

# An Interview with Ethan Sherwood Strauss About Writing Online, Social Media and the NBA, and The Victory Machine

28-36 minutes

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Good morning,

Today is going to be a very busy day on Stratechery:

First is this week's interview with Ethan Sherwood Strauss; more on that in a moment.

Second, the Stratechery podcast service was updated overnight; everything seemed to go smoothly, but from what I've seen on Twitter, some folks may have received some stray notifications or downloaded an old podcast or two. Thanks to that update, Stratechery will launch a new feature: there will be a free version of the Stratechery podcast that includes Weekly Articles, and can be updated in place to include the Daily Update. This doesn't necessarily concern you directly, as you are already a subscriber and have had access to the [Daily Update Podcast](#) for two months, but now you can tell your friends! Look for a post (but no email for subscribers) in a couple of hours.

Third, there will be a *second* Daily Update Interview about some embargoed news that will be available at 2pm Eastern; I will email you again at that time with the news and transcript. This is, needless to say, quite rare: I believe this is the first day Stratechery has had multiple posts since I launched the Daily Update back in 2014. Don't worry, I don't expect it to become a habit!

On to the interview:

## An Interview with Ethan Sherwood Strauss

To call [Ethan Sherwood Strauss](#) a beat reporter is, in my estimation a disservice: Strauss is a *writer*, and an extremely good one at that. Strauss works for *The Athletic* and primarily covers the Golden State Warriors, after previously doing the same for ESPN. Strauss also hosts the *House of Strauss* podcast which [I appeared on last October](#).

The occasion to interview Strauss was the publication of his new book [The Victory Machine](#), about the rise and fall of the Golden State Warriors dynasty. While this may seem to be more in the vein of [@NoTechBen](#) than Stratechery, what I found compelling about the book is that there is basically zero discussion of what happens on the court: Strauss is fascinated by everything else, from sneaker deals to social media, and the story he tells is one in which the Internet really has — again — changed everything.

As a reminder, the [Daily Update Podcast](#) is particularly useful for interviews, even if you are generally a reader, and today's interview will be posted at the same time as this email is sent. It is also slightly longer than this transcript, which has been edited for length and clarity.

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**Ethan Sherwood Strauss:** I'm very intimidated, you've got some fairly smart customers. I'm but a mere [sportswriter](#) on this, so I'll try to rise above my station.

**Well you do share a locale with a good portion of my readers, being in the Bay Area and whatnot, and a sporting interest because while this is not an NBA pod, this is not hosted by @NoTechBen, there are a lot of Warriors fans in the Stratechery user base. So they will, to the extent we touch on that, they will enjoy it.**

**ES:** I actually considered doing a chapter of this book about how so much of the world's economy was probably decided courtside and in the Bridge Club of Oracle Arena. I mean now it's Chase Center, but I don't know if the titans of industry are showing up there like they used to. I would go to the bunker suites that were the expensive luxury lounges that theoretically, everybody in tech who is making money would be in, but this season strangely empty for some odd reason Ben, I don't know why.

### **The Victory Machine**

**(laughs) So the book we're referring to was just released yesterday, [The Victory Machine](#), [The Making and Unmaking of the Warriors Dynasty](#). This is usually not a book review pod, but there was a couple of reasons I thought it'd be interesting to talk to you. First, the book is very, very interesting in that it's a book about basketball that is not about anything that happens on the court. It seems that is clearly an explicit choice that you didn't really talk about any basketball plays other than Steph Curry getting hurt.**

**ES:** I think it's because the fan for the most part doesn't need a lot of help consuming basketball, and I think people like reading about what their team did, what makes them tick. But if we're talking retrospective, we're talking a book, it seems at least with the NBA, we're more drawn to the Greek tragedy of the personalities. So much of the literary NBA seems to revolve around how teams break apart, how these dynasties break apart. [Breaks of the Game](#) by David Halberstam is not about the Portland Trailblazers coming together to win a championship, it's about the dissolution after they win a championship. When people talk about Shaq and Kobe with the Lakers, they're not talking about the synergy that those two players had together, they're talking about the strange Greek tragedy of two of the best players of that era eventually getting sick of each, their egos not being able to sustain the dynamic any longer and breaking up before they had to.

