

# How To Be A Freelance Sportswriter & Publicist

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## About the Author

James M. Raia has been a journalist since 1976. In addition to columnist

and staff positions with three metro daily newspapers, he has been a full-time freelance writer since 1987. He contributes sports, fitness, business and human-interest articles to myriad publications, Associated Press to Reuters, Golf Week to USA Today, to the Sacramento Bee to several city magazines. He's also the publisher of several websites and e-books and author of the syndicated automotive column, The Weekly Driver, since 2003.

In addition to How To Make As A Sportswriter & Publicist, he's also the author of the e-book The Tour Within The Tour de France and How To Run & Enjoy The Marathon.

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Preface

Every time I write a freelance article, I think: "How many times can I sell this piece?" It's what every successful

freelancer does, and it's how every successful freelancer should think. During the past nearly 25 years, I have sold some articles more than 20 times, and you can do the same with the practical advice offered in *How To Be A Successful Freelance Sportswriter & Publicist*.

The comprehensive volume details my experiences as a self-employed journalist, and the diverse opportunities my career has provided. But it does not gloss over the reality of the occupation. It's rewarding work, and it's hard work.

## Introduction

Nearly 35 years ago, when I was learning my craft as a general assignment sportswriter at the

Sacramento Bee, my colleagues and I observed a phenomenon every election day.

Whether it was a local, regional or national vote, the reporters and editors on the Metro staff were treated as if they were enduring a catastrophic ordeal.

Since the news staff had to work long and hard hours on tight deadlines as the issues and races unfolded, management made certain the cafeteria delivered a near-endless supply of sandwiches and coffee. The sports department staff viewed this display of “compassion” as an insult.

With little exception, sportswriters always work long and hard hours under tight deadlines. Such is the

nature of most sports journalism. Since many sporting events occur at night, the sports section is usually the final section of the newspaper “put to bed.” Working until midnight is a scenario most sportswriters know well.

And while I don’t know if the coffee-and-sandwich routine is a policy practiced by many newspapers, never in my staff writer career did management express its appreciation for my deadline work or the similar efforts of any co-workers. As a result, I believe sportswriters’ skills are generally under appreciated.

In fact, sports departments are often considered “toy departments.” I don’t know the moniker’s genesis, but it’s a bad rap. Those who don’t understand,

simply consider sports writing a compilation of names, scores and clichés. Bad sports writing - often transferred into bad sports broadcasting by radio and television broadcasters - includes such trite phrases as "giving 110 percent," and "winning one game at a time." Lazy sportswriters also have a great talent for relying on phrases associated with war.

Good sports writing is none of these things. Good sports writing is comprehensive reporting, succinct editing and in-depth interviewing -the same skills associated with other areas of journalism.

But such thinking is not always prevalent. Many years ago, I contributed a sports article to a

national and highly respected law magazine. I know little about the legal world, but I have a good friend who's a criminal defense attorney.

He's also a private pilot, who earlier in his legal career often flew his plane to compete in track meets as a nationally ranked masters runner.

Since the national law magazine included a section called "Lawyer Lifestyles," I was certain I had a good story. I send the editor a query and quickly received a 1,200-word assignment that paid \$800.

After again studying the section of the magazine in several back issues, I wrote the article in accordance with the editor's letter of assignment and the publication's style.

As I later discovered, however, the magazine had just hired a new associate editor. A few months later when I received my contributor's copy (and payment) my article had been rewritten to include numerous sports clichés that did not appear in the original manuscript.

Furious, I wrote the editor a professional but stern letter objecting to the gross rewrite. It wasn't long before I was informed that the magazine had hired the previously mentioned new associate editor. One of her first responsibilities was to edit my story "to make it sound like a sports story."

And so it is with freelance sports writing: You take the good with the

bad and forge ahead. Doors open and close and perseverance rules.

## Chapter 1

### One Of The Best Jobs In The Country

Every sportswriter has tales of horrendous editing. But any sportswriter knows that good editors have also made their copy better. And any good sportswriter who appreciates the craft knows that the business is tough yet stimulating and rewarding. As far as I'm concerned, it's one of the best jobs in the country.

I have been a sportswriter since I wrote a column titled the "Unsung Hero" for my high school newspaper in 1971. Since 1976, when I was hired by the Sacramento Bee to answer

telephone calls and compile high school and junior college scores on Friday nights, I have earned my living primarily as a sportswriter.

I've spent late nights filing stories from a closet at the local motor speedway, and I've covered the U.S. Open golf tournament six times. I've "grabbed" quotes from more high school coaches than I care to remember, and I've interviewed boxers whose faces looked like offerings from the local butcher's display case.

I've crowded into locker rooms with herds of other reporters and listened to Joe Montana, Charles Barkley and Wayne Gretzky. But I've also been fortunate enough to have had great learning experiences during one-on-

one interviews with Julius Erving, Jean-Claude Killy and Lance Armstrong.

Most of my one-on-one opportunities have occurred in the last two decades. After staff writer and columnist positions at three dailies, I have been gainfully employed as an independent sportswriter and publicist since 1987.

For the past several years, I've worked at home. But I have also worked out of several small offices a few miles from where I live. I work hard and I tend to talk about my job a lot because I enjoy my world as an independent businessman. I am responsible for my successes and failures. If I don't work, I don't get paid.

Although there are the usual highs and lows common to any business, finding work can be overwhelming and it can arrive without effort. But when I hear friends and associates talk about how about how they have to work because “their 30-person staff is two people short,” I have little empathy.

## Chapter 2

### All Aspects Of The Business

As an independent writer, I not only write and edit, I run all aspects of a business. I answer the telephone, often pay my expenses and often solicit work. If I want a new notepad and pencil, I don't go to the company supply cabinet and grab a free handful. I go the local office supply outlet and buy my supplies.

All of this said, I wouldn't have it any other way. While I received invaluable training and have life long memories from my newspaper career, my journalism horizons have drastically expanded in my freelance tenure.

