



Walsh is double winner in FWAA writing contest

Christopher Walsh and Dave Matter were the big winners in the 20th annual FWAA Best Writing Contest.

Walsh, from BamaOnline.com, became a rare two-time first-place winner in the same year when he picked up top places in Game and Column categories. Matter, from the Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune, placed first in Feature and was second in the Game category behind

Walsh.

The other first-place winner was Joe Rexrode for his Enterprise story in the Lansing (Mich.) State Journal. The only other double placer was Ivan Maisel of ESPN.com for second place in Column and honorable mention in Game. All the writers will be honored at the annual FWAA Awards Breakfast Jan. 7 in South Florida.

GAME

First Place — Christopher Walsh, *BamaOnline.com*

Second Place — Dave Matter, *Columbia Daily Tribune*

Third Place — Pete Thamel, *New York Times*

Honorable Mention — Andy Staples, *SI.com*; Ivan Maisel, *ESPN.com*; Chris Tomasson, *FOX Sports Florida*

FEATURE

First Place — Dave Matter, *Columbia Daily Tribune*

Second Place — Andrea Adelson, *ESPN.com*

Third Place — Teddy Greenstein, *Chicago Tribune*

Honorable Mention — Brett McMurphy, *CBSSports.com*; Greg Barnes, *InsideCarolina.com*; Thayer Evans, *FOXSports.com*; Matt Fortuna, *ESPN.com*

COLUMN

First Place — Christopher Walsh, *BamaOnline.com*

Second Place — Ivan Maisel, *ESPN.com*

Third Place — Gene Wojciechowski, *ESPN.com*

Honorable Mention — Malcolm Moran, *published in NY Times*; Pat Forde, *Yahoo! Sports*; Brett McMurphy, *CBSSports.com*

ENTERPRISE

First Place — Joe Rexrode, *Lansing State Journal*

Second Place — Chris Tomasson, *FOX Sports Florida*

Third Place — Michael Rothstein, *WolverineNation*

Honorable Mention — Ryan McGee, *ESPN.com*; Kelly Whiteside, *USA TODAY*; Don Kausler Jr., *The Birmingham News/(Mobile) Press-Register/The Huntsville Times*



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Executive Director's column



STEVE RICHARDSON

With the 2012 football season underway, greetings from the FWAA!

By this time, if you have paid your dues, you should have received your 2012-13 Print Directory through the regular mail.

Once again a tip of the hat to Ted Gangi for producing the directory, which to most insiders is known as "The Bible" for college football information. You will find all the contact information you will need in the directory and what is on-line at collegepressbox.com (available to FWAA members).

In addition, there are several member benefits that are listed on the back of your membership card and on-line at the Membership Center at our website <http://fwaa.memberclicks.net>. To access go to that site and click on FWAA at the top of the page and a menu will drop down. It is your responsibility to access and activate the benefits that are provided for you if you want them.

With your email (username) and the password you received when you joined or paid your dues, you can access your benefits at the website above. Hopefully, you customized the password and have it grouped with other usernames and passwords you use. If you did not do so, and have lost the password provided, I can retrieve it for you.

We have basically become an online world at the FWAA. So that is why it is important for YOU, an FWAA member, to keep your information updated on-line so we can reach you. Especially critical is the right email. If we do not have a working email for you, then you will not receive releases about what is going on in the organization. You will be lost in cy-

berspace.

In the directory, we also have provided an FWAA Awards Calendar (Page 23) that can help you navigate the timeline of our awards during and after the 2012 regular season. All members are eligible to send in ballots to our All-America Committee in November. You will receive those via email. All members will also be urged to vote electronically for the Eddie Robinson Coach of the Year Award in December.

On the same Page 23, we highlight the weekly award programs we currently are running: Tostitos Fiesta Bowl National Team of the Week (Mondays), the FWAA/ Bronko Nagurski Player of the Week (Tuesdays) and, starting later in September, the Discover Orange Bowl Courage Award Nominee (Wednesdays).

For the first time this season, an FWAA member appears on College Sports Today on SiriusXM Radio on Monday mornings for 5-10 minutes to announce and talk about the winner of Team of the Week.

And finally, the FWAA has the pleasure of teaming with the Bell Helicopter Armed Forces Bowl to launch the Armed Forces Merit Award (Page 24 of the Members Directory). It will be presented to "an individual and/or a group who have created, developed and produced a program within the realm of the sport of football that provides care, concern and support for past or present members of the United States Armed Forces and/or their families."

The FWAA has appointed a five-person committee to assist in choosing the honoree for this award, which will be announced on Nov. 12.

Meanwhile, in this issue of The Fifth Down, we highlight the winners and placers of the Best Writing Contest for the 20th straight year. Christopher Walsh of *BamaOnline.com* is a rare double winner. Dave Matter of the *Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune* placed first in one category and second in another.

Enjoy the season!

Game winner: Christopher Walsh, BamaOnline.com

Comment by the judge, Mickey Spagnola: What a wonderful job of capturing the emotion of the Alabama team, and likely the entire state, after winning the national championship game, while at the same time giving us an account of what actually happened in this Alabama-LSU rematch. Especially a game of this magnitude, where most readers likely watched the game on TV, we needed something more than being bombarded with stats and play-by-play. I was in the stands for this game, and I would have wanted to read this the next morning.

By **CHRISTOPHER WALSH**
BamaOnline.com

NEW ORLEANS — Between the hugs and falling pieces of crimson and white confetti, the emotions almost got the best of him. The long-off look and effects from months of agonizing pain were still displayed on his face, only for once they were being washed over by pure joy.

Overwhelming doesn't begin to characterize what this past year has been like in Tuscaloosa, leading to this one shining moment when he could smile, and nearly cry, after winning an incredible and almost unbelievable national championship.

"It's awesome," University of Alabama junior long-snapper Carson Tinker said. "There are no words that can describe this. Just a lot of work paid off. Everyone here faced some kind of adversity, and just to see how they all came out of that is a great thing."

Behind him, Nick Saban was on stage at the Mercedes-Benz Superdome to accept another crystal football, his third, with the Crimson Tide claiming its 14th title that just a few months ago seemed like a distant possibility. Still on the minds of everyone enjoying the celebration were the 52 people killed in the horrible tornado of April 27, including Tinker's girlfriend Ashley Harrison (and many more throughout the state), and the death of offensive lineman Aaron Douglas in May.

Alabama's wounded heart had arguably never thumped harder, especially after the way it dismantled Southeastern Conference rival LSU, 21-0.

"We earned it," strength and conditioning coach Scott Cochran said. "LSU is an awesome team. We actually played well against that great of a team. How exciting is this for the Alabama family."

