

NCAA extends hand and olive branch in St. Louis

It's been over four months since members of the USBWA and the NCAA met at the Renaissance Suites hotel in St. Louis in mid-June. But it seems like yesterday.

For instance, I'm still full.

Current USBWA officers and past presidents traveled to St. Louis, on their own dime, at the invitation of Greg Shaheen, vice president of Division I Men's Basketball, and David Worlock, NCAA media relations chief. We held a six-hour, two-meal meeting. From 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., we discussed our favorite issues and topics (including the favorite topic), expressed opinions and concerns, agreed on some and agreed to disagree on others.

There are a number of ways to describe the tone of the meeting. Historic. Significant. Respectful. Informative.

Mainly, the spirit of St. Louis was one of cooperation.

More on that later. First, let's review the highlights.

1) Press seating at the Final Four will not change, at least through 2011 in Houston. There are details here I cannot divulge. In fact, Shaheen gave us information about the seating designs for future Final Fours that he had not even told the NCAA D-I Basketball Committee. Right. He told us first.

There are three things you need to know about this. One, CBS is concerned about atmosphere or, a lack thereof, in their opinion, in the current court layout at a Final Four. They want more noise down by the floor. The NCAA is coming up with a way to accommodate this without shipping us. Two, we serve as a buffer to the court to discourage terrorists, wackos, or anyone who might want some publicity by rushing the court. Some of us suspected this and had it confirmed. Three, our seats down there are not guaranteed forever. Shaheen made that clear, while also making us feel that we aren't getting moved anytime soon.

2) Wireless cost \$29.95 in Indy last year. Don't look for that price to go down. Shaheen brought the NCAA's wireless guru to the meeting. He confirmed what many of us know: wireless is a strange, fluid thing that changes by the year, if not by the week. The Final Four venues, domes in particular, are wireless-ready in the football press boxes, but not down on the floor or in the work room areas downstairs. Thus, it costs more to set up. And, it's unpredictable. (See: last year's Saturday night meltdown on press row.) The NCAA spent \$25,000 to fix the problem for Monday night. But this is something we are going to have to live with – until the next level of wireless comes around the corner.

3) There will be no post-game concerts or corporate parties next to the media work room (in the open area behind the bleachers) in the Georgia Dome. The corporate types will do their thing somewhere else in the dome, away from us.

4) Signing up for regional credentials on line will be more flexible to allow us to wait for the brackets to come out to figure out our travel plans.

Now, for the really good stuff.

5) We have been invited to travel to NCAA headquarters in February and take place in a mock bracket exercise in the actual Basketball Committee "War Room." We will use the actual committee computers, the computer program, the data, RPI, etc., and do our own bracket with the teams currently in the hunt and on the bubble next February. There are 10 computers, and Greg says we can fit two writers on each one. That's 20 doing the brackets with room for 20 more to watch in the room. All of it will be on the record and suitable for print. And all will be expected to pay their own dime to get there and spend the night (it will take most of one day).

Joe Mitch and I will come up with an invitation list. A lot of folks are going to want to do this and, I should add, Shaheen and Worlock want to make sure certain folks are there, too. This won't be easy. If you don't make the cut this time, feel free to pick your bone with me.

6) During one of our breaks, I asked Greg if there was any way we could make this St. Louis meeting an annual shindig, with access also to Committee members and CBS folks. Without hesitation, he said, "I don't see why not." *Voila*. Next May, we will have an entourage going to San Antonio to meet with Greg, David and assorted committee members at the NCAA's annual spring meeting with the committee (always held at the next year's Final Four site). I'm still pushing for a CBS type or two to join us. I think it would be very important to have CBS get to hear us and get to know us. I also feel the Final Four breakfast we have with the Committee isn't enough. It feels rushed. It feels like all we do is air our complaints. I think we should get some quality time getting to know the committee, too. Greg agrees.

7) Greg offered the NCAA's help and assistance ("anything we can do to help") with USBWA events at the Final Four, including promoting our events to the public. Yes, that includes the Oscar Robertson breakfast. You should have seen the smile on Joe Mitch's face.

There you have it.

So what do we think?

Well, certainly, there are going to be skeptics among us. Do we trust the NCAA? Why should we? Aren't they

Tom Shatel President, Omaha World Herald



just leading us into a trap, throwing us goodies now so they can take it all away later?

I've heard that line of thinking.

I don't buy it.

Maybe it's from all that fresh air, solitude and corn stalks. Maybe in the Midwest, we are built a little different. Naive? Perhaps. Trusting? Sure. That doesn't mean we are immune to cynicism.

