

# Full-court press: Daily News unveils Garden's tactics vs. reporters

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There apparently is very little gray area in James Dolan's mind when it comes to dealing with the media. His basic rule is quite simple: you are either with us or against us.

That is the message on Page 3 of the Madison Square Garden media policy, in big bold letters.

"Media members who show fairness and journalistic integrity are granted regular access to our spokespeople," the policy states. "Media members who do not show journalistic integrity or fairness are not unilaterally granted unlimited access to our spokespeople."

Dolan never explains what he means by integrity. On Page 2, there is even a line acknowledging that "Journalistic integrity is impossible to precisely define."

But the Madison Square Garden chairman seems to equate integrity with lack of criticism. In recent years, media members deemed to be overly critical of the Garden, Dolan, Knicks and Rangers, eventually found their access limited or cut off completely.

The protocol for such extreme measures is outlined on Page 12 of the 16-page confidential document from 2003 that was obtained by the Daily News. Dolan's manifesto includes phrases such as "controlling media access" and language about restricting and rewarding access based on favorable and unfavorable coverage.

According to the policy, "Consistent explanation of certain ramifications provides the media with fair notice of the company's expectations and the potential consequences of objectionable journalistic behavior."

The unwritten consequences are intimidation, spying, planting unfavorable stories and, according to one former Garden executive, monitoring employee phone records.

The former Garden executive claims that Garden honchos obtained employees' phone records to see if they had talked to certain reporters, and threatened to fire employees who had done so.

It is unclear if Garden officials accessed reporters' phone records or private cell phone records of employees.

"Are you asking me if it happens or did it happen?" the former executive said. "Let's just say that if they wanted your phone records they could get them."

This is the world that awaits Donnie Walsh, who was named Knicks president on Wednesday and who has been given the authority by Dolan to revamp his controversial media policy that was established following the Knicks' 2000-01 season.

Dolan says his intention was to protect himself and his employees, but the policy instead created a culture of paranoia, fear and mistrust. The job of changing that culture and repairing relationships falls on Walsh, who was accessible and cordial to the media throughout his 20-plus seasons as an executive with the Indiana Pacers.

Walsh says the media will be given a professional working environment, free of media-relations employees eavesdropping on conversations and interviews and recording those talks on a BlackBerry. Walsh has not outlined his plan for a new media policy except to say, "I think access is a big part of most franchises."

Already, there have been some noticeable changes. A high-ranking Garden executive contacted The News late Tuesday to inform the paper of Walsh's press conference the following day. Just 13 months earlier, Dolan instructed his media-relations staff to inform all the local papers except The News that Isiah Thomas was being given a contract extension. Upset over The News' coverage regarding several Garden-related stories, the Knicks intentionally excluded the paper from a major announcement.

When Walsh addressed a group of 25 print reporters on Wednesday, he was seated next to Garden VP of communications Barry Watkins and four other media-relations employees. None, however, was typing into a BlackBerry.

Whether the events of the past two days represent a sign of genuine change in policy and procedure remains to be seen. Current and former Garden employees find it hard to believe that Dolan, whose obsession with battling the media is legendary, suddenly will wave the white flag.

Just how obsessed is Dolan? According to a former executive, Watkins has a binder for every reporter that covers the Knicks, Rangers or the Garden. They are essentially scouting reports on the writers and include copies of stories they've written.

"There are certain writers that the company won't deal with because of negative stories they've written," said the former executive, who requested anonymity. "Other writers they know they can play ball with. There are some influential writers and radio guys that people at the Garden will say, 'We own them.'"

It is not just newspaper stories that are monitored. The Garden assigns employees - usually interns - to listen to local sports radio programs and television shows to keep a "naughty and nice" list of what is said.

Dolan will do just about anything to uncover leaks within the organization. Beginning last season, News reporters were sometimes tailed by security guards at the Garden. Former Knicks coach Larry Brown said in November that he felt as if he was being spied on at the Garden.

The use of unnamed sources is of particular interest to Dolan. On Page 14, the policy even cites the Columbia School of Journalism on sourcing: "While the use of unnamed sources for reporting is not preferred, it is widely accepted."

A few paragraphs later, Dolan's policy says that "Unnamed sources should not be provided the opportunity to take 'cheap shots' in stories." Two unnamed Garden executives were quoted in the New York Times two months ago shooting down The News' report that Bucks owner Herb Kohl had turned down a five-player deal for Zach Randolph. Isiah Thomas even said publicly that the other teams "use" New York newspapers to further their agendas.

But in March, Kohl admitted that he had turned down the deal for Randolph, calling into question the integrity of Thomas and the two unnamed Garden executives. None was punished.

And yet, there is a "company response" for unfavorable stories that the heads of each media-relations department are instructed to follow:

- A call to the reporter by the public relations representative explaining the objections the company had with the way in which the story was written.
- Limiting a media person's follow-up access to the division representative about the incident in question.
- Limiting the media person's follow-up access to the division about all subjects.
- Limiting the media person's follow-up access to the company about all company projects."

Dolan's staff has carried out his mission statement for seven years, which coincides with the Knicks' seven straight losing seasons. On Wednesday, Dolan turned over control of the team and its media relations to Walsh.

But not without a warning.

In his lone unscripted remark on Wednesday, Dolan told the media, "Be careful what you ask for."