

NCAA shouldn't be dictating that scrimmages be a secret

The primary business of the U.S. Basketball Writers Association is insuring that its membership finds a workplace free of unnecessary roadblocks to getting our jobs done. That task includes dealing with issues of access in a constantly changing media world.

Lately, we've spent a ton of time debating how that access should or shouldn't include the ever-expanding field of new media.

It's a worthy and complicated conversation with few easy solutions or set-in-stone guidelines, and I suspect that the important task of sifting through all the good, bad and ugly in the new media world will continue to be a relevant and constantly changing debate. But in the meantime, we've allowed a less complex issue of media access slip by without so much as an organized whisper of discontent.

It's an old-fashioned problem called simple access to a basketball scrimmage in the preseason.

The NCAA calls them "informal practice scrimmages" and a few years ago passed legislation that mandated that college basketball programs were allowed to conduct these secret scrimmages between all Division I programs to go on behind closed doors. According to the NCAA bylaws, these secret workouts are to be held without any public viewing by any non-basketball personnel. No tickets sold. No spectators allowed in the gym, but most im-

portant to the concerns of this organization, access and all information about these scrimmages denied to members of the media who cover these teams on a daily basis.

I have attempted twice in the past few months to reach out to Jim Haney, the executive director of the NABC, to see if there was a compelling coaching-related reason why the coaches feel this media ban is necessary.

I was hoping as the head of the largest organization representing college coaches, Haney would be able to give our organization a little insight into the situation that perhaps we as journalists had blinders to. But I have yet to hear anything from him. Not a peep. Not a whisper. Not so much as a reply to emails directly to him and through his intermediaries.

I have discussed this issue with several members of the organization who say they have had conversations with head coaches of every sort in Division I hoops, and for the most part, none of them felt like having reporters in the room would be much of a problem. At the very least, it seems odd that the NCAA would be in the business of determining individual media policies for its entire Division I basketball membership.

It is our organization's stance that the NCAA rulebook should not be in the business of telling coaches, sports information directors and athletic directors whether or not media can watch their teams practice.

In those circumstances where coaches choose to close regular-season practices, the NCAA is not mandating they be opened to the media. So the NCAA certainly should not be in the business of closing off these preseason scrimmages by rule, either. There is no solid reason why media should not be permitted to attend these events and report on what they see. If the NCAA doesn't want tickets to be sold or fans to be permitted to watch, that's fine. But the media should not be denied the opportunity to do their jobs.

The single most troubling aspect of how restrictive this rule is the part of the bylaw that determines that all details of these scrimmages are off limits to the media. No facts, no figures, no details of any sort can be told. Yet imagine for a moment what sort of idiotic nonsense could

have ensued if for example a nationally-ranked team's top player suffered a season-ending injury in a private scrimmage.

What if Robbie Hummel's injury had occurred during one of Purdue's "informal" scrimmages to which our members were denied admittance? By NCAA law, how would the school be able to dispense information about such an injury if no details are allowed to be discussed publicly?

As president of the USBWA, I recently received an explanation of the rule from a top NCAA official. It was a lot of talk about how these private scrimmages allow teams to compete and practice against other teams in a strictly practice and teaching environment and how the presence of the media would somehow alter that environment.

It makes little sense at all. When I reached out to Haney a while back, it was with the intention of seeking his organization's help in helping us gauge the NABC's interest in supporting new NCAA legislation to amend this needless restriction on our rights as journalists to do our jobs.

If Haney has no interest in this, we'll continue to search high and low for some college administrator or conference commissioner who understands that the media is not the enemy and will stand up for our rights.

The "new" NCAA proclaims it is an organization that is trying mightily to shed its old image as a stogy organization with a convoluted rule book. In many instances, the "new" organization has already begun making steps in the right direction by carefully re-examining many of those bylaws that clearly are behind the times or irrelevant to its goal as a so-called "transparent" institution.

Expunging this needless media blackout would be an important step in the right direction.

