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# Coming Down the Stretch: An Analysis of the use of Sports Reference in Political Dialogues and its Effectiveness

*by David Garr*

**Abstract:** *Did a candidate just “hit a home run?” Which candidate is running as “the underdog?” Is someone “moving the goalposts?” In today’s media landscape, the use of sports references to describe political candidates and events is abundant. This paper takes a look at the history of this type of horse-race journalism and its use in current political dialogues. Through a study of primary election night transcripts and ratings, this study looks at how the networks and their viewers have been affected from enhanced use of sports references throughout their coverage. Additionally, research conducted for this study looks at the effectiveness of utilizing those nuanced sports metaphors in political coverage over more direct and insightful campaign information.*

## I. Introduction

Sports vocabulary can appear in many diverse arenas of speech and dialogue. Conversations concerning romance (the baseball “bases” metaphors), business (going for the gold), and even the American psyche (the idea of sports athletes and stars as social heroes and idols) are often subjected to language infused with sports references and metaphors. Political dialogue is no different. Aside from actual sports conversations, politics may be the next most prolific arena penetrated by sports metaphors. However, with the abundant nature of sports in political conversations, the question arises, do these references help the conversation? Specifically, do the allusions to sporting events and terminology help the viewers gain a better understanding of the nature of the campaigns, candidates, and situations? Or, is the use of sporting references in these contexts merely a means of sensationalizing a story? This study seeks to demonstrate that, indeed, the use of sports references in political dialogues does provide the audience with a greater understanding of the nature of the issue.

Traditionally, when sports and politics are discussed in the same conversation, many of these dialogues revolve around the politics of sports. Examples are abundant of how politics intermingles with sports. International sporting events such as the Olympics can be grounds for political protests, such as the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Domestic sporting events can draw in politics, politicians, and divide the parties (for example, which side of the aisle fans position themselves often decides what color – blue or red – their Washington Nationals hat might be). The intermingling of politics and sports can even refer to intercity politics, such as using ballparks and stadiums in an effort to revive or redevelop a lapsing area of the city. These are traditional examples of how sporting events are grounds for developing political ties and interests.

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However, the reverse is often true: political events can also serve as playgrounds for sports conversations and metaphors.

Sports references and metaphors increasingly seep into political discussions each election cycle. These sports euphemisms become more prominent as campaign seasons develop. One candidate may be running as the “underdog,” the “long-shot,” “running strong,” or “hitting a home run.” On the other hand, an opponent might be “moving the goal posts” or “playing dirty.” Campaign contexts are full of sports innuendos.

A number of questions arise when discussing sports references in the modern political arena. What is the reasoning for this usage? Does it benefit the viewers? Does it benefit the networks? Is it merely a way for broadcasters, journalists, and candidates alike to sensationalize the political coverage? Currently, there is little study in the use of sports language in politics beyond the narrowed scope of closely following the front-runner and the latest tracking polls. Throughout the following analysis, this paper will examine sports metaphor usage in political discussions during the 2008 party nomination process. To accomplish this task, this paper utilizes a two-pronged study of the use of sports references in political discourse. First, it will examine at the prominence of sports language in the broadcasts of primary coverage for the 2008 elections. Then, through an audience analysis study, this paper will demonstrate the effectiveness of using sports language to relay information to the television viewers and newspaper readers.

## II. Literature Review

Texts on the subject of media use of sports language when discussing campaigns and elections are few and far between. While there are plenty of texts that discuss the role of politics in sports, media discourse in election reporting, and the role of gender and race in elections, it is rare to find a published material that discusses the use of sports references, language, terminology, metaphors, etc. when discussing candidates and political contests.

In their compilation of essays entitled *Out of Bounds*, Aaron Baker and Todd Boyd delve into sports' impact on society, focusing on specific events and their relevance to the social fabric. While not specific to political coverage, Baker and Boyd analyze media representations of sports and how different groups in society are affected. The focus of their work is the politicization of sports, which is relevant to the overall understanding of how sports affect networks within culture and their overall significance (Baker, 1997). However, this work lacks particular usage of terminology and the effects of the language on the general audience. Through further research, a better understanding of these particular areas can be developed.

“Horse-race journalism” is the subject matter of Thomas Littlewood's 1998 work, *Calling Elections*. Littlewood takes an historical look at how horse-race journalism developed over time and its consequences. Littlewood devotes a significant portion of his book to the use of sports language on political reporting. On the subject of the specific language used by journalists to describe politicians and elections, Littlewood notes that the election process, with preliminary contests that are filtered into one large, overarching contest, is much like an elimination tournament, and therefore lends itself well to sports analogies. Littlewood also discusses competitive feelings that political writers had with their sports-writing counterparts over the attention and interest of the newspaper reading public (Littlewood, 1998).

