

# Learning from Athletes’ Writing: Creating Activity Journals

*Students—and athletes—  
can benefit from writing  
activities that take place  
outside the classroom  
walls; these activities often  
lead to better thinking,  
writing, and performance.*

**E**nglish teachers know the scene: My students have taken out their journals to write an entry. Heads lower and pens move across the pages. A few kids look off into space. Their heads drop back and cheeks puff in a range of quirks triggered by writer’s block, mild indifference, or simmering emotions. Sweat trickles off their chins.

This scene isn’t taking place in my former English classroom at Mountain Valley High School in Maine. We’re at the soccer field as my high school players write in their team notebooks to unpack the game they have just played.

Guided by a series of prompts, my players analyze the strengths and weaknesses of both teams. In just a few minutes, they evaluate their play while thinking through team and individual adjustments for the next game. Their writing is authentic and at times gritty; most of my players are all in because they’re doing real work that matters to them. It’s exactly what we want from the students in our classrooms. Even the sweat.

As an English-teaching athletic coach, I assigned writing through training logs, journals, and team notebooks. My athletes set goals and organized their training; more than a few churned out the occasional rant. Once, on a flight back from England, I asked my players on a state soccer team to write about their experiences playing against English schoolboy teams while touring London. Out of paper, I had the 16- and 17-year-olds use their airsickness bags, an unlikely inspiration.

Thirty years later, I still have those bags and that lively writing. From their words, chock-full of stories and advice, I learned that the Maine boys

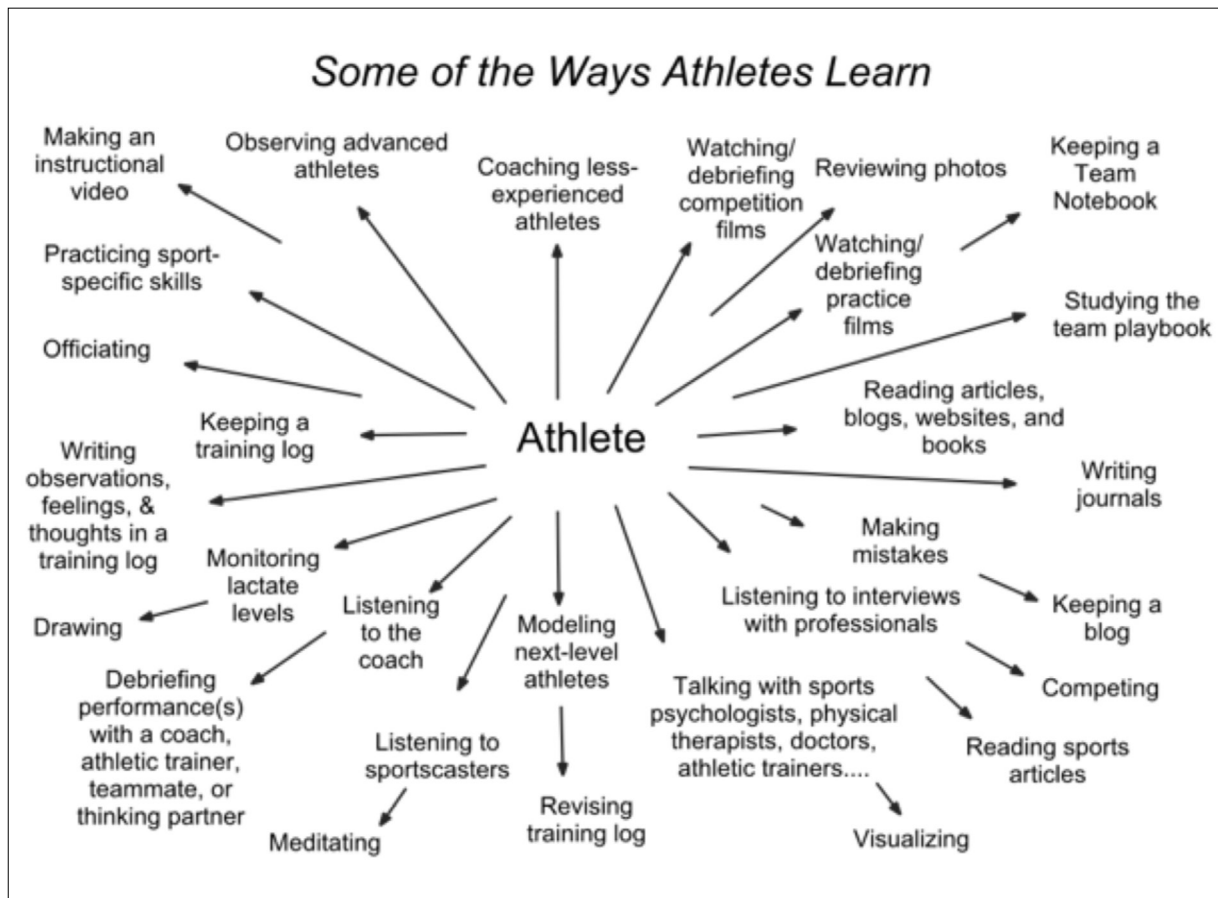
didn’t mind getting “schooled” by the English teams, they loved the mummy exhibition at the British Museum, and they’d never forget the city-wide scavenger hunt I organized halfway through the tour. That madcap quest dragged them through the highways and byways of *ole London town* and exasperated a guard at the American Embassy. Even years later, as good writing does, theirs evokes memories and brings me right back to the soccer fields, the chaotic London streets, and those boys.

