



Beyond the Book®



BEYOND THE BOOK

A WINNING SEASON? IT'S TIME TO TAKE SPORTSWRITING SERIOUSLY

KENNEALLY: I want to turn now to Peter Golenbock. Peter is the author of many, many books on sports. Most recently a novel, actually, *7: The Mickey Mantle Novel*, and the other book titles have included *Wrigleyville*, *Wild, High and Tight: The Life of Billy Martin*, *Bums*, and the *New York Times* bestsellers, *Dynasty*, *The Bronx Zoo*, written with Sparky Lyle, *Number 1* with Billy Martin, and *Balls* with Craig Nettles. Peter lives in St. Petersburg, Florida. Welcome to the panel, Peter.

GOLENBOCK: Thank you very much.

(applause)

KENNEALLY: I was intrigued to learn that you began your own sportswriting career as a correspondent from a certain small town in New Hampshire. And it was already, though, a kind of foreshadowing of the direction your writing would take. Tell us about that.

GOLENBOCK: Well, I didn't know it. I mean, I was a freshman at Dartmouth College, and I started working for *The Dartmouth*, which was the campus newspaper. And I guess I was pretty good at it, because very soon they asked me if I would be the campus correspondent to the *New York Times*. And they were paying me \$5 an article. You'd write two paragraphs and a box score, and they said you can write about any sport you want to. And for crying out loud, they had dozens and dozens of different sports. I thought, boy, I'm going to get rich. And I was making a good \$30 a week doing that. I was one of the wealthiest guys on campus.

KENNEALLY: That was good walking-around money in those days. But there was also a figure on campus who became important to you who did relate to the future of your career.

GOLENBOCK: Yeah. It's kind of amazing how it works like that. When I was a kid, I discovered a book called *The New York Yankees* by Frank Graham. And I have no idea why this book meant so much to me, but I must have read it a hundred times. Because in this book, he had conversations with Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. And I think the book came out in like 1946, something like that. And this was the history

of the Yankees. Frank Graham was this wonderful sportswriter. One of the guys who wrote conversations, as opposed to just facts. I was more – I was always interested in the people more so than exactly what they did. Though if you were a Yankee fan, you knew they were going to win.

And so the athletic director at Dartmouth was a fellow by name of Red Rolfe, who turned out to be – he was a third baseman for those Yankees during the '30s and the '40s. And when he was there, he was sort of on his way out. I mean, everybody wanted him to leave. All the coaches wanted a new guy, wanted new blood. Red was kind of a pain in the ass. The baseball coach wanted him gone. But to me, he was like a god. I was like a 16-year old freshman at Dartmouth College, and this was Red Rolfe, who had played ball with Lou Gehrig and played ball with Joe DiMaggio. And it was a chance for me to sit with him and ask him about these guys. And so I became sort of a pet of Red's, because here was this kid who actually cared about him and cared about his career. And I didn't realize it, but Red Rolfe was the first of probably 400 interviews that I've had with former Major League players. It was magical, for me.

KENNEALLY: That's terrific, the way life really began that early for you –

GOLENBOCK: (inaudible) amazing.

KENNEALLY: – in your career. And it would continue that way – tell us about how you pitched your first book idea, and that then became the bestseller.

GOLENBOCK: Well, also unique kind of a thing. After Dartmouth, I went to NYU law school, where I spent most of my time hanging out with the Knicks and the Rangers and the Yankees and the Jet and the Giants. I mean, I was not a very good law student, and I knew just enough to get by. And I got my first job working for Friedman and Fishman. And I lasted there six weeks, because they handed me this stack of cases and they said, OK, we want you to handle these. And in six of them, the statute of the limitations had run. Now, that's a six-year statute of limitations where if you let the statute run, your client cannot get into court. And you can be disbarred for that. So either Friedman or Fishman, one of the two of them, said here's this pile of cases. And I brought them back to him and said, hey, the statute run on these six cases. And he said to me, OK, call these people up and tell them why they don't have a case. And I said I quit. And that was it.

