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DIVIDE BETWEEN COACHES, REPORTERS WIDENING

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by John Pruett
Huntsville Times

A newsletter from the Football Writers Association of America arrived in the mail the other day. Well, technically, it didn't arrive in the mail. In keeping with the world we now live in, it showed up online.

The publication, called "The Fifth Down," is distributed every two or three months to sports writers around the country who care enough to plow down \$40 for an annual membership. In addition to notes and quotes about college football, the FWA president writes a centerpiece called the President's Column.

This year's president is veteran sports writer Ron Higgins of the Memphis Commercial Appeal, the son of a former LSU sports information director.

In his first President's Column, Higgins proclaimed that "things have to change in the way our profession is being treated by the coaching establishment."

Higgins voiced his concerns at a recent meeting of the NCAA Football Committee. Its members, he said, "seemed stunned by our increased lack of access to players and coaches" and "surprised to hear how media guides have morphed into recruited guides."

Some of the guides, Higgins noted, might have 10 pages on a weight room and more than 100 pictures of a head coach, while omitting year-to-year results.

He went on to complain, rightly so, that he and other reporters are tired of being told that you can't talk to assistant coaches, you can't talk to freshmen, you can't watch practice, you can't go to the locker room after a game.

As a result, Higgins said, the frustration level between reporters and coaches is at an all-time high.

Part of the problem, of course, is the Internet. Understandably, no coach in America wants inside information about something that happened during practice to show up on a message board or on somebody's blog even before practice is over. As mainstream reporters, we get that.

But the situation goes much deeper than barring reporters from practice. Higgins is right when he asserts that many coaches "now make millions and they don't care about us, and some don't respect the professional advice of their own sports information directors."

He maintains that any coach who says "I respect the media and the job you do" is a flat-out liar.

Higgins is also right when he says that with each passing year, schools are making it more difficult for reporters to do their jobs. He pledges to do everything he can to reverse the trend by continuing to raise the issue to anyone who'll listen.

We're with you, Ron. Good luck. You'll need it.

The thing is, nobody cares except us. You're preaching to the choir, but the rest of the audience isn't listening.

"Stunned" they may be, but members of the NCAA Football Committee don't care about diminishing media access. It's not in their job description. Administrators don't care. Coaches don't care. The general public doesn't care. Even the fans don't care.

Until they care, the situation won't change. It'll only get worse.