

A new presidency; new issues facing USBWA

Tom Shatel did an outstanding job.

Getting the USBWA into the mock bracket selection process through the cooperation with David Worlock and Greg Shaheen of the NCAA was one of the best events of the year.

The eye-opening experience has been cited countless times. It was a brilliant move by the committee to shine the light on the process.

It also served as a perfect primer for those of us who have to chart which teams are worthy or are close or locks or not even on the board for the NCAA Tournament.

Shatel had a role and should be applauded as the outgoing president.

Now it's my turn.

I hope to somehow equal at least that one event.

My charge is to ensure that we get that same access to the committee in February. We'd like to take another set of 20, if possible, to the meeting in Indy if the NCAA agrees to go through the same process. And the more we can diversify the group, the better, although cost can be an issue for some.

I'm also looking at some sort of writer's rights when it comes to seating. This is an issue that SIDs, who are also members of our organization in full force, need to work with us in concert. We know that athletic directors are beholden to selling as many seats as possible. But we must have the access on a game-by-game basis. That means seating with a sightline, ample power and hopefully wireless access for those filing on deadline.

At the very least, there needs to be some sort of dialogue

with the local media, the ones that are there on a daily basis, before any changes are made. I implore SIDs to work with us on this issue to ensure that the media can still properly cover the game that so many of us have a passion to cover.

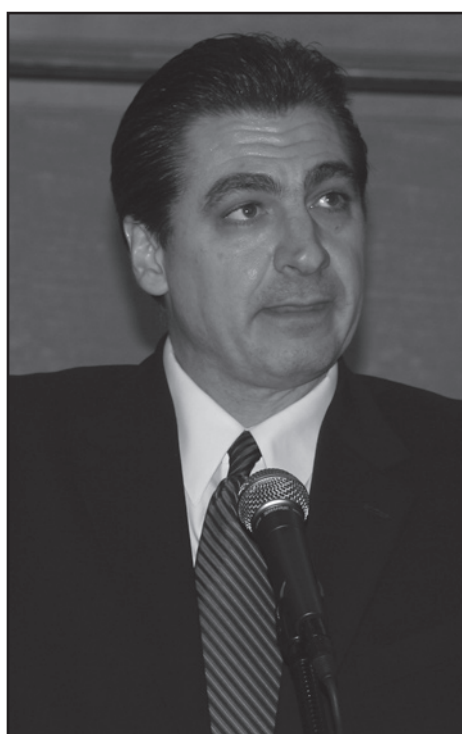
We also need to revisit the seating issue at the Final Four. Internet sties like ESPN.com, CBS Sportsline.com, Foxsports.com and Yahoo!, need to be treated like any other major newspaper. The seating chart has been based on an old set of rules, and the time has come for an update of this process. This doesn't mean that major metros should lose seats, but there needs to be a reorganization of the seating. I don't see any reason why we can't look at who is covering what games on Saturday night to ensure that everyone has an appropriate seat to watch and record the game. Monday night doesn't seem to be an issue, since a number of writers and radio go home after the semis. I have heard from smaller papers, too, that want access to the Final Four, as well. We

should address this point and maybe there should be an olive branch extended, especially to those papers that are close to the site. If they can't afford the lodging, then at least they can have access by getting to the site of the event.

We also have an issue with the player of the year award that has to be resolved. If we want to stay in the business of having an award, then we must either be willing to outsource the breakfast, get a major title sponsor or realize that we might have to be much more low key about our presentation. The most important awards we give is the Most Courageous and Katha Quinn Awards, and neither should be affected by any changes to the Oscar Robertson Award.

Please forward any issues that need to be addressed during the offseason. And if there are complaints that need to be heard, and a voice that is needed, then I'm here to serve you this year and make the calls that are needed to make. Enjoy the offseason!

Andy Katz
President
ESPN.com



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Honored, humbled by Katha Quinn Award

Being presented with the Katha Quinn Award by the USBWA Board of Directors at the recent NCAA Final Four in Atlanta will go down as one of the great moments in my career.

