

# SportsLetter Interviews

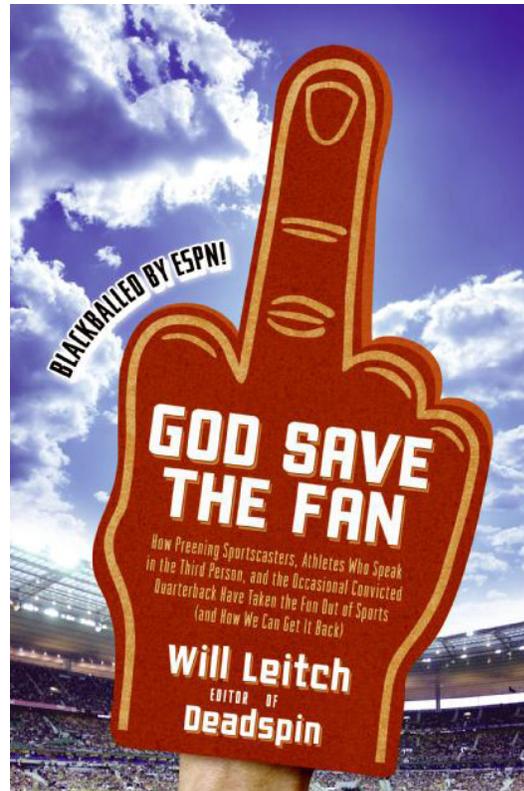
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## Will Leitch

In the fall of 2005, writer Will Leitch launched Deadspin.com, a wickedly arch blog about the world of sports. Published by Gawker Media, Deadspin.com has become must-view daily fodder for fans and journalists alike. Indeed, Deadspin.com more than lives up to its motto: “Sports News Without Access, Favor or Discretion.”

Leitch recently published a book entitled “God Save the Fan: How Preening Sportscasters, Athletes Who Speak in the Third Person, and the Occasional Convicted Quarterback Have Taken the Fun Out of Sports (and How We Can Get It Back)” (HarperCollins). Its clunky subtitle aside, the book is an unapologetic extension of Deadspin.com’s cynical and no-holds-barred take on sports and sports media. Not so incidentally, the book serves as a manifesto for all those fans who like nothing better than to swill beer in the bleachers and argue about the latest trade by the home team.

As Leitch writes in the introduction, “Years of major media inertia has fomented a culture of complacent hero worship, bland game recaps, and stale ‘up with people’ soft focus features that are meant to humanize the athletes — but in fact only reinforces the Athletes Are Different from You and Me maxim that has defined sports coverage for decades. But that’s



not why we, the fans, watch sports. We watch sports to be entertained.”

A former sports reporter, Leitch is the author of two previous books (“Catch,” a novel, and “Life as a Loser”). SportsLetter spoke with Leitch while he was in Los Angeles on his book tour for “God Save the Fan.”

— David Davis

**SportsLetter:** You were in Arizona recently for the Super Bowl. Did you attend Media Day?

**Will Leitch:** The one media-sanctioned event I did go to was Media Day. I lasted about 45 minutes. Everyone always talks about how Media Day is a circus and it’s crazy. But a circus at least attempts to be entertaining. The two stories that came out of Media Day were, “Oh, there’s a crazy lady in a wedding dress who asked [Tom] Brady to marry her.” I think that was a joke from four Media Days ago. And, the other one was general observations like, “Boy, Bill Belichick looks so relaxed.” I couldn’t take very much of that. I found it a lot more interesting to talk to locals, to see how they were reacting to everything that was going on out there. Also, I was trying to see if I could find any Arizona Cardinal fans. And, nope, I didn’t find any.

**SL:** How would you rate the overall experience? Did the game itself save the experience for you?

**WL:** Yes, it did. It’s funny because one of the things that overwhelmed me was how everything is so marketed and branded. The Super Bowl has become [this event where] everyone that works in the business of sports gets together, gets drunk, and back-slaps for a week. It’s about promoting the NFL brand and promoting the players’ brand. And I don’t particularly feel comfortable in that situation. It’s not my thing. I was very frustrated, almost depressed, by the massive consumerism. I found that almost no one was talking about the game. By the time Sunday came around, most of the people I talked to were ready to go home, and I felt like the actual game was going to get lost. But then, when the game had a moment to stand on its own, it was beautiful and awesome. It did almost make up for

everything. At a certain level, I found myself being a cynical sports social critic all week, and then when the game got going, I was like a ten-year-old, jumping around and high-fiving and going crazy. It was good to be reminded of that. It was like, “That’s why we love sports.”

