Bad Times But Still Swingin’

*World Series Coverage Before and During the Depression*

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The Great Depression was a time of severe social and economic upheaval for the United States. The hardships precipitated by the stock market crash and subsequent bank and business closings resulted in widespread unemployment, disillusionment, and turmoil.

Though newspapers proved a surprisingly resilient industry during the late 1920s and early 1930s, even they were not immune to the harmful effects of economic decline. Average circulation (and thus newspaper readership) dipped only slightly, but as businesses closed, newspapers lost advertising revenue—45 percent over the four years following 1929.

Even today, newspapers in similar situations, to compensate for the advertising revenue shortfall, often reduce production expenses by decreasing the number of pages they print. The decisions on how to cut content, however, do not come easily. Certain sections are preserved at the expense of others—an agonizing decision-making process that can anger both journalists and readers.

One likely victim of cuts would seem to be the sports section, with its emphasis on diversion and escape over hard news. Previous studies have attested to the popularity of the sports page in the years preceding the Depression, particularly the 1920s. But that decade was a period of economic prosperity, both for the nation and for its newspapers. How well did the sports section survive the economic disaster of the years that followed? Did readers lose their appetite for sports coverage during harsh economic times? Did the growing need for so-called hard news during a critical point in history relegate sports to a smaller portion of the newspaper?

Previous research has not addressed such questions. This paper will help remedy that shortfall by presenting research that examines sports coverage from eight newspapers in 1927 and in 1932. Coverage of a specific sporting event of high public interest—baseball’s World Series—will be compared to
see whether major newspapers from a variety of geographical regions devoted less space to that sporting event, and to sports in general, when the Depression’s effects were being fully felt. Such data can help determine the priority assigned sports during a period when most of the hard news, while bad, was in fact arguably more important news.

More than merely quantifying editorial decisions, however, this paper will also seek to interpret Depression-era culture by using newspapers as a cultural text. As one sports researcher acknowledged: “American newspapers are a mirror in which the nation is reflected in all its complex cultural diversity.” Sports heroes such as baseball players were popular (though perhaps not as well paid) cultural icons in the 1930s as much as in the 1920s. A sustained level of sports coverage would demonstrate that, even in the midst of economic depression, newspaper readers valued the diversions of the sports page, and newspaper editors obliged them.

EVOLUTION

The development of sports journalism, starting in the nineteenth century and climaxing in the Jazz Age, the 1920s, has been the subject of extensive previous research. In many ways the evolution of the newspaper sports page paralleled the evolution of baseball and other modern sports, reflecting their symbiotic relationship.

By the early nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution provided Americans with more leisure time, and they began to turn their interest toward sports. The earliest sports journals originated in Great Britain, the first being Pierce Egan’s Life in London and Sporting Guide, which began publication in 1824. It was retitled Bell’s Life in London four years later. Under that title it gained in popularity, reaching a circulation of 75,000 by the mid-1800s.

Similarly, in the United States, magazines reached enthusiasts more successfully than did newspapers. While James Gordon Bennett’s New York Herald reported on horse races and prize fights from the 1840s on, most newspaper publishers looked down on such pursuits and left sports reporting to magazines such as Spirit of the Times. However, when Richard Kyle Fox parlayed coverage of sports (among other, more lurid topics) in his National Police Gazette into a nationwide circulation of 150,000, the newspaper industry began to take notice.

The New York Clipper, which began publication in 1853, hired Henry Chadwick, who is recognized as one of the first journalists whose primary responsibility was to cover sports and who wrote many articles about the emerging sport of baseball. In a reflection of the close relationship between sport and
media, Chadwick also is credited with the invention of the box score and helped to codify baseball's rules. During the 1890s the involvement of such publishers as Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst wedded sports journalism and yellow journalism in the minds of many. Hearst was credited with developing the first separate sports section as well as with such innovations as hiring sports celebrities to write guest columns. His and Pulitzer's contributions, however, also lowered the status of sports journalists within the profession.

