

A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME: HOW SPORTS REPORTERS VIEW  
THEIR ROLE IN A CHANGING ECOSYSTEM

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

For much of its history, sports journalism has been viewed as the journalism industry's black sheep, never truly fitting into what the other iterations of the profession believe it should be. As Anderson (2001) attempts to emphasize, sports journalists have long been viewed as partisan cheerleaders for the teams and industry they cover, letting their biases and relationships with those they cover affect their coverage. Some sports journalists do consider themselves to be "homers," or people who pander to the audience of the team they cover for favorable reaction or less-restricted access.

Before the advent of the internet in the early 2000s and the digital technology that followed it, sports journalists almost exclusively worked in four places: newspapers and magazines (print) and radio and television (broadcast) stations. But like all sections within the journalism profession, sports has undergone a drastic shift in its landscape, seeing more and more stakeholders and players entering the field. Instead of the traditional main sources of coverage, sports now sees a plethora of them. Bloggers — often fans of the teams or leagues they write about — have emerged. Individual teams, as well as the leagues that govern them, now hire in-house reporters to cover teams and the league as a whole from in a positive light. Instead of

sending out press releases and hoping reporters would choose to write a story off of them, the organizations can now tell their own story, framing themselves to potential consumers as they see fit. The trend has even made its way down to collegiate and high school levels, where schools and universities have hired former reporters or young journalists looking to break into writing as communications professionals who write stories that teeter between news and public relations. So what is the role of a sports journalist? Is it to provide entertainment value for consumers? Or to disseminate information gained through access to players, coaches and executives? Traditional news journalists believe their sports counterparts should be more critical of the people and institutions they cover, investigating for malpractice or corruption. As the ecology of sports journalism continues to shift in the digital age, those inside and outside the industry are left to discern what the role of sports journalism in society is, and even more so, what the industry will look like in the future.

The theoretical framework of this research centers around institutional theory and the universal set of occupational standards institutionalized in journalism on a large scale. Cohen (1963) is typically given credit for coming up with the first classification of journalists' roles by distinguishing between a "neutral" and a "participant" role. In the now-changing ecology of sports journalism, what defines a journalist's cultural capital is now uncertain. In the institutional sense, a journalist's calling card was his or her own autonomy and objectivity (Mindich, 1998), but depending on whom you talk to, that might be shifting toward the pre-19th century ideals of partisan affinity for one group — i.e. team reporters or journalists who cover a team more favorably for better access. At the theoretical level, it's important to research this to determine

whether journalism — and sports journalism in particular — is shifting away from the institutional norms of objectivity and instead toward transparency. Kuhn (1970) says that newest entrants to a field are the least educated on the traditional norms of the profession and are then most likely to be people who change those norms. On the practical level, this research is necessary because the other "new entrants" into the sports journalism ecology present a challenge to the idea that the people who cover sports should do so without favor to anyone. In a 2015 article, then-Grantland writer Bryan Curtis, who is now with *The Ringer*, discusses the challenges media who cover the Oklahoma City Thunder face because they are perceived as negative compared to the team's own employed reporters. In my research, I intend to study what currently employed sports reporters — both those of a traditional media background and those who work for the institution they cover — believe their role in journalism is and what they foresee as the future of their profession.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The pair of theories I intend to use for this research are the field theory and the institutional theory. Bourdieu (1985) categorizes a field as a structured social space where "various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field." According to Benson (2010), field theory tries to understand the journalism field by exploring the relationships between practitioners in the field as well as the relationship with other fields. It allows for journalists to be separated into fields and categorized by the goal they're trying to achieve. But the separate actors all have a shared understanding of the nature of their field, called a "doxa" (Benson and Neveu, 2005), which includes the traditional roles of journalists, journalism ethics and other epistemological knowledge. In the context of my research, sports journalists would represent the "actors" in the field of sports journalism, with the traditionalists struggling to keep the institutional norms of the industry intact while new actors (team reporters) are transforming the field in the digital age. New actors might or might not be educated in what the traditional role of a sports journalist is through journalism training, but their entrance into the ecology causes disruption regardless.