Although some touted the Crimson Tide as not deserving another shot at LSU after the Nov. 5 defeat at Bryant-Denny Stadium, "The Rematch of the Century"

Christopher Walsh

BamaOnline.com

Age: 44

College: University of New Hampshire

Background: I have covered University of Alabama football since 2004 and for BamaOnline (247Sports) since 2009. I've also covered three National Football League teams and Major League Baseball. But, like Nick Saban, this is the longest I've ever been in one spot. Honors include a previous FWAA Best Writing Contest first in enterprise in 2007 and two second places, a First Amendment Award (formerly Freedom of Information Award) from the Associated Press Managing Editors, the Alabama Sports Writers Association's highest honor for story of the year, and two Pulitzer Prize nominations. I've written 18 books, including the recently updated "100 Things Crimson Tide Fans Should Know & Do Before They Die." My latest "side" project is the Ultimate Football Database: ultimatefd.com. This fall I'm going to dare to get married during the middle of football season.



eventually turned into a beat-down in all three facets of the game.

However, for one half it was all but a continuation of the 9-6 loss in overtime, complete with another blocked field-goal by LSU, and neither team able to reach the end zone. While Alabama was repeatedly knocking on the door, and managed three field goals, LSU notched just one first down while running more of an option offense behind quarterback Jordan Jefferson.

"They did a lot of different stuff tonight," defensive coordinator Kirby Smart said. "We had to adjust the first series and change-up what we did. They played like a different team which I think hurt them more than us."

Yet the first crack actually occurred on special teams, where the Tigers were thought to have a significant advantage and had given up 6 punt-return yards all season. Senior Marquis Maze' went 49 yards on his second chance, and despite pulling a hamstring gave Alabama better field position than it ever had in the first meeting.

It led to the first of five Jeremy Shelley field goals, which tied the record for most in any bowl game.

"I'm happy for Shelley," Tinker said. "He deserves it."

With the defense yielding nothing, Saban was per-

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Game winner (continued)

(Continued from page 3)

factly content to keep sending Shelley out as each field goal took a little more out of the previously undefeated Tigers.

Led by defensive MVP Courtney Upshaw, who had seven tackles and a sack, Alabama finished with a 21-5 edge in first downs, 69-44 in plays, and 384-92 in total yards. LSU's longest possession went just 23 yards and its biggest play was for 19. It went three-and-out six times, with an interception by linebacker C.J. Mosley on the second play of a possession, and converted just two third-down opportunities.

"We knew it was going to be a physical game," senior nose tackle Josh Chapman said. "I love a physical game."

LSU crossed the 50-yard line only once, and then promptly went backwards and fumbled away the ball. In comparison, Alabama failed to cross midfield only twice, one of which resulted in a punt from the 46.

Yet junior running back Trent Richardson wasn't the one carrying the offense. With the Tigers – who had the winners of the Bednarik and Thorpe awards for best defensive player and defensive back, respectively, in cornerbacks Morris Claiborne and Tyrann Mathieu -- daring sophomore quarterback A.J. McCarron to try and beat them the Tide came out throwing on first downs and even without Maze still passed for 234 yards.

Senior H-back Brad Smelley had a game-high seven receptions, senior Darius Hanks was right behind him with five, and sophomore Kevin Norwood made some big receptions to finish with four catches for 78 yards.

"We knew coming into the game somebody else had to step up, and coach just gave me an opportunity," said McCarron, who completed 23 of 34 attempts and had no turnovers. "I don't think I did anything special."

If so, he was the only one.

"Tonight, he was on a whole other level, he actually blew me away," senior center William Vlachos said. "He talked to us at halftime, he talked to us pregame, he's on the stage getting offensive MVP. The guy is unbelievable."

Finally, with 4:36 remaining in the game, Alabama scored the one-and-only touchdown between the two teams in eight quarters and one overtime, when Richardson recorded his 21st rushing touchdown of the season by bouncing outside on a 34-yard run.

"That was probably the most fun touchdown I've ever scored," junior left tackle Barrett Jones said. "Two games of frustration of not finding the end zone, just to seal the deal, that was a great feeling."

Although Alabama is the first national champion to not have won its conference title since Minnesota in 1936 (excluding independents), there will be no talk of a

split title. A couple hours after the Million Dollar Band packed up, the Associated Press announced that the Crimson Tide was the overwhelming No. 1 team, having received all but five votes.

After being so close to being considered one of the best teams ever in college football, LSU fans left having to settle for No. 2, with the additional stigma that not only had it come at the hands of its former coach, the dismantling was done in the Tigers' own backyard.

"I told my team that it should hurt," LSU coach Les Miles said. "Quality people. We fight like hell, and we finished second."

"It's supposed to be painful."

Meanwhile, Alabama relished the finality of the moment, and what it had accomplished. For example, after playing in his final game for the Crimson Tide, Vlachos refused to let go of the game ball, even in the locker room, while offensive coordinator Jim McElwain walked arm-in-arm with his family off the field, and to his new job as the head coach at Colorado State.

Everyone else will head back to rebuilding Tuscaloosa on Tuesday, with another crown jewel to be prominently displayed, and a championship like none other to be celebrated.

"We're a group of guys who wanted it," junior cornerback Dre Kirkpatrick said. "We didn't finish anything we did the first time we played these guys. We were going to finish this time."

FWAA Notes

NCAA Football is starting a new digital magazine for college football fans and is looking for contributions from FWAA members. Contact Tiffany Greco of IMG for more information at tiffany.greco@imgworld.com. ... FWAA member Drew Boylhart has a new book out ... "The Draftnik: A Story about the Pro Football Draft and its Impact on a Dyslectic." Check it out at <http://bookstore.iuniverse.com/Products/SKU-000600831/the-draftnik.aspx>.

Thayer Evans left *Fox Sports Interactive* and Pete Thamel has jumped from *The New York Times* — both to *Sports Illustrated*. ... Brett McMurphy left *CBS Interactive* for *ESPN.com*. ... George Schroeder jumped from the *Eugene Register-Guard* to *USA Today*. ... Mark Blandschun retired from the *Boston Globe* and now is breaking stories at ajerseyguy.com. ... Andy Seeley left Minnesota for Central Florida. ... David Bassity left Oklahoma for Houston. ... Gina Chappin has recently launched a new business, Dolce Sports Media, but continues to serve as the media coordinator for the Rose Bowl Game. .

Feature winner: Dave Matter, Columbia Daily Tribune

Comment by the judge, Gene Duffey: The writer's superb description of the scene makes you feel as if you are on the bus with the players. Great quotes from Pinkel and several Tigers. Includes interviews with the president of the MU Alumni Association in Joplin and one of the player's whose family lives in Joplin.

By DAVE MATTER
Columbia Daily Tribune

"Oh ... my ... God," Gary Pinkel gasped.

Pinkel has been coaching college football players for more than 30 years, and if he ever wondered how to get a busload of them quiet, he unlocked the mystery Friday.

Drive them through a war zone.

"Oh ... my ... God."

That's all Pinkel could say as the White Knight coach bus crept east on 15th Street in Joplin, giving Pinkel and his Missouri football players their first view of the town leveled by last month's tornado.

Jaws hung wide open. Camera phones clicked. Thirty-two college football players sat in silence, with sheets of glass separating them from the carnage outside.

They saw houses ripped open, roofs blown off and walls torn down.

Trees were uprooted like weeds in a garden. The trees left standing were stripped down to trunks and shorn limbs, like a kindergartener's stick-figure drawing.

Street signs were scattered across lawns. Stop lights, too.

