



Sports journalist and author Ronald Reng.

# Sports Correspondent, Unsuccessful Novelist, Accidental German Sports Literary Journalist: The Strange Arc of Ronald Reng

Peter Auf der Heyde  
Solent University, United Kingdom

**Abstract:** Since the commercialization of professional sports, German sports have changed. The creative aspect of much of the writing has given way to a more to-the-point, factual style. There are exceptions, of course, and Ronald Reng is one. Formerly a sports correspondent for German-speaking newspapers in England and Spain, Reng aspired to be a fiction writer and wrote several novels that achieved little commercial success. By chance (after being asked by a goalkeeper to write his story), Reng tried his hand at what he calls narrative sports writing. Unlike his novels, the nonfiction book *Der Traumbüter: Die unglaubliche Geschichte eines Torwarts* (published in English as *Keeper of Dreams: One Man's Controversial Story of Life in the English Premiership*) was critically acclaimed and sold well. Reng has continued to write nonfiction books using the narrative style he adopted for his first novel. This study places Reng's writing in the context of sports literary journalism, looking first at the history of German sports journalism before briefly outlining the history of sports literary journalism. The inquiry concludes by examining Reng's writing in the context of Tom Wolfe's framework for the New Journalism. Much of the information is derived from primary research in the form of interviews with Reng, as well as other authors, including accomplished sportswriter and New Journalism pioneer Gay Talese.

**Keywords:** literary journalism – Ronald Reng – sports journalism – biographies – German football

In 1954, Germany faced Hungary in the football World Cup final in Berne, Switzerland. Inspired by a group of gifted players such as Ferenc Puskás, Sándor Kocsis, and Nándor Hidegkuti, the Magical Magyars took secured a 2–0 lead, but the German side struck back with ruthless efficiency and won, 3–2.<sup>2</sup> Twenty years later, Germany again faced a team that encompassed the concept of total football<sup>3</sup>—just as Hungary had in Switzerland—in the World Cup final. The Netherlands, inspired by the creative genius of Johan Cruyff, opened the scoring, but Germany won the match.<sup>4</sup> In 1990, Germany again used discipline to win its third World Cup title. Thomas Winkler has described historical German national teams as a “classic example of efficiency,”<sup>5</sup> while Alex Capham said, “In a culture that models itself on punctuality and efficiency, German football has been packed with teams that are organised, strong and physically fit.”<sup>6</sup>

When Germany won its fourth World Cup title in Brazil in 2016, it played a very different game. Winkler notes that around the turn of the millennium, German football “[had] undergone an astonishing change of style.” By 2016, they were “playing ‘beautiful’ football”:

The Germans, formerly notorious and feared as ruthless fighters and cool tacticians, suddenly began playing exciting, technically refined, high-speed football. Before, their game was shaped by rock-hard defenders; today by creative football addicts. If before it was about stopping as many goals as possible, today it is mainly about scoring some.<sup>8</sup>

This change had manifested itself four years earlier at the World Cup in South Africa, when Germany “[played] the most spectacular football” and the “team no longer stumbled to cynical victories, but lost with intoxicating beauty.”<sup>9</sup>

Similar to its footballing counterparts, much of German post–World War II sports journalism—and football journalism in particular—can be described as “structured, efficient, and to the point.”<sup>10</sup> But just as German football has changed, the country’s sports journalism has also evolved. Asked why there was so little good literary sports reporting in Germany, an unnamed literary critic answered: “Because sport[s] is one dimensional.”<sup>11</sup> That might have been true years ago—at least in in general sports reporting—but more recent work has been more creative.

This essay’s examination of Ronald Reng’s work is prefaced by a history of German sports journalism<sup>12</sup> before placing his work into the context of sports literary journalism.<sup>13</sup> Reng’s work is analyzed using a cultural studies approach and formalism. The study of Reng’s longform sports narratives of the last twenty years will show that he should be categorized as what he truly is—a New Journalist in the classic mold of Gay Talese and George Plimpton.

As such, Reng's work is exemplary of this strand, albeit one that has comparatively few fellow writers in Germany.<sup>14</sup>

Much of the study derives from primary research in the form of personal interviews conducted with Reng, Gay Talese, and German author Christoph Biermann, as well as email correspondence with Lee Gutkind.

### From Gymnastics to Entertainment

If, as it is said, "sports are a microcosm of society,"<sup>15</sup> it is not far-fetched to expect the history of sports journalism to follow a similar path to that of sports in general. The history of sports journalism in Germany dates to the middle of the nineteenth century, when in 1842, the first sports paper, *Allgemeine Turn Zeitung* (General gymnastics newspaper), was published.<sup>16</sup> Like other sports publications begun in the years that followed, the *Allgemeine Turn Zeitung* was sport-specific, covering only gymnastics. At the time, German society was transitioning from traditional to modern, and as the working class had more free time, sports and sporting activities began to move from a feudal context to a mass phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> By 1880, virtually all sports had their own publications.<sup>18</sup>

