

## **Chapter XX: Contemporary sports reporting**

*Genre: Sports writing*

*Platform: Wapp sites*

### **Learning objectives**

This assignment is designed to help us become more familiar with an emerging form of news writing and distribution, wireless reporting.

Wireless journalism is the product of the convergence of many technologies, including print, video, telegraph, wireless Internet and cellular telephony, and borrows from all those media in both the kinds of content it offers and its work processes. Its development is driven by the tremendous potential for profit, highlighted by two factors: the proliferation of mobile phones among all segments of the population; and news consumers wanting more personalized news, delivered in smaller, more easily digestible chunks. Given these factors, it's not surprising niche journalists in the sports news industry are pioneering wireless journalism. What is surprising is how far general interest newspapers lag in entering this medium. Still, there's little doubt wireless journalism is a growth field, and will require increasingly greater numbers of reporters and editors to provide content as the medium continues to grow.

We begin with a visit to the newsroom of a pioneer in the practice, Mobile ESPN, to learn how the medium functions and how the journalists there work.

### **Mobile ESPN**

“Ben, Matt Leinert’s on the phone.”

You might hear such a phrase cried out across the sports department of any news outlet, especially if the reporter has a call in to the former-USC-turned-pro quarterback. In the newsroom of Mobile ESPN, though, the words take on a completely different

meaning. Here, a video technician is telling assistant editor for text Ben Larsen that the audio/video/text feature they've been discussing, a news item about Leinert, is ready for preview on Larsen's cell phone.

Mobile ESPN, a service that provides sports news to subscribers via their cell phones, is owner Disney Corp.'s latest venture to capture a bigger piece of the huge sports information consumer pie. It operates out of Building B, an outlying structure on ESPN's vast campus of modern buildings, satellite dishes and parking lots, in Bristol, Conn., just west of Hartford. While most of Building B—the ESPN on-line broadcast center—is divided into cubicles, Mobile ESPN's newsroom is set up like a bullpen, with staffers sitting at banks of computer monitors in rough U-shaped configuration. In addition to each station having a computer—the text reporters use PCs, the video guys use Macs—it also has two or three large, flat-screen computer monitors; what little desk space isn't taken up with keyboards, mice, note pads and small TVs is littered with mobile phones. Three large whiteboards mounted on one wall are filled with video clip slugs, work assignments and miscellany. There's a constant low murmur coming from the video monitors, either from video clips technicians are editing, or sporting or news events staffers are keeping an eye on.

Presiding over it all is editor Anthony Mormile, whose career in sports journalism started in Pittsburgh in 1987 and includes both video and text wire services. He was recruited in 1994, when ESPN was starting its own wire service, and was brought in to run Mobile ESPN in 2005. "I consider myself on the cutting edge of technology, but I wasn't a wireless guy," Mormile recalls. "At first, it was very foreign."

As Mormile tells it, ESPN was the second to enter the mobile market, after MSNBC. With sports being only a small part of its service, MSNBC “put its video in a bucket—five clips, no order.” ESPN Vice President for Product Development John Zehr had a better idea, creating Mobile ESPN, a service that not only sorted clips “by sport, by topic, by player,” as Mormile says, but also offered a range of sports journalism products that drew upon the considerable resources of ESPN, the self-described “worldwide leader in sports.”

ESPN’s great competitive advantage over other mobile sports journalism outlets is its access to programming. “Content is king, and that’s why ESPN’s a player, because we have the content,” Mormile says. “ESPN has the contracts already in place. The other companies, they could offer 10 appetizers, but they can’t deliver a main course.”

Because it operates in a different medium with unique characteristics, Mormile also sees distinctions between the programming capabilities of Mobile ESPN and other ESPN outlets. *ESPN the Magazine*, which is printed, has space constraints; ESPN’s



**Anthony Mormile**

television and radio channels have time constraints; and ESPN.com, the website, has to find advertisers to support features. Wireless journalism is largely free of these limitations. “There’s no space constraints in our world,” Mormile says. “Throw it up there. See if people like it. When

Ben wrote a Minor League Future Game story, we had the [ratings] numbers that night. I said, ‘Ben, do it again, people loved it.’”

