.

The close relationship and joint financial interests with many news media and broadcasting companies made it easier for powerful sports organisations such as the IOC and FIFA to escape public scrutiny in spite of their rapidly growing turnovers. To Andrew

Jennings, these sports organisations had become perfect applications of mafia structures and principles.

“They appealed to me because they were global organisations, were at the sharp end of the big brands’ penetration of new markets (we didn’t call it globalisation then) and were completely ignored by grownup reporters,” he wrote in *The Global Investigative Journalism Casebook*, a UNESCO Series on Journalism Education, in 2012.

“I saw every investigative reporter’s dream, a massive empty canvas to paint upon, with a soundtrack of empty mantras, never challenged by the beat reporters.”

Uncovering corruption among the Lords of the Rings led to IOC reforms as shown in chapter 4, which also details what happened when Jennings threw his love on FIFA.

A dangerous profession

Confronting organised sport can be more than just unpleasant. Some reporters put their lives at risk. Based on her research of 78 incidents reported between 2010 and 2016, Kirsten Sparre, a former assistant professor at Aarhus University and now editor at *Play the Game*, concluded in 2017 that investigative sports journalism can be a dangerous profession. However, the 78 incidents of intimidation aimed at journalists working within the broad field of sport is probably only the tip of the iceberg.

The 78 incidents studied occurred in 35 countries across six continents. They ranged from 15 physical assaults to eight journalists being detained, two being kidnapped, and four being killed. The personal safety of sports journalists was compromised through arrests, detentions, physical and verbal assaults, abduction, attacks, threats of violence or death, legal actions, property damage, personal and digital sexual abuse, and even killings. Despite these dangers, Kirsten Sparre pointed out that the safety of sports journalists has never been of particular interest to academic researchers or media freedom organisations.

You may add that international sports organisations are also not putting democratic rights and journalistic safety at the top of their priorities when they choose illiberal or even authoritarian states as hosts for their major events.

In November 2021, Reporters Without Borders urged journalists and media to protect themselves against the Chinese regime’s surveillance when covering the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February 2022. Journalists were warned not to download applications that

could allow the Chinese authorities to monitor them and to denounce any editorial interference or pressure from the regime.

“The Olympic Games provide President Xi Jinping with a dream opportunity to restore his image and try to make people forget his catastrophic human rights records, including press freedom and the right to information,” Reporters Without Borders’ East Asia Bureau Head, Cedric Alviani, said of China’s attempts to use the Olympics to overshadow its bad human rights records.



Journalists covering the Beijing Winter Olympics were tightly controlled by authorities in China which ranks 177 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index. But the Olympic media centre offered nice massage chairs where no danger lurked. Photo: Maja Hitić/Getty Images

In 2021, China was the world's largest prison for journalists with at least 127 journalists detained, ranked as number 177 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index, and was accused of having a media culture worthy of the Maoist era, in which it is a crime to freely seek information.

The other host of a global mega-event in 2022, Qatar, also has a bad record for media freedom, being ranked as number 115 in the World Press Freedom Index. After Qatar in 2010 won the right to host the event, the autocratic rulers of the Middle East Emirate promised FIFA that foreign journalists were welcome to investigate the conditions of the millions of migrant workers who were hired to build the stadiums and the infrastructure for the World Cup. But since then, several foreign journalists have been detained when working in Qatar, and their movements are monitored and restricted.

Countries like China and Qatar can no longer expect only to be applauded when hosting mega-events. The days of the toy department are over.

Earthquakes in sport

In 2019, the prize-winning investigative sports reporter Hajo Seppelt, owner of the production company EyeOpening Media, estimated that out of more than 200 people covering sport for his main customer, the public German broadcaster ARD, only 5-10 per cent of them were working on doping or other background stories in sport:

“So even if the size of our team may be large compared to other media outlets in sport, we are still just a small part of the sports journalists at ARD,” Hajo Seppelt said in an interview with Play the Game, referring to the eight employees of his own company.

Although the ARD sports coordinator Axel Balkausky told Play the Game that the German broadcaster's investigative sport documentaries are “worth the money they cost”, entertaining sports journalism was the main priority at ARD.