As the nineteenth century ended, a further shift occurred. Sports moved from exclusively mass based, to mass based and competition driven.<sup>19</sup> It was at this juncture that journalism and sports intersected. Both targeted the same group: the masses. Blöbaum identifies several reasons why sports were particularly appealing to journalism. The separation of popular sports and competitive sports played into the hands of the news media, which at the time consisted almost entirely of the written press. Competitive sports relied on results and could easily be publicized in newspapers. Many sports were personality- and event-driven and often took place on a single day. This meant sports were much easier to report on than subjects, such as science and education, which were based on processes rather than events.<sup>20</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that newspapers were weary of being left behind. On May 23, 1886, the German newspaper *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* (Munich newest news) launched a sports section called *Sportzeitung* (Sports newspaper). This was not the first time that sports had appeared in German newspapers, but it was the first that they had been published in their own, stand-alone section.<sup>21</sup> A year earlier, the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* (Berlin stock exchange courier) became the first newspaper to employ a sports journalist, who reported solely on horse racing.<sup>22</sup> Growing interest in sports—and sports stories—led to sports journalism growing in importance and, in 1895, the first general sports magazine, *Sport im Bild* (Sport in pictures), was published.<sup>23</sup>

Blöbaum, who identifies a Sporting System and a Journalistic System, writes that as sports became more competitive, the two systems discovered a symbiosis, which both could use to their advantage. As interest in sports grew, it became more worthwhile to inform the public of sporting events. This function was primarily fulfilled by newspapers, resulting in more people becoming invested in sports. This led to a separation of the sports audience. On the one hand were those who watched sporting events live in the halls and stadiums and, on the other, those who were interested in sports but experienced them from a distance through newspapers. In other words, the Journalistic System opened doors for a wide audience within the Sporting System.<sup>24</sup>

After World War I, the kinds of sports being reported on shifted. Privileged sports, such as sailing, gave way to more mass-based sports like boxing, football, and cycling. Sports reporting was viewed as a good—and necessary—deflection from the effects of the war. As a result, the way in which sports were reported also shifted, from information-based reporting to entertaining the reader. During this time, the need for such “deflective entertainment”<sup>25</sup> also led to a rapid rise in the number of sports publications. Whereas in 1920 there were 159 sports publications, by 1933 there were more than 400. Sports also started being broadcast on radio.<sup>26</sup> Then, beginning in 1933, sports took on a more sinister role. The National Socialist government not only curtailed press freedom, but also used sports as a propaganda tool. By 1935 the number of sports publications had gone down to 239.<sup>27</sup> In 1936, the Olympics in Berlin took this misuse of sports to its lowest point. However, another upsurge in readership followed the end of World War II, for reasons comparable to those that caused the upswing following World War I. Newspapers achieved record sales on Mondays as readers were eager to relive sporting events from the weekend. And the arrival of German television, in 1952, saw sports gain a foothold in an entirely new medium.<sup>28</sup>

By 1978, sports had become an integral part of newspapers. No medium aimed at a general consumption could afford to go without coverage for fear of losing reader-, listener-, or viewership and thereby lose revenue. Since then, professional sports are, practically, no longer separable from business interests, and are part of an interdependence between culture and economics. As sports have become increasingly commercialized, they have merged with media and business to form an inseparable entity.<sup>29</sup> This in turn has resulted in changes to sports journalism throughout the world, including Germany. With the ever-growing cultural importance of football, and sports becoming a communication marketing tool, of which the media are an integral part, there has been a shift toward football journalism, rather than sports journalism.<sup>30</sup> There has also been a change in the way in which most reporting takes

place. Prior to the commercialization and the growing involvement of big business in sports, there were attempts at creative writing.<sup>31</sup> This has widely given way to uncritical and unoriginal reporting that delivers sports as staged, entertainment mega-events to fans.<sup>32</sup> There are, of course, exceptions, one of which will be discussed later.

### Not Only the Toy Department

For many years, sports journalism was not considered a serious genre of news media, leading to the cliché that sports is the toy department of the news media.<sup>33</sup> However, sports journalism has attracted some of the finest writers, including literary journalists.<sup>34</sup> This crossover between literary journalism and sports journalism has been widespread in the United States. It is much less prevalent in Germany and, as such, German sports literary journalism is an aspect that has—at best—been under-researched. It is thus helpful to look toward the United States to gain an understanding of sports literary journalism.

Gay Talese, whom Tom Wolfe once described as “the founder of the New Journalism,”<sup>35</sup> started his career in journalism as a sports reporter for his high school newspaper. What attracted Talese was that sports could be used as a metaphor for life. “Athletes go through the emotions that people feel throughout their lives. They have moments of despair and failure, and they have moments of success. By looking at sport[s], you can understand human nature in the raw.”<sup>36</sup>

Literary journalism historian John Hartsock has identified other writers, such as Ring Lardner, as pioneers of literary sports journalism.<sup>37</sup> Long before Talese, Lardner “wrote social reportage, sketches of baseball personalities, as well as short stories, embodying how the genre of literary journalism ‘found an outlet among newspaper columnists who had liberties that conventional hard news reporters often did not.’”<sup>38</sup> Not being bound by the news cycle, free to choose their own style, some early sports writers used techniques employed more frequently in fiction than journalism. Ted Geltner and Ted Spiker describe it as a “no-consequence, just-for-entertainment realm of sports coverage [that] allowed creativity to flourish to an immense degree and produced some of the finest craftsmen in the grand tradition of American literary journalism.”<sup>39</sup>

