



Athletic shoes, race-walking talents, ability to cover off TV title-series necessities

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Wanna cover a championship series in sports?

Okay, you got your credential as an entrée to the stadium.

Now you need a good pair of athletic shoes and the ability to do some fitness walking – if not race-walking.

Like Saturday night at the United Center. Daniel Paille of the Bruins had just scored the game-winner in the first (yes, just the first) overtime. It takes maybe seven minutes to quickly write a “top,” factoring in the game-winner detail and final score to the deadline story. Now you gotta dash to the locker room.

Except some lucky TV folks and writers who did not have to write the Johnny Deadline version of the game story went ahead of you to wait at the entrance to the Blackhawks’ locker room not far away. Between you and the home locker room is another line of people, waiting to get into the Bruins’ locker room that is about 100 feet closer.

Thou shalt not pass.

“You have to go around,” said an NHL functionary to those of us scrambling to get to interview the Hawks. Chicago’s NHL team opens the locker room faster – usually well within 10 minutes of game’s end -- than any other local franchise.



Patrick Sharp tried to bail out his Hawks teammates in Game 2, then afterward helped bail out frantic media. Photo credit: [Resolute](#).

“But we’re on deadline,” protested a writer for a downtown daily.

The functionary shook her head. Apparently, media not already near the Hawks’ door could not pass by Bruins coaches’ office and TV studios with their equipment heated up after the final horn, along with the queue waiting to enter Boston’s lair. So 180-degree turns were made by a host of frantic Chicago media. And we had had to make a ¾ of a circumference around the service corridor of the United Center’s basement, almost a five-minute trip, to reach an entrance that normally would be 30 second away.

By the time we got there, Jonathan Toews was totally engulfed in media, while Marian Hossa and Brent Seabrook were already finished speaking. Thank goodness for bail-out interview Patrick Sharp, who scored the Hawks goal.

You get in, but there are no guarantees

So you want to be a sports journalist? Glamorous, huh? Maybe you’re admitted to a Stanley Cup Final. But that’s all the credential guarantees. You may not have a seat. You may not be able to see much of the action. You may not even get into the locker room post-game even with full access.

I’ve been telling those who crave my position for years it isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Attorneys and other well-paid folks said they’d trade jobs with me. My response: You wouldn’t want the salary, the hours or frustration.

And in working the first round through the championships of any sport, you won’t necessarily be rubbing shoulders with the game’s greatest names. More often than not, you’ll get clichéd answers in carefully-managed stage conferences from the superstars. The next level of athletes will be absolutely mobbed with TV cameras and some of their savvy reporters setting better picks than you’d see in the NBA Finals. You’ll end up watching as much of the games on TV as you will via live action.

TV sets were my United Center vantage point for both the final periods of the Hawks’ three straight overtime games and the NBA Finals in the mid-1990s.

In order to have quick access (so we thought) to the locker rooms immediately after the hockey games, we had to set up in the basement press room. The pressbox seats were



Michael Jordan knew full well when the United Center locker room opened and closed to media. Photo credit: Steve Lipofsky at basketball-photo.com.

seven floors up and a long corridor walk down from the locker rooms to the elevator. You could get stuck waiting for the elevator and miss the opening of the locker rooms if you watched 'till the clock ticked down to 00:00.

Back in the Jordan era, we lesser lights in the media were assigned seats behind the basket way up in the 300 section. While they were decent vantage points for hockey, you simply didn't see anything for basketball. I chose the TV's (then normal 25-inch sized, no big screens just yet) in the pressroom.

The pre-game athletes' access is cut severely. Baseball always had the most pre-game access among all sports even as the total amount of locker room time has been slashed in successive Collective Bargaining Agreements. But in the postseason, the big-league locker rooms are shut tight. Enterprising reporters need to station themselves in and around the dugouts when players come onto the field for batting practice to gather notes or early-story quotes. Occasionally, a player will stop in or in front of the dugout to chat a couple of minutes. But it's catch-as-catch-can.

Sweet Lou invoked ghost of Durocher



A seat squarely across Minute Maid Park prevented a post-game interview with Juan Uribe, whose throw from shortstop clinched the 2005 World Series for the White Sox. Photo credit: [bridgetds](#).

room sprayed champagne for a championship clincher. I followed the White Sox wire to wire in 2005, from Boston, back across the country to Anaheim, and then down to Houston for the World Series. My seats in the auxiliary press section at Minute Maid Park were in the upper deck in right center.

