

# This Jazz Artist Makes Pro Football Hall of Fame Speeches Sing

When the Pro Football Hall of Fame's inductees began to ramble, executives turned to Jezra Kaye to help them rein it in.



By Ken Belson

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The Pro Football Hall of Fame passed an uncomfortable Rubicon in 2018 when the former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis spoke for more than 33 minutes at his induction ceremony.

The Hall's role is to celebrate the N.F.L.'s greatest players and coaches, who often give impassioned and emotional speeches at their inductions. But over the past decade, the event, held annually in August, has become an arms race of "thank yous" and rambling speeches that run 15 minutes or longer.

As ceremonies stretched past four hours, droves of fans sitting outdoors at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium in Canton, Ohio, left early. Hall of Famers, wearing the gold jackets customary to the ceremony, walked offstage to escape the sweltering heat. The producers at ESPN and NFL Network, which air the inductions, struggled to avoid showing empty seats and fretted about losing television viewers. Lewis's unscripted speech was a bridge too far.

"We would sit in the production trucks and talk among each other and say, like, 'this is terrible,'" said Seth Markman, who has led ESPN's N.F.L. studio coverage for more than a decade and will helm this year's production. "The event can't go this long. People are leaving."



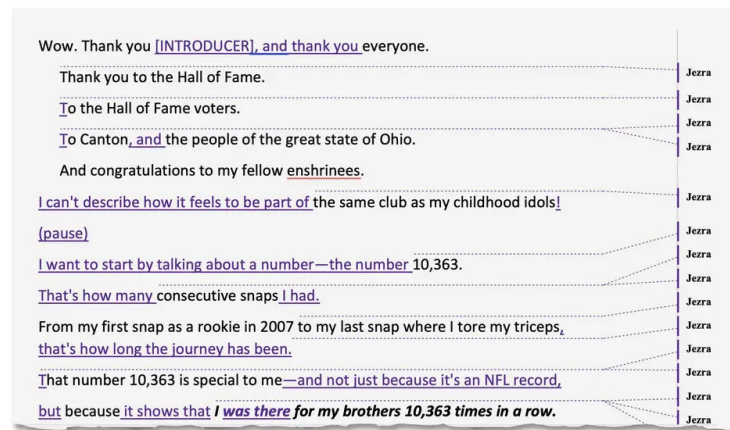
After Ray Lewis spoke for more than 33 minutes at the 2018 enshrinement ceremony, Hall executives and TV producers looked for ways to speed up the proceedings. Joe Robbins/Getty Images

Executives at the Hall, the league and the networks looked at ways to speed up the ceremony. They considered holding up wrap signs and playing music to cue speakers to finish, and even thought about sending someone onstage to escort long-winded speakers off. None of the options were used, though, because they might embarrass the speakers, said Rich Desrosiers, a spokesman for the Hall.

One solution was to enlist Jezra Kaye, a professional writing coach, in 2021 to work with inductees on improving — and shortening — their speeches. Kaye, a former jazz singer and romance novel writer living in Brooklyn, said it doesn't matter that she knows next to nothing about football.

"My sport of choice is reading romance novels, and I have this privilege that others would kill for," Kaye said. "But awards speeches are very similar no matter what the field because they have a specific social function, to show gratitude."

Joe Thomas, the former Cleveland Browns offensive tackle, worked with Kaye on the induction speech he plans to deliver Saturday. He and two more of this year's nine speakers — Ken Riley II will present on behalf of his father, who died in 2020 — started with Kaye in the spring after the Hall of Fame class was announced in February. Some jotted down notes or, like Thomas, wrote first drafts. "Anyone who doesn't use a speech coach in this situation is an idiot," he said.



Jezra edited the speech Joe Thomas planned to give Saturday, adding points of emphasis and consolidating his thoughts. Illustration by The New York Times

Kaye said her main task is cutting speeches down to size by getting the former pros and coaches to prioritize who they thank so there is time left to describe their importance.

In 2021, when the 28 inductees from that year's class and from 2020 were enshrined during one weekend, the Hall cut target speech times to eight minutes. Inductees were also given the option of videotaping longer versions of their speeches that would be posted on the Hall's website. During speeches, the names of friends and family members scroll across the bottom of screens in the stadium so speakers don't have to read them.

This year's class is a more typical size, which allowed Thomas a bit more wiggle room. He said Kaye cut his original draft from about 15 minutes to the 10-minute, Hall-approved target time during a few videoconference sessions.

"I might say, 'half of this has to go, so you either have to throw out half of the people or half of what you say about them,'" Kaye said. "The way that you bring out the beauty and the meaning is by limiting the amount they can say."

For Steve Atwater, the Denver Broncos defensive back who was in the 2020 class, Kaye's condensing made an impact. He ended his eight-minute speech by rousing former teammates in attendance to stand, calling them out by name so he could share the spotlight.

"Her expertise helped direct my ideas in the right direction and helped funnel them down in a way that's digestible, instead of being all over the place," Atwater said. "Once we figured that out, the rest was simple."

The rest of Kaye's guidance usually boils down to three messages: don't go off script; stories that sound great to football players don't always land for a TV audience; and jokes don't work if they take too long to set up.



Kaye advises speakers not to go off script. Amir Hamja/The New York Times

Peyton Manning drew high praise for his rollicking nine-minute speech, in 2021, which he began by thanking “those previous inductees who gave long-winded acceptance speeches, forcing us to have a whopping six minutes to recap our football careers.” He gave special thanks to Lewis, saying he “just finished giving his speech that he started in 2018.”

Though Kaye typically advises against following Manning’s comic example because most speakers can’t match his delivery, Tom Flores, the former Raiders coach who worked with Kaye on his 2021 speech, opened by quipping that the Hall made him the second speaker on the program because they knew he’d keep it short. “I’m 84 frappin’ years old. I’ve got to go to bed at 9 o’clock,” he said to wide cheers.

Kaye had insisted, like she does with all the inductees she helps, that Flores read his speech to her several times and practice it on his own. But onstage emotions momentarily got the better of him, even though he had given hundreds of speeches as a coach and was a seasoned radio announcer.

“When I got into the speech, there was a point there where I totally blanked out, had no idea where I was, and kept talking,” Flores said. “But I didn’t say anything that I didn’t feel. I thought that’s what they wanted and that’s what they should get.”

Flores ended his speech with a poignant story. He and Sam Boghosian, a Raiders assistant coach, were standing on the field in the waning seconds of Super Bowl XV with their team ahead by 17 points. Both men had grown up in the Central Valley, California’s agricultural heartland, and worked their way up the football ranks. Now they were about to win the biggest game of their lives.





Tom Flores ended his speech in 2021 with an anecdote from Super Bowl XV. Emilee Chinn/Getty Images

“Not bad for a couple of grape pickers,” Flores recalled them saying to one another.

The anecdote, which took less than a minute, provided a glimpse into Flores's journey and added an emotional flourish that can go missing when speakers, mindful of time limits, rush through a long list of shout outs.

"Last year, it felt like, 'if I only have seven minutes, I'm just going to do thank yous,' so we lost a little of the storytelling, which we loved," Markman said. "The emotions, the stories, the real feelings, we don't want to lose that."

**Ken Belson** covers the N.F.L. He joined the Sports section in 2009 after stints in Metro and Business. From 2001 to 2004, he wrote about Japan in the Tokyo bureau. More about Ken Belson