Arnold Hano followed Lardner. Hano’s writing career began in earnest when he attended the first game of the 1954 World Baseball Series between the Cleveland Indians and the New York Giants, hosted by the Giants at the Polo Grounds in the Bronx. Inspired by the action of the game—specifically Giants center fielder Willie Mays’s backhanded catch in the eighth inning,

which is regarded as one of the greatest plays in baseball history<sup>40</sup>—Hano decided to write a magazine piece that ballooned to 10,000 words. As the *New Yorker* seemed his only viable option for publishing such a piece, he took it there. The editors read it and said “they liked it,” but said “it wasn’t right.”<sup>41</sup>

Hano decided to expand the piece into a book, *A Day in the Bleachers*, which Geltner and Spiker have described as, “for its time, a sparkling work of technical innovation.”<sup>42</sup> Hano included characters from both “the stands and on the field.” [He] “built tension related to the action of the game . . . interlaced with vignettes that created personal connections to the players involved.” And he expanded his story to include:

. . . details that at first glance would have seemed far too incidental for mention in immediate news coverage of the game. ‘The Catch’ became a chapter unto itself, built entirely around Mays’s pursuit of [Cleveland outfielder] Wertz’s towering shot and the subsequent throw. . . . Today, it’s easy to recognize *A Day in the Bleachers* for what it is: longform literary journalism . . .<sup>43</sup>

The year Hano witnessed Willie Mays’s catch, *Sports Illustrated* launched.<sup>44</sup> “From the beginning,” Geltner and Spiker write, “the project had a literary bent. In its first three years, the magazine ran pieces by Ernest Hemingway on hunting, John Steinbeck on fishing, Robert Frost on the Major League Baseball All-Star Game, and William Faulkner on the Kentucky Derby.”<sup>45</sup> The magazine also introduced a special feature called “the bonus piece,” which “showcase[d] . . . its most literate and accomplished writing.”<sup>46</sup> The bonus piece gave voice to Paul Gallico and George Plimpton, writers who engaged in experiential or participatory journalism to get their stories. For instance, world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey knocked Gallico out,<sup>47</sup> and Bobby Jones played golf with him. Plimpton briefly played with National Football League teams, the Detroit Lions and the Baltimore Colts—now the Indianapolis Colts—and tried his luck goaltending for the National Hockey League team, the Boston Bruins.<sup>48</sup>

Talese was (and is) not the only New Journalist “drawn to sports because of the drama that unfolded and the scenes that could be re-created from both the competition and the human side of sports.”<sup>49</sup> These writers introduced a new style of sports writing.

Whereas much of sportswriting revolved around the games, players, and scores, the New Journalists opened up the playing field for the audience—as the writers took readers to places they never had access to before: into people’s homes and conversations, behind previously closed doors, and inside the minds of people whom readers cared about. This level of detailed and point-of-view reporting and writing would be the springboard for today’s longform narrative pieces.<sup>50</sup>

David Dowling identifies Hunter S. Thompson as another New Journalist who was in his element writing about sports.<sup>51</sup> Thompson's "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," reflects Thompson's Gonzo writing—his offshoot from the New Journalism—that marks his style.<sup>52</sup> Dowling describes Thompson's "Kentucky Derby" as literary sports writing (in contrast to literary sports journalism) and as "a wildly embellished and fabricated work of journalism deeply engrained in the tall tale tradition."<sup>53</sup> Comparing Thompson and the Tall Tale Tradition, Caron writes, rather provocatively,

Hunter S. Thompson is a liar. I don't mean he is the "lumbering and slovenly" kind of liar that Mark Twain deplored in his essay "On the Decay of the Art of Lying." Far from it. I mean Thompson is a spit-polished, copper-bottomed, double boiler yarnspinner, capable of steaming against the strongest current of truth imaginable and swelling the heart of Mark Twain with envy and admiration. For both writers, facts are just so much cord-wood fuel for the imagination.<sup>54</sup>

Talese might be included with Hunter Thompson—as well as David Foster Wallace, who wrote extensively about tennis—as a group of writers whom King describes as "occasional sportswriters,"<sup>55</sup> who bring an outsider's view to the world of sports journalism.

### The Accidental Literary Journalist

Ronald Reng became a literary journalist by accident. Like Talese, who often chooses obscure subjects for his books, Reng has written about individuals who do not fit typical or expected criteria of being book worthy. His first book, *Der Traumbhüter: Die unglaubliche Geschichte eines Torwarts*, was published in 2002 in German and, two years later, in English, as *Keeper of Dreams: One Man's Controversial Story of Life in the English Premiership*.<sup>56</sup> The book tells the story of goalkeeper Lars Leese, who, despite never playing in Germany at the highest level, spent two seasons as a professional in the highest league in England, only to disappear back into German football oblivion.

Leese himself had engaged Reng to write a book about his life. It was an idea the goalkeeper's friends had been encouraging, but Leese had been uncertain about doing—even though he and Reng had known each other since Reng's time reporting from England. When asked, Reng accepted the invitation. It would be Reng's first foray into what he calls a narrative nonfiction book.

The book was widely praised, and the English edition won the Best Biography category in the 2004 British Sports Book Awards.<sup>57</sup> Nonetheless, Reng had little interest in pursuing more longform sports writing. Instead, he concentrated on sports journalism.



