Baseball and the Media
How Fans Lose in
Today's Coverage of
the Game

George Castle

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London
“I don’t talk to players as much as I used to,” Chass said. “Gaylord Perry was the last player in baseball who was older than I was.”

Life changes, of course. Newspapers ain’t what they used to be. And the working conditions covering baseball ain’t the same. Again, newspapers imitate the game they cover in more ways than their executives realize. Change is slow to come for both, but come it must. The readers will demand it or speed up taking their business elsewhere.

Celebrity Players or Upstanding Role Models?

Just when you think you’ve seen and heard everything in baseball, something new comes into your gaggle of experiences.

Breezing past a group of reporters early in the 2004 season, Cubs catcher Michael Barrett asked us, “Do you guys need to interview me?” The answer almost always to such a question would be “yes,” but I never heard a player verbalize the obvious in a daily clubhouse routine.

Months later, Barrett explained himself at length. “My personal opinion is that bad publicity is better than no publicity at all,” he said. “There have been articles in the paper I haven’t enjoyed. But, hey, my name is in the paper. To me, it’s an honor to have your name in the paper, good or bad.

“The perfect example was in 2000. I made two errors that cost us [the Expos] the game and I was booed out of the stadium. But even in one of the worst moments of my career, it’s a cool feeling to know people care about what you’re going through right now. If you’re honest with the fans [through the media], they realize how much of a person you are and they can relate to you, and that’s what makes baseball the game it is.”

An addendum to such sentiments was offered by Jeff Bagwell, longtime centerpiece of the Houston Astros, whose clubhouse could have been rated for years as one of the most media friendly. “We always looked at it as the media has a job to do and we have a job to do,” Bagwell said. “We have to work together. If you appease each other I think things work out in the long run. Both sides have to handle themselves. There’s a big if there. It has to work both ways.”
Amazingly, too many players don’t get it. Today's Major Leaguers give off the image of aloofness, if not outward hostility, to the phalanx of media that provide them publicity their teams otherwise could not afford to purchase.

The best-paid players are being compensated like Hollywood celebrities, and they can live their lives as such. Tinseltown stars often throw a moat around themselves. Yet part of the age-old appeal of baseball is its accessibility, both in person to fans and through the media. If the mainstays of the sport ever become as distant as the stars of the big and small screen, something is lost forever. Baseball ceases to function in its traditional mold.

For all its faults in marketing and promotion, compared to the NFL and NBA, baseball remains the most media-accessible sport. For a 7:05 p.m. game, the home and visiting clubhouses typically open at 3:35 p.m. The media is shoed out of the home locker room during batting practice at around 4:20 p.m., but additional player-manager access is possible in the dugout and field while the visiting clubhouse remains open until around 5:30 p.m. Unless occasional team meetings interfere, the home clubhouse doors swing open again at that juncture for another forty-five minutes.

It may have been said amid a tense, angry, postgame, losing clubhouse back in August 1984, but there was more than a shred of truth in the comeback that Chicago radio reporter Bruce Levine directed at several New York Mets then. “Without us, you wouldn't have jobs,” Levine said. Indeed if few came out to cover big league games, the crowds would not have followed and, in turn, the cash flow enabling players to achieve instant affluence would be absent.

But with frequent turnover on newspaper baseball beats, lack of ballpark presence by the majority of radio sports-talk-show hosts, and a sizeable number of newspaper columnists, pressure to get short sound bites by radio and TV reporters, and thrown-against-the-wall information by nascent Internet blogs, players have a sharply decreasing appetite for fulfilling what seems a necessary part of their jobs. Just when technological advances enable an explosion of information to be enjoyed by the average consumer, players in the most media-accessible professional sport are increasingly keeping their distance, increasingly watching what they say and when they say it, and withdrawing some of the trust that naturally should be present.

The end result is an ill-served public, which does not receive a wholly accurate picture of a favorite sport, overeager media spoiling the working conditions for more responsible colleagues, and players who can be unfairly portrayed as overpaid, insufferable jerks.