An additional advantage, Mormile says, is, “Because we’re new, people leave us alone.” The editors and staffers at Mobile ESPN have more opportunities to be creative, and to innovate. “Mobile is what the Web was 10 years ago,” he says.

Because familiarity with digital technology is such a large part of wireless journalism, there is an increased emphasis on technical skills. “I used to tell people, ‘Study the obscure sports to get your foot in the door,’” Mormile says. In units outside Mobile, ESPN still operates like traditional newsrooms: reporters start by doing menial tasks, pay their dues, work their way up the ladder, spend a lot of time “in the pipeline.” An applicant’s knowledge of sports is the critical factor in hiring decisions. Not so at Mobile ESPN. Mormile says, “If you’re really on the cutting edge of technology, I’ll teach you the sports.” Most of the video editors have experience in Web design, not sports writing. “Now, you have to be new media savvy—Web, wireless, encoding, shooting, editor,” Mormile says. He notes that Mobile ESPN will send one reporter—dubbed “the predator”—to provide audio, video and text coverage of a sporting event. This is “real foreign” to the way ESPN used to operate, he says. “It’s a real changing of the guard here.”

Young journalists “have an unprecedented opportunity here,” Mormile says. He gives several reasons for this. “Ben and his coworkers are phenomenally lucky, when you consider that this medium is so new, it scares off a lot of the older journalists.” Because of the increased creative freedom and lack of constraints, wireless reporters have much more opportunity to write much earlier in their careers. “Half of these guys would never

have gotten hired down the hill [at ESPN], I don't care how great their video skills," Mormile says. "This new breed of journalists is learning to do more things than they would ever have to do in the old days. They're exposed to many more different kinds of sports, instead of being pigeonholed."

Mormile's imprint on this venture cannot be understated; he's been involved since before its inception, and continues to help define the content, work processes and technology. Mobile ESPN has a staff of 20: the editor, Mormile; six text editors; 11 video editors; and two overnight staffers who work in the Digital Center down the hill. Only one woman works at Mobile ESPN. The newsroom is staffed seven days a week, 20 hours a day, remaining idle for four or five hours in the early morning.

From a user's perspective, Mobile ESPN is, first, a provider of cell phone service, with a range of plan minutes and the usual included options: voice mail, call forwarding, call waiting and so on. It also offers, for a premium, other typical cellular options like wireless Internet and text messaging. Subscribers get their phones—known as a wireless application, or "wapp"—and mobile service from ESPN, which piggybacks on the Sprint network. The heart of the endeavor, of course, is the range of the sports programming packages available to users by paid subscription. In the same way that ESPN.com produces a website of linked pages for access via computer, Mobile ESPN produces a "wapp site" of linked pages for access via cell phone. Wapp sites first developed for viewing on Blackberries, and were "not very visually appealing," Mormile says. Just as wapp site technology improved, mobile phones capable of receiving and displaying audio/video were developed. The trouble with wapp sites, Mormile points out, was that it took a user too many clicks to get to the desired information.

“We try to do everything in three clicks: football, Giant game, Tiki Barber rushing yards,” he says. This technological innovation, which led to greater ease of use, also created content issues. “People thought if it was that simple, they wanted more information,” Mormile says. “We couldn’t have anticipated that until we actually went through a cycle. They consumed so much information that we couldn’t feed their appetite. That was the crazy thing. We started with eight topics; now there’s something like 20. People get on the phone [Mobile ESPN] and they expect it to be better than [ESPN] dot-com.”

At this writing—August 2008—Mobile ESPN offers three forms of sports news reporting: text, video and alerts. The “lead page”—what would be the home page on a website—features one lead story; below that, a list of 12 headlines links subscribers to other stories; and across the bottom scrolls a line of headlines culled from the others. These are all text features. The left side of the screen features a scrolling “sideline menu,” which links users to other available wapp pages.



**A lead page**

Currently, the majority of text content comes from the ESPN.com website. “Right now, only two or three of us have enough time to do our own thing [generate content],” says Ben Larsen. Content generated in-house includes Larsen’s Fantasy Baseball blog, as well as on-site coverage of the British Open golf tournament and the World Series of Poker. “The goal is to produce the bulk of our content in-house,” Larsen says.