Bryan Burwell
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
President



Four multiple-winners claim firsts in Best Writing Contest

Four writers took first place in one category and placed in another in the U.S. Basketball Writers Association's annual best-writing contest.

John Feinstein took first place in the Game Story-Spot News category for "The Dream is the Same in Division III," a story about the Division III championship game written for the *Washington Post*. Feinstein also placed second in column writing for "A Ball, A Towel, A Ref's Memorable Gesture."

John Akers of *Basketball Times* placed first in Enterprise-Investigative reporting for "Inside the Room: NCAA Tournament Selection Process," a historical look at the evolution of the NCAA Tournament selection process. Akers also placed third in Magazine Length Features.

Luke Winn of *Si.com* and Tom Archdeacon of the *Dayton Daily News* both grabbed first- and fourth-place finishes.

Winn took first place in Column Writing for "Bob Knight's Tactical Brilliance," which examined Knight the teacher from a newly released set of coaching DVDs. Winn also finished fourth in Magazine Length Features.

Archdeacon placed first in Moderate Length
CONTINUED on Page 3

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USBWA breakfast to include new award, Phi Slama Jama

Plans are underway for the USBWA’s annual breakfast at the NCAA Final Four to honor the organization’s player, coach and freshman of the year.

The USBWA has entered into a partnership with the University of Houston lettermen’s club, called the “H” Association, to promote the breakfast to the general public during this year’s Final Four in Houston. The breakfast, scheduled for 8 a.m. on Friday, April 1, the day before the national semifinals, will be held at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston.

At the breakfast, the USBWA will present the Oscar Robertson Player of the Year Trophy and the Henry Iba Coach of the Year Award and the winner of the Wayman Tisdale Freshman of the Year Award. Formal presentation of the Tisdale Award will be made in May at the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame by Access Sports, an Oklahoma City-based, not-for-profit foundation formed to support youth basketball in Oklahoma by allowing disadvantaged youth the opportunity to participate in leagues and training.

The USBWA will also present its “Good Guy” Award to a coach who is recognized for being media friendly and for his contributions to college basketball.

In addition to the USBWA awards at the breakfast, the USBWA, with the assistance of the “H” Association, will honor the University of Houston’s Phi Slama Jama teams that went to three straight Final Fours in 1982, 1983 and 1984 under Coach Guy Lewis and featured USBWA All-American Akeem Olajuwon.



Joe Mitch
 USBWA
 Executive Director

The “H” Association has confirmed that 23 of 25 former Houston players have indicated they plan on attending the breakfast. A crowd of close to 1,000 is expected to be on hand for the ceremonies.

The USBWA Friday breakfast has grown to become an annual fixture at the Final Four and has proven to be an excellent fund raiser for the organization and a way to showcase the USBWA’s national player and coach awards.

The event has been a sellout every year since it was first held in 2005. Oscar Robertson has been a fan favorite and is on hand to present the player of the year award. USBWA members introduce the award recipients and tell stories about the winners that delight the crowd. Players and coaches typically have stayed over after the breakfast to sign autographs and pose for pictures.

It’s the one event at the Final Four where fans get a chance to rub elbows with some of the greats in college basketball, past and present.

Current USBWA President Bryan Burwell will emcee this year’s breakfast.

Tickets for the breakfast are \$75 each and will be available on-line in February at usbwa.com.

USBWA Membership Application Form

Send a check for \$50 and let the USBWA make your job of covering college basketball easier.

Name _____

Newspaper/Publication/Website/College _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Home Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Office Telephone _____ Cell Phone _____

Fax _____ Email Address _____

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Times have changed, but good sportswriting remains the same

In those pristine memories of childhood, fully edited by time, the Raleigh newspaper still lands on the cement driveway with a hollow thud.

The sound traveled farther and louder in winter, when outside news of the outsized world seemed more vital because it carried the implied hollow thud of a basketball bouncing across a gym floor.