Frankly, I was overwhelmed with emotion when Malcolm Moran presented me with the award, named in honor of the former St. John's University sports information director who passed away 19 years ago following a courageous battle with cancer.

I feel honored to join a distinguished group of professionals who have been recognized by the USBWA over the years for their commitment to working with and being a friend of the media.

People like Skeeter Francis of the ACC; Roger Valdiserri of Notre Dame; Rick Brewer and Steve Kirschner of North Carolina; Bill Hancock and Jim Marchiony of the NCAA; Tim Tolokan of Connecticut; Mike Tranghese of the Big East; Craig Miller of USA Basketball; Al Shrier of Temple; Wayne Duke of the Big 10; and my associate at the Missouri Valley Conference, Jack Watkins ... individuals who have earned the respect and trust of the media.

During my acceptance speech, I wanted to give thanks to those who have helped me in my life – my wife Sue who fortunately likes sports as much as I do; my employer – the Missouri Valley Conference and Commissioner Doug Elgin, who see the value in an association with the USBWA and understand my loyalty to the organization; and finally, my mentors from my college days at Michigan State, Fred Stabley and Nick Vista, two giants in the SID profession.

Being associated with the USBWA for 27 years, the last 24 as executive director, has given me a unique perspective on the growth of the USBWA and its place in the college basketball landscape.

Today, thanks in large part to the work of Tom Shatel

Joe Mitch Executive Director USBWA



and the many fine presidents who preceded him, the USBWA has earned the respect of the NCAA that has reached unparalleled levels.

Never before have the working conditions for all print media been any better than they are now.

Sure, there are things that need to be worked out – wireless for one and for others, courtside seating, late-night start times for tournament games and the delay of up to an hour of the winning team getting to the interview room after the national championship game.

But the good thing is that the NCAA – thanks to Greg Shaheen and media coordinator David Worlock – is open to discussing these issues and working to resolve problems that affect the media, especially sports writers.

What has made my tenure with the USBWA so rewarding also has been the ability of the organization to give back to the sportswriting profession.

The USBWA has awarded over \$25,000 in college scholarships to students looking to pursue a career in sports journalism.

The sportswriting seminar that is sponsored each year by the USBWA at the men's NCAA Final Four has been immensely successful and has grown to now be a part of the Women's Final Four as well.

This coming basketball season will mark the 52nd year of the USBWA's existence. As rich as the history of the organization has been, the future is even brighter for the USBWA.



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An emotional Executive Director Joe Mitch accepted the Katha Quinn Award for his years of service to the USBWA.

Shatel made the most of being there at the right time

In-between listening to the annual Final Four coaching rumor mill, marveling at how perfectly the Florida team's parts fit together and wondering how Margaret Mitchell got it all so right with "Gone With The Wind" (written in a well-preserved house not all that far from the Georgia Dome), there was time to attend to USBWA business in Atlanta.

Over the weekend, I was counting down the hours for president Tom Shatel before Andy Katz took over. Whenever I would see him (which was often), I would give him an update. It wasn't because any of us wanted his tenure to end, but just something for laughs. Tom said he was looking forward to his time being over which, given all that was accomplished in his year and how much work went into it, sort of made sense.

When the NCAA, specifically Greg Shaheen and Dave Worlock, told us at the 2006 Final Four how much they wanted to work with us, it was up to us to make it happen. Overcoming skepticism from some members, Tom just went to work. And he made it happen.

From the St. Louis meeting with the committee to the February mock bracket session in Indianapolis to the sometimes tedious discussions about wireless, Tom was right there as our advocate. He simply wanted to do the right thing by our members. And he did it.

Are there still issues? Absolutely.

Is there now a clear line of communication to address

those issues? Absolutely.

At a Saturday morning meeting with several members of the committee, Shaheen and Worlock, Shaheen spoke about reducing the costs of wireless for USBWA members. When it was suggested at that meeting that we find a way a better way to get access to all the starters for each of the four teams on the Friday before the semifinals, we worked out a solution with Worlock that should solve the Greg Oden situation in the future.

Oden was not brought to the main news conference and was then surrounded near his locker by dozens of people. Few could hear him. Fewer could see him.

