

A passion FOR THE game



John Feinstein's books about
golf, tennis, college football and
college basketball aren't just
behind-the-scenes stories of the
sports they cover—they're
one sports fan's passion incarnate.

By Mitchell Bard

John Feinstein had an epiphany. "I was driving home one night and I'm flipping around on the radio and I pick up a Montreal Canadians-New York Islanders hockey game. I pull up to my house and there are two minutes left in the game and I sat in the car and listened to the end of the game, bad signal and all from New York. And I remember getting out of the car and thinking, 'Anyone who would sit in the car in the freezing cold listening to the end of a hockey game on a bad signal out of New York is a sportswriter.'"

This passion for sports made Feinstein turn down the opportunity to report hard news for the legendary Bob Woodward. "He told me if I went back to sports, I'd never be heard from again."

Woodward was wrong. Feinstein has probably sold more sports books than any other author. In fact, his chronicle of a year with Indiana University basketball coach Bob Knight, *A Season on the Brink*, is the best-selling sports book of all time. The former *Washington Post* reporter is now working on his tenth book—his eighth on life inside the sports world—on Atlantic Coast Conference basketball. He also reports for ESPN and National Public Radio, writes columns for *Golf Magazine*, *Tennis Magazine* and *Basketball America*. "I'm probably the busiest unemployed guy in America," he says.

The love of sports that led Feinstein to sit in that freezing car listening to a hockey game is conveyed in each of his books. It's the quality that helps his readers experience the vicissitudes of a season of tennis (*Hard Courts*), golf (*A Good Walk Spoiled*), professional baseball (*Play Ball*), college football (*A Civil War*) and college basketball (*A Season Inside*, *Forever's Team*, *A Season on the Brink*). Feinstein says he inherited his ardor from his parents, who were both professional musicians. "I think the thing my parents passed on to me was being passionate about what

Photo by Fred Vuich

you do. They are both passionate about music. My personality is to be passionate whether I'm talking about sports or politics."

In high school, Feinstein discovered he could combine two passions—writing and sports. "I never said, 'Okay, I'm getting into this because I want to be a famous bestselling writer.' I got into it because I had a passion for sports and I love to write. My parents like to tell people that when I was a kid I always wrote the longest letters home from camp. I liked my creative-writing class in high school. That's when I first started thinking of being a journalist, because I enjoyed the writing. I did it because it was fun."

His interest in sports began even earlier. "As a kid I played everything. My best sport in high school was swimming; I went to college as a swimmer. At some point, I realized you can't make a living swimming, so in college I got involved with the student newspaper. But sports was always my enduring passion."

Looking for "Talkies" to Tell

When Feinstein first went to work for the *Post*, no jobs were available in the sports department, so he accepted a job covering cops and courts. It was time well spent.

"I teach a journalism class. I tell kids who want to be sportswriters they should get experience in hard news. For one thing, it gives you a perspective on sports. After I'd interviewed the parents of children who had been raped or murdered, walking into a losing locker room was never difficult.

"My experience covering police, sports and politics helped shape me in terms of recognizing a story that has something to do with something other than games. If you read my books, I write very little about the games themselves or the events. I use them as an excuse to write about the people."

Covering hard news also gave Feinstein a good sense of what makes a good story, and that, he insists, is the key to writing a great book on sports or anything else. "You need a good story to tell. I had an editor at the *Post* who called a good story 'a talkie,' which meant it was a story that people are going to talk about. I've always tried to think in those terms. Is this a story people are going to go, 'Oh, I didn't know that. This is interesting.'" Many sports books profile superstars, but Feinstein looks for less obvious heroes. "I've always found the most interesting stories in sports are about the people who struggle. I

hope that's what's going to interest the readers the most."

