

BEST IDEAS 2.0

2008 ASSOCIATED PRESS SPORTS EDITORS CONVENTION • MINNEAPOLIS

The contest

PUTTING THE ANNUAL MADNESS TO WORK IN YOUR DEPARTMENT

Maintaining perspective

Why even bother with best ideas and contests when we're scraping by as an industry, with wounds getting worse by the year?

Because our jobs bind us all. Our goal — understand and satisfy our readers — is common. And maybe, just maybe, your paper chasing industry standards and reaching after tangible, content-based goals will uncover an idea that will make mine better.

Because we all inherently want to get better. Because we're responsible for setting and maintaining our own collective standards as an industry.

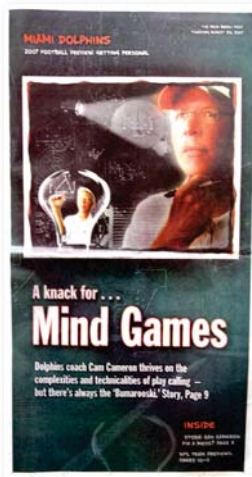
Why are triple crown winners triple crown winners?

Papers placing in the Top 10 in daily, Sunday and special sections in 2007

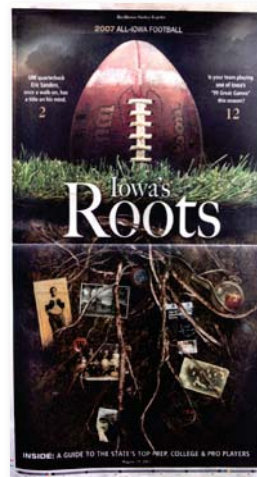
Lincoln Journal-Star



Palm Beach Post



Des Moines Register



Kansas City Star



Ties that bond: Common traits shared by triple crown winners

They know their readers: As space and resources dwindle, we all have to make decisions on behalf of the people who buy our product every day. Knowing them, knowing what interests prevail in our markets and maintaining a stranglehold on those interests is not only a good idea, it's our lifeblood. It's what can and will always make us, and our jobs as the authorities in those markets, relevant.

They own the big stories: It doesn't matter if we're talking eight-man football playoffs or the Super Bowl, if your readers are talking about it, you need to dominate it, and the best sections always do.

They get creative: Innovation doesn't have to be a new story form or multimedia inroad. It can be new enterprise, different angles or a theme readers may have missed.

Contest advice from a former judge

Be about readers. Only mean it a lot more than most who say that.

A good starting point: Meet expectations

One question: What does a reader have a right to expect from this section tomorrow?

The answer won't be an endall, but it will set you down a right path.

If a section has done everything that can be asked of it, readers will find analysis, a strong voice and thorough, well-edited content.

A top-20 guarantee: There's no time for over analysis and second-guessing in APSE judging. Therefore the test of a top-20 section is rather straightforward: If a section merely gives readers everything they deserve, it will always, *always* land in the top 20.

Attention to detail goes a long way

Planning matters: If you have a 10-page section and only have six pages of content, does it ever show. It's a product of planning and organization, but you can't mask a lack of content. Fluff and/or filler is a putoff. It makes readers stop. It makes them put the paper down and go into the backyard and throw a tennis ball to the dog. And you don't want them doing that prematurely, especially if it's done before they get to the good stuff.

Editing matters: You can't meet a reader's expectation if you have a factual error. Yes, staff size and the process is an issue, but that's not a reader's problem.

Great writing, enterprise stand out

There's always room for great writing: Tell stories. Put us in people's shoes. Let us know about their successes, their failures, their motivations. Talk about them. Good writing makes readers want more. It makes them seek out more. When done right, it can still be the cornerstone upon which our industry rests.

Enterprise still rules, too: Find subjects that matter, or find subjects that should matter and *make* them matter. We still have more resources, better writers and the largest selection of trained professional journalists in the industry, and we can still make a difference to people's lives.

In special sections, sell out for content

In the Top 10, you'll find 70-page sections and 10-page sections. Size does not matter. It's what you do with the space that makes or breaks it.

Personally, I ask: "How do I feel after I read this section?"

