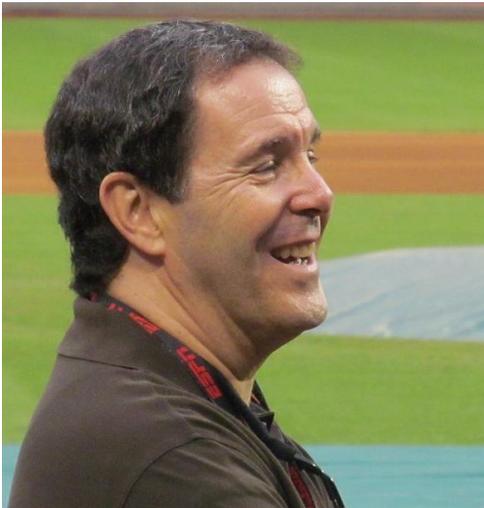


BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Fans do not benefit from steady drumbeat of media's continuing baseball coverage cuts

By George Castle, CBM Historian
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ESPN's Jayson Stark is the latest example that big names with great records are not immune from layoffs in the bloodletting of baseball coverage. Photo credit [Dealphungo](#).

The one blessed counter-trend to the steady drumbeat of baseball coverage cuts makes Bruce Miles' life a bit more pleasant in 2017.

The Chicago northwest suburban-based *Daily Herald* Cubs beat writer since 1998, Miles gets to pack his bag every so often to follow the Cubs away from Wrigley Field. His employers have restored some of the road coverage slashed since 2009. Miles used to cover the majority of road games and the entire spring training. But in this decade, he has largely been limited to driving to Milwaukee and one quick in-and-out week in Mesa.

Thank goodness for small favors OK'd by *Daily Herald* editor John Lampinen. The modest boost in the travel budget stands in stark contrast with hits to baseball coverage that just keep on coming eight years into a quantifiable economic recovery outside media.

The shock waves have not buffeted Chicago baseball quite yet. No traveling reporter covering the Cubs or Sox, or mic jockey working baseball for a downtown broadcast outlet has been laid off. No newspaper or web site covering baseball has folded here. But elsewhere, relentlessly, the pressboxes are steadily emptying out.

Cutting through muscle into bone lately was the ESPN layoff of Jayson Stark, one of the business' heavyweights. Former *Sun-Times* and ESPNChicago.com White Sox beat man Doug Padilla, transferred to the popular Dodgers beat for the World Wide Leader, was oddly another cut. Also shown the door were a bevy of analysts. Ex-Cub Doug Glanville, who got his broadcast start on my "Diamond Gems" radio show in 2007, departed along with perfect-game pitcher Dallas "The Beard" Braden and former Reds GM Jim Bowden. ESPN cut down on its "Baseball Tonight" telecasts and actually is farming out much baseball studio program to the MLB Network.

But the real canary in the coal mine was the December layoff of CSN New England Red Sox beat writer Sean McAdam, one of the longtime stalwarts in Boston baseball journalism. When a Red Sox scribe is cut in one of the two most-intensely covered baseball markets in the country (to go along with New York), the alarm bells should go off in MLB headquarters in New York, and specifically in the commissioner's office.

Spink HOF honorees lose gigs

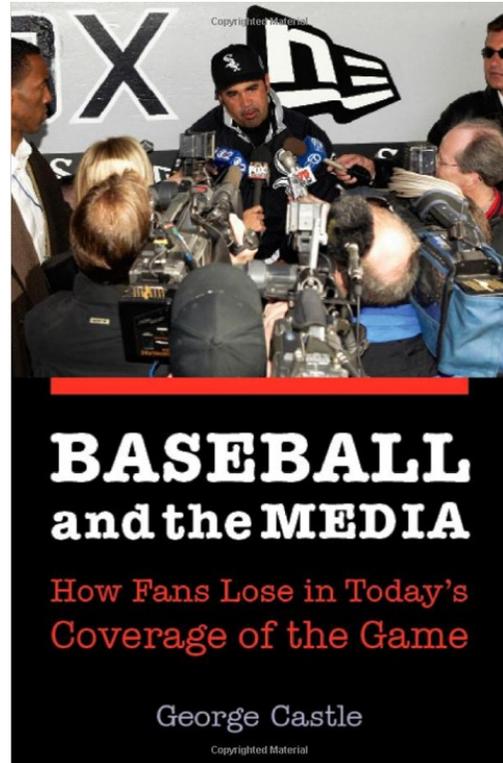
The cuts of Stark and McAdam should warn that no one is safe, no one is too talented to be laid off. In 2016, recent Spink Award (writers' wing in the Hall of Fame) winners who lost their gigs included Tom Gage in Detroit, Hal McCoy in Cincinnati and Bill Madden in New York.