He says he's less interested in highly publicized athletes like golfing sensation Tiger Woods. "Obviously, he's a phenomenon, but where's the hardship? They would try to tell you the hardship is being a minority, but he was such a phenomenon at an early age that I don't think he encountered racism head-on very often. I'm more interested in a story about a golfer like Paul Goydos, who basically quit golf after college—he had arthritis in his hands—and was a substitute teacher. He grinded and grinded and grinded. He was on the Nike Tour and off the Nike Tour, and on the PGA Tour and lost his card and got it back, and in 1996 he wins a tournament. To me that's a great story, not a guy who's bred to play golf from the age of 4."

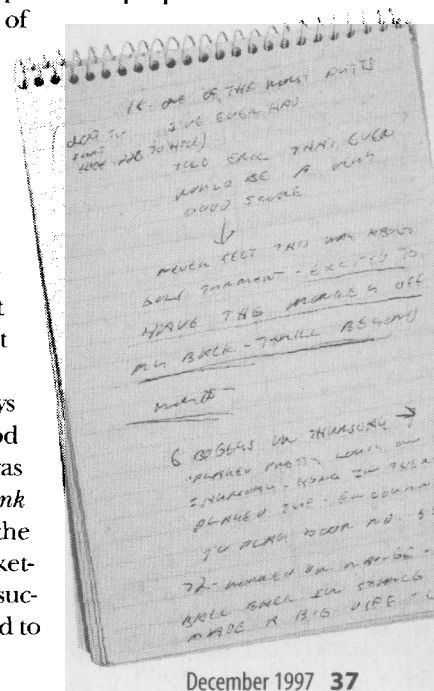
Feinstein's books focus on people. When he decided to write a book about Atlantic Coast Conference basketball, he was drawn by the personal stories. "I didn't think, 'I'll write about the ACC'; I thought, 'I'll write about [University of North Carolina coach] Dean Smith going for the record for most career victories. I'll write about [Duke coach] Mike Krzyzewski the year he turns 50. I'll write about [Clemson coach] Rick Barnes becoming a national celebrity. I'll write about [Wake Forest coach] Dave Odom's big chance to win a national championship that may never come again.'"

Chronicling a year in the life of the student-athlete-cadets at the Naval Academy and West Point immediately impressed Feinstein as a great story because of what they go through to play football. "When you see them stand together singing their alma maters, you understand there is no rivalry like this. There's nothing like that moment for me in sports because of the life they lead at the academies and the life they will lead after they leave the academies." The poignant story of honor, glory and victory put *A Civil War* onto the bestseller lists.

Of course an author doesn't always know at the outset if he has a good story. It wasn't until Feinstein was halfway through *A Season on the Brink* that he realized just how compelling the story of the mercurial Indiana basketball coach would be. The key to the success of that book was the access he had to

Behind the Scenes

Author John Feinstein's notes from an interview with golfer Greg Norman following a PGA Tour tournament. "I use the games as an excuse to write about the people."



From Manuscript to Bestseller

Pages from the manuscript and published text of Feinstein's *A Good Walk Spoiled*.

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building a dream house in Hinsdale, Illinois, and living happily ever after.

Only it wasn't quite that simple. Sluman is one of those people who has a knack for making life look easy when it isn't. The fact that he had grown up to become one of the best golfers in the world was, in itself, a remarkable story. He grew up in Rochester, New York, the youngest of three sons. Like a lot of people in Rochester, his father worked at the Kodak factory, often on the overnight shift. "Trick work," they called it, since the hours were never the same from week to week. The good news about those hours was that he often had afternoons free to play golf with his sons.

Jeff was a classic little brother, always working to keep up with the big boys. By the time he was ten, he was preciously successful at both bowling and golf.

It was at the age of ten that he was diagnosed as having a rare kidney disease known as nephritis. He had to take a steroid called prednisone for the next eight years to keep the disease under control. Although the prednisone worked, it also prevented him from growing. As a high school freshman he was 4-foot-6. It wasn't until he was in college and off the prednisone that he finally caught up with his peers—or at least almost caught up with them—in stature.