During the early twentieth century, newspaper sports sections experienced phenomenal growth: “Sporting columns grew overnight from one-man jobs to big and dignified and semi-independent departments.” That independence manifested itself in an editorial autonomy that allowed sports editors to send their pages directly to composing rooms, bypassing copy desk scrutiny. In addition, sports journalists, including baseball writers, would accept financial compensation from sporting promoters that took several forms: a baseball beat writer could expect free tickets to baseball games, extra money as official scorekeeper, and even direct payments in appreciation for free publicity. By the 1920s baseball club owners were even paying the travel expenses of the reporters who covered their teams.

Coming out of World War I the nation was experiencing a surge in sports interest that continued the growth in popularity of sports writing. During the 1920s athletes had begun to replace industrialists and even government leaders as the heroes of youth. The 1920 and 1924 elections had begun to forge a new campaign strategy, in which candidates were judged more by image than by accomplishment or rhetoric. Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge “offered the public no coherent platform beyond a hazy vision of ‘normalcy,’ an amorphous idea which meant many things to many people at a very superficial level.” Within that political environment the Jack Dempseys and Babe Ruths, who had overcome opposition in forging their athletic destinies, provided new heroes, and these icons survived even economic depression.

Perhaps no athlete captured the sporting public during the 1920s like Babe Ruth. His popularity remained high even during the Depression, though his skills were in decline. To sports fans of the time, Ruth’s unpredictable behavior, described by a horde of popular literary sports columnists, provided entertaining reading. Plus, his impressive batting statistics quantified his value to baseball as aptly as his high salary.

One way that sports heroes like Dempsey gained popularity was through extensive newspaper coverage of their fights, especially before the event. Dempsey's promoter, Tex Rickard, was skilled at gaining prematch publicity for his boxer and his events. The problem facing newspaper publishers was
that the symbiotic relationship between media and sports was taking on more of a business arrangement than mere event reporting. Newspapers provided readers daily reports on their favorite teams, which drew fans to games, and sports promoters extended journalists courtesies that went beyond facilitation to financial compensation.¹⁷ Such self-interest by sports promoters and journalists would seem to ignore the newspapers’ commitment to their readers over their sources, even as the sports journalists themselves argued that newspapers were following, not leading, the public’s changing attitude toward sports.¹⁸

That cozy relationship, however, troubled many newspaper editors because of the ethical pitfalls. Concern among editors reached the point where, in 1926, the American Society of Newspaper Editors appointed a committee to study the problem. The committee, in its report at the 1927 ASNE convention, recommended that sports sections stop giving away free publicity for upcoming sports events, that sports sections come under the same editorial supervision as other departments, that sports journalists not accept fees for providing services at sports events (with corresponding pay raises to compensate), and that newspapers commit their sports departments to increased coverage of amateur athletics.¹⁹

All that enthusiasm waned, of course, after the stock market crash of 1929, which initiated nearly a decade of economic depression. Some social scientists noted a move away from spectator sports such as baseball toward participation sports. Golf and tennis, long the pursuit of upper-class Americans, were “democratized” and adopted by the middle and lower classes.²⁰

Communication historians have not studied the 1930s as extensively as the Jazz Age, particularly where sports coverage is concerned. But several studies have offered perspectives on sports coverage during that time. In one study of World Series coverage in the 1920s, two effects of the 1929 stock market crash were noted. Attributed to the crash were the psychological effects of grim reality replacing Jazz Age ebullience. But more direct and measurable was the reduction in story length caused by fewer pages.²¹ As a result baseball team owners were forced to promote their teams more proactively, and teams began to employ public relations directors.²²

During the Depression, newspaper sports sections also served an important social function. Not only did newspapers sponsor sports events for charitable purposes, but some also addressed race relations (arguing against the banning of African-American baseball players) and such public morality issues as the serving of alcohol at athletic events.²³

