

Feature

Truth Be Told?

By Gary Brown



Malcolm Moran remembers it well. Connecticut senior basketball player Nykesha Sales tore her Achilles tendon near the end of the 1998 season as she was on the verge of becoming the school's all-time leading scorer. With Sales needing just one more bucket for the record but too hobbled to play, the regular-season finale between the Huskies and Villanova opened with a staged inbound pass to Sales, who – with her foot in a cast – scored the uncontested record-breaker.

In return, Villanova was allowed a chipper at the other end, and with the score 2-2 and Sales relegated to the bench, the rest of the game “began.”

Moran, a Penn State journalism professor now but a New York Times reporter then, recalls the incident not for its uniqueness in sport, but instead for the 72-hour debate that followed in print, on the air and in cyber space.

“No one play in any one sport in the modern era has generated that much intense conversation in such a short time,” Moran said.

Contrast that with 76 years ago when few – if any – reporters asked Babe Ruth what he was doing when he pointed to the bleachers at Wrigley Field, apparently predicting and then delivering a home run. Imagine the scene in the interview room today if Alex Rodriguez were to do that.

At no time in history have information, analysis and interpretation been so plentiful in sports journalism. In the last 30 years alone, USA Today has printed it, ESPN has televised it, the Web has synthesized it and talk radio has amplified it. While that feeds fans' frenzy, the information arms race has turned sports reporters into personalities, columnists into entertainers and editors into marketing directors.

For college sports coverage, all of that means a glut of information and opinion. Sometimes the games themselves aren't even the stories. Which got more attention: Tennessee's win over Rutgers in the 2007 Division I Women's Basketball Championship or Don Imus

insulting the Scarlet Knights afterward? People may not recollect Oklahoma State's record in football last year, but they surely recall coach Mike Gundy's reporter-prompted tirade. Remember Duke men's lacrosse?

Former Washington Post writer and Stanford visiting professor Gary Pomerantz said of the recent culture shift, "In sportswriting, we've gone from the hero worship of Grantland Rice during the 1920s to the hard-edged investigative reporting of BALCO. Today, technology moves news along so quickly, it makes the core essentials of good journalism – fairness, toughness and accuracy – more essential now than ever before."

Those essentials are under duress in a time-to-fill environment.

"People in talk radio and the 24/7 nature of TV news have to talk about something in those 24 hours," said Charles Gerber, ESPN's recently retired executive vice president of college sports. "Everything is news now."

Beyond the games

Perhaps that change has been more apparent in print media than anywhere else.

Greg Bowers, an assistant professor at the Missouri School of Journalism and sports editor of the Columbia Missourian, said sportswriters realized with ESPN's emergence in the 1980s and the rise of the Internet in the 1990s that merely reviewing what happened on the field of play wasn't as important since most of the audience already knew the outcome. "The old reason for buying the paper is gone," he said. "What journalists are trying to do is create a new reason for buying the paper."

That has meant giving readers something unique, and that change has resulted in a bent toward writers offering more inflammatory commentary and becoming more visibly a part of the story – perhaps even crossing a line from reporting to entertaining.

"The traditional game story died years ago," Bowers said. "Offering depth and analysis and telling the behind-the-scenes stories is where sports journalism has gone. Whether it's the right direction has yet to be determined."

Moran called today's environment a trumped-up version of what occurred in the 1940s and '50s, when television forced print reporters to provide more context and explanation. People with televisions already knew who had the game-winning hit in the ninth, and writers had to go beyond the game for those readers. The integration of big-league baseball, as embodied by Jackie Robinson, also changed the ways sports were covered, Moran said, because people realized sports had social implications. Entities that limited their sports coverage to games fell behind that curve.

The situation is much more complicated now. It's not just broadcasting but instead the amount of broadcasting, and the access to it, that is the issue. Throw in the bloggers, vloggers, the all-sports anchors and the talk-show hosts, and you have an army of digital reporters and commentators vying for reader interest through increasingly provocative content.

There's a trade-off in all of this. Perhaps what is gained is the media's ability to inform fans – a mutually beneficial arrangement that helps fuel sports' growing popularity, particularly in college football and basketball. Alumni bases from the largest state schools to the smallest

private institutions can follow their teams online through laptops, PDAs and cell phones. Chat rooms, blogs and message boards keep the conversation alive and immediate. Information is virtually unlimited.

What's lost? Certainly, accuracy takes a frequent beating. But Moran said that another significant casualty might be the relationships between writers and their subjects.

