



## A WINNING SEASON? IT'S TIME TO TAKE SPORTS WRITING SERIOUSLY

David Marannis at Book Expo 2007 – New York City

KENNEALLY: On behalf of Copyright Clearance Center, my name is Chris Kenneally. I'm the moderator for another special edition of a program we call *Beyond the Book*. We're here to join the BookExpo America extravaganza this weekend at the Jacob Javits Center in New York City. And this is as close as I'll ever get, I think, to being an announcer for a World Series baseball game. Because it's a beautiful day, there's some great players here to talk to and to watch as they tell us all about their stories, and it feels as if there's like a World Series here of authors and editors.

I want to start with David Maraniss, who is, among many other things, an associate editor at the *Washington Post*, and the author of four critically acclaimed, best-selling books – *They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace Vietnam and America*, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*, *First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton*, and last year's *Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero*. He also recently served as guest editor for *Best American Sportswriting 2007*. He is the author of *The Clinton Enigma*, and co-author of *The Prince of Tennessee: Al Gore Meets His Fate*, and *Tell Newt to Shut Up*. During his nearly three-decade career at the *Post*, he has won virtually every major award in journalism, including the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting. Welcome, David.

MARANISS: Thank you.

(applause)

KENNEALLY: Indeed, well deserved. You've written biographies of Bill Clinton and Vince Lombardi, among others. And since we're talking here about sportswriting and how it may or may not differ from other kinds of writing, I want to ask you did you approach Vince Lombardi as a subject any differently than you might Bill Clinton?

MARANISS: Well, I have to say that when I was researching the Lombardi book, or writing it, Bill Clinton's second term was unfolding in some difficult ways for him. So it was a relief for me to go home from after appearing on television trying to explain Bill Clinton, to go home and write about the Packer sweep. But in fact, I approach all of my books the same way, with the same level of research. And some are a little easier than others, but I try to do it the same way. My first motto is go there, wherever there is. For Lombardi, that meant persuading – uttering the famous last words to my wife, how would you like to move to Green Bay for the winter?

KENNEALLY: And you did.

MARANISS: Yeah. And I did, and we loved it. But Bill Clinton and Vince Lombardi, they seem like polar opposites. One, the symbol of the old way and discipline, and the other sort of the symbol of the post-war Baby Boom generation and all of its undiscipline. But in fact I found a lot of commonalities between those two people. The obsession to win, first of all. Incredible will power. Coming out of nowhere to succeed – Bill Clinton from Hope and Hot Springs, Arkansas, to become the first Baby Boomer President of the U.S. Vince Lombardi really struggling in anonymity for 20 years and almost ready to give up coaching, ready to become a bank official, when he got his shot. And went from New York City, where he lived most of his life, out to little Green Bay and turned it around.

Another aspect they had in common, surprisingly, was they're both educated in Jesuit colleges. Bill Clinton coming out of Arkansas – his first year at Georgetown, one of the seminarians there took him out for a hamburger and a beer. And after a short discussion, said, you know, Bill, you really ought to come into the priesthood. And Clinton said, well, don't you have to be a Catholic first? He was a Baptist. But he was so good at adapting to any situation that all the seminarians there thought he was a Catholic. And Lombardi, of course, was a Jesuit through and through. Trained at Fordham. And there's a scene in my Lombardi book where his secretary in Green Bay sneaks into his office late one afternoon and sees him in there wearing priest's garments. I mean, he really sort of in some ways thought that we where he should have been.

KENNEALLY: And you also uncovered something that surprised me, that Vince Lombardi almost had a political career.

MARANISS: Well – yes. It would have been a disaster. But it wouldn't have been as big a disaster as what happened. This was actually when Richard Nixon was looking for a running mate. And he asked John Mitchell to check out Vince Lombardi. And John Mitchell came back and said, you know, his wife loves you, Marie. And he's got all of the things you're looking for, but there's one problem – he's a Kennedy Democrat. So Nixon took Spiro Agnew instead.

KENNEALLY: You told me when we chatting about this panel that your subject really is American culture. And I want to ask you about how sports figures serve as a lens into that for you.

MARANISS: Yeah. Well, they can. I don't want to pretend that sports figures are sort of the best representatives of American culture, but they can offer some wonderful opportunities to explore some of the key issues of American life. And so whether it's writing about the mythology of competition and success, as Michael Lewis does with Bill Parcells – which is one of the stories in the anthology that I edited – or Vince Lombardi, it really – what sports does is provides you first what you need as a writer, which is a great, dramatic story. And then you can move into culture from there. I don't want to exaggerate it. There are times when some writers try to put culture into a sports book when it doesn't belong. But with some figures, you can do it. And so with like Jackie Robinson or Roberto Clemente, what better lens is there into race and culture in America than sports? And so in those ways, I think it provides incredible opportunity.