It just means we, or, I, am willing to give someone a chance to prove themselves. When someone looks me in the eye and shakes my hand and tells me something, I'm going to believe it and make them prove otherwise. I'm going to give them the benefit of the doubt that they are telling the truth.

I don't know Greg Shaheen. We just met. I know we have two things in common: we both love college basketball and Diet Coke.

From what I heard, there may be a third common bond: an interest in having the media cover the Final Four the right way.

Ladies and germs, I've been covering the NCAA for 25 years.

I got to know Dave Cawood while I was a young mutt feeling my way around the college beat at the KC Star in 1982. Then Jim Marchiony. Alfred White. Bill Hancock. Like many of you, I've watched the Final Four grow up, from the intimate book-store feel tournament we loved in the late '70s and early '80s to the corporate giant it is now. We all know how the NCAA works, what they like, don't like, what they'll give, won't give. I've had a good working relationship with all of them.

I have yet to see anything like this olive branch, however.

The bottom line is, we could worry about where our seats are going to be.

And we will. But we can also look at the big picture here.

The NCAA is opening the door to some places we haven't been.

I say we go in, eyes open and hand extended.

Time to consider nominees for USBWA's Triple Crown

With the start of another season, USBWA members are reminded to give thought to nominating candidates for the numerous awards presented annually by the USBWA.

Here's a list of those awards:

HALL OF FAME. Established in 1988, the USBWA Hall of Fame honors past and present members who are recognized for their contributions to the organization and achievements in sports journalism.

To be eligible for consideration, an individual must have 20 years of service in the profession.

The current number of inductees in the Hall of Fame is 48. Marvin West of the Knoxville News-Sentinel and Scripps Howard News-Service, was inducted last year.

MOST COURAGEOUS. Since 1978, the USBWA has annually honored individuals who wage courageous battles in life in face of adversity and personal hardships.

Last year's recipient was Tennessee Tech coach Mike Sutton for his battle with the paralyzing effects of Guillain-Barre Syndrome, in which the immune system attacks nerves and weakens the legs and arms.

Other past award winners include Grant Dykstra, who overcame a farming accident that left one of his arms mangled as a child to become a standout basketball player at Western Washington University; Trey Schwab, a Marquette assistant coach who had a double-lung transplant; the Oklahoma State basketball program following the plane crash that killed 10 members of the team; and former Tulsa and Arkansas coach Nolan Richardson for dealing with racial prejudice in life and the death of his daughter from leukemia.



Joe Mitch
Executive Director
USBWA

KATHA QUINN AWARD. This award is presented in memory of Katha Quinn, the late sports information director at St. John's University who died of cancer in 1990.

The award honors individuals for their service and contributions to the USBWA, especially those who have excelled at servicing the media and, like Katha, are an inspiration to those in sports journalism.

Last year's winner was ex-Big Eight and Big Ten commissioner Wayne Duke, who was instrumental in the formation of the USBWA in 1956 and wrote the organization's original constitution. Previous recipients include SIDs Tim Tolokan of Connecticut and Steve Kirschner and Rick Brewer of North Carolina; former NCAA

media coordinators Bill Hancock and Jim Marchiony; Craig Miller of USA Basketball; and the Washington Post's Mark Asher.

All three awards are presented at the USBWA's awards

USBWA All-America Watch List

- Arron Afflalo, UCLA
- Morris Almond, Rice
- Corey Brewer, Florida
- Jared Dudley, BC
- Glen Davis, LSU
- Nick Fazekas, Nevada
- Nate Funk, Creighton
- Aaron Gray, Pittsburgh
- Taurean Green, Florida
- Tyler Hansbrough, UNC
- Brandon Heath, S.D. State
- Jarius Jackson, Texas Tech
- Dominic James, Marquette
- Luc Mbah A Moute, UCLA
- Josh McRoberts, Duke
- Joakim Noah, Florida
- Greg Oden, Ohio State
- Richard Roby, Colorado
- Brandon Rush, Kansas
- Ronald Steele, Alabama
- Loren Stokes, Hofstra
- Curtis Sumpter, Villanova
- Al Thornton, Florida State
- Alando Tucker, Wisconsin

USBWA Pre-Season Top 25

- 1. Florida
- 2. North Carolina
- 3. Kansas
- 4. Ohio State
- 5. UCLA
- 6. Alabama
- 7. Wisconsin
- 8. Arizona
- 9. Pittsburgh
- 10. Georgetown
- 11. Texas
- 12. Duke
- 13. Memphis
- 14. Connecticut
- 15. LSU
- 16. Washington
- 17. Creighton
- 18. Georgia Tech
- 19. Louisville
- 20. Syracuse
- 21. Texas A&M
- 22. Southern Illinois
- 23. Xavier
- 24. Tennessee
- 25. Kentucky

breakfast held annually at the Final Four site. Send nominations to mitch@mvc.org.