The latter is an image that can hardly be affixed to Pirates first baseman Sean Casey, a glib man who during his long tenure with the Reds understood one important role of players.

“I realize with the media, you guys have a job to do, too,” Casey said. “You guys get a paycheck, support a family, pay the bills by what you write and what you can relay to the fans, and how they perceive athletes. I try to be as cooperative as I can. You have bills to pay as I do.

“I look at it as everyone does what they’re passionate about. Some people do things they’re not passionate about. They just show up at work every day. I never want to forget that. My dad instilled in me that nobody is more important than anyone else. Everyone in life has a job to do. You bring great joy in what you write. You bring different emotions to people by what you write.”

Dealing with the media is part of a big leaguer’s job, according to longtime left-hander Jamie Moyer, who first began talking to reporters as a Cub in 1986.

“There’s certain professionalism that goes along with everybody,” Moyer said. “Not just media, but players also need to give that respect back to the media. I’ve been on some clubs where if things go well, players are standing in front of their locker with their chests out, smiling and happy, and willing to talk to anybody. But when things go bad, they don’t want to talk to the media. That’s wrong. You deal with the media and be upfront. If you say you don’t want to talk, you’ll get together tomorrow.”

Cleveland Indians left-hander C. C. Sabathia believes you get more with sugar instead of vinegar. “You want to interact with these guys,” he said. “For the most part, they’re going to believe what Hoynes [Cleveland Plain Dealer beat writer Paul Hoynes] writes. They’re in here [locker room] so much. I think if you are a good guy, it’s a great career move to do as much stuff with the media as possible.”
Completing a media-friendly lineup is reliever Ray King, who made a name for himself with the St. Louis Cardinals in 2003-5 before moving on to Colorado. There’s a practical business reason for good diplomatic relations with the media and fans. “You never want to burn a bridge,” King said. “This game is not forever. You never know where you’ll be tomorrow. All of a sudden, there might be two or three media guys who are higher up in certain places where you want to get a job or get your foot in the door.”

If the hubris of the past few decades was swept clean and all could start out fresh, the odds may favor players who are of the Barrett-Bagwell-Casey-Moyer-Sabathia-King mold. But cynicism, mixed with a healthy dash of realism, might counter such positive statements. The sense of mistrust works both ways. Just listen to veteran Chicago sportscaster Tom Shaer, who cut his teeth working in tough media market: Boston.

“Players make so much money, they care so little about marketing the game,” Shaer said. “They’ve been convinced by the players union and their agents that they don’t need to care. They don’t give a damn about selling tickets. They don’t figure there’s any percentage in doing media stuff. They do media stuff if they feel like being nice.

“The majority are not good guys. The majority are either indifferent or adversarial. It didn’t used to be that way. The standard in players’ contracts is that they are supposed to engage in reasonable efforts to promote the sport. No one has ever, ever enforced that. I blame the owners and players.”

Shaer has some basis in his criticism. During gigs with several TV stations, he had to work clubhouses, dugouts, and batting cages to snare those ever-pesky sound bites. The players are not always available at the snap of a finger from a large broadcast media outlet. Although Shaer frequently was in attendance at ballparks, in contrast to many of his contemporaries, he may not have had the extra time to “work” players one-on-one, an absolute necessity in bridging the inherent eyebrow-lifting at media intentions.

I found a different Major Leaguer than Shaer did. Toiling in clubhouses for the better part of two decades, I discovered that Bagwell’s analysis was no empty platitude. Building relationships and minimizing conflicts involved arriving early each day and talking to players person-to-person, in a noninterview setting. Not every communication with a big leaguer should be a media member needing an interview. The tape recorder, camera, or notebook should be sidelined at this point. More often than not, the successful bridging of the gap was accomplished by talking to the players about themselves as individuals even away from baseball, inquiring about their families, social and civic interests, and levelling the whole discourse with a little humor—basically treating them like the normal people that they’d be if they did not possess the singular skill to play baseball at the highest possible level.

