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Kerouac in Florida

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Jean-Louis "Jack" Kerouac, author of *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, *The Subterraneans*, and *Big Sur*, is known around the world as the Beat Generation icon who wrote novels and poetry that changed literature forever. But in St. Petersburg, Florida, he's the local death celebrity. Kerouac bounced around the country until dying at age 47 of "[massive abdominal hemorrhaging](#)" at Saint Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg on October 21, 1969 (Lelyveld). He lived with his mother - and eventually his last wife Stella - in two St. Pete houses between 1964 and 1969, but produced little poetry or fiction while living there (North-East Northport Library). One genre of writing he did engage in during this period has only recently received scholarly attention: his sports writing.

On a summer night in 1965, Kerouac was introduced to a local St. Petersburg sports writer by friend Cliff Anderson who remembers the event:

When Kerouac first hit town in St. Pete, I introduced him to my friend Mike Fowler, then assistant sports editor for the *St. Petersburg Times* afternoon paper *The Independent*. One night Jack and I clanked six-packs up to the news room and found Mike chewing on his pencil for an idea for the next day's column. Jack offered his professional services (free, we already had the beer). He would write a column and make his major league baseball prognostications. Fowler was all for having Jack pinch hit for him so we could get to the beer, have a celebrity guest write his column and especially watch Kerouac at work. Jack screwed a piece of paper into a typewriter and as the carriage went back and forth and the bell went ding-ding-ding. I thought of Truman Capote's remark, 'that Kerouac fellow, he's a typist.' [sic¹]

¹ What Capote actually said was, "That's not writing, it's typing."

Nevertheless in about three minutes Jack handed sports editor Fowler a column that needed no additions or corrections. Mike called for the copy boy and the three of us slid out of the office into a sweet evening on the town. Fowler is a newspaperman in the tradition of 'come in late and sweat blood right up until deadline,' and when the other reporters find out that Mike was "rescued" by Jack Kerouac and that he is his friend it is too much for them. (Anderson)

That three-minute piece Kerouac wrote in the news room became a series of newspaper articles, published in June and July that same year. Mike Fowler interrupted his own column to print them and introduced the author as "one of America's foremost sports experts," a former Columbia football prospect who was "also one of America's foremost writers" (Kerouac "In Mid-June").

Describing a literary icon as a sports expert before calling him a poet or novelist highlights a truth: writing was what Kerouac did, but his passion was sports. Both athlete and sports

fanatic, from childhood he developed a complex fantasy baseball game which became the subject of [*Kerouac at Bat: Fantasy Sports and the King of the Beats*](#) by Isaac Gerwitz. Gerwitz, curator of the Jack Kerouac archive at the New York Public Library, completed a detailed study of homemade publications Kerouac created to cover the news in his fantasy baseball and horse racing worlds. These newsletters show the young man's talent for writing shows and his devotion to the sports he followed (McGrath).

In the first column for *The Independent*, published June 16th [*In Mid-June My Ideas About The Major League Race*](#), we hear Kerouac's voice ("This sorry old horse...You guys better look out for the Detroit Tigers....and some other kidneys ah caint remember") trundling through his observations for the Major League season. He humbly introduces his predictions for the season as a "five cent bet," then moves on, gathers steam for a stronger conviction, and finishes coyly: "My bet is now five dollars" (Kerouac "In Mid-June"). The man knew his stats.

Kerouac's [two remaining columns](#) for *The Evening Independent* pay homage to his sports writing heroes and weigh in on the debate kicked up in the wake of the fight between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston, May 25, 1965 (Allen). On the subject of sports writing Kerouac begs his readers, "for once start talking about the quality of prose of our sports writers....[P]lease pay attention, will you, to the old Daily Mirror columns of Dan Parker and put them together in a book" (Kerouac "Two By Jack"). Not just a fan, but a critic, Kerouac describes writer Frank Graham's style as "sparse, thin-as-a-rail" appealing because it was "reportage devoid of style-consciousness and yet conscious of the quality of what prose should be" (Kerouac "Two By Jack"). As for the boxing match that took place not far from where his aunt lived, Kerouac declared:

The eyes of all men in the world were on that fight. All men are interested in the World's Heavyweight Boxing championship fight. The mayor of the town was only in his thirties. From the Maine woods maybe a couple of old-timers came in, in Jeeps, after a

snowshoe trek, to see the oldtime American cigar-smoke fight scene. It was all over. (Kerouac "Two By Jack")

These columns remind us that Kerouac was a studied fan, able to reach back into the annals of American sports writing and also to stay abreast of current sports news, a fan who was comfortable and passionate about discussing both.

Recognition of the Beat King's sports devotion has mounted in recent years. In 2005, a [Jack Kerouac bobblehead](#) went to the Baseball Hall of Fame (Pathak).



Another is available for purchase through the [Lowell Spinners MILB web page](#). Proceeds benefit Lowell High School recipients of the Jack Kerouac Scholarship Fund (Lowell Spinners).



The research done by Gewirtz for his book [was presented on exhibition at the New York Public Library in 2007](#) (McGrath). The articles Kerouac wrote in St. Petersburg have recently been digitized and added to the Google News archive, making them available to readers online.

Future scholars will have to include Kerouac's work in the field of sports writing in their assessment of the man. Thanks to beer and willingness on warm summer nights, St. Pete gets a part of that.

He's not dying anywhere else.

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