LODGE NOTES. The USBWA mourns the passing this past July of long-time member Bob Pille at his home in Tucson, Ariz., after a year-long battle to regain his health following an automobile accident. Pille, a Bradley graduate, worked for the Peoria Journal-Star, the Times Herald in Washington, D.C., the Cincinnati Post and the Detroit Free Press and in 1966 returned to his Illinois roots as a Big Ten sports writer for the Chicago Sun Times. He retired in 1988 but continued to do freelance work in retirement.

The USBWA put out a call for those who have been members the longest.

To date, those who have responded are: Wayne Duke and Don Bryant of Nebraska, both members since the USBWA's inception 50 years ago in 1956; and Larry Kimball, 44 years, since 1962 when he was at Delaware and later Syracuse.

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USBWA Membership Application Form

If you have not yet renewed your membership to the U.S. Basketball Writers Association now is the time to act.

For your \$40 membership fee you will receive:

- the most complete directory in college basketball
- Marriott Athletic VIP Card
- voting for All-America team and player and coach of year
- seven issues of *Basketball Times*;
- access to USBWA website (usbwa.com)
- eligibility for Best Writing Contest, with cash prizes

Send a check for \$40 and let the USBWA make your job of covering college basketball easier.

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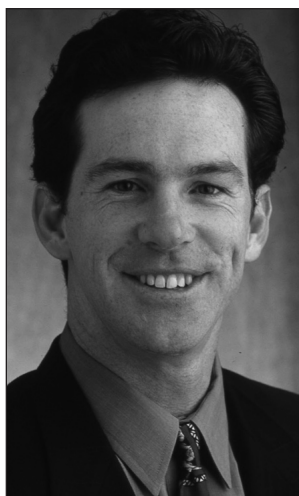
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Jamie Dixon has one vote for USBWA's Most Courageous

Sadly, the season is on the verge of beginning and there are already too many candidates for the most courageous award.

There are five members of the Duquesne basketball team – Sam Ashaolu, Stuard Baldonado, Kojo Mensah, Shawn James and Aaron Jackson – who were shot after reportedly walking away from a disagreement after a school dance. All of them could be candidates for the United States Basketball Writers Association's most cherished award in March.



Jamie Dixon

So, too, could the entire team as it deals with the mental and physical anguish of being shot at and the recovery that will unfold over the course of the season.

The trauma that is ongoing for players at Georgia, who are dealing with the loss of their teammate Kevin Brophy after he was killed in an automobile accident shouldn't be forgotten.

And, most recently, the tragic death of Toledo's Haris Charalambous after a workout will certainly linger in the minds of the Rockets' players throughout the course of the season.

But there is still one person, whom to me, exhibits courage on a daily basis for being able to forge ahead. The voting hasn't even begun, the candidates aren't even formally announced, and still, I can see no one else that should deserve this award, and this honor, more than Pitt coach Jamie Dixon.

Dixon is still dealing with the day-to-day grieving process of losing his sister, Army women's coach Maggie Dixon, last April to a heart ailment.

The two Dixons were incredibly close. A number of

us in the organization have written about Maggie and how her life touched those at Army and men and women in the sport. I'm not sure I've ever been as traumatized by the death of someone I knew, to some extent covered, as when Maggie suddenly died. As I have written for ESPN.com, I saw Maggie and Jamie less than a week before she died while at the Final Four in Indianapolis.

Her shocking death at age 28 is still hard to fathom. I have seen Jamie a few times since, and talked to him countless times in the months since her passing. Jamie has worked tirelessly to keep her memory alive and wanted to ensure there would be an event in her memory. That's why he didn't care who Pitt was playing at West Point on Nov. 12 as long as he got a game for Maggie's memory. His good friend Steve Hawkins of Western Michigan agreed to be the opponent in a doubleheader at West Point with the Army women's team going against Ohio State in the inaugural Maggie Dixon Classic.

There is so much more Dixon is doing that isn't public, notably continuing to be the glue for his immediate family, parents and sister.