Although someday I may tally an exact list of publications, news services and syndicates to which I've contributed, I know I've written more than three thousand articles for more than 100 publications, news services and syndicates.

I have covered most and still enjoy some mainstream sports, particularly automotive topics and golf. But my fondness for endurance sports - cycling, long-distance running and numerous winter sports - has taken

me to more than a dozen countries. I have covered bicycle races in Japan, Germany, France, Luxembourg, Italy and Canada, and I reported on the Winter Olympics in France. I've covered a golf tournament in Morocco – twice.

While these experiences have occurred primarily because of my perseverance, the same opportunities can be available to anyone who wishes to pursue a career as an independent sports journalist. The task is simple: Develop competent writing and marketing skills, set high goals and believe in what you're doing.

My father, an astute businessman, once called me a "gun for hire." With three words, he summed up exactly

what freelancers do for a living. Of course, the word "freelancer" conjures images and dates to an era long ago.

In fact, several years ago while traveling on an assignment, I cut out a one-panel Rubes cartoon from the local newspaper. The cartoon shows a knight in armor sitting on a small stool. Next to the knight is a sandwich board offering the following services: "Fair Maidens Rescued," "Dragons Slayed," "Swords Removed From Stones." The caption of the cartoon reads: "After being cut from the royal payroll, the famed knight went into business for himself and thus became 'Sir Freelance A Lot.'

## Chapter 3

### Endless Opportunities

While some might argue the knight's opportunities were limited, and my father's words were perhaps harsh, nothing could be further from the truth.

Independent sportswriters have endless opportunities as long as they keep in mind the "weapon" of choice is a computer. And it's mightier than a gun or a sword.

It is my hope that the following guide will give you practical information and motivate you to pursue a career as a freelance health and fitness and/or sports journalist. And if your experiences are similar to mine, as your career expands, friends will likely ask you bizarre questions about your occupation, family and work

associates.

The two questions I get asked most frequently are, "How much did you get paid for that article," and "How do you make a living doing that?"

I have never asked anyone how much he or she makes. So when I get asked how much I get paid, I usually respond, "Enough to make me want to do more."

## Chapter 4

### Business Tactics: The Mailman Delivers

After a year or two of scattered bookkeeping and irregular work habits, I realized I was making a big mistake -and losing money. And so for the past 20 years or so, I've

developed efficient business practices - savvy marketing, detailed bookkeeping, timely correspondence, and a wealth of contacts and resources. Without utilizing these skills, I believe it's nearly impossible for a freelancer to monetarily survive.

In short, anyone considering an independent sports writing career should quickly understand that maintaining an organized business is as important, if not more important, than writing. The following subsections detail these areas.

As any veteran freelancer knows, the delivery of the mail is the most anticipated part of the day. Bills come in the mail, of course, but most importantly, so do the checks and other fringe benefits of our careers.

But unlike our less fortunate brethren who are employees and receive only one check at regular intervals, our compensation rarely fits any set pattern.

During my freelance tenure, I've gone more than a month without receiving one check. But I've also received a half-dozen checks, totaling several thousand dollars, a few unsolicited books and videos, and the offer to travel on an all-expenses-paid trip — in the same day.

It's the trip offers, which have been increasing in recent years because of the assertive nature of public relations firms, visitor and convention bureaus and various organizations, that freelancers should consider the

“bonuses” of our occupation.

While writers employed full-time by publications are often forbidden to accept complimentary offers because of the possibility of breaching some editor’s idea of objective journalism, freelancers set their own rules.

So, it’s a simple decision. If you believe it’s not ethical to accept free travel offers, often called “junkets,” don’t. If you trust you can remain objective despite being “wined and dined,” I suggest you seek out opportunities to see the world on someone else’s dime and earn a living at the same time.

As a former staff writer for daily newspapers with policies against complimentary travel and

accommodations, it took me awhile to realize accepting such offers is OK. And certainly by accepting numerous trips, my freelance career has blossomed.

In the past several years, for example, I've traveled to Morocco (golf tournament), Hawaii (several times for travel and sporting events), Arizona (senior lifestyle articles), Montreal and France (cycling events), Carmel (golf tournaments and health and fitness articles), Colorado (World Cup skiing, bike races), Lake Placid (cross country skiing), Minnesota (cross country skiing coverage), Utah (cycling events), New Mexico (health and fitness articles) and Pennsylvania (cycling events).

And on every occasion, I've generated

income from the trips as well as expanded my worldly horizons.

While the trips provide fodder for articles, it's not my writing ability that has prompted my invitations, rather developing good contacts and perseverance.

Therefore, if you like the idea of traveling to write sports articles, here are a few guidelines:

\* Send a letter to as many chambers of commerce or visitors and convention bureaus as you wish. Succinctly (one page) explain you're a freelance writer (give credits and send a writing sample) and state you may soon be visiting the area. Request any literature available, and ask if the organization has any business

relationships with area hotels, airlines and restaurants for visiting journalists.

If you receive an assignment from a publication about the area, send a copy of the letter to the tourist organization as proof of an assignment. Many times, complimentary or reduced-rate accommodations will be offered. Sometimes, accommodations will be offered without a letter of assignment, too. Many assertive tourist organizations also regularly schedule "familiarization" trips for journalists. If you're on the mailing list, it's likely you'll get invited.

\* Subscribe to at least one of the several writers' market newsletters that list trips and accommodations

offered by various organizations, hotel chains, etc. Writing for Money is a good source. On other occasions, I've also been invited on trips after responding to offers in various freelance newsletters, some free, some available via Internet subscriptions.

\* Write to several major public relations firms in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York and tell them you're a journalist seeking information about travel, business, sports, health & fitness or whatever your chosen writing specialty. The public library is a good source for out-of-state telephone directories that list public relations firms.

\* Attend a local writer's club meeting. If there's one thing writers can do well

besides write, it's network. I've shared dozens of tips, phone numbers and contact names with writers from around the country.