One of the main things with the book, and with Deadspin, was that I always wanted to avoid the trap that I think a lot of people who work in sports media fall into. I didn’t want to be one of those guys who say, “Oh, I don’t really care about the game. I just want it to be over with so I can file my story and go home.” I feel like a lot of these people have lost touch with the joy of sports.

**SL:** You’ve been doing Deadspin since the fall of 2005. Why did you decide to step out of that and write a book about sports fandom?

**WL:** I was looking for what my next book project was going to be — this is my third book — and I liked the idea of merging [the essay form in] my previous book, “Life as a Loser,” and sports. I’ve written a lot of essays, and I think that form, frankly, is probably a better fit for me than a blog. So, I wanted to be able to make it “Life as a Loser” about sports, and about how we all have this collective experience as fans together. Originally, the book was going to be twenty-five 3,000-word essays, these mammoth things. I wrote three of them, and I was actually bored with my voice. So, we decided to loosen it up so that the book would take a more light-hearted approach. I think the book is a little bit more strongly opinionated than the site is, and that’s by design.

When I started Deadspin — and it seems so silly and naïve now — but I was like, “Wouldn’t it be fun to have a site where we could just talk about sports! It’ll be fun!” Getting so invested in that — and seeing people’s reactions to it — I saw how much fan frustration there is and that there are so many ways that fans don’t have their voice heard. That was something that was inspiring to me, something I could speak to and understand. So, that became the general idea for the book.

**SL:** Were there any books about sports fandom that you read as a model in preparation for writing the book? Even something as far out as Fred Exley’s “A Fan’s Notes”?

**WL:** I'm huge fan of "A Fan's Notes." I wouldn't even deign to compare this to that. The only thing the books have in common are that they contain words and they have the word "fan" in the title. His is so infinitely better written than mine.

I talk about fan empowerment, but I really wanted this to be funny. I tended to look at writers that I really enjoy that are outside of the world of sports. I'm a big fan of Tom Perrotta, and I like his observational, wry sarcasm. I'm a big fan of Chuck Klosterman, and I'd be remiss to not point out that the book's format owes him a big debt. He's also much funnier than I am.

As for my favorite sportswriters, I'm into people like Roger Angell. Roger Angell is a beautiful writer. In a way, what he does is actually not all that different than a blog. He does these very moving, very intelligent, very well-crafted, very funny descriptions and observations on the world of sports. What's great about Roger Angell is that he comes into everything and you always feel like you're seeing it through fresh eyes. I remember when my beloved Cardinals won the World Series in 2006. After the champagne had dried on my shirt and I could not speak anymore, I thought, "Wow, Roger Angell's next column is going to be about us." Inevitably, it ended up being more about the Mets, but even so I guarantee you this: I know the Cardinals better than Roger Angell. But I know that he can come in and see things in a new way and be able to enlighten me on something that I love and am obsessed about. That's a hard thing to do.

**SL:** You write in the introduction that you wanted to "write about sports the way we talk about sports." What do you mean by this?

**WL:** I think the average person reacts to sports differently than the way that sports are presented to them. The average sports fan is a lot more intelligent than people give them credit for. They have regular lives that aren't involved in sports. Sports is this place where they can go to to get away. People who work in sports — whether they're a player or a coach or a media member — forget that they're paid entertainers. I mean, sports is entertainment. We can take it seriously, but it is diversion. And, that's fine. Woody Allen once wrote something like, "If you want to make the world better, tell funnier jokes." So, I think there's legitimate value in this. I don't mean to somehow diminish sports. But it's supposed to be fun. It's a

distraction that is one of those rare things in the world that doesn't actually impact your life, but impacts your life dramatically in ways that are almost harmless.

**SL:** You write later that "sports do not matter," and this is one of your underlining points in the book. What, then, do sports mean?

**WL:** To me, it's like any great entertainment. There have been movies that have touched my life, in very profound ways, that don't actually have anything tangible to do with my life. But they've affected me. I think sports is the same way. Everything that has that emotional attachment to sports are usually things that have nothing to do with the actual games themselves. You have these family connections, you have someone you bond with over the games.

When I say sports don't matter, what I mean is that the games don't really matter. What matters is our reaction to them and how we fit them into our lives. I'll never forget Jim Edmonds' amazing catch in Game 7 of the Cardinals-Astros playoff series, the year they lost to the Red Sox in the World Series [in 2004]. He made this amazing catch that saved everybody and changed the game. I will always remember that — it will always be a big part of my life — but I don't think that Jim Edmonds and I would be friends. And that's what I mean. The actual games, the physical activities themselves, that's not what matters. What matters is our reaction to them and how we put them in the framework of our lives.