## Writing, Learning, and Wimbledon

Athletes in all sports and at all levels of performance keep training logs, journals, or team notebooks as one more way to learn extensively about their sport (see Figure 1). Such organizing, planning, and reflection can play a pivotal role in an athlete’s life. What’s more, as communication tools, athletes’ writing has the potential to be especially helpful for coaches.

Examples of athletes’ writings abound. Tennis great Serena Williams keeps a journal. At Wimbledon 2007, she shared a few pages of her writing with reporters. “Writing,” she explained, “can help clear out negative thoughts and emotions that keep you feeling stuck” (Williams and Williams 114). Olympic swimming phenom Michael Phelps spoke about his reflective journal with *The Today Show* host Matt Lauer just after the 2012 summer games (Stump). The all-time Olympic medal winner kept the journal to preserve his memories. And on the workaday side of an athlete’s life, ski racer Lindsey Vonn (Graham), baseball slugger Carlos Delgado (Jenkins), and golfer Johnson Wagner (Wagner and

FIGURE 1. "Some of the Ways Athletes Learn," Kent (2012). Reprinted with permission.



McDaniel) have been in the media for the way their writing informs their training and performances.

While researching *Writing on the Bus: Using Athletic Team Notebook and Journals to Advance Learning and Performance in Sports* (Kent), I interviewed Coach Amy Edwards of Gonzaga University about the writing activities she used with her soccer team. Edwards explained that writing helped her players

- prepare for competition,
- learn about the experiences they faced,
- become more in tune with themselves and their teammates, and
- take responsibility for their performances, good or bad (14).

