

Separating news from TMZ, Deadspin reports is our job

Arriving at the unmitigated truth wasn't always this complicated. It used to be straight and to the point. Now it's obscured by layers and layers of nuance and nonsense. Now we get our "truths" in Internet chat rooms and from gossip-fueled websites. Now we're being asked to wade into the same tabloid playing field with the likes of Deadspin.com and TMZ.com, and everyone is trying to decide if they're willing to go with the new uncomfortable rules of the "gotcha" journalism game.

Over the course of the last few weeks – actually the field has been tilting steadily for a lot longer than that – the shift has become more apparent than ever. Whether witnessing another questionable public outing of an athlete behaving badly (see: Brett Favre vs. Deadspin) or more close to home with the expulsion of two Saint Louis University basketball players, we are constantly being asked to grapple with deciding where to draw the line when it comes to how (or if) we should report on the alleged sexual misconduct of the jocks we cover.

Some want to say that in this new media reality, the game has changed and there should be no question about whether we should be in the business of tell-all news. We are in a world where youthful readers cling to instant gratification via Twitter's 140-character digest rather than the long-form newspaper, creating uncomfortable questions on whether our old business model (and the accompanying professional ethics) are rapidly becoming extinct.

These folks want to tell us that we have to change with the times, we have to adapt and compete. They say we must do whatever it takes to get clicks on the Internet.

Well, I certainly hope not.

Life in the mainstream sports media is becoming more challenging every day as we fight to remain relevant in this brave new media world. But we can't compromise all the most important things that still separate us from those on the Internet's less credible edge. The tabloids, unedited bloggers and anonymous chat-room commentators have a low bar to hurdle, unencumbered by the mainstream's higher ethical journalistic standards.

We have to be able to hold tight to that distinction.

Before the NFL announced that it would investigate Favre's alleged indiscretions and whether or not he was guilty of anything bordering on sexual harassment in the NFL workplace, it wasn't news, even if what Deadspin was putting out there was titillating and incredibly embarrassing. But now we are in a very weird place, because to me, the only proof we have is those awkward voice mails where he revealed himself to be that sad old man who didn't know how much he was embarrassing himself by begging to a younger (and obviously uninterested) woman. Nothing illegal there. Stupid, yes. Illegal, nope?

And I will wait now for a show of hands from anyone out there who wants to be put in the position of verifying that those groin photos are valid. Anyone? Anyone?

I don't care about the stupid private indiscretions of high profile athletes if it has no impact on how they conduct their business on the field. If they are not break-

ing any laws, their private life is theirs. But since the rules have changed and Deadspin and TMZ have gotten into the business of exposing salacious behavior of jocks, it might be a good idea for athletes to realize that they run the risk of having their dalliances outed by the tabloids.

But that's their business, not mine.

The tougher and legitimate stories that are out there are ones where the police become involved and serious accusations are filed. Stupid voicemails aren't my business. But when we have athletes involved in alleged sex scandals, like this latest mess involving Saint Louis University's basketball program, that's the mission of mainstream sports media to attempt to discover the truth, even if the truth is getting harder to discover.

On Oct. 13, two of the Billikens' top players, point guard and leading scorer Kwamain Mitchell and leading shot blocker and rebounder Willie Reed were dismissed from school in the aftermath of allegations that they were involved in an on-campus sexual assault. While St. Louis prosecutors said they would not bring criminal charges

against the players after an incident last May, when a university coed said she was sexually assaulted by three SLU basketball players, the university's student conduct committee ruled that it had enough evidence to dismiss the players for the fall semester.

So here we are once again, stuck in the middle of another unclear and uncomfortable, but extremely complicated, sexually provocative, he-said, she-said mess in the world of sports. Is this another adventure in misplaced athletic entitlement like a Ben Roethlisberger, jocks-behaving-badly pub crawl? Or is it a lot closer to resembling the botched investigation and rush-to-judgment mess in the Duke lacrosse scandal, where no one involved was

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Bryan Burwell

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

President



Blue Devils dominate USBWA poll, lists

Defending national champion Duke is the nation's preseason No. 1 team, according to the U.S. Basketball Writers Association board of directors.

The Blue Devils also placed Kyle Singler and Nolan Smith on the watch list for the Oscar Robertson Trophy, given to the the nation's best player, and Kyrie Irving on the watch list for the Wayman Tisdale Award, the newly named award for the nation's top freshman.