A lot of times, with people who write about sports, they get caught up in these morality plays. The best recent example of that is with the Roger Clemens steroid thing, where you realize how much people have lost touch with what this was originally supposed to be about. This was supposed to be about, "Let's get to the bottom of this steroid problem. Let's find out how this affected our game and how we can fix this in the future." But that's not what's happening with Roger Clemens going before Congress. He's going up there to be made a jerk out of. They're going to get him.

**SL:** In the book, you write that fans are the ultimate powerbrokers. And yet, there's never been any organized fan movement to protest rising

ticket or beer prices. How much power do the fans really have and how should they express this power?

**WL:** I think it's a subtler sort of power. Whenever you see people do those organized boycotts of teams or whatever, they never work. Frankly, it doesn't make sense that they would. That's playing right into the hands of, "We take this as seriously as you do, so therefore we are making this formal protest." Because, no matter how fired up you are, you're not really that fired up. I mean: as much as I love sports, I think I might go protest what's happening in Darfur first.

It's a subtler thing, like calling for more accountability. Look at that Giants-Patriots game at the end of the regular season. Five years ago, that game would never get shifted to the local [television] stations. It was like, "You know what: there's nothing you can do about it, people." And now, there's a way to change the level of discourse. When there is genuine outrage on the level that we ask sports to be put to us — which is, the level of entertainment — those voices are heard now. Sometimes, I think that people think that I'm advocating a "let's-all-storm-the-gates" position. To me, the larger point is, we are the consumers. And, every business knows that you have to keep your most loyal consumers happy.

**SL:** How would you characterize the divide between fans and players?

**WL:** The divide between fans and players is very healthy and probably the way it should be. When it comes to fan interaction with players, it's always best to keep everything in perspective. Which gets back to the paid entertainer idea. Like, we would not care about Jim Edmonds at all if he was not able to hit a home run and make a great catch. We'd have no tangible interaction with his life. No matter how much you may revere him, there's not actually a connection there. I've found that, as a fan, the less you know about your favorite players' personal lives, the better. The interaction should always be between fans and another fan.

There's an excellent essay by Jason Fry, who writes a great New York Mets website called "Faith and Fear in Flushing," and he wrote about this idea that the franchises are the fans. I don't mean that in economic terms. I mean that, for instance, everyone who works for the New York Mets right

now, in 15 years it's likely that none of them will be working for the Mets. Whereas, everybody that's rooting for the Mets will still be rooting for the Mets 15 years from now. So, technically, the Mets are a corporation and a bunch of millionaire players who all wear the same uniform. But that's not what it is. What makes up these franchises is this collective thing with fans. They're your thing.

For me, I often have a hard time remembering that the St. Louis Cardinals play baseball. They're actually something so much larger for me. We always joke that the Cardinals are our official family religion. It sounds silly, but I think it's pretty close to true. There's rituals involved, there's tradition involved, there's worship involved that brings us together at the same time.

**SL:** You write that most fans don't really care about the issue of steroids in sports. Why do you believe that steroid use in sports isn't important to fans?

**WL:** I think it's significant in perspective. I think it was much more of an affront to fans ten years ago, when they were first hearing about it. The idea that, "These games aren't pure" - I think that's an old notion. I'm not sure the intelligent, average sports fan believes that anymore. I don't think that makes them a worse fan. I don't think that makes them cynical or jaded. I think it's reacting to the way that sports always were.

I think that most people have made their peace with steroids. I think that most people believe that, all this testifying before Congress and doing the Mitchell Report is just a way to keep a story going. It's a way for people that spend their entire lives working in sports to deal with the fact that they missed something dramatic ten years ago.

I think fans are more resilient than that and a little more chameleon-like. They can adjust to that. All told, I think any sports fan would rather the players on their favorite team not be on steroids. They would just assume to have no steroids in the games. Like, with the Cardinals: they just traded Scott Rolen for Troy Glaus, who's named in the Mitchell Report. So, Glaus has that hanging over his head, but if people were really so outraged about steroids, they'd say, "Get this guy off of my team." I didn't see any

of that. I think that's good. I don't think that's hypocritical because, at a certain level, none of us really understands what the life of an athlete is like.

Fans have accepted that some people are using steroids and some people aren't. They don't have time to get to the bottom of this thing. They're here to watch a game and enjoy themselves. And, I think people that work in sports try to describe that as, "Fans want to hear no evil and see no evil." No, that's not it at all. It's not that fans don't care about steroids as much as it's in perspective. We're able to get past it.