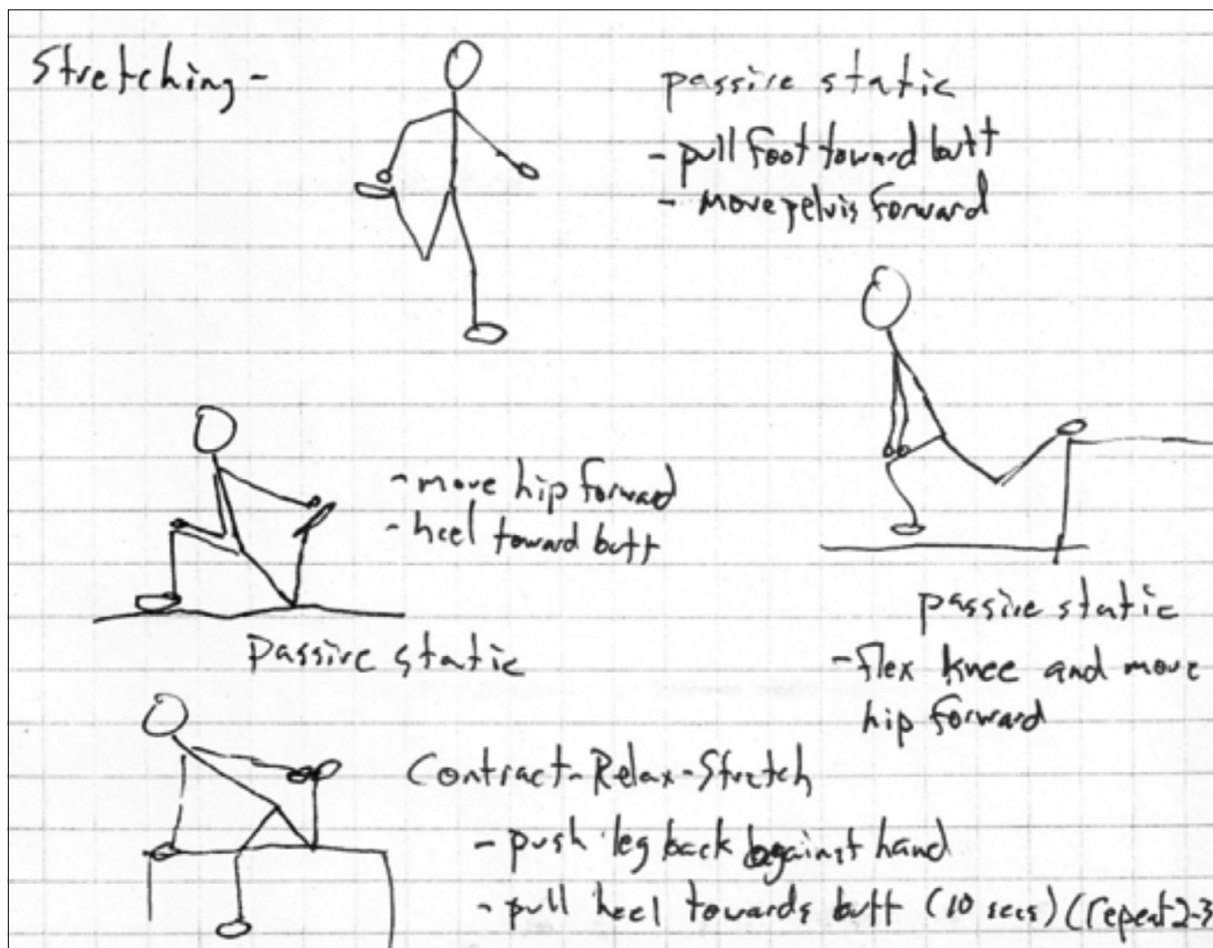
"Writing," she said, "is a great tool for communicating with your athletes and provides a segue

to ask questions, to get suggestions from players, to recognize trends" (185).

As an English teacher I was struck by Edwards's observations. Her list of benefits complemented my hopes for students' learning when they write. Her words also brought to mind Donald M. Murray's views on writing as a way to learn: "We write not to say what we know, but to learn, to discover, to know. Writing is thinking, exploring, finding out" (37). Such beliefs about writing hold true for both our schoolrooms and sports arenas.

US ski racer David Chamberlain kept extensive training logs and journals. His writings and drawings (see Figure 2) offer lessons on the practical and meaningful use of journals (Kent 146–64). A three-time World Championship competitor, Chamberlain called his journaling "a meditation" and a practice that helped him "open up the mind

FIGURE 2. "Yoga poses and stretches," Kent (2012). Reprinted with permission.



and go for it." To read his journal entries is to be taken on tour with a world-class athlete. The themes that weave through his writing offer us a glimpse into his ten-plus years on the international racing circuit:

- |                       |                               |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Loneliness            | Colors and visualization      |
| Training sessions     | Awareness of body and mind    |
| Family and friends    | Relaxation and breathing      |
| Focus                 | Preparation, control, routine |
| Physical conditioning | Yoga                          |
| Emotional self        | Understanding the human body  |
| Food                  |                               |
| Dreams                |                               |
| Body tension          |                               |

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Writing                          | Need for fulfillment and satisfaction            |
| Bettering oneself                | Optimism, personal goals, and self-encouragement |
| Need for accomplishment          | Questioning career and life plan                 |
| Self-esteem, playfulness         | Frustration with training or body                |
| Schedules and lists              | The world (environment, economy)                 |
| Equipment and company sponsors   |  |
| Balance, alignment, and symmetry |  |
| Asserting oneself                |  |

Edwards's observations and Chamberlain's writing provide an insider's view of the role of journal writing in sports. In our field of English, journaling is also known as expressive writing (Pradl),

what Thomas Newkirk calls “maybe the best idea of all” (69).