Gage was a two-time victim, having had his 37-year Detroit News' Tigers beat taken away. Shifting to the Fox Sports Detroit web site, Gage was cut about four months later with all other Fox regional-site writers nationwide. McCoy, 76, lost his Fox Cincinnati gig, but still writes a Reds blog for the *Dayton Daily News*, his longtime newspaper home that cut out its former staff coverage of Cincy home and road games late in McCoy's staff tenure. Staggering after decades of readership defections, Madden's *New York Daily News*, once the largest circulation daily in the country, opted to lop off more senior staffers' salaries like throwing ballast overboard. Madden and his connections were put out to pasture.

I chronicled how fans were not served well by the first wave of baseball coverage cuts in my 2006 book "Baseball and the Media." Then, I focused on outlying newspapers in cities such as Rockford, Peoria and Kenosha cutting their original Chicago baseball coverage in favor of lower-interest high-school sports; the first wave of fan-bloggers not having real access to games writing from where the sun doesn't shine in their personages, and radio sports-talk show hosts pontificating like experts while rarely, if ever, showing their faces at the ballpark.

In the ensuing decade-plus, the cuts have progressed far beyond the scope that I covered in "Baseball and the Media," to an almost unimaginable level.

Then, and ever since, doubters in and out of the profession have stated the mass of fans don't care about the machinations and politics of baseball media, who is covering games and how much coverage is undertaken. But if they should, vitally, if they value their interest in the game at a level higher than simply putting on team regalia (hellooo,



The narrative of "Baseball and the Media" in 2006 could not have guessed at the scope of baseball coverage cuts in the ensuing decade.

Cubs fans), emptying the wallet on overpriced tickets and concessions, and singing in the seventh inning.

White House a good comparison for competitive coverage

Having a variety of competitive reporters covering your favorite team holds to the same principle as a multiplicity of newshounds working the White House. The much-reviled media is putting the Trump Administration's clumsy spinmeisters' feet to the fire daily. An old concept of "good questions often elicit good answers" is turned on its side in Trump Administration coverage. Outrageous and ignorant replies from the top on down shows the mess into which many swing-state voters have put the country. But without those questions and the humans concocting them, the ineptitude of the government would be covered up by official proclamations and, yes, alternate facts.

The same principal applies to baseball. To be sure, many regular baseball journalists still move around in cliquy packs, simply recording the same quotes from managers in press conferences and players in group interviews. But the more, the merrier, applies here.

Out of the madding crowd will usually be a few independent-minded journoes who will ask the manager -- whether affable or voluble -- about strategy, ranging from over-working a 100 mph-throwing closer in the World Series to bunting the tying run to third with one out in the eighth. Remember Jack Brickhouse's admonition that there were nine ways to score from third without a hit?

Somehow, a patient, personable reporter who hangs around and hangs around might still get something revealing from a manager away from the choreographed press conference. In addition, enough pre-game clubhouse access remains after years of cut-backs in Collective Bargaining Agreements to permit a reporter to still develop professional relationships with players.

The sport that still possesses the most daily access to its participants, baseball has become heavily corporatized. The gulf has been widened between media (and by translation the fans) and team personnel. The golden age of access in the Nineties is long gone.

MLB.com, the core of the game's hyper-profitable Baseball Advanced Media, does a bang-up job of multi-media daily game and feature coverage. But do not expect MLB.com staffers, drawing paychecks from an arm of MLB, to take the lead on controversial stories or advance news on trades or injuries.

AP breaks Eaton injury story

A perfect example took place on April 29. Ex-Sox Adam Eaton, who was the sparkplug of the Washington Nationals' lineup, hurt his left knee running the bases the previous night. The local Associated Press bureau, citing a "person familiar with the situation," reported Eaton was lost for the season with torn ligament. The source was cloaked under anonymity because the Nationals had not yet released information on the severity of Eaton's injury. The Eaton story surely was not going to leak out via outlets feeding off the MLB revenue stream.

The season-altering story for the Nats coup for the AP, which usually does not employ the same beat person to cover a team regularly at home. In Chicago, Cubs and Sox games are covered by a rotating schedule of AP bureau chiefs and stringers (per-diem reporters). None are wired into the team as a regular beat person. Still, the opportunity to break stories and provide independent perspective is present without the self-censorship of someone employed by an outlet formally connected with MLB.

There was a time when baseball coverage actually was on the upswing. Back in the 1960s and early 1970s, the then-four Chicago daily newspapers typically cut out road coverage in September if the Cubs and Sox were far out of contention. On Aug. 30, 1974, beat writer Bob “Lefty” Logan of the Tribune covered the 52-75 Cubs playing the Padres in a two-night doubleheader in San Diego off sports editor Cooper Rollow’s office TV. The paper used a false dateline: “SAN DIEGO, Special to the Tribune.”

As suburban newspapers and FM radio grew starting in the 1970s, Chicago home games were increasingly covered by scribes and tape recorder-wielding reporters. Separate sections of pressboxes were designated for radio reporters. The downtown Chicago dailies began to staff the teams on the road even through the end of death-march seasons. The *Daily Herald* began covering Cubs and Sox road games as part of a big sports department expansion in 1988. The *Daily Southtown* began regular Sox road coverage in 1993 and Cubs away games in 1998. In the same period, the *Northwest Herald* in McHenry County and the *Times of Northwest Indiana* began working the majority of both teams’ home games and went on the road in the postseason.

