

They Run, They Sweat,

He Writes

BY BRYON CAHILL

There are three types of sportswriters in the world. The first is the writer who reports the facts. He is a hard-hitting journalist who gives us a play-by-play account of the game: Who scored the winning basket? How many yards did the fullback rush? Who had the big hit?

The second type of sportswriter is the one who adds color to the facts. She reports the ins and outs of a team's season and comments on the individual players, their injuries, the managerial struggles, and the winding road to victory and loss. She looks at the statistics as more than numbers and breaks the game down into human details.

Both of those styles usually overlap, but rarely do they stray into the land of personal opinion. That's where Bill Simmons, the "Sports Guy," comes in. He is the third type of sportswriter—the

one who relates to the average fan and tells it as *he* sees it. Following in the tradition of sports journalists such as Peter Gammons and Bob Ryan, Simmons looks at the world of sports with an opinionated approach, providing knowledgeable insights that are both poignant and humorous.

Since 2001, Bill Simmons, 35, has been writing his column, "Sports Guy's World," on ESPN.com's Page 2. ESPN gave him his own platform after discovering his personal Web site, where he was writing as the "Boston Sports Guy."

Simmons is no stranger to sportswriting. As an undergraduate at the College of the Holy Cross, he wrote a regular column, "Ramblings," for his college newspaper, *The Crusader*. After college, he boosted his love for the game with a master's degree in sports journalism from Boston University.

The Sports Guy's everyman style is relished by more than 100,000 fans, all of whom visit ESPN.com regularly to read his musings on everything from fantasy football, his favorite sports movies, and *The O.C.* to his favorite teams, the Boston Celtics and the Boston Red Sox. In October 2005, Simmons's fans also welcomed his first book, *Now I Can Die in Peace: How ESPN's Sports Guy Found Salvation, With a Little Help from Nomar, Pedro, Shawshank and the 2004 Red Sox.*

Writing recently interviewed the Sports Guy to find out how it feels to be one of America's top sportswriters.

Writing: Tell us a little about your job.

Simmons: Usually I write about 12 to 15 columns a month and always from the typical sports



In his column for ESPN, Bill Simmons mixes humor, facts, and sports drama.

Bill Simmons Is... the 'Sports Guy'

fan's perspective. I haven't held a 9-to-5 job in my entire life. In fact, I got into this business to avoid working a real job! Most days, I don't even shower until noon.

Writing: When did you know you wanted to be a sportswriter?

Simmons: When I was a kid, I loved some of the writers for *The Boston Globe*—Leigh Montville, Ray Fitzgerald, Bob Ryan, Peter Gammons—and always thought that would be the coolest thing in the world, to write about sports for a living and go to games and stuff. But it wasn't until I was in college and I started writing my own sports column that I decided, "Hey, maybe I could do this for a living." It seemed much more interesting than law school.

Writing: How did you get into sportswriting?

Simmons: I had been writing my whole life—short stories, longer stories, everything you can imagine. I was a pretty bad student for the most part; writing had always been my one true talent. I threw myself into it, read as many books and writers as I could, and really tried to figure out the best way to write a column. I was lucky enough to get a column in my college newspaper at Holy Cross when I was a freshman, and it became popular pretty much right away. That was that.

Writing: Who were your main influences?

Simmons: A ton of people—William Goldman, Roger Angell, David Halberstam, the *Globe* guys, Mike Lupica, Frank Deford, Mitch Albom, George Plimpton, even

Raymond Carver. I think it's important for fledgling writers to read as many different people as possible. Figure out what you like and why you like them, and eventually you'll stumble into a style of your own.

Writing: Do you have any regular writing habits?

Simmons: My habits are pretty goofy. I have four different parts of my house where I write, and I always bounce around depending on where the "creative energy" is. I spend a ton of time procrastinating and thinking about what to write, instead of actually writing it.

The Sports Guy Shells Out Writing Advice:

You can't learn how to write unless you're constantly reading, just [as] you can't learn how to play music unless you listen to hundreds of different albums.

For whatever reason, many aspiring sportswriters either don't understand this, or they dismiss it altogether. In fact, I've had conversations with younger people who have approached me and asked me for advice. When I ask them what their favorite sports books are, they give me the Peyton Manning Face. I'm always astonished by this.

How can you aspire to become a sportswriter without reading as many different styles and perspectives as you can?