\* If you're traveling to a specific destination without the assistance of the visitors and convention bureau or chamber of commerce, ask any area hotels if they offer journalists' rates. Most often, it's the hotel sales manager who determines if a deal can be offered.

\* Some editors who accept freelance work won't accept the piece if it has been produced from information gathered on a "junket." If the editor states this in the publication's guidelines, you're stuck. If the editor doesn't ask, don't push the point.

\*A good article rests on its own, and so does fluff. Once you're asked on a familiarization trip, consider the following:

\* A professional public relations person will not ask you to mention any hotel sponsor in your story or make any other journalistic demands. An industry professional knows what his/her job is and should respect what your job is, too.

\* If you're asked to "give a plug," I'd suggest not doing any business with the organization. A PR firm may, however, ask you to send them clips of your trip. I believe this is a professional courtesy journalists should never forget.

\* Whether you call a journalists' trip a

junket, a familiarization trip or a sponsored trek, keep in mind such travel is never really free. By going on the trip, you are traveling on time you could be using to generate other income. Additionally, there are always expenses (tax deductible) that you will incur on journalistic trips.

From my perspective and experience, however, all freelancers should travel on at least two writers' trips and then make an individual decision if the experiences were positive, financially beneficial and worthy of repeating.

## Chapter 5

### Multiple Sales Are Not Dirty Words

Life was simpler, but more boring during my newspaper career. I was given an assignment. I wrote the

story, it appeared in the newspaper and I went on to the next assignment.

I never once considered writing the same story for more than one publication or writing different versions of the same story for different publications. That approach always sounded unethical, and for most of the 10 years I worked strictly for newspapers, I wanted no part of such practices.

I can even remember commenting once to a fellow staffer who was also a successful freelancer: "Why would you want to rewrite something or use the article elsewhere? It seems like a lot of work to make another \$50 or \$100."

But we all learn. In my instance, I

have come to realize what I do best is market. I believe a competent writer with great marketing skills will have greater financial freelance success than a very skilled writer who has no marketing savvy.

I have simply learned to write about sports, health & fitness, recreation, leisure, business and lifestyle subjects that appeal to wide audiences. And unless I'm writing a piece for a publication that pays enough not to worry about multiple sales, I believe an article purchased only once is unsuccessful.

As an example, I've covered bicycle racing since 1979. A few years ago, however, my sister gave me an idea outside of the competitive vein when she mailed me an article about the

bicycle built for two.

The article reminded me how much I've enjoyed the bicycle built for two (more commonly called tandem) competition during the seven Cycling World Championships I've covered in several countries.

The newspaper clip my sister mailed me gave me the idea to write about tandem cycling - its history, the exercise involved, etc. The idea has worked surprisingly well. Nearly every editor to whom I've written or called thought the article proposal was unique and gave me an assignment. As a result, I have now written more than 20 news service, syndicate, newspaper, website and magazine articles about tandem cycling.

The reason the article has generated nearly \$3,500 in income is because it appeals to a varied audience. I've sold articles to senior publications, in-flight magazines, general interest newspapers, cycling magazines, fitness magazines, national health and fitness syndicates, a running magazine and a women's sports magazine.

The New York Times and USA Today to Runner's World and Retired Officer, a military lifestyle magazine, the editors all liked the historic, lifestyle and uniqueness of tandem cycling as a sport or recreation. I simply had to take the subject and craft the story to fit the various publications' needs. I now jokingly call the tandem article, "the story that won't die."

While the article on the bicycle built for two has sold more often than any other article I've written, I have had numerous other multiple-sale successes.

A piece on Dr. Eric Heiden, who has had careers as an Olympic gold medal speed skater; a professional cyclist, a television commentator and is now an orthopedic surgeon in Utah, sold eight times. An article on golfers' back problems and exercise, has been purchased seven times. Most recently, an article I wrote about sunglasses has sold six times.

The point is, if you pick subjects that have wide appeal, your chances will improve. In the instance of my sunglass article, the American Optometric Association estimates that

\$2 billion was spent on 105 million pairs of sunglasses a year in the United States. With that simple fact alone, there's plenty to expand upon and a wide audience to attract.

Multiple sales can also work with a slightly different approach. Instead of writing a feature and selling the article several times, freelancers can also attend events and set up what amounts to their own news service.

I have used this strategy many times over the years while covering such events as the U.S. Open Golf Championship, the National Cycling Championships, the Tour DuPont (the U.S. version of the Tour de France), the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii and the Winter Olympics.

If there's an event I decide to attend, I write to a variety of publications I contribute to with ideas several months in advance, if an editor accepts an idea, I ask them for a letter of assignment to mail to the tournament or event organizers. After I've been accredited, I then look for additional assignments. I also call the tournament headquarters and ask if there's an official hotel. Most often the hotel will offer a media rate.

If that scenario isn't available, I find a hotel in the area and begin to weigh my assignment(s) value against my expenses. I've never gone on a trip or an assignment knowing that I'm going to lose money.

One of my greatest experiences as a sportswriter was covering the 1992

Winter Olympics in Albertville, France. As a former stringer for United Press International, I had acquired a press pass and had my flight and room accommodations paid for by the worldwide service.

At the time, UPI was barely solvent. And so while the news agency had provided my room and board and travel expenses, it couldn't pay me to cover speed skating and figure skating.

But for me, it didn't matter. As soon as I was told what sports I was going to cover, I wrote letters to the sports editors of several athletes' hometowns.

Soon enough, I received several return phone calls and negotiated a

series of independent contracts. Knowing that France was eight hours ahead of West Coast and five hours ahead of East Coast, I had plenty of time to work on other articles after filing my deadline UPI stories.

So on a daily basis for two weeks, I not only covered speed skating and some figure skating daily for UPI, I filed stories on individual athletes for the Anchorage Daily News, Sacramento (Calif.) Union and Champaign News-Gazette (Illinois). I also contributed several magazine articles to Olympian upon my return. Ironically, two of the publications — The Sacramento Union and Anchorage Daily News — are no longer published.