"Look, there's a mattress up in that tree," Pinkel said, breaking the quiet.

For the group of players who volunteered their Friday to help clean up the tornado's path of destruction, this was their first taste of reality.

"You see so many things on TV, but it's not real until you're actually there," wide receiver Wes Kemp said a few hours later. "Now, it's like, that's where somebody lived. There's thousands of people who don't have homes right now. Where are they right now? They're just scattered with friends and family. It just makes it so much more real."

The day had just begun.

Countless volunteers have descended on Joplin since the May 22 tornado damaged or destroyed more than 8,000 homes and 500 commercial properties in southwest Missouri. Twelve days after the twister tore

Dave Matter

Columbia Daily Tribune

Age: 34

College: Missouri

Background: I started at the Columbia Daily Tribune as a part-time reporter my junior year in college, and 2012 is my 14th football season at the paper, spending 11 as the Mizzou beat writer. I've had the pleasure of working for two exceptional sports editors in Joe Walljasper and the late Kent Heitholt, two friends who have taught me more about writing and reporting than you can ever learn in journalism school. This year, I co-authored a book with Ron Higgins and Steve Richardson, "The Mizzou Fan's Survival Guide to the SEC," and spent the summer on a book signing tour around the state. It wouldn't be possible or half as fun without my wife of almost six years, Molly. A football writer's dream, she sacrificed by planning a wedding between bowl season and signing day, and we almost managed to have our twin boys in the offseason, too, but they came two months early — the night before a football game in 2009. Her support and acceptance of this crazy lifestyle is rare and precious. Our boys, Connor and Jackson, have just started to figure out my job has something to do with football and that roll of paper that magically arrives on the driveway every day. Let's hope those still exist by the time they can read.



through more than six miles of the town, Pinkel and MU's contingent made the four-hour bus ride to join the corps of volunteers. The first stop off Highway 44 was Trade X Sales, a home-furnishing store on North Main Street in Joplin. The store's warehouse is being used to store goods donated to tornado victims. And the Tigers brought a bunch.

The previous Saturday, MU packed its 18-wheel semi with donated items collected at D. Rowe's restaurant, owned by former Missouri player David Rowe. On Friday, the semi followed Pinkel's bus of players to Joplin. For about an hour, the players unloaded the pallets of goods and hauled them into the warehouse.

Inside, the walls were lined with rows of diapers, cleaning supplies, bedding, children's toys, clothes and an ocean's worth of bottled water.

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Feature (continued)

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Pinkel's party was a cross-section of his 2011 roster. Defense and offense, white and black, starter and backup. Established veterans like All-American tight end Michael Egnew worked alongside walk-ons like linebacker Daniel Carpenter. Soccer players Kendra Collins and Haley Krentz joined them. Friday was the football players' day off between summer workouts, but at 7 a.m., this bleary-eyed group loaded a bus bound for hell.

"This is my home state," Kemp said. "I'm from Missouri. ... How could you not come here and help?"

Among the MU crew was former star quarterback Chase Daniel, who brought along New Orleans Saints teammate Tyler Lorenzen. On Saturday, Daniel signed autographs at a Columbia car dealership with all the proceeds — more than \$4,500 — going to United for Joplin, the United Way's campaign to help tornado victims.

"The state of Missouri has been so good for me," Daniel said. "I played four amazing years here. The fans have been so amazing the whole entire time. ... They come from all over to watch us. The least we can do is come here and help them."

To help the cause, MU printed T-shirts that read, "One State, One Spirit, One Mizzou," and has sold 16,000 since the storm, raising more than \$175,000 for United for Joplin.

Next stop, Forest Park Baptist Church on South Highview Avenue. In the wake of the storm, the church became local headquarters for Samaritan's Purse, an international disaster relief organization that helps with volunteer projects in ravaged towns like Joplin. Missouri's crew stopped there for lunch and an orientation session on the day's next assignment.

To get there, the bus made the chilling drive down 15th Street.

"It's just, it's mind-boggling," Daniel said. "You see it on TV, you see it in the newspapers and on video, and yeah, it looks horrible. But it looks like you're on a movie set. It doesn't look real."

"It was a devastating picture, not even close to seeing it on TV," Pinkel said. "You just think how sad it is. In 20 seconds, people's lives changed."

Including Rachel Greene. The president of the MU Alumni Association chapter in Joplin was standing in her driveway at 25th Street and Connecticut when the tornado sirens went off. As the twister got closer, she ran inside to the crawl space. She had to settle for a closet.

"It started raining *in* the closet," she said.

Seconds later, most of her roof was gone. Rain soaked everything inside. The wind was so powerful, it moved her house off its foundation. Greene has since moved in with her younger sister. Her car was destroyed in the storm, too.

"It's like a bad dream that you're not coming out of," she said. "But the spirit of the people of Joplin is unlike anything I've ever seen. The state of Missouri has come together to help pitch in. Just seeing what my alma mater has done has blown my mind."

That's why Greene was waiting in the church parking lot for Missouri's bus, to thank Pinkel and the players for visiting the nightmare, even if only for a day.

The blown-out windows and splintered trees didn't impact Mark Hill like it did his teammates. He'd grown numb to the damage after spending four days in Joplin immediately after the tornado. Last summer, Hill's dad and stepmom moved to Joplin from Branson. His step-siblings are scattered around town, too.

"The first time I drove through, you're just emotionally drained," said Hill, a sophomore offensive lineman. "You're just shocked. It's hard to think. It's like whenever somebody passes away. You think they're just going to come back. You think you're going to drive back through and everything's going to be OK. But every time you turn around, you see a car wrapped around a telephone pole or a big metal beam twisted in half that you'd never think could be lifted off the ground."

Hill's parents' home was spared. His siblings' houses escaped the storm, too. A friend's house was badly damaged, and Hill spent several days ripping through sheet rock and fastening tarps as makeshift roofs.

"We had to use a GPS just to get around because none of the road signs were up," he said. "It was a shock."

After coming back to Columbia for offseason workouts, he started organizing Friday's trip. A handful of teammates quickly agreed to join him.

"That was a big deal for me, too, especially Joplin being a place where I live," he said. "It was almost like they were helping me out. Not that I was affected, but people I know were affected here."

After eating lunch alongside volunteers from all over the Midwest — out-of-state license plates included Iowa, Indiana, Arkansas, Wisconsin and Kansas — the Missouri players headed inside the church to watch a safety video. Pinkel and Daniel had flown back to Columbia — Pinkel was meeting with a recruit in town on an unofficial visit — but the rest were headed to one of the worst areas of destruction. After the video, a volunteer offered one last warning: "You are going into a zone of decimation."

Of all the streets left ravaged by the storm, these Tigers were assigned to ... 1380 Kansas Avenue, enough irony to stir a few laughs on such a somber day.

At the corner of Kansas and 19th Street, they found a

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Feature (continued)

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one-story white house, battered but still standing. The lawn was littered with memories and debris that came from who knows how many miles away. A tree had been plucked from the ground and smashed into a fence. Household items had to be separated from metal objects and fragments of wood, all of which were to be piled along the curb.