Right now there's a lot of interest in [The Last Dance](#), the documentary about the Bulls, which is about the last season when the Bulls decided that they were going to break up no matter what, even if they won the championship, which they did. So for whatever reason with basketball, that seems to be the interest and we look back at it. It's more about the personalities and why the personalities are not properly satiated, than it is necessarily about why a pin down screen worked at a particular moment.

**At the same time, though, the most gripping parts of your book are when the Warriors are falling apart.**

**ES:** Yeah, I suppose, I mean I'm wondering about that, I'm thinking about that. I think it's good to capture some of that too because there is this creeping determinism dynamic where whatever happens in sports, we convince ourselves we saw coming. I mean, we do that with everything. You're seeing that in the news, where people are pretending like they saw the coronavirus pandemic unleashed in a way that they were not talking about in February or in January. We do that in sports and sometimes we lose some of the drama that actually existed.

There's this idea, especially with the Warriors, this superteam, well of course they were going to win all the time, and we lose track of how they were down by double digits going into the second half in a [Game Seven against the Houston Rockets](#). And that was not this

last season where they got so injured they fell apart, but there were times where it looked like it was going to break apart. And for the sake of posterity, maybe it is good to capture some of that, because we do forget, and I think that might be something that draws people to, again, the aforementioned Bulls documentary where we look back on it, of course Michael Jordan is the superhero, of course. I mean, he's going to win, you know, every like six out of six. That's how it goes. That's not how it was experienced at the time.

## Becoming a Writer

**So when you started writing about the Warriors, was that for a personal blog or was that for another site?**

**ES:** That was the [WarriorsWorld Blog](#), I had been leaving comments on the Golden State of Mind blog back then, I was just a disheveled, beleaguered Warriors fan watching terrible basketball thinking Anthony Randolph might be good, and it was just a little side hobby. Rasheed Malek, who ran the WarriorsWorld blog at that time said on Twitter that we were looking for writers, and at that moment that I had just moved back, there wasn't a whole lot going on. And I thought, well, you know, I enjoy writing about basketball, why not?

What I couldn't have predicted is a few articles in, Rasheed was no longer babysitting me, he was just saying, post the article when you want, and the Warriors were so desperate, nobody was covering them, they were completely a woebegone, total laughingstock. They were one of the few teams saying, fine bloggers, show up to the arena, and I would walk into the locker room and I would see [Marcus Thompson](#), back then of the *East Bay Times* of the Bay Area News group and then I would see [Rusty Simmons](#), and then there'd be a tumbleweed blowing through and nobody else, maybe a cameraman.

So it was a great place to learn on the job in a very bizarre kind of job where I would make stupid mistakes, I didn't know what I was doing. Everybody else, there was a path and I think that path has been taken away, where they would cover high school football and they would go on up the ladder, I knew none of the lingo, I knew none of the etiquette or would do stupid stuff like taking a picture of the plays on the whiteboard in the locker room with my phone. I got pulled aside by the PR guy and he said, you're going to be banned from the league forever if you do that again, just so you know — I had no idea! So I thought that was just a great experience to make mistakes in total obscurity as opposed to what I do now, which is to make mistakes in public.

**But not a mistake with Kevin Durant as you are clear to say**

**ES:** No, I did everything right. (laughs)

**So you went from the *WarriorsWorld* blog then from there you started freelancing for *ESPN*, you started working there, what was it like going to such a massively larger platform like that?**

**ES:** It was completely mind blowing, very serendipitous, but I was a little bit starstruck frankly. I make the analogy that sometimes when you're really hungry, you open up your pantry and there's nothing really there, but you see there's some stale almonds there. Like, okay, I can eat some stale almonds, it's what's here. I felt that way with *ESPN* where the Warriors suddenly got good, okay, who do we have in the scene? Well, really nobody, everybody we have is anybody to the West Coast is down in LA and we could hire somebody for a lot of money or tell somebody in LA to move and uproot their whole life and go to the Bay. Or we've got this kid out here, he's written some articles for us, they weren't disasters, we can pay him a relative pittance and why not?