This is the process a text editor like Larsen follows to publish a piece. His computer has two screens: one features a regular Internet browser—set to ESPN.com



#### **A sideline menu**

most of the time—and the other is a “publishing” screen, which is where he programs content. Mobile ESPN shares a server with ESPN.com, called ContentEditor; when Larsen sees a story on the website that he wants to publish on the phone, he searches for it on ContentEditor and then enters the file in the Mobile ESPN publishing interface. He can search for a story on ContentEditor two

ways: by location (URL) or by story ID, both of which are available in the address bar of the Web page. Text stories, whether written in the Mobile ESPN newsroom or culled from ESPN.com, cannot be previewed before publishing; but since they’ve already gone through the editing and proofreading processes, previewing isn’t necessary.

The process for publishing video is longer. The lead page displays three tabs across the top that turn into drop-down menus when activated. The menus feature links to video clips. Videos are 176 pixels wide by 144 pixels tall, at 150 dpi. The content of the tabs rotates, depending on which sports are in season, what special features Mobile ESPN is offering, and other criteria. Examples of tab offerings include “ESPN News” (a regular, culled from the cable TV show), “The Take” (also taken from ESPN television), game highlights and specials like the MLB All-Star Game. Video sources include ESPN programming, which is acquired by workers in the Digital Center, as well as other TV

programming, captured in the Mobile ESPN newsroom by video editors. Initially, staffers believed users were always looking for more video. “We could never push enough clips,” Mormile says. More recently, though, they’ve learned that users weren’t viewing some of the video because of the sheer number of clips being offered. Larsen says they’ve now switched to quality over quantity.

While text editors can work individually to publish a written story, the publishing of video clips is a more collaborative effort, requiring the work of several staffers; and yet, because wireless reporting is such a new phenomenon, there’s little structure in place to facilitate, or



**Ben Larsen**

even define, the process. Here’s where text editor Ben Larsen’s natural leadership skills come into play. While getting his bachelor’s degree in journalism at Salem State College—where he was, I’m proud to say, my student—Ben served as captain of the baseball team and sports editor for the college newspaper. He also started and maintained his own sports writing website, [evenflowsports.com](http://evenflowsports.com). In this newsroom, he fills the structural void by taking charge of a project and shepherding it through the publishing process.

The open floor plan allows for staffers to communicate easily with each other, which they do frequently. After a video editor has downloaded or captured a clip, Larsen works with him to prescreen the clip; he then consults with the graphics editors to

superimpose the “lower third” titles. Text editors work with two phones, a “preview” app and a “live” app. Once a video clip is programmed, Larsen checks it on his preview phone; if necessary, he can make changes to the item before publishing it. Generally, he oversees the entire process, from video capture to publication. Larsen embodies Mormile’s description of this new breed of wireless journalist: “These guys are not scared off by doing all the facets of taking something from start to completion.”

It should be noted that the process for publishing clips that are composed of just game highlights is somewhat different. After all the night games, including those on the West Coast, are finished, two staffers in the Digital Center edit the video and send it to the Mobile ESPN newsroom; there, the voice-overs are written and recorded by staffer Paul Severino. These clips are usually published around 4 a.m., so users can access them first thing in the morning.

Alerts are the third form of sports news reporting on Mobile ESPN. Personalizing the news users receive, especially alerts, is a big part of Mobile ESPN’s marketing



strategy. All users identify a favorite team and a favorite player; according to Mormile, 70 percent of users have their alert clips tagged under “a broad category that’s more aggressive in getting you the information.” When news breaks about one of these users’ favorites, “we wake up the app,” Mormile says—in other words, the user’s phone rings. Another 22

percent have “some interactivity,” where, when news breaks about users’ chosen favorites, the tagged clips are shown when they open the phone.

Larsen describes alerts as being “saved for breaking news.” Mobile ESPN defines breaking news in a way appropriate for sports journalism: alerts include scoring updates for ongoing games, announcements of player transactions, events relevant to fantasy sports team owners, and developments from Mobile ESPN exclusives like the World Series of Poker.

