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Ron Kroichick's perspective on sports writing today

By Jon Kingdon



Ron Kroichick and his son Trevin at the U.S. Open at Pebble Beach in June 2019. Photo provided

"Find a job you enjoy doing and you'll never have to work a day in your life." - Mark Twain

Ron Kroichick, longtime sportswriter for the San Francisco Chronicle, took those words to heart: "I was always into sports and I liked to write so it was a perfect match. It merged my passions."

These passions have led to much recognition for Kroichick's writing: Best Sports Feature in 2016, California Newspaper Publishers Association (for series on Najee Harris, the nation's No. 1 college football recruit); Five-time honoree, Associated Press Sports Editors writing contest; Four-time honoree, Golf Writers Association of America writing contest.

Kroichick, a longtime Lamorinda resident, was born in Chicago and moved to San Diego when he was 12. It was then when Kroichick began anticipating a career as a sportswriter: "I knew at age 12-14 that being a sportswriter was what I wanted to do."

From that point, Kroichick kept his eye on the prize. Despite being an all-league tennis player and a member of the Patrick Henry High School basketball team, it was clear to Kroichick that a career as a professional athlete was not in the offing and that a career in sports journalism was a far more realistic career goal. As the sports editor and eventually the editor-in-chief for his

high school newspaper, Kroichick went on to UC Berkeley where he became the sports editor of the school paper as a sophomore.

It was a perfect match for him, says Kroichick who graduated in 1987 with a BA in English: "Berkeley had a great English department and the combination of top flight academic school and working on the student paper provided me with a really good experience there."

After an internship with the Riverside Press-Enterprise, Kroichick took a part-time job with the Sacramento Bee that soon became a full-time position and later allowed Kroichick to live in the Bay Area, which he had come to love during his time at Cal: "I moved back to the Bay Area because I was covering the Oakland A's from 1990 to 1994. It was a great time to be covering the A's with Jose Canseco, Mark McGwire, and Rickey Henderson, among others. That experience really shaped me as a sportswriter because I got to cover this 'rock-star' kind of team. Not only did they win a lot, they were full of personalities."

It was also a job more suited to an unmarried reporter: "I did get tired of the travel, being on the road constantly," Kroichick said. "I got married in 1993 so when the Raiders returned to the Bay Area in 1995, that prompted me to get my job with the Chronicle. This enabled me to get off the road and covering football made for a much more manageable life."

It pays to have a "liberal arts" education in sports to be a sportswriter. It has not been all football, baseball and basketball for Kroichick. He has been called on to cover boxing matches ("which was way beyond me") and a horse race at the California State Fair ("I was a fish out of water there") but the reporting tools translate the same for any event.

"You're a storyteller," says Kroichick. "It does help if you have a passion and a background for a sport but if you can tell stories, ask the right questions and express yourself with clarity, you can cover anything. I did cover figure skating at the Olympics in Norway in 1994 for the Bee which was the year of the Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan controversy. But that was more soap opera than figure skating."

Working on the road, Kroichick developed more of a relationship with his fellow writers than with those working in the office of his paper: "There is a camaraderie and a bit of a fraternity because you don't have that social interaction most people have at the office. We either work at home or at an event so the other beat writers became my friends. When I started covering the A's, I was only 24 so a lot of the writers were from my dad's generation. They were helpful, not so much about writing but how to handle the life - how to manage the travel, how to take it when a player would get angry at you."

When Kroichick was at Cal, he did some work under Dan McGrath for the Chronicle and it was McGrath as sports editor for the Bee who gave Kroichick his first full-time job. McGrath's initial advice was short and to the point: "Dan told me to 'Keep your eyes and ears open and don't think you know it all because you don't.' It's the best advice I ever got."

It's more than just covering a game and writing a story for the reporter today. Working as a beat reporter, covering the Oakland A's was a job with constant deadlines. Kroichick's chosen field at Cal prepared him to operate with the clock ticking: "It helped that I was an English major, writing essays and papers at the last minute in college," Kroichick said. "You learned how to organize your thoughts quickly. Baseball was great training for that because I was on deadline pretty much every night. Those five years really set me up where I learned to not panic, write quickly, organize my thoughts and express them clearly."