Kemp and wideout Jerrell Jackson hauled a washing machine from outside of the house. Then came a refrigerator. It took no less than five players to unravel a mangled garage door from under a tree trunk. Others carried metal beams, shingles, furniture. Wideout Terry Dennis found parts of a car bumper still attached to the tail light.

Clouds of dust and the smell of rotting flesh lingered everywhere. Hill discovered one source, a dead squirrel embedded in the grass like a lawn ornament.

"Just to have a house, we should feel extremely fortunate," Kemp said. "These people were probably feeling fortunate when" Hurricane "Katrina happened. Now it happened to them, the same type of devastation. You just have to count your blessings and never take things for granted."

As the players worked, a family arrived. For the last 18 years, Carol Mann, 36, has lived in the house with her mother, Sharon, 62. Both suffer from seizures and neither can drive a car. And when the tornado hit, they huddled in a bathroom.

"It sounded like a freight train was coming," Carol said.

Neither was hurt. They've since moved in with Sharon's sister, Patricia Williams, and her husband, Patrick. They live 10 blocks south, and their house suffered only minor wind damage.

"When you see this devastation, you realize how fragile life is," Patricia said. "Possessions at this point don't mean anything."

Carol works part time at McDonald's and carries a coin purse that holds her lunch money. She'd lost it in the storm, but sure enough, one of the players found it while clearing through rubble in the house. He returned it with her \$5 inside.

"So much of the news you hear is so negative," Patricia said. "But those boys renewed my faith that there are so many good people in the world."

Once the players turned what had been a junkyard back into what resembled her sister's property, Patricia broke down in tears.

"Where do we begin without all of these people coming in, like the football team, everyone?" she said. "Where does a person begin without their help?"

"Yesterday this stuff was strewn everywhere. And in just a few hours ... look what they've done. It's amazing.

All I can say is I love them all, and I wish I could send a thank-you card to each one of them."

Once a volunteer crew has cleared a property, it's the Samaritan's Purse tradition to give the homeowners a Bible and join them in a group prayer. With piles of debris lining the street, the players joined hands with Carol Mann and her family. One by one, the volunteers then signed the first few pages of the Bible. The first signature came from a man who arrived by caravan midway through the cleanup.

"Jay Nixon, the Governor of the Show-Me State," he signed in big looping letters. "God bless."

By 4:30, it was time to pile back on the bus. The players had cleared a couple lots. Thousands were still untouched. Safety Kenronte Walker looked out at what seemed like a horizon of rubble.

"Man, we did all that work, but it doesn't seem like we've done anything," he said. "It's like one drop in the ocean. I wish we could come back."

The players were pooped. A Prius with Kansas plates pulled up, and the driver rolled down his window and playfully yelled, "Rock Chalk Jayhawk!"

The players smiled as he pulled away. Some barely noticed. Others sat quietly, scraping at the crust of grime covering their arms and legs. This neighborhood could have been any of theirs back home. Will Ebner's in Friendswood, Texas. Matt Hoch's in Harlan, Iowa. Kemp's in St. Louis.

"It's stunning," defensive end Jacquies Smith said. "It's a sight to see if you've never seen anything like this. For me, I've never experienced or seen any type of weather like this. It can take away a lifetime of memories."

Sitting at the corner of 19th and Kansas, Smith leaned on a stop sign and watched his teammates climb aboard the bus. An elderly woman had lived in a small house just a few feet away. Her house was sucked into the twister and destroyed. She was missing for a few days, Patricia Williams said, and later pronounced dead, one of 141 lives claimed by the country's deadliest tornado since 1950.

"It's sad to see this type of thing happen to a community," Smith said. "Right now, I'm just trying to soak it all in."

For a few hours, though, Smith uncovered something beneath the wreckage. He wasn't sure what it was, but it felt good.

"We're working as a team, building unity," he said. "It all carries into the season. It creates a lot of lifetime experiences. Guys like me, this being my last year, we can look back at this, this experience. Going through it with my fellow teammates, this is great."

Column winner: Christopher Walsh, BamaOnline.com

For Christopher Walsh's profile, please see his other winner entry on Page 3.

Comment by the judge, Mickey Spagnola: This was the best group of columns we've had in quite some time. Very difficult to narrow down to three winners and three honorable mentions, so a lot of close calls, and even had trouble differentiating first place from third place. Very tight. Ultimately, the first place story on the tornado tragedy hitting Tuscaloosa did a great job of not only tugging at heart strings, but the personal association with the tragedy brought the emotion of a city to the forefront and put the reader right in the neighborhoods. Good stuff.

By CHRISTOPHER WALSH
BamaOnline.com

For some, the tears haven't stopped.

For many, they haven't really started yet. It's hard to cry when you're numb and exhausted.

It's almost impossible to believe that it's only been three days since a monster tornado emerged in the southwest corner of Tuscaloosa and began a mile-wide path of carnage that essentially didn't stop until North Carolina. While it systematically and methodically destroyed and killed, it also ripped a hole in every single person here who was fortunate enough to survive.

Words simply can't describe what people have seen and endured. This wasn't something on television or in an unfamiliar place. They saw it while looking out of their windows, heard it as it ripped through everything in its way and felt it as it cut through the heart of this community.

The gash goes deeper than any satellite image can show. Anyone who calls Tuscaloosa home knows people who lost their businesses, homes or lives. We're talking about our friends, our colleagues, our loved ones.

After surveying the scene President Barack Obama said "I've never seen devastation like this" about what will almost certainly go down as the deadliest tornado ever. To come up with a comparison, one needs to talk with those who experienced Hurricane Andrew or Katrina, or even a war zone.

That's what 15th Street and McFarland Boulevard, perhaps the busiest intersection in town, resembles. Nearby Hokkaido Restaurant was completely destroyed. The pile of rubble across the street gives no hint to what was there before. The path of destruction goes well beyond what the eye can see.

Standing there one can't help but fear the worst. You wonder what happened to those driving down I-359 when the tornado crossed, if people inside places like Mike & Ed's and Full Moon Bar B Que got out safely and pray that Chuck E. Cheese wasn't full of children.

Although the death toll will rise significantly, two names gave an immediate face to this disaster: Loryn Brown, the well-known daughter of former Alabama football player **Shannon Brown**, and Ashley Harrison.

I had gotten to know Ashley a little over the past year as we shared a favorite hangout. She was bright, friendly and eager, and we talked about everything from her hometown of Dallas to her future plans with boyfriend **Carson Tinker**, the Crimson Tide's long-snapper. The last time I saw her was before Alabama's second spring scrimmage, when Ashley ran up and gave me a hug before entering Bryant-Denny Stadium.

She was 22.

I found out about her death after spending the first of two days helping friends Alex Perez and Kathryn Lo Porto, who lived in the area known as Cedar Crest, between 15th and DCH Hospital (which was narrowly spared). It's a neighborhood I've traveled through nearly every day while covering Alabama football for BamaOnline, just like I used to navigate through equally decimated Alberta City to get to work.