Alerts are short: their headlines are limited to a field of 20 characters, and their text bodies are limited to 40 characters. The abbreviated character field does create a tension between journalistic integrity and necessities of space. At first, this was less of a problem for Mormile: “I could still get away with *New York Post* headlines on the phone for a while.” Very shortly, though, the tension became apparent. “I’m more *New York Times* than I am *New York Post*,” Mormile says. “There’s definitely a school of thought that will say there’s nothing wrong with a headline like, ‘A-Fraud: Yankee Slugger Lets Team Down Again.’ We don’t do that.” For his insistence on integrity, Mobile ESPN staffers consider Mormile old school; down the hill, at ESPN proper, he’s considered “way too progressive,” he says. “If you have 17 characters to get a headline to fit, these guys will shorten it to, ‘Schilling Stinks.’ And I’m like, ‘Uh, no.’ And they’ll say, ‘That’s what the [Boston] *Herald* will have tomorrow, I guarantee it.’ And I’ll say, ‘Yes, that is correct, but we’re still ESPN.’”

What’s next for Mobile ESPN? Mormile envisions “total personalization,” where, for example, users will be able to track their kids’ high school sports on their phones. “My phone, no matter where I go, will keep me in touch with my roots,” he says. If the

Web made leaving the house a chore, wireless journalism is the next logical development. “The biggest thing about the phone is convenience,” Mormile says. “It prevents you from having to get up off the couch to get on the Web.”

And the next generation of wireless reporters? “Because the phone is new and credibility is everything, I think you lean towards solid journalists and sacrifice a little on video,” Mormile says. “Eventually, those things will even out. There’ll be this whole crew of new media people who you’ll say, ‘Not only did this guy come through the new media pipeline, he’s got a great news sense—he has a good college background in journalism.’”

### **Practice**

***Assignment xx:** Understand how these sports story forms are innovative: the notebook and the preview/review.*

***Assignment xx:** Create three kinds of wireless news reports for a wapp site: a lead page, a breaking news alert, and a blog with at least a week’s worth of entries.*

These assignments can certainly be done with the sports section of your college newspaper; this is the obvious—and currently, the most professionally applicable—approach. A more interesting and challenging approach—and one that I suspect anticipates developments in wapp sites—would be to use the news section of the newspaper. Indeed, you could try this assignment with any section of the newspaper, since wireless journalism will continue to grow as a field. The choice is the editors’, or they may allow reporters to choose, either individually or collectively. Another approach would be for reporters to undertake the assignment with the sports section first, and then with the news pages. For the purpose of describing the assignment, I will use the sports section.

**Part 1:** Create a lead page for the sports section of your college newspaper. Your lead page should include the following features: a lead story, with a headline of no more than 30 characters and a summary of no more than 90 characters; and 12 headlines of no more than 30 characters each. If you have the technical savvy and resources to fulfill this assignment electronically—using desktop publishing or graphic generation software—all the better; if not, a written document will suffice. The editor should set the deadline for this filing of the lead page; I recommend two or three days, or by the next class meeting.

**Part 2:** Choose one story from the sports section of your college newspaper and create a wireless breaking news alert. The headline should be no more than 20 characters, including spaces and punctuation, and the body text should be no more than 85 characters including spaces and punctuation. Ben Larsen has provided an example:

Headline: Taveras Goes Hitless

Text: Houston Astros CF Willy Taveras went 0-for-3, snapping his 30-game hitting streak.

The headline is 18 characters and two spaces. The text is 82 total characters, including spaces and punctuation; please note the perfect grammar and punctuation, despite the brevity of the form. This aspect of the assignment should be filed as email to the class email list, with the headline of the alert in the subject line and the body text in the body of the email. Deadline for the breaking news alert should be short, even as soon as midnight of the day the alert is assigned.

**Part 3:** Choose one story from the sports section of your college newspaper and maintain a blog on the subject for a week or longer. The editor should determine how long you should keep your blog and how many entries are required during that time. If you blog for a week, I suggest one entry per day; the longer you keep the blog, the less

frequently you need to make entries. It's important that your blog contain real developments in your subject, not just opinion. Single entries should run about 500 words, which is the length Ben Larsen aims for when writing his blogs on Mobile ESPN. As he says, "There are no space restrictions. But we do like to keep it under 500 words. Anything over would seem extremely long on the small screen of the phone." Two of his blogs appear at the end of this chapter. Please note that, significantly, they have no headlines; as discussed in the previous assignment, multiple entries of a single blog are typically run under one headline, separated only by the date of posting. Your blog should be kept online; try a free blogging site like [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com) or [myspace.com](http://myspace.com). Deadline for the blog will vary, depending on the amount and frequency of entries required. Keeping a blog for a month is an excellent practice.