In dealing with so many different types of personalities, it's only natural for a reporter to develop relationships, friendships, and respect for a number of the athletes and to have favorite players and coaches to deal with. It was certainly no different for Kroichick: "It's not like it's a big chore for them to talk with us. If they treat you like a person, that does not go unnoticed and is appreciated."

Dennis Eckersley - Oakland A's - "I still keep in touch with Eck. He was so real, and I admired his authenticity. He wasn't afraid to show his vulnerabilities. Even after giving up a big home run, he would stand up and answer our questions. He really took responsibility for his successes and his failures."

Stephen Curry - Golden State Warriors - "Steph might be the most grounded superstar in sports today. He treats people with respect. There are times we'll talk about golf, a big passion for him and it's like two guys hanging out and chatting."

Steve Young, former 49ers quarterback - "I've gotten to know him through the 49ers and golf events. He is such a good guy who is willing to connect on many different levels. I talked with Steve at Pebble Beach after the Super Bowl earlier this year, and he gave me some great quotes about Kyle Shanahan and Jimmy Garoppolo."

Steve Kerr - Golden State Warriors - "He is just so smart and does not have a big ego which is unusual for someone so successful at the highest level. He can also talk about many subjects beyond basketball. He's really intelligent and doesn't talk down to the writers."

As for his favorite sports to cover, Kroichick has found much truth in George Plimpton's perspective on sports: The smaller the ball, the better the writing. "I think there is some truth to that," says Kroichick. "It's the pace of the game. Baseball and golf are my favorite sports to cover. Baseball is better to write about because it unfolds at a slower pace, so you have time to develop a story. I've covered golf over the last 15 years. It develops at a slow, rhythmic pace where you have time to delve into a player's backstory and personality, covering much more than just what club he hit. I really have become more into golf the last 10 years because I've been able to play with my son, Trevin, and it's been a great father-son bonding thing."

As the games and athletes have evolved, so have the fans which is something that the sportswriter has to take into account, says Kroichick: "You know that everyone is going to have the score on their phone or they have watched the game on TV so explaining what happened is no longer enough. You have to give them a reason to read the story beyond that the A's won or the Raiders lost. You need to provide an insight into things like why they called a certain play or why a player felt good or poorly that day. That is why it helps to have a relationship with the athletes and an insight into their past or some twist which then allows you to write original content that isn't going to seem stale to the readers. My goal is to provide something that readers and fans can't get anywhere else."

With the loss of many newspapers and the reduction in the staffs of the papers that have survived, aspiring journalists need to be alert to other opportunities that may be available, says Kroichick: "If I were just coming out of college and had ambitions of being a sportswriter, my first piece of advice would be to have a plan B. There are all kinds of ways to be involved in the sports industry that might not be traditional journalism because the reality is that traditional journalism has changed and has contracted and there are simply fewer jobs available."

Working for a good publication in a very desirable market has allowed Kroichick to live the fans dream, having covered World Series, Super Bowls, NBA Finals, 11 Master and US Open golf tournaments. Yet none of these have compared to the thrill Kroichick found watching his son play for and have a lot of success for the Campolindo High School basketball and baseball teams.

"I've had a really fortunate career to cover these events and I don't think anything has been more exciting than watching Trevin," he said. "In fact, it's not even close. The most exhilarating feeling I've ever had in sports was seeing Trevin succeed in sports at Campo. When Trevin hit the winning free throws against Whitney in the state tournament, the adrenaline rush was so much better than any sporting event I ever covered. It's not only that he had a good experience but that my wife and I were able to watch him and share it together."

Though his career at the Chronicle is far from complete, Kroichick can look back on his life and work so far with great affection: "I just feel grateful I've gotten to do what I love to do, and do it where I want to live."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

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