I thoroughly enjoyed writing for daily papers. The adrenaline. Working to deadlines. The feeling that something very important was taking place and I was directly involved. This directness and the presence of journalism fascinated me. And at the same time, I tried to become the next J. M. Coetzee and wrote novels. But book readers and book buyers thought otherwise, and the novels were not bought. I had no interest in doing more creative sports writing. Until I was practically forced to do so in 2009.<sup>58</sup>

That year, 2009, the German international goalkeeper Robert Enke, who suffered from depression for much of his life, committed suicide. Enke's widow and two of his best friends asked Reng to write a book about him. Reng, who knew the goalkeeper from Barcelona, where both had lived for a while, agreed. *Robert Enke: Ein allzu kurzes Leben* was published in 2010. Two years later, in 2012, the book was published in English translation. *A Life Too Short: The Tragedy of Robert Enke* marked Reng's return to longform sports writing after a decade away.

Reng has picked up the pace since then. He next wrote *Spieltage: Die andere Geschichte der Bundesliga* (2013), which was translated and published in English two years later, in 2015, as *Matchdays: The Hidden Story of the Bundesliga*.<sup>59</sup> Of the book, Reng said he wanted both to tell the story of the history of the German professional football league, Bundesliga, and the book to be published in 2013, when the Bundesliga went into its fiftieth season. He chose Heinz Höher, who worked as a player, coach, and manager in the Bundesliga, for the *Matchdays* narrative.<sup>60</sup> *Mroskos Talente: Das erstaunliche Leben eines Bundesliga-Scouts* (Mrosko's talents: The incredible life of a Bundesliga scout), followed in 2016<sup>61</sup>; *Warum wir laufen* (Why we run), in 2018,<sup>62</sup> and *Miro: Die Biografie* (Miro: the biography), in 2019.<sup>63</sup> *Miro* is a biography of former German international football player Miroslav Klose, who holds the record for the most goals scored in the World Cup finals. Reng's latest book was published in 2021. For *Der große Traum: Drei Jungs wollen in die Bundesliga* (The big dream: three boys want to go to the Bundesliga) he followed three teenagers for nine years as they embark on their dream journey to become professional footballers. He is currently working on a book around the 1974 World Cup.

Like Talese, Reng chooses as his subjects those whose stories would otherwise not be told. Talese wrote about the likes of dentist Dr. Walter H. Jacobs, who, when he "sees a fighter get banged on the mouth, hit in the teeth or butted on the gums, immediately begins to worry—not about the fighter, but about the fighter's mouthpiece,"<sup>64</sup> or Tito Infanti, "who from a distance looks no larger than a fifth of Scotch, [but] is one of the nation's fastest, smartest and richest midget wrestlers."<sup>65</sup> However, Talese also wrote about the stars of the games, particularly of boxing. And, like Tom Wolfe, one of whose first sto-

ries for *Esquire* was about Cassius Clay,<sup>66</sup> Talese wrote several pieces about the heavyweight world champion, including a piece for *Esquire* when he accompanied the boxer post-retirement on a trip to Havana to meet Fidel Castro.<sup>67</sup>

Despite writing about stars, who included Muhammad Ali, Joe DiMaggio, or Floyd Patterson, it was the stories like the ones about the dentist and the wrestler that Talese considers his most important:

They were the most gratifying. Because if it were not for me, those people would not be known in a way that they became remembered. They become part of an anthology. They get an obituary because they are known a little bit. Were it not for my interviews with them, they would not maybe get as much of an obituary, or an obituary at all. Of course, if they were prize fighters, they would have an obituary. They're professional, they have a ranking, they have a place in the history of the game. But those unknown people, some of them I wrote about, and they became known because that story was reprinted again and again and again. They became part of a literary category. Granted, based on journalism, but also supported by storytelling technique, which is an element of fiction.<sup>68</sup>

Many of the subjects Reng chooses for his books are—like Talese's dentist and wrestler—the underdogs of the sporting world. They are people few would have heard about, had it not been for his writing. The goalkeeper Leese, for instance, was not exactly a household name. He played nine first-division football matches in his entire career, which spanned fourteen years. His other 101 league games were played in the German lower leagues. Reng's book *Spieltage: Die andere Geschichte der Bundesliga (Matchdays: The Hidden Story of the Bundesliga)* tells the story of Heinz Höher, who had an equally indistinguishable—and unsuccessful—but lengthy career as a player and manager in German football, winning nothing as a player or coach.<sup>69</sup> In *Mroskos Talente: Das erstaunliche Leben eines Bundesliga-Scouts* (Mrosko's talents: the incredible life of a Bundesliga scout), Reng tells the story of Lars Mrosko, a football scout who, were it not for Reng's book, likely would have remained virtually unknown.<sup>70</sup>

For Reng, the importance of telling stories like the ones about Leese, Höher, and Mrosko is that he uses them to tell a larger story:

I am fascinated by people more than things. That's why I always want to write about people. This is essential for me. There are really great books, especially in science. There are great nonfiction books that really come to grips with the subject. For instance, "How do I arrange shelves?" or something like that. That's not me. People are the most interesting thing for me. I write books when I meet a person and I have the feeling that, on the one hand, [that person has] an extremely interesting individual story, but you

can also perhaps understand the bigger picture through [the] individual story. That would be, for example, if a historian says, “I want to write about the Second World War,” but then [looks] for a soldier or a general or a politician and ostensibly tells [that person’s] story because it [is] as exciting [as] how the soldier, general, or politician fought against Hitler. Maybe he was just a little cog in the wheel, but the historian can tell the big picture through the individual story. That, for me, is the perfect book.<sup>71</sup>

It is a perspective that Reng addresses directly in *Matchdays: The Hidden Story of the Bundesliga*, when he writes: “Would we not learn so much more about the Bundesliga by telling the story of a single man, rather than yet again summoning up all the characters, goals and tables?”<sup>72</sup>

### Setting Scenes and Giving Details

Wolfe identified several techniques that literary journalists use in their work, with the primary one being writing scenes.

