



FORUM: SPORTS IN THE 1970S

Hunter S. Thompson: Sportswriter

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On a winter's night in 1968, in a yellow sedan barreling down a dark New Hampshire highway, Richard M. Nixon talked football with Hunter S. Thompson. Nixon would soon win the state's Republican primary—an important kickoff for his deliberate, disciplined campaign. Thompson was an unlikely choice for an intimate audience with the buttoned-down candidate. The outlaw writer in shabby jeans, a chronicler of hippies and Hell's Angels, cast Nixon as a “foul caricature of himself, a man with no soul, no inner convictions, with the integrity of a hyena and the style of a poison toad.”¹

That evening, though, Thompson was the lone football fan in the press corps. A campaign aide arranged the interview on the condition that they discuss only football, so Nixon could relax. Sitting in the backseat, the candidate and the writer chatted for the entire hour's drive. Nixon loosened up, even slapping Thompson on the knee while reliving Max McGee's game-winning touchdown catch in the recent Super Bowl. Nixon, who had a “loser” reputation, conveyed respect for Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, the ultimate “winner.” Thompson marveled that Nixon “is a goddamn stone fanatic on every facet of pro football.” The presidential candidate remembered where a backup receiver on the Oakland Raiders had attended college.²

That football conversation launched an enduring, adversarial dynamic between Nixon and Thompson. During Nixon's ensuing presidency, Thompson sharpened his cynicism about American politics and power. Nixon's plastic persona, militaristic emphasis, and duplicitous methods represented the nation's festering alienation. “The saga of Richard Nixon is the Death of the American Dream,” Thompson reflected. “He was our Gatsby, but the light at the end of his pier was black instead of green.”³

The Nixon years coincided with the most fertile, celebrated phase of Thompson's career. He won a reputation as a fearless, drug-fueled critic of social norms and establishment politics. Writing in first-person, often via his alter ego “Raoul Duke,” he spiced his accounts with satire, mixed facts with fantasy, reveled in misbehavior, and skewered the nation's underbelly of hypocrisy and hatred. As copious biographers and critics have explained, it established his brand of “gonzo” journalism.⁴

¹Hunter S. Thompson, “Presenting: The Richard Nixon Doll (Overhauled 1968 Model),” *Pageant*, July 1968, 6–16.

²Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (New York, 2012), 44–6; Hunter S. Thompson, “Jacket Copy for Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream,” *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time* (New York, 2003), 108; Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America: The Gonzo Letters, Volume II* (New York, 2000), 41, 49, 94–5, 102, 404–5.

³Hunter S. Thompson, *Songs of the Doomed: More Notes on the Death of the American Dream* (London, 2010), 95–8, 128–9, 159–63.

⁴See E. Jean Carroll, *Hunter: The Strange and Savage Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York, 1993); Paul Perry, *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York, 1992); Peter O. Whitmer,

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In this same era, Thompson kept explaining American life through sports. He birthed gonzo at a sporting event, the Kentucky Derby, and practiced it at the Super Bowl. His writing emphasized how sports surfaced an ooze of greed, excess, and racism. Despite his isolated perch, Thompson joined a larger conversation about the role of sports in the early 1970s. While American politics were polarizing over crises about government power, economic stability, race, and gender, the sports world was similarly dividing over questions of authority and freedom. In his inimitable style, Thompson presented a radical critique of sports and society. Nixon was more than his political muse. The two men surveyed sports from across a cultural chasm.⁵

For Thompson, the early 1970s was a return to sportswriting. “There was a time,” he recalled, “when I could write like Grantland Rice.” Though he resented the “sporty bullshit” of hacks who regurgitated the style of old-time columnists, sportswriting had been his livelihood in the 1950s. “Sports writing was the only thing I could do that anybody was willing to pay for,” he stated. While serving at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, he worked as the newspaper’s sports editor, annoying superiors by moonlighting for a civilian paper and writing sensational, editorializing articles that defied military protocol. Upon his discharge, he worked as a sports editor in a Pennsylvania mining town, unsuccessfully applied at the big New York papers and *Sports Illustrated*, and wrote for *El Sportivo*, a Puerto Rican weekly that billed itself as “The Sports Illustrated of the Caribbean,” but in fact mostly covered bowling.⁶

Then, for most of the 1960s, Thompson stopped writing about sports. He served as a Latin American correspondent for the *National Observer*. A freelance piece for *The Nation* led to his breakthrough book, *Hell’s Angels*, a sardonic first-person narrative that captured an emerging fascination with violent outlaws. Yet his earlier experience had shaped his style. He wrote breathlessly, driving sentences with verbs, taking license with language. Sportswriting lent him the freedom to write “lunatic gibberish ... just as long as it moved. They wanted Action, Color, Speed, Violence.”⁷