The importance of Littlewood's work is that it provides a basis and understanding of how the two perceived separate entities gradually began to interweave. It helps to explain the nature and setting for pundits and politicians alike to use sporting analogies. Furthermore, Littlewood's assertion that “[s]ports conversation binds a diverse community together in a quasi-patriotic way that political activity does not,” presents a good understanding of why journalists would try to incorporate sports language into political conversations (Littlewood, 1998, 75). Littlewood directly notes that “politicians – and the journalists who covered them – shared an interest in making the electoral process more exciting by presenting it as another kind of athletic contest” (76). Littlewood's work helps create the basis for modern media's use of sports terminology in political discussions, and also forms the hypothesis that sports metaphors provide a different connection with the reader.

In 1983, Peter Golding, Graham Murdock, and Philip Schlesinger released *Communicating Politics*, a

compilation of essays about the means by which mass communications meet the political process. One of the essays, written by Dan Schiller, is entitled “Transformations of News in the U.S. Information Market.” In this essay, Schiller argues that due to the mass commercialization of news, news programs have become subject to business systems. Therefore, the mainstream press has taken a mass appeal approach to reporting, which includes “elevating entertainment over information and emphasizing crimes, scandals, sports and human oddities” (Goulding, 1986, 20). Furthermore, Schiller argues that the once definite lines between news, entertainment, public relations, and advertising are now being blurred to the point of extinction.

Schiller’s arguments are important to the framework of this paper because he is making the assessment that the use of sports-infused language only *amplifies* the entertainment value of the content. The product of sports-infused language is *not* that it helps citizens understand situations and circumstances of the political event on a higher level. Rather, it is a means by which the news networks and programs sensationalize the content and gain more viewers. Schiller’s writings are over twenty years old. However, the case can still be made in today’s saturated market – with multiple 24-hour news networks and internet technologies that permit all individuals to get information faster and in a more specialized manner – the bridging of sports and political realms is merely an attempt to capture a wider audience and keep viewers attention to their news services.

**T**he mainstream media [offers] tantalizing coverage of elections at the expense of issue-based political journalism.

### III. Historical Perspective

**T**he use of sports language in political conversations can fall under the category of “horse-race journalism.” It is important to understand the concept of horse-race journalism because the theories behind it and its methods are heavily tied to the use of sports references in political conversations. As author Thomas Littlewood describes, our current conception of horse-race journalism (or horse-race reporting) has come about in response to readers and viewers shunning the political system (Littlewood, 1998). Horse-race journalism has been defined as a mechanism used by the press that centers its political coverage around polling data, particularly on shifts in which candidate is ahead and which candidate is trailing (Rosen, 2004). Generally, this polling data is focused around the actual competition for office and not more important issues. This creates an atmosphere where the important message is who the current frontrunner is, not where candidates stand on the issues (Owen, 1991). The ultimate point of horse-race journalism is to answer one simple question as to who is going to win (Rosen, 2008). According to Littlewood, as a knee-jerk reaction, the mainstream media has taken to offering more tantalizing coverage of elections at the expense of issue-based political journalism (Littlewood, 1998). Due to the nature of the data surrounding elections (survey data and number-based information), sports are an easy platform on which to project political communications. Both sports and politics are statistics-based mediums. Where sports have records, speeds, and efficiencies to compute, politics have public opinion data, latest projection information, and vote totals. Each of these mediums provide a breeding ground for fast-paced, around-the-clock information. Horse-race journalism is the premium example of how sports and politics merge. The frantic nature of horse-race journalism is one of the main impetuses for the use of sports messaging in political conversations. It is important to understand horse-race journalism and its developments as a means to understand how it has been embraced today and how it has led to the current use of sports terminology in elections.

Horse-race journalism became a commonplace mass communication tool in elections during the mid-nineteenth century. Thomas Littlewood remarked that a landmark in horse-race journalism came during the 1848 election between Zachary Taylor and Lewis Cass. The 1848 election was the first in which national elections were held on the same day. This meant that information needed to be gathered as quickly as possible

redistributed to the public (Littlewood, 1998). The mid-nineteenth century also saw the newspapers embrace straw polls for the electorate. Newspaper publishers were looking for new ways to capture the passion of the interested public, and quick straw polls served just that purpose. This period also saw the newspapers embrace a new form of engaging readers on lead-up reporting and results of the presidential elections through gambling. Newspapers published odds of candidates and allowed subscribers to place bets on the outcome of the elections (Littlewood, 1998).