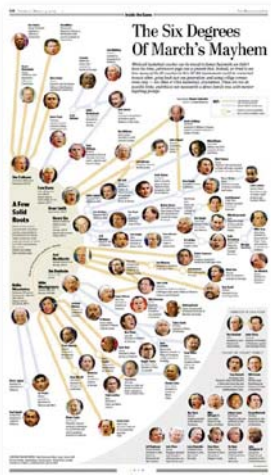
I want to feel informed, like I could go forward satisfied that I knew all I needed to know.

If I felt like I did *not* want to put the section down, or if I felt like a reader would be a fool to throw this section away for weeks, that's when you stand out, that's exceeding what a reader can rightfully expect, when you make them want to read *50 more* pages at the end of the section.

Editors' Choice standouts: Who set the bar, and why

Sampling the year's best, as chosen by a panel of experts and voted on by visitors to sportsdesigner.com

The Washington Post



Infographics, attention to detail

The Post has the horses to entertain and inform, and it did both in 2007, picking up EC awards for infographics and breaking news covers while landing six more category finalists.

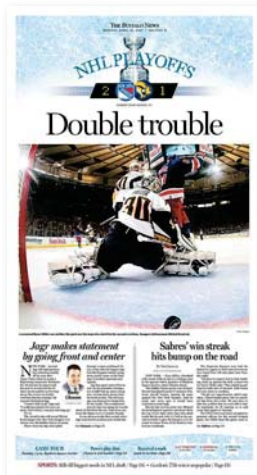
Los Angeles Times



Photography, illustration

The Times cleaned up, with four EC awards and five more finalists, highlighted by this never-done-like-this before illustration for basketball season and vintage, documentary photography in a Stanley Cup special section.

Buffalo News



Originality, clarity

The News had eight finalists and one EC winner, for live game covers. Unique details and furniture, and simple, easy-to-follow presentations play off of skilled photography and illustration to work every time.

Omaha World-Herald



Inside pages

With EC awards for breaking news and live game inside pages, and just missing one for special section inside pages, the paper was rewarded for depth of storytelling and layer upon layer of information.

Managing visuals in your department

Editing and hiring advice to sports editors from a design editor

As an editor: Dealing with designers

Watch out for: Drawing pages up for designers; running with an idea without including the designer; calling for a change without communicating the reasons why.

- You may only have 15 minutes to spend with designers every day, but they spend eight hours working on your section. Take care not to oversimplify instructions or dismiss ideas they may have spent several hours or more working on.
- The most productive and valuable editing of design comes on the front end. Once it's in the paper, criticism feels like a one-way lecture.
- You can get a designer to do *anything* for you if you ask the right questions. "What if we do ..." goes a long way.

For your designers: Working together

Watch out for: Reacting in haste to editing; making edits personal; trying to do too much without a content-based reason for doing so.

- Open your mind to the possibility that, even though you may know more about design, that your editor is looking at your work like a reader would.
- Realize that an editor dealing with anywhere from 10 to 50 people in a given day does not have the time or agenda to turn editing into a personal issue.
- If you find yourself unable to answer an editor's question about design, it should be a red-flag alert to reconsider what you're doing. The phrase "because it looks cool" should never enter the conversation.

Find the right hire, and then make it

Moneyball approach: The most talented college designers take the same internships or entry-level jobs year after year. If you're not in their market, your hire must be for potential.

- A good college portfolio is a nice start, and that's it.
- Look for people who are willing to ask you critical questions about your section, and offer ideas about how to make it better.
- Look for people who are willing to listen when you critique their work. If they back their work with sound reasoning, put them on your list.
- If you promise that you'll make someone better, be willing to follow through on it.

Be in position to bring good people on board

You can find good people everywhere: Start at the nearest colleges and the closest papers. Not all searches need to comb the nation.

- Spend an hour or two each month at newspagedesigner.com, and keep a list of designers – especially young designers and those nearby – whose work impresses you.
- At the very least, know the journalism advisers at area colleges by first name. It's even better if you can speak to students every semester.
- If a student e-mails you seeking advice, or if a competitor from a smaller nearby paper e-mails you with praise, RESPOND! The gesture will pay off tenfold more often than not.