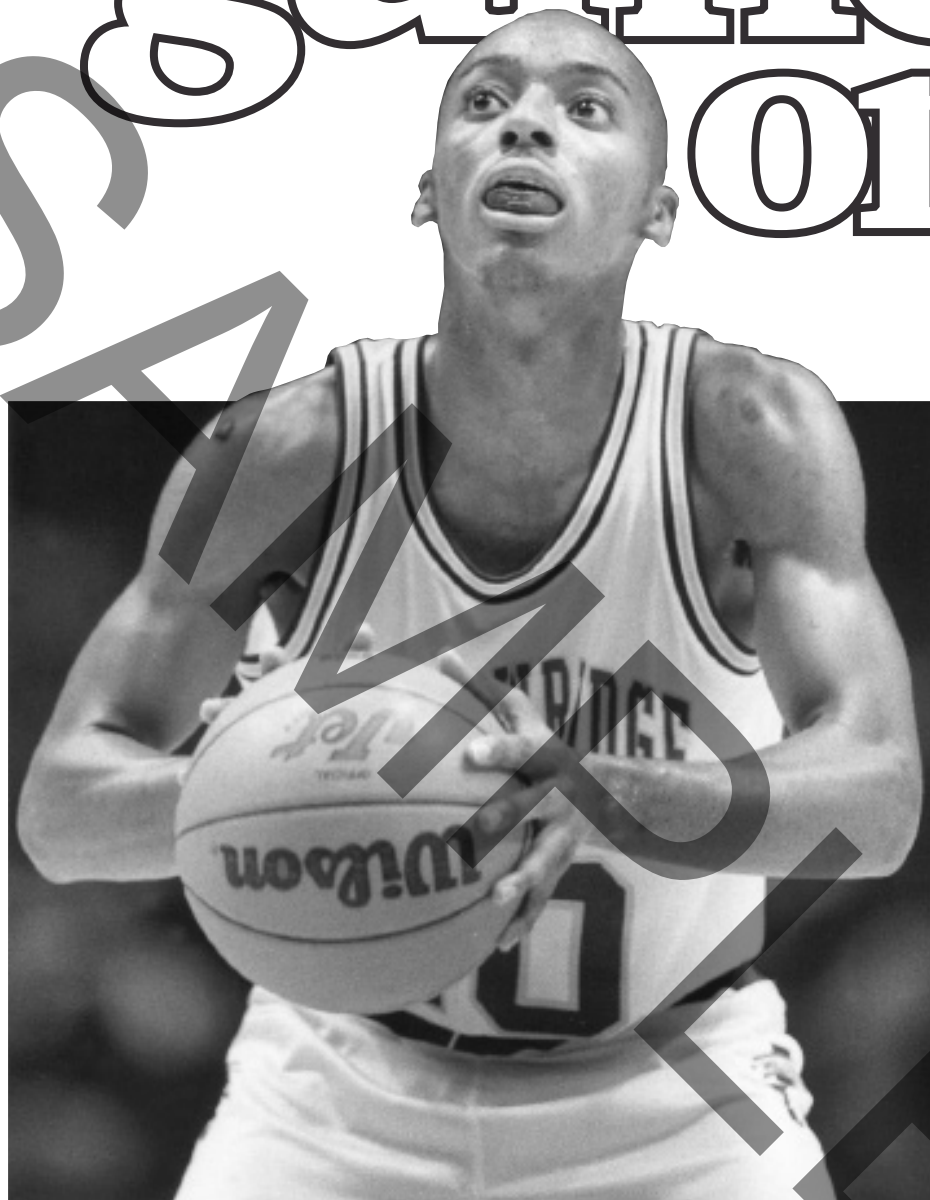


game on



Reporting and **Writing Sports** for **High School Media**

BOBBY **HAWTHORNE**

SAMPLE

Game On : Reporting and Writing Sports for Student Media

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For more information, contact Bobby Hawthorne: utbobby@gmail.com

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FOREWORD

About the Author

Many of my **favorite memories** revolve around sports, either as a player, fan or coach. Many of my **strongest friendships** were forged on a football or kickball field, or a racquetball or tennis court.