Institutional theory, while somewhat intertwined with field theory, attempts to explain how institutional myths, which are defined as professional ideals, norms and values, and changing everyday practices, shape the occupational values of members of an institution and also shape how outside stakeholders perceive those practitioners (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2005). These myths, often created by stakeholders in the institution, seek to reinforce the traditional ideals of objectivity and professionalism within journalism in an attempt to keep their roles and positions necessary for the foreseeable future. Specifically in the case of sports journalism, more traditional stakeholders like newspaper journalists and television reporters have been critical of new actors entering sports journalism because it 1) threatens their place in the hierarchy and 2) challenges the institutional ideals set forth by them and their predecessors. While fraternizing with athletes and coaches or openly rooting for the team you're tasked to report on was unheard of in traditional sports reporting, the lines have become blurred as actors with direct allegiance to the team they cover have entered the marketplace. These reporters will sometimes be given preferential treatment by the leagues or teams they cover, especially if they're employed by them, because more favorable coverage ensues. Not only does this threaten the ideals of objectivity and fairness, but it also harms the interpretive or critical columnists, whose job it is to opine on those very subjects.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As (Lewis & Weaver, 2015) note, unlike traditional sports journalism, where stories are more focused on statistics and performances, the current direction of the field is putting more emphasis on the connection between sports, celebrity and pop culture, which Lewis and Weaver find to be

more preferential for sports fans. Because of athletes increased exposure to fans on social media and the amount of information available via social media, smartphone applications and other digital sources, sports reporting has changed drastically in the past few decades, especially the last five to 10 years. Instead of being reliant on sports media for coverage and exposure, teams — and even athletes themselves — are now able to communicate with fans and followers directly on Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other platforms. In a 2014 article for *Fast Company*, author Matt McCue gives examples of how athletes have attempted to venture into the communication space and control their own message. Charlie Villanueva, an NBA free agent, made video clips for fans to follow along with as he tried out for different teams, went through daily workouts and discussed future plans with his agent. But when media reports started surfacing that Villanueva had agreed to join the Dallas Mavericks, his blog went silent. Although Villanueva didn't share the news, consumers were still informed of his decision to sign with Dallas by more traditional media outlets.

For certain sports news consumers, the advent of social media has lessened the need for sports journalists because they receive all of their news in one place — usually Twitter — and don't feel the need to read the actual stories. Sports journalists themselves are to blame for this in many ways because they give away information for free on personal social media accounts without requiring readers to click through to their site.

In their traditional role, sports journalists — like their political, news or entertainment counterparts — were considered to be the gatekeepers of their chosen section of the media

landscape, making the ultimate decisions on what and who got covered, how it got covered and when it got covered (Lau & Russell, 1980). Along the lines of institutional theory, they are the actors attempting to maintain that hierarchy, but with each league, organization, coach and player having the option to be its own news outlet, their stranglehold on the news-making industry is weakening.

Much like reporters who travel aboard Air Force One to cover presidential travels or trek daily to the White House for press briefings, sports journalists do the same to gain access to key sources and develop as much insight about their beat as possible. In that same vein, sports journalists also deal with many of the same conflicts as other journalists, be it conflicts of interest due to source relationships, struggles with public relations staff or even the challenge of covering athletes (or politicians) who now have social media as a platform and no longer need reporters to spread their message.

Sports journalism, because of the exponential growth of networks like ESPN and Fox Sports, including specialized networks for leagues, has often been at the forefront of dealing with the technological advancement that is still perplexing many traditional journalists (Boyle, 2017).

With the coming-of-age of digital news sites like ESPN.com, CNNSI and AOL FanHouse, traditional outlets (print, radio and television) were dealing with a changing ecology long before their counterparts. Soon after the jump into the digital sports sphere began, blog sites run by fans of the teams they were "covering" started to up. In 1998, Jim Heckman, the son-in-law of former University of Washington head football coach Don James, started a subscription website

entitled Rivals.com. For \$10 per month, subscribers could access college sports recruiting information about their favorite school. Similar sites soon followed, and an untapped segment of college sports reporting that no one had thought of as a viable business — recruiting — suddenly emerged as multi-million journalism industry. Over the next decade, fan blogs such as SBNation.com started to make a foothold for themselves, allowing fans to write about the teams they loved — or hated — without any journalistic standards or oversight. With the advent of podcasts and video sites like YouTube, anyone with recording equipment and an interest in sports could have their own sports talk show. And soon enough, institutions — the MLB, NFL, NBA and college universities — realized they could produce their own content now that people could be reached on the internet instead of solely through print publication. In 2009, following massive layoffs at newspapers and media outlets around the country, the Los Angeles Kings didn't feel as though they were receiving as much media coverage as they deserved. So they simply hired their own reporter away from the *Los Angeles Daily News*. In 2013, the University of Oregon hired Rob Moseley, who had covered the team previously — and at times critically — for the *Eugene Register-Guard* newspaper, to be its new editor of GoDucks.com, the university's official athletics site. In between, MLB, NBA and NFL teams have created similar positions, with MLB.com having a designated beat writer for every one of its 30 teams. Like traditional media outlets, these reporters travel to road games, interview players before and after games and write stories. But because of their affiliation to the league or team they cover, they often get special access not granted to other reporters. Neill Woelk, who covered the University of Colorado for more than two decades at the Boulder Daily Camera, now works for CUBuffs.com, the school's athletics website, as a contributing editor. While other reporters are barred from viewing any