One year after his Nixon encounter, *Playboy* commissioned a profile of skier Jean-Claude Killy. As Killy won three gold medals at the 1968 Olympics, magazine writers admired his daring style and debonair charisma. Thanks to the pioneering agent Mark McCormack, who marketed athletes for prosperous consumers, Killy started endorsing Chevrolet, United, Bristol-Myers, and numerous lines of ski equipment and clothes, while *Ladies’ Home Journal* published family-oriented articles about the suave Frenchman. At auto shows, Killy compared ski racing to driving Chevys, while surrounded by buxom models.⁸

When the Going Gets Weird: The Twisted Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson—A Very Unauthorized Biography (New York, 1993); William McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist: The Life and Times of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York, 2008); William Stephenson, *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson’s America* (London, 2012); Kevin T. McEneaney, *Hunter S. Thompson: Fear, Loathing, and the Birth of Gonzo* (Lanham, MD, 2016); Timothy Denevi, *Freak Kingdom: Hunter S. Thompson’s Manic Ten-Year Crusade Against American Fascism* (New York, 2018).

⁵On political division, see Kevin M. Kruse and Julian E. Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974* (New York, 2019), 7–87. On Thompson and sports, see William McKeen, *Hunter S. Thompson* (Boston, 1991), 78–90; Jay Cowan, “Hunter S. Thompson, Gonzo Sportsman,” *Aspen Magazine*, Midsummer 1989, 44–9; Bill Shea, “An Inside Look at How Sports Shaped Hunter S. Thompson’s ‘Gonzo’ Journalism,” *The Athletic*, Apr. 30, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/1783460/2020/04/30/an-inside-look-at-how-sports-shaped-hunter-s-thompsons-gonzo-journalism/>.

⁶Hunter S. Thompson, “Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl: No Rest for the Wretched,” *Rolling Stone*, Feb. 15, 1973, 10; McKeen, *Outlaw Journalist*, 21–38; “Hunter S. Thompson, The Art of Journalism No. 1,” interview by Terry McConnell and Douglas Brinkley, *The Paris Review* 156 (Fall 2000): 47–9.

⁷Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (New York, 1967); Thompson, “Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl,” 10; McKeen, *Hunter S. Thompson*, 106.

⁸John Skow, “Has Anybody Here Seen Killy?,” *Saturday Evening Post*, Feb. 10, 1968, 66–71; Dan Jenkins, “Killy and Bonnet Girl Power Will Save the Day for France,” *Sports Illustrated*, Feb. 5, 1968, 34–7; Dan Jenkins, “Over the Scattered Bones Came Jean-Claude,” *Sports Illustrated*, Feb. 19, 1968, 14–7; Myron Cope, “Visions of Super Stars

Thompson's article, "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy," subverted the conventions of sportswriting and foreshadowed the rise of gonzo. He spent ten days following Killy's advertising tour, but publicists shielded the celebrity from authentic interactions. In their brief encounters, Killy resented the brainless marketing grind, but resolved to exploit it. Adopting a truculent first-person perspective, Thompson conveyed his disgust. "As far as I know, you don't exist," he told Killy over the phone. "You're a life-size dummy made of plastic foam."⁹

Playboy refused to print any version of Thompson's rambling 110-page submission. The magazine was a vehicle of aspirational consumerism, courting blue-chip corporations such as Chevrolet. The article ran instead in the inaugural issue of *Scanlan's Monthly*, whose co-founder Warren Hinckle had edited the crusading, leftist magazine *Ramparts*. Thompson's anti-establishment sportswriting set the tone for *Scanlan's*, which, in its brief, debt-ridden history, invited the scorn of major corporations and the Nixon administration.¹⁰

Thompson next turned to the Kentucky Derby. Sportswriters loved the event, which provided material about colorful jockeys, affluent owners, earthy trainers, rampant gambling, mint juleps, and sentimental renditions of "My Old Kentucky Home." In 1970, conventional accounts narrated the victory of longshot Dust Commander. The unconventional Thompson, however, was returning to his hometown of Louisville, bearing the class resentments of his youth. In 1963, moreover, he had investigated the Black community's rankling discontent, challenging Louisville's progressive reputation. Thompson told Hinckle that instead of writing about the actual race, he would describe "the vicious-drunk Southern bourbon horseshit mentality that surrounds the Derby."¹¹