I've experienced every range of emotion possible — from a 13-1 record my senior year in football to a 3-13 record as a rookie coach of my 8-year-old daughter's Northwest Austin kickball team.

I cried when the Dallas

Cowboys lost to Baltimore 16-13 on a last-second field goal in the 1969 Super Bowl. The next year, they demolished the Miami Dolphins 24-7, and I still get goose bumps when I read Tex Maule's story in Sports Illustrated, which I've saved.

When I can't sleep, which is often, I occasionally watch Vince Young lead that furious Texas Longhorn comeback over USC in the 2001 Rose Bowl, and I almost always chew my nails, though I know how it all plays out.

I love sports. My life has been shaped and baked by my involvement with athletes and participation in athletics. By the way, that's me in the photos

above — about 50 years and 50 something pounds ago.

Anyway, while I appreciate the lessons young people learn by competing, I'm not blind to the damage misguided adults can inflict on them as well. I survived a season when my stepson was coached by a man whose chief strategy seemed to be berating and belittling his players.

I've seen coaches run up the score just for the pleasure of watching the opponent's coaches suffer, and I once coached against a woman who, at a crucial moment in a key game, instructed the slow girl to fake an asthma attack so she wouldn't have to bat.

Fortunately, I haven't encountered many like her. Most of the coaches I've known are like Bill Griffin, an old friend who died in June 2000 after a long illness. Bill and I grew up in the same small town. He and I played football together, were both members of the high school newspaper and yearbook staffs and later worked together as novice sportswriters at the Longview Morning Journal. I went on to The University of Texas at Austin. He went to Louisiana Tech, but we remained close.

After bouncing around from one job to another, Bill became what he was meant to be: a teacher and a coach. He began by coaching junior varsity girls basketball, then became an assistant varsity coach, then became head football coach and athletic director at small a coastal town just south of Houston.

In terms of wins and losses, he was no legend. In terms of helping kids grow and mature, he was Hall of Fame. Bill loved young people, loved joking and jostling with them, loved challenging them to suck it up and deal with it, regardless of what "it" was. He'd lost his father when he was still in grade school, and he understood determination and grit.

Bill was the kind of person all parents want to coach their child because the lessons he taught will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Of course, few conjure images of the Bill Griffins of the world when they think about sports. They're more likely to think about cheating scandals, trash-talking and crime sprees. That tends to dominate sports talk media, and many of us have grown cynical and disillusioned with drugs and thugs and creeps who prey on children.

As for the Dallas Cowboys, if they win another Super Bowl, fine, but I'll never again lose sleep over them or any other pro sports team. But I don't feel that way about high school sports. I want my alma mater to win even though I don't know a kid in the entire school. Once a Roughneck, always a Roughneck.

I also want Austin High to win, partly because they tend not to. They're not exactly a perennial powerhouse in any sport that I know of, and yet I follow them because my children are AHS graduates. "Forever Loyal." That's the school's motto, and it applies to graduates and their relations.

The bottom line is this: I appreciate the young people who dedicate themselves to a team and a purpose. I don't glorify high school athletics. It's not why we have public education, but I admire the kids who hustle out there on those fields and courts.

Despite the occasional corruptions and personal foibles, scholastic athletics remains one of the most cherished aspects of the American high school experience.

I especially admire the men and women who coach them. Most aren't doing it for the perks or the prestige. They're doing it because they love working with young people. They want to help them pursue something noble and heroic, and I'm not talking about ribbons or medals or trophies or headlines.

Despite the occasional corruptions and personal foibles — when schools turn a blind eye to bullies and sexual harassment, when fans turn into fanatics, when coaches turn into thin-skinned tyrants —

scholastic athletics remains one of the most cherished aspects of the American high school experience. The profession is full of men and women like Bill Griffin, and the lessons they teach last well beyond a lifetime.