If this wasn't enough to wear on a person's mind, Jamie had to deal with the tragic death of a cousin, John Jackson, of a heart attack at only 43 in June.

Andy Katz
Vice President
ESPN.com



You see, Jamie is carrying more emotional trauma than most coaches, or players, will this season. It's not a contest. It's a fact. It doesn't matter what Pitt does this season. Sure, they are expected to compete for the Big East title, possibly the Final Four. The games, the practices, and the day-to-day rigors of being a basketball coach, as well as being with his wife and two children, can help Jamie deal with the loss of his sister, maybe his closest friend.

And to do all that takes courage. He is still leading a group of young men on a basketball team. He has been courageous throughout this entire process, the rock of the family, the face of the tragedy for the world to see, hear, and watch him naturally tear while dealing with such heavy loss.

These are shoes no one should have to wear. But Jamie had no choice. And he hasn't quit, given up or even once felt sorry for himself. He has forged on like no other, carrying her memory with him on a daily, maybe at times, hourly basis.

And he, and Maggie, should be honored.

My vote is in before the discussion even begins. Jamie Dixon is the most courageous person going through the 2006-07 basketball season.

The tragedy of this is he must be courageous beyond one season as he tries to get over such a painful loss.

We're all experts, but getting it wrong is part of the fun

There are so many reasons to watch the games that we sometimes lose sight of the one that probably intrigues us the most. It is the unknown.

Obviously, there are many games where the result is pre-ordained. Then, there is George Mason.

Last season, a month or so before Selection Sunday, I wrote something to the effect that there didn't seem to be any teams in the SEC or Pac-10 capable of winning the national championship. Nearly two months later, the Final Four was two SEC teams, one Pac-10 team and George Mason. Florida beat UCLA for the title.

We all know some things. It is what we don't know that keeps us coming back to find out.

So, a new season is upon us with much that is known and far more that is unknown.

Florida, an afterthought a year ago and still a bit of a long shot when the 2006 NCAA Tournament began, is now the favorite. Still, it is instructive to note what Gators coach Billy Donovan said after his team won it. Sometimes, it is just your time. There is no rhyme or reason to it. It just is.

Logic now says that Florida is the team to beat. All of their players return. But will it be the same dominant team it was in March? Even teams with the same players are often not the same team from one season to the next. Some get better. Some stay the same. Some get worse.

There are no guarantees. Which is why we watch the games. We all made predictions with the knowledge that it

won't take much to make us look foolish.

The Big East was acknowledged as the best conference last season. They had four teams in the Sweet 16. And none in the Final Four.

This season, North Carolina and Kansas have everybody back. They also had terrific recruiting classes. They figure to win 50 games between them. None of that guarantees anything in March.

The Big Ten did not have a team make the Sweet 16 last season. Many of the league's best players were seniors. Thus, the league figures to be down until you remember Ohio State got Greg Oden and all his friends. It takes just one team to change the perception of a league.

For years, I was certain that the game had gotten com-

pletely away from the little guys, that it was totally stacked in favor of the BCS leagues. Then, we get St. Joe's in 2004 and George Mason in 2006.

Will the BCS leagues continue to dominate the tournament and the Final Four? Obviously.

But schools and stories like George Mason and St. Joe's make us remember why we loved the games in the first place.

There is still an element of the unknown.

As long as we still have that, we still have a game that from the first jump ball in November to that championship Monday night usually delivers on what makes sports such wonderful theater. We simply don't know, even though we think we do.

Dick Jerardi
Vice President
Phila. Daily News



Sports writers must form shield for Fainaru-Wada, Williams

I don't know Mark Fainaru-Wada or Lance Williams. But I have a lot of respect for them. And so should you.

They are the two *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters who helped expose BALCO and ultimately, the athletes who cheated. Their book, "Game Of Shadows" documents the murkiest and darkest side of sports.

Their hard work has culminated with a strange payoff — the government wants to throw them in jail. Instead of praising the two reporters who went to great lengths to expose frauds and try to help clean up sports, they are being threatened with prison for not ratting out who provided them with the information used to break the story.

As reporters, we have certain protections afforded us. However, those protections come at the mercy of the very same people who provide us with them. If a judge decides a reporter must give up his sources, then any protection one has goes out the window.

Chances are few of us will have the opportunity to break a BALCO-type story or that we'd find ourselves in front of a grand jury. But every one of us relies on sources for us to do our jobs, and that's why we have to support Fainaru-Wada and Williams. They are doing what any one of us would do, except their sources are being targeted by the feds whereas most of ours usually don't go beyond some athletic department or some juiced-in booster.

