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Sports Journalism Pioneer: Mary Garber

The “white-haired little old lady in sneakers” was the nickname legendary sportswriter Mary Ellen Garber answered to in the final years of her career. Garber was lovingly bestowed the nickname by people in her hometown, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, recognizing her for her loyalty to the town and 50 years of navigating uncharted journalistic waters. Garber’s career was split between the Twin City Sentinel and Winston-Salem Journal until her passing in 2008. She became decorated with many awards including the Red Smith award, Mel Greenberg award, and induction into the National Sports Media Association Hall of Fame (Mary Ellen Garber, 2009). Her career was also embellished with interviews from world class athletes from Vince Lombardi to Arnold Palmer. Despite the magnitude of her accomplishments, Garber never became a household name and while well recorded, her legacy remains unknown to many journalism historians as well. World-class tennis player Billie Jean King (2008) who interacted with Garber on the sidelines felt that “...Mary never received the recognition she deserved”. Her career pioneered sports journalism for women in the mid 20th century which was originally a male dominated field. Her career was cemented by her passion for breaking barriers and her commitment to publishing well-rounded stories.

It is important to note two things before further diving into Garber’s career. Firstly, Garber never planned on making a career out of sports journalism. Secondly, the context of the

time period she was writing in was highly significant to her accomplishments. The roots of Garber's career developed in the midst of the Great Depression and World War II, a time when women were restricted to certain roles, women's sports did not exist, and when major gender, racial inequalities were apparent in everyday life. (TePoel, 2014) Upon further examination it is clear that Mary Garber, prominent female sportswriter, broke down barriers for female voices in sports journalism, brought light to underrepresented communities in local sports, and had a lasting impact on journalism history.

Mary Garber was born on April 16th, 1916, to parents Mason Garber and Grace Garber in New York state. Growing up, her father worked as a civil engineer and moved their family to Winston-Salem, to build a railroad station. In an oral history interview produced for National Public Broadcasting, Garber explains how she feels like she came from a family of hard workers and always had those traits in her framework. She says a bunch of individuals would agree when she says that "... my parents encouraged us all to have our own opinions. It was perfectly all right if we didn't agree with what they said and thought. They encouraged us to think for ourselves" (Interview: Mary Garber). She credits her mother as the person who taught her to treat everyone equally, a value that followed her throughout her sportswriting career.

Garber took interest in sports and writing at a young age. It wasn't until later in life when she combined her two interests. She says "we always had newspapers. I read them as soon as I learned to read..." (American History). The radio was always on in their household. The Garber family was no stranger to many forms of media. Garber and her two sisters would write fan letters to the Notre Dame football team and to their grandparents in the format of the "Garber News" as a sort of life update. In high school and college she became involved in the school newspaper. By the time she went to college she was sure she wanted to study and pursue

journalism. According to Garber, she reluctantly attended Highlands University in Roanoke, Virginia because her father did not want her to go to a big university. Her dream was to attend Duke University not because of the world class education but because they had a good football team (Mary Ellen Garber 2009). Garber grew up playing many sports including tackle football. She made a deal with her father to attend Highlands for the first two years and transfer to Duke if she still felt like it would be a better fit. She never transferred to Duke, but she became grateful for the close faculty student relationships, personal confidence, and opportunities at Highlands (Gentry, 1990).

By the time she graduated in the spring 1938, the country was still facing the effects of the great depression. At the time, jobs, let alone positions at newspapers, were slim. Over one year post graduation, she was finally given the opportunity to be editor for the society section Twin City Sentinel. Garber was eager to hold any writing position. Typically, the society paper was considered “soft news”. It was often a section assigned to female writers where they would cover the social updates and engagement of the local community. Garber took the society papers in a new direction, she claims, “ I wasn’t the typical society editor because they usually spend all their time talking to the 400 of the real society people. I didn’t do that. I did society with a capital S. I also had club meetings and wrote an article on how to watch football. It was unusual (American History TV). Considering the rest of her career, this wasn’t subject matter that she was necessarily interested in, but it was an important stepping stone for her career as a journalist. She then began covering other beats for Twin City’s sister paper the Winston Salem Journal.

Upon World War II, most able bodied men were drafted, leaving major gaps in the newspaper forcing them to restructure. From her recollection “... the war began in Europe and all of us realized that with the international situation as it was, men were going to be going to the

service” (Garber, 1990). As a result, Garber was transferred to sports editor of the Winston-Salem Journal. Just a couple of months covering the sports section, Garber realized her passion for sportswriting and never turned back.

At this point, females had never really covered sports, so reporting was uncharted territory that they knew came with its own set of challenges. During the war, Garber covered mostly local sports teams ranging from football, basketball, and baseball. One of Mary Garber’s most recollected accomplishments was her advocacy for women in press boxes. She was the first woman allowed in Duke University’s press box. Most teams wouldn’t allow women and children into press boxes, and until the 1970’s many of them didn’t have a women’s restroom. Unfortunately, the press pass female journalists were given did not bear them full access because it was labeled “no women, children, and pets” in bold. Garber went on record telling NPR host Noah Adams (2000) “Because that was the law of the Sportswriters Association, that women were not allowed. In fact, it was--they put me in the wives' box, and I covered the game from there, which was kind of hard.” (Garber, 2000). Garber would not take no for an answer especially because it was affecting the authenticity of her work. She built relationships with editors, team staff, not afraid of rejection. Although frustrated, the last thing Garber wanted to do was make waves or embarrass the paper. She slowly made connections with coaches, editors, and other reporters, many of which didn’t have a problem with Garber joining them. Garber’s calm pushback led many teams to eventually loosen up their rules, especially when they realized they were just trying to do their job. When she was turned away, she would track down athletes and coaches after the game in order to get the scoop.