The *News & Observer*, likely the leading government watchdog between D.C. and Florida, opened those tall coliseum doors before cable and the web turned every major-conference game into programming inventory.

Dick Herbert, the veteran sports editor and former USBWA president, insisted that his staff emphasize the exploits of North Carolina's Big Four. They were all neighborhood schools until R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. money bought Winston-Salem a college in 1956 and moved Wake Forest out of Wake Forest, 100 miles away.

The schools were such everyday institutions, especially their basketball teams, that Herbert shortened the names to eliminate superfluous adornment: Duke, State, Wake and Carolina.

He liked things clean and straightforward, which explains why he complained gruffly when colleges ditched their narrow press guides for the 8x11 recruiting magazines. The glossy guides wouldn't fit in his coat pocket or typewriter case. (Half a century later, basketball writers grouse about online media guides that usually don't fit a standard laptop screen. Time marches on, one partial backlit page at a time.)

Herbert despised TV's intrusion on the basketball

culture, particularly the delays and eventually the late starts that cut into reporting. His response became The N&O's understated rebellion, published starting times suggesting TV's undesired power: 8:05 p.m., 9:06 p.m. and so on.

The newspaper's game stories typically were clean and straightforward, with fewer quotes and milder opinions than now, but they shared a common theme. The stories told the reader what happened in the game.

Basketball is about shooting, rebounding and defending, yet few teams excel at those elements, and a surprising number of basketball game stories flunk the fundamentals test.

That might sound basic, a sparse prerequisite for the form. Basketball is about shooting, rebounding and defending, yet few teams excel at those elements, and a surprising number of basketball game stories flunk the fundamentals test.

The stories might suffer from an overload of 12-3 runs and run-on quotes about stepping up under adversity, or they might suffer from a dozen darts missing the tar-

get. There's no need to elaborate on the shortcomings all sportswriters experience. There's also no need to perpetuate them in perpetuity.

Games have beginnings, middles and ends. Ideally, so do game stories. The game's general flow might be worth a paragraph or an extended narrative, but it is worth something. The flow sets up the characters and the climax, which begs for details, preferably in sequence.

This is not news, of course. Despite deadlines, faulty wireless and inconsistent access, sensibly reporting the key plays in a basketball game remains quite possible.

It begins with a simple premise: Not everyone saw the game. It ends in an expectant reader's cement driveway or on a small computer screen, where it can still match the dimensions and the obsession perfectly.

Lenox Rawlings
Winston-Salem Journal
First Vice President



Looking for next Rising Star in the USBWA constellation



Dan Wolken won the inaugural Rising Star Award.

The time has come to identify the USBWA's next Rising Star.

Dan Wolken of the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* won the inaugural award, given to a member who is under 30 and shows the most promise in our profession.

Because this was like an inaugural Hall of Fame Class, with too many worthy candidates to mention them all. The finalists included J. Brady McCollough of the *Kansas City Star*, Brendan F. Quinn of *Basketball Times* and Luke Winn of *Sports Illustrated*.

We need your nominations to identify the next Wolken.

The award could go to someone who has already made a name for himself while covering one of the top teams for a major newspaper or web site or who writes about college basketball as a whole for a magazine. It could be someone who has excelled at a medium-sized or smaller newspaper. It could be a student writer who is scooping the older writers on his beat. It could be someone who has built a reputation with his own blog site or as a freelancer.

We not only want to recognize the obviously gifted young writers in our organization, we want to help jumpstart the careers of those who might be under-recognized. And in turn, we hope an infusion of youth will also be

good for the USBWA. Everybody wins.

We require only that the nominees are USBWA members who were under 30 on Jan. 1, 2011.

