

# PREACHING<sup>BE INSPIRED</sup>today

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## What Preachers Can Learn from Sportswriters

*How to find the back story, put the picture in a frame, and stick the landing.*

I can picture you, and I can picture him, and there is no resemblance. You stand behind a pulpit or lectern in your Sunday best, business casual, or dressed-down look, according to your church's fashion. But he (and it was almost always a "he"), that famed sportswriter of the 1950s, wore an overcoat and a fedora on chilly nights in the press box. You stand straight and tall, but he's hunched over a Remington portable typewriter. The two of you could not appear more different, but you have more in common than you might think.

I have this compelling interest in what preachers can learn from literary types, whether it be songwriters or authors of mysteries and novels. Why? Because we traffic in words just like they do, and we too aspire to fashion words in ways that are beautiful, striking, memorable, and moving. And sportswriters, especially those who banged out columns for their waiting newspapers back in the day, seem to me to be like first cousins to preachers. Why?

### Sportswriters and Preachers Are Alike

First, they wrote on deadline, as do most of us. Around my office, we regularly postpone things, from worship nights to new logos to remodels of the youth area. But one thing we never postpone is a Sunday. Every preacher I know has a weekend deadline constantly staring them in the face. And as journalists write the "first rough draft of history," we compose the first rough draft of local theology.

Second, preachers and sportswriters generally write for folks who already know the score. Chances are, if you are preaching a historical narrative this weekend, most of your seasoned listeners already know that David upset Goliath, that Joab defeated Absalom, that the Philistines were poised to upset Samson, only to watch the blind former-strongman play to a tie in overtime. What's more, they know that Judas quit the team, that Paul traded Barnabas, that Esau fumbled away his birthright, and that young Isaac on Mt. Moriah rebounded from what sure looked like sudden death.

That press box king, recapping games for his local readers, knew that most of them on Monday would have attended, watched, or listened to the game on Sunday. How do you capture the interest of folks who already know the score?

Here are a few gifts those ink-stained sportswriters can present to us.

### Find the Back Story

Jim Murray, the six day a week sports columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, was labeled the "King of the Sports Page" by his peers. His friend and fellow sportswriter Dave Kindred notes that while Murray watched the same

game and attended the same press conferences as all the other professionals, he was usually focused on the back story, something “strange, funny, or bizarre.” Anybody can read a box score or watch a highlight; the best give their readers, in Murray’s words, “something that nobody else can do.”

Recently I attended an Auburn-Oregon football game with my oldest son Drew (an Auburn alum). I gained a bit of background on Auburn’s team from my son on the drive to the stadium, including that Auburn’s quarterback was a true freshman. We both jumped up and down like kids when that same freshman QB, Bo Nix, lofted a last minute touchdown pass to win the game. But the next day, while reading an article in today’s sportswriting monolith, *The Athletic*, I discovered a back story. Bo Nix’s father, Patrick Nix, once completed a “[jump-ball touchdown pass](#)” to lead his 1993 Auburn team over their rival Alabama in the Iron Bowl. For me, the back story enhanced the focal story.

So, what does this look like for the preacher? One simple way to do this is to track down the cross references. I don’t mean in an academic fashion. We’ve all heard the rookie preacher, fresh from seminary, read parallel passages to us without interest or context. No, I’m talking about taking the time to chase down a parallel passage and interview it.

Take Matthew’s introduction to Jesus’ public ministry in Matthew 4:12-17. In these six verses, Matthew alternates between the play-by-play person in the booth (tracing Jesus’ movements after the death of John the Baptist) to the color commentator (telling us the deep motivation for Jesus’ move to Galilee). Matthew says it was to “fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah” (Matthew 4:14). There, in Isaiah 9, the backstory plays out.

Why does Jesus travel far from the Bible Belt of Judea to make his way to “Galilee of the Gentiles,” of all places? Ancient prophecy predicted that Jesus would publicly launch his Kingdom ministry in that place in Northern Israel that had seen way too much darkness, that plot of ground that was always first to feel the enemy’s boot when Assyria and Babylon plowed through from the north. In a place of political chaos and spiritual darkness, Jesus himself decided to flip the breaker and bring the light of his kingdom.

When preachers share the back story, seemingly prosaic actions and statements take on a deep and testament-binding significance.

Think about this week’s sermon text. If it is an Old Testament text, does it anticipate a New Testament fulfillment? If it is from the Gospels, is there a necessary Old Testament back story? Does the apostle Paul’s “pray without ceasing” find a real-life application from Jesus who prays all night before he chooses his disciples? If you are showing us the Spirit who hovers over chaos in Genesis 1, could you preview the Spirit who turns the chaotic collection of disciples into a church in Acts 2?

## Put it in a Picture Frame

In an era that preceded SportsCenter highlights, the kings of the press box helped their readers see and savor great moments. Jim Murray once said that when Frank Howard was tracking down a fly ball, he resembled “a moose chasing a butterfly.” It was Murray who also suggested that the Indianapolis 500 should begin with the announcer stating, “Gentlemen, start your coffins.”

W.C. Heinz excelled at painting pictures for his readers. In one of his most famous deadline pieces, “Death of a Racehorse,” Heinz traces the sharp rise and rapid fall of a 2-year-old named Air Lift:

They were off well, although Air Lift was fifth. They were moving toward the first turn, and now Air Lift was fourth. They were going into the turn, and now Air Lift was starting to go, third perhaps, when suddenly he slowed, a horse stopping, and below in the stands you could hear a sudden cry, as the rest left him, still trying to run but limping, his jockey—Dave Gorman—half falling, half sliding off.