The basic one was scene-by-scene construction, telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative. Hence the sometimes extraordinary feats of reporting that the new journalists undertook: so that they could actually witness the scenes in other people’s lives as they took place . . .<sup>73</sup>

Despite his preference for chronological narration, Reng often makes use of this device in his books.<sup>74</sup> In *A Life Too Short: The Tragedy of Robert Enke*, he starts the book with a conversation between Enke and his wife shortly before her birthday in 2009. Reng describes how Teresa Enke asks her husband for a poem for her birthday and how he then struggles to find the right words—at first.

The words he puts down on the paper look bent and rough—he hardly ever uses his valuable goalkeeper’s fingers to write. But in his head the words start forming rhymes more and more quickly, and he’s filled with joy—not like the flood of happiness he experiences when he steers a difficult shot over the bar, quite gentle, but so intense that Robert has to keep on writing, in the office, in the hotel the evening before a Bundesliga match, on scraps of note-paper, on the backs of bills. Sometimes, if he has no paper to hand, he taps his ideas into his mobile phone. By the time the big day, 18 February 2009, arrives he has written 104 lines.<sup>75</sup>

Reng then goes forward in time to Enke’s suicide, before making another leap to Teresa’s first birthday since Enke’s death, all while describing the scene. In order to create the scene, Reng does meticulous research as he attempts to bring the scene to life by reconstructing the details. In so doing, he is recreating history.<sup>76</sup> Despite not having a set formula for his books, he generally prefers following a chronological order.

I use that because I find it is the easiest for sports book readers, and it is the best way to follow the development of the narration. For example, in England, it got out of hand with many authors wanting to be super-creative in their writing, and they then gave themselves an insane or an artificially complicated structure. I don't think it's necessary. Coetzee is again the best example. He stands out with his elegance and simplicity. I had the impression that in some cases, in England, the desire to not follow chronological narration is exaggerated.<sup>77</sup>

Another device employed in literary journalism is dialogue<sup>78</sup> and, again, it is one Reng makes use of. Whenever he can, he attempts to introduce dialogue he was party to. He goes to great lengths getting interviews. An example of this technique can be found in Reng's book about the last fifty years of the Bundesliga (*Matchdays: The Hidden Story of the Bundesliga*). In the 1970s, a match-fixing scandal wracked German football, and German international goalkeeper Manfred Manglitz was one of the players implicated. After being found guilty of match fixing, Manglitz was banned for life from the sport. He moved to Spain and gave few interviews, trying to put the scandal behind him. Reng, however, used a lengthy dialogue with Manglitz, based on an interview with him in Spain.

The approach Reng uses to introduce his interviews is interesting. Manglitz first appears on page twenty-three of *Matchdays*, as a teammate. Ten pages later, Reng tells the reader Manglitz's thoughts. It is only on page 137 that it becomes apparent Reng interviewed him in Spain.

Manfred Manglitz, who, after all, could cope with anything, accepted these insults stoically. It's only 40 years later, in Villajoyosa Bay that he says: "Did it hurt? What do you think?"

In the 1970s, when Manfred Manglitz was on holiday at the Costa Blanca and saw the mighty blue light that flowed straight from the heavens into the sea, he knew: this was where he wanted to live.

There are only a couple of tennis courts and a fine, sandy beach between his home and the sea. By now, he's spent almost half his life in Villajoyosa.<sup>79</sup>

However, it is not always possible to get interviews. In *A Life Too Short: The Tragedy of Robert Enke*, Reng uses three main sources to reconstruct some of the dialogue throughout the book. First, he had access to Enke's diaries, in which Enke wrote about his struggles with depression. Second, Reng uses his own conversations, including, for instance, one with Enke on the day he committed suicide. Third, Reng uses Enke's conversations with friends and family after being told of this dialogue. Because Reng was doing the book with Enke's widow's full support, friends and acquaintances of the goalkeeper were eager to talk to him.<sup>80</sup>

The third device Wolfe identifies is the “so-called ‘third-person point of view,’ ” which Wolfe describes as

. . . the technique of presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character’s mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it. . . . Yet how could a journalist, writing nonfiction, accurately penetrate the thoughts of another person?