“Hello, how ya doing?” goes a long ways with me,” former, longtime slugging outfielder Ellis Burks said in 2004. “People acknowledge your name, not just put the microphone in your face and say, ‘Answer this.’ I like for a person to introduce themselves to me and I do the same thing before I answer questions. I want to know who you are. That way, when I see you the other time, it will be that much easier.”

Some of the most animated, even entertaining conversations have been off-the-cuff all the way up to a publicity-hating fellow like Barry Bonds. Perhaps some information would be filtered into my written or broadcast work, but the original purpose is an effort to get to know the player and let them get to know you. If the end result is access when the interview going gets tough, so be it. That’s also Journalism 101, practiced by reporters in any City Hall or cop shop in the country away from sports’ toy factory. Familiarity does not breed contempt if you handle yourself the right way.

That all said, anyone working in baseball media is dealing with high-profile types enjoying a radically different pay scale and potential lifestyle than anyone else in the room. With a minimum salary of three hundred thousand dollars—compared to sixty-eight thousand in the late 1980s—the players can attain affluence available only to the top 1 percent of American wage earners. Their perspective cannot be the same as it was when they were struggling through the minors on fifteen hundred dollars a month.

And when salaries skyrocket toward the twenty-million-dollar mark, the ballplayers are now on a par with Hollywood celebrities, who by nature and necessity have to cast a moat around themselves to ward off intrusive media and overzealous fans, if not outright
stalkers. It is in this classification, of whether they are near or at the top of celebrity rankings, and whether instant influence changes them for the worse, that players are divided.

Longtime catcher Todd Pratt pointed me in one direction at mid-summer 2004 when he told me that money does change, and spoil, many of his fellow big leaguers. Perhaps the sweaty, straining position behind the plate gives catchers an honest appraisal of life, because Michael Barrett believes the rise in earning power has an effect. “It’s a little bit of that, a little bit of perception,” he said. “It’s the way people put some players on a pedestal. We’re just like normal people who have been blessed with an opportunity to play at a Major League level and make a substantial amount of money. With that comes a great deal of responsibility.

“A lot of players aren’t equipped to handle that as well. We don’t make the best decisions a lot of times. We try to be good role models... If you ask the average person to live our lifestyle, it would be very difficult. It’s not like a guy makes $15 million, $20 million for ten years and has time to adjust to that lifestyle. If he’s making $10 million, it’s one year, two years. To be able to adjust to that lifestyle, you have very little time to make that adjustment. You might come across as a guy who’s changed. In reality, money does change people a lot. At the same time, I don’t believe when you step on that field, the amount of money has anything to do with how you play the game. On the field, you’re all playing the same game.”

Another plain-speaking type, almost the Harry S Truman of baseball during his time, was Rod Beck, former Giants and Cubs closer. Beck was as down-to-earth a player as I ever met during his short Chicago tenure in 1998–99. “I came into life like that,” Beck said. “I was taught by my parents and every coach I had to put up any punches. I learned to talk about it in truth. If people don’t like the truth, that’s their own problem. I’m one of those guys if you don’t want to hear the truth, don’t ask me.”

A true throwback, Beck would hold court in his locker in his skivvies, beer in hand, long after games, before repairing to Bernie’s, a popular bar a block northwest of Wrigley Field, to mingle with fans. While rehabbing his arm at class-A Iowa in 2003, he invited fans to join him for libations after games at his trailer in the stadium parking lot.

“I’m not sure money is the root of all evil as much as stature,” Beck said. “You become a celebrity when you become a superstar. Everybody wants a piece of you.

“A lot of it is putting up a guard. They don’t want to be taken down from that stature. People who achieve fame at a high level wish to keep it. It’s a survival instinct kicking in. The scary part is, why can’t you keep it while being honest? Wouldn’t that make it more so, solidifying your stature? But for some people, that’s frightening. That’s their defense mechanism kicking in—everyone keep away.”