This was not the only tactic used to engage the public's love affair with sports. During the 1870s, horse-race journalism, and the use of sports language as an apparatus for political dialogue, began to take a much clearer shape. As the greater competition for newspaper space and public attention grew, so did the necessity for political journalists to find new ways of engaging the public in their stories and public affairs. This meant journalists had to learn to attract viewers. Journalists explored new ways of engaging the newspaper reader "by employing the language, and evoking the images, of the sports page" (Littlewood, 1998, 77).

Many perceive the current notions of horse-race journalism, and the methods and language it encompasses, as beginning with the coverage of elections on television during the mid-twentieth century. The 1960 contest between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon has been said to be the first real example of modern horse-race journalism (Owen, 2008). The art of the "sound bite" and the quick and poignant headline during the time were a consequence of political reporting on television, as it became a pivotal news distribution device (Littlewood, 1998). Television enabled horse-race journalism to reach a milestone in the 1980 presidential elections. During this election cycle, more than half of the race coverage between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter focused on the contest-like atmosphere (Owen, 1991).

Today, examples of horse-race journalism are blurred between many different mediums. A quick search of a blog, internet website, RSS feed, or even television (especially the cable news networks) and radio to pick up election news demonstrates saturation with statistics about the presidential campaigns, polling information, and pundits discussing who will win the presidency. The argument could be made that recently – especially during the 2008 presidential race – the horse-race journalism aspect of media coverage has elongated the nominating process. This has led to individuals declaring their candidacy for presidency and members of the press speculating on who the eventual nominee and winner would be almost two years before the election was even scheduled (Horrigan, 2006).

### *Sports Language in the 2008 Nominating Contest*

In 1997, Aaron Baker wrote that the media uses American professional sports to describe cultural texts because they are widely consumed by a large audience. Furthermore, quoting Stuart Hall, Baker writes that sports are popular because "they function 'in a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture'" (Baker, 1997, xiii). To a greater extent, the usage of sports analogies in campaign contexts comes via political pundits, those who are paid to tell the populous what is going to happen and when. CNN and MSNBC's political coverage teams are some of the leading contenders when it comes to comparing an election to a sports contest.

Political pundits are not the only participants in the political arena that infuse rhetoric, commentaries, and analysis with sports vocabulary. Candidates also produce sports terminology routinely throughout their speeches and interviews. Senator Hillary Clinton is one candidate who has embraced utilizing America's love affair with sports. In her May 14, 2008 interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Sen. Clinton responded to a question regarding why she is staying in the race for President, with: "So, I don't believe in quitting. You may not win in life but you do the best you can. You go the distance. You don't walk off the court before the buzzer sounds. You never know, you may get a three-point shot at the end. So we're going to finish this process" (Blitzer, 2008). In the span of twelve seconds, Sen. Clinton offered two prominent sports analogies. First, she referred to "go[ing] the distance," or continuing the process through the end of the party nomination phase. This prominent term is derived from track and field, and refers to continuing until the conclusion of the race.

The other sports reference Sen. Clinton employed was the “walk off the court” and “three-point shot.” Here, Sen. Clinton was using the analogy to explain she has no intention to bow out of the nomination race, while hoping she wins against nearly insurmountable odds. Similar phrases used to describe these types of situations include “to throw up a Hail Mary” (football) and “facing an uphill battle” (cycling).

As much as political candidates rely on sports terminology, political pundits and commentators are much more prolific in their uses. CNN, while leading the night audience viewership, was by no means innocent of infusing their May 6, 2008 primary election coverage with sports topics. During the night, CNN anchors, pundits, and politicians used sports references 61 times throughout the election coverage’s broadcast. These included a number of boxing, baseball, and racing references. Furthermore, of those 61 sports-related statements, 27 of those utterances referred to the campaign as a “race” between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Additionally, throughout the night, CNN’s anchors and politicians made direct metaphors or correlations between the candidates or contest and a specific sporting event (CNN.com, 2008a; 2008b).