And then I went to the *New York Times*, and I got myself a job at Prentice Hall as a journalist, writing about President Nixon's wage and price controls. And this was the summer of 1972, and I discovered the whole thing was kind of a fraud because all the prices were allowed to go up, but none of the wages. So sort of Republican duplicity that perhaps we've seen before. At any rate, after six weeks, I found a trade book catalog from Prentice Hall. And I thought to myself, well, I can write a book better than the stuff I'm seeing in this catalogue. And I ran downstairs just to knock on the door of the trade book editor's office, and it was such a small

operation that he didn't even have a secretary. And so he says come in, and I went in. And I told him, look, during the 16 years between 1949 and 1964, the Yankees won 14 pennants and nine world championships, this would make a great book. And not only that – every year, they had more than a million in attendance, so that's 16 million people. And if I can sell books to just 1% of those people, we'll have a bestseller. And he says, OK, I'll give you a contract.

KENNEALLY: And that –

GOLENBOCK: And that's what happened. And then – and it doesn't happen very often. And actually, I told that story to the *Bergen Record* in the first article about this particular book after it came out, and Dincheke (sp?) received 60, 70 book proposals. And they were all terrible, so –

KENNEALLY: He didn't take any of them.

GOLENBOCK: Yeah. Right.

KENNEALLY: Well, that was a wonderful stroke of luck for you. But then something happened – you worked on the book for almost a year, researching the record of those years, and determined that that was hardly going to be enough?

GOLENBOCK: Well, I went to Yankee Stadium, and the Yankees – Bob Fishel was the PR guy, and Marty Appel, who's still a close friend of mine, was his assistant. And they said, sure, you can do whatever research you want, we're got all these newspaper articles in our files, and you're welcome to hang with us. And I became sort of an unpaid member of the Yankees during the 1972-73 season. Steinbrenner came along right after that and fired everybody. But this was before everybody got fired. And so they let me hang around. And after I had compiled all my information with which I was going to write this book, it occurred to me quite in the pit of my stomach that none of this information was worth a damn. I hadn't quite formulated it. But if you're going to write a book, the idea is you're going to write something that somebody's never read before. You better give them something new, or it's not worth doing it.

And so I went back to Dincheke and I said look, I need – he gave me \$2500 to start. So at the end of the year, I went back to him and I said, look, I need to interview these guys. Will you give me another \$2500, and he said yes. If he had said no, my career was over. I would have owed him \$2500, and I don't know what I would have done. But he said yes. So he gave me \$2500 – I started going around the country interviewing. I started with Jim Constanti and ended up with Mantle and Maris, and Clete Boyer and Whitey Ford, and everybody who played on the Yankees, I went to see them. Interviewed them all. I had to go back for another \$2500, and yet a fourth \$2500, and each time, the guy gave me the money. And that enabled me to finish the book.

KENNEALLY: Well, tell us about the first meeting with Mickey, and – he told you something that must have struck you, and I'm imagining became the seed that got planted that wound up being this new book.

GOLENBOCK: Yeah, without a doubt.

KENNEALLY: Tell us about that.

GOLENBOCK: Mickey had – I'd called Mickey. The Yankees were wonderful to me, just wonderful. And they gave me access to all the telephone numbers of all their former Yankees. If I tried to do this today, the Yankees are so rotten today that I couldn't even get in the door. They'd have hung up on me. But I'd been hanging around for a year and made friends with all these people, and they said sure, here's our list of alumni with their addresses and telephone numbers. Which certainly made – David can tell you – that's the trick of these things. Find out where these people are, and sometimes that's the hardest part. And so I called Mickey at home, and he said, sure, come over the house, I'll be glad to talk to you. And I showed up and knocked on the door. And I guess it was Merlyn who answered, and I said where's Mickey? And she said he's in New York. Well, apparently, Mickey –

KENNEALLY: Mickey was being Mickey.

GOLENBOCK: Mickey was being Mickey. And so I got on a plane, went to New York, and I met him there in the clubhouse. And we talked for over an hour, and he proceeded to tell me some of the most intimate aspects of his life. The thing I discovered about Mickey is you could generally ask him anything, and he would give you, if he trusted you, an open, honest answer. And so among the things he told me about – he told me about – I was the first person he told about his fears. Mickey had retired in '68, and this was '72 or '73. And so Mickey said to me, he said at night, I go to sleep and I have this dream that I'm standing outside of Yankee Stadium, and I can hear the public address announcer going now batting in the third position, number seven, Mickey Mantle, and I can't find the door to get inside the stadium. And I can hear Casey Stengel saying where's Mickey, where's Mickey. And I can't get in. And he said, and I would wake up in a cold sweat. You know? Which was very, very interesting.