And I think I was that guy, but it was just crazy to suddenly — I remember in the first Warrior's playoff run, it was my job to cover whichever team lost and [J.A. Adande](#) would

get the column for whichever team won and I'm just looking and whenever I'm talking to him, J.A. is talking to me like we're teammates and what are we supposed to do? It's like, okay, you do that, and I'm just looking at him: "You're J.A. Adande, I see you on television. This is very strange." It was something that took some getting used to know the people there is as human beings and to just get over that part of it. You had to get used to the idea that you had more of an audience, the stupid stuff you say on Twitter could actually come back to hurt your company. All of these were mistakes are probably made here and there, but it was a great experience, it was definitely a great experience at the beginning, at least.

**Do you talk about the ending. Are you allowed to talk about the ending?**

**ES:** I think so. I mean, I don't know as much about the ending as maybe some other people know. There was this sea change, this changing of the guard, at *ESPN* in the NBA section especially — I think it was perhaps influenced by a lot of machinations at the top end. It felt political, it felt similar to when the general manager gets fired in the NBA and then the coach will get fired, he needs to have his own guys. It felt like one of those situations, but people ask me about it and asked me if I was targeted or if it had something to do with criticisms I had made in the past, specifically of Adrian Wojnarowski, because he was the guy who was brought on and given a lot of latitude to control coverage. And frankly, I have no idea, I wasn't in the room when they made these decisions, but whatever happened, happened and I'm happy with the outcome because it led to me coming to *The Athletic* and having the best job I've ever had.

**Why's it the best job you've ever had? What's the difference of writing for a big ad-supported company like *ESPN* versus a subscription company like *The Athletic*. It sounds like it's better. What makes it good or bad?**

**ES:** Well, can I curse on your podcast? Is that, is that something I could do?

**Go ahead.**

**ES:** There's just less bullshit. The idea is, look, we have very tangible metric of success. You're going to get there if you write good stuff, if people like what you're doing, they're going to subscribe and they're going to give us good feedback versus when it's ad-supported — and this is only an aspect, one aspect of the difference between working for *ESPN* versus *The Athletic* — but ad-supported, you're almost trying to trick people with clickbait. You're incentivized to do it and there's a lot of great work that happens over there, a lot of very talented people but it's just not one to one in that way. It really feels like at *The Athletic*, and I'm not trying to sound like a company man but it's just true, that when it's subscriber-based, it seems like you're more incentivized to create a quality product befitting of somebody paying you money than when it's ad-based, that just seems to be the case.

**The Take Zone**

**You had a great thing to write about too. One thing that is really striking about the book is your discussion about social media. As you note, there was this narrative for a long time that social media is the best thing that ever happened to the NBA, it's great, look at how popular they are, NBA Twitter's this amazing place, et cetera, et cetera. And you are maybe a bit more skeptical about that narrative.**

**ES:** I can't fault the NBA for going whole hog into NBA Twitter and I think it's established in the book that the NBA did invest into Twitter and try to become a part of Twitter in a way that the other leagues didn't, and they were trying to gain a first mover advantage. Again, I think it's hard to fault them. Who knew, right? Who knew. But I think what ended up happening is that Twitter has a lot of adverse consequences for its high profile users and the NBA perhaps got high on its own supply and it corrupted not only the minds of the

players but maybe the product in general. Maybe media where a lot of people are mistaking noise for signal.

