Sports journalists in Scandinavia consistently turn a blind eye to the real challenges facing the world of sports. In their daily sports coverage, the leading newspapers of Denmark, Sweden and Norway almost exclusively carry entertainment-type articles about high-profile athletes, top clubs and popular spectator sports. The type of journalism offered in Scandinavia is basically uncritical and shy away from dealing with wider issues such as the sports world’s impact on society in regards to social, economic and health-related issues.

Monday Morning’s analysis of nearly 3,200 sports articles from nine leading Scandinavian newspapers shows that articles focusing on the broadly based sports and athletics that more than 6 million Scandinavians participate in, make up less than 1 per cent of the total sports coverage. Likewise, articles dealing with the sports industry that in Scandinavia boasts a yearly turnover of tens of billions of Danish kroner, make up just 7 per cent of the total columnage in the sports pages. The lion’s share of sports coverage, 85 per cent, focuses on the stars and events of commercial elite sport.

The most important contemporary development that sports journalists are ignoring is the fact that the Danish people are losing interest in competitive sports. This trend has been ongoing since the late eighties, and is a real challenge to media enterprises: Readership interest in printed and broadcast sports journalism is steadily declining. All recent usage statistics of sports coverage in leading Danish media show a drop off in consumer interest. The late sports news on Danish channel TV 2 has dwindled from 744,000 viewers in 1994 to 289,000 today. The late sports news on Danmarks Radio’s television has lost some 50,000 viewers since 1996. Following this trend, it is clear that the leading Danish newspaper Politiken within the month will cancel the most ambitious gamble in Danish sports journalism recently – its twelve-page Sunday sports supplement – citing poor reader and advertiser response.

The editors interviewed by Monday Morning state a need to rethink focus in order to address the fading public interest in results- and entertainment-based sports coverage.

Bo Malthesen, editor-in-chief of Politiken states, »We need to acknowledge that we have created a ghetto of sports coverage. A ghetto of sports results, entertainment and top events catering to a narrow interest.

By pigeonholing issues and editorial staff, we have lost the attention of readers who are interested in issues such as sports in relation to business, health and keeping fit, local voluntary work and so forth.«

Blinkered entertainment

Our analysis shows that the ghetto-metaphor is a very accurate portrayal of contemporary sports journalism.

An entertainment ghetto about male sports icons – a ghetto for male readers. Health-related, economic, political and social dimensions of the sports world, provenly of more interest to the female readership, are ignored wholesale by the current brotherhood of sports journalists and editors.

The main findings of Monday Morning’s analysis, grouping Scandinavian as one, are shown in figure two.

A summary of our findings

Results, summaries and advance coverage fill the columns. Eight out of ten articles deal exclusively with current elite sporting events. Either as advance mention of an upcoming match, or as reportage from a recent event.

Focus on big-money televised sporting events.

Football is the subject of 52.2 per cent of all written sporting journalism in Scandinavia. In each of the three Scandinavian countries different sports are given top priority – but seen collectively, televised and sponsor-friendly elite sports receive most of the media attention. Following the all-dominant sport of football, the ranking of sports receiving coverage is: Handball with 8.1 per cent, skiing and winter sports with 8.0 per cent, cycling with 5.2 per cent and ice hockey with 4.4 per cent of total coverage.

Uncritical journalism dominates. Only four years after the greatest scandal in modern sporting history – the revelations of doping in the 1998 Tour de France – it is
noteworthy that only 19 per cent of sports journalism takes a critical angle. The subject of doping only takes up 3.8 per cent of total columnage.

Eight out of ten articles are uncritical reportages or news.

Women nearly invisible. If not for female handballers and Norwegian female skiers, women would be almost absent from the sporting pages. A mere 8 per cent of stories focus on female sports and athletes. 12 per cent of stories carry a mixed-gender focus, and 80 per cent focus exclusively on male sports and athletes.

Politics, money matters slighted. Despite a long presence on the stock exchanges, an annual turnover amounting to billions of Danish kroner and government subsidies in Scandinavia collectively running into billions of Danish kroner, only 8 per cent of sports coverage focuses on economics or politics.