In the absence of sports journalism studies, other communication studies can be consulted to gain some understanding of the Depression-era media audience. One such study of popular culture claimed that those who attended
sporting events “were not escaping from the real world; they were partaking of some of its essential features.” Popular culture, movies, radio programs, and newspapers, as well as sporting events, empowered these audience members to face their culture, rather than escape from it.\textsuperscript{24}

But did newspapers continue to offer sports coverage during the Depression? Another influence, independent of economic disaster, was the emerging mass medium of radio. The World Series had first been broadcast in 1920, though mass diffusion of radio broadcast technology did not happen until later in the decade.\textsuperscript{25} At this point the first Major League baseball game on television was still about ten years away, in 1939.\textsuperscript{26} It would be up to newspapers and radio to satisfy the public’s craving for news on baseball. By looking at coverage of an annual event like baseball’s World Series, we can see indicators of whether sports continued to find coverage within the pages of American newspapers even as the society changed drastically. The 1927 and 1932 World Series offer a promising point of comparison.

THE 1927 AND 1932 WORLD SERIES

In the 1920s and 1930s the New York Yankees of the American League were one of the most popular teams in baseball. Between 1921 and 1933 the Yankees appeared in the World Series seven times, winning four world championships. Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig were the best-known Yankees in both World Series, but newspaper coverage highlighted other team members as well. In 1927 Ruth set a single-season record by hitting 60 home runs, and Gehrig drove in 175 runs.

The Yankees’ opponent in 1927 was the Pittsburgh Pirates, who had won the World Series two years earlier. The Pirates were led by the young Waner brothers, “Big Poison” Paul and “Little Poison” Lloyd.\textsuperscript{27} According to baseball folklore, when the Waner brothers and their teammates watched Ruth, Gehrig, and their Yankee teammates take batting practice, the sight caused them to lose their confidence. As one anecdote noted, after Ruth finished his turn, he called to the Pirate players: “If you chase down any of those balls, I’ll autograph them for you.”\textsuperscript{28} The Yankees beat the Pirates in 4 consecutive games, two at Pittsburgh followed by two at New York.

In 1932 Ruth, Gehrig, and a greatly changed roster of teammates faced the Chicago Cubs. The Yankees’ manager, Joe McCarthy, had been fired by the Cubs two years earlier after his team failed to repeat as National League champions and finished second.\textsuperscript{29} McCarthy’s team earned a measure of revenge for their manager, beating the Cubs, as they had the Pirates five years earlier, in 4 straight games.

In what would prove to be his final World Series appearance, Ruth also pro-
provided a memorable addition to baseball folklore. While facing Cubs pitcher Charley Root in the fifth inning, Ruth supposedly pointed to the center-field fence, predicting a home run (which he subsequently hit).30

CONTENT ANALYSIS

To examine World Series coverage this paper will incorporate a content analysis of eight daily metropolitan newspapers: the Atlanta Constitution, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Washington Post.

The dates included in the study were October 5 to 9, 1927, and September 30 to October 3, 1932.31 These dates marked the first day of the World Series (allowing for a preview) through reports of its final game.32 For this study morning editions of newspapers were analyzed.33

The 1927 and 1932 World Series provide relevant comparison for two reasons. First, the two Series occurred over a four-year span, before and after the stock market crash in October 1929, which precipitated the Depression. That chronological distance would allow the effects of the Depression to be more fully apparent. Second, because both Series were 4-game “sweeps,” coverage was not affected by intervening factors, such as increased, extended drama in a 7-game World Series that could be expected to precipitate additional audience interest and corresponding newspaper coverage.

The newspapers were coded according to several criteria. First, the length of the newspaper sports section was measured by counting the number of pages. The total number of pages in the newspaper was also recorded to determine whether newspaper sports sections were given a smaller share of the available news hole in 1932.34

Newspaper articles covering the World Series were also measured according to paragraph length. Several journalism historians have attributed to the Depression a move toward a leaner, more concise writing style to save space and reduce costs. That should be reflected in shorter articles. Articles were coded in two ways: by the categories “short article” (up to five paragraphs) and “long articles” (at least six paragraphs) and by average article length. For the purpose of this study sidebar boxes containing such statistics as box scores, composite statistics, predicted lineups, and schedules of games were coded as short articles. Since their paragraphs could not be counted, however, they are not included in calculations of average article length.