A bad kidney or being forced to take a steroid or a lack of height wasn't about to stop Sluman. He was breaking 80 in golf by the time he was twelve and was a scratch player in high school. When he wasn't recruited by anyone to play golf, he enrolled at Monroe Community College in Rochester and kept working on his game. After a year there, he transferred to Tennessee Tech, where he was on the golf team.

That was the good news. The bad news was that because of a lack of dorm space, he had to sleep in the back of the pro shop at the course where the team played. That didn't seem too awful until the pipes froze halfway through the winter and trips to the bathroom meant a trip outdoors, no matter how cold it might be in the open-air lavatory.

Still, he worked at his game. And when a friend told him that summer that he was going to Florida State, Sluman decided to go with him. He had no scholarship, hadn't applied to school there, and

It was at the age of 10 that he was diagnosed as having a serious kidney problem. For the next eight years, he was constantly on medication. His physical problems virtually halted his growth—he was under five-feet tall when he got high school—but never stopped him from competing in golf or bowling. By the time he was 12, he was breaking 80 and by the time he got to high school, he was playing close to scratch golf.

Still, his size scared recruiters off when it was time to go to college and he ended up bouncing around in junior college for several years. When a friend was recruited to play at Florida State, Sluman decided to just show up and try to walk on the golf team. He did and he did.

By now he was off the medication and was all of 5-foot-7 and 140 pounds. But he could hit a golf ball a long way and he could hit it a long way straight. He graduated with a degree in finance and decided to give the tour a shot for a few years. If it didn't work out, he could always go back to business school.

He still hasn't gone back. The first three years were a struggle, to the point where Sluman decided during 1984 that if he ended up back at school at the end of that year he was going to have to seriously consider another line of work. But he broke through that year, winning xxxxxxxx. After that, he just kept getting better and better.

Bob Knight and his team.

"To be there in the locker room and hear what he said was entirely different from having players describe to you afterward what he said. It's just different. It's one thing to hear someone's a genius, it's another to see how it manifests itself. It's one thing to know someone has an explosive temper, it's another thing to see and hear how that temper manifests itself. Understanding the suffering kids went through trying to play for this guy was the human aspect of the story. How did players put up with this and emerge triumphant? That made the story that much more poignant.

"I knew when I was writing that book that I had a hell of a story. You know as a reporter when you have a good story. You feel it in your gut. What I didn't know was if anyone would buy the book."

After *Season* was published, Feinstein realized he'd found a winning formula. "I discovered from the success of that book—and I don't even mean the commercial success, though that was certainly part of it—that there were other books that could be done built around access."

A Sense of What It's Like

All right, you want to tell the inside story. How does a writer get the access he needs?

Feinstein says obtaining entree to people varies in each case. "Knight is a guy who, if he likes a reporter, will give him tremendous access. Not just me. He's done that with

other people over the years. I told him, 'I just want to follow you around for one year.' He said, 'That's fine.' That was the negotiation. The only thing I deserve credit for is the idea, because there were other writers who could have done it by asking him, but I was the one who did.

"With Army and Navy, it was completely different because they didn't know me. I said, 'Despite some of the problems both academies have had, you both produce great people, and if you believe that then giving me access to those people will only reflect positively on you and the program.' They believed I was sincere when I told them I thought there's no event in sports like the Army-Navy game. I said, 'Look, if you have a cheating scandal that involves 30 members of your football team, I'm going to write about it. But it's already going to be in the paper anyway, so what do you have to lose?'"

Once you've established a reputation, it obviously gets easier to gain access. "People said, 'Didn't Knight's reaction hurt your access with other people in basketball?' The truth was the opposite," Feinstein explains, "because people in basketball knew the book was fair. When I did my second book, people took the approach that if he's as fair to me as he was to Knight, I'll come out okay."

That may work for someone who has written for the *Post* and *Sports Illustrated*, but what chance does a freelance writer have of getting the same kind of access?