The answer proved to be marvelously simple: interview him about his thoughts and emotions, along with everything else. This was what Gay Talese did in order to write *Honor Thy Father*.<sup>81</sup>

In *Miro*, his biography about Miroslav Klose, Reng begins the book by telling the reader Klose’s thoughts:

If there is a country road in addition to the trees, then he can look at cars. From up there, he accurately recognizes the passing models. A Golf 3, the A-Class from Mercedes, a black BMW M3. He would like to have a car like that. He talks about cars to his work colleagues a lot. But he doesn’t talk to anyone about the moments when he looks out over the world from the roof ridge. You don’t talk about such things. He feels it. Silently. For himself.<sup>82</sup>

Reng feels confident sharing Klose’s feelings with the reader because he has invested so much time into understanding Klose.<sup>83</sup>

Reng is also not opposed to bringing himself into the story, despite feeling uncomfortable about it:

I don’t have a problem bringing myself in. This journalistic reflex of not becoming part of the story is automatically turned off when I write books. This is where the creative reflex comes in. I try to get in as little as possible—unlike Norman Mailer, for instance. He wrote [in *The Fight*] more about himself than about Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali. And I strictly reject that. The author has to be an observer. He can only appear if it is really relevant to the story. In the case of Robert Enke, we were so close that I had certain situations with him or that he sent me via text message at the time. I had to get involved in those situations. But I try to make myself as small as possible and as big as necessary.<sup>84</sup>

Another technique Wolfe associates with New Journalism is what he calls “*status life*”:

[This] has always been the least understood. This is the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene.<sup>85</sup>

To be able to do this, Reng engages in research—serious research:

For me, research is probably, despite all creativity, despite all creative writing, the most important part of my work. I try to find an incredible amount of details. For the book about Heinz Höher [*Matchdays: The Hidden Story of the Bundesliga*], for example, I spent weeks in the archives in Bochum, where he was a coach. I had to write out everything by hand as there were no mobile photos at the time, and I was not allowed to make copies. I recorded at least 150 hours of tape with him, all of which I listened to. I am not sure how many, but I met [with] at least fifty other people and then, of course, there is all the time invested in thinking about the project. For instance, I thought perhaps it is also important for me to meet the VfL Bochum [the football club Höher coached] secretary, even if many journalists would think, well, she's not a famous personality. But for me, it's about depicting everyday life at different times in the books. So that is the deepest work, the research. The rest is writing."<sup>86</sup>

An example of using these intimate details is in *Matchdays*, where Reng writes: "In the living room of Höher's family home, 26 Kaulbachstraße, the grey plastic telephone rings. You can get brightly coloured telephones these days, but the post office wants one mark ten extra per month for them."<sup>87</sup> The scene he is describing is from early 1976, yet he shares with the reader the color of the telephone. During his research Reng read a newspaper article from the late 1970s that the German Federal Post Office was offering orange telephones. From that he deduced that the phone could only have been grey or white. Then he asked Höher what color their phone had been. Reng used the information he received in his book.

There are also some inherent dangers in pursuing such details. Enke's widow, Teresa, told him of a time when her husband was playing in Lisbon and did not want to leave the hotel room, as he was anxious. To recreate the scene, Reng visited the Lisbon hotel room where the Enkes had stayed. He then used his observations of objects, such as the grey armchair in the room, to describe the scene. Yet there was no way to know for certain whether the decor had been changed. Nine years had passed since the incident.<sup>88</sup>

### A Pioneering Legacy

Despite the success of his books, selling between 30,000 and 300,000 copies and being translated into several languages, Reng does not see himself as a pioneer of a wave of German sports literary journalists. Far from it, he sees no wave.<sup>89</sup> Instead, if there is a tendency among German sports journalists—football journalists, particularly—it is towards technical writing. In part, it is being forced on journalists because football clubs now tend to isolate their players from the many reporters who clamor for human inter-

est stories. But it is also true that the early twenty-first-century emphasis is on data and analysis. Journalists need to demonstrate expertise and depth, explaining, for instance, why the German professional football club Bayern Munich would have suddenly switched to a three-man defense in the second half of a game and what space they would then have available. This is a trend Reng is not interested in following.<sup>90</sup>

West German and then German football had by the end of the twentieth century earned a reputation for its ruthless—some would say mechanical<sup>91</sup>—flair for playing the game. The journalism of the time followed in this wake, sticking to a rote commentary of the game, in forms akin to a rehearsed training ground set-piece. As the West German style of play took on more flair and inventiveness, Reng broke rank and began to write with imagination, bringing the full psyche of the player to bear, while expanding the script beyond the field of play and into the social relations and personal lives that lay beyond it. While not overwhelming the strict, technical, and pedestrian writing style, Reng “red-carded” this way of writing and, having thus gone against the norms of traditional sports writing, began experimenting with new formations that inspired a generation. There was push-back: more agents shadowed their star players to protect them from journalists’ prying questions; and changerooms—once-reliable locations in which to conduct interviews—have become less accessible.

But, as Reng’s work shows, the public has had an appetite for more than just the headlines of big transfers and the technical aspects of the game. Reng’s pioneering legacy has continued. Future studies may evidence the extent to which his legacy lives on.

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*Peter Auf der Heyde teaches sports journalism at Solent University, United Kingdom, and is senior research associate at the Centre for Sociological Research and Practice at the University of Johannesburg. He introduced a literary journalism module for journalism and sports journalism students at Solent and is currently writing a book on judicial political executions during Apartheid in South Africa. A previous book, *Has Anybody Got a Whistle*, chronicles his travels throughout Africa in pursuit of football stories. His research areas include literary journalism, the criminal justice system, and the sociology of sports.*



### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this text, the international term *football* is used, rather than the U.S. term *soccer*.

