

Preface

I wrote these stories between 1992 and 2018. They cover a dozen different sports for a dozen different media outlets, from the *Ann Arbor News* to National Public Radio, and they stretch from a couple pages to a dozen. But they have one thing in common: they all meant a lot to me when I wrote them, and they still do today. That's why I'm thrilled to see them together in one place, as well-preserved as anything in the increasingly ephemeral world of journalism can be.

It took more than a decade to bring this idea to life. Back in 2001, I published my first book, *Blue Ice: The Story of Michigan Hockey*, with the University of Michigan Press. A few years later I started talking with my friends at U-M Press about creating this book, but the timing never seemed right—until now.

Once I sat down with editor Scott Ham to start building this book, we decided pretty quickly we didn't want to produce a mere "greatest hits" collection, a random sampling of my favorite pieces. Instead, we sought to select and shape these stories to tell a bigger story about sports, and our relationship to them.

With that in mind, we discarded the idea of organizing these stories by superficial categories like geography, or chronology, or the sport or team I was writing about. In sifting through more than a hundred pieces, we whittled the list down to 40, and were pleasantly surprised to see they fell very nicely into themes, including sections on how we get hooked on sports; why we love playing them (despite frequent failures); the stars, the leaders, and the legends we admire; and how our love of sports is threatened by greed, in ways both obvious and subtle.

Once we framed the pieces along those lines, we could see that this collection has little to do with wins and losses. Instead, the stories here use sports as a prism to take a closer look at the character of the people who play, coach, and watch them. The subjects face conflicts over our most cherished values, and they work to resolve them—or exploit them. Because these stories address such universal themes, I hope they have retained a certain timeless quality.

That's why we've included stories from across the sports spectrum, including profiles of big names like Magic Johnson, Bo Schembechler, and Joe Louis, to profit-mongers determined to suck the fun out of our sports, to unsung heroes whose passion drives them to coach Little League baseball teams and run summer camps for peanuts—and die with no regrets.

These stories speak to the value of sports, but also *our* values. I don't think I'm the only one who's less interested in last night's box scores than the stories behind them: the untold personal struggles that transform even our best-known sports figures from two-dimensional caricatures into full human beings we can appreciate for reasons that go deeper than their win-loss record, and introducing the people who work off-stage to a broader audience.

While we gave ourselves a wide berth in picking these stories, we decided to stick to those that are tied to the state of Michigan. That wasn't too hard, because the Great Lake State has been home to major league baseball, football, hockey, and basketball since those leagues started—something only New York, Boston, and Chicago can also claim—not to mention the University of Michigan and Michigan State, plus countless amateur squads competing in everything from high school hockey to intramural softball.

Michigan is one of the nation's best sports states, a place where we define ourselves as much by our teams as our professions. When we get together for a game, we all wear the same colors. Sports build a bond so strong they often allow us to transcend our many differences.

I care deeply about all of the people in these stories, and I loved writing about them. I gave these pieces everything I had, often hammering out a dozen drafts during all-night writing sessions, and it felt good to see every one of these stories come out in print. If you know any writers, you know we don't always feel that way.

I've been reporting, writing, and commenting about Michigan sports for a quarter century now, from my days freelancing for the *Ann Arbor News*, writing Sunday features for the *Detroit News* and longer pieces for *Sports Illustrated*, *ESPN Magazine*, *Men's Journal*, *Fortune*, *Time*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and National Public Radio. What got me dreaming about this collection, however, was my experience telling sports stories every week on Michigan Radio, for sports fans and non-fans alike, who often say, "I don't care about sports, but I liked this."

Whether you're a sports fan or not, I hope you enjoy these stories, and the spirit that inspired them.

Kid Stuff

Sports are a passion usually sparked in childhood and, like most of our enthusiasms, fanned by our parents. That was certainly true for me. My father instilled my love of sports, and in the process created a bond that kept us connected even during my insolent adolescent years, when little else did. He believed that sports could teach bedrock values, a simple but powerful idea that has been the foundation of just about everything I've done since, as an athlete, coach, and commentator.