In the future, each team will continue to be represented

by two players and a coach at the Friday news conference. The starters not on the podium will be brought to breakout rooms that are already used Sunday. The other players will be available in the locker rooms. It took us several minutes of back and forth to arrive at a solution that should work to everybody's advantage.

Andy is now in charge. In San Antonio, at the 2008 Final Four, I will get the gavel. Tom's time is up, but, as we strive to make our relationship with the NCAA even better, we all need to thank Tom who was there for us when Greg and Dave said they wanted to find a way for us to better do our jobs and then followed through all the way until the moment I ended the countdown for him.

Dick Jerardi VP - Philadelphia Daily News



Don Imus reminds us to think before we speak

I was going to revisit an earlier topic, that being working conditions for writers during the regular college basketball season. Then I happened to hear Don Imus' comments regarding the Rutgers women's basketball team following the Scarlet Knights' amazing run to the national championship game and the subsequent firestorm that followed his remarks.

By now, you're aware of the comments, and they need not be repeated here. But what I want to remind all of you that as members of the media, we too are in the spotlight and what we write and say in our columns carries weight in the court of public opinion.

We might not have the ability to reach as big an audience as Imus, but we are subjected to the same guidelines and face the same consequences as he does when we stray.

Of course, most of us have the good sense to not write stupid things that land us a seat in the managing editor's office. Most of us know better. We're not out to get ratings or shock people at 7 in the morning.

Still, as writers, we are trying to help boost circulation at our newspapers. Sometimes, we write things that turn out to be controversial and advertisers call the publisher and demand a retraction, lest they pull their ad dollars and go elsewhere with them.

Often, these matters get resolved, and life goes on for both the paper and the advertiser. Most good newspapers will stand behind their reporter, assuming that the reporter used sound judgment in his or her reporting and did not deliberately attempt to libel anyone.

Obviously, sound judgment was not used by Don Imus. His comments, which were a combustible combination of ignorance, misogamy and stupidity – with a dash of hate thrown in for good measure – were fueled by a producer who spews the same hateful bile on a daily basis in a beleaguered attempt to front as "comedy" and by a former sports talk-show host who was fired a couple of years ago for hateful remarks, only to be brought back and add fuel to the fire with his own two cents' worth of vitriol.

Let what Imus did serve as a reminder to all of us in the media that we need to think before we speak, whether

it's orally on the air or as we sit in front of our computer to write. Some of you are talk-show hosts in your communities. Many of you have appeared as a guest on a talk show. Most of the time, it's innocent enough. You come on, talk about the state of the team you cover, try to give some insight as to whether the team will make the NCAA Tournament, have its star player declare for the NBA Draft or whether a coaching change looms on the horizon.

You try to be candid and forthright. But you also try not to put your foot in your mouth, either. At least you should be cognizant of trying not to do so.

Sometimes, the over-zealous host tries to trap you and get you to say something over-the-top. Most of us know how to dodge such questions.

Even on Imus' show, which has been running for 30 years in New York, the smart journalists and politicians know where the lines are and they don't cross them, no matter how hard Imus and his lackeys try to lure them over the line. Talk radio can be a mine field, and one wrong step and you can kiss your career goodbye.

Nobody I know would risk losing everything just to say something outrageous. At least, I would hope not. Still, let's remember that as members of the media, we are visible and what we say is being judged. So if we can just remember to think before we speak, we'll be better off, both in the short term and the long term. Because for all the money he makes, I doubt any of us would want to trade places with Imus today.

Steve Carp VP - Las Vegas Review Journal



Writing contest deadline set for June 15

The deadline for submitting stories and columns published during the 2006-07 basketball season for the USBWA Best Writing Contest is June 15.

Entries can be submitted in five categories: column writing, moderate-length features, magazine-length features, spot news/game coverage and enterprise/investigative stories.

Only dues-paying members of the USBWA are eligible to enter the writing contest. Members may enter more than one category but may submit only one entry per category.

Plaques and cash prizes will be awarded in each cat-

egory.

Winners will be announced in the fall issue of The Tipoff and posted on the USBWA website.

