

BERNIE'S BACK! Jump Shots And Jabs

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 07 May 2009 19:00

Hey there, all of you in The Sweet Science cyberspace! I'm back. At least until further notice.

Perhaps some of you have noticed my absence from TSS for the past three months or so. That is because I was wearing my basketball cap, which temporarily displaced my boxing and football caps.

Being a sports writer – not exclusively a boxing writer -- for a major metropolitan daily newspaper obliges those of us still hanging on in our troubled industry to exercise a certain degree of versatility. You go where the assignment is, the better to enlighten readers and to draw that all-important weekly paycheck.

But the Philadelphia 76ers were ushered out of the NBA playoffs last week, which again opened a window of opportunity for me to re-enter the world of my primary sporting love, which involves sweaty men with padded gloves on their fists. The Sixers' elimination in Game 6 by the Orlando Magic came too late for me to be credentialed or to fly out to Las Vegas for the Manny Pacquiao-Ricky Hatton megafight, but I caught all the action in a sports bar in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, one night after I covered my first live fight since February, in which Rogers Mtagwa outbrawled Ricardo Medina over 10 rounds at the Blue Horizon. Sitting there at ringside, chatting up former Pennsylvania boxing commissioner George Bochetto (my onetime opponent in a local "celebrity" boxing match some years ago) felt like ... well, it felt like home.

And if my Monday column in the Philadelphia Daily News about the ramifications of Pacquiao's smashing victory -- coupled with the announcement of Floyd Mayweather Jr.'s unretirement -- was written on the basis of my observations made while watching the pay-per-view telecast in a smoky restaurant-bar (cough, cough), so be it. You can't always be there live and in person.

Unless, of course, you're covering the NBA monster that requires daily feedings.

The latest of my occasional transformations was initiated when Phil Jasner, our great (you're officially great when you've been inducted into the writers' wing of the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., as Phil has) Sixers beat writer, took ill and underwent two surgeries that sidelined him for an indefinite period. My telephone rang, and on the other end was my executive sports editor, asking if I might be available to fill in for Phil while he recuperated.

Hey, when your paper is in Chapter 11, as so many of our finer print publications are in these uncertain economic times, you don't say you need time to think things over. You immediately volunteer your services, and begin booking flights for points hither and yon.

Unlike boxing, whose major events are sporadically scheduled, the 82-game NBA regular season is at once a marathon and a sprint, with players, coaches and media bouncing around from city to city like human pinballs. While many of my colleagues who were in Vegas to cover

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Pacquiao-Hatton arrived four or five days in advance of the event, to write about all the preliminary stuff leading up to Pacquiao's two-round masterpiece, those involved with the NBA often fly in, do their thing, fly out the next morning. What's the old joke? Oh, yeah, if this is Wednesday, it must be Phoenix.

My reintroduction to life in the NBA – I also had pulled extensive pinch-hit duty for Jasner during the 1992-93 season, when he was rehabbing from back surgery – featured a dreaded seven-day, five-game West Coast trip, during which the Sixers played the Lakers in Los Angeles, the Suns in Phoenix, the Warriors in Oakland, the Kings in Sacramento and, finally, the Trail Blazers in Portland.

(Confession: It actually was a nine-day trip for me. My first two days in Los Angeles were spent researching some stuff and advancing the Sixers. But I never left my hotel room, other than to go to practices, so it wasn't as if I was hanging out at Hollywood and Vine or taking the tour at Universal Studios. I was working very hard, thank you very much. Honest.)

A few things have to be taken in consideration about these West Coast jaunts (East Coast teams take two of them every season). One, you're going to feel jet-lagged for a couple of days while your body clock readjusts. Second – and this is the really hard part – the games are starting three hours later, with tipoff usually at 10:30 p.m. Eastern time. With an 11:15 deadline for the first edition, that means your sidebar is filed before the game is played, about something or someone connected with either team. Whether that thing or person is remotely involved with the actual game, of course, is purely coincidental.

The game itself also can be a bit dicey. Under the best of circumstances, you have an extremely tight time frame in which to file your story for the first edition, which sometimes means an editor has mandated that your story be ready for transmission, oh, five minutes following the game's completion. That requires East Coast types to write "running," which means cranking out a large percentage of your game story while the game is in progress, a procedure which has certain built-in drawbacks. In the NBA, that blowout you think you were going to write about – one team up by 20 or more points midway through the third quarter – can change in a hurry as the team that's behind goes on a run to make it close or even go ahead. It happens more often than you think.

Take the Sixers-Lakers game at the Staples Center. It was one of those back-and-forth affairs, a nail-biter whose outcome probably wasn't going to be determined until the final buzzer – or, in this case, a nanosecond past the final buzzer. With the Lakers leading by two points, Andre Iguodala fired up a three-pointer which didn't swish through until after the horn had sounded and the red light framing the backboard went on.

Try writing all that in five minutes and, oh, yeah, with a couple of pertinent quotes included, if you please.

Not that I or any other sports writer has much reason to complain. Aside from the occasional churning stomach while confronted with a killer deadline, we have one of the best jobs people could imagine. We get paid for going to games and boxing matches. We stay in nice hotels, our

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meals and rental cars are paid for. The average fan would imagine that's a pretty good gig, and he'd be right.