While CNN led the night in viewership coverage between the three cable networks, it was third-ranked MSNBC that led the night in politics-as-sports references (Stelter, 2008). Analyzing the conversations from the May 6, 2008 primary night election coverage from MSNBC, it is difficult to navigate the transcript without finding the plethora of sports language, including boxing, baseball, football, horse-racing, auto-racing, and running references. Not including allusions to the Democratic primary campaign as a “race” (51 times between pundits and candidates), there were 91 references to sports throughout the six-hour broadcast (*Special Coverage*, 2008). That equates to nearly one sports-related reference every four minutes. When adding the reference “race” to that equation, nearly every two and a half minutes a sports-related term was used in the broadcast. Not surprisingly, former Fox Sports and ESPN sportscaster Keith Olbermann led all pundits and politicians in the number of sports-related references used at a total of 23 times.

#### **IV. Sports Analogies Survey**

##### *Observations/Data*

To determine the effectiveness of utilizing sports analogies in political discussions, a survey of 126 respondents was conducted. The initial hypothesis posed that the use of sports-infused language in political situations and about political entities benefited the conversation, as it gave the individuals more grounds to understand the circumstances. The first hypothesis tested was:

*H<sub>1</sub>: Respondents will choose the sports-infused political reference over the reference that does not contain the sports analogy.*

Additionally, as a counter to the initial hypothesis, a null hypothesis was introduced:

*H<sub>0</sub>: Respondents will either not choose the sports-infused political reference over the reference that does not contain the sports analogy, or they will choose the references with the same frequency.*

To test the initial hypothesis, a survey was created including statements regarding the same political event with two options for the survey respondent, a sports-infused statement and a non-sports infused statement. As the initial hypothesis suggests, a majority of individuals will gravitate toward the sports-infused remark. As a null hypothesis, the data and presentation of sports-infused political language will reveal that there is little to no impact on the viewer/listener and that when presented with both options, the viewer/listener will gravitate towards the non-sports referenced materials.

#### **V. Methods**

##### *Operations and Procedures*

To better understand for the usefulness of sports analogies in political dialogues, a poll of 126 participants was conducted via the web-based survey site, Survey Monkey. While 126 individuals began the survey, only 102 participants completed the survey. Individuals were randomly asked to participate in the survey at their leisure. The link to the survey was initially posted on the social networking site, Facebook, as well as sent to students in the Communication, Culture & Technology (CCT) graduate program at Georgetown University. After three days from the initial email and notice on Facebook, the link was then posted on the Georgetown sports-based Hoya Saxa Blog. The survey was posted on the “Politics, Religion, and Civil Discussion” portion of the blog. HoyaSaxa.com is mainly a blog that focuses on Georgetown University sports and sports-related activities. The survey was made available for the public through these forums for fourteen days. A full text of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A at the end of this report.

### *Participants*

Based on the individuals with access to the link containing the survey, those respondents were relatively young – under 30 years old – and had at least four years of college education. Additionally, the audience for the Hoya Saxa blog site, while not exclusive, is predominately male. Furthermore, the site is geared toward Georgetown Alumni and sports enthusiasts. Therefore, the viewership on the site tends to be geared toward a crowd older than the traditional Facebook user or CCT student. No additional demographic information was addressed through survey questions.

### *Process and Results*

The survey was conducted using three types of questions. At the onset of the survey, the first question (Name1) posed to the respondent asked them to choose from a list of six choices for which name for election coverage appealed to them the most. The choices, followed by the networks they appear on, were “Ballot Bowl” (CNN), “Indecision 2008” (Comedy Central’s “The Daily Show”), “Decision ‘08” (MSNBC), “Vote ‘08” (ABC News), “Campaign ‘08” (CBS News), and “You Decide 2008” (Fox News). Survey Monkey randomly organized the applicable responses for each individual participant. The purpose of this question was to set up the respondents’ reaction to the names of political coverage and initial leanings toward sports references. At the conclusion of the survey, the same question reappeared on the survey (Name2), acting as a revote and to monitor any movement in responses as a result of reading the other ten questions. These series of questions acted as good indicators of the effectiveness of using sports references in personal preference of political coverage.

Following the initial question, eight consecutive questions (Q1-Q8 on the survey) were asked with two possible choices. In each of these questions, the directions proffered, “[w]hich of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?” The respondent was then offered two quotes from different sources, regarding a similar situation from the 2008 primary election cycle. In one of the options, a direct reporting of the event was chronicled. In the other option, a sport-infused delivery of the information was used. Respondents were also given information on when the article containing the quote was published, who wrote it, and what source it came from. The responses were randomly ordered for each participant.