Offering the contrary view was lifetime Houston Astro Craig Biggio, still as dirty-uniformed a player on the cusp of forty as he was as a young catcher in the late 1980s. “I speak for myself, whether you have two dollars in the bank or twenty dollars in the bank, you treat people the way you want to be treated,” he said. “It was the way you were raised. You just remember who you are. Money might change some people but for the most part it doesn’t change everybody.”

Meanwhile, money was not the push to Jamie Moyer, even though he had amassed a comfortable paycheck after twenty seasons and had high overhead at home with six children to support. “I can honestly say I wasn’t looking for fame and fortune,” Moyer said in 2004. “I played because I love the game and still do. I see a lot of players to whom money really doesn’t matter. They live lives where it doesn’t affect them. Others spend frivolously. If you live within your means, great. That’s your personal side. As a family man, I have responsibilities.”

But the players are able to spend like few others in the country. John Hickey, Mariners beat writer for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, remembered pitcher Dave Stewart cataloguing a shopping trip in the clubhouse while Hickey covered the Oakland Athletics in the 1980s.

“He pulled out the receipt,” Hickey recalled. “He said what the heck did I buy for eighteen hundred dollars? Two sweaters, eight hundred dollars each. Two pairs of socks, one hundred dollars each. Who needs a pair of one-hundred-dollar socks? They’ve moved into a nouveau riche class. They buy a house; they don’t buy their furniture at Sears. They have a craftsman make ‘em.”

Then comes a telling Moyer statement that automatically creates
at least a little guff: "We are entertainers and we are in the entertainment business."

You won't get an argument from Cubs ace Mark Prior. "Obviously the money's great," he said. "We understand we are entertainers. With that brings a lot of responsibility in the public realm. On the flip side is your public and private life, where people try to dig in and merge them. I try to find a happy medium, what your public responsibility is and private responsibility is. Instead of going to movies, fans come out for three hours to watch a baseball game. I don't mind entertaining. But I also know who I report to—the twenty-four other guys on the team, the manager, and the coaches."

Problem is, as "entertainers," as celebrities, the ballplayers have lost their means for privacy. And in a scary age, previous restraints that governed social civility don't exist. The media is seen as a conveyance of private information the players do not want let out.

"That's where it gets scary," Prior said. "That's where you find where standoffish people are trying to be distant with the media. In this day and age, in the world we live in, you don't know who's out there. It's not back when Babe Ruth played, [not] even the 1980s. People follow you home, want to know where you live. That's where you get scared. You don't know if they're fans or have a malicious intent. We're probably the only professional athletes where people know our schedule, when we're home and not home, and they know exactly how much we make."

Prior and fellow Cubs pitcher Kerry Wood found their privacy invaded when their home addresses became a matter of public record. Property transfers—the sale of homes—are available to the general public. Newspapers have now started regularly publishing celebrities' home purchases, sometimes with an accompanying photo. Prior's Chicago residence was listed. In addition to one fan following him home on the interstate from a game in Milwaukee, the right-hander was awakened by others calling his name outside his bedroom window at 2:00 a.m.

"Maybe one out of a thousand people know how to use that," Prior said of the property transfer process. "But you don't have to put it on the front page of the section. That's where you have a lot of trouble. That's why guys get away, try to bolt out of town, and don't live in the cities where they play."

Wood was even more blunt. "In my opinion, if it's public record and the public really wants to find out about it, let them dig it up and find it," he said. "Don't print it in the fuckin' paper you sell to millions of people. What kind of shit is that? People found their way to my house just from a photo of a restaurant right next to it."

Wood's anger was even more white-hot when the subject of Fox Sports was brought up. While he mowed down the Braves in Atlanta during two victories in the 2003 National League Division Series, the angle-hungry Fox production crew kept focusing on the reactions of Wood's wife, Sarah. Ballplayers feel they are macho enough to protect themselves, but they don't want members of their families exposed to an uncertain public.