But that's also an ironic beauty of freelancing. Had I been employed full-

time by either of the defunct newspapers, I would have been in the job market. But since I don't rely on only one paycheck, I can replace two lost markets with two other outlets.

On numerous other occasions, I have used this same multiple-market strategy to cover golf tournaments, boxing matches, track and field meets and bicycle races.

A few years ago, I covered the Hawaiian Ironman Triathlon for the 10th time. After negotiating an airfare and accommodation agreement with race organizers, I contributed articles to seven publications, including the Dallas Morning News, Detroit Free Press, Portland Oregonian and Bicycling Online.

Of course, there is one potentially serious pitfall to avoid. All publications purchase various article rights and you must be careful not to sell any conflicting rights by selling to competing publications. With the advent of competition among websites, who's buying what rights can be further complicated.

For instance, if you try to sell an article on old baseball cards to the in-flight magazine of United Airlines, you can't sell the same article to the American Airlines magazine. But if you write your baseball card article for a local newspaper, you can sell the same piece to 10 other regional newspapers.

If you write an article for the New York Times, you can't sell the same

article to USA Today since both are national newspapers. But you can sell the same article to two different regional newspapers since the publications' circulations don't overlap.

There are also syndicates that purchase only the second rights to articles already published. In these cases, however, the syndicates will likely either purchase the second rights for six months or a year. During that period, you can't sell the same piece elsewhere.

If Playboy, The New Yorker, Smithsonian or other major national magazine buys your original baseball card article, they'll likely ask to purchase first rights or all rights. Payment will also be at a high-enough

rate you won't have to worry about multiple sales.

If this case occurs, you'll have to decide what route to pursue. If you agree to sell the piece to the national publication buying all rights, don't sell the piece anywhere else. If the piece does appear elsewhere, it's unlikely you'll ever work for the editors involved again. Which, of course, defeats the purpose of being a freelance writer.

The multiple-sales market approach has also worked in two other ways for me but to a lesser degree.

Occasionally, I have written features on well-known athletes — triathlete Dave Scott and cyclist Greg LeMond, for instance. I'll then mail photocopies of the features unsolicited to as many

as 25 newspapers around the country. I've used email in the same way. And most recently, companies like EByline.com and Constant Content have debuted to act as agents for writers and publishers

On both occasions, I sold the articles several times, although I had hoped for more success. And after writing, editing, photocopying and paying postage to mail the manuscripts, your success rate needs to be fairly high let's say at least five sales each — to make a worthwhile profit.

Since endurance sports are my specialty, I wrote self-syndicated running column for more than a decade. The column covered the full spectrum of the sport. It has appeared in as many as nine

publications at one time and I now have many of the articles posted on my website: [www.jamesraia.com](http://www.jamesraia.com).

Since every freelancer should have a specialty area, my running column could just as easily be your stamp, pets, antique, and business or computer column. And although there's no sure-fire way to approach editors with a column idea, I sent the following two documents along with several column clips to nearly 50 editors in three West Coast states. Keep in mind, the newspaper market is tough. Any offer, regardless of price, should be considered. Here's a sample of what sent to editors:

Jim Jenks

Sports Editor Santa Rosa Press  
Democrat

P.O. Box 569  
Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Dear Jim:

Enclosed are three recent samples of my self-syndicated weekly running column, *On Pace*, for your consideration. As a full-time freelance writer and veteran long-distance runner; I write the column to fill an important niche.

As I'm sure you know, running is a popular activity. Unfortunately, many dailies don't have the personnel to cover the running world or a staff member interested in the sport. My column can fill that need, either as a unique feature to complement the sports pages or to add to the weekly recreation or outdoors page or section.

As you can read, the 700-word column covers local, regional and national trends, opinion, human interest, health and fitness issues and news features.

As a former staff writer for the Sacramento Bee, Contra Costa Times and Monterey Country Herald, I am currently a contributor to more than 30 news services, newspapers and magazines, including the Associated Press, Reuters, USA Today, Los Angeles Times Syndicate, Runner's World, Outside and several in-flight magazines.

My column appears in numerous newspapers, but not in your circulation area.

I write the column weekly, but can cater it to a particular publication's requirements. I can e-mail the column, send it hard copy by mail or FAX it. I propose a fee of \$50 per column.

Some newspapers, by the way, incorporate a running calendar with the column to give it a local angle. A photograph is also available.

Sincerely, James Raia

## Chapter 6 No More Money Blues

I can vividly remember the green envelopes I used to receive once a week from each of my three newspaper employers. Paycheck

enclosed, the tightly sealed business-size envelopes were usually distributed late in the afternoon. Sometimes, the checks were dispatched into employee mailboxes. On other occasions, the checks were dispensed in a silly ritual conducted by an administrative secretary or a middle management-type.

The check distributors always seemed arrogant. They'd hand me my check and then stand there waiting for a "thank you." They acted like they were doing me a favor — as if they had something to do with the newspaper's decision to pay me.

Perhaps such dynamics and office egos are better fodder for an employer-employee relationship article. Still, the lack of a regular

“green envelope” is often a traumatic obstacle for freelancers to overcome.

That said, the most important concept to grasp as a freelancer is the uncertainty of the occupation. A freelancer must understand and accept he or her never knows when paychecks will arrive.

As examples, all of the following scenarios have occurred during my freelance tenure:

- \* I've received prompt checks from extremely professional staff that work for small circulation and unheralded publications.

- \* I've received very slow payment from well-established national publications with editorial staffs and

account payable departments so poorly run, it's a wonder the periodical gets published.

\* I've worked for editors who are former freelancers and who understand. They request prompt payment to payroll departments that in turn lose invoices or have accounts payable personnel who are constantly either on sick leave or vacation.

\* The publication has folded.

\*The check has been lost in the mail.

\* The check has been mailed to an incorrect address.

\* I've received two checks for the same story.

- \* I've received the incorrect amount.
- \* I've received someone else's check.