The poll was conducted before second-ranked Purdue lost star forward Robbie Hummel for the season to a torn ACL.

Oscar Robertson Trophy Watch List: Malcolm Delaney, Virginia Tech; Jimmer Fredette, Brigham Young; Elias Harris, Gonzaga; JaJuan Johnson, Purdue; Jon Leuer, Wisconsin; Kalin Lucas, Michigan State; Shelvin Mack, Butler; Marcus Morris, Kansas; Jacob Pullen, Kansas State; Kyle Singler, Duke; Nolan Smith, Duke; Isaiah Thomas, Washington.

Wayman Tisdale Award Watch List: Harrison Barnes, North Carolina; Will Barton, Memphis; Tobias Harris, Tennessee; Kyrie Irving, Duke; Perry Jones, Baylor; Cory Joseph, Texas; Brandon Knight, Kentucky; Fab Melo, Syracuse; Jared Sullinger, Ohio State; Patric Young, Florida.

USBWA Board of Directors' Top 25

1. Duke (10)	346
2. Michigan State (3)	327
3. Kansas State (1)	299
4. Ohio State	290
5. Pittsburgh	282
6. Kansas	256
7. Villanova	251
8. Florida	206
9. Kentucky	192
10. North Carolina	189
11. Gonzaga	188
12. Syracuse	176
13. Missouri	175
14. Illinois	169
15. Purdue	140
16. Baylor	134
17. Washington	125
18. Butler	105
19. Memphis	92
20. Temple	86
21. Virginia Tech	78
22. Georgetown	65
23. Brigham Young	63
23. Tennessee	61
25. Texas	48

Others receiving votes – San Diego State 42, Wisconsin 39, West Virginia 24, Xavier 14, Florida State 12, Georgia 12, Wichita State 11, Minnesota 10, UNLV 10, Old Dominion 9, Utah State 9, Arizona 8, Richmond 8, Murray State 6, Miami 3, Mississippi State 3, Wofford 3, Marquette 1, UCLA 1.

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USBWA is honored to present new Wayman Tisdale Award

The U. S. Basketball Writers Association’s freshman of the year award has a new name – the Wayman Tisdale Award.

The award is named in honor of the former Oklahoma great who was the first freshman to receive All-America honors from the USBWA in 1983 when he averaged 24.5 points and 10.3 rebounds and shot 58 percent from the field.

The 6-foot-9 Tisdale went on to become a three-time All-American at Oklahoma, was a member of the USA’s Olympic gold-medal team in 1984 and played 12 seasons in the NBA, averaging 15.3 points.

He was also a nationally recognized jazz musician and was actively involved in many charitable and humanitarian causes, including the Wayman Tisdale Foundation, which provides financial assistance to amputees needing prosthetics. Tisdale died of complications from cancer in 2009 at the age of 44.

“I think it’s a very appropriate honor, considering Wayman was the first freshman to ever make All-American,” said former Oklahoma coach Billy Tubbs.

Members of the USBWA will select the Tisdale freshman of the year and honor the recipient each year at the USBWA’s college basketball awards breakfast held during the weekend of the NCAA Final Four.

A second presentation will be made to the winner in May at a dinner hosted by Access Sports, an Oklahoma City-based not-for-profit foundation, at the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City.

Funds raised through the award by Access Sports will go to support local charities, particularly youth basketball in Oklahoma. The Tisdale Foundation will also be a direct beneficiary.

USBWA AWARDS. Nominations are now being accepted for the USBWA’s postseason awards that are presented at the Final Four each year.

The USBWA’s Hall of Fame, established in 1988, honors members – past and present – who have made significant contributions to the organization and are



recognized for their achievements in sports journalism. To be eligible for consideration, an individual must have a minimum of 20 years in the profession.

The USBWA added three members last year – Skip Myslenski, retired *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter; past president Bud Withers of the *Seattle Times*; and former NCAA Executive Director Walter Byers, who helped establish the USBWA 54 years ago.

The USBWA’s Katha Quinn Award is named after the former St. John’s University sports information director who passed away from cancer in 1989. The award recognizes individuals in college basketball for their service to the media or the inspiration they provide to those in sports journalism.

Last year’s recipient was Chris Fallon, media coordinator for the NIT.

The USBWA’s oldest award is the Most Courageous Award, which was established in 1978 and is the only one of its kind in college basketball. It is presented to a player, coach, game official or athletics administrator who has faced obstacles in life and demonstrated extraordinary courage reflecting honor on college basketball.

