

# Grantland Rice & His Heroes

Reporting during the  
'Golden Age of Sports'

# What made the golden age 'golden'?

- Every sport had an invincible champ who regularly performed courageous, unbelievable feats.
- Skillful 'gilding' by era's sportswriters: Certainly, Rice's hyperbolic style helped create larger-than-life heroes.
- Did not focus on athletes' flaws

# Sports at start of 1920s

- Pro baseball, football given as much space as soccer is today. MLB and college football biggest sports.
- Boxing, golf and tennis growing.
- Dempsey-Willard fight in 1919 was 1st big-time sports event after WWI.

# Factor that elevated sports

- Technology – allowed for more leisurely pursuits
- Economy – boomed, so more money to spend
- Spirit – WWI ended, people wanted to celebrate

# Technology & sportswriting

- Wrote stories on portable typewriters
- Dictated stories to telegraph workers
- Handed off stories to be set in hot lead
- Often, did not speak with athletes after games
- Printer reporters still had a virtually monopoly on sports coverage.

# Sociological reasons sports thrived in '20s

- World War I had just ended. The nation needed a release after a horrible war that killed millions. (Plus, the Spanish influenza killed millions right after the war concluded.)
- Soldiers trained in boxing during bayonet maneuvers. These men returned home fans of that sport.
- World lost some stability – war, race riots, women's suffrage movement, prohibition, communist scares. Sports provided some of this stability.
- Work week decreased from 60 to 48 hours thanks to technology. So people had more time and money.
- Technology (trains, cars) enabled fans to travel to events faster and from more distant locations.
- Media enabled writers to reach a wider audience.

## Sociological reasons cont'd

- Urbanization of the United States. This created a crowded, faceless society. Star athletes stood out. Before heroes had been captains of industry, business and scientists. Now, athletes became stars.
- Economy thrived. (More money to spend on leisure, magazines, travel.) The Yankees attracted a million fans in 1926.
- Rice would have argued that sports thrived at this time because it had the greatest collection of athletes “...since the first cave man tackled the mammoth.” (p. 17)
- Athletes did not just have skill; they were sometimes charismatic like Babe Ruth and Bill Tilden.
- After war, U.S. emerged as world power – gave people confidence to flex muscles, show off and be confident.

## Sociological cont'd

- WWI may have prompted people to shed the collective consciousness that led to the war; instead, people may have desired to cheer the individual. That fit perfectly with the emergence of sports – and the emergence (or creation) of sports heroes.

## Rice on reasons sports grew after WWI

With the return of peace it was only natural that there should be a great rush back to sport again. There was first of all an almost universal desire for recreation and for play. There was also a great desire for the thrills of competition not quite so closely associated with death and devastation, where it was more man against man, rather than man against machine. ... They had been held in so long as part of a vast machine that each one felt the old desire to frolic again, with his individual freedom no longer restrained ... 1920 will bring the greatest international competition that sport and outdoor life have ever known.” *(Country Life, 1919)*

## Expanded coverage increased sports' popularity

- Sports stories started to **analyze** strategy
- Stories provided **background** for games
- Stories illuminated players as **characters**
- Associated Press created 8-man sports dept in '27.
- United Press International tripled volume of sports between '25-'28.
- By '25, avg metro paper carried 2,000 column inches of sports a week, twice that of 1915. A broadsheet has about 120, so this is almost 17 pages a week.
- Some papers devoted 25% of content to sports. Kept pace with public interest.
- Newspaper circulation increased 8 mil to 36 million from 1914-'26.
- Growing literacy rates and economic prosperity allowed allowed for expansion of sports and media.

# Grantland Rice

- Upbeat, idealistic, romantic
- Personality came through in stories
- Had poet's ability to capture events in images and phrases
- Viewed sports as testing ground to the soul (to him, character was important)
- Enthusiastic. Did not feel sports were a grind.
- Kept busy. He covered all the main events.
- Classically trained. And he used those references in his stories.

What defined the writing style of Rice  
and his contemporaries?

- Hyperbole
- Lyricism
- Vivid Images

# Gee-Whiz School

Rice: “When a sportswriter stops making heroes out of athletes, it’s time to get out of the business.”

- Sportswriters were more poets and storytellers than statisticians and sports journalists. They coined slogans and nicknames
- These writers praised freely, embellished what they saw and were glad to glorify their subjects. Much like today’s entertainment news.
- Used allusions, mythology

# Aw-Nuts School

- More skeptical
- Harder to convince of player's immortality
- But would also use allusions, etc., to create heroes for those they felt were worthy, like Christy Mathewson
- McGeehan a disciple of this school

## 4 factors that enabled Rice to influence sportswriting in the 1920s

- No. 1 – Rice was perceived as an **authority** in his stories.
- No. 2 – Weight **history** has given to his judgments (athletes are among the best ever.)
- No. 3 – His **style** suited his audience
- No. 4 – His own fame and **exposure** across the country

# No. 1 – Authority

- Rice knew more sports figures in his time than any other sportswriter.
- His stories and columns were printed in 200-plus newspapers, in the top magazines, and he was also heard on some radio. He was the person most people read and knew. As a result, he was the writer most people trusted.

