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## Jackie MacMullan describes challenges of sports writing in Portsmouth

PORTSMOUTH — From a young female sports intern struggling to get into locker rooms to a respected journalistic stalwart giving Larry Bird a piece of her mind, stories of Jackie MacMullan's career in the Boston sports community captivated audience members at the Portsmouth Public Library Monday night.

It was standing room only inside the Levenson Room, as hundreds turned out to hear from one of Boston's most renowned sports writers and former University of New Hampshire graduate discuss her journalistic challenges covering Boston sports for 25 years.

Along with signing copies of her latest book, "When the Game was Ours," MacMullan spoke about the impetus behind the book and gave spectators a sneak peak of what life was like for Earvin "Magic" Johnson and Larry Bird.

MacMullan, who is a freelance newspaper sportswriter and NBA columnist for the sports website ESPN.com., gave intimate details of the feud between Johnson and Bird saying it was by far the greatest rivalry ever in the game of basketball.

Calling it the "the most exhilarating and frustrating" thing she's ever done in her career, MacMullan spoke about the challenges of writing a third-person narrative of the battle for supremacy between the two sports legends. Having interviewed close to 120 people for the book, MacMullan said the book transformed from a story on two basketball players to a tale of a "very unlikely friendship."

She recalled tales of the first time Johnson and Bird met each other, while on an international team made up of top collegiate players. From battling for playing time in the early stages of their collegiate careers to winning National Championships and being cast into the limelight of the NBA, MacMullan said the feud between the two men transformed into a "mental scoreboard" throughout their careers.

Remembering Bird as a man of few words and Johnson as a flashy and raucous celebrity of sorts, she recalled the disdain the two had for each other early in their careers to the friendship that blossomed as a result.

"Hollywood couldn't have made up this script," she said. "You couldn't have written it any better."

Having spent hours upon hours interviewing the two men throughout her career and during the book process, MacMullan said the one thing that set them aside from players then and now was their innate motivation to win.

"Neither one of them cared if they hit the winning shot, as long as they were part of the winning shot," she said. "That's what made them special."

She recalled the first time the two actually sat down to talk and surprisingly learned they came from similar backgrounds and lifestyles. MacMullan said things between the two changed forever when Bird found out Johnson was HIV positive in 1992. With Bird thinking that Johnson was going to die due to little being known about the virus at the time, MacMullan said the everlasting connection that formed between the two solidified that day.

In addition to covering details of her book, MacMullan also discussed the current state of the NBA and sports in general. From blasting Rick Pitino during his stint with the Boston Celtics, to roasting the current salaries of professionals, MacMullan held nothing back.

Saying high salaries will most likely be a thing of the past with a new collective bargaining agreement, she said big changes are in play for the NBA.

"Does money ruin sports? she said. "Sure it does."

She also spoke on her vision of the current Celtics team and compared the current Big 3 — Kevin Garnett, Ray Allen and Paul Pierce — to the original Big 3 — Larry Bird, Kevin McHale and Robert Parrish.

"I think they're in trouble," she said.

She also praised the play of Rajon Rondo, but said the young guard needs to develop into a more consistent player before being deemed a franchise player.

Perhaps the most captivating story of the night, was the story of traveling with the Celtics during the early stages of her career and witnessing Bird shy away from the media so much that he accepted a challenge from a young boy to play cribbage while waiting in the airport.

She also recalled the only time Bird ever snapped at her in the locker room.

"I asked him a question and he snapped at me and I said, 'I'm sorry your back hurts, but you don't have to be rude,' " she said.

She even dismissed the age-old myth that sports writers see nothing but naked athletes while in the locker room conducting interviews. MacMullan joked she could probably count the number of nude athletes she had seen on one, maybe two hands.

She also spoke about her time in the area and recalled working as a freelance writer for Foster's Daily Democrat and attending prom at the old Pier II restaurant in Portsmouth.

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