Send all entries to: Joe Mitch; USBWA Writing Contest; 1818 Chouteau Ave.; St. Louis, Mo. 63103; (314) 421-0339; or e-mail entries to mitch@mvc.org

For entries submitted by the mail, print the name of the category, the author of the story, the publication in which the article appeared and the date of the publication on a 3 x 5 card and staple it to the article.

Here's hoping Florida changes college basketball culture

ATLANTA – Finally there were no more doubters to convince or haters to dismiss. All the real and imagined enemies who haunted Joakim Noah for 12 long, laborious, yet ultimately enlightened months atop college basketball's mountaintop had all been chased away. In the semi-calm of the Florida locker room after the Gators had successfully defended their NCAA title with that stunning 84-75 victory over Ohio State, the gap-toothed, pony-tailed, peace-loving, 6-foot-10-inch extrovert sat on a folding chair surrounded by true believers.

"So Joakim, where do you think Florida should be ranked among the greatest college basketball teams of all time?" said one breathless scribe.

Noah almost fell out of his chair feigning a mock heart attack. "Wow, wow, wow," he said, slapping his big hands on his chest, then cackling like a giddy school boy. "I'm just soooo happy you're saying that. I don't know where we rank all-time because I'm not really sure I can determine that. But thank you, thank you, thank you for saying that. I mean, it just sounds soooo good to my ears to hear you even think we belong in such company."

Oh yes, Noah and all the other Gators liked the way that sounded. Hoop historians were carefully trying to find a place for Florida in the college basketball annals with Bill Russell's San Francisco Dons (repeated champs in 1955-56), Oscar Robertson's Cincinnati Bearcats ('61-62) and Christian Laettner and Grant Hill's Duke Blue Devils ('91-92). Yes, Florida belongs on that narrow shelf with the six other schools (UCLA, Oklahoma and Kentucky too) who managed the daunting repeat as NCAA basketball champs. But it's time to acknowledge Florida's place in college basketball lore, and it goes so much deeper than the remarkable feat of becoming only the third team in 34 years to do a NCAA championship repeat.

What the Gators accomplished was also a meaningful statement and a rewarding reminder of how college basketball used to be, when future lottery picks stayed in school and improved themselves on and off the court.

Better yet, maybe Florida's victory was the first step in silencing the foolish voices who believe that anyone with a killer crossover or lethal jumper is stupid if they don't make a hasty beeline to the pros as the first possible opportunity.

We live in a disturbing time where the basketball culture in this country too often encourages everything be done at an accelerated pace. Hurry up and grow up. Hurry up and get paid. Kids are being convinced by sycophants and seedy playground grifters that they'll be considered failures if they're not in the NBA before they know how to drive, even if they are too immature physically or emotionally to rush into that adult world.

But the Gators showed us another way.

"We did do something special," said Noah. "We decided that it was okay to come back to school and not get paid. I personally feel that money doesn't always buy happiness. I don't know what's going to happen in the future and I'm not going to judge anyone if they want to come out for whatever reason. Look, if they have a family situation where they need to take care of their people, I understand that. I also understand that some guys might want to come out just because they want to get a real nice watch. That's cool, too. But maybe what we did will change the culture in some small way. Maybe it will show the guys who come after us that they should never let other people make decisions for them about (going to the NBA). Make up your own mind. If you want to stay in school, enjoy being in college for a while, then stay in school. We showed 'em that it's all right to do that. I remember last year when I told some people, 'Hey man, I'm staying in school.' They were all like, 'WHAT? Are you crazy?!?!?' But now look at us. We came back, we won it again, and now you guys are writing about us and

Bryan Burwell
VP- St. Louis
Post-Dispatch



history. How wild is that?"

Good for us and good for them. The lottery-pick Gators came back to school and no one suffered for it. They didn't lose millions. They gained memories, history, maturity and if you want to think about it from a pure, cold-hearted business standpoint, they even gained some invaluable high-profile marketing and celebrity status courtesy of their month-long run in CBS primetime.