**Let's break those apart because I think there's two parts and you and you write about both of them. So let's start with the players themselves. I love the part where you talk about when you were in the "Take Zone", which is when Kevin Durant called you out in person for an article you had written when he had not been speaking to media at the same time the Knicks were clearing cap space, et cetera, et cetera. And you wrote an article being like, can the Warriors and can Kevin Durant commit to the short term to win a title when clearly he's thinking about the long term, a very reasonable take.**

**Kevin Durant did not like that take very much, and you became the center of the cycle. Everyone was talking about you, everyone was talking about were you being fair or unfair? And you talk about how just overwhelming that is and it's something that I've never been in that level of the Take Zone, but I've been a couple times where something blows up on Twitter and you end up in worlds you didn't even know existed and people talking about you and you're just overcome. It's honestly really hard to explain if you haven't been there, but it was one of the most upsetting experiences of my life and it was a fraction of what you experience, which is a fraction of what the NBA players experience.**

**ES:** Yeah, it's real. You start getting paranoid and I think that in general, happiness is probably inversely correlated with the time you spend thinking about how other people think about you, and Twitter is geared in the opposite direction where you're almost incentivized to think that way. And then I think almost maybe celebrities are our canaries in the coal mine, where they're experiencing all of this in a scaled up version, an order of magnitude above what we are, but as our lives become more and more integrated into these mediums, we're going to become more like what they are.

All I know is the experience I had was not a pleasant one, it is not a natural thing to watch people on television argue about whether or not you're good at your job, and you can think that you would handle that well, you could think that you wouldn't take it seriously, but when you're actually in the Take Zone, as I call it, it is a highly unpleasant experience to go through, and it's inescapable, and the reason it's inescapable is if you want to live in the modern world, yeah, people would go, you don't like what's being said about you on Twitter. Delete Twitter, turn it off. If you don't like what's being said about you on IG, do the same. But when something is scaled up to that degree, it's just coming at you no matter what. I mean, I deleted those apps, but suddenly I had cousins, I had acquaintances, people I hadn't talked to since high school who were sending me text messages that Dan Patrick said this about you, Tracy McGrady said that about you and you cannot run from it, you can't hide from it.

There are people who develop coping strategies, there are people who aren't as narcissistic who learn to tune it out. But it's almost, you know, this is a weird place to take it off the top of my head, but I remember because a lot of people recently watched, Contagion and one of the scientists at a certain point says this all happened because the wrong bat met up with the wrong pig. I sometimes think about that because maybe it's the wrong medium or the wrong moment of technology met up with the wrong psyche and maybe this person would have been fine as a 1990s basketball player or as a 1980s basketball player.

**Yeah, you made that point that [Michael] Jordan was — it was amusing how competitive he was to a degree, right? And that, "Oh, look at the slights that he took and what a whack Hall of Fame speech". But then you think about it, is that so different from Kevin Durant?**

**ES:** It might not be! There's this whole other issue where success often comes from people who are unbalanced and unpleasant in many ways, and it accounts for a lot of their drive and maybe the insecurity is fuel, and now we're almost having celebrity ruined for ourselves as a performance because we know too much about these people. We want to believe that they are on a plane above ourselves, that they are just resting on their laurels after their careers, basking in their glories. But now we can see, you know, name the celebrity. I mean you can see like Cher has had these really insecure tweets. You watch Taylor Swift, the documentary about her, you watch somebody who was falling apart psychologically from the social media scrutiny. So not only is the social media pressure making them unhappy, it's making us bummed out because we see how unhappy it's making them. So that is the dynamic that we're in right now.

**Is Twitter Bad for the NBA?**

**To tie this back then to the angle on the NBA, why might it be — again, I think it's still widely accepted and assumed that social media is good for the NBA — what is the argument that it might not be good for the league, beyond the impact on the players sort of psyche?**

**ES:** I think the biggest argument is that ratings have been down for awhile, and maybe that's not an argument. Again, this is the signal versus noise question, but for all of the coverage of how zeitgeisty and fun the NBA is and how their players are just so culturally prominent, the fans don't seem to be as invested or interested, and you wonder if the league is chasing its tail and just constantly absorbed into whatever is getting play on social media. We should be clear that ESPN is a major NBA partner, they're not just some news organization that is going to cover whatever it wants to cover, no. They have a vested interest in the NBA being popular. If you look back in the day, the NBC presentation of the NBA product was all about holding it up with this gravitas, the Marv Albert introductions and the Bob Costas introductions, you feel like you're about to watch a battle of Titans and it has this meaning and this gravity to it.

