

# THE SPORTS WRITER

by Emily Krone, MSJ04

**BILL JAUSS** has been at the top of his game for years: He has chatted with champions. He has built a career in both print and broadcast. He has talked back to Bobby Knight. But after decades in the business, the legendary Chicago writer remains defined by his gentle modesty, his expert

storytelling ability and his insatiable enthusiasm for all things sports.

**T**he wind is blowing in off Lake Michigan and into the Wrigley Field press box. Suspended from the roof of the upper deck, shaded but not insulated, the Cubs press box is chilly despite the temperate June weather.

The sports writers curse the Chicago weather and their choice of summery clothing. They pull on their hoods, fetch hot coffee or retreat to the heated cafeteria to watch the game on closed circuit television. And they complain.

Well—not all of them. Not Bill Jauss (BSJ52). He has not mentioned the weather. Nor has he mentioned his bum knee—a product of a spill at the ballpark the other day. He is smiling.

“I bet you’ve worked in colder than this, Jaussey,” says a writer seated near Jauss.

A Chicago sports reporter for nearly 50 years, Jauss has, of course, worked in colder weather. He has written about nearly every sport—from field hockey to football—and worked in nearly every medium. He has canvassed beats, crafted columns and talked shop on radio and television. He has worked for two now-defunct afternoon papers, Chicago Today and the Chicago Daily News. Since



Photos courtesy of Bill Jauss

1974 he has written for the Chicago Tribune, which, he says, even his “creative” expense accounts can’t seem to sink.

In response to the other reporter’s comment, Jauss tells a story about a Bears game played in particularly arctic weather. To inure himself to the cold, a fellow newspaperman began imbibing. By the end of the game, the reporter was too drunk to file, and Jauss ended up writing the story on his behalf. The editor for the inebriated reporter wrote back, “To whoever wrote this: Thank you.”

Jauss converses in anecdotes punctuated with infectious laughter. “I love golf,” he begins, launching into a story about Arnold Palmer and a groundskeeper who received an unexpected communication from the links leg-end via walkie-talkie.

Palmer, he remembers, relished direct contact with fans, a sharp contrast to today’s professional athletes, buffered from the public by a layer of press agents and hangers-on.

“I love women’s sports,” Jauss continues, recalling the time he lectured his granddaughter’s third-grade class about sportsmanship. The little girls clapped, he recalls. “But one little guy said: ‘I don’t think that’s good sportsmanship. When you’ve got him down you should stomp on him.’”

Jauss guffaws, the difference between men’s and women’s sports encapsulated.

A grizzled, world-weary newspaperman Jauss isn’t. He begins many of his sentences with “I love.” Jauss loves Chicago fans, Billie Jean King, the prospect of a Cubs-Red Sox World Series and talking sports—any sport—at Chicago’s Billy Goat Tavern.

Jauss even loves the abrasive Bobby Knight, who famously chided sports reporters for making their livings writing, a skill Knight said most people master in the first grade.



A photo of college-age Jauss, who was a member of the Northwestern football team



Jauss speaks after being inducted into the U.S. Basketball Writers Hall of Fame.

"I said to him, 'Bobby, not everybody can do it. [Reporters] have to capture [an event] in a few number of words, and do it quickly and on deadline.'" Jauss grins. "He said to me, 'Oh yeah? Could you describe me in 50 words?' And I said, 'Five will do: honest man, great coach, jackass.'"

"Besides being an absolute encyclopedia of what's going on in the sports world over the last several decades, Bill's got as much enthusiasm whether he's covering the Cubs or a high school championship," says Kerry Luft, a Medill graduate who was formerly Tribune sports editor and is now the paper's foreign editor. "In an era when far too many reporters say, 'Been there, seen it, wrote it,' Bill Jauss is still searching for stories, even though he has been there, seen it, wrote it."

Jauss was a reserve guard for the Wildcat football team in 1950 and 1951 and played on the freshman team when Northwestern went to the Rose Bowl in 1948. After serving in the Army, he began his journalism career in 1954 at the Twin City News Record in Neenah-Menasha, Wis., where he got a taste of small town life. Neenah and Menasha (which Jauss says he misspelled in his first article for the paper) were the kinds of towns where the gas station attendant knew before you did that your tank was empty, he says.

There, a typical day covering sports included trips to the police station, for the official word on who had speared the largest perch; the bowling alleys, for the previous days scores; and the taverns, for, he says, updates to the cribbage league's standings.

Taverns, and the beverages they serve, figure prominently in Jauss's anecdotes.