About the sample stories: I've used several of my own stories, not because they're particularly great but because I know what it took to produce them. I can promise you that I did nothing that a typical high school sports reporter can't replicate. It takes time and effort and some skill, but it's not nuclear engineering.

About the photos: This isn't a book about photography, but photography is integral to sports reporting, so I've used as many as I deem necessary and feel competent in sharing. I used a few new ones but I've retained several old black and white ones because I love them and they do the job. By and large, they capture the truth about remarkable moments, and I believe that's what we should be doing visually and verbally.

So, that's it. If you have questions or comments, go to my website: www.radicalwrite.com. Order a set of the new 4th Edition textbooks while you're at it.



TELL IT LIKE IT IS. In case you couldn't figure it out, I'm #81. Kneeling. Far left. I played wide receiver and defensive back for a 13-1 state semifinalist team. We remain the winningest team in White Oak High history. White Oak is a small town located about halfway between Dallas and Shreveport, LA. I also ran a 2-minute half-mile and played baseball. I later took up tennis and racquetball. I never much cared for golf. Too cerebral and too slow. Plus, tennis racquets are easier to smash than golf clubs.

PEP TALK

If you get nothing else from this book, then understand this:

You can't publish stats and gassy quotes about games played weeks if not months ago and pretend it's news. It's not.

If information is plastered all over campus and on the windows of local pizza joints, then you don't need to publish it. If it's posted on the school's website, you don't need to publish it. If it's read during the morning announcements, you don't need to publish it. Do you see a trend here?

If you want to cheerlead, join the cheerleading squad. If you want to whine or point fingers, start a blog. If you want to coach, buy a whistle.

If readers can find it anywhere else, they'll go there first. You don't need to publish it.

No one cares who you think will win the Super Bowl or the World Series or the NBA championship unless your last name is Popovich, Belichick or DiMaggio II.

If you're smart enough to crank out 900 words off the top of your head about the Jamaican cricket finals but too lazy or busy or distracted to interview a coach or player at your school, then start a blog.

The publication staff needs reporters who can write, not writers who can't or won't report.

“I was a great football player,” he said, then stopped and looked at my recorder. “Don’t say I said that. But, dude, I was a great football player. I was a fullback and an inside linebacker. I never had the speed to play in college. But I loved it. I don’t think anything will ever take its place. The competition. The team. You get a little bit of that in acting. You get it with action films. You have to train, be in shape. I think I learned more about how to handle myself as an actor playing sports than I ever did in theatre.”

Chris Pratt ▸ “Call to Stardom” ▸ by Rich Cohen ▸ Vanity Fair ▸ February, 2017



CHAPTER ONE : MORE THAN THE SCORE

Let's Play Ball!

Somewhere in this country, someone is **kicking or kicking at**, throwing or swinging at a ball. Someone else is jogging or sprinting, swimming or diving, or in some similar way working up **one heck of a sweat**.

And nowhere is this infatuation more prevalent than in the high school. From the largest West Coast mega-high school to the smallest, backwoods junior high, the drama of extracurricular athletics binds communities to their local schools.

This is good until the moment fans turn fanatical and the higher ideals of interscholastic athletics are sacrificed for victory. In other words, we'll do whatever we have to do to win.

It's also a sign of the times that high school football games are televised nationally and often feature powerhouses like IMG Academy of Bradenton, FL, and Bishop Gorman of Las Vegas,

both of which recruit coast-to-coast, much in the same way as Division 1 universities do.

Similar institutions exist in prep basketball, and it's entirely likely that more of them are on the horizon. How they'll affect the general landscape remains to be seen, but public school coaches are generally opposed to these star-studded outfits.