The point: until a freelancer has a check for the correct amount in hand, many things can go wrong. And, unfortunately, when things don't go smoothly, there's not much a freelancer can tell a landlord, mortgage company or credit card bill collector that will foster empathy.

But while compensation hassles can prove bothersome, freelancers can overcome paycheck anxiety. Keep in mind freelance writing is a business. And just like any business, there will be fluctuations in cash flow.

In this regard, a few years ago, Chuck

Woodbury, a good friend and publisher in Edmonds, Wash., gave me some valuable advice. Just like any businessperson, Woodbury explained, a freelance writer shouldn't worry about a bad experience or even a bad month.

For example, for easy figuring, let's say you're earning an average of \$3,000 a month as a freelancer and then a month comes along and you only receive \$500. Don't fret. As Woodbury explained, and as I've related to many others, quarterly income averaging is a better gauge of "true" income. Two \$3,000 months and a \$500 month, for example, will produce a \$2,166.67 per month average for three months.

Another "must" business practice is to

keep a list that includes when you've mailed a manuscript, its expected publication date and the expected date of compensation. I keep two lists on my computer.

Each month, I have a pretty good idea what I expect to earn. When I receive a check, I don't let it sit around or put it in my wallet and forget. I immediately write down the amount earned and add it to my cumulative income for the month, quarter and year. I always know what I've earned at any given time during each month. I always know exactly where I stand compared to my income at the same time the previous year.

Of course, even established freelancers with steady incomes worry about paychecks. I still look in the

mailbox every day. But the nice thing is having no one but myself to thank when my "green envelopes" arrive or when I get notice of a Paypal deposit.

Sportswriters who work for newspapers, magazines or new services, usually have beats. While assigned to cover a team or a specific area, their daily work routine falls into place as a season unfolds. Sometimes their beat stories nearly "write themselves" as players display their skills or lack of skills and the team progresses toward post-season play. There are injuries, trades, great and poor performances and usually a steady stream of team politics about which to write

Freelancers don't always have this luxury. The key to success for an

independent sportswriter is to find and cultivate story ideas and markets.

The bigger you think, the better. Sure, you can contribute articles to the local daily and all of your friends will say nice things. But once an independent sportswriter understands there is a vast world of sports and diverse sports writing opportunities away from their hometown, the quicker they'll discover the increased financial benefits.

For example, many years ago while attending a skiing trade show in Las Vegas, I had the opportunity to interview Jean-Claude Killy, the famous skier, entrepreneur and president of the 1992 Winter Olympics.

Although I had gone to the gargantuan trade show and eventually witnessed all of its gaudiness with only one small assignment, I got lucky. Through a PR contact, Killy agreed to a one-hour solo interview, and it was terrific. It was only a few months before the Winter Olympics in his native France, but Killy graciously answered questions while also finding the appropriate tune to tout his new line of clothing and sunglasses. He was smooth, savvy, a gentleman and a great interview.

I wrote and filed my one short (700 words) deadline story for Reuters, the global news service, a couple of hours after the interview. But I also knew I had enough material for a much longer piece. A few days later, I returned to my office in Sacramento,

and thought about the material I had accumulated.

With the Olympics quickly approaching how could I turn my one-on-one interview into more profit? What I had was a one-hour taped private interview with the skier often considered the greatest in history; an interview with an international businessman and multi-millionaire and an interview with the reigning president of the Olympics — all rolled into one. What I had was the fodder for a great feature.

Considering Killy's worldwide status, I decided to query some foreign publications, and it worked. In addition to the feature I contributed to Reuters, I also ended up writing two magazine features on Killy, which

generated an additional \$700 in income. I wrote one piece for Silver Kris, the in-flight magazine of Singapore Airlines, printed in English.

And I also sold the same feature to Skiing, a Japanese consumer monthly printed in Japanese, through FujiFotos, a news agency based in Tokyo. Since then, I have sold several other articles to both markets and a few additional cycling articles to Pedal, a monthly Canadian cycling magazine.

I discovered my foreign markets from Markets Abroad, a newsletter similar to Writing for Money, which is unfortunately no longer published. But I have also discovered that several writers' magazines, such as Writer's Digest, periodically advertise foreign

market lists for sale in their classified sections.

From my experience, although there are some differences between selling articles to domestic and foreign markets, much of the business of selling to foreign markets is the same as selling a story to your hometown newspaper. It's a business, so approach the publication with a professional query and it's likely you'll receive a professional response.

However, I have also queried several foreign publications and never received responses. Keep in mind, therefore, that you're investing time and money with no guarantees.

Based on my experiences, here are some guidelines to selling to foreign

markets:

\* Regardless of the country, international publications seek stories with global angles. A story on Jean-Claude Killy is a natural; a piece on a great high school athlete has no worldwide significance. A business story on the CEO of IBM who's also a recreational marathon runner has worldwide interest. A piece on the new president of the regional board of realtors who also runs 10-kilometer race won't sell overseas.

In addition to the article on Killy, the articles I've sold to Silver Kris have included: a health & fitness piece on sunglasses; a profile of speed skater/cyclist/physician Eric Heiden; a health and fitness article on golfers' back problems; and a lifestyle article on

tandem cycling. The editor of Silver Kris felt the airlines' passengers had significant interest in the subjects.

\* Some foreign publications have editions in English as well as in one or more other languages. With the exception of bylines, the contributor's copy of Skiing I received from Japan is in Japanese. My article was translated into Japanese characters, but the check I received was in U.S. dollars.

\* Be careful what rights you're selling to foreign publications. Editors should specify what rights they're purchasing in their letters of assignment.

\* Some foreign publications pay in the currency of the country, some pay in U.S. dollars drawn from a foreign

bank and some pay in U.S. dollars drawn from a U.S. bank.

In either of the first two instances, you'll likely pay a processing fee for depositing a foreign check in your U.S. bank account. Payment can be tricky, however.