<sup>2</sup> Hungary arrived at the 1954 World Cup finals on the back of an unbeaten run of twenty-six matches, going back five years. They added four more before being beaten by Germany in the final. Rec.Sport.Soccer Statistics Foundation. Hungary's series of 30 matches is unbeaten.

<sup>3</sup> Although the Dutch club Ajax Amsterdam and the Dutch national team in the early 1970s are widely accredited with having come up with the concept of total football, in which every out-outfield player can take on any position, the Hungarians (and some other teams) in essence played total football before the concept existed.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, "The Cruyff Turn Is Born in 1974," para. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Winkler (journalist), email interview with author, May 30, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Capham, "A Look Inside: The German Football Machine," para. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Winkler, email interview with author.

<sup>8</sup> Winkler.

<sup>9</sup> Winkler.

<sup>10</sup> Christof Biermann (author), Berlin, Germany, interview with author, August 11, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Hecker, "Aus der Tiefe des Raumes" [From the depths of space], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Frankfurt), November 2, 2019, para. 1. Original quotes: "Warum gibt es angeblich so wenige gute literarische Erzählungen zum Sport?" "Weil er keine zweite Ebene hat." Unless otherwise noted, title and other translations are mine.

<sup>12</sup> For a systematic overview of the historical development of literary journalism in Germany, see Boven, "Tracing the History of Literary Journalism in Germany: Developments, Challenges, and Trends," pages 20–59, in this issue.

<sup>13</sup> The terms *New Journalism* and *literary journalism* are used interchangeably in this essay, as, within the confines of the form of sports writing discussed, these terms describe the same style of writing.

<sup>14</sup> Others who have a similar writing style are Raphael Honigstein, Christopher Meltzer, and Christoph Biermann.

<sup>15</sup> The quote is generally attributed to U.S. tennis player Billie Jean King, whose thirty-nine Grand Slam titles record (twelve singles, sixteen doubles, and eleven mixed doubles) is surpassed only by Australian Margaret Court (sixty-four titles) and Czech/American Martina Navratilova (fifty-nine titles). The date when she first used the phrase seems to be unclear, though in an article published in *Sports Illustrated* in 2010, King is credited with having said that "sports is a microcosm of society." Frey and Eitzen, however, used the phrase "sport . . . is a microcosm of society" in their article, "Sport and Society," published in the *Annual Review of Sociology* (1991): 504.

<sup>16</sup> *Allgemeine Turn Zeitung* [General gymnastics paper]; Wipper, "Sportpresse unter Druck" [Sports journalism under pressure], 128.



<sup>17</sup> Thieme, “Die Sportberichterstattung im Wandel der Zeit” [Sports reporting in changing times], 8.

<sup>18</sup> Surprisingly, football, today the most popular sport in Germany by far, was one of the last to have its own publication. *Der Fußball* (The football) was first published in 1894. It lasted as a football magazine just one year, before being turned into a general sports magazine. It was only in 1911 that a new football magazine [*Fußball*] managed to establish itself on the sports market. Hauer, *Sportjournalismus in Deutschland*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Blöbaum, “Sport,” *Journalismus als soziales System* [Journalism as a social system], 305–307.

<sup>20</sup> Blöbaum, 306.

<sup>21</sup> Hauer, *Sportjournalismus in Deutschland. Vom Marktschreiber bis zum Missionar* [Sports Journalism in Germany. From Barkers to Missionaries], 33.

<sup>22</sup> Müller, *Von Kampfmaschinen und Ballkünstlern* [Of Combat Machines and Ball Artists], 70.

<sup>23</sup> Wipper, “Sportpresse unter Druck” [Sports journalism under pressure], 129.

<sup>24</sup> Blöbaum, “Literatur und Journalismus” [Literature and journalism], 23–24.

<sup>25</sup> Wipper, “Sportpresse unter Druck” [Sports journalism under pressure], 128.

<sup>26</sup> Hauer, *Sportjournalismus in Deutschland* [Sports journalism in Germany], 38.

<sup>27</sup> Hauer, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Eckardt, “Fußballnationaltrainer Jürgen Klinsmann auf dem Weg zur WM 2006” [National soccer coach Jürgen Klinsmann on the way to the 2006 World Cup], para. 2; Hauer, “Sportjournalismus in Deutschland,” 38.

<sup>29</sup> Hauer, *Sportjournalismus in Deutschland* [Sports journalism in Germany], 39.

<sup>30</sup> Hauer, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>32</sup> Schmalenbach, “Qualität im Sportjournalismus” [Quality in sports journalism], 347.

<sup>33</sup> The statement that the sports department is the toy department of the news media is variously credited to sports journalist Howard Cosell, with the original quote reported as “Sports is the toy department of human life.” Lavine, *Replays, Chicago (Illinois) Tribune Magazine*, September 3, 1989, 6; Rowe, “Sports Journalism: Still the ‘Toy Department’ of the News Media?” 386; Geltner and Spiker in “A Short, Comprehensive History of Literary Sports Journalism,” 301, attribute the quote to sportswriter Jimmy Cannon, as does Cosell in the prologue to his autobiographical, *I Never Played the Game*. Cosell wrote, “Once I bought the Jimmy Cannon dictum that “Sports is the Toy Department of life. I don’t now and never will again,” 16.