### **Discussion and evaluation**

This assignment illustrates for us how wireless journalists choose, approach and write stories, headlines and columns, and how their work differs from that of print journalists. Perhaps the most significant factor is the different characteristics of the two media: electronic versus mechanical, small format versus large format, instantaneous communication versus time-delayed communication, and so on. The technological differences between the two media affect both the form and the content of the communication.

Another interesting factor to explore is the increased incorporation of the audience. Newspapers, whether general- or special-interest publications, are funded by advertising dollars, and so must cast a wide net in terms of attracting readers, all of whom are potential consumers of advertised goods. On the other hand, wireless journalism is

subscriber-driven; and the phone's small screen limits the amount of advertising space available. This focus on attracting subscribers manifests in a couple of ways. On a macro level, the wireless journalism industry is divided into niches, with sports being the largest niche, for now. Within those niches, there is an increased emphasis on tailoring the news to the wants of individual subscribers, enabled by the technology and necessitated by the economics of the industry.

Discussion of this assignment may center on how those two factors, the technological and the economic, play into the decisions made by reporters. For **Part 1**, you might explore your decision-making process regarding creating the lead page and choosing the lead story and 12 headlines, as well as comparing your lead page to the newspaper section from which you culled it. Was choosing a lead story difficult? Did your lead story differ from the main bar of the newspaper section you were recreating? What factored into your thinking in choosing a lead story? Was the summary of your lead story the nut graf of the original story, or did you write a new summary? What was your thinking about this, and how did the change in technologies impact your reasoning? How did you choose and order your 12 headlines? Were your choices based on news value, chronology, or other factors, like target audience? Are your headlines more the *New York Post* or *The New York Times*?

Similar issues of decision-making might be explored around **Part 2**; specifically, whether decisions are made according to traditional journalistic conventions, like news value and timeliness, or whether they're made based more on technological and economic factors, like space limitations and targeting subscribers. And because the wireless alert is a construction unique to this medium, it provides an opportunity to think

at greater depth about how the technology impacts the form. How did you choose the story from which to create the wireless alert? Was your choice based on traditional journalistic conventions, like news value and timeliness, or on technological and economic factors, like space limitations and targeting subscribers? Did you find it difficult to write so short? Did you sacrifice accuracy or grammatical correctness for brevity? Did you have trouble filing the story properly?

For **Part 3**, I would suggest approaching your discussion of these blogs in very much the same way you did in Assignment 38. A balance needs to be struck between “shoe-leather reporting” and opinion, and between a literary journalistic writing style and colloquial blogging discourse. As previously discussed, the ease and immediacy of blogging, as well as the time pressure of producing frequent entries, tempts reporters toward the latter in both cases. Discussion might center around reporters’ difficulties in maintaining regular blogs, on deadline; your struggles to hit your target count of 500 words, and whether you tend to write short or long; your challenges in finding factual content to include your blogs, as opposed to opinion; and where the language of your entries fall on the spectrum between print journalism and blogging. Lastly, it might be worth discussing if you had any technical difficulties in starting or maintaining your blogs.

\* \* \*

Here are two blogs written by Ben Larsen: the first is about the MLB Futures Game, which Larsen described as being “very well received” by other sports writers and Mobile ESPN subscribers; the second is about the British Open, which Larsen says shows he can write about “real sports,” too. As you read, notice that his blogs aren’t just

opinion; they're filled with actual reporting. Sure, he opines, but he supports his ideas with facts. You'll recall my criticism of blogging from the previous assignment. I would also point out that Larsen writes about sports in a smooth and easy-to-follow style—conversational, even—without falling into jargon or cliché. You'll recall my warnings about these common sports writing hazards from Assignments 28 through 30. The first piece is actually stronger in both regards than the second, which may be why it was so well liked.

A quick glimpse at a roster compiled of players from the first six years of the MLB Futures Game would raise an eyebrow. At first glance, it looks like a roster for an actual All-Star Game, but in reality, it's just a sign of the times. There may be no better predictor of major league success than making a Futures Game roster.

The collective impact that players on last year's Futures Game rosters already have made on the major league level this season is proof positive that these players are the real deal.