Last season, for the first time in its history, the USBWA presented a men’s and women’s Most Courageous Award. Brigham Young coach Dave Rose, who overcame pancreatic cancer to guide the Cougars to an NCAA tournament berth last season, was named the men’s winner. The women’s award went to Tiffara Steward, who overcame several disabilities to play at Farmingdale State.

USBWA members who have individuals they wish to nominate for any of the awards should send them to my attention at mitch@mvc.org.

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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Baylor 'almanac' might be media-guide model of future

For the past nine years, my Novembers demanded an every-other-day trip to my post-office box or the pile of media guides waiting for me there would be out of hand.

That shouldn't be a problem this fall.

But if we haven't prepared for the day the media guides died, shame on us. We've all seen it coming for a while now.

In an attempt to make the transition easier, I recently contacted each conference to see what course they and their schools were taking in this new world. Most schools, of course, are going exclusively to online guides, but the way that those guides are being made available varies from conference to conference. It's a learning process for everyone.

Baylor might have come up with a compromise solution that satisfies everyone. That school removed the recruiting information that, combined with the economic downturn, led to the media guide's downfall, and put it into a Web site called BaylorAthleticsExperience.com.

"We were the first school in the country to take our recruiting information and put it toward this site," said Baylor sports-information director Chris Yandle.

The meat of the old media guides – roster, schedule, coach and player bios, historical information – now goes into what Baylor calls an almanac. The template, which models the old NCAA record book, demands few pictures other than mug shots and requires little design effort from the SIDs. Though at 162 pages it is smaller than the allowed 208, the guide contains more information than most, and with a limited printing, costs a fraction of their past guides.

"It goes back to the original meaning of those media guides," Yandle said. "Rather than burning the midnight oil designing it, it's a simple template. We've cut money. We've saved money. Now we're going back to what our jobs were originally, and that's providing information for the media."

Atlantic 10 Conference schools are taking varied approaches to the issue. At least five schools will print a limited number of books. At Saint Louis, the only printed guide will be for men's basketball. La Salle will print a smaller 6x9 guide that focuses on text and records, with a virtual guide taking over the recruiting chores. Xavier will also have a print and virtual guide. UMass reported that it will have no media guide, moving instead toward a Web site with increased videos and blogs.

Here's what we learned from the conferences that responded to our request:

America East – All school guides will be digital and will be made available on thumb drives and on the conference web site.

Atlantic 10 – See above.

ACC – Their goal is to provide all 12 school guides on thumb drives.

Atlantic Sun – At least two schools will print guides; most are online only.

Big South – Creating online "Basketball Media Center" that will include links to each member school's guide, plus a PDF of the league media guide.

Big 12 – Mixed bag. Last year, seven schools printed guides, and Baylor created an "almanac."

CAA – Will print a conference guide and create thumb drives that includes each school's digital guide.

Ivy – Online links will be available at each school's web site.

MAAC – Links to each school's digital guide will be included on the league web site.

John Akers Basketball Times Second Vice President



Missouri Valley – Will provide links to each school's digital guide, plus the league guide.

Mountain West – Seven schools will print guides this season. Links to all nine online versions can be found on the MWC Media Portal, a password-protected site located in the MWC Media Services tab of the conference's Web site. Accredited media members wishing to access this information can request a username and password by submitting the online application form.

Ohio Valley – Creating an online "press box" that includes links to each school's guide. Also plans to create CDs or DVDs including each school's guide that will be sent to local and national media.

Pacific 10 – Very few schools will print guides. Digital guides will be available at a one-stop location on the Pac-10 web site.

SEC – All schools are expected to print guides.

Southland – Five schools will print guides; all will provide online guides.

SWAC – All schools are printing digitally.

Sun Belt – More than half the schools will provide digital guides, with a few providing a limited number or printed guides.

WCC – The majority of schools still print guides.

Burwell

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exactly a pure innocent, but assigning absolute guilt was a convoluted riddle?

With this story, all that we know for sure is that it begins (where else?) in a bar, with some over-served souls apparently making a series of light-headed decisions full of regrettable long-term consequences. Trying to get to the unmitigated truth in stories like this are more in line with what our jobs should be about. But getting to the bottom of a story like this is even more demanding than ever, particularly when private universities and the students themselves (in this case, both the alleged victim and the players, too) obstruct that process by hiding behind the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

"Saint Louis University men's basketball players Kwamain Mitchell and Willie Reed are currently not enrolled at the University. Federal law – the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) – does not allow the University to release any additional information without the consent of the students involved."