In the 1970s, many idealistic young people elected to go into journalism after reading "All the President's Men," or seeing the movie version starring Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. The aspiring reporters were all going to change the country and save the world, see? Except that many newspaper beats feature a certain amount of drudgery. The mechanics of producing a story are always the same, but those of us who cover sports or review movies have a higher fun quotient. That's a major reason why we do what we do. Thousands of people pay to attend an important fight or big-time baseball, football and basketball games. What's happening at the City Council meeting might have a greater impact on the individual lives of citizens, but games are their outlet, which is why, in my town, Eagles mini-camp is much more closely followed than the mayor's plans for closing a budgetary shortfall.

At my paper, the beats, with few exceptions, are rotated after a number of years. Marcus Hayes, who picked up the Sixers for me for the final three regular-season games and the first round of the playoffs (my wife and I took nearly two weeks of vacation to attend the wedding of a relative in Louisiana), previously served as the beat writer for the Eagles and then the Phillies. Only rarely does someone – Jasner on the NBA, me on boxing – remain on a beat for decades, so long that he or she becomes singularly identified with whichever sport or team is being covered.

But despite that veil of familiarity, even the most typecast of sports writers have to be ready to shift gears at a moment's notice.

When I interviewed with Mike Rathet and Brian Toolan, then the executive sports editor and sports editor, respectively, of the Philadelphia Daily News in the spring of 1984, I'd already been in the business for 15 years. They asked me what sports I had covered. I told them I'd written about most everything: baseball, football, basketball, tennis, a little golf. Oh, and I think I mentioned I was fond of boxing, my dad having been a fighter before he joined the New Orleans Police Department. "The only thing I probably haven't covered, being from the South, is hockey," I think I remarked.

I was hired, setting me on a quarter-century adventure that continues. Some months after my move to the Philly area, I called the head sports department clerk to inquire about my schedule for the following week and was told that there were three days when I down for doing stories on the Flyers. That's the NHL, for any of you who are unfamiliar, as I was, with anything that had to do with pucks.

I immediately, and frantically, telephoned Rathet. "But I don't know anything about hockey!" I protested.

"Yeah, but you have five days to learn," replied my boss, who advised me that it was easier to teach a good writer the nuances of a sport than to take someone knowledgeable about that sport and teach him how to write.

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Must be at least a little true. By the time the 1984-85 Stanley Cup playoffs rolled around, I was part of our four-person coverage team for the finals, which pitted the Flyers against the superb team that would win it all, the Edmonton Oilers of Wayne Gretzky, Jari Kurri, Mark Messier and Grant Fuhr. I was assigned to do pieces on the Oilers, which was one helluva way to become acclimated to a sport with which I had had limited experience.

Sometimes it's like that restaurant scene involving Meg Ryan in "When Harry Met Sally." When in doubt, fake it. Any veteran sports writer can turn on his tape recorder and craft at least a semi-readable story on an event about which he normally would be clueless. I've done it with figure skating and auto racing. I once was assigned to cover the figure-skating nationals in Providence, R.I., during an Olympic year, and the truth is I didn't know the difference between a double-axel and a toe loop. But there were reporters there who covered that stuff all the time, so I let them do the heavy lifting. The competitors answered any and all questions from the more informed media, I copied the responses and produced a story that, I think, conveyed all the pertinent information readers would want to know.

It was different with boxing, when I took over for Elmer Smith in November 1987. I'd been watching the "Gillette Cavalcade of Sports" with my dad since I was a little kid, and he had increased my awareness of and interest in the pugilistic arts by taking me to live cards. Go ahead, ask me about the New Orleans welterweight rivalry that pitted Jerry Pellegrini against Percy Pugh in the 1960s.

I've never been rotated off boxing, maybe because no one else on our sports staff has the passion for it that I do. But I've always been required to branch out as needed, be it for takeout pieces or, these past four seasons, as our beat guy on Penn State football. That's been a good fit; I love college football, and, I'm not sure why, but legendary Nittany Lions coach Joe Paterno reminds me a little of Angelo Dundee.

Still, most of our Philadelphia Daily News readers identify me with boxing, as do those of you who regularly visit this site. Five terms as president of the Boxing Writers Association of America can do that for a keyboard jockey, which is why, after I picked up the Sixers this season, I had readers sending emails that basically stated, "I didn't know you could do basketball."

Hey, when you've been a sports writer for nearly 40 years – I celebrate that anniversary in August – the likelihood is that you've covered hundreds of basketball games. And football games. And baseball games. And ... well, you get the idea.

Not that the ability to shift gears on the fly is always appreciated. Some years back, I was assigned to cover the NCAA women's Final Four in the Louisiana Superdome. Not only was it a chance to return to my old hometown, but Geno Auriemma, the acclaimed coach of the University of Connecticut women's basketball program, is a Philadelphia guy. His Huskies wound up playing Pat Summit's Tennessee Lady Vols in the final in one of the most anticipated games ever in women's hoops. There was a sellout crowd in the arena, and the television ratings were the largest ever for a women's game.

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Back in Philly, I was missing two minor fight cards that were off TV and drew maybe a couple of hundred spectators at each venue. The publicist for both shows wanted to know why I wouldn't be at either show.

"I've been assigned to the women's Final Four," I said.

"But you're the *boxing* writer!" he yelled. "You should tell your editor to go bleep himself."

Yep, that sure enough would do wonders for my job security.

Anyway, I'm refocusing on boxing and am prepared to again joust with Ron Borges, Michael Woods, Frank Lotierzo and other members of the crack TSS team for your attention.

And if any of you are wondering about what the 76ers need to do as they retool in preparation for the 2009-10 season, I'm good with that, too.