For my generation, our love of sports didn't grow only during organized games on official fields, courts, and rinks, where adults taught us how to play by the rules, but also on our driveways and streets, backyards and basements, where we lost track of time playing games we made up ourselves. Here we learned to pick teams, play fair, and settle disputes ourselves, with no parental supervision—and we kept it up, running an intramural softball league and putting together our own pond-hockey teams.

Of course, playing without parents also generated a lot of mayhem, but that was part of the fun—even if most of us don't allow our children to do the same things today. Call us hypocrites if you like, but when you read my stories about the crazy stunts we did, you'll understand.

As a coach and a sports writer, it's been gratifying to see that my experience falling in love with sports, and what they can do for us, has been shared by so many others, from Huron hockey's unforgettable assistant coach, to the kids on the Potawatomi reservation in the Upper Peninsula, to the friends of Wes Leonard in tiny Fennville, Michigan.

This section focuses on the games we play when the world isn't watching, yet matter as much to us as anything that happens in the big leagues.

The Best of Bacon: Select Cuts

John U. Bacon

https://www.press.umich.edu/9764639/best_of_bacon

University of Michigan Press, 2018

A FATHER'S DAY GIFT

June 17, 2011
The Detroit News

My dad grew up in Scarsdale, N.Y.—but, as he's quick to point out, that was before it became "Scahhhsdahle." His father told him always to root for the underdog, and my dad took that seriously.

All his friends were Yankees fans, but dad loved the Brooklyn Dodgers. A perfect Friday night for him, when he was a young teen, was to go up to his room with a Faygo Redpop, a *Boy's Life* magazine—he was on his way to becoming an Eagle Scout—and listen to Red Barber reporting on the Dodgers' game. Instead of saying something prosaic like, "The bases are loaded," Barber would intone, "And the bases are *saturated* with *humanity*."

Dad was a decent athlete, but after the first day of his high school baseball tryouts, he didn't think he had much of a chance to make the team, so he skipped the second day—only to find out later the coach asked his friends where he was. A few years later, he redeemed himself by starring at shortstop for his fraternity softball team, which won the title when he pulled off a perfect squeeze play. You never forget those moments.

My parents raised three kids, and spent most of their weekends schlepping us to swim meets and hockey games. My dad had to wake me up at five in the morning, then pile me and my hockey bag into our 1965 Volkswagen Beetle—which had no radio and a heater only in theory. I'm sure I complained every time he woke me up. He didn't complain once.

My dad never played hockey, but he taught me the important things: Play hard. Play fair. Losing is okay. Loafing is not. And hot-dogging after a goal is simply unacceptable. You're better off not scoring than acting like you've never done it before.

My dad and I spent countless hours together watching George Kell broadcast the Detroit Tigers' games on TV, and listening to Ernie Harwell deliver them through the car radio.

In high school my brother and I both made the varsity hockey team, and played together for one season. My dad is not one to brag, but he

gushed about how proud he was to see his two boys standing together on the blue line for the national anthem. It didn't matter to him that that was all the ice time we usually got.

When I became a sullen teen—at least at home—we didn't have a lot to talk about. Still, like Daniel Stern's character said in *City Slickers*, we always had baseball. That kept us connected, when it seemed like few things did.

After I left home, we started becoming good friends. As Mark Twain said, "It was amazing how much my father had changed."

We formed another bond when I took over my old high school hockey team, Ann Arbor Huron, which had not won a game in a year and a half. Assessing my team's situation, my dad said, "Well, when you're on the floor, you can't fall out of bed."

I gave my parents a schedule, but I didn't expect them to come to any games. I wasn't a teenage player, after all, but a 35-year-old coach. But they came to every one of our home games, and even our away games in Trenton, Muskegon, Traverse City, and Culver, Indiana, becoming valued members of the hockey parents' gang.

When we won our first game, they were there. When we finally beat our arch-rival, Ann Arbor Pioneer, in my third season, they were there. The lobby crowd was loud, but not my dad. He didn't say a word—he was too choked up to speak—but I'll never forget his glassy eyes as he reached out his hand to grasp mine, and he held it, firmly.

He knew how much it meant to me. And I saw how much it meant to him.

When I asked him a couple months ago what I could possibly get him for his birthday, he said, "Just your friendship."

Consider it done.

And that's what he's getting for Father's Day, too.