**SL:** You had to endure a reality check when one of your favorite players, Rick Ankiel, admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs. Did that admission change your opinion about Ankiel or about his comeback story?

**WL:** The problem after the HGH thing was not, "He was a great guy before, He's a bad guy now." He was just a human being the entire time. If you put anyone you don't know personally up at that level — either praise them so much that they can do no wrong or hate them so much that they can do no right — you're destined to be disappointed.

**SL:** Let's turn to Deadspin. How many page views does Deadspin get per month? How many visitors?

**WL:** I don't know the visitors numbers. We had about 11 million page views in January. Which is pretty amazing considering it's just me sitting down and typing.

**SL:** Why do you think Deadspin has caught on and become so popular?

**WL:** I certainly don't think it's due to my brilliance. I think that people were clamoring for something like this. I think there was general frustration and exhaustion when it came to, "Why are the people on the television screaming at each other when I just want to find out who won the game?" And, "Why is there no place where I can say something and have it be heard?"

One of the keys to the site in the beginning — and I think it's still there

— is that I don't know anything more than anyone else does. I have certain biases — like, being a Cardinals fan — but I don't think there's ever anyone that comes to the site and feels unwelcome. That's what the appeal is: People can be a part of it. It's not, "Hi, I'm Will. Here are my opinions on the world of sports." Nobody cares what I think, and I didn't want there ever to be separation between me and the people who read the site. The site is almost a clearinghouse; it's like a fanzine for sports. And, particularly on the Web, it's hard to find a collection of fairly intelligent people talking about sports.

**SL:** With Deadspin, you've been blogging about sports since 2005. Where do you see the blogosphere headed and how will that impact sports?

**WL:** Generally speaking, I'm always wary of making predictions about stuff online because, like, when I started the site, there was no YouTube. So, things can change really dramatically and really fast. But I do see more quote-unquote mainstream companies getting into blogs, like ESPN picking up True Hoop or Yahoo! picking up The Mighty MJD. Some people are concerned about this, but I don't see a problem. Like, True Hoop was really good before it went to ESPN, and it's still really good now. We're really just talking about different URLs. We're not talking about mainstream against the blogs, or the independents against the big corporations. For the reader that's actually consuming all of this, it's literally just different things to type in. It went from TrueHoop.com to MyEspn.TrueHoop.com or whatever. To the reader it does not matter in the slightest.

There will always be independent sports blogs 'cause there will always be people that have something new to say. The more voices the better. Having said that, there are a lot of really, really lousy blogs. There are literally millions. But the ones that are good do get readership. That was the thing that was most exciting for me when I started the site. There are so many talented people out there, and that was a cool thing to be a part of. I'd link to them, and they'd write back, "Thank you so much for helping us get more traffic." It was amazing to me. I think, lately, people have gotten obsessed with traffic over readership because they've figured out that this many clicks is worth this many dollars. It's gotten away from the

general idea of what this blog thing was all supposed to be about — which is, loyal people that come back on a regular basis and read it all the time.

**SL:** Related to all of this, you write in the book that the “current paradigm of sportswriting is dead, even if it doesn’t know it yet.” What do you mean by that?

**WL:** Well, think about the way that game coverage was originally set up. Literally, the only way people could find out what happened in the game the night before was if someone went to it and reported back to them. Clearly, that’s not the way things work anymore. So, already, the beat reporters have to change dramatically what they’re doing. That paradigm doesn’t work anymore. I think some people realize that, and some people don’t. Like, at the Super Bowl, I noticed reporters updating stuff on their sites non-stop throughout the game.

Then, you look at columnists. A lot of columnists have been the lone voice in their town for, like, 30 years. The ones that really shape the opinions — there was no challenge to them. There was nobody else that was able to get that wider readership. Now, those guys have to raise their game. They can’t sit back and say, “This is what I’ve done for 30 years and this’ll keep working.” Because it won’t. People have other options now.

You see some people reacting to blogs with the old “those guys writing in the basement in their pajamas” type of stereotype. People that say stuff like that are the ones that are threatened. The ones that are smart get it and have adjusted accordingly. Like, Peter Gammons wrote this column a couple of weeks ago saying, “Here are all the blogs I read every single day.” This is Peter Gammons — and he gets it! He’s paying attention and not missing anything. He understands that there are more voices, more competition, and that he needs to raise his game. He realizes that he can’t just sit back and wait for stuff to come to him anymore.