"That's one of the things I'm most concerned about with this generation of journalists – how do you get to know somebody when you're 25 years old and trying to do an honest job?" he said.

Moran cited his own career as an example. He got to know Mike Krzyzewski when the Duke coach was at West Point. There weren't more than a dozen people around Krzyzewski the first time Moran covered one of his postgame conferences.

Krzyzewski also came down to weekly luncheons in Manhattan. "You'd have Mike, Lou Carnesecca, Jim Valvano – and they would linger a little while, so in addition to the structured remarks, you had a chance to introduce yourself, get to know them, do a story on them, they see your work," Moran said. "And that led to understanding, and that led to a chance to repair damage if there was a controversial topic or if you made a mistake – at least there was a little foundation there that allowed you to talk it over."

Those days are mostly gone now, a casualty of the relentless demand on subjects' time.

To some contemporary reporters, that loss of interpersonal interaction is no big deal. After all, there are so many other ways to generate content. CBS Sports Vice President Leslie Anne Wade said many people now have the technology to capture what is said and done – whether it's on the air or not – and make news with that information.

"There used to be a time when during commercials, announcers would play with the telestrator or make a joke – you certainly wouldn't do that today with the same comfort, since anything that goes up on the satellite can quickly make its way to YouTube or to any number of outlets," she said.

Case in point: Somebody posted a YouTube video that caught well-known ESPN personality Chris Berman chewing out his staff while prepping for a Monday Night Football telecast.

And even the on-air opinions of broadcasters may be endlessly debated under the flag of "news." "There is a new awareness that everything we say can be scrutinized – every fan with an opinion has a platform to counter anything a TV analyst says. Anyone who has a contrary opinion has a platform to be in the media," Wade said. She added, however, that those conditions haven't caused CBS to shrink from opinions. Few other media entities are shying away, either. The engine feeds itself.

Does the media environment naturally provoke reaction or is provocation itself the real aim? For some, Moran said, it's the latter.

"As the environment has become shrill, the only way some people think they can be heard above the din is to be even more shrill," he said. "Many executives measure a columnist by the number of responses he or she gets. Some columnists are outraged by that premise, but others market themselves as contrarians."

And they do market. Writers have found new opportunities for expressing views – and supplementing their income – in talk radio or local outlets or national cable (such as ESPN’s “Around the Horn”). “If your outrageousness could help you land that kind of gig, then your accountant would tell you there’s nothing wrong with being outrageous,” Moran said.

Enter the blogger

The muddying of roles has not stopped with television and radio cross-promotion. In recent years, sports editors and producers have demanded that their reporters host blogs in which they can lead interactive conversations with interested readers.

“The problem with the blogger is that it’s not necessarily journalism,” Gerber said. “Things are put on the Internet that aren’t double-sourced, that are put down as fact that probably are rumor, or that are opinion stated as fact – that blows everything out of proportion. And once it is said, it’s up to whoever is being challenged to disprove it.”

Missouri’s Bowers agreed, noting that no editor hovers over some guy in the basement to ensure that his claims are verified. “Most bloggers aren’t journalists,” he said. “Journalists are supposed to play by the rules of journalism; bloggers don’t have to.”

But many newspapers have turned their reporters into bloggers to attract readers, seemingly indifferent to readers’ ability to distinguish between gossip and legitimate reporting. “Blogging is fine for what it is,” Stanford’s Pomerantz said, “but it’s a readers-beware environment – they shouldn’t take an uninformed view as an informed one.”

Of course, the blogosphere (and the issues that surround it) isn’t unique to sports. In fact, not much about the evolution of journalism is unique to sports. ESPN’s Gerber said the evolution of sportswriting mirrors the evolution of regular journalism. Both fields feature a combination of 24-hour cable news, whether it be sports or general news, and the growth of talk radio. The multiplicity of media has made everything transparent, if unfocused.

But the same Malcolm Moran who noted the fuss over the Nykesha Sales incident warns about the changing landscape. Whereas at one time sportswriter Dick Young was setting the agenda, now the brash, outrageous talk show host is. “And it’s risky,” Moran said, “because it’s not always journalism, but ratings-driven. The potential for manipulation and exploiting subject matter is a lot greater when you’re looking for ratings points.”

Pomerantz said the new day can be seen both as a perilous period and a thrilling time because of all the new possibilities.

“The delivery system is not going to alter the task,” he said. “We still have to find the story, report it, distill and synthesize the information and tell it. That remains the same, whether it appears on a printed page or computer screen.”

