

Another Lesson From The Local Media

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Monday, June 16 2008 7:00 PM -

If the average Cleveland Indians fan was surprised by the team's announcement last week that catcher Victor Martinez was being shelved for the next two months because of elbow surgery, apparently it paled in comparison to the shock felt by the local reporters covering the team. They supposedly cover the team on a daily basis, spending more hours with the team during the season than they do their own families. Yet not one of them was even aware that Martinez had a chronically sore elbow until Martinez left the game or if they were never mentioned it. The good 'ole PD ...



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Crank-in-residence Sheldon Ocker of the Akron Beacon Journal on Sunday [really upbraided Indians's management](#)

for all the mystery surrounding both the Martinez and Travis Hafner injuries.

Ouch. Jim Ingraham of the Lake County News-Herald and Lorain Morning Journal matched Ocker

[indignant word-for-indignant word](#)

. Double ouch. Paul Hoynes of the Plain Dealer couldn't personally muster the energy to register his protest formally, but once someone wakes him up I'm sure he'll get right on it.

Sure, as Ingraham said, the Indians look bad. Guess what? The reporters covering the team look worse. Lost in the convenient rage by the local press is their complete lack of appreciation for irony. Doing what reporters often do best, pointing fingers elsewhere, these three should really be asking themselves why

they were scooped on this story by the Indians' public relations office. They supposedly cover the team on a daily basis, spending more hours with the team during the season than they do their own families. Yet not one of them was even aware that Martinez had a chronically sore elbow until Martinez left the game or if they were never mentioned it.

The complacency of most of the local media covering the town's various pro sports teams is hardly breaking news. But then again, either were the injuries to Martinez and Hafner, playing out as they did over the course of months, not days let alone hours.

This episode really provides a nice backdrop to a [column](#) I wrote last week and the feedback it received about how the Indians management, utilizing their local media enablers, were busy weaving a new story line into the collective conscious that injuries alone were the real reason this team was performing well below the misguided preseason expectations. Injuries are playing a role certainly but the far bigger culprit is general manager Mark Shapiro's increasingly disastrous decision to essentially stand pat this last off season.

A reader, agreeing with the points made and wondering why Hoynes, for example, wasn't willing to come out publicly and say that that this team wasn't wearing clothes, sent the column to Hoynes for a response. Hoynes, expressing far more anger at the reader than he could muster at Shapiro, suggested first that I got the idea to write the column from the Plain Dealer and, by the way, it must be nice sitting in the safe confines of an ivory tower and pontificating while he and his ilk slug it out each day, going down to the locker room, talking to the players and writing on a deadline. Who knew Hoynes had such contempt for Bill Livingston and Bud Shaw?

The surprise though came at the end of the email. Essentially Hoynes said you can't use injuries as an excuse but you can't ignore them either. In other words, he really didn't disagree.

I'm not suggesting that anything that happens in the world of sports, particularly pro sports, is worth the wrongheaded emphasis we place on it as a society. But so long as we're going to cover sports, there's nothing wrong with taking it seriously. In the bubble that Hoynes, Ocker and the rest occupy the only ones apparently capable of taking it seriously and reporting on it with requisite insight are the beat reporters that "go down to the locker room." Without them, we'd miss manager Eric Wedge saying after another loss, "we've just got to keep playing hard."

What Hoynes' e-mail really reveals is that he like many others in his line of work these days has taken on a bunker mentality when it comes to their internet competitors. Rather than embrace the diversity of voices or accept the challenge they present, reporters like Hoynes have increasingly taken on the tone of the aging ex-wife pushed out for a younger version. In the process, the loss of relevancy they fear is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It's a fair point to make by whoever makes it that Shapiro and Wedge cheated fans by not being more forthcoming earlier in the season. Indeed, it's equally fair for anyone with a keyboard and access to an audience to second-guess the thought process that led to Shapiro and Wedge thinking that it was a good idea to initially play two obviously injured players and then keep them in the lineup while their failures and the losses continued to pile up like sandbags fending off flood waters. The problem is that it would have been far more useful for those with the supposedly inside access, like Hoynes, Ocker or any of the rest of them, to be on the front end of the story, not the back.

If the secret to insight is in the locker room, then why, again, did Hoynes, Ocker and the rest completely miss the Martinez and Hafner stories? They missed it because, gosh, Shapiro decided to be deceptive with the fan base. That doesn't get Shapiro off the hook, but a little after-the-fact indignation doesn't mean the local reporters that were sleeping all along shouldn't likewise hang with him.

Incapable of self-reflection, the local press has long since taken on the clubby

persona of a jaded insider. Indeed, what Hoynes is essentially saying is that he and his brethren pull punches and play it safe in order to maintain access that they don't really utilize in the first place. Shapiro and others like him know it and play into it, doling out access to them just infrequently enough to make it seem special. The reality is that Shapiro didn't volunteer the information about Martinez sooner because he knew he could get away with it. He has a complacent pack of reporters covering this team, a pack whose interest doesn't extend much beyond the relative merits of whether or not the chicken picata on the pre-game buffet is a bit too spicy. If Shapiro takes a little flak afterward for not being completely truthful, so be it. It isn't going to change the coverage of his team going forward.

The lesson here is that access is overrated and insight underrated. A valid point isn't any less so because it was made by someone on this site and not by one of the drones sitting in the press box. If you're still relying on the local media to hold the team and its management accountable, then you'll surely be disappointed and ill-informed. Then again you're probably not reading this anyway. And, for the record, I couldn't have gotten the idea for my column from reading the Plain Dealer. That would have meant that someone like Hoynes would have had to have written it in the first place and we all know by now that didn't happen.