Their house was near the back of the community that brushed up against the businesses on McFarland, and one could sit on their front deck and see Krispy Krème Doughnuts a little more than 100 yards away. They were home when the tornado hit and at the last second jumped into the hallway under the attic door, before grass, fiberglass and steak knives started to fly. Unknown to them until later, a Krispy Krème truck had been thrown into their yard, hitting Alex's car before finally coming to a stop next to their deck and acting as a bit of a buffer.

That's right, a truck hitting their house may have been a good thing.

While salvaging what they could, people kept coming by. The first were neighbors, to check on one another and swap stories. Two doors down there was an empty foundation where a house had stood, next to where the guy with the motorcycle helmet became local lore. He had grabbed his dogs, chained them to him and jumped into a bathtub, and as everything started to twist and disintegrate the dogs started to be pulled away when he tightened his grip and refused to let go. Somehow they

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Column winner (continued)

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all survived.

But not all the stories were as uplifting. A woman told of how someone had put her wide-screen TV in her car and then realized it couldn't be driven so abandoned both. Another had his prescription drugs and alcohol swiped. Onlookers kept walking by as if it was a novelty and some were making their children walk through the dangerous area without adequate protection.

Then the volunteers followed and kept coming at a phenomenal rate. "What do you need?" and "Please take some water," were regularly overheard and welcomed. At midday the owner of Sips N Strokes came by with sandwiches followed by Bottom Feeders with more food later in the afternoon.

Similarly, many of those in the Alabama athletics department made heart-felt contributions, for which they

haven't wanted attention. **Nick Saban** brought water into a ravished area and visited a shelter. Gene Stallings worked a grill for emergency workers. Men's basketball coach **Anthony Grant** volunteered to help in any way he could. While at Temporary Emergency Services, softball coach Patrick Murphy saw former football player DeMeco Ryans make an "unreal" financial donation.

It's been nothing short of remarkable, from them and so many others. There will be heartache, grieving and some scars that will never completely heal. The number of volunteers will thin, the donations will slow to a trickle and the mangled landscape will improve with time.

Eventually, proud Tuscaloosa will begin to turn its attention toward rebuilding and, believe it or not, in some ways will be a stronger community. That much has already been proven, only the tears will continue.

We have so far left to go.

2012-13 Best Writing Contest Information

CATEGORIES

- Game Story (Immediate Deadline)
- Feature Story/Profile
- Enterprise/Investigative
- Column/Analysis/Commentary

You may begin sending entries now. You must be an FWAA member in good standing to enter.

Deadline: June 15, 2013. Entries sent after the deadline WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.

Limit: One (1) article per category, although a series of articles may be submitted in the enterprise category.

Entries must have appeared in print or on line between Feb. 1, 2012 and Jan. 31, 2013.

- Entries must be submitted electronically to contest@fwaa.com.

- Entries not sent to this e-mail address will not be accepted

- Send MS Word or text files only
- DO NOT SEND HTML files, Word Perfect files, stories in other word processing software or links to stories on the Internet or electronic libraries

- Make your entry easy to read by taking out unnecessary carriage returns (They can give your entry an odd look when opened by a judge's word processing program)

- Delete any embedded advertising, photos and cut-lines from the files (The file should contain only your story and your identifying information)

At the top of each entry, the following information should be included

- Writer(s)

- Publication or online service
- Category
- Date of publication
- E-mail address and telephone number

The entries will be sorted and stripped of identifying information and forwarded to the judge(s).

- Files containing your entries should follow this naming convention: yourname-category.doc

- The category must be one of these four words: Game, Feature, Enterprise or Column

- Example: KenStephens-game.doc

Questions? E-mail Ken Stephens at ken.stephens@sbcglobal.net

FWAA BEAT WRITER OF THE YEAR AWARD

In addition, see below, we have created a special award for the top beat writer as judged by a special FWAA committee headed by long-time FWAA member Malcolm Moran, Knight Chair in Sports Journalism and Society and Director of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University.

If you have a nomination of an FWAA member who covers major college football (either a team or a conference) or you want to nominate yourself, please send an e-mail/letter explaining the qualifications of the person (no more than 250 words) to:

Malcolm Moran

Penn State University

College of Communications

5 Carnegie Bldg

University Park, PA 16802

Malcolm's e-mail is mum24@psu.edu.

Enterprise winner: Joe Rexrode, Detroit Free Press

Comment by the judge, Gene Duffey: Unique and excellent look at how colleges try to keep their athletes away from agents. Good quotes from agent, coaches, former players and Michigan State officials. The Javon Ringer story is a perfect example..

Editor's Note: Although Rexrode now works for the Detroit Free Press, these stories were published by his previous employer, the Lansing State Journal.

By JOE REXRODE
First of seven stories

EAST LANSING — When most people think of sports agents, they think of fancy suits, expensive cars, slicked hair.

When the people who have witnessed player procurement on college campuses think of agents, they think of backpacks, sandals, spiked hair.

These are the people who make first contact. The “runners.” And they are a mysterious bunch. The

“Most of them look like college kids,” said Jennifer Smith, MSU’s associate athletic director for compliance.

Some, apparently, are college kids.

“I do think it’s very common for many agencies to have runners on campuses across the country,” said Bruce Tollner, founder of Rep 1 Sports Group, which represents former MSU football players Javon Ringer and Blair White. “In some cases the agency will pay for the runner’s schooling and then the runner’s job is to point players in the direction of that agency. It’s something we don’t want any part of. We choose not to go in that direction and sometimes we’re not in the mix at the end with a player because we weren’t in it on the front end.”

The front end is the concern of MSU and other schools, which do all they can to inform, educate and plead with their athletes to avoid agents. Conversations aren’t a problem, but it’s against NCAA rules for athletes to accept money or gifts from agents, and anyone who does is ineligible – which is why USC was stripped of its 2004-05 BCS championship and star Reggie Bush stripped of his 2005 Heisman Trophy after a marketing agency reportedly gave Bush \$300,000 in gifts while he was still in college.

Bush is an extreme case, a sure-thing star who commanded huge attention and dollars. Much of the interaction between runners and players involves smaller purchases, say those who are familiar with the process.

The goal is the same, though. Get that player to com-

JOE REXRODE

Detroit Free Press

Age: 39

College: Michigan State

Background: I started at the Free Press as Michigan State beat writer in August, after serving in that capacity for the Lansing State Journal starting in January of 2003. But I covered those beats as far back as the mid-1990s for the MSU college newspaper, The State News. Nothing like a little Nick Saban to



give a young journalist some humility and a fear of loud noises. I was a part-time reporter at the State Journal for the 1999-2000 year, helping cover Saban's 9-2 breakthrough at MSU and bolt for LSU, followed by Tom Izzo's national championship basketball team. I then spent two years on the news copy desk before switching to the sports desk, then taking over for retiring mentor Jack Ebling on the beats. I also covered the London Olympics for Gannett, and over the years have covered the NBA finals, NFL football, NASCAR, professional golf, college women's basketball and high school sports. I wrote a 2006 book on the history of Michigan State football and have won more than 20 writing awards -- including my two favorites, first-place honors from the FWAA. I am married (Katie) with two sons (Jack and Brennan) and a daughter (Caroline).

mit to the agent who employs you.