Mickey was one of those athletes who should have dropped dead on the day that he quit. Because he just could not figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. And he really wasn't equipped to do anything with the rest of his life. He was fortunate, because he was so incredibly famous, and people would pay him money to go to dinners or go to openings of malls, or that sort of thing. And people, beginning about '87 or '88, would pay him \$25, \$30, \$40 to sign his name to a piece of paper. Which Mickey also thought was totally ridiculous. What I loved about Mickey was that he did not think he was any big deal. Mickey could not understand why people were so gaga about him. Which was a totally endearing quality about him. Plus, he was one of the funniest, funniest people I have ever had

the pleasure of sitting with. We'd be sitting in a bar, and he would be telling these incredible raucous jokes – many of which, I put in this book.

I mean, this is a very, very funny book because Mickey was a very, very funny person. I find it unbelievably ironic that the *New York Post* ripped me a new you-know-what for being so – they said it was pornographic. And then, of course, they should come out – after following poor Alex Rodriguez around – Stray Rod. Still one of the great – in history that will go down as one of the great headlines of sports history. But the fact that they're following this guy around – there's something very sleazy and sort of semi-disgraceful about all of that.

KENNEALLY: But the thing that's different with this book, of course, is that you got an opportunity, because it's a novel, to imagine things that didn't necessarily happen, and write them.

GOLENBOCK: Well, I mean the things that are in this book are things that happened. What I had to do – I mean, I was forced to do it. The reason I called it a novel is that if I had not called it a novel, the *New York Post* would have ripped me a new one for not being able to establish my sources. I didn't want to – who was that fellow with a million little lies – James –

LAWFRENCE: Frey.

KENNEALLY: James Frey

GOLENBOCK: Frey. I didn't want to be James Fried. So I deliberately called it The Mickey Mantle Novel. But all of these things in this book happened. What I didn't have the opportunity to interview anybody about, because the people who told me these stories had passed away, was the details. And so the things that are in this book happened. But I must tell you, the details of it, for a number of these stories, I had to imagine.

KENNEALLY: And yet, you got an opportunity, because it was a novel, to imagine yourself as Mickey.

GOLENBOCK: Well, amazingly enough – you sort of transform yourself – I wrote this thing in the first person, with Mickey telling the story. This is the autobiography Mickey would have written, had he had somebody like me to sit with him and do it. But he had passed on in 1995, and so unfortunately I sort of had to do it myself.

KENNEALLY: Well, your sportswriting career then goes back 35 years or more. What is it about sportswriting today that you admire, and what is it that you find lacking?

GOLENBOCK: Well, that sportswriters I admire are the ones I read. David here is as good as anybody on the planet. And Michael Lewis is – I find amazing. Because what Michael can do, what's just incredible to me – he started off with *Moneyball*

interviewing a whole raft of general managers, apparently to write a book about exactly what, I'm not sure. But when he came across Billy Beane of the Oakland A's, he discovered something. And he discovered something very, very important. And he's got this incredible mind, where he takes all of this – it's like sculpturing, where you take a big blob of clay and you sculpture it away until you come up with a Brancusi. And that's what Michael Lewis did.

He had one scene in *Moneyball*, where he's got all the scouts sitting in the room on this side, and he's got this kid sitting over here with a computer. And they're trying to figure out who to draft. So he says to the scout, who should we get? And the scout throws a name out. And Beane goes, nah, I don't think we want him. And so he goes to the guy with the computer, and says who should we get? And he says, well, this guy last year hit so and so, and his on base percentage and so and so, we ought to draft this guy. And the guy goes, OK, we'll draft him. The next scout – and he declines his recommendation. He comes back over to this guy, and he takes his recommendation. Well, before we're done, he fires all the scouts. He determines that the scouting system is ridiculous, and that the guy with the computer with the numbers – the numbers will tell you who to take. And that's what his book was all about. And it was an incredibly revelation.