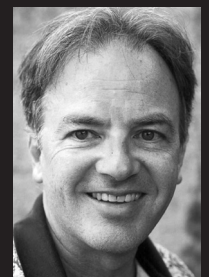
The Rising Star committee – comprised of myself, Wolken, Nicole Vargas of the *San Diego Union Tribune*, Jason King of *Yahoo! Sports*, Gary Parrish of *CBSSports.com* and Shannon Shelton of the *Detroit Free Press* – would place an emphasis on writers who have displayed journalistic excellence, an interest in the USBWA and a desire to cover college basketball for the foreseeable future.

Surely you know someone who fits that bill.

Please send your nominations to me at johna19081@gmail.com by Feb. 15. Self-nominations are welcome. We'll also consider anyone who was nominated a year ago and was still younger than 30 on Jan. 31, 2011.

The winner will receive a plaque and will be recognized at the annual USBWA breakfast on the morning of April 4, the day of the national championship game.

John Akers
Basketball Times
Second Vice President



Virginia Tech still closing doors to members of new media

By Brian Noubert
Gold & Black Illustrated

For more than 20 years now, my employer, *Gold & Black Illustrated*, has covered Purdue's football and men's basketball teams everywhere they've played.

For me personally in my young career, that's meant covering numerous college football bowl games, including a Rose Bowl; five NCAA men's basketball tournaments, two NITs and preseason events all over the place; and live events on dozens of campuses nationwide.

For the first time in our print magazine's two-plus decades of publishing, we were turned down this fall for a press pass to an event on another school's campus.

Citing longstanding athletic department policy, Virginia Tech declined our credential request for Purdue's Dec. 1 game there, making it *the least* of our concerns that our flight to Roanoke, Va., was already booked.

Subsequent appeals to athletic department higher-ups and follow-up inquiries from the USBWA – the Association's effort, by the way, was much appreciated – were stone-walled. Big Ten and Atlantic Coast Conference officials held no jurisdiction here, even though the game was part of the annual Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

First, some background on our publication, which some might call a "fan magazine," but we believe to be much more: *GBI* began printing more than 25 times per

year back in 1990. We joined the Internet about the time everybody else did and partnered with Rivals.com, the national network of sports sites now owned by Yahoo!

Between our magazine, which went largely digital for the first time this year; our web site; and our robust social media communities, *Gold & Black Illustrated* and GoldandBlack.com publish to tens of thousands. We've expanded heavily into television and radio, as well.

To the Virginia Tech athletic department's credit, their policies are explicitly outlined online at Hokie Sports.com.

(Link: <http://www.sportssystem.com/clients/vt/>)

Long story short, per written Tech's policies, online media will not be granted credentials at Virginia Tech if they either A.) "primarily" cover recruiting or B.) sponsor message boards or interactivity components that allow users to post anonymously.

There are other stipulations, but I'm running out of space here and, in our case, these were the only two points that were relevant.

Rivals.com covers football and basketball recruiting. Maybe not "primarily," but it does cover them. So do major newspapers all over the country, more and more every season. ESPN, which broadcast the Purdue-Virginia Tech game, maintains its own online recruiting network.

As for the anonymous interaction, look around.

StoryChat is everywhere. How many of us do *not* allow users to respond to blog postings without including "the actual name and city of the individual," as Tech's policy demands? How many of us use Twitter, which is inextricably linked to anonymity? Social media is a new central front in sports journalism.

Virginia Tech has reasons for its policies, and it should be noted the sports information personnel we dealt with were only upholding mandates set by their superiors.

Whether it's fear of the Internet, a desire for absolute control over information or financial interests in university-sanctioned sites or publications driving these policies, I don't know.

Universities have the right to credential – or not credential – whoever they'd like, for whatever reasons.

I do want to say that we've greatly appreciated every school and event that has provided us the access we've needed to do our jobs. We consider that access a privilege, not a right, and have done our best to conduct ourselves accordingly.

I just wish that as a member of the media, I'd been judged on my own merits, on my employer's 20-plus years of publishing professionally and on a variety of different platforms. Rather, I was summarily dismissed by association, for reasons that do not make sense in our ever-changing, ever-evolving sports media world.