These carefully crafted words raised more questions than they answered. And it makes you wonder if it's all just a bit of blissfully naïve wishful thinking on the part of the university to believe that this would suffice to muffle all the Internet innuendo and campus gossip that has been filtering out since last spring.

"So what the heck just happened? That's a very good

question," said Willie Reed Sr., father of SLU's former starting center.

"They're trying to blame my son for something he didn't do," said Reed, "and I'm not having it."

Willie Reed Sr. says his son and Mitchell were suspended last month by the university's student court for a full year because of allegations that they were involved in an unspecified violation of the student code of conduct.

The suspension happened as a result of a behind-closed-door hearing before the school's student court. For reasons no one can adequately explain, the hearing didn't happen last spring or even over the summer. Instead, it was conducted after Mitchell and Reed returned to school last month. According to Reed Sr., the alleged victim had an attorney and her parents present at the hearing, and the lawyer came armed with a thick book full of documents that supported her case.

His son was not given the same privileges. According to Reed Sr., statements that supported his son's innocence were not admitted into the proceeding. Neither player was allowed to have parents in the room and the only legal representation Reed had was a second-year law student who had less than 48 hours to prepare his defense.

"I am highly pissed," said Reed Sr. "We were not allowed to be there at all. Her parents were allowed to be there. Her parents were the ones who were pressing the school to kick them out for one year and that's what they

(originally) did. Once I got involved in the process, (the university) tried to tell me it wasn't a legal matter. But it was a legal matter, because if it wasn't, why did she have an attorney involved and why was her attorney allowed in the room when the student conduct code said no attorney was supposed to be involved?

"They still have not responded to that."

But if the original hearing was smothered in unfair influence that leaned towards the accuser, whose father reportedly has a lot of clout with some deep-pockets university donors, you have to wonder if the appeals process tilted the influence the other way. The lengthy delay in the first hearing allowed the attorney for the accuser to compile a thick pile of evidence. But how much did the players benefit from the lengthy delay of a ruling on their appeal? Normally an appeal is supposed to take three or four days, according to university sources familiar with the process. But as word began to get out in the media – and perhaps among influential sports donors – this appeal dragged on for a month, and the result was a reduction of the suspension from one year to one semester.

"They tried to come up with a compromise that didn't satisfy anyone," said Reed. "I'm sure the young lady's parents aren't happy because they wanted them kicked out for a year. But I'm not happy, either, because I know my son didn't do what he was accused of. This thing was all screwed up."

When, why did SIDs go into lockdown mode?

Just when I think access issues in college sports couldn't get much worse, something like this happens.

Back in June, our paper assigned a reporter to cover one of the summer sports camps in the area. While at the camp, our man encountered a local athlete who now competes for a Big 12 school. It was a perfect opportunity to update our readers on the kid's career, plus get his insight on this particular camp, which had helped raise his profile as a recruit two years ago.

But the interview never got past the first question.

"We're not allowed to do interviews," the athlete said.

I wish there had been a punch line. Sadly, as many of you know too well, this was no joke. Such situations are becoming the norm.

As if the challenges of shrinking newspaper budgets and increasing layoffs weren't enough threat to our livelihoods, we're faced with ever more obstacles to performing our basic jobs. When the simplest summer staple – local boy or girl makes good – can be stymied this way, we have a serious problem.

What to do about it?

Here, I appeal to the sports information directors in our group: We need your help.

You SIDs comprise more than one-fifth of the USBWA membership. We value your participation. You're important to our fiscal health. The work you do to compile records, player bios, game-day notes and to alert us to obscure milestones about to be achieved ... all that is invaluable. But that's only part of your job.

On Page 3 of the 2010 USBWA Membership Directory, in a section called "About the USBWA," the first paragraph includes these words: "The primary goal of the USBWA ... (is) to serve the interests of journalists who cover college basketball."

Truth is, one of the journalists' major interests – some of us would say the most major among major interests – is access to coaches and players. In too many places, it's not happening. Two or three minutes in a postgame interview room is not a sensible definition of access. "You can get the coach on his weekly conference call" is not access. Players off limits to chat for five minutes on their way off the practice court is not access. Players directed not to do interviews with hometown media during a two-week summer break is not access.

Am I being clear?

