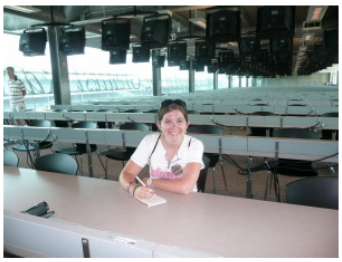
THE INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST
THE SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS' BLOG FOR FREELANCERS

A sports fan turned freelancer

By Anna Pratt | July 7th, 2015



Heather Rule, who is based in the Twin Cities, Minn., covers high school sports as a freelance reporter for the Star Tribune. On her blog, "Thoughts from the Stands," Rule, who studied journalism in college, writes about baseball, hockey, tennis and IndyCar racing. She also Tweets updates during all the Minnesota Twins games as the in-game social media coordinator for Major League Baseball. Here's what Rule had to say about how she got into sports writing, some of the highlights, and what it's like reporting on such a male-dominated arena.

Q: Where did your interest in covering sports come from, do you think? How did you get started in this beat? What sports do you cover?

A: When people hear that I write about sports, the usual follow-up question they ask is: 'Did you play sports in high school?' Well, yes, I did, but I don't think there's much of a correlation between that and my sports writing. I played tennis, but I wasn't all that good. I'm much more of a spectator than an athlete, which is why I named my sports blog "Thoughts from the Stands." I've been a fan of IndyCar racing for most of my life, and I started watching a lot of Minnesota Twins baseball in middle school, which was about the same time the Minnesota Wild started, so I watched them as well. I've covered many of the state high school tournaments (football, basketball, hockey, tennis, badminton), plus other section playoff games and sports features.

Q: What kind of training did you do to immerse yourself in sports reporting?

A: My major in college was print journalism, and I was on the school newspaper staff, too. We got to choose from a list of stories each week. I started taking a few sports stories and found that not only did I like to watch sports, but I liked to write about them, too. So along with my journalism classes, my time as a staff writer and then sports editor of the paper helped me develop my sports reporting skills.

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578 8K

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Q: Can you say a little about how you landed a gig or two?

A: Networking. It really is true. Keep in touch with people you meet, and it will pay off somehow later. I worked in the Star Tribune sports department answering phones a few years ago and kept in touch with some of the staff I met, especially through social networking. One of them reached out to me about a sports freelance gig after he saw on Facebook that I was moving back to the Twin Cities. That was all it took. For another job, I reached out to someone I wanted to connect with via LinkedIn. We didn't know each other at all, but he was nice enough to agree to a networking meeting. We kept in touch and he helped me land a phone interview for a very competitive position.

Q: What do you do to stay on top of your game? What might be an important lesson along the way? And/or a challenge?

A: Sports blogging has been a huge key for me. I started my blog right after college to keep up my writing skills, since I had an internship at the time that didn't focus on writing. Blogging was something fun I could do on my own, no matter what job I was doing at the time. I'd encourage others to keep writing, and blogging is a good way to do that. Find something you love and something you know and just write on a platform you feel comfortable with. For sports in particular, keep watching sports, too. The more you watch, the more you learn. Also, be sure to read what other writers put out there regarding your favorite teams. Reading is learning.

Q: What's it like being a female in such a male-dominated area?

A: It's interesting, because I hear from a lot of people that being a female in the sports world should provide big benefits for me. I don't know that I've really seen that happen for me yet. There have been just a couple times where I felt like others treated me a little differently because of my gender (and maybe my age) as I tried to do my job covering a game. But it doesn't happen often. For me, I wish there were more women working in sports. I covered the high school boys' state hockey tournament this past year and took time to look around at the full press box at Xcel Energy Center. I think there were one or two other women and that was it. At the same time, I realize how far women have come in what used to be an extremely male-dominated area. But there's still room to grow.

Q: What kinds of sports stories do you like best?

A: All stories come back to one thing, even in sports: People. Yes, there are games involved, but what often makes great sports stories are the people behind the game stats. Maybe it's a great comeback story of an injured player. I also love underdog stories; the whole David beating Goliath angle is really fun. Games with surprising finishes also make great stories. You know, the ones that make you say, "This is why they don't play the games on paper." More generally, I'd say hockey and baseball are my favorite sports to write about.

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Anna Pratt (Twitter @annapratt) Email

Anna Pratt chairs SPJ's Freelance Community. She also serves on the board for the award-winning Minnesota Pro Chapter of SPJ. As a staff reporter-turned-freelance journalist, Pratt, who lives in Minneapolis, Minn., has ventured into garbage houses, spent the night in a homeless shelter and witnessed a fistfight in a church basement, all for various stories. Her byline has appeared in the Star Tribune, The Line, the Southwest Journal, the Minnesota Independent and several suburban and community papers, web publications and broadcast media in the Twin Cities. She's had many beats, including education, community news, business, development, arts, civil/human rights and immigration.

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This entry was posted by Anna Pratt on Tuesday, July 7th, 2015 at 3:01 pm and is filed under Uncategorized. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

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