Four multiple-winners claim firsts in Best Writing Contest

Enterprise/Investigative

1. John Akers, Basketball Times: Inside the Room: NCAA Tournament Selection Process
2. Lew Freedman, Basketball Times Online: A Long, Last Cruise Filled With Questions
3. Scott Dochterman, Cedar Rapids Gazette: Whiter Iowa's Basketball Program
4. Scott Powers, ESPNChicago.com: Triple Threat Mentoring: Changing Somebody's World
5. Jack Styczynski, NYTimes.com: The Coaching Carousel

Magazine Length

1. Kevin Armstrong, SI.com: The Ubiquitous Basketball Iconoclast
2. David Teel, Newport News Daily Press: Of Coach K's Appetite and Influence
3. John Akers, Basketball Times: A Gunshot and Tragedy in Chicago
4. Luke Winn, SI.com: From Iran to Division I
5. David Krider, Max Prep News: Her Handicap is a State of Mind

Column Writing

1. Luke Winn, SI.com: Bob Knight's Tactical Brilliance
2. John Feinstein, The Sporting News: A Ball, a Towel, A Ref's Memorable Gesture
3. David Jones, Harrisburg Patriot-News: A Piece of Life on the Basketball Court
4. Tom Archdeacon, Dayton Daily News: Weed Blossoms Into a Roundball Rose
5. John Clay, Lexington Herald-Leader: What Matters Most is the Game

Game Story / Spot News

1. John Feinstein, Washington Post: The Dream is the Same in Division III
2. David Woods, Indianapolis Star: Butler's Miracle Run Continues
3. Ken Davis, Basketball Times Online: UConn Gets a Signature Win
4. Mike Waters, Syracuse Post-Standard: Boss O'Nova
5. Ton Noie, South Bend Tribune: Irish Ride the Good Karma

Moderate Length Feature

1. Tom Archdeacon, Dayton Daily News: A Legend Returns to the Court of his Youth
2. Jason King, Yahoo! Sports: Acts of Kindness and Compassion
3. Brett McMurphy, AOL Fanhouse: Shawn Vanzant's Guardian Angel
4. Paul Klee, IlliniHQ.com: Peoria: A Basketball Mecca
5. Kathy Orton, Washington Post: Jeff Ruland the Risk Taker



Akers



Armstrong



Winn



Feinstein



Archdeacon

CONTINUED from Page 1

Features for "A Legend Returns to the Court of His Youth," a story about former Dayton basketball legend Dwight Anderson. Archdeacon also placed fourth in Column Writing.

Kevin Armstrong of SI.com also took first place, in Magazine Length Features, for "The Ubiquitous Basketball Iconoclast," on longtime basketball talent scout Tom Konchalski.

Other second-place finishers included Jason King of *Yahoo! Sports* for Moderate Length Features, Lew Freedman of *Basketball Times Online* for Enterprise-Investigative, David Teel of the *Newport News Daily Press* for Magazine Length Features and David Woods of the *Indianapolis Star* for Game Story-Spot News.

Third-place finishers included Scott Dochterman of the *Cedar Rapids Gazette* for Enterprise-Investigative, David Jones of the *Harrisburg Patriot-News* for Column Writing, Ken Davis of *Basketball Times Online* for Game Story / Spot News and Brett McMurphy of *AOL Fanhouse* for Moderate Length Features.

The fourth-place winners were Scott Powers of *ESPNChicago.com* for Enterprise-Investigative, Mike Waters of the *Syracuse Post-Standard* for Game Story/Spot News and Paul Klee of *IlliniHQ.com* for Moderate Length Features.

Fifth-place finishers: Jack Styczynski of *NYTimes.com* for Enterprise-Investigative Reporting, David Krider of *Max Prep News* for Magazine Length Features, John Clay of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* for Column Writing, Tom Noie of the *South Bend Tribune* for Game Story / Spot News and Kathy Orton of the *Washington Post* for Moderate Length Features.