Next we see the twenty stable hands standing around idly, the blood running down Air Lift's foreleg, the syringe given to numb his pain, and the specially shaped gun that attached to his forehead. Sometime after that fateful shot, the heavens opened, the rain pouring down, the lightning flashing, as the veterinarians rushed for the cover of the stables, leaving alone on his side near the pile of bricks, the rain running off his hide, dead an hour and a quarter after his first start, Air Lift, son of Bold Venture, full brother of Assault.

As I read Heinz's work, I can *see* the story played out in front of me. He manages to make me care about a horse who died long before I was born. [His words seem to say to Air Lift](#): "You mattered. You lived. You had great dignity. And while the rainfall of oblivion seeks to drown your significance, I will yet choose to remember you."

Preachers frame the details that society too quickly forgets. We amplify the last shreds of dignity people possess, and in so doing magnify a God for whom every hair of our heads, or manes, are numbered.

We help people hear the pitiful pleas of a thief on the cross. We help them picture Daniel, choking on the fumes of Babylonian idolatry, open a window three times a day to let in the unpolluted air of God's presence.

We risk obscuring the spare beauty of Luke 15:20—"So he got up and went to his father ..."—by painting a portrait of this hungry and anguished young man. Perhaps we hear him rehearsing his speech, crumpled up on yellow notebook paper in the back pocket of his badly faded blue jeans: "Look, sir, thanks for agreeing to hear me out. I want you to know I get it. I willfully tore up my own birth certificate when I left. I know I'm not your son anymore. But I have always known you to be a kind man ..." We carefully unveil the speck the young man sees on the horizon, as the speck grows into a lump and the lump into a person, an old person, hobbling, in fact running on ancient knees that hadn't moved that fast in decades.

Preachers, if we can frame the picture for our hearers, they won't just read it. They will hear it. They will see it. They will feel the dignity that our God mysteriously attaches to the least deserving. When they fear that their life will end forgotten in the rain of oblivion, we will assure them that against all odds the Lord "will watch over your life" (Psalm 121:7).

Realizing that we dare not take liberties with the actual text, I think that preachers can take a clue from sportswriters here. In the same way that Heinz helps us see the jockey, "half falling, half sliding off" Air Lift, can you take a second pass through your rough draft for this weekend and add a few visual details?

## Stick the Landing

It's an old pastoral joke. "Here's a preacher who needs no introduction. What they needs is a conclusion." I have deep sympathy for that preacher, and in many ways, I am him. It's hard to sustain an engaging Biblical argument for half an hour or so, and then have to tie every major thread together with one beautiful paragraph. More than once, after running out of steam, I've wanted to look straight at the congregation and say, "Well, I guess that's about it" and walk off.

But here's where the sportswriter can provide some badly needed inspiration. One of the best, Rick Reilly, anchored the back page of *Sports Illustrated* for close to a quarter of a century.

Reilly opened his article on the 1996 Masters, the one where Greg Norman took a six-stroke lead into Sunday, by highlighting Norman's daughter Morgan-Leigh making a wish that her dad would overcome the curse. He didn't, blowing an epic lead and losing by four strokes to Nick Faldo.

The article concludes with Norman and Morgan-Leigh packing up his Suburban to drive away from Augusta National:

And as her father wheeled slowly down Magnolia Lane, Morgan-Leigh probably didn't notice the Sunday paper in the back of the Suburban. She probably hadn't read in it what she will learn some day in school, that 84 years ago, on this same April 14, another unsinkable ship on its way to certain glory listed, gurgled, and sank. The *Titanic*.

Somehow, Reilly weaves all the themes—the unsinkable lead, the tragic collapse, the eerie coincidence.

In his recounting of Reggie Jackson's three-homer World Series game against the Dodgers, the Pulitzer Prize winning Red Smith notes how Reggie's teammates tried to get him to do a curtain call after the second homer. Reggie politely refused. But after the third?

This time he could not disappoint his public. He stepped out of the dugout and faced the multitude, two fists and one cap uplifted. Not only the customers applauded. "I must admit," said Steve Garvey, the Dodgers' first baseman, "when Reggie Jackson hit his third home run and I was sure nobody was listening, I applauded into my glove."

How can preachers learn to put an exclamation point, instead of an ellipsis, at the end of our sermons? I certainly wouldn't consider this to be my forte, but on better days, my conclusions give a new twist on an earlier moment in the sermon that connected with the listeners.

A couple of months ago, in a sermon from Genesis 16 where a despondent Hagar now exults to discover El Roi ("the God who sees me"), I used an illustration about someone picking me up from the airport at night. He phones me when he pulls into the terminal, and we begin to question one another. "Do you see me?" *No, do you see me?* But then, finally, while I'm still searching, he says, "Don't move. I see you!"

I came back to this moment in my conclusion:

Friends, I want you to walk out of here today with at least 10 pounds more hope than you had when you walked in. Can you trust *El Roi*? Maybe you're standing on that sidewalk, in the dark, and you can't see him. It doesn't matter. He sees you! "Stay where you are," He shouts. "I'm almost there!"

Preachers, I'm not in a press box, but I am still cheering you on. May God show you a back way into the framing the greatest story there is to tell, and may it end with a bang and not a whimper. And, perhaps most importantly, may you finish your "column" this week before you have to step up to the plate to deliver it.

Larry Parsley

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