His story, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," was a chronicle of gross excess, a comic descent into madness, and a portrait of a fracturing America. Again writing in first person, Thompson played the role, in Tom Wolfe's phrase, of a "frantic loser." He thrashed in a pool of blowhards and racists and greasy spoon restaurants. With his companion, the odd-ball Welsh illustrator Ralph Steadman, they weaved down highways in a bright-red convertible, beer buckets and booze bottles rattling at their feet. They wandered through the sun-blasted, blubbering masses at Churchill Downs. They wangled into the press box, fooling aghast elites about impending guerrilla protests from the Black Panthers. In the final paragraph, Thompson described rolling up to the airport curb and depositing Steadman, who was covered in beer and vomit and Mace. Meanwhile, the radio brought the latest news on the Cambodia invasion and Kent State massacre.¹²

The homecoming left Thompson in a state of "crazed angst, far gone in a pill-stupor and barely able to think, much less write." After three days in a New York hotel, cajoled by editors and besieged by copyboys, he surrendered some sprawling half-formed notes. To his surprise,

Dance in His Head," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 4, 1968, 72–4; Jean-Claude Killy, "Fabulous Fun of Skiing," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Dec. 1968, 54–6; Jean-Claude Killy, "Skiing: Killy Has the Answers," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Jan. 1969, 82–3; Jean-Claude Killy, "Jean-Claude Killy and the Winter Woman," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Nov. 1969, 87; "Jean-Claude Killy's Ski Kindergarten," *Ladies' Home Journal*, Jan. 1970, 52–3; Jean-Claude Killy with Al Greenberg, *Comeback* (New York, 1974), 38–41.

⁹Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 164, 167, 179, 183, 195–6; Hunter S. Thompson, "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy," *Scanlan's Monthly*, Mar. 1970, 89–100.

¹⁰Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 195–6, 221–5, 269–70; Steven Watts, *Mr. Playboy: Hugh Hefner and the American Dream* (Hoboken, NJ, 2008), 3–8, 449–52; Warren Hinckle, *Ransoming Pagan Babies: The Selected Writings of Warren Hinckle*, eds. Emmerich Anklam and Steve Wasserman (Berkeley, CA, 2018), 292–7; Warren Hinckle, *If You Have a Lemon, Make Lemonade* (New York, 1974), 362–3.

¹¹Whitney Tower, "Command Performance," *Sports Illustrated*, May 11, 1970, 22–7; Hunter S. Thompson, "Southern City with Northern Problems," *The Reporter*, Dec. 19, 1963, 26–9; Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 293.

¹²Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," *Scanlan's Monthly*, June 1970, 1–12; Tom Wolfe and E. Q. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism* (New York, 1973), 172; Ralph Steadman, *The Joke's Over: Bruised Memories—Gonzo, Hunter S. Thompson, and Me* (Orlando, FL, 2006), 6–34.

Hinckle loved them. Enhanced by Steadman's grotesque sketches, the *Scanlan's* article was a sensation. A friend described it as "pure Gonzo."¹³

Thompson's sabotage of sportswriting had borne a literary genre. He next envisioned a series of gonzo assaults where he and Steadman disrupted institutions of American mass culture: New Year's Eve in Times Square, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and hyped-up sporting events such as the Masters and Super Bowl. They first crashed the 1970 America's Cup in Newport, Rhode Island, the ultimate sporting bastion of the upper crust. They wore absurd outfits, played bongos into the night, and dumped orange dye into the water. Bored by sailing and addled by mescaline, they hopped onto a rowboat at 4:00 am, planning to spray-paint "FUCK THE POPE" on a multimillion-dollar yacht, only to be foiled by the clattering paint canister. Thompson never actually wrote about the America's Cup, but the episode affirmed how sporting events could promulgate characteristics that Thompson reviled, from highbrow snobbery to mass conformity. Gonzo journalism thus embroidered sports into its larger critique of American indulgence.¹⁴

Thompson's signature book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, began as an assignment for *Sports Illustrated*. During the 1960s, the magazine had established itself as the gold standard for sportswriting, embracing literary approaches to the craft. It hired Thompson to write captions for a photo spread about an off-road motorcycle race called the Mint 400. He brought along attorney Oscar Acosta, extravagantly exploited his expense allowance, and wrote "a much longer & dirtier thing than they wanted." *SI* editor Pat Ryan insisted that he resubmit a concise description, which she then nixed. By then, the degenerate duo had returned to Las Vegas to crash a conference of district attorneys, continuing Thompson's drug-propelled, fact-and-fiction romp through a city built on hype and overkill—a rumination on the lost ideals of the 1960s. Thompson wrote as his alter ego, Raoul Duke, "the absolute cream of the sporting press."¹⁵