\* When mailing manuscripts and/or computer disks to foreign countries, it's best to use a courier service like Federal Express or DHL. You'll pay more, but the success rate and delivery expediency are worth the price. Send query letters by U.S. mail, however; but remember that foreign countries have varying postal rates.

\* Some foreign publications desire text/photo packages, and the editors will ask you what your package is

worth. You name the price, and they'll likely counter with another offer. It's their way of doing business, so deal with it.

\* Finally, selling to foreign publications takes more patience and perseverance than selling to U.S. markets. But if you're willing to invest the time and money, you'll eventually reap the financial benefits of multiple sales.

While the aforementioned guidelines are specific toward foreign or global publications based upon my experiences, the same practical guidelines apply to domestic markets. In short, think "professional." if you make an editor's job easier by playing by his or her rules, you'll have a better chance of success.

## Chapter 7

### Diversify For Success

One of the best things about being a journalist is the potential for diversity. If you're a sportswriter; for example, you can use your creative skills to develop other kinds of writing or to work in other writing-related fields.

Although I generate most of my income as a sports and health and fitness writer, I have expanded into other areas — mostly notably business, lifestyle and travel writing. But with my journalistic skills, I have also created opportunities to earn supplemental income as a publicist and teacher.

Such versatility is thoroughly

enjoyable. While sometimes generating sizable chunks of income, teaching writing and creating public relations for small businesses and sporting events gives me a breather from the constant grind of “cranking out” articles.

In short, while I still have a great passion for writing non-fiction manuscripts, I have learned how to use my skills in different but equally satisfying ways.

## Chapter 8

### The World Of PR (And I don't Mean Personal Record)

For much of my employment tenure at daily newspapers, I was trained to believe sportswriters and public relations representatives were

adversaries. And true enough, if a PR person called me at work, more times than not it meant they wanted to tout something not worth promoting.

But I steadily began to accept that much like reporters, PR people come in all shapes and sizes and their degree of professionalism greatly varies. I also concluded one day that I could probably make good money as a PR person. My revelation occurred after numerous experiences when I knew more about the various sports I was covering than the events' publicists.

And since I no longer worked within the restraints of various employers' policies, why couldn't I be a journalist and a publicist?

As I mentioned, my awakening to this possibility occurred about 20 years ago. While walking back from lunch one day, I was intercepted by a friend in front of the running store one block from my office. She had an inquisitive and upset look on her face, and her expression told me I was about to be part of a discussion (monologue?) I couldn't win.

"Hey, James! Howzit going? How's your running? Hey, by the way, how come my name wasn't in the newspaper after I finished the Western States 100 (the annual mountain running trek from Squaw Valley to Auburn).

"You know, I had relatives visiting from out of town, and they were upset when they didn't see my result

in the paper. You're a reporter. You used to work for the Sacramento Bee. It's not for me, of course. But why don't you call them and complain or something?"

The one-sided conversation very quickly progressed into one of those scenarios which always reminds me of the great Mark Twain line: "It is better to remain quiet and seem a fool than to speak up and remove all doubt."

While I respect the accomplishments of my friend and while she has assisted and offered support during my attempts running ultramarathons (distances longer than the standard 26.2-mile marathon) her question angered me.

Why was it my responsibility to get

her name in the newspaper? Why didn't she call the newspaper or write a letter to the editor? And why did I feel like I had to justify my chosen line of work? I would never dream of asking any of my friends to justify or question their expertise as teachers, physicians or engineers. So, why did I feel like I was on trial?

After working in journalism for more more than 35 years, I know that what appears on sports pages is not always printed solely based on merit. Did the tantrums of Barry Bonds or Shaquille O'Neal in the prime of their careers warrant such overwhelming coverage when compared to the athletic accomplishments of someone who has run 100 miles?

Do the pranks and personal lives of

the aforementioned warrant any coverage at all? Do county golf tournaments or local bowling tournaments warrant coverage?

I don't read about these issues, but a lot of people do, and traditions die hard (or at least take a long time to change). I also know the public has grown accustomed to reading about professional athletes' endeavors on and off the field.

I know many sportswriters, broadcasters and fans are former athletes. And if you've played football, basketball or baseball, you can, in some small way, relate to, or fantasize about, what it must be like to succeed in your favorite sport at a higher level. Thus, sports geared toward the masses — the games that return fans

to their youth — get more exposure than the esoteric activities in which only a small percentage of the population participates.

But how could I explain all of this to my friend? She didn't know how the newspaper business works. All she wanted was to see her name in print. Nevertheless, her pointed comments remained bothersome and intriguing.

And soon enough, the thought occurred to me: Since I enjoy trail and ultramarathon running so much, how could I get some ink for the sport I like. How could I earn income, but not jeopardize the time commitment it takes to operate a sole proprietorship as a freelancer?

I decided to take a chance. I called

the race organizer of the Western States 100 - the country's most prestigious ultramarathon - and asked if I could submit a proposal for a PR campaign for the annual June event. After contacting the board of directors, the race director invited me to the race's monthly meeting, and I gave them my pitch.

For the sum of \$2,500.00, I offered the following for the race:

- \* I would write a series of five releases and mail them to various regional and national journalists from a media list I had created with my computer's bulk mailing system.

- \* I would answer any media inquiries and make "courtesy" calls to editors to see if they needed any assistance

on race day.

- \* I would attend the event, document what happened, and report the results to any interested media.

- \* I would assist any journalists in attendance during the race weekend.

- \* I would write a follow-up release and mail it to any non-daily deadline journalists. Additionally, I would not be precluded from contributing my own freelance assignments — as long as the work didn't interfere with my responsibilities during the race.

My contract called for me to be paid in monthly increments of \$500 as well as \$500 in advance. Race organizers provided letterhead and envelopes. The event would reimburse gas

mileage, hotel room as well as my meals and me for postage. I provided a monthly invoice and a synopsis of my work each month, and I expected payment within 30 days.

From my perspective and from the comments I received, my job as the race's publicist was an unqualified success. I collected 52 newspaper articles about the Western States 100 and presented them to race organizers at a post-race meeting. Additionally, the race was mentioned on three radio stations and six stories were broadcast about the event on local and network television.