**SL:** Will there no longer be a print publication called Sports Illustrated five years from now?

**WL:** Well, if it gets any thinner, it’s going to evaporate. Look, I love reading magazines and I love reading newspapers. But I don’t think my

13-year-old cousin feels that way. To me, that's the larger issue. I don't think print is going to die. I think there's always going to be an audience for that. It's never been a matter of blogs coming in and replacing print. It's recognizing that, you have to adjust. If you don't adjust, you will be left behind.

I found it amusing that, after the Super Bowl, what the newspapers did was to serve as instant mementoes of something that had happened, as opposed to something that was reporting any kind of news. They became tangible collectibles. Ultimately, that's a bad sign. They became a yearbook to remind you of something that happened, rather than something that's actively describing the recent event.

**SL:** On Deadspin, you often critique ESPN and poke fun of its "worldwide leader" image. What does ESPN do right and what does ESPN do wrong?

**WL:** I think there's been a misconception that I think everything ESPN does is wrong. They have a lot of very talented, very intelligent people there. It's not a matter of, "They're out to destroy sports." What's happened — and I think it was a natural thing to happen — is that they are a corporation. That's fine — there's nothing wrong with corporations. But even if you don't like ESPN and get frustrated by lots of stuff ESPN does, if you are a sports fan you have to watch ESPN. There's no viable competitor. I mean, if you don't watch ESPN, you're not much of a real sports fan. Because of that, they know they've got us. We're not going anywhere. But they're a corporation; they have to grow. So, what happens is, they have to go after the more casual fan. They have to, maybe, dumb things down, go for the lowest common denominator. You saw that with the "Who's Now?" segments that they did. Which every sports fan I know was repulsed by, but it was a huge freaking hit for them. I think when they do that, when they start making decisions based on the bottom line, they're inevitably going to upset some of their base, their most loyal customers. I think that's what happened. It's not a matter of being evil or not caring about the fans.

The larger point is, it's not for us anymore. And, if you remember, that's how they got us: that idea of looking at sports in a different way. You had Keith Olbermann and Dan Patrick [doing "SportsCenter"] at 10:00 and

Craig Kilborn and Brett Haber at 1 a.m. I had friends that weren't even sports fans that watched "SportsCenter" every night. What's happened is, they've lost touch with what got people into them in the first place.

**SL:** For one chapter in the book, you sat down and watched ESPN for 24 consecutive hours. Besides a lot of repetition, what did you learn from that experience?

**WL:** You know, the repetition is one thing. Really, they basically decide what the storylines are for that day, and everyone follows in step. Like, the day I watched, everyone was talking about Michael Vick and whether Randy Moss was going to get along with Tom Brady, which turned out okay. And, everybody on the network, all day, that's all they talked about. Anything else going on during the day was brought up only in passing. It was very clearly decided: "Here are our stories today. This is what we'll be covering."

**SL:** Does ESPN have too much control over sports?

**WL:** Without question, they do have too much control over sports. I think it's best to think of ESPN not as this outside thing that looks at the world of sports. Think of them as another sports league. That's how you should think of them because I guarantee you that they're a lot more powerful than the NHL is. More people know who [announcer] Scott Van Pelt is than most baseball players. Now, I don't know if you can blame them for being too large or it's more that no viable competitor has come out.

**SL:** Do you consider Deadspin to be a part of sports media or outside of it?

**WL:** I think it's probably both. There's an element of being outside, and there are things I try to do that are different than what "the media" is doing. I try to avoid press boxes. Most of my friends are not sports fans. The site's supposed to be more for average people than for people who work in the world of sports.

**SL:** What are your daily must-view sports-related websites?

**WL:** The ones I never miss are Cardinals-related sites. Ever. Like, “Viva El Birdos” is one of my daily reads. I always read “Kissing Suzy Kolber” and “Free Darko.” Frankly, one of the nice things about my job is that, if something’s going on, someone will let me know about it. I mean, my job is to write about my email.

**SL:** We touched on this before, but what are your favorite sports-related books, fiction or non-fiction?

**WL:** Of late — because there’s too many to talk about over the years — are Jeff MacGregor’s “Sunday Money,” about NASCAR. Will Blythe’s “To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever,” about hating Duke, is really good. I enjoyed Sally Jenkins’ new book about the Carlisle Indian School’s football team, with Jim Thorpe and Pop Warner [“The Real All Americans”]. That was very, very good. Historically, my favorite is “A Fan’s Notes.” But I’ve never even considered that a book about sports. It’s about so much more than that.

**SL:** How long do you plan to keep doing Deadspin?

**WL:** As long as it’s still fun. The minute they take the fun out of it, I’m not gonna want to do the site anymore.

**SL:** And, what’s your next book project?

**WL:** It’s not sports-related at all. It’s fiction.