Popular sports unpopular with the press. 35-40 per cent of the Scandinavian population partake actively in sports on a local basis, and more than 2 million Scandinavians voluntarily lead local athletic and sports associations. Despite of this, community-based and amateur sports receive less than 1 per cent of the total sports coverage. A solid 85 per cent of sources for sports journalism are top athletes and their trainers and managers. A free space for unbridled nationalism. 6 out of 10 sports articles have a national focus. 40 per cent of international articles spotlight a national athlete who is partaking. The tennis-player Kenneth Carlsen is heavily covered, despite being a modest world number 122. The female handball teams of Norway and Denmark receive a boatload of coverage during championships despite female handball being little more than a curiosity outside the Nordic region.

Journalism terrible at responding to development

Bjarne Ibsen, director of the Research Institute for Sport, Culture and Civil Society, labels the results «lamentably familiar.» In Bjarne Ibsen’s view it is sports journalism’s negligence that causes the problem: «Sports journalism is in fact terrible at responding to developments in the fields of sports and athletics. It has been documented that public interest in elite and competitive sports is dwindling. The population’s interest has shifted and elite sports and athletics are heading into a crisis. Unseen by the media, a whole new sports culture is emerging.

The media is actively dealing with the consequences of this shift in interest – in a deflated football economy, and in the large television networks’ inability to sell televised matches. But as yet, no sports journalist has given attention to the reason for the crisis.»

Mr. Ibsen refers to the grave financial problems faced by top European clubs after the transmission rights-owning broadcasters have fallen like dominoes during 2002, primarily because of inability to sell the rights to televised top events at the high prices at which they were originally obtained.

Television determines priorities

The analysts, editors and journalists interviewed by Monday Morning all point to television as the central, problematic influence on sports journalism.

The written press increasingly focuses on televised sporting events – as these events are reasoned to automatically carry a high reader interest and thus help sell newspapers.

Media researcher Ulf Wallin at the University of Göteborg has no doubt that ties too close for comfort developed between television, the written press and the commercial sports industry.

From a comprehensive analysis of the development of Swedish sports journalism carried out by Mr. Wallin in 1995, he learned:

Less than 1 percent of the sports pages deal with the daily sports life of the media audience, Søren Schults Jørgensen proved.

Miss the scoop of the decade?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participation in Sports or Athletics</th>
<th>Participation in Sporting Events</th>
<th>Index 1987-1992</th>
<th>Interest 1987-1993</th>
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<td>100</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>129</td>
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</table>

Figure 2: The Danes’ interest in competitive sports has declined since the nineties. The loss of interest in written and televised sports journalism is conspicuous. Numbers for the elite sports are falling in a time where the population’s general interest in sports is on the increase.

Industry or independence?

"... TV especially – but also to an extent the written press – have entered into a near symbiosis with the sports industry. Advance coverage of large upcoming events is gradually becoming a primary focus. In this way, the media creates interest and revenue for large elite events – and these in turn provide journalists with good copy. In doing so, local sports and athletics are starved of media attention and therefore find it difficult to secure sponsorships and recruit members."

A similar view is offered by Kirsten Frandsen, researcher into sports journalism at the University of Århus: "The top sports are those whose organisations are good at selling broadcasting rights. In this way, television determines for the written press what is relevant to write about."

Kirsten Frandsen points out that motor sports in Denmark enjoy five times the media coverage of yachting. The 55,000 active practitioners of yachting in Denmark outnumber the 15,000 people actively involved in motor sports by more than three to one.

Also, Danish yachting performs substantially better internationally than Danish motor sports. But the motor sports have more money and are better at self-publicity.

Olav Skaaning Andersen, sports editor at the large Danish tabloid Ekstra Bladet, rejects that the written press takes its priorities from what is televised, but feels that broadcasters have lost their independence: "The big public-service broadcasters are so focused on the sporting events they themselves televise, that they in their news broadcasts almost exclusively carry stories related to 'their own' events. It throws journalistic integrity to the wind."

An interesting result yielded by the Monday Morning analysis is that less than 1 per cent of sports reporting is concerned with sponsorship, and just 5 per cent of articles deal with the large international sports organisations – such as UEFA, FIFA and the IOC, and national sports organisations such as NF (Norway), RF (Sweden) and DIF (Denmark).

These large organisations not only exert major influence on sporting rules and tournaments, but also pass judgment on doping cases and so forth, and negotiate substantial broadcasting rights.