I hate to make this sound like a fairy tale, but it really seems like one. Once upon a time ... believe it or not, SIDs were advocates for the needs of media who covered their teams. Real advocates. And we had reasonable access. That generation of SIDs, it seems, is gone; replaced by a new breed intent on controlling, rather than facilitating, the message and the process.

Kirk Wessler
Peoria Journal-Star
Third Vice-President



I know, some of you, maybe even most of you, would argue these issues have been torn from your control. Coaches have been allowed to grow bigger than life, and you might be powerless to talk sense into your guy, even if you want to. Maybe yours is one of those schools already moving to render the professional sports journalists irrelevant. That's depressing to contemplate, but possible.

But this issue is bigger than one newspaper, one team, one conference or even six conferences hell-bent on taking over the world. The sport is bigger than all of us. Writers and SIDs have different jobs and serve different masters, but we all love college basketball. We should be working together to give millions of fans access to as many stories as we can muster.

The roadblocks, however, make this task harder than negotiating Chicago's toll roads during rush hour in construction season.

SIDs, please ... USBWA writers need your help.

NCAA opening door wider to passionate blogs, web sites

For many fans, journalists and sports-information directors, the sheer volume of blogs and web sites devoted to college basketball can seem overwhelming.

Even if they're read in an RSS feed, getting through a daily regimen of must-see sites remains a daunting task.

How does one distinguish among them for content, quality, intent and scope? Which are serious about following the sport, and which exist as "bleat" blogs with an axe to grind?

And what to do if you're in charge of deciding which online entities should receive proper media credentials?

That last question has been vexing for the NCAA and bloggers frustrated by what they claim have been overly constrictive standards that have left them at home during March Madness.

This summer, the men's and women's Division I basketball committees approved changes that would give a nod to blogs and sites that are passionate about college basketball but don't come close to driving the level of traffic of large media sites.

The changes came after discussions with the U.S. Basketball Writers Association at the men's and women's Final Fours and as the NCAA re-evaluated credential criteria in all its championship sports.

Previously, the NCAA granted men's and women's Division I basketball tournament credentials to sites that either generated a million unique visitors a month or covered at least 90 percent of their team's home games.

That left a large gulf, in terms of eligibility, between ESPN.com or Yahoo! Sports and the Duke Basketball Report.

In the void have been some burgeoning regional- and nationally-oriented sites and journalists who've exited traditional media and have been writing in independent or small online environments (including yours truly).

The new criteria would give the group blog Rush The Court, to name one example, seating along press row that it was denied last season. Under the new standard, sites or blogs that cover at least 100 regular season or conference tournament games will be credentialed.

"If they're making a concerted effort to cover the sport during the regular season, then we want to open the door to these folks," said David Worlock, associate director of the NCAA Division I men's basketball championship. "We want to let them prove themselves as being serious members of the media."

USBWA member Randy McClure, the proprietor of Rush The Court, said last season that his collection of 25 writers covered 156 games in all 31 Division I men's conferences and 11 of the 13 top conference tournaments, including the ACC, Big East, Big 12 and Pac-10.

"We're appreciative that the NCAA seems to be listening to its constituents in both the media and the fan world," McClure said. "This shows that they're taking a progressive stance to keep up with the changing media and I certainly laud their efforts."

The women's criteria changed along the same lines, but Rick Nixon, Worlock's NCAA women's counterpart, said additional factors will be considered. Demand for women's credentials isn't as high, and some innovative sites focusing on women's hoops aren't geared toward game coverage.

Hoopfeed.com, operated by freelance journalist

Wendy Parker
Freelance
New Media Liasion



Cheryl Coward, aggregates women's high school, college, pro, international and recruiting links from a wide variety of sources on a site and Twitter feed that she said coaches, players, SIDs and journalists have found valuable given the dearth of mainstream coverage. She also was denied NCAA credentials last season, but Nixon said her service would be "looked at seriously" under the new provisions.

Worlock and Nixon stressed that bloggers and independent journalists should be known by and have a regular working relationship with SIDs and conference-media contacts, especially since the revised criteria are the first stage in the NCAA's wider embrace of new media.

"We want to set the standards high," Worlock said. "We want to make sure we're credentialing people for the right reasons."

They've asked the USBWA to assist in this process by letting them know of new sites or blogs, whether they're run by journalists or others, that fit these new standards. Please e-mail me at wparker.idk@gmail.com if you know of sites (including yours) and with any other questions about the USBWA and new media issues.