“They’d just befriend them, it’s funny how they do it,” said Jason Strayhorn, who played football at MSU from 1994-98 and witnessed runners in action with teammates he did not want to name. “You see them together at the bars, at the clubs and all of the sudden this guy’s hanging around and he’s got lots of money. And obviously guys are gonna gravitate to the guy buying food and drinks for everyone.

“And it’s not like he has a promissory note (with him) saying ‘You owe me this,’ but that’s really what it is. I remember seeing that. And at the time you don’t even think about it, because you think differently at 21.”

Said Tollner: “They’re taking them out to bars, buying them stuff and then they’ll try to get them down to Miami or wherever and get them tied to the agent at an early stage.”

In 1995, when Strayhorn was a redshirt freshman at

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Enterprise (continued)

(Continued from page 10)

MSU, Tony Banks was the Spartans' star quarterback. In a 2010 story in Sports Illustrated, NFL agent Josh Luchs said he illegally paid dozens of college players including Banks – whom he said got “hundreds of dollars a month” and in turn became a client when his eligibility was finished.

This story and the others Luchs told did not result in violations for college programs, because they were revealed four years or more after the fact. The NCAA has a four-year statute of limitations on violations.

And MSU has a daily reason to fear them, and the runners who can bring them on.

So who are these runners? Sports agent Molly Fletcher, an MSU grad who grew up in East Lansing, said they are usually younger people trying to break into the business who have not been certified as agents.

“They want to prove to agents that they can one day become an agent, instead of just a runner,” said Fletcher, 39, who recently started her own agency in Atlanta, MWF Enterprises, and avoids football and basketball players because of story lines like this. “These runners are just paid to be visible.”

That pay is probably less than \$50,000 a year, Fletcher said. Or it could be a small percentage, 1 percent or so, of the contract for a client the runner helps land (agents typically get 4 percent to 10 percent).

Or the runner may be what NCAA vice president of enforcement Julie Roe Lach calls a “subcontractor” – someone working independently to gain influence with a prominent athlete and shop that influence to various agents.

“A million different kinds of people, and a lot of them are involved in AAU (youth basketball) because it’s an avenue,” MSU men’s basketball coach Tom Izzo said.

“It can be anybody in the world,” Tollner said. “Someone finishes law school and he buddies up with the future No. 1 pick.”

Often, the agencies who use aggressive, rule-breaking runners are fledgling operations, Tollner said, who are trying to break into the business “unethically” and end up flaming out.

But in a 2008 Los Angeles Times story on the accusation that alleged runner Rodney Guillory took \$250,000 from a sports agency and funneled it to USC star basketball player O.J. Mayo, a sports agent speaking on condition of anonymity said this of runners: “Overwhelmingly, 95 percent of the time, there’s a third party involved. If agents could get players in a fair, representative way without paying money they would, because everyone is a bottom-line businessman. But they can’t.”

“A lot of guys in that space don’t operate with the

same level of integrity I want to operate at,” Fletcher said of agents who target college football and basketball players. “What a yucky way to live, because at any minute that world can explode.”

Second of seven stories

It was a passing moment in HBO’s “Real Sports” special on cheating in college athletics, a March 30 investigative report that centered around former Auburn University football star Stanley McClover’s allegations – supported by three teammates -- that boosters paid them based on their performance on the field.

After McClover described getting cash from a booster at a Louisiana State University camp while he was being recruited in the summer of 2002, a photo flashed across the screen of McClover in MSU gear while reporter Andrea Kremer said: “McClover said there were money handshakes from boosters at other football camps, too. At Auburn, for a couple hundred dollars, and also at Michigan State. All the schools denied any wrongdoing.”

Jennifer Smith, MSU’s associate athletic director for compliance, was tuned in.

“Oh (crap),” she recalled of her reaction, even though the NCAA has a four-year NCAA statute of limitations on violations. “At first I was looking at the time frame like, ‘OK, how far back are we?’ And then, if they can’t give any details about anything, usually it’s not very truthful. The statute of limitations (has passed), but it doesn’t shed you in a very good light.”

Athletic director Mark Hollis agreed, saying he was “frustrated” by the claims of McClover, who did not respond to State Journal attempts to reach him for comment on his mobile phone and on Facebook. The NCAA did inform Smith that it is looking into all of McClover’s claims and will get back to her if it finds anything.

Considering what’s going on all around MSU, a random allegation of a cash handout from several years ago is rather trivial. The University of Michigan is on probation after the NCAA found it guilty of major violations involving excessive practice and illegal monitoring by coaches, and Ohio State University appears headed for major sanctions in the wake of a scandal that has forced coach Jim Tressel to resign and star quarterback Terrelle Pryor to forgo his senior season.

MSU football hasn’t had NCAA problems since it was placed on four years of probation in 1996 for major infractions, including academic fraud, improper benefits from boosters to players and lack of institutional control. (The probation was extended for two years in 1999 because of major infractions in MSU’s wrestling and women’s track and field programs, the last major infractions

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Enterprise (continued)

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for the school).

That probation brought about significant changes, including a full-scale compliance department – compliance previously had been one of assistant athletic director Clarence Underwood's duties -- and a beefed-up academic support staff. And it still resonates, Hollis said.

"Whenever there's adversity, whenever there's a challenge like the NCAA issues we had here, I think it's a wake-up call," Hollis said. "And I think that's what happens as a result of things that happen nationally."

Jason Strayhorn was a freshman football player at MSU in 1994, watching head coach George Perles fired amid a losing season and mounting allegations of NCAA violations. Perles was cleared by the NCAA of any wrongdoing, but his job was lost and his program skewered publicly for perceived corruption.

Grade changing and claims that St. Louis businessman and MSU alum Robert Miltenberger had given \$2,000 to the mother of recruit Hickey Thompson were among the most damning accusations.

When Nick Saban replaced Perles in December of 1994 – bringing assistant coach and current head coach Mark Dantonio with him -- Strayhorn said there was "much more discipline and structure" immediately.

For one thing, he remembers the arrival of strength coach Ken Mannie and a resulting "fear of what the next day would hold."

Major NCAA trouble has been avoided since then, through the tenures of Bobby Williams, John L. Smith and Dantonio. Williams was head coach when McClover visited MSU in 2002.

Dantonio said he has never been directly approached and asked to cheat, but he has seen and heard some things over the years. He has no doubt some of his colleagues do things such as getting around the limit on calls to recruits by buying disposable phones, for example.

"One time, I was in a staff room and I was an assistant and (another assistant) coach said, 'Tell you right now, coach, it's gonna cost X amount of money – a lot of money – to get (a recruit) up here for camp, it's gonna cost X amount of money to get him on a visit, it's gonna cost X amount of money to get him here,'" Dantonio recalled. "And the response from the head coach was 'Quit recruiting the guy.'"

Dantonio also saw the HBO special on McClover, during which McClover said he received about \$1,000 in cash and sexual favors while visiting Ohio State.

Dantonio, who was Tressel's defensive coordinator at Ohio State at the time, was asked if he believed McClover's stories were plausible.