Similarly the following two questions, Q9 and Q10 respectively, were similarly prompted with “[w]hich of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?” However, unlike the previous eight questions, respondents were directed to two choices with nearly identical language. The primary difference between the two statements was that one statement contained a statement utilizing a sports analogy, while one did not. In Q9, the initial statement was used for one choice: “Nominating a Democratic presidential candidate has become a marathon, but primary voters are going the distance” (Moore, 2008). The language in the question’s other choice was changed around to “Nominating a Democratic presidential candidate has become a long process, but primary voters are continuing to show up.” The purpose of this language selection was to present a manufactured quote that had nearly identical language without the

sport-infused metaphor added to the political process.

The logic applied to Q9 was also used in Q10. However, instead of manufacturing a non-sports metaphor to a sports-infused statement, the opposite was used. The following untouched statement was given to the survey participants as a response choice, “Republican Sen. John McCain has erased Sen. Barack Obama’s 10-point advantage in a head-to-head match-up, leaving him essentially tied with both Democratic candidates in an Associated Press-Ipsos national poll released Thursday” (Pickler, 2008). As an alternative, the same language was used in the second choice, with “leaving him running neck and neck with both Democratic candidates” in the place of “leaving him essentially tied with both Democratic candidates” from the initial quote. Similar to the previous questions, Survey Monkey randomly ordered the survey choices for each individual response.

### Results

At the conclusion of the research, the survey was closed off from further responses and the data was collected. In order to maintain uniformity in responses throughout the survey, the data from Q1 through Q10 was recoded so that those responses that chose the sports-infused statements were labeled “Sports” and those who chose the information-specific answer were labeled “NonSports” per question. Following the recoding process, a one-sample t-test was run to verify the data was significant. The t-test showed that, in fact, there were significant differences between responses for “Sports” ( $t(93)=28.433, p<.05$ ) and “NonSports” ( $t(93)=31.627, p<.05$ ) statements. The mean difference for NonSports was valued at 5.26596 whereas the mean difference for Sports was 4.73404, creating a difference of .53192.

Among the most appealing names for campaign and election coverage, “Indecision 2008” was the favorite both times asked, initially being favored by 25.4% of the respondents and growing by 3% to 28.4% on the revote. The sports-referenced election coverage “Ballot Bowl” was favored by 1.6% on the initial questioning, and grew to 3.9% by the conclusion of the survey. A full list of the responses to Name1 and Name2 can be found in Table 1:

**Table 1:**

	<b>Name1 Response Percentage</b>	<b>Name2 Response Percentage</b>
<b>Ballot Bowl</b>	1.6%	3.9%
<b>Indecision 2008</b>	25.4%	28.4%
<b>Decision ‘08</b>	19.8%	21.6%
<b>Vote ‘08</b>	16.7%	13.7%
<b>Campaign ‘08</b>	12.7%	16.7%
<b>You Decide 2008</b>	23.8%	15.7%

Q1 through Q8 all show similar results in their reporting. When given the choice between the sports-infused statement and the non-sports infused statement, the majority of respondents chose the non-sports related and more direct statement. This was the case for each of the questions, with the exception of Q7. A summary of these data can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2:**

<b>Question Order on Survey (Reference Label)</b>	<b>Percentage who chose Sports-infused response</b>	<b>Percentage who chose Non Sports-infused response</b>
<b>Question 2 (Q1)</b>	39.2%	60.8%
<b>Question 3 (Q2)</b>	34.2%	65.8%
<b>Question 4 (Q3)</b>	39.5%	60.5%
<b>Question 5 (Q4)</b>	31.0%	69.0%
<b>Question 6 (Q5)</b>	38.5%	61.5%
<b>Question 7 (Q6)</b>	29.8%	70.2%
<b>Question 8 (Q7)</b>	55.4%	44.6%
<b>Question 9 (Q8)</b>	33.0%	67.0%
<b>Question 10 (Q9)</b>	46.5%	53.5%
<b>Question 11 (Q10)</b>	66.7%	33.3%

It is important to note that Q9 and Q10 vary in their responses. In each question, the original statement garnered more votes than the enhanced version (either pulling the sports reference, as was the case in Q9 or adding the sports reference in Q10). The responses in favor of the non-sports reference in Q9 were 53.5%, compared to 46.5% who preferred the sports reference. In Q10, the sports referenced quote was favored by 66.7% of the participants, while 33.3% favored the non-sports infused statement.