If you want to write about sports someday, start reading, keep reading, and never stop reading. That doesn't guarantee you'll become a sportswriter, but it's an excellent start.

I'm usually most **prolific** in the morning or late at night, when I'm a little tired, because I think you're more likely to take chances or think of something crazy if you're not totally awake.

Writing: What is the best part of your job?

Simmons: Being able to write about whatever I want, then knowing that hundreds of thousands of people will read it. What's better than that? And did I mention that I don't shower until noon most days?

Writing: You've been known to write about popular movies that have a "guy" appeal, such as *The Bad News Bears* and *Anchorman*. What puts you in the mood to write about something other than sports?
Simmons: I like writing about the stuff that my friends and I talk about—for eight years, that's been the goal. And what we usually talk about is sports, TV, movies, and girls. So I guess it's natural that those four things are going to overlap in my column. My feeling is that you can write about *anything*, as long as you're interesting and creative about it.

Writing: How did you discover your writing voice?

Simmons: I wrote in relative anonymity for three solid years on my old Web site. There, I had the chance to experiment with different styles and see what worked. Eventually, I found my voice, and by the time I arrived at ESPN, I had all my pitches working. Most people don't get that chance, or they get discouraged by negative feedback. I was pretty lucky.

Color Commentary

This column, by Bill Simmons, appeared on ESPN.com the day after the Boston Red Sox lost Game 7 of the 2003 American League Championship Series to the New York Yankees. According to Simmons, this is "the best thing [he] ever wrote."

Alliteration makes *Pantheon* stand out even more and evokes images of Greek gods.

Great way to illustrate that Pedro is exhausted and has absolutely nothing left in the tank. Again, conjures images of Greek gods.

Fiery adjectives spice up Simmons' writing.

Parallel construction (it wasn't just this, it was also this) drives the point home. (Not to mention another *P* alliteration!)

Baseball players and managers are human beings too. Even the Greek gods were fallible.

PARADISE LOST, AGAIN

October 17, 2003

So it happened again. ... If the Red Sox were a girl, you would probably break up with them. You would call them on the phone, calmly explain that you can't take it anymore, let them down as gently as possible and move on with your life. But sports aren't like that. You're stuck with your teams from childhood. ... You can't get out. ...

I will spend the rest of my life wondering why [Red Sox manager] Grady [Little] allowed [starting pitcher] Pedro [Martinez] to **wilt to death** in the eighth inning. This isn't **Pantheon Pedro** anymore; honestly, it's been over two years since his last Mozart routine on the mound. Even if his ceiling is higher than just about anyone else's ceiling, asking him to throw 125-plus pitches over three-plus hours in Yankee Stadium—in the most nerve-wracking setting imaginable—was indefensible at best and catastrophically moronic at worst. ...

Nobody in his right mind would have allowed Pedro—**struggling heroically with a three-run lead, 115 pitches on the odometer, running on the fumes of his fumes**—to pitch to [Yankee outfielder Hideki] Matsui. Not with **flame-throwing lefty** Alan Embree waiting in the bullpen. The ensuing disaster (Matsui's ground-rule double, followed by [catcher Jorge] Posada's bloop single to tie the game) **wasn't just predictable, it was downright sickening. ... Boone's homer in the 11th wasn't just inevitable, it was practically preordained. ...**

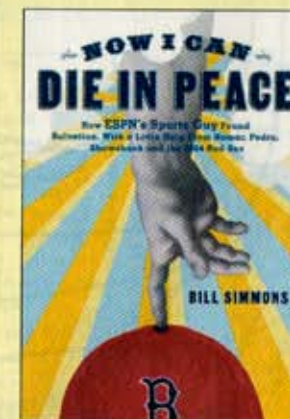
The **demise** of the 2003 Red Sox was a little more simple: They fell short because of their overmatched manager, to the surprise of absolutely no one who followed the team on a regular basis. **I'm sure he's a nice man and everyone likes him**, but when it comes right down to it, you don't want Grady Little managing your team in the "Biggest Non-World Series Game Of All-Time." ... This man would hit on 19 at a blackjack table because he "had a feeling." That's all you need to know.

Reference to *Paradise Lost*, John Milton's classic novel about Lucifer's fall from heaven

The writer begins on a humorous note, by comparing his baseball frustrations to another real-life situation.

Morbid imagery and metaphor set the scene. Pedro is compared to a dying flower.

Here, the writer compares Pedro's pitching history to a work of art by one of the most famous classical composers of all time.



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