"The first time they had Sarah on TV the whole game, I told them I didn't want her on," Wood said. "Not because I'm trying to be a dick, but it's a security issue. She gets recognized without me. She's not a public figure. I told Fox to keep her off TV. Sharon [Pannozzo, Cubs media relations director] talked to them. But they put her on TV the next game. They wanted to put me on after the game. They asked me three times. I said I wasn't going to do it. I'm not going to honor their request to talk. I gave them a chance."

"At some point I've got to look out for the safety of my family. They don't care. Was it really necessary to have a split-screen of me and my family in the postseason, or were they trying to make it a drama because she gets excited in the game? If just having a playoff baseball game on your station isn't enough, then maybe you shouldn't have playoff baseball on."

The Woods love taking their pug and Jack Russell terrier out and about, including to a Chicago neighborhood dog park called "Wiggly Field," but found it almost impossible during the 2003 NLCS. The pitcher was mobbed. They have to attend movies at 2:00 p.m. on weekdays. He also reported the couple was the object of aggressive fan adulation while out to dinner.

"At times it becomes frustrating," Wood said. "We were out for Sarah's birthday. The table across from us, they called someone on their cell phone. Fifteen minutes later, people in Cubs gear sit down and stare at us. You're eating dinner in a fishbowl."

"I want to live a normal life, but I don't have a normal job. Before I got into the big leagues, I never recognized celebrities. I would have
recognized Nolan Ryan [a childhood hero], but I wouldn’t have said a word to him. I would have been way too intimidated.”

Even a normal-guy manager like the Twins’ Ron Gardenhire finds that he’s recognized more, and more is desired from him, as he moves away off the field. “Kirby Puckett, to be a normal, everyday guy, he couldn’t do it,” he said. “He couldn’t go anywhere without someone wanting something. I’ve had to change the way I do things. People see me, recognize me. I’m honored, but I don’t want to be disruptive in any way. It’s flattering. It does change your life. You have to make adjustments.”

Seattle writer John Hickey said many players have even withdrawn from public contact on the road, instead using the ballpark as a home away from home. “Players didn’t spend as much time in the clubhouse as they do now,” Hickey said. “Eddie Guardado gets to the clubhouse at noon for a 7:00 p.m. game. He plays cards, talks on the phone, reads. The clubhouse becomes your home. When you’re on the road, a lot of players choose to spend time in the hotel room and clubhouse. Players don’t embrace the city they’re in. Chicago, they’d go to the Art Institute. San Diego, to the beach. But this doesn’t really happen anymore.”

Given that their private lives are anything but, given such fan reaction and the prying media, the ability of players to function as role models and allow their fans to know more about them through the media is increasingly compromised. So is their ability to offer candid appraisals of their own and their teams’ performances. Assuming the hero’s mantle for their young fans is hard when segments of the media and public are alternately criticizing and stalking them.

The purist’s definition of a role model is one’s parents or teachers. Iconoclast relief pitcher Mike Marshall said in 1974 he would not sign an autograph for young fans unless they also showed him the autograph of a truly significant role model, such as a teacher.

“As far as being a role model, we shouldn’t have to be,” Rod Beck said just before his career ended in 2004. “But we are whether we like it or not. You shouldn’t have to divulge your personal life, unless you choose to reveal it. As far as how you affect the game, things that pertain to the sports world, there is some obligation [to the fans].”

Reliever Ray King believes that players have an obligation to the fans. “The media is kind of like our bridge [to the fans],” he said. “You feel good, the fans feel good, and the media feels kind of good. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours to where we can both make each other feel good. The more people read your articles, the better you’re going to feel.”

King’s former Cardinals teammate Jim Edmonds agrees. “I definitely think the fans are why you’re out there,” Edmonds said. “It’s okay for the people to understand who you are and where you’re coming from. The biggest problem is that the information doesn’t get out where it’s supposed to be. The obligation is to get the story right, not a story just to fill the void.”

Yet even if the flow of information is not cut off by more suspicious baseball celebrities, they are more guarded in their comments. Cleveland Indians outfielder Casey Blake confirmed that he and others think about what they’ll say after gaffes when the media horde is admitted. So many players and managers feel they’ve been burned after on- or off-the-record comments that they tend toward the bland when they open their mouths.