"The only way to do it," Feinstein says, "is to sit down with people in person. You must sit down and explain who you are and what you want to do and why you want to do it. Pick a subject, say [New York Yankee manager] Joe Torre. Suppose you wanted to do it before the Yankees won the World Series. You could go to him and say, 'You've had an interesting career, you've been a great player, you've managed three or four teams, you've been through the ups and downs, you've been hired and fired, you know what it's like. I want to give people a sense of what it's like to be in the game for as many years as you have.'

"You have to make people understand why you want to do what you want to do. They may say no. I've had people say no. But if you have a good story and make a good case, people will listen."

Feinstein admits it's a big advantage to

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hadn't been invited down by anyone. "But at least I knew the weather would be warm," he said. "I've never heard of any pipes freezing in Tallahassee."

The pipes didn't freeze, and Sluman somehow talked himself into school and onto the team. If there is one thing Sluman can do as well as play golf, it is talk. He isn't a rapid-fire talker like his buddy Mike Hulbert, who can turn the answer to "how are you today" into twenty minutes on any subject from the weather to the economy. But he has about him a direct manner that makes people believe he is 100 percent sincere about everything he says.

On serious matters, he is. But there is always a joke lurking with Sluman. When Florida State's arch-rival Florida was upset by Auburn to lose the number one ranking in football 1994, Sluman called Dudley Hart—as famous about Florida as Sluman is about Florida State—and left a message from Florida coach Steve Spurrier apologizing for the loss.

"I threw my voice," Sluman said. "He'll never know who it was." Want to bet?

By the time Sluman got to Florida State, he was off the medication and was all of 5-foot-7 and 140 pounds. But he could hit a golf ball a long way and he could hit it a long way straight. He graduated with a degree in finance and decided to give the tour a shot for a few years. If it didn't work out, he could always go back to business school.

He still hasn't gone back. The first three years were a struggle. He got his card in 1983, lost it and went to the mini-tours for a year, then got back on tour again in 1985. He decided that if he ended up back at school at the end of that year he was going to have to seriously consider another line of work. But he broke through in 1985, winning \$100,523. After that, he just kept getting better and better.

In 1987, he should have won the Players Championships. He was lining up an eight-foot birdie putt that would have given him a playoff victory over Sandy Lyle when a fan jumped into the water that fronted the greens. Sluman had to back off and wait for officials to collect the young man—a former Florida State cheerleader—and remove him. Shaken, he missed the putt. Lyle won the playoff one hole later.

Sluman was upset about what had happened, especially when he found out later that the swimmer had dived into the water earlier in the day, had been given a warning, and was allowed to stay on the

know the people you want access to. He already knew Bob Knight. He'd covered tennis for five years at the *Post* when he wrote *Hard Courts*. But even Feinstein wants access to people who may have never heard of him or, worse, don't like what they've heard. In that case, he advises, offer references. "Herb Sendek, the coach at North Carolina State, doesn't know me. His only real knowledge of me is that I've spent a lot of time ripping Rick Pitino, his mentor and former boss. I said to him, 'I understand why you might be uncomfortable giving me access, but you can talk to some of the other guys in the league who are giving me access.' He ended up coming back to me and saying okay."

No one is obligated to talk to you, Feinstein adds. "If someone should choose not to, I say, 'Okay, that's your right. I'm going to try to be as fair to you as I can, but you need to understand if you don't talk to me, then I can't tell your side of the story.' If you just say Joe Blow's an ass because he wouldn't talk to you, then you're an ass. If you can describe something that shows why he's an ass, then you're being fair."

Slam-Dunking Interviews

Feinstein's books depend on his interviewing skills. "Ask the easy questions first," he advises. "Never start out by asking the guy if he stopped beating his wife yet. That should always be the last question. I always try early on to give the person a sense that I know about them. You say something to Curtis Strange like, 'When you knocked it in the bunker at 17 on the last day of the Open and made that bogey, was playing 18 having lost the lead as difficult as anything you've done in golf?' In other words, Curtis Strange knows I remember the 1988 US Open and how he ended up in a playoff with Nick Faldo.