Perhaps, Dick Schaap knew as many. (Can read Schaap's work in 'Flashing Before My Eyes.')

## No. 2 – History

- History has shown that most of these athletes in the ‘Golden Age’ are, in fact, among the best ever. Babe Ruth is arguably, the best baseball player ever. And Bobby Jones, Bill Tilden, and Jack Dempsey are certainly among the best ever in their respective sports.

## No. 3 – Rice's style

- Leading practitioner of style that employed hyperbole, lyricism and vivid images. Today, that style seems quaint, simplistic.
- Hype was everywhere in the '20s. His writing was also hyperbolic.
- Alluded to mythology and history.
- Used metaphors and hyperbole to create larger-than-life spectacles
- Hyperbolic nicknames – Sultan of Swat (Ruth), Manassa Mauler (Dempsey), Galloping Ghost (Grange), Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (ND)

## No. 4 – Fame

- 1st nationally famous sportswriter
- Made \$100,000 a year in 1920s
- Had national audience. Published in 250 newspapers, including NY papers and several popular magazines.
- Worked 1st World Series radio broadcast (1922)

These factors helped him to influence public – and other sportswriters – more than anyone else

# Rice on sports

“The main idea back of sport should be recreation in pursuit of health and pleasure: Competition that help build up clean living, cool head, stout hearts and sound judgments under fire.

Victory is, of course, the more pleasing destiny, but it isn't the entire destiny.” (p.

2)

# Gallico on Rice

“The personality of Grantland Rice shone through his columns – that of a sweet, gentle man with something endearingly childlike about him, who passionately loved his work and his world.” (p.3)

# Gallico on sportswriting (1936)

“The sportswriter has few if any heroes. We create many because it is our business to do so, but we do not believe in them. We know them too well. We are concerned as often, sometimes, with keeping them and their weaknesses and peccadillos out of the paper as we are putting them in ... We sing of their muscles, their courage, their gameness and their skill because it seems to amuse readers and sells papers, but we rarely see them as people and strictly speaking, leave their characters alone because that is dangerous ground.” (p. 6)

# Rice on sportswriting

My life as a follower of sport has been one thrill after another: big thrills and little thrills – thrills of all descriptions marching by with the seasons, and always I have the knowledge that there are new and possibly greater thrills to come.

There has been the thrill of the new star suddenly coming to fame on some great play, and the deeper thrill of the fading veteran coming back for another whack at glory after he was supposed to have been down and out. The basis of the big thrill in sport is the uprising against heavy odds, the smaller man beating the larger one, the has-been coming back, the battered and broken rising to heights of glory.” (p. 7)

## Literary elements in Rice's writing

It was an afternoon of blazing heat, heat blown northward from the Sahara in the wake of a sirocco, heat that was heat . The thermometer was at a hundred or more, and into the blast of this furnace the greatest runners of 30 nations were setting out upon the 10,000-meter cross country whirl. An almost parade started. Only a few finished. Along the route there were fine runners unconscious, completely out, with faces upturned to the sun as ambulances came by to rush them along to waiting trainers and physicians. There were others who were reeling and floundering – running a few yards, falling and then rising again as they fought their way. There was courage enough here to make a war. (Rice on Paris Olympics)

# Not all was literary

- Grantland Rice could also confuse readers with his literary allusions.

“Bill Hallahan again shut out the famous maulers from the mansion of Mack with only three scattered blows as the battle ended, 2 to 0.”

Better: Bill Hallahan limited Philadelphia to three hits, leading St. Louis to a 2-0 victory.

# Depression's affect on sportswriting

- Less space devoted to sports. No more 4,000-word piece on a game. Fewer sidebars and columns as well.
- More precise language to reflect starker times. Adjectives great diminished.

# Comparison to Greeks

- Created heroes, wrote odes to athletes
- John Kieran a N.Y. Times wrote: “What would we have known of Achilles, Hector, Aeneas, Ulysses, Ajax and other heroes of ancient times if not for Homer and Virgil. So the champions of a great era in American sports found their personalities and their performances chronicled by a great group of writers, men who were outstanding in their own part of the field, the **press section.**” (p. 23)

# Some ideas for reflection

- How is storytelling done today?
- Who is the most influential sports journalism today – or during the past 10-20 years?
- How are sports events, and athletes, reported today in print and other media?
- How would the '20s heroes compare to today's top athletes?