“More investigative journalists could cause earthquakes in sport,” Hajo Seppelt said: “There are two kinds of sports journalists: Those who mainly entertain and those who investigate. The first group is a large majority, but if the numbers were fifty-fifty, we could really leave no stone unturned, and I assume a lot of things in sport would change.”

It is a fact that journalists can't inform the public of what is wrong with sports if they are not given the time and the funding to investigate the matter. It is also a fact that no

matter how few they are and no matter how strong opposition and intimidation they face, investigative sports journalists have already caused quite a few earthquakes in sport.

The corruption in FIFA, the Russian-international doping and extortion scandal, Lance Armstrong's doping practices, and the sexual abuse scandal in US gymnastics are just a few examples of the crucial role journalists can play in sport by exposing wrongdoings.

As Jean-Yves Lourgouilloux put it at Play the Game 2017, when he was a public prosecutor at the Parquet National Financier, the French police department investigating financial crime:

“Journalists, anti-corruption associations, and whistleblowers from all over the world are decisive. Without them, we couldn't do anything. How many times have we all heard about journalists' work: ‘It is all rubbish, it is rumours’? And how many times have we discovered later that it was not? We couldn't have even started some of our major cases without the previous work of independent journalists. And I stress the word ‘independent.’”



“Journalists, anti-corruption associations, and whistleblowers from all over the world are decisive. Without them, we couldn't do anything.” French public prosecutor Jean-Yves Lourgouilloux said at Play the Game 2017 in Eindhoven. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game



Andrew Jennings gave Play the Game an arousing start in 1997, calling for critical reporting and international networking among journalists.

Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game



Sport, lies and Stasi-files – a golden opportunity for the press

The first-ever keynote speech given at a Play the Game conference would anticipate what happened in the years to come, as British reporter Andrew Jennings (1943-2022) demanded much higher standards from sports journalists and led media attention in a new direction.

I'm sorry to say that in most countries the standard of reporting about the reality of modern sport is usually appalling. Too much journalism has become the tame pet of the powerful interests who seek to profit from TV and sponsor-driven sport.

In Britain – as in most other countries – we have news reporters who sometimes publish untrue material, fail to check their facts and write dubious stories that will get them free trips, drink, food, clothing, cash and other benefits.

But the very worst manifestations are to be found in sports reporting. Of course, there are honest sports reporters; but we still have to ask: How reliable is their work? Can we trust journalists? Or don't we care? When I look at modern sports reporting I am saddened because too often I find:

- Reporters who don't tell the public what they really know. Many reporters are aware of endemic corruption in sport – but don't reveal it.
- Reporters who are too close to the international emperors of sport; the Samaranchs, Nebiolos and Havelanges.

- Almost criminally bad standards of reporting; laziness, reluctance to ask questions, a reliance on press releases.
- Too much accepting of hospitality from the people they are supposed to report on.

My own background in journalism

I'd like to tell you a little about my background in journalism. I began in 1967, working with the investigation department of The London Sunday Times. I learned an immense amount not just about technique – but also about high standards of research and integrity in the production of a story.

One special lesson I learned then was this: When the pack of reporters go in one direction – go in the opposite direction. Avoid the crowd, stay away from the mob of quick turn-around, newsbite reporters and go away and dig until you think you are getting to some truths. Some independent truths are better than none. [...]

I've had the good luck to work with some wonderful journalists: Men and women who were honest, intelligent and talented. They taught me the basics of

journalism: High ethical standards, keep digging until you find out what the authorities do not want published – and then tell this to the people.

I've always been inspired by the words of that great reporter, Louis Heren, a Deputy Editor of the Times of London. He told his reporters, "Find out why the lying bastards are lying." You can hear what he was saying: Don't just expose corruption. Find out – and then tell your readers and viewers – why corruption flourishes in your own society.

So, I learned my trade writing and filming investigation stories.

The standards of accuracy and proof were very high. Again and again, editors and lawyers would send me back to get even more proof, more documents, until we had a watertight case. At the same time, I was working alongside ethical journalists covering domestic and foreign news, economics, the environment, cultural affairs – all of them delivering to the highest possible standards.