At the same time, because I often work as a stringer for the Associated Press, I filed an advance story and a race report article to the local bureau

and earned an additional \$200. I also contributed a short race report (250 words) a week later to Runner's World and earned another \$75.

By word of mouth, I acquired similar contracts for several other events, including the Sunmart Texas Trail Run, the Napa Valley Marathon and the American River 50, the country's largest ultramarathon.

My conclusion from these experiences is simple:

Attaining publicity for ultramarathons, a local flower show, a charity fundraiser or any event seeking media exposure is feasible — and it's a particularly good way for an independent journalist to supplement their income.

But do not be mistaken. Organizing a successful PR campaign is difficult, and I don't recommend attempting the various tasks involved without proper training.

Consider some of the hurdles during my first year publicizing the Western States 100:

For years, the Reno Gazette-Journal provided advance and post-race coverage of the event. Naturally, I sent the sports editor all of the event's press releases and followed up with several answering machine messages. When I finally reached the sports editor; he said, "Yes, the newspaper usually covered the race, but that wouldn't be possible this year because the staff was stretched thin

and because the run coincided with the Reno Rodeo.”

This didn't make sense. Since the race is held at the same time each year how could it conflict with vacation time and the Reno Rodeo this year, but not in previous years?

In another ironic instance, a former Northern California sports columnist on several occasions wrote eloquently about the Western States 100.

Despite covering all of the sporting world's major events, he often said the event was one of the greatest sporting affairs he had ever attended.

But he also happened to live a few blocks from the finish line. He covered the event by leaving his house at about 8 p.m. on race night, walking a

few hundred yards and waiting for the winner to cross the finish line at the local high school.

The columnist said he never bothered to see the “real race” at the start or either of the race’s two major check-in stations. When I asked him his reasoning, he said he figured he wouldn’t be able to return to the high school in time to see the winner finish some 16 hours later. Driving from start to finish takes no more than two hours.

In short, he was lazy. And while it may be easy to assume that a reporter from a large-circulation newspaper or a big-time television station has more skill and experience than one from a small-town, publication or TV outlet, this simply is

not true.

The dilemma is that journalists who “change hats” and work as PR representatives, can’t apply their own journalistic rules and integrity to other journalists. Your sole job as a PR person is to provide accurate and timely information. How another reporter writes or a broadcaster broadcasts the information is not your responsibility.

Reporters working as PR people also need to learn patience. While preparing the first of Western States 100 press releases, the first media call I received was from a young-sounding woman who said she represented an independent film distribution company in Southern California.

“We’re really interested in coming up and filming that weekend,” the woman explained. “Can you send us all the information you have about the Western States Tournament?”

On another occasion, about two weeks before the Western States 100, I received a call from the Armed Forces Radio Network. My first thought was, “Great, they want to come up and broadcast the race.”

Nothing was further from the truth. What this person, who identified himself as a supply sergeant, wanted was an application immediately sent to his captain, who had decided to enter the race on a whim. “He runs a lot,” the caller said, “so it won’t be a problem.”

The problem was that the event has qualifying standards; you can't enter on a whim. Knowing this, I had to diplomatically explain the situation, offer to mail an application for the next year's race and end the conversation with something upbeat and encouraging like, "Well, I hope to see your captain next year I'm sure he'll do well."

While working for three months on a public relations contract for the Sunmart Texas Trail Endurance Run in Huntsville, Texas, I was able to collaborate with numerous newspapers, news service and broadcast media outlets. The effort produced 42 press clippings about the invitational marathon and 50-mile race.

One of the most successful articles about the Texas event was a cover piece about the women's winner Ann Trason. It appeared in Outside Magazine. Additionally, Turner Group, Inc., an independent television syndicate in Golden, Colo., filmed the race and sold it to various cable systems around the country. In both instances, I served as a consultant and absorbed valuable insight into magazine and broadcast worlds.

The point is that if you're interested in promoting an event or organization you feel is worthwhile, it's possible and rewarding. The key ingredient is to persuade the company or organization that PR is just as important as any other component of their business.

With this in mind, following are some basic guidelines and suggestions for promotion - from a journalistic perspective. There's no guarantee, of course, that these guidelines will work. But they have proven successful in my world, and I suggest you use them to pursue a business or event you'd like to promote.

\* The most efficient way to expose an event to the media is to hire a journalist as a PR person. Journalists know the media, how the "game" is played and are usually better writers than PR people, who often have limited (if any) journalistic experience.

\* Inform the race/event organizers that they have to be capable of producing fast, accurate and complete

results. Daily newspapers will cooperate only if results are provided in timely, same-day fashion. Name, age, hometown, and time are essential. Magazines have deadlines, too. Respect the fact that reporters are doing their jobs, just like you are.

\* Have passion for the event you're publicizing, but don't expect the media to share your enthusiasm. A reporter's job is to objectively cover an event, not to provide hype. And with rare exception, any coverage is good coverage.

\* Realize the event you're publicizing is one small nugget in the journalism world. In my instance, I have passion for ultrarunning as a journalist any participant. But I know the sport is a small niche in the sports world.

Therefore, I don't come on "heavy-handed" with my public relations releases, and I don't expect miracles.

\* I write the releases in a straightforward, journalistic format. I include sponsors' names, of course. But I cut to the "nuts-and-bolts" of the release early in the first page. I always keep in mind one thing: Reporters and editors are deluged with press releases. If a release doesn't get their attention quickly and if it isn't written in succinct fashion, chances are it will abruptly be deposited in the trash.

\* If you're a journalist working as a PR person, make time for reporters. If a reporter is worth anything, they'll respect your time, too, and appreciate your efficiency and competence.

Remember that most daily reporters work under tight deadlines.