Finally, the number of World Series photographs, both headshots and action photos, in each newspaper was recorded. Photographs attract readers, but they require the resources of both space and technology, which might have been in smaller supply during the Depression.
RESULTS

Every newspaper in the study decreased in its average number of pages between 1927 and 1932. The number of pages allotted to sports also decreased, but the percentage of pages devoted to sports did not. Newspapers continued to devote the same proportion of their news hole to sports. Thus the sports section was not depleted, with its pages given to other sections, to compensate for the decrease in space (see table 1).

The majority of newspapers devoted fewer pages to sports. World Series coverage showed a similar decrease (see table 2). Of the newspapers studied only two, the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune, ran more stories about the 1932 World Series, and the increased Tribune coverage can easily be

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explained by interest in the hometown Cubs. Even the New York Times ran fewer World Series articles in 1932 than in 1927, though the Yankees played in both. In most of the newspapers studied the main competition was the opening of college football, which generated much more local interest than World Series games featuring teams from distant cities. Professional football, still in its infancy, did not receive the same level of coverage as the college game.

Even though newspapers ran fewer World Series articles, the proportion of longer articles (more than five paragraphs) did not increase or decrease in any discernible pattern (see table 3). Every newspaper except the New York Times ran more articles that were longer.

One kind of longer article that proved popular with magazine readers was guest columns written by baseball players and managers. In 1927 and 1932 the San Francisco Chronicle ran syndicated columns by John McGraw, manager of the New York Giants. (The Washington Post also ran McGraw’s columns in 1927.) In 1932 the New York Times ran daily columns by two opposing players: third baseman Joe Sewell of the Yankees and third baseman/team captain Woody English of the Cubs.

Although most newspapers ran fewer World Series articles, average article length increased for all of the newspapers in the study (see table 4). If sports journalism were moving toward a leaner writing style, it was not reflected in World Series articles.

Most sports pages also featured more photographs in 1932 than in 1927 (see table 5). That can be attributed to improvements in technology that made using such photographs more cost-effective. The photographs ran on both the sports page and the rotogravure sections that were popular Sunday sections in both 1927 and 1932.
Although the number of photographs appears to have held steady from 1927 to 1932, the entire decrease in the *San Francisco Chronicle* can be attributed to the layout on its October 5, 1927, edition. To preview the 1927 World Series the newspaper framed its front sports page with twenty headshots: the nine starting players and manager for each team.

**The Babe Ruth Legend: Did He Point?**

Along with the content analysis reported above, coverage was consulted in more depth to study the newspaper reporting of one legend that has survived from the 1932 World Series. The narrative from the third game, mentioned...
earlier, described Ruth pointing to the center-field fence before hitting a home run.

Neither the New York Times nor the Chicago Tribune reported the event. The Times report did acknowledge that Ruth was the target of booing and jeering by the Chicago fans, many of whom threw lemons at him. During Ruth’s fifth-inning at-bat (when the famed pointing incident was supposed to have occurred), the Times reporter covering the game noted that “Ruth signaled with his fingers after each pitch to let the spectators know exactly how the situation stood.” To the Times reporter, Ruth was signaling the count of strikes and balls, not predicting a home run or where he would hit it.36

The sportswriter covering the game for the Chicago Tribune likewise noted that “Ruth held up two fingers, indicating in umpire fashion. Then he made a remark about spotting the Cubs those two strikes” before hitting his home run.37 Tribune sports columnist Westbrook Pegler, however, described the scene in greater detail. He noted that Ruth was trading insults with Cubs pitcher Guy Bush on the Chicago bench. Pegler reported that Ruth was pointing toward Bush, though Pegler vaguely refers to a signal that said, “Now, this is the one. Look!”38 But he does not specifically mention Ruth pointing toward the center-field fence.