“I do that myself,” Jeff Bagwell said. “I stay away from controversy. I always have to think about what I say—otherwise there will be problems with the media.”

Jamie Moyer said that the editing process in print and broadcast skews the true meaning of what players really say. “You watch some of these shows take part of the interview out and embarrass the player,” he said. “It’s all looked upon as being funny. That’s horrible, personally. I really try to pick and choose who I talk to and what I say, and that’s unfortunate.”

The Cubs rarely, if ever, give their “A” material for public consumption when being interviewed. “To be perfectly honest, I’ve been that way since day one,” Mark Prior said. “I know what I believe and I know what I think. Not all what I think needs to be said. B’ material? Maybe my ‘C’ material. They say I’m nonchalant in my press conferences. Literally every starting pitcher on this staff can write on a piece of paper the answers before they’re asked. It’s the same questions: ‘How did you feel? If there was a certain pitch that changed the course of a game, what were you thinking with that?’”

“We’re all aware things get twisted in the paper and nothing gets done about it,” Kerry Wood said. “You try to be as careful as you

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can talking to people and give them no chance to twist anything. You've got reporters coming up the next day and asking about what you said, and it's totally opposite of what you said. You've got one reporter who printed it and ten more standing there who printed it a different way. That's what gets guys frustrated.

"Understand our jobs. You've got guys getting down on you. Obviously it would be boring if you wrote everything we said. I've been saying the same shit for five years. I mix it up every now and then, but it's mostly the same shit. It makes your job tougher than it should be, but we're guarded for a reason. It's pretty bland answers, to be honest with you."

But if players and other baseball types who grew up talking plain English weigh their words carefully, imagine the turmoil endured by Spanish-speaking players who struggle to add English as a second language. The huge influx of Latin players over the past twenty years has made media-player communication that much more difficult.

These big leaguers' audio comments are not used by radio stations because their English is so broken or garbled. With TV, the visual element can somewhat cover the audio problems. Print reporters can try to clean up the broken English.

The majority of big league teams have invested heavily in their Caribbean development programs, so they have added English classes for their imports. Some players take to the language well, while others haven't. At least the situation is improved compared to the 1950s, when Orlando Cepeda felt almost all alone coming into the Giants system from Puerto Rico.

"It was very hard," Hall of Famer Cepeda, now a Giants instructor, said. "They didn't have too many Latin players in the National League. Maybe five—Tony Taylor, Roberto Clemente, Roman Mejias, Felix Mantilla, Juan Pizarro. You had to struggle to communicate."

"It was an unfair situation. Many times they [media] didn't want to know where we're coming from. It was a big difference coming from Puerto Rico to the States. The food, language, everything. It was very hard for us. Some of the coaches labeled us hothead, hot dog, lazy. We were just confused. It was tough being black and Latin in Virginia in 1955."

The situation had improved to a degree by the time Tony Pena broke in as a Pirates catcher in the 1980s. But even learning the language in shotgun fashion at the center of the action—first behind the plate, then as Kansas City Royals manager—Pena realizes the effort to communicate is sometimes a struggle. And thus media accounts of Hispanic players may not paint a true picture due to the language barrier.

"It was hard for me to put the words together," Pena said. "I have to do it every single day. You guys have a job to do like we do. I always spend time to give you as much information as I can. Still, Latin-American players have a fear to express themselves. Our culture is different. Latin-American people are very sensitive. We have a lot of pride. If we're afraid, we don't want to talk.

"We use a lot of shortcuts in our language. Try to use the same shortcut in English, it doesn't work."

Even a veteran player like outfielder Moises Alou, who grew up in a storied baseball family and attended junior college in the United States, struggles to use English correctly. "I learn a word or two every week," he said of the process continuing even after fifteen seasons in the majors.