The struggles for women didn’t stop there. As professional sports writing became more complex, locker room interviews became more prevalent in the format of sportswriting. The

New York Times published a short opinion piece written by Garber on the issue. She agrees that “There's a spontaneity that comes if the writer and the player get together in the dressing room that just isn't there in the manufactured setting of an interview room.”(Garber, 1990). For most of her career she relied on connections that she built with staff members to drag coaches and players out of the locker rooms so she could get the sound bites she needed (Rapport, 1994). She didn't understand why there was no solution to the embarrassment the presence of a female journalist might cause an athlete. She says “Why couldn't they cover up?”. In the New York Times piece she emphasizes her frustrations, ultimately stating that “It concerns me that when things like this happen...she is doing her job and is entitled to an opportunity equal to that of men to pursue her profession (Garber, 1990). Garber wanted to make it clear that she never went into the male locker room during her career and couldn't understand why it was such a big deal (Eberbhard and Meyers 1988).

Garber was very candid on all the gender struggles she faced as a sports writer. In an interview with Gentry, Garber recalls being known for her knit hat and light mittens she wore on the sidelines to keep warm. Jogging shoes did not exist, so she ran around in her oxfords or flat heeled shoes adorned with a skirt, shirt, and jacket because women didn't wear pants at the time. Garber says “I would give anything to be able to dress as I do in Reeboks and slacks. It certainly would have been a whole lot more comfortable”(Gentry, 1990). Although it seems like clothing is such a small obstacle in the grand scheme of things, Garber's openness to discomfort is just a testament to her strength, resilience, and passion for the art.

Garber discovered her guardian angel from the stands of Ebbet's field in Brooklyn, where she watched Jackie Robinson play for the first time in 1947. Writer for Sports Illustrated Tim Crothers (2000) in an interview with Garber outlined how Jackie shaped her career, becoming a

major inspiration for her as a female pioneer in sports journalism. Garber states, “When people would step on me and hurt my feelings, I would look at how he kept his mouth shut and did his job the best he could with the belief he would someday be accepted”. Garber was one of the first people to watch Jackie play. His poise, professionalism, and love for sport inspired her to devote more time to share the stories of underrepresented athletes. Although Robinson is one of the most well known baseball players in history, his career did not start out quite that way. As she reflected on the 30 years since Jackie Robinson made his debut, she commends him for breaking the barrier for colored athletes and setting the stage for thousands of black athletes to compete after him (The Voice, 1947).

It is important to note that Garber’s started at the Twin City Sentinel in 1940 which was 14 years before *Brown v. Board of Education* when the Supreme Court overruled the separate but equal act.. Lynn Klyde Silverstein, professor of journalism at University of Northern Colorado (2013) elaborates on how Garber advocated for equality in the sports section and changed how Black athletes were written. When Garber began covering sports, the Jim Crow laws of the south were very much reflected in the Winston-Salem Journal. Most of the news about Black individuals were segregated, printed only on the Negro page. Garber was the first white woman to regularly interview black athletes. “Race was an issue for many newspaper readers, though. When she started covering the black schools, Garber received threatening letters” (Klyde-Silverstein, 2013). She did not let that stop her. As a white woman, Garber had to overcome the stigma of social codes in the South. As a result, she made some coaches very uncomfortable when she came to games because they had once lived with the fear that they could be killed for even looking at a white woman.

In an interview conducted by Gentry for the the Washington Press Club, Garber recalls her experiences with segregation while covering high school sports. No one was covering black high school games. The newspaper would hire students to be correspondents for the games to cover the Black sports and had a white editor. Garber felt that "...black parents were just as interested in what their children as white parents were."(Gentry 1990, page 38). She believed that black students were working just as hard as everyone else, there was no reason for their games to not be covered in the paper. In response, she began covering sports for Atkins which was the black city high school in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The principal of Atkins felt it was inappropriate for Mary to sit in the stands and actually arranged for her to view their games from the music room. From then on Garber continued to make meaningful connections with coaches with the work she published about their teams (Eberbhard and Meyers 1988).

Towards the end of her career she took it upon herself as the "underdog reporter" to cover the benchwarmers, equipment managers, and many stories about African-American athletes before they were widely accepted in the South. Former Winston-Salem Basketball Coach Clarence Gaines who worked closely with Garber stated, "Nobody cared much about black players 40 years ago, but Miss Mary...went out of her way to make sure that everybody got a fair shake" (Crothers 2002, para. 5). One of Garber's most proud achievements was after she wrote a story featuring a football player named Drew Buie. Before being featured, Buie had no plans of attending college, let alone playing football in college. Garber's endorsement earned him a football scholarship to a division two college, 4 year NFL career, and successful coaching career back in North Carolina. She covered things that "...weren't too popular" according to Coach Gaines which gained her a lot of respect in the community. They say it is a combination

of her willingness to defy convention and interview all athletes regardless of race that made her a pioneer of the industry (Klyde-Silverstein, 2013).

One of Garber's most favorite stories came from a conversation one of her friends overheard two kids sitting on the bleachers. The kid was pointing and telling the other kid "That's Mary Garber. And she doesn't care who you are or where you're from or what you are. If you do something, she's gonna write about you" (Klyde- Silverstein, 2013). Mary Garber passed away in 2008 at the age of 92. She never stopped writing. Her death was followed by many obituary notices from major newspaper companies labeling her a "sports writing pioneer. Garber's legacy is survived by her life's work, awards, scholarships in her name and most notably finding a way for women to be taken seriously in sports writing. After further consideration of the societal implications forced by the time period she lived in, how she overcame gender adversity, the impacts on aspiring female sports writers, and her experiences as an advocate for underrepresented athletes, Mary Garber has cemented herself in journalism history books.

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