\* Be knowledgeable and accurate about the event you're publicizing. If a reporter asks about last year's results, don't say someone won in about four fours, but know the exact winning time. Don't say your event had 400 runners if it only had 310. The event will quickly lose whatever media credibility it may have had. If there's a controversial aspect to your event, accept that a reporter's job is to present both sides of the issue.

\* Sponsors are important. Unfortunately, publications have varying policies about the inclusion of sponsoring company's names in articles. Sometimes the policies make

sense, sometimes they don't. Accept these policies and don't argue with the reporter since they don't make the rules.

\* Publications also have varying policies about reporters accepting gifts. Some reporters are not allowed to accept "tokens of appreciation." If a reporter says he or she can't take a T-shirt or a baseball cap, don't be offended. Likewise, if the race you're publicizing is going to offer something to the media representatives in attendance, don't play favorites. Offer the same niceties to everyone.

\* Ask reporters for their business cards. Keep them on file or insert their particulars in your computer database for next year when it's time to start the PR process again. If a

reporter does a good job, write them and tell them so. If the opposite occurs, a letter of constructive criticism is warranted.

If a major mistake is made, call the publication on the same day the mistake occurred and request a correction or clarification.

\* Be patient. As a PR person for a sporting event, small business or organization, you should know everything about the subject you're publicizing, but don't expect the same from reporters.

## Chapter 9 A Niche Within A Niche

The success stories of small businesses are chronicled daily in

newspapers as well as on television and radio. Monthly magazines and trade journals thrive on business profiles. But every time these stories are published or broadcast, there's an equally compelling story behind the printed or spoken word.

Let me explain. As an independent small businessperson, I like to read, listen and watch how other entrepreneurs have developed their businesses. But what I also like to know is how a particular business received such great (and free) exposure.

As a journalist and publicist, I know the answer can be simple. While many business reporters are enterprising and developing their own story ideas, they also rely on ideas that arrive in

the mail or electronically via press releases. Simply stated, a press release appropriately representing a business, its owner or owners or a product, presented well, will entice reporters and editors. More succinctly, information from well-written business press releases will be published. Information from poorly written press releases is not often used.

Considering the two alternatives, journalists interested in providing public relations for smaller businesses or even large corporations can easily provide the first alternative and receive healthy compensation to do so.

To accomplish this, business owners first must understand public relations are an integral component of a

successful business. Chances are, a business wouldn't forget to list its business phone number in the telephone directory. Likewise, the business world shouldn't underestimate the power of the press.

In this regard, I have solicited and received several small business contracts, in the past few years, including one part-time account that produced nearly \$12,000 in income during a six-month period.

The contract quickly developed after I attended a trade show in Las Vegas for sporting goods retailers. Although I was on assignment to write a few new products articles, I also took the opportunity to ask a few of the business owners I interviewed if they had a need for public relations.

In one instance, the owner of a new company called Undercover Sports in Newark, Calif., nearly agreed on the spot. Undercover Sports, which has since been sold and renamed, manufactured bicycle helmets shaped like baseball caps for children and adults.

The company owner's young son had twice been seriously injured in skateboard and cycling accidents, primarily because he wasn't wearing a helmet. The son told his father that helmets were "geeky."

Knowing his son loved wearing baseball-style hats, the father brainstormed and eventually invented a safety approved helmet shell that fit under a baseball cap. Coincidentally,

the State of California was about to pass a mandatory helmet law for bicycle riders under age 18.

Not only did I write about the company in several newspapers articles, I eventually signed a six-month contract that paid me bonuses if I wrote a press release that triggered other magazines, newspapers or news services articles or features on radio or television stations.

In all, I wrote four press releases, mailed them to cycling columnists, business reporters, community affair reporters and a variety of other regional and national journalist. The response was dumbfounding. My releases resulted in more than a dozen newspaper articles, including a

prominently placed sports story in USA Today.

Additionally, the company owner and his son appeared on several regional radio talks shows and a few public affairs television shows. The result was a substantial boost to my wallet.

While my contract for Undercover Sports wasn't retained after the six-month time frame, it led to several other diverse business PR accounts.

Consider some examples:

\* Maxit Designs, Inc., in Carmichael, Calif., a mother-daughter team that manufactures and distributes thermal underwear and other inclement weather training apparel for the National Football League and the

general sporting public.

\* Fleet Feet, Inc., press releases and consulting for the national retail running and triathlon chain. In each of these instances, I consulted with the company owners, determined what kind of public relations and exposure they were seeking and mailed out releases according to their needs.

The opportunity for this kind of public relations is nearly endless. If you find a business in your area that's intriguing, call and see if you can make an appointment with the owner or managing partner.

Explain your expertise and offer a proposal that for \$500, you'll write, edit and mail to the appropriate media a release about the business. The

company would be required to supply letterhead and reimburse you for expenses and postage.

If the company agrees, you would write the release, submit it for approval and then mail (or email) it to a variety of local media outlets. Once the release is mailed, you should submit an invoice (payable within 30 days) to the company. Believe me, it works. Just look in the Yellow Pages and notice how many public relations firms are listed.

Many of the firms charge companies an exorbitant amount to help defray various corporate expenses. As an independent, you can offer a lower but fair price and achieve equal success. Of course, mentioning that you're working for yourself can also

be a good “selling” point to other business owners, who will likely appreciate your honesty and entrepreneurial ways.

## Chapter 10

### Those Who Can Also Teach

In addition to sports and business public relations work, I’ve also discovered in recent years that my experience as a sports newspaper staff reporter and freelancer is of interest to others considering the field.

This can hold true for anyone who writes — whether you write poetry, children’s books or romance novels. If you have expertise, why not consider teaching a class at a university extension learning program, a

community college, a writers' conference or a private workshop in your home or office?

In my instance, I've taught a half-dozen sports and health and fitness classes at several education levels. The compensation is not spectacular, but it's not bad and usually ranges from \$40 to \$100 per hour. Again, teaching provides an alternative to earning income as a sportswriter. It's using our journalistic skills, but there's no game to cover or athlete to interview.

In other words, you're a "gun for hire," and that's a good thing.