But it doesn't minimize the fact that without sources

to tell us what really goes on, the truth won't be revealed. Ultimately, the public doesn't get the real story.

As reporters, it's our job to inform our readers. People pay good money to support college basketball, and if we're suppressing information because there's a fear of killing the messenger, then we're not doing our jobs.

Each of us has been in that situation. A kid gets suspended because he flunked a drug test, and we know it. Of course, we can't prove it, because we'd be violating the kid's rights to privacy under the "Buckley Amendment," so we accept the school's terse two-paragraph statement that a player has been suspended "for conduct detrimental to the basketball program," and that's what we go with. We don't get hauled

in front of a judge, and it's the safe way out.

Fainaru-Wada and Williams walked the tightrope without the safety net. They got the proof and they went with it, safe in the fact that their sources were accurate and reliable.

Now, they face 18 months in jail because they aren't going to reveal their sources. As fellow journalists, we need to be their safety net. We need to work to make shield laws for journalists stronger. We need to be able to protect our sources so the truth isn't suppressed.

To do anything less would mean we are willing to accept being a step away from a government-controlled press and you can kiss those sources goodbye.

Steve Carp
Vice Pres., Las Vegas
Review Journal



Talk (radio) is cheap, but it doesn't need to be

So, we all can't carve out a second income as professional radio talk-show guests. Then again, we all don't have the acclaimed library of work like colleague John Feinstein.

That's not a shot at John, but I think we all know how much his reputation has been enhanced by his ability to get his voice on the radio (even if it means being the color man for Navy football).

While I generally focus on technology issues in this space, I thought I'd depart from that this time as we get ready for another college basketball season.

I am here to briefly guide you through the world of sports talk radio, where content is cheap and easy (or at least that's what the radio stations and networks would prefer).

But, there are two sides to this and, if planned properly and diligently, sports talk radio can be mutually beneficial.

There are several career writers who have carved their niche on radio, and it's launched them into varying levels of stardom.

ESPN's John Clayton comes to mind. A solid NFL beat man in Seattle for years, he quickly became a favorite of ESPN Radio, long before we'd ever see him on television.

His good nature and great information made him a regular must-listen on what was then weekend-only network radio. His unique information, though, is what made his appearances stand out and, over time, the brass at ESPN realized he was the real deal.

As they say, the rest is history.

But, for Clayton, it didn't start as a regular paying gig. My recollection is that he was merely a willing participant in the beginning who proved he was on the inside. That's what allowed him to migrate to the payroll and eventually to a leading man on the network's NFL coverage.

So, why all this background? And, how does this relate

to you, the college basketball writer?

Chances are, your cell phone occasionally rings with a sports talk radio producer you don't know from a station you've never heard on the other end. Even worse, that ring comes while you're on the line with a key source or on deadline far from home.

Needless to say, having been one of those sports talk producers, I know. I made a few of those calls.

What the station is looking for is your insight, perhaps from a game or campus that they don't have the resources to cover. And, they want it for free. Ten minutes of your time doesn't seem like much to them, but 10 minutes is 10 minutes.

Yet, if you know your stuff and perhaps even have something to promote, you should be prepared to take the on-air invitation. Now that your copy is national via the Internet, anyone in that listening audience can read you.

So, the station gets a credible guest and you get, well, you get an opportunity to promote yourself and your expertise.

Although you shouldn't make a habit of dropping everything to satisfy every interview request, you should

be able to find a happy medium. And, it's more than likely that you have some newspaper pals yapping on sports talk radio that you just enjoy chatting with.

Eventually, your on-air rapport could find you some income. It doesn't always happen, but as much as radio stations are looking for content, they are also looking for talent and segments they can sell.

Those decisions are up to you. Call 'em as you see fit. But, one little test I try to tell writers to take is to ask the station to send you a little something for your trouble — a T-shirt will do the trick. It's not that you need another freebie T-shirt, it's that you want to see just how gracious that station or network is when they borrow your time and information.

As the season gets ready to tip off, surely you will find yourself on the phone doing radio somewhere. When you do, remember that you can make it a win-win, as long as the appreciation goes in both directions.

Ted Gang is the webmaster for the Subway's official website, usbwa.com. He is also a former producer for ESPN Radio and Sports Radio 1310, The Ticket in Dallas. He writes a regular column for The Tipoff on technology issues.

Ted Gangi
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Webmaster