<sup>34</sup> Rowe, *Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity*, 115–18; Rowe, “Sports Journalism: Still the ‘Toy Department’ of the News Media?” 385–405.

<sup>35</sup> Boynton, “Gay Talese,” 361.

<sup>36</sup> Talese, interview with author.

<sup>37</sup> Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism*, 171.

<sup>38</sup> Hartsock, 35; Dowling, "Re-Branding Literary Sportswriting: ESPN's Venture into Fiction," 127.

<sup>39</sup> Geltner and Spiker, "A Short, Comprehensive History of Literary Sports Journalism," 301.

<sup>40</sup> Morgan, "The Catch Still Amazes," para. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Waddles, "Bronx Banter Interview: Arnold Hano Part II," para. 38; Geltner and Spiker, "A Short, Comprehensive History of Literary Sports Journalism," 300.

<sup>42</sup> Hano, *A Day in the Bleachers*; Geltner and Spiker, "A Short, Comprehensive History of Literary Sports Journalism," 301.

<sup>43</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 301.

<sup>44</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 304.

<sup>45</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 304–305.

<sup>46</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 305.

<sup>47</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 302.

<sup>48</sup> McKeen, *Stranger Than Fiction: The Art of Literary Journalism*, 42–43.

<sup>49</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 304.

<sup>50</sup> Geltner and Spiker, 304.

<sup>51</sup> Dowling, "Re-Branding Literary Sportswriting: ESPN's Venture into Fiction," 123.

<sup>52</sup> Winston, "The Gonzo Text," 130.

<sup>53</sup> Dowling, "Re-Branding Literary Sportswriting: ESPN's Venture into Fiction," 126.

<sup>54</sup> Caron, "Hunter S. Thompson's 'Gonzo' Journalism and the Tall Tale Tradition in America," 1, quoting Twain, "On the Decay of the Art of Lying," 221. Caron argues that "the similarities and differences between what Tom Wolfe calls New Journalism, what Hunter S. Thompson calls Gonzo Journalism, and what Mark Twain would call a Tall Tale," allow an understanding of how "Thompson can be professional at both reporting and lying," 1. D'Agata and Fingal, *Lifespan of a Fact*, have argued there is scope for artistic embellishment in literary journalism. This essay takes the view put forward by scholars such as Gutkind, who has argued that within literary journalism, there is no room for deviation from the truth. Gutkind, "Truth Or . . .," 14–17.

<sup>55</sup> King, "The Spirituality of Sport and the Role of the Athlete in the Tennis Essays of David Foster Wallace," 219–21.

<sup>56</sup> Reng, *Der Traumhüter*, 2002, and Reng, *Keeper of Dreams*, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Sportsbookawards, "Previous Winners."

<sup>58</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>59</sup> Reng, *Spieltage*; Reng, *Matchdays*.

<sup>60</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>61</sup> Reng, *Mroskos Talente*. [Mrosko's talents].

<sup>62</sup> Reng, *Warum wir laufen* [Why we run].

<sup>63</sup> Reng, *Miro: Die Biografie* [Miro: The biography].

<sup>64</sup> Talese, "Dentist Puts the Bite in the Fight," 38.

<sup>65</sup> Talese, "Troupe of Midget Wrestlers Won't Work for Small Change," S-5.

<sup>66</sup> Wolfe, "The Marvelous Mouth of Cassius Clay." Clay later changed his name to Muhammad Ali and in his time was considered one of the best boxers—if not the best—of all time.

<sup>67</sup> Talese, "Ali in Havana: When the Champ met Castro"; Talese, "Boxing Fidel," 138–47.

<sup>68</sup> Talese, interview with author.

<sup>69</sup> Reng, *Spieltage: Die andere Geschichte der Bundesliga* [*Matchdays: The Hidden Story of the Bundesliga*].

<sup>70</sup> Reng, *Mroskos Talente* [Mrosko's talents].

<sup>71</sup> Reng, interview with author (edited for clarity).

<sup>72</sup> Reng, *Matchdays*, 14.

<sup>73</sup> Wolfe, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore," 158.

<sup>74</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>75</sup> Reng, *A Life Too Short*, 10.

<sup>76</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>77</sup> Reng.

<sup>78</sup> Wolfe, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore," 158.

<sup>79</sup> Reng, *Matchdays*, 134.

<sup>80</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>81</sup> Wolfe, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore," 158; Talese, *Honor Thy Father*.

<sup>82</sup> Reng, *Miro*, 9, 10. "If there is a country road in addition to the trees, then he can look at cars. From up there, he accurately recognizes the passing models. A Golf 3, the A-Class from Mercedes, a black BMW M3. He would like to have a car like that. He talks about cars to his work colleagues a lot. But he doesn't talk to anyone about the moments when he looks out over the world from the roof ridge. You don't talk about such things. He feels it. Silently. For himself."

<sup>83</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>84</sup> Reng; Mailer, *The Fight*.

<sup>85</sup> Wolfe, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore," 158.

<sup>86</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>87</sup> Reng, *Matchdays*, 3.

<sup>88</sup> Reng, interview with author.

<sup>89</sup> Reng.

<sup>90</sup> Reng.

<sup>91</sup> Winkler, email interview with author.

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