In fact, a late night at the Billy Goat Tavern led to Jauss's gig on "The Sportswriters," a print journalists' roundtable that developed a cult following first on radio and then on cable television. At the bar Jauss and Daily Southtown sports columnist Bill Gleason were rehashing a hockey game they had covered, eventually attracting an audience.

"Billy Goat's has a 2 a.m. license," Jauss says. "Two comes up, and Gleason and I were still discussing this event, so we walk over to Andy's down the street half a block. And we see these guys tailing us. And Gleason or I ... turned and said, 'Where are you guys going?' They said, 'Wherever you're going. You guys are interesting. We want to hear how this thing finishes out.' And that was the germ of the idea."

"The Sportswriters" pioneered the sports-talk genre. The show began its run on WGN radio in 1975 and made its television debut in 1985. The set of the show was, in effect, the neighborhood pub relocated on a soundstage, where four beer-swilling, cigar-smoking, smack-talking scribes sat around a poker table and opined about sports.

Show producer Bill Albrecht says "The Sportswriters" managed to touch on everything one does not talk about in polite company: sex, politics and religion. Jauss, with a soft spot for the workingman and women's sports, was the show's resident bleeding-heart liberal.

Before today's game, Jauss chats with Cubs General Manager Jim Hendry. Hendry is speculating that a dearth of scholarships for collegiate baseball players is dampening young people's enthusiasm for the sport. Jauss

asks Hendry if skyrocketing season ticket prices might not also play a roll. Undaunted, Hendry continues to hold forth on the sorry state of the NCAA, until Jauss interrupts again, asking if major league baseball has a responsibility to foster the sport in inner city areas.

"He goes way beyond the stereotype of a sports reporter," says Medill Associate Professor George Harmon. "He'll say to a youngster that being an ex-athlete with a head full of statistics won't do it for you. You need to know crime, the justice system, economics and maybe even politics to cover all this stuff properly."

In that vein, Jauss says one of his favorite interviews with an athlete

did not touch on sports at all. The interview, with Montreal Canadiens' goalie Ken Dryden, took place at the Stanley Cup Finals during the Vietnam War. Dryden talked about the experiences of attending an American college during the Vietnam War, of being exempt from the draft when your friends and teammates were not.

"It was just so totally fascinating," Jauss says.



Jauss plays with his grandson Kenneth William at a family Christmas gathering in 2002.



Jauss, far right, poses with Bill Gleason, the late Ben Bentley and Rick Telander of "The Sportswriters" in an autographed publicity shot from the early 1990s.

Jauss says his 15 years as a Medill adjunct lecturer, from 1964 to 1979, were similarly enlightening. He recalls a time when his students came to lab and announced they were skipping class to barricade Sheridan Road. Jauss told them to participate in the protest, and then come back and write about it. "Which they did," he says. "I was glad I wasn't teaching mathematics."

Jauss modestly says that his students taught him more than he taught them; that he was "flabbergasted" to be asked to teach a class in which he earned a "D"; that Medill will profile anyone who works for 50 years and avoids major felony charges.

The truth is, Jauss has been consistently splendid throughout his career.

"I have found Jauss to be one of the most knowledgeable football writers I have met," said legendary Notre Dame football coach Ara Parseghian when Jauss joined the Chicago Today staff in 1970. "He understands the game, and more importantly, he can analyze a game of football almost from a coach's point of view."

Tribune sports editor Dan McGrath, who introduced Jauss into the Basketball Writers Hall of Fame in 2003, says, "I have seen him in action for many, many years, and it is so refreshing. The way sports are nowadays, it's somewhat easy to get cynical and jaded, and he is just the opposite. I wish I had a dozen more like him."

On this windy day at Wrigley, Jauss does not miss a pitch, each one recorded in his notebook as a strike, a ball, a foul tip, a hit or an out. Besides a brief debate over

the merits of a Corey Patterson bunt, Jauss's attention remains fixed on the field.

After the game, Jauss interviews the Oakland pitcher. Armed with his notepad of statistics, Jauss is able to quantify the pitcher's outing. Meticulous record keeping, Jauss has found, earns him more thoughtful responses to his questions.

Jauss's approach to the game recalls an earlier point he made about sports writing. Jauss talked about a letter that a Medill dean sent out announcing a new graduate-level sports writing class. The letter made clear that the course would transcend sports and avoid anything so "mundane" as how to cover a hockey game. Jauss replied with his own letter touting the importance of the "mundane," of knowing a sport inside and out before you can transcend it.

Jauss rarely waxes poetic—though he did pen an ode to the Loyola men's basketball team that won the 1963 NCAA Championship. He has built a hall-of-fame career on the mastery of motion offenses, on the intricacies of defensive line play, on the simple elegance of getting the story and getting it right. M