One coach wrote, "We live here. We work here. We pay our taxes here. We help raise each other's kids. We love to win. But understand that may not always be possible. We appreciate the lessons our kids get from struggles and defeats, too. We are not concerned with recruiting lists or national rankings. We want our kids do their best. We want our teams to do their best. We want our kids to act right. We want our teams to grow and mature together and learn those life lessons that can only be learned on the football field."

And yet, more and more 7-on-7 summer football leagues and elite quarterback camps, coached by former NFL stars and successful head coaches, are popping up. Meanwhile, college football recruiting

is covered by ESPN and dozens of websites with as much bug-eyed fervor as a presidential election. College signing day has become almost a national holiday.

In Texas and a few other states, schools and communities have built \$50 million stadium complexes equipped with Jumbo-trons the size of 18-wheelers. State championship games are played now at the most ritzy venues, and coaches are paid salaries the average teacher can only dream of earning.

THE BASIC MISSION

I don't think it's unfair to say that many communities seem to have lost sight of the basic mission of public education, which is to prepare young people for meaningful roles in society — not necessary meaningful roles on kickoff return teams or pep squads.

All of this invokes memories of a famous quote, attributed to former Oklahoma Sooner coach Bud Wilkerson: "I want a university the football team can be proud of."

Of course, schools are run by elected or appointed school boards and other governmental entities to reflect local values, standards, expectations and concerns, and if the local priority is a winning girls basketball program, well, so be it.

There are consequences to skewed priorities, some of which are heartbreaking, others laughable, such as the Philadelphia dad who sued the school for \$40 million because his son got cut from the track team.

THE WEIRDEST THINGS

It sounds absurd, but it is what it is. People do the weirdest things when it comes to sports. A Dallas father brought racketeering charges against a lacrosse camp. Normally sane people scream at television sets, get into fights over Little League baseball games, criss-cross the country in motor homes to follow their favorite teams.

They spend whatever it takes to build a winning sports program while students read history books that still mention the Soviet Union, and they work on computers that require floppy disks. One of the more memorable quotes from H.G. Bissinger's classic, *Friday Night Lights*, came from an English teacher.

"I don't mind that it's emphasized," she said of football. "I just wish our perspective was turned a

little bit. I just wish we could emphasize other things. The thing is, I don't think we should have to go to the booster club to get books. I don't think we should have to beg everybody in town for materials."

In fact, quite a few people argue that athletics should be confined to physical education classes and little else. Organized sports should be turned over to clubs or private leagues or groups of individual parents. The question, "Should sports be cut from school" is a hot topic on interscholastic debate websites.

One side claims it offers a reason for many kids to remain in school and maintain their grades. It also relieves stress and provides opportunities for physical fitness. It teaches important life lessons such as leadership, teamwork, discipline and self-motivation.

The other side says it's given too much attention and too many resources. It encroaches upon the classroom and fosters an environment of chauvinistic entitlement, which can lead to bullying and sexual harassment. The desire to win places too much pressure on kids, coaches and administrators.

THE PRESSURE TO WIN

"It'll be good for you to be a member of a team," parents will say. "You'll learn to be part of something that's bigger than you. Plus, it'll get you out of the house and away from the computer."

They'll cite all the positive attributes: teamwork, responsibility, self-motivation, leadership, respect for authority, and so forth. Much of it is true, but it's equally true that some parents push their kids into sports to re-live or re-invent their own high school days, which creates an entire host of complications.

First, parents won't let the games belong to the kids. They badger the coaches, and if they don't get their way, they badger administrators. They badger teachers for passing grades to maintain eligibility or for better grades to gain entrance into elite universities.

They coddle their children rather than forcing them to face the same reality they'll face over and over in life: Sometimes, your best efforts aren't good enough. Someone else's are better. But instead of using this as a teachable moment, they allow the kid to sulk and quit.

Or, on the flip side, parents sometimes place their own needs, values and priorities above those of their children. They tolerate bully coaches, poisonous team chemistry, and unfair organizational politics and