Schulian, John, editor. *The Great American Sports Page: A Century of Classic Columns from Ring Lardner to Sally Jenkins.* New York: Library of America, 396 pp.

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When I survey the media knowledge of students in my American Sport in Media and Culture course, a first-year seminar designed specifically for our Division III athletes, one question typically remains unanswered: “Name a sports columnist you regularly read.” I dropped the adjective “syndicated” a few years ago. Reading newspapers with vigor is not the norm anymore. Now, not reading newspapers has become a demented badge of honor—and look where we are.

Newspapers were an essential part of civic life, and many readers started with the back page, the sports section. Charles P. (Charlie) Pierce, erstwhile sports columnist for the *Boston Herald* and current political pundit, sums things up nicely in his introduction to *The Great American Sports Page* by recounting his process of deadline revision on Saturday, October 25, 1986, the night the Red Sox and the New York Mets were playing the sixth game of the World Series. The night did not end well for Bill Buckner. With precision, Pierce describes how his column evolved during the topsy-turvy game: “We were now well into those hours in which the conventional *Herald* wisdom had it that I should be writing in Mandarin. [the print deadline was established to reach distant precincts, not the Chinatown neighborhood where the Herald was printed.] But, then, Bill Buckner—and all the ridiculous events leading up to Bill Buckner—unfolded, and I had to start all over again, writing about a world-historical debacle within fifteen minutes or so left and the Deadline Muse sitting on my shoulder, whispering things like, ‘Don’t forget that Bob Stanley was out there looking like the bystander at a car bombing’” (xiv). Pierce laments losing the old print days, when deadlines mattered and tweets came from birds: “The Deadline Muse is worn out, and the occupation of daily sportswriting is exhausting itself in tandem” (xv).

Editor John Schulian’s compendium of newspaper columns contains an astonishing array of subjects written by an exceptional collection of writers. “The column is where the stars of the twentieth-century sports page usually conduct their business,” Schulian declares, “and even with longform now in flower, there are still those scribes who feel the column’s magnetic pull” (xxi). This assortment of deadline wonders, which hold up even though decades have passed since many were published, illustrates the talent of writers who faced a deadline window to produce highly readable content. None of these columns lag, even though many were written about long forgotten racehorses and prize fighters. Forty-six writers, starting with W.O.McGeenhan, a progressive thinker when it came to both female athletes and boxing, which he called the “manly art of modified murder,” to Joe Posnanski, once the anchor of *The Kansas City Star’s* sports section who produced website content after he left *Sports Illustrated*. The writers are ranked in birth order. It’s an all-star lineup and each brings a bit of history back to readers.

As an example, both Joe Palmer (1904-1952), of the *New York Herald Tribune*, who almost completed a Ph.D. at the University of Michigan but veered away from academe for print work, and Red Smith, the elegant and droll columnist for the *New York Times*, mention Exterminator, a now obscure champion racehorse, in their respective columns, “Stymie-Common Folks” and “A Horse You Had to Like.” The horse’s name jumped off the page for me, because it is buried just outside the city where I was born, educated, and left. To this day, on the night before the Kentucky Derby, a ragtag group of unprofessional gamblers detach from their barstools, travel to Exterminator’s gravesite, and as part of an elaborate ceremony meant to honor the dead and provide money for the living, select a designee to hurl the numbers of every derby entry toward the horse’s headstone. The number closest to the grave marker takes the serious money. Almost every column in this collection contains a memory trigger of some type.

Larry Merchant’s “Poetry in Motion,” which is about opening day at Yankee Stadium in 1973, focuses on the person selected to throw out the first pitch, poet Marianne Moore. Moore once taught at the Carlisle School, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and she had a student named Jim Thorpe: “He was a gentleman. I called him James. It would seem condescending, I thought, to call him Jim” (184). Moore’s favorite Yankee was Elston Howard, and she named her pet turtle after him in tribute. She found Mickey Mantle gruff and Babe Ruth “boorish.” The game, the thing apart, reached her: “It’s the dexterity and accuracy that I like most about it. The nimble movements of the first baseman, the way the ball lights in his glove. The way an outfielder catches one backhand. But I don’t like the double play; the execution is nice, but someone is always disappointed” (184-185). Linking a poet, a city, and baseball team inside a sport column made sense to the iconoclastic Merchant.

As the subtitle of this collections indicates, all the greats are here: Damon Runyon, Grantland Rice, Shirley Povich, Jimmy Cannon, Dick Young, Jim Murray, Bud Collins, Tom Boswell, Ralph Wiley, Jane Leavy, Mike Lupica, and Michael Wilbon. Schulian, though, revives lesser-knowns like Wells Twombly, who believed that words could take readers to places television could not go, and who famously cutoff an unproductive interview with Reggie Jackson by telling the slugger that he was as good a writer as he [Jackson] was a homerun hitter and if he wanted an interview, Jackson would have to call him. Writing after the untimely death of the great Roberto Clemente, Twombly equates the incomparable Pittsburgh Pirate with the physical world: “In nature, there are certain movements so swift and graceful that no mortal can adequately describe what has taken place….No man living is skillful enough to describe exactly how Roberto Clemente moved through the meadows of our land for 18 summers. His was a special style and grace. It was smooth motion, fluid and compact….No athlete of Clemente’s quality has been taken for granted quite so shamelessly” (191-192).

“The Medal” by Robert Lipsyte also contains the power of heightened culture observation: “[Dick Tiger] had wanted to return the medal [Member of the Order of the British Empire] for some time, he said. But it was not until he read two weeks ago that John Lennon, the Beatle, returned his O.B.E. for reasons that included Britain’s involvement in the Nigerian civil war, that he decided to mail back his medal” (205). Tiger, a boxer of Nigeran descent, who won two world championships, the middleweight and the light-heavyweight, is a name that not many fans, even boxing fans, would recognize. Lipsyte’s piece brings him back, and connects Tiger to a moment in the history of post-colonial liberation.

Every column in *The Great American Sports Page* stands as a reminder of what we no longer have: newspapers that “monitored the heartbeat of everyday life” (xvii). No matter the writer, from the rightwing lugnut Dick Young to the former rock’n’roll critic Tony Kornheiser, the sports columnist had an audience at breakfast tables, in shift-break rooms, in subway trains, on buses, and on commuter trains—everyone took the news and the opinions for better or worse. Bill Plaschke’s 2001 column about a reader, “Her Blue Heaven,” exemplifies how columnists could extend their work when the subject demanded it. Not held to a word count, Plaschke offers a story that countervails the skepticism that professional sports breeds. Plaschke sums up an unanticipated discovery with emotive style: “It is the same fight the sports world experiences daily in these times of cynicism and conspiracy theories. The fight to believe. The fight to trust that athletes can still create heroes without rap sheets, virtue without chemicals, nobility with grace” (352).

The collection is a reminder of things that went wrong, like the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn, Muhammad Ali being stripped of his title, the National Football League ignoring its veterans, and baseball players behaving badly. However, these columns also underscore moments of magnificence: the miracle of Coogan’s bluff, Jim Murray’s lost eye, Larry Brid’s description of Michael Jordan, and a tribute to Buck O’Neil. Every column in this compilation is worth reading, and *The Great American Sport Page* belongs on the shelf of any quality sports library.