## **VI. Analysis/Discussion**

The question was posed: have the networks, particularly CNN and MSNBC, benefited from enhancing their coverage with sports terminology? The short answer is both yes and no. It depends highly on the context in which the question is posed.

The data presented through analysis of survey results suggest that individuals favored the non-sports referenced statements significantly over the sport-infused choices. With the exception of Q7, when two statements were given about the same event, the non-sports statement beat the sports-infused statement nearly two-to-one each time. The main difference between Q7 and Q1 through Q8 is that the reference from Q7 can be interpreted as having a reference to gambling rather than sports, i.e., “roll of the dice” refers to a game of chance rather than sports. Still, survey results indicate that a majority of individuals gravitated towards the non-sports references over the sports references.

Additionally, the initial questioning about preference in coverage naming is truly interesting. The directly sports-related title, “Ballot Bowl” received the least amount of votes by a substantial margin. The leading vote-getter, “Indecision 2008” may indicate the mood and feelings of the country, due to the prolonged nature of the nominating process during this cycle. The apparent distaste for “Ballot Bowl” over the other choices may have little to do with the sports-infused nature of the name, rather the indecisiveness of the country during the pre-nomination stage. After viewing the survey, there was some movement toward “Ballot Bowl” in preference. While the two percent increase may seem marginal, it demonstrates that overall there was significant movement toward the sports-branded coverage as a result of the sport-infused line of questions. The movement away from the directly indicative names like “Vote ‘08” and “You Decide 2008,” and toward “Indecision 2008” may have more to do with the questions previously posed and a subsequent further blurring of opinions. This information does however, indicate that the preferences for political coverage encapsulating sports names is at best minimal.

The response to the non-sports statements was overwhelming. Due to the vast difference in opinion choosing

the non-sports statement over the sports-infused references, it would indicate that the use of sports in reporting the news does not help the individual understand the event better. A majority of individuals who took the survey gravitated to the non-sports references seemingly because of the information they received from those statements rather than the nuanced approach sports references tend to take when adding commentary to a political statement.

If one were to characterize success in terms of increasing ratings, using the sports metaphor tactic has worked. Fox News, the ratings leader of the major cable news networks, has seen its primary coverage viewership numbers dropping. The April 22, 2008 coverage of the Pennsylvania primaries showed that both MSNBC and CNN's coverage moved ahead of Fox News' in the highly valued 25-54 demographic and took a substantial chip out of Fox News' overall ratings on the night (Stelter, 2008). Two weeks later, in the following round of primary contests in Indiana and North Carolina, MSNBC received another key victory over ratings-leader Fox in the 25-54 year-old demographic. Overall ratings on the night for all the networks were down from the previous primary elections. MSNBC's coverage, however, saw the shortest drop in its overall audience, losing 13.2% of its audience (roughly 212,500 viewers) compared to CNN's 13.6% drop in its audience (347,167 viewers) and Fox News's 17.3% drop in its audience (408,667 viewers) (Gorman, 2008). One must note, however, that this may be a coincidental occurrence. MSNBC's ratings success may have come about because of the language and enhanced use of sports references. On the other hand, it might merely be a factor among other factors, such as the lack of Republican contests to watch, etc. that likely could have had an effect as well.

### *Survey Quality*

A number of issues and complications arise from conduction of the survey. Primarily, there may have been an issue with the preceding information to adequately set up the survey questions. Specifically speaking, there may have been a lack of information when it came to properly placing the quote in the appropriate perspective. Without an adequate understanding and context for the quote, individuals may have chosen based upon their overall understanding of the race and not on the individual event being referenced.

An additional issue raised through the survey is the lack of diversity for respondents. Indeed, the survey's distribution points were closed off to only those who had profiles on the social networking site, individuals on the CCT email distribution list, and fans who visited the highly specialized sports blog. The resulting respondents did not number nor broad enough to be fully indicative of the American popular opinion.

Furthermore, a lack of demographic questions in the poll and subsequent answers from the data is a significant issue. Because no questions were asked in the survey about gender, race, education levels, income, etc., it is difficult to understand the nature of the respondents to the survey. One especially informative demographic category that was not asked was political ideology or party identification. This information would have been helpful in identifying any political or personal biases that would have resulted in a person or group's answering habits. The only information available is basic demographic information about the mediums the survey link is posted on, but even these are not sufficiently in-depth. The lack of understanding of the respondents further hampers the validity of the collected data.