"That's simply a matter of doing your homework and being prepared, so you don't walk in and ask what we call the Seve Ballesteros question. The Masters people always insist that their chairman asks the first question

which, when Ballesteros won the Masters in 1983 was, 'Seve, just how tall are you?'"

It's also important to make sure the meaning of your question is clear, as Feinstein discovered covering the 1979 Pirates-Orioles World Series. "The Pirates won Game 6. Jim Palmer pitched well, but gave up a home run to Willie Stargell to lose the game. Palmer was the obvious person to talk to. He's standing at his locker. Everyone is hanging back. Nobody went over to Palmer. It's getting toward the deadline, so I walk over.

"I'm looking for an easy opening question to get him to start talking. I'm thinking the guy pitched well, so the easy question is, 'How'd you feel out there?' The answer should be, 'Well, I had good stuff, threw the ball well, I made one mistake to Stargell,' and then you get him to talk about pitching to Stargell and what pitch he hit and how he felt when he saw the ball go out. So I say, 'How'd you feel?' He looks at me and screams, 'How did I feel! How did I feel? What kind of stupid question is that? I lose the sixth game of the World Series and you come in here and ask, 'How do I feel?' What kind of stupid asshole are you?' Palmer storms off to the training room screaming, 'Can you believe this asshole comes in here asking how do I feel?'"

It was horrible. I just stood there and waited at his locker until he came back. Then I said, 'Hey, can we try this again?' He said, 'Do you have a better question?' I said, "No, I'm going to try to ask the same question. How d-i-d y-o-u f-e-e-l o-n t-h-e m-o-u-n-d t-o-n-i-g-h-t? I know you feel terrible now. You've made that clear.' And he said, 'Oh,' and he talked and he was fine."

Saying It Better

Once you have the material, you've still got to sit down and write the story. Feinstein's daily regimen usually consists of having breakfast with his son, swimming and working out. He gets home about 11. "I edit what I wrote the day before, take a break

and go through materials, interviews, notes, tapes, whatever. Then I break to have a bite to eat. I sit down around 1 and write until about 6. I found if I go much beyond 6, the writing gets a little sloppy."

He writes for a fixed amount of time rather than words or pages. "If at 6 I've only written 1,500 words, why write another 1,500 since I'll probably just have to rewrite them anyway. If at 4 I've already written 3,000 words and I'm on a roll, I stop. I'm not sure if it was Hemingway who once said you should always stop writing when you're on a roll. Don't stop writing when you're stuck because if you do, when you sit down the next day, you'll be stuck again. But if you stop when you're mid-thought and then start the next day, you're still in mid-thought and can pick up and go."

Feinstein finds that writing comes easily to him when he's prepared. "Writing has never been something that I've struggled with. It's like anything else, there are days when it's harder than others. Usually when I have a day that is hard to write, I haven't done my job as reporter, haven't asked enough questions."

After writing for a newspaper, Feinstein appreciates the luxury of contemplation writing books. "You can think, 'How do I say this so that it's not a cliché?' It's not like working at a newspaper and being on a deadline where you have to have it finished in ten minutes and you realize there are going to be nights when you're not as good as you want to be. My books usually have fairly tight deadlines because they relate to a specific period of time. But you do have an opportunity to go back and say, 'How can I say that better?'"

The answer is that John Feinstein will probably find a way to say it better. **WD**

Mitchell Bard

What **Mitchell Bard** really wanted to do in life "was be the next Howard Cosell. Interviewing John Feinstein was a chance to live the sportswriter's life vicariously." Bard's articles have appeared in *B'nai B'rith Jewish Monthly*, *Lifestyles* and *The World & I*.