"I don't know," Dantonio said. "Good question. ... I'm

not naïve. If people want to cheat they can cheat. They'll find a way. I mean, you know, governments are corrupt. It's a shame. A shame we're sitting here talking about it, really.

"I don't want to be controversial with this, but I do want to tell you what I really feel and tell you the truth. But do I think there's widespread cheating in college football? I do not. I just do not."

Third of seven stories

EAST LANSING — The big-money boosters, the Peter Secchias of the world, have their names on buildings, are always visible at major MSU athletic events, have a direct line to coaches and administrators – which in turn makes them accountable for what they do.

It's the lesser-known, lesser-donating types who cause more concern for MSU officials. They are the ones who have more to gain by giving cash, gifts and favors – "improper benefits" as described by the NCAA – to athletes.

"It's more people who just, they don't really give a lot but they want to be around the program," said Jennifer Smith, MSU's associate athletic director for compliance. "And tell people, 'So-and-so is taking (cash from me).'"

MSU athletic director Mark Hollis said agents are a much bigger worry for him than boosters, although Smith said she is especially wary of boosters in the football world, where there are a lot more players and opportunities for small transactions that could get the athletic department in trouble.

Those transactions can happen with current players or with recruiting prospects.

"You can't be with prospects and you can't be with boosters 100 percent of the time," Hollis said. "What you can do is create a culture where that's totally unacceptable. And that's the case here at Michigan State."

So how is such a culture created? Hollis said MSU has forms for its boosters, outlining the rules of contact with athletes and warning that violators can be officially "disassociated" from the university.

Such forms are standard procedure for major athletic departments, but Hollis said MSU does a good job of limiting and monitoring interaction, and of educating all parties.

Jeffrey Marron agrees. The former MSU walk-on player and assistant coach, who co-owns a New York investment firm, has been involved in the program since the late 1980s and is now what he calls an "upper-middle" level of donor.

"In the last 10 years, I know we've done it right," Marron said. "I'm proud to be a Spartan. We're not Auburn.

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Enterprise (continued)

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“Can random things happen? Sure. But systemically? No way. I just know we don’t come in contact with players anymore. Fifteen to 20 years ago, the rules were a lot different. Now you really have no contact.”

Still, opportunities to take money are inevitable. A booster may target a recruit he wants to convince to pick MSU. Or an MSU player he wants to come over and hang out with his kids.

“If people that have their hand out, they’re gonna find it, I’d imagine, from a booster or something,” MSU coach Mark Dantonio said.

“I think every player goes through that,” said former MSU football player Jonal Saint-Dic, who said he resisted temptation in college. “A coach can tell you 30 times not to take any money from no boosters or any money from a car dealership. Coaches can knock that up your head all day. At the end of the day, it’s the athlete’s decision.”

Fourth of seven stories

EAST LANSING — They’ve been known to show up in the Clara Bell Smith Academic Center, sidling up to players in study hall. They’ve been seen – and shooed away by MSU officials -- at practice, in the tunnel after football games, the locker room after basketball games and at team hotels.

When high-profile sports agent Drew Rosenhaus stood outside the MSU locker room after the 2007 Champs Sports Bowl, making himself visible to then-junior star receiver Devin Thomas, it was a pretty good indication that Thomas wouldn’t be back for his senior season.

But at least that’s out in the open. MSU is more concerned with the nameless, faceless middlemen who help make connections with people like Rosenhaus. They try to keep them away from MSU athletes, but they can’t threaten them with much, because there is no legal recourse in Michigan against agents who break NCAA rules.

“There’s not really a lot of punishment if you don’t do things right,” said Jennifer Smith, MSU’s associate athletic director for compliance. “You can get disassociated with the NFL (Players Association). Texas has a rule, Alabama has a rule (with legal penalties for agents who give gifts to college players).

“But how many of them are not doing it right? The thing is, you have all these people that want to be agents and are trying to be agents that really aren’t. ... I think the big-name agents, they don’t need to be dirty at this point in their careers. But it’s the people that are trying to be that are (the problem).”

“It’s a challenge,” MSU athletic director Mark Hollis said of policing agents. “You watch a little bit closer when it’s potentially the last basketball game or the bowl game.”

MSU’s primary strategies are to watch for unfamiliar faces and remind athletes of the repercussions of accepting cash and gifts. Smith and her staffers check the pass list of each player before each football and men’s basketball game, to see if any unusual names – potential agents or runners – pop up.

Each year before the NCAA Tournament and bowl game, MSU players sign affidavits, which are later notarized, proclaiming their innocence.

“It protects the institution more than the kid, but it’s like, ‘I haven’t taken anything, I haven’t signed anything,’” Smith said. “So we do that before every postseason competition. So it’s kind of like another layer. If they had done something and then they played in the tournament, at least we could pull that out and say, ‘We went through this. They are lying. It’s not lack of institutional control or lack of monitoring. We have told them.’”

Because telling them is really all MSU can do. It’s up to the athletes to decide whether or not to listen.

“Once you open the door, it’s opening Pandora’s Box,” former MSU football player Jason Strayhorn said. “Whatever you do in the dark will come out in the day.”

Fifth of seven stories

EAST LANSING — It was unsettling at times, this agent search for which Darlene Ringer had no instructional handbook.

Like the time, during her son Javon’s junior year at Michigan State, an unfamiliar man walked up to her in Spartan Stadium, shook her hand and said: “I will be talking to you.”

Or the call from celebrity Bishop Noel Jones, on behalf of a fledgling agent in California who wanted to make Javon “the face of his program” – an appeal to the Ringers’ deep religious beliefs that did not work.

Or the moment she informed Daniel Martoe, an agent who works for Drew Rosenhaus’ agency, that Javon would not be signing with them.

“He almost had a fit,” Darlene recalled of a conversation that took place after Javon’s final MSU appearance in the 2009 Capital One Bowl. “He was shocked. He was saying, ‘Is there any way I can talk to Javon?’ No, sorry.”

And that’s rule No. 1 in the handbook Darlene could write for parents now: Keep the agents and their employees away from your child, insist on dealing with them directly and exclusively.

“Keep your head level,” Darlene said, dispensing

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Enterprise (continued)

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more advice. "Don't let the excitement and hype draw you in. Keep reality there. Don't let the lights blind you and don't buy into someone's pipe dream, 'I'm gonna do this and do that.' Know your child and think about your child's needs instead of your own. Forget about the big house, big car. This is your child's future, not yours."

The Ringers – Darlene and Javon's father, Bishop Eugene Ringer – got serious about picking an agent in the summer of 2008, before Javon's senior season at MSU. Darlene handled it and started by poring over dozens of mailed info packets in her Dayton, Ohio home and choosing a top 25.

She called them all, and the first 15 to respond made the next cut. It got to 10, then seven, then three, based on many factors.

Are they Christian? Do they seem like smooth talkers? Are you speaking with the agent or an assistant?

Some seemed to have a problem dealing with a woman rather than a man. Gone. Some disparaged the way MSU's coaches utilized Ringer on the field. Gone.