### *Further Research*

The survey presents many insights into the minds of not only those who ingest political commentary, but the nature of individuals and their reception to types of communications as a whole. The survey lacked the ability to delve deeper into the impetus behind choices, and much in the area is yet to be explored. The completed survey was merely a pilot study. Further in-depth research and analysis can be conducted into the effectiveness of these types of communications, as well as the other types of communications often infused with political conversations. Analysis of ratings trends and the use of particular types of associated language is another area that has great explorative potential. Additionally, the idea of sports as a filter for messaging and message distribution is another area that can be examined through further study.

## VII. Conclusion

It is not difficult to understand why sports language has been adopted for use in the political realm. The nature of calling a sporting event is very similar to the nature of reporting on a political race, especially in a race for the presidency. The perception of statistics describing the acolytes of professional athletes in the eyes of fans and sports commentators alike are viewed in much the same manner to the public perception ratings of politicians. The comments and quotes attributed to athletes and sports league officials are monitored just as closely as statements made by politicians and their campaign officials. Sporting analogies and situations lend themselves extremely well to the world of politics and political reporting.

The research conducted for the purposes of this paper set out to gain a better understanding of the nature of sports diversion into politics. The hypothesis was presented that the reason political pundits, politicians, and commentators used the references was to benefit the television viewer and political reader – that it helped them understand the information being presented in a better manner. The frequency and rate at which the cable news networks report stories using sport language has been identified. However prolific its nature is in our current and past forms of media, the research in fact showed that it had little impact on the reader and listener. Indeed, the majority of survey respondents from the survey actively favored the non-sports referenced passages than the sports-infused references. The null hypothesis turned out to be the correct hypothesis.

The questions then arise, why do journalists continue to use these techniques when reporting on politics and candidates? Why do candidates continue to tie sports themes to their campaigns? Who benefits? Or for journalists, is it, as reporter Jay Rosen pointed out, “the inside baseball mentality” – that horse-race reporting is a means to compensate for a lack of experience, used as psychological defense that compensates for a writer’s insecurities, or fulfilling the general allusion that the commenter understands politics and can call an appropriate winning strategy (Rosen, 2008)?

As the British Ambassador to Washington DC during the 1880s, James Bryce once noted, “Americans like excitement...The presidential election, in which two men are pitted one against the other over a four months course for the great prize of politics, stirs them like any other trial of strength and speed; sets them betting on the issues, disposes them to make efforts for a cause in which their deeper feelings may be little engaged” (Littlewood, 1998, 45). Americans love the nature of sports: they always have and perceivably always will. Americans have such a national love affair with sports that some have referred to sport as America’s religion (Lipsyte, 1996). This appears to be the main reason broadcasters seek to enhance their political coverage with sports references. Americans love sports and sports talk, and infusing political conversations with these types of allusions is a logical step. If journalists want to spice up their coverage or present the information to the public in a new and exciting fashion, it would appear sports are their means of doing so. However, in doing so, their use of sports references appears merely a means to sensationalize an event. As Rosen notes, “without who’s going-to-win, ‘we’ might as well stay home” (Rosen, Salon.com, 2008).

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## Appendix A

### *Survey Questionnaire*

#### **Name 1: Question 1**

Of the following choices, which name for election coverage appeals to you the most?

- Decision '08
- You Decide 2008
- Ballot Bowl
- Indecision 2008
- Campaign '08
- Vote '08

#### **Q1: Question 2**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- In Mishawaka, Clinton supporters who came to the event --obviously a pro-Clinton crowd --said they wanted the former first lady to stay in the race, although several noted they would be comfortable voting for Obama if he was the Democratic nominee. They were not surprised that Clinton had made reference to staying in the race in her speech and several said they had heard on television that Clinton was being pressured to drop out. ~March 28, 2008, Perry Bacon Jr., Washington Post
- Hillary Clinton played to her underdog status by asking voters not to brush aside her candidacy, as some are suggesting now, and have suggested in the past. She said voters have to ask themselves who they can count on to solve the problems facing America. ~March 28, 2008, Fernando Suarez, CBS

#### **Q2: Question 3**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- “You know, we are in the fourth quarter and it is a close contest. We are running up and down. We are taking shots,” Mrs. Clinton said, speaking over a crescendo of applause. ~March 30, 2008, Jeff Zeleny, New York Times
- “Hillary Clinton says she has no plans to quit the race, but her campaign may be running out of time and money” ~April 1, 2008, David Wright, ABC World News Tonight

#### **Q3: Question 4**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- Just as Senator John McCain appeared poised to become the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, he was reminded over the weekend that many Republican voters still have not climbed aboard

his bandwagon. ~ February 11, 2008, Paul Vitello and Michael Cooper, New York Times

