

Le Anne Schreiber, 73, Dies; a First Among Sports Editors

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Le Anne Schreiber, who became the first woman to run a major American daily newspaper's sports section when The New York Times appointed her to that position in 1978, died on Friday at a hospital in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. She was 73.

The cause was lung cancer, said Jennifer Shute, a close friend.

Ms. Schreiber, who was later an ombudswoman for ESPN, was an untraditional choice to be The Times's sports editor: She had never covered sports for a daily newspaper, though she had gained some experience writing about the subject. She had reported for Time magazine from the 1976 Summer Olympics in Montreal, prompting the tennis star and feminist Billie Jean King to name her editor of her magazine, womenSports.

Ms. Schreiber joined The Times's sports section in early 1978 as an assistant editor. Several months later, at 33, she replaced James Tuite as the editor, but with a caveat: She told the newspaper's management that she would stay at the job for only two years.

"If The New York Times was ready to appoint a female head of a hugely male department for the first time in its history, I had no right to refuse the position," she wrote in a memoir, "Midstream" (1990), in which she recalled feeling less than fully accepted both inside and outside the paper. At the time, The Times was in the midst of settling a class-action sex-discrimination lawsuit filed by hundreds of its female employees.

"I was," she wrote, "depending on one's view, the bitch, the saint, the amazon, the token, the recipient of awards and death threats and, ultimately, the ingrate, for insisting upon my pre-agreed release after two excruciating years."

Gerald Eskenazi, a sportswriter for The Times for 44 years, wrote in an email that Ms. Schreiber had been eager to learn "what we covered and also what we might be doing differently."

And, he said, "With her Socratic method, she made you think about what you were doing."

A flash point in her tenure occurred in early 1980, when she killed a column by the Pulitzer Prize-winning sports columnist Red Smith, in which he called for a boycott of that year's Summer Olympics in Moscow to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The decision caused a furor, both inside and outside the paper, but Ms. Schreiber said the column had had several errors. Dozens of countries, including the United States, boycotted the Olympics soon afterward.



Ms. Schreiber in 2018. In 1984, she wrote “Midstream,” a dual account of her mother’s death and Ms. Schreiber’s life in rural upstate New York. Milena Herring

After leaving the sports section in September 1980, Ms. Schreiber spent nearly four years as deputy editor of *The Times Book Review*. Although several women have been deputy sports editors at *The Times* since her departure, none have held the top job.

Le Anne Schreiber was born on Aug. 4, 1945, in Evanston, Ill. Her father, Newton, worked in the photography division of *Life* magazine, and her mother, Beatrice, was a homemaker. Athletic growing up, Le Anne played pickup basketball and baseball in the absence of organized sports for girls.

She earned a bachelor’s degree from Rice University in Houston and a master’s in English from Stanford University. While doing postgraduate work at Harvard, where she was planning for a career teaching English literature, she decided that journalism might be a more exciting pursuit. She wrote a letter in 1974 to Henry Grunwald, the managing editor of *Time*, suggesting article ideas.

“The ideas caught his eye,” she told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1978, and she was hired. Starting in 1974, she originally covered international politics, but she later persuaded Mr. Grunwald to send her to cover the Montreal Olympics.

“I wrote three cover-length stories in three weeks — and I’d never written a sports story before,” she told *The Inquirer*.

She was hired by *womenSports* two months after the Olympics and joined *The Times* a year and a half later.

After leaving *The Times* in 1984, she wrote "Midstream," a dual account of her mother's death and Ms. Schreiber's life in rural upstate New York; freelance articles, including two for *Glamour* magazine about abortion that won a National Magazine Award in 1992; and "Light Years" (1996), a book of reflective essays written after her parents and brother, Michael, had died, all of cancer.

No immediate family members survive.

In recent years Ms. Schreiber taught English at the New York State Writers Institute at the University at Albany. In 2007, she returned to sports for two years as ESPN's ombudswoman.

"She enjoyed it because by the time she had left *The Times*, she had become sports-phobic," Milena Herring, her former partner, said in a telephone interview. "She didn't want to watch the U.S. Open on TV or in person. But at ESPN, it wasn't about sports at all, but about looking at the coverage of sports as a journalist with a critical eye."