The Las Vegas story first appeared in *Rolling Stone*, which editor Jann Wenner was transforming from a rock magazine into the pre-eminent outlet for provocative first-person journalism. His paradoxical mass-marketing of radical politics and the counterculture depended on Thompson, whose "Fear and Loathing" articles scrutinized the fissures and hypocrisies of the Nixon era. The masthead listed him as "Sports Editor." Articles filed under Raoul Duke were titled "Memo from the Sports Desk."¹⁶

Thompson ran for sheriff of Aspen, Colorado, on the "Freak Power" ticket, theatrically opposing the paranoid, conservative incumbent. In the aftermath, he pitched a "king-hill Sport Story" to Robert Lipsyte, the progressive "Sports of the Times" columnist for the *New York Times*, about unionizing ski patrollers opposed by merchants who "hunker down in a brain-swamp of Nazi Agnew platitudes." His bodyguards in Aspen included Dave Meggysey, the former pro linebacker whose memoir *Out of Their League* charted his slow alienation from football. Mentored by sports activist Jack Scott, Meggysey decried how coaches commodified players, demanded conformity, and discouraged intellectual pursuits. In this leftist narrative, football glorified militarism and coerced hyperpatriotism.¹⁷

¹³Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 295–6, 299–304; Perry, *Fear and Loathing*, 141–3; Craig Vetter, "Playboy Interview: Hunter S. Thompson," *Playboy*, Nov. 1974, 75.

¹⁴Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 319–22, 326–8; Steadman, *The Joke's Over*, 35–65.

¹⁵Michael MacCambridge, *The Franchise: A History of Sports Illustrated Magazine* (New York, 2007), 77–109; Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 375–6, 382, 388, 418–9; Carol Waxman to Pat Ryan, Jun. 14, 1971, Aug. 31, 1971, folder 11, box 4104, Time Inc. Records, New York Historical Society.

¹⁶Robert Draper, *Rolling Stone: The Uncensored History* (New York, 1990), 4–15, 165–6, 175–7, 184–8; Joe Hagan, *Sticky Fingers: The Life and Times of Jann Wenner and Rolling Stone Magazine* (New York, 2017), 5–17, 174–80, 193–7, 218–23.

¹⁷Hunter S. Thompson, "The Battle of Aspen," *Rolling Stone*, Oct. 1, 1970, 30–7; Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America*, 352; Hunter S. Thompson, *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century* (New York, 2003), 91; Dave Meggysey, *Out of Their League* (Berkeley, CA, 1970).

Meggysy joined a burgeoning chorus of anti-establishment voices in sports. Foreshadowed by the “Revolt of the Black Athlete” in the late 1960s, when Black activists protested that sports reflected society’s racism, the “Athletic Revolution” of the early 1970s interpreted sports as fundamentally exploitative. Like Meggysy, pro football players George Sauer and Chip Oliver retired prematurely, citing the sport’s dehumanization. Gary Shaw’s memoir *Meat on the Hoof* detailed how University of Texas football coach Darrell Royal ousted underperforming and nonconforming players. That sense of alienation also appeared on newspapers’ sports pages, where younger and more liberal columnists supported players’ calls for labor rights and personal freedom. *Sports Illustrated* ran articles such as “The Desperate Coach,” which highlighted the divides between authoritarian coaches and rebellious student-athletes. The sportswriters Leonard Shecter, Jerry Izenberg, Larry Merchant, Glenn Dickey, and Robert Lipsyte all penned books that cynically assessed the sports landscape from the Left.¹⁸

By contrast, conservatives celebrated sports for instilling values such as discipline, character, and patriotism. Richard Nixon embraced these ideas. He sometimes stated that if he lived another life, he would have been a sportswriter. As president, Nixon employed sports in his efforts to reposition the Republican Party. For instance, attending the 1969 college football game between top-ranked Texas and number-two Arkansas reinforced his “Southern Strategy.” Pro football lent him the highest platform. The 1966 NFL–AFL merger, the 1970 introduction of ABC’s Monday Night Football, and the rise of the Super Bowl attested that football had replaced baseball as the national sport. The NFL conveyed modernity, masculinity, and militarism in an appealing package. By placing a football on his Oval Office desk, or by sketching plays for Washington coach George Allen, Nixon cast himself as leader of the “Silent Majority.”¹⁹