No good when Game 3 went 14 innings, way past midnight, 'till Geoff Blum won it with a pinch homer. I was almost out of deadline. I had to file the final-edition story for

Major League Baseball stages a pre-game press conference for each playoff team's manager and the opposing pitchers for the next game. Each manager also typically will be made available to their team's traveling beat writers for a more intimate session, yet nothing earth-shattering usually is imparted in these chats. In 2007, Lou Piniella somehow was cornered by a dozen media in the dugout at Chase Field for Game 2 of the NLDS, after his pre-planned presser. In the wake of his controversial move to pull Carlos Zambrano in a 1-1 game, Sweet Lou invoked the billy goat and the ghost of Leo Durocher in his "what am I supposed to do?" stream of consciousness. Rarely, though, will the media get something substantial out of an impromptu session.

Sitting in your assigned seat does not guarantee your ability to dodge locker-

maybe 10,000 newspapers, one-eighth of the circulation, with no quotes. No clubhouse reaction.

Late, late the same day, for Game 4, the need to get the Sox championship account in as fast as possible limited me to the lounge area in the outfield and piped-in press conferences on TV to cull quotes. Traversing all the way around the stadium to the Sox clubhouse behind third base to get Jermaine Dye's reaction to his clutch hitting or Juan Uribe's joy in firing to Paul Konerko for the final out was impossible. I could not cut across the field at that point. Not until the players worked their way back out onto the infield for celebration an hour later, past midnight, was I able to gab with the victors. I best recall Jerry Reinsdorf, acknowledging decades of senseless Cubs vs. Sox fans squabbling, making a "can't we just get along?" conciliatory comment amid the smell of champagne and cigars near the pitcher's mound.



Post-game access to Kerry Wood revealed the Cubs' apparent confidence with one win to go among three potential NLCS games in 2003.

What-should-have-been was also stated late on the night of Oct. 11, 2003 at Pro Player Stadium in Miami. In what has turned out to be the last Cubs postseason victory, Aramis Ramirez's grand-slam homer against the Marlins put the team one win away from the World Series with three potential games to go. I sidled up to Kerry Wood, sitting on an easy chair in the clubhouse. Seems to be within your grasp, and you got a good shot, huh, Woody? "Believe it," he quietly responded. But, yeah, they still had to play three games, and the Cubs didn't realize the Marlins had so much firepower they could afford to bench Juan Encarnacion and his 94 RBIs...

His Airness knew locker-room hours by heart

Michael Jordan never had to worry about pre-game access once the United Center was opened. Players lounges and other off-limits areas gave him respite, compared to the cramped locker room at old Chicago Stadium, where he could escape only occasionally to a proportionally trainer's room. When the larger UC locker room was thrown open for the mandatory 45-minute pre-game session, Jordan and Scottie Pippen were usually nowhere to be found. They knew full well the open and close times. Instead, the likes of Bill Wennington and Steve Kerr were sent out as fodder to speak to the media. Lo and behold, their thankless tasks as ad hoc team spokesmen turned out to be a boon to their post-playing careers. Both "Beef" Wennington and Kerr ended up as broadcast analysts, with Kerr also serving as a general manager.

There is a special place in media heaven for the athlete who takes time under duress in the postseason for us ink-stained wretches and mic jockeys. My 2013 award goes to Patrick Sharp.

The Hawks simply short-circuited after blitzing the Bruins with 19 shots, yet scoring just once on Sharp's goal, in the first period of Game 2. After Sharp spent 10 minutes

with the late arrivals such as myself, I plaintively asked the Hawk who shares the most team seniority with Duncan Keith and Brent Seabrook if he would answer a question for a feature story on his mid-2000s service. Sharp, whom I had missed in a post-practice open locker room the previous day, talked for a minute or so without appearing aggravated. Maybe Sharp put on a good face, but he helped out. And then another group descended upon him near a locker-room exit. He obliged all.

There are others who stood with Sharp with grace under pressure in all sports amid the championship scrum of media. Easy task by athlete or reporter? You want to change places with either of us?

Truth be told, sitting in front of the 52-inch screen is a lot easier. And you'd find yourself in the same position, watching at least some of the game in HD, in the pressroom. Glitz isn't what it always seems.