I hope everyone not only saw what the Gators did, but appreciates what they did, too. This was no carefree exercise. This was 12 months of blood, sweat and maybe even a few tears. This was a grind and a joy, this was a ton of pain and a handful of pure pleasure. But as they stood ankle deep in glimmering confetti and long multi-colored streamers on the Georgia Dome floor, laughing and dancing and hugging everyone in sight, did anyone still think Noah, Al Horford, Corey Brewer and Taurean Green were crazy?

"It's unbelievable," said Noah as he stood beside Coach Billy Donovan's wife and kids smiling uncontrollably. "It's... it's... man, words can't begin to describe this."

It wasn't just about pure basketball – though there was plenty of that on display with Florida's selfless style of so many working parts doing whatever was best for the team. It was about playing basketball the right way. But mostly it was about the hope of starting a trend. I hope the young fellows at Ohio State and Georgetown, victims of Florida's veteran savvy and championship hunger, were paying attention.

I hope big Greg Oden – the most dominant man on the

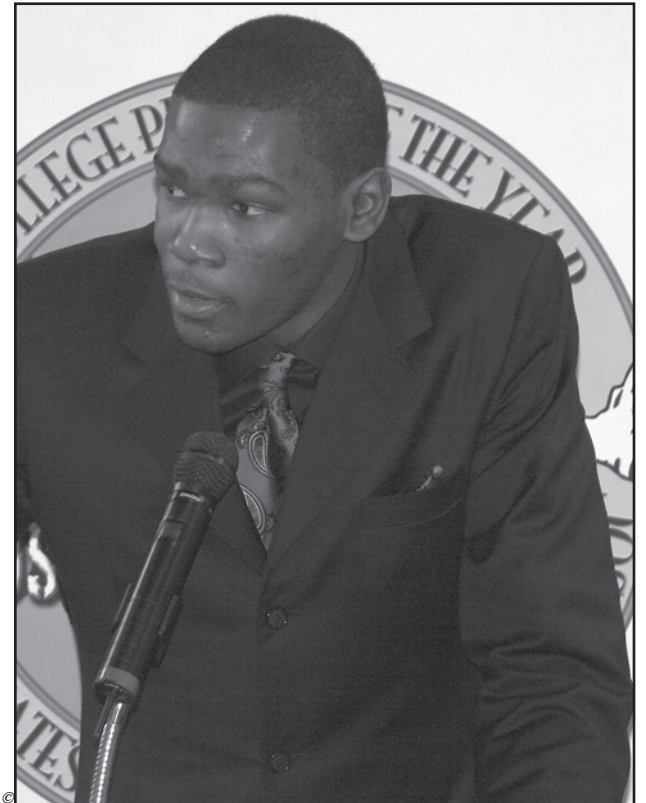
floor on championship night with 25 points, 12 rebounds, four blocks and countless fear-factor misdirections – will get together with his buddy Mike Conley Jr., and the rest of the celebrated "Thad Five," and decide that they want to come back next season and get a little of that fascinating experience.

I hope Georgetown's Roy Hibbert meant what he said after losing to the Buckeyes in the national championship semifinals that he wants to come back next year and get another crack at Oden. I hope is teammate Jeff Green feels that way too. I hope player of the year Kevin Durant was taking notes, too.

I hope that this starts a wave of cultural change that will sweep through every aspect of our basketball culture. I hope this starts a trend that reverberates all the way down to the game's cultural roots, where 8th and 9th graders are already being surrounded by shamefully ambitious hustlers who are far more interested in cashing in on their potential riches than protecting them.

"I don't know if we've changed the culture," said senior Florida center Chris Richard. "But if we've just shown one guy that you don't have to rush anywhere, then that's a pretty good thing."

Bryan Burwell is a columnist with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the author of "At the Buzzer! Havlicek Steals, Erving Soars, Magic Deals, Michael Scores: Greatest Moments in NBA History," and the host and co-writer of "The Color of Change," a nationally syndicated TV documentary on the Negro baseball leagues.



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Washington State's Tony Bennett was the USBWA's coach of the year; Texas' Kevin Durant won the Oscar Robertson Trophy.