- On Tuesday, more than 20 states will vote in the biggest primary day of the year. John McCain is the Republican front-runner now, but can he handle? Can he convince conservatives he's the man to win? ~ February 3, 2008, Bob Schieffer, Face the Nation

#### **Q4: Question 5**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- If the battle between...is not resolved by the outcome next week, it may be that, for the first time in many years, the Democratic nomination will not be decided until the party convention in August. ~January 28, 2008, The Age
- Tim Russert: Black Voters 78% Obama 19% Clinton 2% Edwards. White voters 40% Edwards 36% Clinton 24% Obama...Lester Holt: So right now nobody's looking at a knockout punch. This is going to be a slug fest all the way to the convention. ~January 27, 2008, Sunday Today Show

#### **Q5: Question 6**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- The campaign of Sen. Barack Obama vowed to defend the party rules and said the Clinton campaign was moving the goal posts on a solution. "We will not accept the seating of delegates based on the January votes since Senator Clinton herself said the Michigan contest didn't count for anything," said Obama campaign manager David Plouffe. "We played by the rules. Now when they believe it serves their political interest, they are trying to change the rules." ~ March 13, 2008, Brian DeBose, Washington Times
- Obama campaign officials have insisted just as vociferously that, unless the DNC finds a solution, neither delegation should be seated. To simply seat the delegates, they argue, would amount to changing the rules midstream. Allies of Obama have quietly floated the idea of allowing the delegations to be seated, but with the delegates allocated evenly between the candidates. ~ March 7, 2008, Dan Balz, Washington Post

#### **Q6: Question 7**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- They key, though, almost every conservative says --"the home run," as David Keene put it --is McCain's vice presidential choice. The nominee must be an unapologetic conservative, in the eyes of true believers. ~ February 28, 2008, Kevin Merida, The Washington Post
- But there is little consensus within the party about what issue will define McCain's choice. Should his team look to a candidate who could shore up his economic credentials? Should he choose a partner

who could allay suspicions among some conservatives that McCain is too liberal? Or does he have the latitude to choose a candidate who might broaden the appeal of the Republican Party? ~March 22, 2008, Maeve Reston, Los Angeles Times

### **Q7: Question 8**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- [Former President Bill Clinton] has called...the prospect of an Obama presidency a roll of the dice. ~ January 18, 2008, Melissa Block and Robert Siegel, All Things Considered (NPR)
- This is attacking his experience. Now, you know, that's probably acceptable, OK, questioning experience. ~ January 23, 2008, Ed Shultz, Hardball with Chris Matthews

### **Q8: Question 9**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- You know, the soap opera keeps pulling you back in, this horse race between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and John McCain. ~ April 8, 2008, Clarence Page, Talk of the Nation
- There are high-minded reasons that viewers are tuned in, after all: As CNN Washington bureau chief David Borhman points out, voters this year are engaged: They've seen close contests and tense recounts. They want to have a say. ~ January 22, 2008, Joanna Weiss, The Boston Globe

### **Q9: Question 10**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- Nominating a Democratic presidential candidate has become a marathon, but primary voters are going the distance: Voter registration is surging in six of the eight states with upcoming Democratic primaries — a sign that turnout could continue to break records. ~ April 6, 2008, Martha Moore, USA Today
- Nominating a Democratic presidential candidate has become a long process, but primary voters are continuing to show up: Voter registration is surging in six of the eight states with upcoming Democratic primaries — a sign that turnout could continue to surpass expectations. ~ April 6, 2008, Martha Moore, USA Today

### **Q10: Question 11**

Which of the following, in your opinion, conveys the better understanding of the 2008 presidential elections event?

- Republican Sen. John McCain has erased Sen. Barack Obama's 10-point advantage in a head-to-head matchup, leaving him running neck and neck with both Democratic candidates in an Associated Press-

Ipsos national poll released Thursday. ~ April 10, 2008, Associated Press

- Republican Sen. John McCain has erased Sen. Barack Obama's 10-point advantage in a head-to-head matchup, leaving him essentially tied with both Democratic candidates in an Associated Press-Ipsos national poll released Thursday. ~ April 10, 2008, Associated Press

**Name 2: Question 12**

After reading the previous statements, which of the following names for election coverage appeals to you the most?

- Vote '08
- You Decide 2008
- Ballot Bowl
- Campaign '08
- Decision '08
- Indecision 2008