## Benefits of Expressive Writing

My discussions with athletes and coaches about their use of writing brought me back to my graduate studies with Dixie Goswami (*Reclaiming the Classroom*) and James Britton (*Prospect and Retrospect*, G. Pradl, Ed.) at the Bread Loaf School of English. During those summers in the early 1990s, I gained remarkable insight into writing, and especially expressive writing. In my Bread Loaf class journal, I scribbled down this quotation by James Atwater:

Expressive writing enables [students] to make sense for themselves of what they have seen or read or done or talked about by composing it for themselves in their own words. Thus expressive writing is fundamental to learning—in any subject matter—because it enables [students] to internalize knowledge, to make it part of themselves, by putting it together in their own terms. (4)

Atwater’s words serve as a theoretical underpinning for my use of journals with classes that I teach and teams that I coach. Many others champion this mode of writing.

“Keep a journal,” urge sports psychologists Leif H. Smith and Todd M. Kays. “This type of daily ‘mental muscle’ work will gradually improve your focus in practice and games” (102). Joanne Hudson and Melissa C. Day agree, explaining that expressive writing helps “prepare athletes [to face] negative emotions and emotional transitions . . . solve problems, manage emotion, experience self development, and practice a preparation strategy” (805). And in her book on the value of journaling, Stephanie Dowrick cites that writing in a journal

- reduces stress and anxiety,
- increases self-awareness,
- sharpens mental skills,
- promotes genuine psychological insight,
- advances creative inspiration and insight, and
- strengthens coping abilities.

When I speak to groups of athletes, coaches, or athletic directors about the potential benefits of

journal writing, inevitably someone in the audience wonders aloud how writing about a basketball game will help a player drain 3-pointers. My response goes something like this:

What if an athlete commits to writing in a team notebook or athlete’s journal for 5 minutes a day, 5 days a week for the training year (5 minutes × 260 days = 1,300 minutes or 21+ hours)? And let’s say that writing, to one degree or another, could reduce an athlete’s stress, improve focus, or solve a problem. Maybe the athlete will get more organized! Would these potential benefits be worth 5 minutes of writing per day?

Olympian Roisin McGettigan, a track and field athlete for Ireland, would add a resounding yes. “I was able to track my progress, learn what worked and what didn’t. I could figure out why I was tired and see if I over- or under-estimated my training” (qtd. in Hanlon 42–43). McGettigan’s *tracking*, *assessing*, and *figuring out* mirror the thoughts of William Zinsser: “Writing organizes and clarifies our thoughts. Writing is how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Writing enables us to find out what we know—and what we don’t know—about whatever we’re trying to learn” (16).

A key to athletes’ writing is its authenticity. For most, it’s real work that has real results. One way to create a similar opportunity for our English students would be to develop journal prompts about their interests and activities.

## Creating Activity Journals

Those of us who assign journal writing often give prompts about our classroom themes or current studies. At other times, students select prompts from a list that we provide. Then there are those open-ended, *write-whatever-is-in-your-head* invitations that incite fiery writing or a griping, “Can’t you just tell us what to write?”

If I were teaching high school English again, I would augment my list of journal prompts to include a strand that focused on my students’ lives beyond the classroom. Think about your students who work part-time at a fast-food restaurant, serve as an officer in the drama club, dance at a local studio, or wrestle for the school team. Picture what these kids face at their jobs or in these activities.

Now, develop a series of all-purpose prompts such as the following that ask students to look closely at their *activities* (e.g., job, club, sport):

- Write a letter to someone who is about to join *your activity* for the first time. Offer insight, advice, or share stories about the job, club, or team.
- It's often said that we are who we spend the most time with. Who are the five people that you spend the most time with? In what ways do they affect who you are when you're involved in *your activity*?
- Think about a supervisor, advisor, or coach in *your activity*. Make a list of the five qualities you believe that person should have to be effective. Write a few sentences about each of these qualities.
- Write about one of your favorite coworkers or teammates and discuss the person's characteristics (e.g., qualities, habits, or quirks). You might also share a story about this person.