According to Bjarne Ibsen, there is a logical explanation to why the individual merchants and large organizations of sport seldom are subject of inquiry: "A kind of holy trinity exists between media, the professional sports clubs and money interests. Too much sports journalism uncritically serves the industry."

As 85 per cent of sports reporting uses top athletes and their trainers as sources, close personal relations between reporter and subject arise – an issue of long debate amongst journalists. The Norwegian media researcher Gerd von der Lippe from the College of Telemarks puts it like this: "Sports journalism is different from virtually all other fields of reporting in that the journalist follows the athlete so intensely, for long periods of time. You become friends with the athlete, camp and travel with the person and become in effect a great fan of their success."

Olav Skaaning Andersen of Ekstra Bladet acknowledges the problem: "The person who writes the spirited reportage on a match or an athlete cannot be the same person who writes the critical, probing analysis of organisations and finances. It just won't work."

Better than their reputation

The sports editors and journalists interviewed by Monday Morning all agree that during the last decade, sports reporting has improved.

Olav Skaaning Andersen of Ekstra Bladet adds: "In broad terms, sports journalism is much better than its reputation. Today, sports journalism is a mixture of many different genres and approaches: Reportage, economical analysis, politics, critical portraiture, etcetera. Just ten years ago it was nothing like this."

"In the mid-nineties a new generation of journalists created a new, critical type of sports journalism. Regrettably, this type of reportage seems to have peaked with the Tour de France revelations and the IOC corruption scandals. I feel that in the last couple of years, critical sports journalism has lost ground," Olav Skaaning Andersen says.

Both Olav Skaaning Andersen and Jyllands-Posten's Henrik Brandt – one of the Danish reporters who has written the most about broadly organized sports and athletics – maintain that sports journalism must also be allowed the liberty of enthusiastic reportage, fascination with its subjects, and national pride.

"You can't begin every football match reportage by uncovering a problem. There has to be room for the joy of the game."

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Figure 1: Football lever

Types of sport featured most in Scandinavian daily papers, pct.

3,200 articles studied

The House of Monday Morning's survey of sports journalism in Denmark, Norway and Sweden is based on an analysis of 3,196 articles from 9 leading daily newspapers. The study is financed by DDI (Danish Gymnastics and Sports Associations).

Figure 2: Advance coverage, news and reportage

Sports reporting in the Scandinavian daily papers by type, pct.

Note: A similar occurrence of top-tier elite sports. Discussions are mostly absent from the sports pages, as are in-depth analyses.

Source: The House of Monday Morning
Sport also has to be a break from business news and other mundane reporting. You have to respect that sports journalism is a slightly lighter genre, Henrik Brandt says.

Who cares for somersaults?
In Olav Skaaning Andersen view, reportage on broadly based sports and athletics is downgraded because of its lack of appeal in print. The readers just aren't interested. Henrik Brandt strongly disagrees with this: "Many sports journalists probably feel that the readers don't care for ordinary somersaults. But it is our duty to show that there are other aspects to those somersaults, and more aspects to the more broadly based sports and athletics," he says, pointing out a recent commitment by Jyllands-Posten into investigating sports in relation to health and fitness. The newspaper wrote about prescribed physical exercise, about physical education in schools, and about the organisations of broadly based sports and athletics. "I have never seen such a strong response from the readers. My sources were called to the Danish Parliament for consultation. It really triggered a debate – it was very satisfying. Also, I got many letters from female readers who were happy to at last find something worth reading in the sports pages."

"But it's a bit of a struggle to write this type of story and fight for it to be included in the sports pages," says Brandt. "We know that 51 per cent of the adult Danish population partake in sports. When we look at the amount of readers who turn to the sports pages, the numbers don't tally. Clearly, something is wrong," Brandt says. Media analyst Kirsten Frandsen finds it difficult to point to a single initiative that can reverse the trend, shifting sports journalism away from uncritical entertainment and domination by commercial interests. "I must admit that I am pessimistic. There is a tendency for parts of the sports world to become unreasonably greedy for money. Maybe it is the audience that will draw the line somewhere," Kirsten Frandsen says. "Some examples illustrating that it is possible to measure and weigh popular sport too," adds Frandsen.

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