**This is really interesting. It just occurred to me, ESPN and all of these companies don't necessarily make the most money on live sports because they have to pay a huge amount of money for the rights. What is really good is when they can make money on cheap stuff. Like SportsCenter is cheap, that's why it was such a profitable thing for ESPN for a long time.**

**ES:** First Take is cheap.

**Exactly, all these talk shows are cheap. And guess what the talk shows flourish on, not by breaking down plays, they flourish by having controversy.**

**ES:** It's a withdrawal, it's not an investment.

**That's right. And so you're getting this vicious cycle where the league's largest channel partner and social media, and all the reporters are on social media, they want engagement, they want likes, and there are people on Twitter that breakdown plays. Guess what? They have like 6,000 followers, right? Who has the millions of followers? The ones that break news, and that news is very rarely about what's happening on the court.**

**ES:** But it seems like the NFL maybe in its stodginess has escaped a lot of that and they have a bunch of products that are about investing in promoting the glory of their product.

**Right, NFL Films, for example**

**ES:** Yeah, NFL films with the trumpets and the slow motion and they've got that great yearly thing that they do where they have all the players vote on who the Top 100 players



are, and have a bunch of guys actually in the league go, hey, you don't know why this defensive end is good, let me tell you in this game, Week 13 he did this thing and they show the footage and you've got them mic'd up. You've got that sound on the sidelines and you feel like you're there, and it's about the game because that is principally what drives people to this. It's not about anything else. It's not that Nick Young is afraid of dolphins or whatever stupid story of the day. They want the games, they want that kind of drama, they want the idea that LeBron is marching into Boston with his legacy on the line in a Game Six, what the hell is going to happen? That's what they want and it seems like for whatever reason, maybe because they need to keep making money off this cheap stuff as you say, a lot of it is okay, what's the silly story of the day? What's on Twitter? Twitter's a good producer, it's a cheap producer, that's what's going to produce our show, let's run with it. And the fans are getting tired of that.

**Well, the other thing that you talked about in your book is we think about LeBron James as being employed by the Lakers, and previously was employed by the Cavaliers, but actually LeBron James is employed by Nike, and it follows that LeBron James' incentive is not necessarily winning, it's winning in the service of selling sneakers. You had that great anecdote about how LeBron and Kyrie suddenly materialize with the exact same shirt on after they won the title in 2016, right? And so you end up with a situation where the players are kind of in on it too, but then you get into their own vicious cycle where they're then miserable on social media because they're the center of conversation.**

**ES:** Yeah, it's like we badly crave connection and even if we want so badly, if we're competitive to have that number one spot, it does I think end up in a Citizen Kane-esque way where even Michael Jordan is miserable. I mean, we clearly have seen that, Wright Thompson [wrote about it](#) beautifully, and he was somebody who did sublimate to a team and have some loyalty to a team still. But yeah, the corporate aspect, the sneaker aspect to me is fascinating, and I think part of why the players love the sneaker company or have a certain fealty to it is that the sneaker company is about promoting their individuality in a way that the team maybe isn't, and there's this thing to chase that they can't necessarily chase in a team where if you become the face of Nike, that's just so much bigger than anything else. I mean, that's huge. That means you're one of the most famous people on earth. That is rarefied air and there's a pareto principal there where the gap between being number one and number two is massive. The gap between being LeBron James at Nike and being Kevin Durant is huge.