Activity-based journal prompts invite students to examine their lives. In doing so, these young people may further discover how writing can be used beyond the classroom to help them plan,

**Activity-based journal prompts invite students to examine their lives.**

reflect, and learn. They may also realize that writing can help them work out problems. When you assign such prompts, you may hear from a

ballet dancer about his relationship with the mirror or a fast-food worker who is concerned about the amount of junk food she is eating. You might even score some fun drawings (see Figure 3).

**Writing (All the Way) Across the Curriculum**

As an English teacher, you might like to take the lead on extending writing across the curriculum efforts at your school. Journals could play a central role. Building the capacity of writing among students in your school community will strengthen not only writing skills but also students' thinking and learning abilities. It's a *win-win-win* for schools.

About 55 percent of all high school students in America play a sport (Koebler). Imagine if half of

**FIGURE 3.** "Draw your favorite dance pose, position, or step." Dancer's Journal Entry, Kent and Bray (2013). Reprinted with permission.



your school's students kept athletic team notebooks or journals beyond the school day. And what if the idea were extended to include music, drama, dance, math team, and student government? How about the kids down at the local skate park or devoted gamers? Talk about writing *all the way* across the curriculum! But let's start with athletics.

Speak with your school's athletic director (AD) and explore the idea of athletic team notebooks and journals. Find out if any coaches are using writing activities with their teams. More than likely, your AD belongs to the National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association (NIAAA) or a state affiliate. The association promotes "education-based interscholastic athletic programs," so your introduction of writing activities will likely be met with interest.

To build your background knowledge, listen to the National Writing Project's Radio Show on

Athletes' Writing (Baker). Become familiar with the Writing Athletes resource website (Writing Athletes.com), an extensive website of articles and models that could provide a template for your discussions. Read several of the articles from the website and pass them along to the AD. The following would be a good start:

- "Sports Writers" by Jessica Bloch. *UMaine Today*, Fall 2012.
- "The Diary of Carlos Delgado" by Lee Jenkins. *New York Times*, May 4, 2006.
- "Power of the Pen" by Richard Kent. *Coaching Management Football Edition*, November 2011.
- "Journaling: More Than Words?" by Phyllis Hanlon. *Cheer Professional*, July 3, 2013.
- "Team Notebooks: Writing to the Next Level: Parts 1, 2, 3" by Richard Kent. *Soccer Journal* 53.2–4, 2008.


If your AD is intrigued by the idea, propose an informational workshop for the school's coaches. Give the coaches a tour of the Writing Athletes resource website, and use Figure 1 to invite a discussion about the ways athletes learn. Expect a lively session because 21st-century athletic coaches are often certified professionals.

You might give the same introduction to your school's principal, leadership team, or parents' group. If you have a student-staffed writing center at your school, the staff could offer workshops for athletes. Perhaps a local college coach who uses writing could be a guest presenter. (If your school does not have a student-staffed writing center like those available at colleges and universities, check out the *High School Writing Center Resource Website*: WCenters.com.) Finally, if this idea is enticing and you're not an athletic coach, why not adopt a team!

## A Final Word

In my last interview with Gonzaga coach Amy Edwards, I asked if she had any advice for athletic coaches planning to try writing activities with their teams. She didn't hesitate. "Make sure you value the information you are collecting," she said. "If the players do not feel you value their words then they

will be very hesitant or resistant to putting much effort into it" (Kent 185). As English teachers, we can relate.

Activity journals provide students with an opportunity to think about their lives in a place where they're often reading, writing, and discussing someone else's life. If you've never offered journal prompts of this nature, you'll be surprised at the writing you receive. Like those airsickness-bag reflections that I collected (and saved) from my soccer players, the writing you receive may help you discover more about your students as well as your English classroom. 

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### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In the article, soccer players write in team notebooks to unpack the game that has just been played. Children and teens often struggle with the idea of beginning their writing, whether in or outside of school, and they often need a structured way to “get going.” A writer’s notebook allows children and teens to take in the world around them and document their daily lives. It also provides an easy, informal way to start thinking about new topics and ideas. This resource from ReadWriteThink.org shares information about writer’s notebooks. These notebooks are a great place to store favorite quotes, random facts, vivid dreams, and future plans. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/start-writer-notebook-30601.html>