And the other thing that's amazing, of course, is that today, you've got a number of teams who do what Billy Beane does. And then you've got other teams, like my Tampa Bay Devil Rays, who don't. And you say to yourself, wait a second. Michael Lewis in *Moneyball* has just told every Major League baseball team how to be the most efficient and to be the most smart, why isn't everybody do this? And you discover that baseball has a tradition, which is very, very, very difficult to break. And so teams with young, hip guys, they're more willing to go out on a limb and do something different than the teams with the guys who are not so young and not so hip.

KENNEALLY: And sports now is much more a part of the entertainment culture than really it's own separate world, don't you think?

GOLENBOCK: Well, the thing you discover watching ESPN is that a lot of my contemporaries are now no longer so much writing the sports, but they're the guys. Tony Kornheiser, who's one of the great sportswriters in America, he's now on TV arguing with Mike Wilbon, who is another of the great sportswriters in America. But now they're making their money being TV talking heads.

MARANISS: Or Buster Olney, who had that –

GOLENBOCK: Or Buster.

MARANISS: – great season covering the Yankees when they first won the World Series, and now –

GOLENBOCK: Buster wrote a fabulous –

MARANISS: – he's on TV.

GOLENBOCK: He wrote a fabulous book on the New York Yankees – Buster's one of the very best. But now Buster's a TV guy.

MARANISS: They're making more money that way.

GOLENBOCK: If I had been –

MARANISS: So that is one of the ways that sportswriting has really diminished.

KENNEALLY: Yes.

GOLENBOCK: I must tell you – it's much more difficult, today, to write about sports in books than it ever was. And I'll tell you – among the reasons is that publishers today now want, more than anything, they want fame. They want celebrity. It's very difficult to write about the 1908 Cubs and find somebody who will actually publish it. I mean, that's a coup. It must be, I'm sure, a fabulous book, because she got that published. But today, they want A-Rod's story. And of course, you as a writer, if you get A-Rod's story – well A-Rod gets \$1 million, he gives you \$50,000 because he's got an agent who wants to make sure that A-Rod gets 110% of the book deal.

KENNEALLY: Right.

GOLENBOCK: You know, it's hard.

KENNEALLY: Do you think the players in 1908 thought of themselves as anything particularly special? They were just having some fun and lucky to get paid for it?

MURPHY: Well, I think the really great players always have a sense of being something special, of being gifted far beyond ordinary mortals. Although I came across a series of newspaper articles that Honus Wagner did, in which he gets very testy at – he thought people didn't respect the amount of work he did. But he was clearly – I mean frankly, all great athletes are something of freaks. I mean they're just – they can just do things we can't do. I think the big difference is that today, in the major sports, your life is quite separate from the lives that ordinary people lead. Yogi Berra used to go home in the winter and sell suits. And I think that connects you much more.

GOLENBOCK: He was good at it.

MURPHY: But Peter and David –

GOLENBOCK: He was good at it, too.

MURPHY: – actually know – all my guys were dead. (laughter)

(overlapping conversations; inaudible)

MARANISS: Well, most athletes today have a sense of entitlement from age 11. They're separated from the rest of the kids at school. And so by the time they're 18, they do have this – and a lot of – maybe 1% of those will make the Major Leagues or the NBA or the NFL, but – so there's a whole lot of kids who have really traumatic experiences from age 18 to 24, when they realize they're not going to make it. But all of the ones who do make it, that sense of entitlement is even more enhanced. And so then, when they get out of – when their careers end, then they're really in trouble. A lot of them.

GOLENBOCK: Some people have said that basketball's the worst thing that has ever happened to the black community. And the reason for that is, I discovered in my research, that of the high school ball players, one out of every 10,000 high school ball player makes it to the pros. And it may even be less now, because they're going to Europe, to Estonia and places like that, to get professional basketball players. But these kids in the 7th and 8th grade, almost every single one of them, if you interview them, will tell you that they're going to be professional basketball players. And so some sociologists wonder if perhaps they take the basketball away and not make that an option, perhaps some more – some of these kids would study harder, work harder to go to college.

KENNEALLY: Well, on that, I want to thank everybody here, from Lawrence to Golenbock to Murphy to Maraniss, it's a great play, and really enjoyed having you all here. Thank you, as well, for joining us.

(applause)

GOLENBOCK: Thank you.

MURPHY: Thank you very much.