**This is so interesting because one of the things that strikes me about the NBA is the NBA is a real world example of an Internet phenomenon and you just articulated it, which is that on the Internet if you are number one you get such a scale advantage, it sort of builds on itself and it feeds on itself and you become bigger and bigger and more powerful.**

**That's actually what happens on an NBA court and that's what makes it very different from the NFL. Realistically, only about five teams have a chance to win in the NBA every year, and that's because only like five players are good enough to carry their team to a title. The delta between the best player in the NBA and say the 15th best player in the NBA is so much wider than in any other sport, you end up with this situation where the returns become large, and it happens everywhere. It happens in terms of sneakers, it happens in terms of social media attention, and it happens in terms of power. Like LeBron James again, it's great for him to be in the center of conversation everywhere, is that good for the rest of the league? Maybe not so much.**

**ES:** Maybe not so much. And it creates crazy business dynamics too because suddenly you have billions of dollars at stake in a guy's knee, right? I mean, you could make the argument that Michael Jordan was as integral to building Nike into what it became as Steve Jobs was to Apple, but Steve jobs didn't have a situation where if Bill Laimbeer hip

checked him, then Apple would be torn asunder. It's crazy that these young men, doing a physical activity out there have some sort of connection to the markets. I know I'm digressing maybe from the point that you made, but I'm just thinking about the insanity of the sneaker business in general, and how it's tied up.

I make the argument in the book that Under Armour was badly hurt by Steph Curry sublimating his ego to a certain extent and accepting Kevin Durant into his team for the greater good of the Warriors to win championships, but that was in direct opposition to the forces we're talking about in regards to being the face of a brand and satiating your own ego.

**Will the NBA Return?**

**So is the NBA going to come back?**

**ES:** (laughs) I mean, eventually, right? What's interesting to me about the NBA and whether the NBA comes back quickly — I'm not an epidemiologist, I don't know — but I think some people have been slow to catch up with the real dynamic, which is that the politicians are in charge. This current crisis has caused us to give up a lot of our guard rails because we just need something done and we need something done quickly. I'm not even criticizing, I'm just describing where we're at and that creates a situation where governors have an authority unlike they've ever had.

So yeah, these NBA owners and Adam Silver, they can come up with their plans and they should come up with their plans. Maybe Vegas, you know, maybe this month, maybe that month, but the bottom line is if the politicians don't want it and if they aren't incentivized to go along with it, it's not going to happen, and it can all be dashed by a new infection in whatever city. So I guess the only point I'm making there beyond that it's unpredictable and who knows, is that the NBA is no longer in charge of its own destiny, which is true for a lot of industries.

**Could the NBA, if they were locked in a hotel and they had nothing but games, could that be the salvation of the league for for all the issues that you're talking about.**

**ES:** Look at you, you want that Bucks championship! You lied to me sir, you lied to me. You said that this was going to be not the sports fan you, but this was going to be the business expert. You want the Bucks championship! I see Ben, it's ok.

**(laughs) No because it'll be all about the game, it will all be about the game, there will be nothing else to talk about.**

**ES:** I'll tell you what, I don't want them to do anything that would risk people's lives, but goddamnit, I'm going to be really fascinated by that experiment. I'm going to watch every game. If it's in Vegas, I'm going to try to get a credential, I'm going to drive there to see how they do it, I'm hoping that would be maybe the next book. I don't know. I just know that that could be an incredibly cool product. I just hope if it happens, it's done with some sense of responsibility.

I remember there's something called the fraud triangle about why fraud happens where it's a pressure/opportunity/rationalization. That's when we see big time corporate fraud, those are the conditions that creates it. There could be something similar to this where it could create the dynamics where the league takes a risk with health in a way that it perhaps shouldn't because a lot of these owners are under pressure or at least a contingent of them are. They have been overleveraged you have, good luck Tilman Fertitta, owner of the Houston Rockets whose money is tied up in restaurants, casinos, hotels, oof that's a bad combo. Good luck, Tilman Fertitta, That's not a great combo. Good luck, Micky Arison, Chairman of Carnival Cruises, good luck. There are probably a few others where I



think they just have to be desperate to get basketball back online because the money just dried up like that right after [China pulled the plug on the NBA](#) getting hundreds of millions of dollars every year. So even if these guys have a lot of money, to quote Patrick Ewing during the 1999 lockout, “Yeah, we might make a lot of money, but we spend a lot of money.” And so I think there’s some desperation to get some sort of playoff revenue from this season.

**Ethan, good talking to you and we should do this again.**

**ES:** I would love to, Ben, it was great to be on. Thanks so much for having me.

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