



Frank Deford

The legendary sports curmudgeon talks stand-up guys, naughty boys and the scourge that is the NCAA

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

In sports journalism, there are few as legendary as writer and commentator Frank Deford. His transformative and fruitful career has thus far spanned six decades; his stories reaching audiences via radio, television, books, movies and magazines. As GQ simply put it, he is “the world’s greatest sportswriter.”

Deford’s been awarded an Emmy, a Peabody and the PEN Lifetime Achievement Award – to name a few – and he was elected into the Hall of Fame of the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association in 1998. Last year President Barack Obama presented Deford with a National Humanities Medal for transforming the way America thinks about sports.

At 76, Deford remains a relevant voice in sports journalism. His markedly original and fiercely compelling sports commentaries can be heard Wednesday mornings on NPR, and he continues to appear regularly as a senior correspondent on HBO’s “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel.”

He’s currently in the process of finishing his 19th book, a family saga he describes as an American “Downton Abbey.” It will be his 10th novel. His last book, “Over Time: My Life as a Sportswriter,” was a New York Times best seller.

Deford spoke with Street Roots from Key West, Fla., where he and his wife, Carol, reside most of the year. We wanted to hear his thoughts about some recent controversies involving athletes, and how he thinks the current climate in sports compares to the nature of athletics when he first stepped out as a sports reporter for Sports Illustrated in the early 1960s.

Emily Green: *Recently, the sports world paused when five St. Louis Rams players took to the field with their arms raised, showing their support of protesters in Ferguson. It’s just one example of statements made today. From your perspective, do you think social and political statements made a few decades ago by athletes were more powerful than the ones being made by athletes today?*

Frank Deford: People have said for a long time now, “What’s the matter with athletes, they’re not nearly as engaged as athletes were back in the 60s when you had Jim Brown, (John) Carlos, (Tommy) Smith, (Bill) Russell and Arthur Ashe and so forth, but I think it’s a case of the athletes mirroring their peers more than anything else. I don’t think that young people in general have been very engaged politically in the last few decades the way they were in a very tumultuous time, with Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. My sense is that now that an issue has arisen, which particularly affects African-American athletes, it’s rather natural that they come to the floor and make themselves known. After all, Charles Barkley’s come out and said quite the opposite, that he doesn’t see anything wrong with what the police have done, so I’m delighted to see young athletes speak up. It doesn’t trouble me at all.

E.G.: *Over the course of your career, what kinds of changes have you seen in the attitudes and motivations of professional athletes?*

F.D.: It’s pretty much mirrored the larger society. I don’t think athletes have particularly diverted away from what’s going on in the general mind of the public. There have been some extraordinary leaders. Billie Jean King is probably the most prominent force, culturally, among athletes, and she stood out very bravely, and at a time when she was struggling to be the best player in the world, and I’ve always held her up as the best example of an athlete who can speak up.

But again, athletes are, after all, young people – we should never forget that. We shouldn’t expect them to be leaders. We shouldn’t expect them to be necessarily articulate. I’m sometimes amazed that they do speak as well – some of them – as they do. The average 23- or 24-year-old is still very much of an unformed person, and the best athletes have been coddled and cheated-on-behalf-of and praised and held in the highest regard since they were children, so I am sometimes incredulous that they’ve managed to come through as well as they do. I look back on myself, and if I ever received the attention as a teenager that the athletes do, I think I would have been very unbalanced.

E.G.: *TMZ has been breaking some pretty big news in sports lately, with the Ray Rice elevator video and the Donald Sterling recording – why do you think these stories surfaced via a gossip rag and not from the mouths of sports journalists?*

F.D.: Sports writers are assigned to cover teams and

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