Alou realized he would not get the same coverage in broadcast interviews because of his thick accent. "I don't [sound good], and for me as a Latin person, I totally understand that," he said. "I would like to do some TV work when I retire, but I know I won't be able to get a job on an English-speaking station because of my accent, and maybe there are some words I don't know. Spanish-language TV I can do if I want to."

The language barrier has caused some Hispanic players to withdraw within their ethnic group in the clubhouses, Alou said.

"There's a case of some players who don't want to learn the language," he said. "There's a lot of guys who don't want to do it. They isolate themselves hanging out with Spanish-speaking players, listening to Spanish TV, radio, and music."

"Anyone who has been in the big leagues for awhile, if you are smart enough to play the game, you're smart enough to learn the language. They should be ashamed they don't learn the language."

The linguistics process should work only one way—media members needn't learn Spanish in their own country, both Pena and Alou
agree. "I don't think you guys should learn Spanish," Pena said. "The players should make an effort to get better, to help the team."

"I don't think you should make an effort to learn the language," Alou said. "You should make a better effort to understand the guy. For me, there are a lot of people who don't think I'm a nice guy because I'm moody. I'm a guy who wants to have my time, read about my horses, play cards. They misread me. Not because of the language, but overall. It makes it a little more difficult to understand the player. You should appreciate the effort a Latin player is making to do an interview."

The gulf within a gulf—Hispanic players versus the media—is worsened when only a handful of Hispanic Americans, who can more easily understand the language and culture, work in mainstream media. The Spanish-speaking writers and broadcasters have gravitated to Spanish-language media outlets. TV stations have boosted their hiring of Hispanic-surnamed on-air talent, but those reporters and anchors have tended to move over to the news side, not sports.

In any language, there are ways to narrow the gulf and minimize conflicts. Hall-of-Famer-to-be Roger Clemens, for one, learned to deal with all kinds of coverage over two decades. By his definition, his chroniclers needed to just be fair.

"The only time when I was taken aback was when it was below the belt," Clemens said. "I can deal with it, but my family doesn't want to deal with it. One hand flips the other. For me to have the privilege, wearing a uniform, I get to go to the Middle East and talk to the troops. I get to do that to raise people's spirits.

"But yet, I know there's going to be a chance where I'm going to be unfairly judged in another way. You have to deal with the good and the bad. Things get blown out of proportion because someone didn't do their homework."

Ray King said the players and media can easily cooperate to create a semblance of trust and a relationship. "Spring training is the best time to get to know players," he said of putting down notebooks and tape recorders and just chatting informally. "You introduce yourself, get insight. If they want to interview you, they should ask in advance how much time you need. Do you need to ice down? After the game, some guys are in their own space. Some guys are ready to talk to the media right away. Some guys like to do certain things before they talk. You can get to know that person on a personal level instead of being the starting pitcher tonight."

Craig Biggio believes players need thick skins to play in the majors. King said players must accept negative news because that's simply the flow of the game. "It comes with the territory," he said. "You could go ten games without giving up anything. Next game after that you're going to lose the game. You're going to be one of the first guys to be interviewed. You've got to stand up and say, 'They beat me.' You can't get mad at the media if the headline says, 'King blew the game for Cards.' Because that's what you've done. Read it, accept it. You can't get mad. I can't fault another person because I didn't do my job."

C.C. Sabathia also understands the politics of player-media relationships. "Always try to put a positive spin on it and make things work to your advantage," Sabathia said. "You can't let a guy sitting behind a desk at a newspaper affect what you're doing on the field. It never has and never will affect me."

Basic human relationships mean a lot to Mack Prior. "My biggest thing, and it has nothing to do with baseball, is more respect," he said. "Respecting what I need to do on a given day. On the flip side, I understand the media people have a job to do, too. If they have a specific question on my performance or what I need to do, I'll talk to them or have someone come get me."

Prior's definition of media fundamentals? "You're writing the truth, writing the facts, not manipulating statements and quotes," he said. "Not being sneaky with reporting. Not eavesdropping on private conversations. Not building you up to tear you down."

The tough part is to get both players and those who need their insight to follow the guidebook to a more harmonious working life.