Sport is the soft end of journalism

In newspapers these stories usually appear at the front end of the paper – the sharp end. Sport is usually printed at the back of the paper. When I started investigating sports politics and business, I was horrified to discover this was the soft end of the paper. It seems to me that many editors – who take great care about accuracy at the sharp end – don't care about the soft end as long as the sports reporters get the football scores correct.

The same editors encourage their reporters to investigate corruption in government, the police and business – but don't notice that many of the sports reporters do their best to avoid investigating corruption in sport.

This is serious. Every day we see more and more sponsorship money coming into sport; the TV payments grow tremendously; what I used to call sport is now known as the leisure industry. Too few reporters bother to ask simple questions about the effect of this money on the practice of sport.

The very worst effect has been the covering up of doping in sport. Now that sport is a valuable commodity for sports bosses and TV bosses, they don't want its clean image damaged by the truth – that doping is massive in nearly every sport where money can be earned. So, sports reporters – many of them parents – encourage children and teenagers to worship top athletes as role models although they know that these heroes and heroines are junkies.

And they are pressurised to suppress, to censor their reports – in the interests of the national team, their country's international image, and because the needs of Coca-Cola and other big sponsors are more important than providing a simple, truthful service to readers and viewers.

Find the full speech 'Sport, Lies and Stasi-Files – A Golden Opportunity for the Press' at www.playthegame.org

The sports media: The world's best advertising agency

In 2002, Play the Game engaged the Danish publishing house 'Monday Morning' to study the content of Scandinavian sports journalism. The project analysed 3,196 articles from nine national dailies in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and the findings showed that the written Scandinavian sports press almost exclusively

dealt with promoting elite sport and had a strong focus on big-money televised sporting events – primarily football.

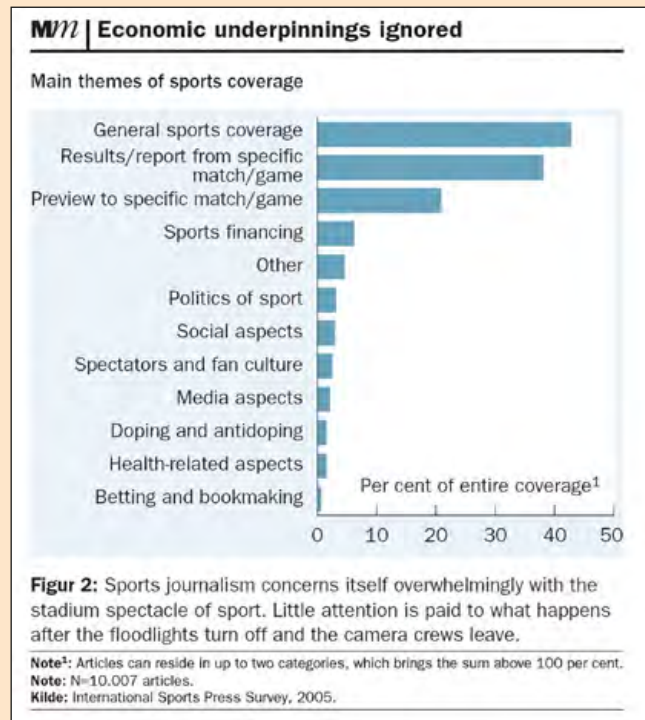
Eight out of ten sports articles were uncritical reports or news, and six out of ten articles had a national focus that made Scandinavian sports journalism look like a free space for unbridled nationalism.

Despite government subsidies for Scandinavian sport amounting to several billion euro, and the fact that both Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have popular traditions of female sports and community-based amateur sports, only 8 per cent of the articles focused on economics and politics. Only 8 per cent paid attention to female athletes, and community-based and amateur sports received less than 1 per cent of the attention.

The results didn't come as a surprise to Bjarne Ibsen, the director of the Danish Research Institute for Sport, Culture and Civil Society:

“A kind of holy trinity exists between media, the professional sports clubs and money interests. Too much sports journalism serves the industry.”

But if the sports press in some of the world's most successful democracies was failing its duties, how did the press in other countries cover sport?