portions of practice, Woelk is allowed to observe the entire time, taking notes and adding color to his story with that information. Because his role is to shine a positive light on the program and the team rather than objectively reporting what is happening, he's given special access to things that other media aren't.

In sports journalism, shifts like this have created the question of what the role of reporters in society is. Little has been studied on that topic, though. Lifestyle journalism itself has become an important and profitable area of journalism (Bell and Hollows, 2005), but while sports journalism fulfills a similar need as its lifestyle counterpart, there is almost no literature about what sports journalists view as their role in the journalistic community. Should it solely fulfill its role to entertain its consumers and disseminate information, or should it also be engaged in the investigation, analysis and critique that is the legitimate purpose of 'news culture'? (Allan, 2004)

In today's society, sports inevitably crosses over into not only politics — as seen by President Donald Trump's effect on the NFL — but it has also merged into culture, business, lifestyle and even education. The investigation and eventual conviction of former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar is an example of reporting that transcended solely having an effect in the sports world. As journalism jobs continue to decline in the United States, the ability to investigate crimes and corruption in sport does, too. Replacing these traditional media reporters are people like Woelk and Moseley, who are able to produce quality content for readers that are interested in the positive aspects of the teams and organizations they follow. No longer do schools who've

hired these reporters send out press releases with this information to be disseminated by traditional media — they can just do it themselves.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research will be guided by the following questions:

*RQ1: What do sports reporters view as their role(s) in the journalism community?*

*RQ2: With the changes in sports journalism due to the emergence of the Internet sports consumption habits on social media, what do sports journalists believe the future of their industry holds?*

## **METHODS**

The sole component of my proposed research will involve semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in sports journalism — four each from the following segments: traditional newspaper journalists, digital-only journalists, viral content producers, and team- or league-employed reporters and bloggers. During these interviews, each participant will be asked a series of pre-determined questions to establish how long he or she has been working in sports media, what their previous and current positions are, what their educational background is and any other necessary information. I also plan to ask them two other specific questions: what they believe their role within journalism is, and what they believe the future holds for reporters in the sports media landscape. Creswell (2009) says to begin these semi-structured personal interviews with icebreaker questions, such as the introductory questions I noted above. These not only give me information to contextualize where each subject fits in my research categories, but it also

gives them a few comfortable, easy-to-answer questions before I begin the more thought-provoking and open-ended questions. Once I've done that, I will ask eight to 10 main questions about the sports journalism field, its role in society and what they foresee traditional media's role in it being. This then leaves time, depending on how long participants are able to talk, for follow-up questions, interesting anecdotes, or other relevant information that might not come directly from my questions. I think these interviews being semi-structured is important for that reason. Each participant — even if they are in the same category as another — will provide different responses and therefore elicit different follow-up questions. Much like a journalist would do with a story he or she is reporting on, leaving a certain amount of time for unscripted dialogue and further discussion could lead to better results. Were I to simply do this as a quantitative survey, where each question is scripted for the respondent and likely done digitally, I think responses would be much less genuine and helpful for my topic of interest.

Livingstone (2010) notes that interviews are important in qualitative research because they allow subjects a "voice." In this case, allowing each stakeholder within sports journalism to express his or her thoughts on the industry and the quality of content in it, but it also allows voices that are heard less often — bloggers, team reporters, etc. — to be heard. As non-traditional members of sports media, they are often ostracized by the hierarchy of the industry as less important or having less valid input. As Whyte (1982) illustrates, the job of an interviewer in a qualitative research study is to be an unbiased listener, observing and noting responses without judgment. In this study, I believe it's important for my role to be exactly that — someone who simply records what subjects are saying and categorizes it without making any judgments or conclusions during