Thompson’s own football obsession, like his political odyssey, revolved around a quest for authenticity. His book *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* sprinkled in sports references and analogies. Just as he embraced the idealistic George McGovern (Figure 1), he admired the rare Dallas Cowboys who resisted autocratic coach Tom Landry. He skewered the phony rituals and half-truths of political campaigns engineered by “greedy little hustlers” like Nixon.²⁰

Thompson’s campaign book ended with the 1973 Super Bowl. Criticizing Nixon’s sporting values, Thompson wrote, “There is a dangerous kind of simple-minded Power/Precision worship at the root of the massive fascination with pro football in this country.” Sportswriters were a “rude and brainless subculture of fascist drunks.” He mocked the notion that football represented “everything Good and True and Right in the American Spirit.” And he turned against the Washington Redskins, because “when Nixon came out for them and George Allen began televising his prayer meetings I decided that any team with both God and Nixon on their side was fucked from the start.”²¹

¹⁸Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (Urbana, IL, 2017); Jack Scott, *The Athletic Revolution* (New York, 1971); Chip Oliver with Ron Rapoport, *High for the Game* (New York, 1971); Gary Shaw, *Meat on the Hoof: The Hidden World of Texas Football* (New York, 1972); John Underwood, “The Desperate Coach,” *Sports Illustrated*, Aug. 25, 1969, 66–76; Leonard Shecter, *The Jocks* (Indianapolis, IN, 1969); Jerry Izenberg, *How Many Miles to Camelot? The All-American Sport Myth* (New York, 1972); Larry Merchant, *And Every Day You Take Another Bite* (Garden City, NY, 1971); Glenn Dickey, *The Jock Empire: Its Rise and Deserved Fall* (Radnor, PA, 1974); Robert Lipsyte, *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2018).

¹⁹Jesse Berrett, *Pigskin Nation: How the NFL Remade American Politics* (Urbana, IL, 2018), 85–203; Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Fan In Chief: Richard Nixon and American Sports, 1969–1974* (Lawrence, KS, 2019); Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making & Selling America’s Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 10–54; Richard C. Crepeau, *NFL Football: A History of America’s New National Pastime* (Urbana, IL, 2020), 55–152; Michael MacCambridge, *America’s Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York, 2004), 152–311.

²⁰Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*, 44–6, 68, 74–5, 105–7, 317, 322–3, 355–6; Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York, 1973), 310–9.

²¹Thompson, “Fear and Loathing at the Superbowl,” 10.



Figure 1. Hunter S. Thompson on the 1972 campaign trail with Democratic nominee George McGovern. Photograph by Annie Leibovitz, June 1972, Public Domain.

The next year, Thompson wrote a rambling, gonzo version of “Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl.” Originally, he had planned to follow the Oakland Raiders throughout the 1973 season, but after he supplied players with cocaine while watching game film, the team banished him. His Super Bowl piece for *Rolling Stone* echoed his earlier critiques of dullard sportswriters and craven administrators. Thompson had once toted beer coolers and hash-stuffed pipes to San Francisco 49ers games at Kezar Stadium, but the NFL had grown too corporate and consumerist. It marketed itself in the mold of the deceased, discipline-obsessed Vince Lombardi—“And it is worth remembering that Richard Nixon spent many Sundays, during all those long and lonely autumns between 1962 and ’68, shuffling around on the field with Vince Lombardi at Green Bay Packers games.” Nixon’s co-optation of football, and his reign over American politics, had since gone hand-in-hand.²²

As the Watergate scandal closed a political era, it also marked the decline of Thompson’s unique brand of sportswriting. His reporting on Nixon’s resignation and pardon had exhausted him, deepening his cynicism. In a 1974 *Playboy* article, “The Great Shark Hunt”—a gonzo take-down of the ostentatious “sportsmen” at a fishing tournament in Mexico—he wrote that “my feeling for national politics is about the same as my feeling for deep-sea fishing, buying land in Cozumel or anything else where the losers end up thrashing around in the water on a barbed hook.” Nixon’s staid hypocrisy had driven him to write with wild and funny fervor, whether he

²²Hunter S. Thompson, “Fear and Loathing at the Super Bowl,” *Rolling Stone*, Feb. 28, 1974, 28–38, 42–52.

was at the White House or the Super Bowl. Now Nixon was gone. In later years, damaged by drug abuse, Thompson rarely wrote as powerfully about sports, politics, or anything else. He had hit his peak in the early 1970s, when his foil was the president—the man he called his “football buddy.”²³

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²³Hunter S. Thompson, “The Great Shark Hunt,” *Playboy*, Dec. 1974, 183, reprinted in Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt*, 421–52.