KENNEALLY: Well, tell us about your experience as guest editor for the *Best Sportswriting* anthology. You got an opportunity to read dozens of pieces. And give us a snapshot of the state of sportswriting today.

MARANISS: You know, I honestly think that sportswriting has always had the best and the worst in writing. And so I don't like to distinguish one golden era from another. I read some incredible pieces this year and some that I thought were stereotypes and trite. But the ones I picked, I tried to pick a wide spectrum of the most interesting stories that I could find. And so they ranged from Michael Lewis, who's an incredibly well-known sportswriter, and Sally Jenkins, one of the great columnists in the country, to a guy I'd never heard of, who I guess has a book coming out this year, named Derek Zumsteg, who – the piece he submitted was on a website called U.S.S. Mariner, which I'd never heard of. And it was a fabulous deconstruction of a 1947 Bugs Bunny cartoon, where Bugs plays all nine positions, and beats the Gas-House Gorillas. And he does it like he's from Sabermetrics, you know, the (inaudible). And he just deconstructs it in a marvelous way. And I wrote a little preface for each of the stories, and I said I'd never heard of U.S.S. Mariner, this piece probably could have used an editor, but on the other hand, an editor wouldn't have let it go, and it's a fabulous piece. So I was just delighted to be able to get it into the book.

KENNEALLY: How do you think sportswriting shapes the way fans relate to the athletes and the sports themselves?

MARANISS: Well, my feeling about sports – and I'm sure it's something that Peter has documented – is that athletes don't change. The culture changes around them, but athletes – I mean, you talk about that golden era of Vince Lombardi and the Green Bay Packers, they were a bunch of roustabouts. Jimmy Taylor and Paul Hornung. And the same with the Yankees of the '50s and '60s. So the athletes today are the

same as then. The culture has changed around them. There's huge amount more money, there's a lot more television, talk radio 24 hours a day. And so the press is focused on everything they do, whereas in the '50s and '60s, really not until I guess the early – or Jim Brosnan in '59 sort of wrote *The Long Season* –

GOLENBOCK: ESPN.

MARANISS: – and –

GOLENBOCK: ESPN.

MARANISS: – yeah, ESPN. But starting then, it started to infiltrate some of what was really going on with these athletes. And then now, anything they do – Stray Rod –

GOLENBOCK: Stray Rod.

MARANISS: – is the headline of the week. With Alex Rodriguez. So it's changed immensely, and that changes the way fans view sports. Although, I have an odd, contradictory sensibility about it, which my dad shares with me. Which is as much as I'm interested in hard reporting and believe it's completely necessary, when I'm listening to a ball game, I want to listen on the radio to the worst homer around. Someone like Ron Santo.

GOLENBOCK: Exactly.

MARANISS: You know? I love that. And it really is a balm to everything else that's going on.

KENNEALLY: You are not one to think of athletes as heroes. And yet the book on Clemente talks about his as a hero. What do you see in him that makes him a hero, when others perhaps aren't?

MARANISS: Well, the truth is that I have some second-thoughts about even using that in the subtitle of the book, because hero is the most overused word in sports. My first idea was to call it *The Passion of Clemente*, but Mel Gibson ruined that idea. So anyway, hero got into the subtitle. I love Clemente. He wasn't a saint. And the book shows that. But he was the rare athlete who was growing as human being, as his talents – well, they didn't diminish much, but as he was getting older. And he died in a way that is the classic definition of a hero, which is someone who gives his life in the service of others. He died in a plane crash trying to deliver humanitarian aid to Nicaragua after a horrible earthquake there, where he had sent down aid and heard that Anastasio Somoza, the strong man of Nicaragua, was really stealing the aid, diverting it at the airport. He said if I go with it to the people, and that's what sent him onto this ill-fated plane, so –

KENNEALLY: And, well –

MARANISS: – in that sense, he was heroic.

KENNEALLY: And your reporting uncovered something, which was that he should never have been on that plane, that plane should never have flown.

MARANISS: Right. The documents I got – that no one had ever seen before – on that actual plane – the internal documents of the Federal Aviation Commission were the most devastating I've ever read, including anything I read about Vietnam. The owner of the plane did not know how to fly it, he'd taken it out once and taxied into a ditch. The Federal Aviation Administration was under direct orders not to allow tramp airlines like that to take off and fly without surveillance. The pilot hadn't any sleep in 27 hours, and had, himself, was about to have his license revoked. They didn't have a flight engineer on the plane, so they recruited a mechanic off the ramp to be the flight engineer. And the pilot was sleeping in the cockpit while it was loaded – 4000 plus pounds overloaded. It didn't have a chance. And it just barely got off the runway in San Juan, and crashed into the sea.

KENNEALLY: Well, I think what we just learned was that sportswriting isn't just about sports, it's about almost any topic really that involves human beings.