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Harvey Frommer
New York City Community College

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SPORTSPRINT—A PRIMER FOR THE READING BLAHS

Harvey Frommer

NEW YORK CITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Newspapers decry low reading scores. Parents battle with children urging them to read more. Educators bemoan reading readiness, reading curiosity, reading skills on the part of their students. Some segments of the society blame the electronic media and limply rationalize that nothing can be done about a deplorable situation.

NBC opts to spend nearly one hundred million dollars on the 1980 Olympics. *Sports Illustrated* has a very successful book club specializing in lengthy tracts focused on the sporting life. Virtually one out of every three Americans each year is entranced by the Super Bowl on television. And millions of Americans in reading newspapers and magazines turn first and fondly to the sections dealing with sports.

There is, or there should be, a connection between the world of reading and sportsprint. For instead of attacking the American obsession with sports, educators should capitalize on it and use it for the priming of reading skills. Just as many non-achieving students look forward to attending educational institutions because of the opportunity to engage in athletics, so would non-achieving readers look forward to immersing themselves in reading activities where they have a built-in interest—the reading world of sportsprint.

What is being proposed here is not a nation of sportsprint zealots, but at least a maximum effort to cull from the magazines, newspapers, books that write about sports in an intelligent manner—starting points for reading skills for non-enthusiastic and inefficient readers.

The world of sports is a world of records. The performances of athletes and teams are noted daily, synthesized, analyzed, computerized and preserved in print media all over the United States.

In the season of baseball, for example, a box score reveals how many times a batter came up to hit, how many hits that batter recorded, the number of runs he scored, his runs batted in and equally (in)significant info. Pitchers have preserved for posterity in the box scores the hits and the runs and the strikeouts and the balls and the earned runs they were responsible for on any given day.

Basketball box scores likewise provide a healthy statistical yield. The number of shots taken, the amount of minutes played, the fouls given and the rebounds accomplished—all of these are there for the discovery and the enlightenment of the reading sports fan.

A student who gives up half-way through a slightly difficult reading passage, frustrated in his search for comprehension and meaning, will expend ten times the amount of time and energy studying the box scores for

insights into the exploits of his favorite athletes. Why not capitalize on this built-in obsession with the world of the sporting record? Why not assign some work, some projects aimed at following and plotting the successes and failures, the ebbs and the flows of athletes and teams?

Reading for detail, for application, for conclusions, development of skills in skimming, pre-reading, all of these could very easily be developed through contact with the world of sportsprint. And this would be just one facet of the sportsprint functioning as a primer for the reading blahs.

Once the records and the statistics of sports have primed the reading pump – the next logical area of activity could be the accounts of the games and the close-ups of athletes in the pages of newspapers and magazines.

Tone, style, main thoughts, use of supporting details, units on contrasting the writing of the newspapers versus the magazine or one columnist in one newspaper as opposed to that of another could also be introduced.

A third major area and perhaps the sector of sportsprint most applicable for reading development is the world of sports literature. This is the area where readers can really be taught to use their intellect, to feel new emotions, to garner a new awareness into the nuances of reading, of life.

Readers could be led to understand and appreciate the bittersweet friendship of the baseball battery in the Mark Harris novel *Bang the Drum Slowly*. They could share the rage and drive and frustration of Jack Johnson in Howard Sachler's *Great White Hope*. The symbolism of Jack London's aging boxer pitted against brash youth in "A Piece of Steak" and the protagonist's romantic musing about the nobility of lions in Africa and Joe DiMaggio at Yankee Stadium in Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* – these too could be the benefits of sportsprint.

The list of emotions, of reading skills, of subject matter is endless. Just a brief sampling of what a sportsprint literary bibliography might look like includes:

Asinof, Elliot, *Man on Spikes*; Brosnan, Jim, *The Pennant Race, The Long Season*; Faulkner, William, *The Big Woods, The Hamlet*; Harris, Mark, *Bang the Drum Slowly*; Hemingway, Ernest, *The Old Man and the Sea*; Malamud, Bernard, *The Natural*; Williams, Tennessee, *One Arm*; Wolfe, Thomas, *You Can't Go Home Again*; additionally most of the works of Grantland Rice, Ring Lardner, Arthur Daley could also find their way into the sportsprint literary bibliography.

The lure is in the subject matter. The material of sports is being read. We as educators have to simply provide the guidance and the focus and the direction for the material to be read in such a way that SPORTSPRINT becomes A PRIMER FOR THE READING BLAHS.