

Reader Publishing Group

Let There Be Books

How Covering Baseball Has Changed

By Larry LaRue

Whenever someone asks if covering major league baseball has changed, I tell them about the first game I covered in 1979, then I wait for them to regain consciousness. That first game required me to carry one heavy suitcase and a typewriter into the ball park. Once the game ended, I opened the suitcase, which contained a machine whose



original design can be found on cave walls in the south of France.

Plugged in, the contraption would hold a single type-written sheet of paper. It required a phone receiver - not the line, the entire headset - which would be squeezed tightly into rubber cups.

Once turned on and connected to the home office, the spindle began turning and through the magic of modern technology, whatever was typed on the sheet of paper was sent to the newspaper.

One line at a time.

If that wasn't crazy enough, my fellow journalists and I had to time whatever we were writing on the next sheet of paper so we could finish and slide it into the beast without losing the connection.

Before 1979, apparently, writers would type their stories, wrap them around rocks and throw them toward their newspaper offices.

Yes, Virginia. Covering major league baseball has changed.

Today, there are laptops the size of cocktail napkins and every ballpark has wireless internet connections. During the course of a game we used to simply watch, we now Tweet and Facebook, blog and occasionally run live chats.

But that's just the technology.

When I fled the newsroom for the sports department, I was trading into a lifestyle even the families of beat writers don't understand.

From mid-February and spring training through September and the end of the regular season, sports writers don't take days off.

None.

That meant leaving home in spring for six weeks of training camp, then covering 162 games once the season began. For a night game, it meant getting to the ballpark by 3 p.m.

It meant, too, that the weekend barbeques and weeknight softball games were out.

In whatever city I'd visit, there were usually friends or extended family hoping for 'an early dinner' with me. They simply couldn't believe I arrived at the stadium long before the first pitch.

It's a job that requires a transition, and that transition appeals only to certain demented journalists.

One of the perks that most appealed to me were the office hours. There were none. My checks were mailed to my home. My connection with editors was limited to telephone calls.

And then, there was the baseball and its inhabitants.

Liking the game isn't enough, and no matter what any of us believed when we began covering it, the men who live within baseball know far more about it.

That's humbling. Beat writers who try to come off as experts with a manager are either quickly put in their place or – far worse – considered idiots and ignored.

The first team I covered was the Angels, the first manager was Jim Fregosi.

I was greeted with suspicion my first spring training, in part because I asked questions that could have been construed as second-guessing Fregosi.

They weren't. I told Fregosi I wanted to learn not only what he did but why he did it, so I could better explain what happened in the game to readers.

Once Fregosi believed me, he was far more patient, and I learned something from him almost daily. That hasn't changed since, though the managers and coaches and players did, and often.

Among the first major lessons I learned was that a big league clubhouse was one of the funniest places on earth – and that the humor was nearly impossible to translate.

How do you write about outfielder Jay Buhner sliding a bagel on to his naked body, where it could, shall we say, dangle, and then racing around the room?

Even more critical, how do you write about it without offending someone whose six-year-old son might read it in the morning paper?

The answer is: You try.

From the moment I began covering baseball through this past season, I believed that while it was a game that revolved around numbers – batting averages, earned run average, on-base percentages, RBI – the heart of baseball's appeal were the men who played it.

The access to major league players who travel for road games is unprecedented in sports.

Cover a full season and you are, by baseball standards, part of the extended family. That doesn't mean you don't write things players or managers don't like. It doesn't mean you don't work hard to beat the competing papers.

It simply means you're accepted in the clubhouse. Players know you and, on a case-by-case basis, some trust you. Not all players trust all writers. Nor should they.

In that sense, it's no different than any other beat. If you can't make people trust you, your success is limited from the outset. And to be trusted you have to earn it.

One of the great delights of the job was learning how unique the characters within the game were.

Reggie Jackson was so much larger than life, for instance, that he required a half dozen personalities, and you weren't sure which one you'd talk to on any given day. I've watched manager Lou Piniella scream obscenities at an umpire and cry when talking about the death of a teammate more than 20 years earlier.

I saw Ken Griffey Jr. antagonize writers and photographers for the fun of it, then roll around the floor of a clubhouse wrestling with a Make-A-Wish child.

Treat yourself as a witness to the events you see and it serves you well in baseball. Not all players know who you are, even after a year or more of being on the beat.

Seattle shortstop Rey Quinones, in my second year covering him, once raged up to me about a story I hadn't written.

"Are you Bob Finnigan or that other asshole?" he shouted.

Another time I'd used an unnamed source for a story and, a month later, pitcher Ryan Rowland-Smith approached me quietly.

"Was I your source?" he asked quietly.

No, I told him. He seemed relieved.

With 750 major league players in the game on any given day – 30 teams, 25-man rosters – I have now covered about 32 years of baseball. Thousands of players, coaches, and managers.

And the number of them with whom I could not get along? Four.

I've almost come to blows with more editors than that.

Along the way, I've been lucky to cover five no-hitters – one of them a perfect game – World Series and All-Star games. I was there the night in Baltimore when Cal Ripken Jr. broke Lou Gehrig's record for consecutive games played.

Historic home runs, pennant races, career-ending injuries – all part of covering baseball.

And for all that, my memories are rarely of the games themselves. After so many years, there are too many to remember.

But those who work and live within baseball? Unforgettable characters. And the joy of writing about them has kept my interest since I had to carry that damnable suitcase into every ballpark.

Larry LaRue's new book "Major League Encounters" has captured 100 of the best stories of the baseball greats he's worked and traveled with over the last three decades. It's out later this month at, and you can get your copy: www.readerpublishing.com.

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