

Entertainment — and much, much more

Sports Illustrated senior writer shares views on sports and experiences in journalism during area visit

BY PAUL WATSON
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Sports writing is one of the best jobs one can have. You get to see some great games, get to meet some great people and work with the greatest people.

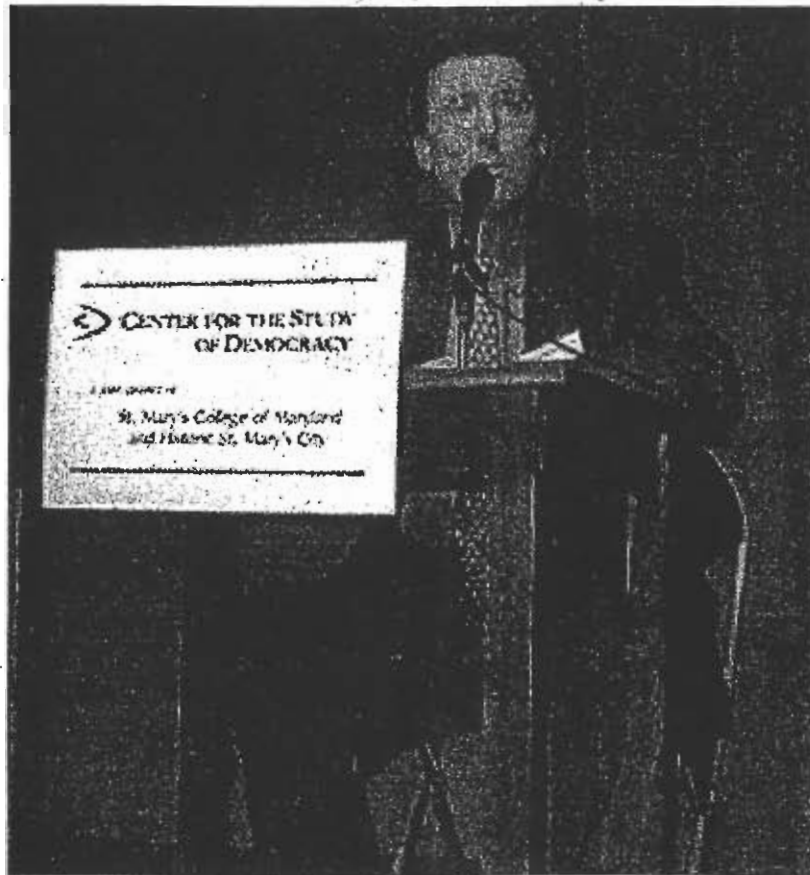
Alexander Wolff, senior writer with Sports Illustrated, knows all these traits so well. Wolff's resume is endless, having been to the Olympics, numerous NCAA basketball Final Fours and traveling around the world for many stories not dealing with a particular sporting event.

Wolff took time out from his busy schedule to visit St. Mary's College on Wednesday, Nov. 19. Despite a rainy evening outside, a good crowd was on hand inside to hear Wolff's lecture, "Sports in a Cultural Context: Why Michael Jordan is a Revolutionary Hero in China and Other Observations."

"I just wanted people to have a sense how as much as we love sports for entertainment value and their ability to surprise us extends even to how they can educate us," he said. "We can learn about the unfamiliar through this thing that we all have in common. And the Olympics are good for that, every four years or every two years including the winter games. But even a game like pro basketball that seems so American and the NBA has really become kind of a classroom.

"Also, I just didn't want to dwell on basketball. I wanted to share some experiences in going to exotic places like Iran, Botswana. Knowing that there were students here, too, I think a lot of people want to work in sports or they want to go into our business. No matter what level you're writing on, you can find stories that speak to universal themes."

Wolff grew up in New Jersey and upstate New York, playing high school basketball outside Rochester, N.Y. He then went



Alexander Wolff, in his 23rd year with Sports Illustrated, speaks of sports on a global level at St. Mary's College.

on to Princeton but was not good enough to play basketball there, he said.

Wolff got into writing by his sophomore year and worked as a stringer for papers in New Jersey, covering campus events.

His hard work there would eventually be his foot in the door with Sports Illustrated, doing entry level work in the beginning. Now Wolff is in his 23rd year with the magazine.

"Some of it's been kind of the

same, but it's also been often doing more and more feature stories and I think editors trust me to do what I want to a degree, which has kept me interested," he said.

Sports journalism has changed a lot in his 23 years. When he began with Sports Illustrated, there was no Internet and ESPN was just beginning.

"The avenues to find news about your favorite sports team are endless and can be found much faster than waiting every

week for the latest Sports Illustrated issue to come out.

"Between cable and the Internet, it's only forced us to do what we have always done best, which I think is take advantage of the fact that we come out only once every week. And we have the time and the manpower to develop stories in depth. It forces us to stick to that," he said.

"And another thing is I've got a 4 a.m. deadline on a Tuesday morning after a Monday

night NCAA final and the press conferences end at midnight. What can I say in four hours that the people aren't already going to know? And that's a challenge. It's always been a challenge, will always be a challenge, but it keeps your blood pumping."

Pro and college basketball is Wolff's primary beat and is a part of his column, "The Hoop Life," which appears at www.si.com.

Wolff has covered the Olympics, soccer's World Cup, cycling's Tour de France, Grand Slam tennis events, numerous NCAA college basketball Final Fours and the NBA playoffs. He served as a basketball commentator for the BBC telecasts of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

He has also written or co-written six books on basketball. In 2002, he authored, "Big Game, Small World: A Basketball Adventure," which was cited by The New York Times Book Review as a 2002 notable book.

He has a busy life at home, too, living in Vermont with his wife, Vanessa, a filmmaker. They have a son, Frank, and a daughter, Clara.

In his tenure to this point at Sports Illustrated, Wolff has seen some of the greatest events. Three came to his mind.

The first was Christian Laettner's game-winning shot in 1992 as Duke beat Kentucky in the East regional final in Philadelphia. The second was the United States basketball team losing three times in the world championships in Indianapolis in 2002.

His third happened almost 20 years ago about an hour or so north of St. Mary's County as North Carolina played Maryland in a 1984 college basketball game at Cole Field House. It was a contest that featured a little known sophomore that would turn out to be one of basketball's greatest players of all time, Michael Jordan.

"His sophomore year [was] when I kind of realized that this guy is like something I've never seen before. I'll never forget that game," Wolff said.

Among his greatest interviews, Charles Barkley's name came quickly out of his mouth.

"A conversation with him is just like playing chess. He was always one or two moves ahead of you. His answer to your current question was always a set up to your next question, to his answer to your next question if that makes any sense. Original as a basketball player. Original as a conversationalist. They broke the mold with him," he said.

And even a Sports Illustrated writer at times can find it tough to get an interview. Wolff said, "It's always difficult. When somebody isn't going to give you any time. Just want to ask some questions. And I understand a lot of athletes have a lot of obligations, especially these days."

Wolff stated that half of the stories he writes are his ideas and the other half are the editors saying they would love for him to do a certain story.

"Generally the ones that I come up with tend to work out better," he laughed, "because I wouldn't propose them unless I already had an inkling that there was a story there."

Not only does a sports writer get to write these great stories and be at these great events, but at the end of the day a paycheck comes with it, too.

"You have a tough deadline, an unreasonable deadline. I have to remind myself that I could be writing for the Financial Times about pork belly futures. And God bless the person who does do that at the Financial Times. I hope he goes to work every morning excited about pork bellies. But I'm really grateful that I get to write what I write about ... It's exciting to write for a living."

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