

THE SPORTS SCHOLAR

by George Robinson

Reprinted courtesy of THE MAIN EVENT, A sports journal for physicians.

Anesthesiologist Stanley Grosshandler, MD, doubles as a sports historian and journalist

Like many physicians, Stanley Grosshandler, MD, enjoys teaching, an activity he indeed considers "the most fun in medicine." The Raleigh, North Carolina, anesthesiologist, however, may be the only doctor in America who splits his pedagogic time between his medical specialty and a course in sports history.

Grosshandler teaches anesthesiology at the University of North Carolina Medical School. He teaches baseball to undergraduates at rival North Carolina State, where two history- department colleagues handle football and other sports.

Scholarly baseball fans will often spot the Grosshandler by- line in the Baseball Research Journal, an annual publication of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). He contributed a research piece to that publication for nine years. "There are always enough SABR people out there who'll pick up on your research if you're wrong," he says. A SABR member for 18 years, he served as its first liaison to major league baseball teams.

The 63-year-old Grosshandler has published a wide range of sports history articles. He contributes a regular series of "where are they now?" profiles of former athletic stars to Sports Digest, as well as historical pieces to Baseball Digest and Football Digest. Among those he has profiled: Bobby Brown, Enos Slaughter, Gene Conley, Arky Vaughn, Wally Berger, Dick Groat, Ernie Nevers, Bob Pettit and Ernie Vandeweghe.

Interviewing Kemp

He has also profiled teams, including the Pittsburgh Steelers and Buffalo Bills. In writing the team history of the Bills, Dr. Grosshandler had occasion to interview former congressman and current Housing secretary Jack Kemp. "He was one of the least pleasant interviews I've ever done," says Grosshandler. "He was very curt, and treated me as if I were annoying him. He had very little to say, and generally acted as if I were a nuisance."

Not surprisingly, Grosshandler is an inveterate sports fan, whose voluminous library of sports books was once the subject of a Sports Illustrated article. Located in his home, the library consists of some 3,100 titles, including guide-books, reference works and sports classics. Disdainful of "kiss and tell" sports biographies, he reserves his shelves primarily for research works. "I also have the scorecard of every baseball and football game I've ever attended," he says. "I can enjoy a game only if I keep score. It's a ritual for me."

In fact, he taught his wife, Mary, and five children to keep score so that he could visit ballpark refreshment stand (and restrooms) without missing action on the field. Fortunately, Mary is also interested in sports; the Grosshandlers took in a San Francisco Giants game while honeymooning.

Beyond Baseball

A prolific writer, Grosshandler has written baseball articles for the stadium programs of every team in the American League, and for local magazines and newspapers in North Carolina and Wisconsin. His diverse interests have led him to assay not only baseball and football, but also swimming, ice hockey and even badminton.

He never knows where or when he'll happen onto a story idea. "I once was an anesthesiologist for Dr. David Dunn, a neurosurgeon who had been a member of the Olympic bobsled team," Grosshandler recalls. "So I wrote a profile of him."

Helpful friends have introduced him to former sports stars such as Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch, about whom he later wrote an article. The physician numbers among his friends front-office people at several major league baseball teams, archivists at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and Sports News trivia maven John

Duxbury. Grosshandler fondly remembers San Francisco Giants general manager Al Rosen discussing his near miss, as a Cleveland Indian in 1953, of an American League triple crown (highest batting average and most home runs and runs batted in). Rosen lost the batting title by 1 percentage point on the last day of the season.

"I have met some absolutely wonderful people through this hobby of mine," Grosshandler says. "My experience is that it's delightful to talk with a retired athlete about his past glories."

Are Sports Academic?

As a teacher of sports history Grosshandler avoids taking an "academic" approach in the classroom. "I try to relate what happened and how the media reported on it," he says. "These other professors waste too much time on the deep sociological meaning of events. That's a waste of time."

An interest in sports history came naturally to Grosshandler. "I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio," he says, "and unless you played football or baseball there, you were an outcast." No outcast, grosshandler played both.

Indeed, he played sandlot baseball until he graduated from medical school at Ohio State, and was an offensive and a defensive end on the football teams at the University of Cincinnati and the College of Wooster.

One memory from his college football career, a fluke Cincinnati victory over Kentucky, stands out. "It was a bizarre game," Grosshandler says. "George Blanda was Kentucky's quarterback, and they were a T-formation squad. Then, two days before they played us, Kentucky switched to a 'Notre Dame box' formation, with Blanda at tailback instead." Unaccustomed to its new offensive scheme, Kentucky lost to underdog Cincinnati. "An inferior team beat the Wildcats that day," says Grosshandler.

Athletic Aspirations

Although he fantasized about a career playing sports, Grosshandler had no illusions about the extent of his prowess. "I realized that I would have not have made it as a pro player in either baseball or football," he admits with a chuckle.

Grosshandler did get at least one "nibble" from a pro organization during his playing days. "When I played football at the University of Cincinnati," he recalls, "the Rams (then in Cleveland) sent a letter asking every college football player in Ohio if he would be interested in playing professionally." Grosshandler had already made plans to attend medical school. "It was a great ego boost to get that letter, but I had already made up my mind to go to college for four more years." He never answered the Rams' inquiry.

The sports-minded physician played in a slow-pitch softball league until a few years ago, but no more. "My wife made me quit," he confesses. "She pointed out to me that my baseball shoes were older than most of the guys I was playing with."

While hard-put to explain his choice of a medical career – "I've always liked people," he says with a shrug – Grosshandler has no trouble explaining his avocation, sports history.

"My father owned a newspaper in town when I was growing up, and I worked on it until I was in medical school," he says. As an athlete and a sports fan, Grosshandler the journalist naturally gravitated to sports as his principal subject.

"I wrote a sports column under an alias," he reveals. "I wanted to keep people from thinking I got the column only because I was the publisher's son." It's an allegation that the widely published sports historian no longer has to worry about.