Rep 1 Sports of Irvine, Calif., got involved when marketing director Chase Callahan and his son attended the final game of Javon's junior season, a home win over Penn State. Founder and lead agent Bruce Tollner – son of longtime college and NFL coach Ted Tollner -- made a positive impression with a pressure-free approach.

Rosenhaus, who previously signed MSU's Drew Stanton and Devin Thomas, made a late push. He and Martoe arranged a late-season 2008 meeting with Darlene at the Kellogg Center.

Ultimately, she liked Tollner better and told him to come to the Capital One Bowl. That "would be the final test," she said, and he was there. Javon met him, signed with him and it has been a happy union – after a stressful journey.

Javon is now entering his third season with the Tennessee Titans and is finishing up his sociology degree at MSU.

Darlene said she would like to see MSU be more involved in helping parents navigate the agent-choosing process. MSU athletic director Mark Hollis said that level of involvement varies from coach to coach, but it's obviously easier for a basketball coach because he has far fewer players.

"Tom takes it to the point of contacting NBA general managers and coaches to get a sense (about an agent)," Hollis said. "So Tom almost plays that intermediary role."

Sixth of seven stories

EAST LANSING — Jennifer Smith has staked out a hotel. Driven alone in neighborhoods that made her fear

for her safety. Slipped into parking lots to check out the vehicles Michigan State athletes were driving.

And traded text messages during a wedding ceremony with a co-worker over a pressing eligibility issue involving an MSU athlete – while standing as a bridesmaid.

Serving as MSU's associate athletic director for compliance involves a lot more than submitting paperwork and educating coaches on the ever-changing NCAA rules. It involves a lot more pressure than some may realize, too.

"Jen has carte blanche," MSU athletic director Mark Hollis said of Smith, "and she's here to protect the integrity of our program."

Told of that comment, Smith chuckled and said: "Scary."

Which also describes the daunting, daily task of keeping MSU out of NCAA trouble. Smith's department of three full-time employees, two clerical positions, an intern and an annual budget of about \$440,000 does it by educating, reminding, policing and, at times, investigating.

When trouble at Ohio State University hit the news in December, Smith fired off an email to MSU's athletes, reminding them it's against NCAA rules to profit from their memorabilia.

She has monthly rules meetings with MSU coaches and even runs a little tournament called "Compliance Madness" (devised by compliance coordinator Holly Baumgartner), pitting coaches against each other to see who can get the best score on the annually required NCAA rules test (baseball coach Jake Boss is the defending champ).

And yes, Smith is all over the cars. All athletes must register their vehicles with Smith's office, providing registration, insurance, dealer information and proof of purchase.

Beyond that, she and her staff do some spying.

"I can't give away my secrets, because then they'll change parking lots," said Smith, whose staff is about the same size as everyone in the Big Ten except for Ohio State, which has six full-time compliance agents. "But we might go to (apartment complex) Spartan Village, we might go during (football) two-a-days. The good thing about the athletes is, they don't like to walk anywhere, so it's pretty easy to find their cars."

MSU has not been hit with major NCAA infractions since 1999 and has been free of probation since 2001. But there have been worrisome situations.

"We've had some allegations against some tutors, that they may have been doing course work for students, and they all came out fine," Smith said. "I'd say those

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Enterprise (continued)

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would be our closest calls. It's been probably five or six years."

Smith, a Wisconsin graduate, has been at MSU since 1997. She came from Louisville, where her job in the middle of an NCAA investigation of Denny Crum's basketball program included staking out a hotel to check on allegations that some athletes and their parents were living there for free.

She was an original member of an MSU compliance department formed in the wake of football probation – yet it was "like heaven," she said after what she encountered at Louisville. The coaches there "knew what they were doing was wrong," she said.

One thing is clear about the people in MSU's athletic department: They lean heavily on Smith to keep them compliant in jobs that demand aggression.

"I think if we're paying good money to these compliance directors, they should have more respect. And ours is really good," MSU men's basketball coach Tom Izzo said. "She lets you take it to the farthest you can take it, but doesn't let you go over. And that's what you've got to do. There's some waters you've got to be in. The NCAA puts you in waters everywhere, believe it or not. The AAU (basketball) waters. You've got to push the envelope to the nth degree, but you can't go over."

Last of seven stories

EAST LANSING — The folks at NCAA headquarters say they're getting tougher on rule breakers. That's probably a good idea.

"Put it this way on college sports. The men's basketball champion (Connecticut) won six weeks after they got hit by eight major infractions, right?" said Dan Wetzel, columnist for Yahoo Sports. "The BCS championship game featured two teams (Auburn and Oregon) currently under investigation, in a bowl game run by a guy (Fiesta Bowl CEO John Junker) who's under investigation."

Wetzel wrote in September of 2008 that college sports was in its "golden age of cheating," with, at the time, no major basketball violations in two years and no major football violations in 15 months.

Things have changed since then, with significant NCAA sanctions against Connecticut basketball and Southern Cal football, and ongoing investigations of Ohio State, North Carolina, Auburn and Oregon football.

NCAA President Mark Emmert, who got the job in April 2010, said in May his organization needs to make sure "the cost of violating rules costs more than not violating them."

Emmert also said he is giving more resources to the

enforcement staff, headed by vice president Julie Roe Lach. She got the job in November and immediately traveled to several schools, meeting with more than 100 officials including some from MSU to get a candid sense of what needs to change.

She heard a lot of things like this from Illinois men's basketball coach Bruce Weber: "Are you going after someone going 68 mph in a 65, or are you going after somebody that's going 100?"

In other words, are you going after people making too many phone calls or people delivering large sums of money for players?

People want big cheaters caught and hit with penalties stiff enough to deter bad behavior.

And although evidence points to more activity from the enforcement staff, national media openly wondered how Ohio State players were eligible for the Sugar Bowl despite committing NCAA violations, or how Auburn star Cam Newton was eligible for the national championship game even though the NCAA said his father broke rules by shopping his services.

MSU associate athletic director for compliance Jennifer Smith said she was stunned by the Newton ruling.

"There isn't a compliance person in the country who didn't treat parents and kids as the same person," Smith said. "I mean, when that came out, everybody was like, 'What do you mean there's not a rule that prohibits this? This is what we've been going on since we started.'"

The thing is, Roe Lach's enforcement staff may have been just as stunned. What should be made clear is that the 10-member Committee on Infractions is a separate entity that decides penalties – and may not always see things the same way as the investigators.

The Committee on Infractions is made up in part of officials from member schools, some of whom may have relationships with the people under investigation.

"Is there a rift? No, there's not a rift," Roe Lach said. "Is there tension between the enforcement staff and the Committee on Infractions? I think yes at times, just as there's tension between a school and the enforcement staff or a school and the Committee on Infractions, or the coach and the enforcement staff or the coach and the Committee on Infractions. Because that's just to me a natural byproduct of doing the work that we do."

One thing does make Roe Lach tense: The well-worn suggestion that the NCAA protects its high-profile athletic programs.

"I can tell you, there are no sacred cows and there are no witch hunts," she said. "We don't have a secret list here that we keep in a drawer and we make sure we don't investigate those people. And we also don't have a list of people that we're trying to find something on. That would just completely abandon any notion of integrity."