From its inception in Boston in 1999, the Futures Game has showcased some of the game's best talent. From Alfonso Soriano to David Wright, Vernon Wells to Francisco Cordero, the game has shown some clout. The 2005 edition was no different.

Take a look at some of the names from the game: Kendry Morales, Edwin Encarnacion, Hanley Ramirez, Yuniesky Betancourt, Melky Cabrera, Francisco Liriano, Josh Willingham, Conor Jackson, Josh Barfield, Jeremy Hermida, Lastings Milledge, Chris Young, Zach Duke, Ian Snell, Justin Verlander and Joel Zumaya. Not to mention, Jeff Francoeur and Bobby Jenks were on the rosters but couldn't play because of obvious obligations with the Atlanta Braves and Chicago White Sox, respectively.

However, it's not just the names that make this game so special. It is how quickly the alumni from the game have made an impression on big league clubs.

Look at last year's starting pitchers. Francisco Liriano of the World squad faced USA's Justin Verlander. They only threw an inning apiece, but earning the honor of starting the Futures Game was an early indicator of how much potential both young hurlers had.

In 21 appearances for the Minnesota Twins, Liriano is 9-1 with a 1.99 ERA and 94 strikeouts in 81-1/3 innings. His hot first half actually earned him strong consideration for a spot on the AL All-Star team. Verlander is 10-4 with a 3.01 ERA in 17 starts for the Detroit Tigers, the team with the best record in the major leagues.

Ramirez pinch-hit for Betancourt in last year's game and both are enjoying solid rookie seasons at shortstop for the Florida Marlins and Seattle Mariners, respectively. Encarnacion, the World team's third baseman last July, is batting .270 with six homers and 36 RBI for the Reds in 2006, despite spending almost a month on the disabled list.

If history repeats itself, you're looking at a 2006 Futures Game chock full of talent. In addition to Howie Kendrick, who has already seen time with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim this season, keep an eye on Stephen Drew, Alex Gordon, Homer Bailey and Billy Butler—all top candidates to make the jump from this game to the major leagues before the year is out.

*21<sup>st</sup> Century Journalism: From the Classroom to the Newsroom*  
Assignment 31: Create three kinds of wireless news reports

Poor Chris DiMarco. He believes he actually has a chance.

The guy throws a crooked number on the scoreboard in the second round of the British Open and realistically has no chance of winning.

Retief Goosen, the fourth best player on the planet, shot a 6-under 66, but has no chance either. Heck, Ernie Els doesn't even have a shot at winning the Open and he sits just one shot back of the leader.

That's because your leader is Tiger Woods. And for the first time in a while, Tiger Woods is playing like Tiger Woods.

Starting with one of the most intense fist pumps of his 10-year career after dropping an eagle on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole Thursday, Tiger's back. He has the look in his eye, the swagger in his step and best of all, the confidence in his swing.

After 17 decent holes yesterday, he has played the last 19 like it's his tournament. That's when you know he's going to win. Who else buries a 209-yard 4-iron at the British Open?

The best thing about his 36-hole total is how he came to it. When he hit his first shot off the first tee Thursday into the thick stuff, I said, "Here we go again." Through the first few holes, he looked like he was thinking too much.

Maybe I was longing for the days like his Sunday at Augusta in 1997, when he simply

knocked every single shot where it was supposed to be without even thinking twice, but he just didn't look like the Tiger that we all know and love (or hate) to watch.

You see, to me, Tiger doesn't need to plan each shot and think about it. I always figured any shot he would ever need to hit was pre-programmed into his brain, his muscles and his computer chip when he came off the conveyor belt 30 years ago.

Well, apparently I was wrong.

Through 36 holes, Tiger has out-thought and out-shot the rest of the field. Not really sure why I second-guessed his approach—like I know anything, anyways—but it could've had something to do with what happened to him at Winged Foot. It was more of a shock than anything else. I just figured that nothing could derail him from being the best player in every single tournament he plays in.

But none of that matters now. He's back. I'm still not sure if he ever left because there hasn't been a player in this world better than him for 400, count 'em, 400 weeks. Tiger is here. Sorry, Ernie. My apologies, Retief. Maybe next time, Chris. Tiger's on top and he's not going anywhere for a while.