That the story has been handed down in its present, mythic form reflects the nature of cultural icons such as Ruth. Extensive coverage notwithstanding, his exploits fueled the interest of Depression-era audiences starved for inspiration. In addition, his penchant for embellishing biographical details of his life, especially his boyhood, also contributed to the longevity of such stories.39 The audience’s receptivity to such legends is crucial to understanding their culture.

UNWILLING TO LOSE READERS

While newspapers did print fewer pages as a result of the Depression, the sports section made no more of a sacrifice than any other section. Apparently, publishers were not willing to risk losing readers at the same rate they had lost advertisers. Sports content had proven an effective means of attracting readers. Even in a time of national crisis, then, readers still found sports content an important coping mechanism that accompanied the hard news reporting on national affairs.

Even an event of nationwide interest such as the World Series could not sustain the level of coverage it had received before the Depression. But that does not mean that it was ignored or that editors cut the length of World Series articles. Instead, sports pages continued to provide extensive coverage with the longer, detailed articles that fans demanded.
Perhaps sports articles, like the games themselves, did provide a form of escape from the harsh reality of the Depression. That escape, however, met an important cultural need, as did the athletes as cultural icons. The trend of “athlete as hero,” which began in the 1920s, continued into the 1930s. In the late nineteenth century, with the increase in industrialization, participation in sports might have been the “safety valve” for society, a break from the rigors of hard factory work. By the 1930s, in dealing with the stress of the Depression, the experience of being a sports spectator seems to have served that same purpose.

The current media landscape is vastly different from the time of Ruth, Gehrig, and the New York Yankees. Now sports fans can see games reported in detail, with instant replay and expert commentary on a variety of media—print, broadcast, and Internet. To the 1930s sports fan, however, the newspaper provided an important connection with sporting heroes, one that they were not quick to give up—either in the Jazz Age or during the Depression.

NOTES

8. Betts, America’s Sporting Heritage, p. 60.


18. W. O. McGeehan, “Our Changing Sports Page,” *Scribner’s*, July 1928, p. 56. McGeehan, former sports editor of the *New York Herald* and a popular broadcaster, also argued that the increased coverage had brought about positive changes—for example, increasing women’s interests in sports.

19. ASNE 1927, p. 102.


26. James R. Walker and Robert V. Bellamy Jr., “Baseball on Television: The Formative Years, 1939–1951,” *Nine* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2003): pp. 1–18. In fact, the first televised baseball game was a college game between Columbia and Princeton on May 17, 1939. The first Major League baseball game to be televised was between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Cincinnati Reds on August 26, 1939, the first game of a doubleheader.


30. Cohen and Neft, *The World Series*, p. 142. This legend will be discussed in more detail in a separate section, following the content analysis of newspaper content.

31. The 1932 World Series included an extra day for travel between New York and Chicago (September 30, 1932). The 1927 World Series did not give players a day off for travel: the two teams played in Pittsburgh on October 6 and in New York on October 7. Thus the 1927 study incorporates five days of coverage, while the 1932 study incorporates six.

32. Within this sample all newspapers were available on microfilm, with the exception of the Sunday edition of the *Boston Globe*. Since the purpose of this study was comparison of the same newspaper at two points in time, the *Globe* was included, since the exclusion of Sunday editions for both years would not affect a comparison.

33. Many of the newspapers included in the study also printed “afternoon-extra” editions to capitalize on World Series interest, some of which were available on microfilm. Since not all of the newspapers were available on that basis, however, the study was limited to morning editions.

34. Measuring overall newspaper length presented problems concerning Sunday newspapers. Only broadsheet-size sections were included in the calculation of Sunday newspaper length, which meant the exclusion of literary and magazine supplements. Comics also were excluded; they were not available in all microfilm editions.

35. For this study, headshots and action shots were counted equally in determining the number of photographs.


38. Westbrook Pegler, “Gehrig Hit ’Em; Foxx or Hoover Might Have—But Not like the Babe,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 1932, sec. 2, p. 3.