The delivery system may not alter the task, but it may affect the outcome.

Will the marketplace of the future demand enlightenment or inflammation – or can media have it both ways?

Those with the answer have themselves a scoop.

Photo illustration by Micah Bell and Arnel Reynon/Sport Graphics

sideBar: noline&photo=n,video=n,podcast=nSideBars:

Taking sports out of context

By Wallace Renfro

I've spent more than three decades in an endeavor – public relations – that often is characterized as being at odds with the independence and high values of journalism. No one believes more in the importance of free and independent press than I do. It is the only thing at the end of the day that keeps the enemies of democracy at bay. Without journalism, we quickly would devolve into something considerably less than democracy.

But I worry that the standards of the fourth estate are slipping.

When it comes to covering sports – college sports in particular – a confluence of issues has brought us to where we are today, and where we are today isn't as good for intercollegiate athletics or for sports journalism. The problem is that sports journalism doesn't either understand or appreciate the context in which intercollegiate athletics lives.

That's not entirely journalism's fault.

Those who cover the college games believe sports is sports, when in fact intercollegiate athletics should be set apart. Like their professional counterparts, collegiate contests are entertaining, and corporate entities with marketing budgets have latched onto them as a way to deliver their message, thus adding a commercial component to the enterprise. But pro sports doesn't have the context of higher education as a backdrop.

At the same time, those of us in higher education and athletics haven't done a good job of demarcating the collegiate game. Thus, those covering college sports – whether it's the games or the issues or the governance – do so from a comparative perspective with professional sports rather than with higher education.

Concurrently, newspaper budgets are shrinking. Fewer are able to devote a beat writer to college sports, and what beat writers there are have little appreciation for trying to understand higher education. Complicating matters is an enterprise whose allegiance to the facts is undermined by the competition for space with those who will pay less attention to those facts.

What does this mean for the future for those of us engaged in intercollegiate athletics?

In a perfect world, sports journalists should understand higher education as a way of understanding intercollegiate athletics, and then write from that perspective. That will be challenging in a profession that seems to devote more time to entertainment and commentary than to developing the story or presenting context.

But in that same perfect world, those engaged in the intercollegiate athletics enterprise must work harder at the way they send messages about the values of intercollegiate athletics. It is naïve to ignore the impact of economic factors on the enterprise. If we are going to engage men and women in athletics because we believe in the value of doing so, we have to understand that it comes at a cost that will be provided less and less by the institutions themselves (because of their own increasing financial restraints). That means intercollegiate athletics at all levels will more frequently pursue commercial ways of generating revenue streams, which stresses the contextual boundaries even more.

At a minimum, our closest constituents have to understand why we do what we do and do so within the context of higher education, and how those values comport with those of higher education. And we have to focus on providing that context at every opportunity. We can't just talk about sports from a commercial perspective. We have to create the context every time we talk about the way we conduct intercollegiate athletics – we have to compare the way athletics operates with the rest of the campus.

Wallace Renfro, vice president and senior advisor to NCAA President Myles Brand, has worked in a public and media relations capacity with the NCAA for more than 30 years since earning a degree from Missouri State.

### Hot Off the press

“Reporters are human. They don’t wake up in the morning relishing the thought of making others uncomfortable. They just want to do their jobs, helping you navigate the world, giving you information that will help your private life intersect with the public sector, and watching out for your interests in the halls of government and other places.”

– *Indianapolis Star editorial*

“The explosion of new media, especially with regard to advertising income, has made competitors out of two traditional allies — news media and professional sports. At the heart of the issue, which people on both sides alternately describe as a commercial dispute and a First Amendment fight, is a simple question: Who owns sports coverage?”

– *New York Times story on sports blogging, April 21, 2008*

“Ten years ago newspapers weren’t in the world of video and audio. We were in the world of print. The leagues don’t have a print product. Their view of this is that we entered their world.”

– *Mike Fannin, president of the Associated Press Sports Editors and managing editor for sports and features at the Kansas City Star, as quoted in The New York Times, April 21, 2008*

“Longstanding news media outlets shouldn’t fear blogging. It’s another way they are able to reach consumers. And if traditional outlets see their ad dollars migrate to the Internet, not much of that money will go to the already hoary stereotype of sports bloggers in their parents’ basements. (By the way, are there any parents who wouldn’t take comfort in knowing their kids were just downstairs opining rather than out doing who knows what?)”

– *Michael Hiestand, USA Today, May 9, 2008*