In 2005, the first International Sports Press Survey outside Scandinavia confirmed that the societal dimensions of sport were largely ignored by the media. Research by Søren Schultz Jørgensen

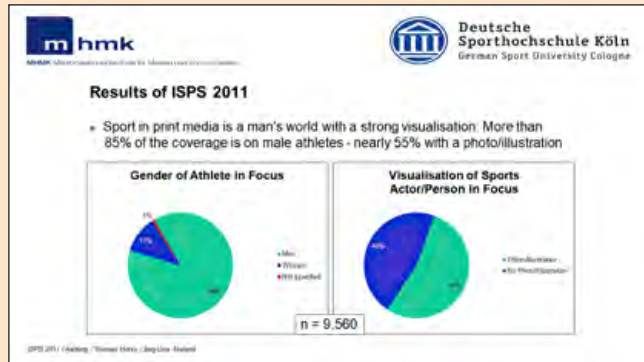
The Nordic story repeated itself globally

In 2005, Play the Game again engaged Monday Morning to design a new and larger study of the international sports press. The international survey included 10,000



When Søren Schultz Jørgensen in 2002 presented the first sports press survey made for Play the Game and the weekly 'Mandag Morgen', the findings stirred up much debate, but twenty years later it is fair to say that very little has changed in the traditional sports press.

Photo: Niels Nyholm/Play the Game



In 2011, sports journalism was still a territory completely dominated by men. Over a decade of research, there was no change in the gender imbalance. And the next decade did not bring any change either.

(Research by Thomas Horky/Jörg-Uwe Nieland)

articles from the sports pages in 37 newspapers in 10 countries and the findings confirmed the results of the Scandinavian Sports Press Survey.

The International Sports Press Survey 2005 concluded that sports journalism was a self-perpetuating male universe with hardly any room for female athletes, female sources, and female journalists. Only 5 per cent of the sports stories were written by a female journalist. Less than 5 per cent focused on the cultural and social aspects of sports.

And contrary to professional standards of journalism which generally require more than one source and perspective in a story, 40 per cent of the sports stories surveyed referred to only one source while 20 per cent of the articles did not refer to any sources at all.

In a summary of the International Sports Press Survey 2005, Søren Schultz Jørgensen, an editor at Monday Morning, labelled the sports press 'The World's Best Advertising Agency'.

He pointed out that even though the sports industry in the US was twice as big as the car industry, seven times the size of the film industry, and one of the fastest growing branches of industry at all, only 6 per cent of the articles about sport in daily newspapers dealt with the economic and financial aspects of sport. And only one article in 30 included the political aspects of the 'toy department of human life'.

Little room for independence

In 2011, Play the Game published its second International Sports Press Survey, now designed by researchers Jörg-Uwe Nieland from the German Sports Universi-

ty in Cologne and Thomas Horky from the Macromedia University for Media and Communication in Hamburg.

The new and even larger survey included 17,777 articles about sport from 80 newspapers in 22 countries, and the findings once again confirmed the conclusions from the International Sports Press Survey 2005. The ongoing debate about the quality and scope of sports journalism seemed to leave no trace behind.

Although FIFA at the time had just awarded the hosting of its World Cups in 2018 and 2022 to Russia and Qatar and widespread corruption had been reported, sports politics and money in sport were still largely ignored. Only 2.7 per cent of the sports coverage dealt with sports politics, and sports finance and sports economy were the topics of just 3.1 per cent of the articles.

10 years later, in 2022, Horky and Nieland again confirmed very little development in sports journal-

ism – except a clear shift from news stories to longer features. Today, people get their sports news from the internet. The gender imbalance is still impressive: The number of female sports writers, for instance, had declined to be behind less than 5 per cent of the stories.

Overall, the three surveys of sports coverage in newspapers indicate that the structures and the priorities of the traditional news media make very little room for independent sports journalists. As this book illustrates, the most important scandals that have drawn worldwide attention and defined the international sports agenda in recent years can be credited to a small number of investigative journalists, many of them working as freelancers.

Find more about the International Sports Press Surveys at www.playthegame.org



Starting at Play the Game 2002, the International Sports Press Survey has run for almost twenty years. Thomas Horky (left) and Jörg-Uwe Nieland (next to Horky) presented the main findings of the 2021 survey during a debate at Play the Game 2022. Photo: Thomas Søndergaard/Play the Game