The first big cut came when industry deregulation prompted FM stations to ditch their news departments, mandated by former FCC public-service requirements, as the Nineties ebbed. Then came the outlying newspapers’ pullbacks by the mid-2000s. MLB.com’s Carrie Muskat once was the *Rockford Register-Star’s* Chicago-based baseball reporter. Later, when that position was pulled back to the office, the *Register-Star* dispatched a staffer to many games. The *Peoria Journal-Star* long had an assigned seat in the Wrigley Field pressbox, but it went unoccupied for many years in the 2000s.

75 pages of Sunday *Tribune* help-wanted in 1999

The most profitable newspaper ad revenue streams literally disappeared in a three-year span. In 1999, near the end of the Clinton Era boom, the *Tribune* had a record 75 pages of Sunday help-wanted classified advertising. Two years later, in the wake of the dot-com bust, that lineage dipped to 21 pages and never recovered as classified shifted en masse to on-line carriers. Top Tribune Co. executive Dennis FitzSimons remarked he had never seen such an advertising decline.



With its editorial independence, the AP could break Adam Eaton's injury story before the Washington Nationals announced it.

By the time an advertising exodus dwarfing 2001 was experienced, FitzSimons had taken his golden parachute and retired from Tribune Tower.

As the 2000's progressed, reliable page after page of local department-store display advertising dropped off. National chains Wal-Mart and Target did not replace the departed Marshall Fields, Carson's, Goldblatt's and Wieboldt's ads.

Starting in 2007, as the economy began tanking, suburban papers west of New York and Boston began slashing their MLB coverage, both home and road. After the '07 season, the *Daily Southtown* laid off almost all its pro-beat writers in favor of recycled *Chicago Sun-Times* coverage. By 2014, the *Northwest Herald* and the *Times of Northwest Indiana* were gone from Chicago pressboxes.

On the pure bottom line, MLB coverage is expensive for any outlet. Estimates of the annual cost of travel for one beat writer was upward of \$50,000 earlier this decade. For a suburban paper covering just home games, the costs were still higher to send a reporter to Wrigley Field or the former Cell. Games ran late, an aggravation for earlier deadlines. Retrenching to lower-cost high-school coverage was penny-wise, but pound-foolish, given strong evidence the majority of sports-minded readers had no connection to the prep sports now stocking the sports sections.

Most distressingly, no on-line outlets nationally or locally replaced the lost coverage long-term. Advertising did not migrate to the internet in the same dollar volume as had held forth in legacy news outlets. Few, if any, could support a large staff making a living wage. AOL's start-up sports and community-news sites, FanHouse and Patch.com, eventually were gutted. Fox's 2016 web site cutback actually came 13 years after an earlier wipeout that cost *Sun-Times* baseball alum Dave Van Dyck his job. ESPN began city sports sites, including Chicago, but retrenched by 2015. Sox and Black Hawks coverage was cut out by ESPNChicago as the national outlet focused on the 100 most popular U.S. teams, hockey excepted. Shown the door were columnist Jon Greenberg and Hawks beat guy Scott Powers, who resurfaced in the on-line subscription startup The Athletic.

Even such stalwarts as CSN Chicago won't automatically cover teams with staffers or stringers writing the Chicago angle wire to wire. Cubs Insider Patrick Mooney was off the weekend of April 29-30, while Sox Insider Dan Hayes had other assignments during the same time. The Cubs' visit to Boston and the surprising Sox's journey to AL Central rival Detroit were covered by AP on CSN Chicago's site.

22 posts for \$44 total

Meanwhile, some new sites with an inflammatory, fanboy style and low-rent taste popped up, but they were low-revenue operations. Writers were paid on the number of views, hence the despised term "clickbait" for sensational stories that drew eyeballs despite their questionable content. I actually tried writing for one in Dec. 2015. I won't name it because the owners were actually well-intentioned guys who loved sports even if they were not professional journalists. I authored 22 posts. I was paid \$44. Exit, stage left.

The internet may have been a boon for Baseball Advanced Media, which guards game highlights like a treasure in permitting their use by on-line outlets. But the erstwhile “information superhighway” has eviscerated industries, starting with newspapers and book publishing, then radio, and now cable and over-the-air TV. On-line is now coming hard for brick-and-mortar retail. When does the carnage end, and from where will the replacement jobs originate? Only a minority have the aptitude for health-care industry positions or the stomach for sales jobs, which require cold-calling and frequent rejection.

Moral of the story is if you’re a baseball fan who wants to know the who, what, where and why of his team’s fortunes, from the executive suite down to the 25th man on the roster, you’ll want a variety of competitive coverage. You don’t want to be transfixed just any news site that pops up or any video that streams on your smartphone.

Receiving the spin via the company line is just not enough when a family of four has to pay \$300 or more for a ballpark outing or you try to carve out 3 1/2 hours for a baseball telecast.