the interviewing process. As a member of the sports media field myself, it is imperative for me to withhold any personal feelings or opinions on the topic or on the subjects' responses, but I don't see any issues arising because of that. In-depth interviews yield "negotiated, contextually based results," according to Fontana and Frey (2000), and in my interviews, my goal is to glean as much information as possible from my subjects about their thoughts, feelings, considerations and motivations about sports journalism and the role they play in it. Because the research topic deals specifically with sports journalism and its roles, the decision to include sports journalists as my research subjects seemed quite obvious because they would have the most knowledge of their industry. Even so, journalists often make very good research subjects because of their knowledge, the communicative nature of journalism and the reflectiveness they often have because of their experiences (Besley and Roberts, 2010). These qualities allow for better responses because sports journalists have insight into their profession that no one else can provide and because all of the respondents will be reporters who have conducted interviews before, I believe they'll be more likely to give more thoughtful, detailed responses to my questions.

Although the specific subjects I intend to contact have not been decided upon, I believe Twitter direct messaging and/or emails will be the most effective way of introducing myself and the study, as well as asking for time to set up an interview. In an attempt to get as diverse of opinions as possible from each group, I've chosen not to limit my research to a specific region or area of the United States but will be interviewing only candidates in the country to keep a somewhat

uniform definition of sports media, journalism and how the two interact. In these two categories, these are possible positions and employers of subjects I plan to contact:

Traditional newspaper, magazine, radio and television journalists: Sports reporters at newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television stations.

Team- or league-employed reporters who moved from traditional media: From this group, I intend to interview reporters and/or editors that are employed by the organization or league they cover, including the NBA, MLB, NFL, NHL, individual teams in each of those leagues, and major collegiate sports programs. They will also have previously worked at one of traditional media outlets I mentioned above and transitioned into working for the organization they cover.

Team- or league-employed reporters who were hired directly into covering the organizations they work for.

Listed below are 15 possible interview subjects, representing both traditional sports reporters and team- or organization-hired reporters, as well as those who have had experience in both.

Neill Woelk  
Former Assistant Sports Editor at the Boulder Daily Camera  
Current Contributing Editor at CUBuffs.com

Thomas Harding  
Colorado Rockies Team Reporter, MLB.com

BJ Kissel

Team Reporter, Kansas City Chiefs

Olivia Landis

Reporter, New York Jets

Nick Gallo

Digital Media Reporter, Oklahoma City Thunder

Lauren Holman

Reporter/Senior Producer, Mizzou Network

Rich Hammond

USC Beat Writer, Orange County Register

Former Reporter for Los Angeles Kings

Rob Moseley

Editor-in-Chief, GoDucks.com

Brittany Ghioli

Orioles Beat Writer, The Athletic

Former MLB.com Reporter

Ben Frederickson

Sports Columnist, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Anthony Slater

Warriors Reporter, The Athletic

Nicole Auerbach

Senior Writer, The Athletic

Andrew Haubner

Sports Director, KEZI 9 Sports (Eugene, OR)

Seth Wickersham

Senior Writer, ESPN the Magazine

Ross Dellenger  
Senior Writer, Sports Illustrated

I'll ask the participating reporters who have been hired by teams, leagues or organizations the following questions, though additional or follow-up questions might depend on the answers given:

1. *What is your educational background?*
2. *What previous jobs have you held before this one, and for how long?*
3. *Why were you interested in becoming a writer/reporter for the team, league or organization you cover?*
4. *As one of those reporters, what information/stories might you have access to that other reporters don't?*
5. *Is there a certain framing or or light you are expected to show the organization in when you create content? Are you discouraged from pursuing any stories?*
6. *How do you/the organization handle breaking news?*
7. *How do you/the organization decide whether a story is publishable or not?*
8. *Are there any examples of stories or particular angles you wanted to pursue but were asked or told not to because of concerns from the organization you cover?*
9. *Have you ever felt animosity from other reporters who cover the team because of your position?*
10. *As a team or league-hired reporter, are there set limitations on what you're expected to cover/not cover? For example, if a player is suspended for performance-enhancing drug use, would you report on that?*

11. *How do you think your position — if at all — affects the traditional media reporters covering the beat?*
12. *What do you believe is the future of sports reporting? Do you see this trend of teams, leagues and organizations hiring their own reporters continuing?*
13. *What you believe defines quality sports reporting?*
14. *What recent trends do you see affecting sports reporting, whether for traditional reporters or ones who work for the organizations they cover?*

I'll ask the traditional reporters the following questions, though additional or follow-up questions might depend on the answers given:

1. *What is your educational background? What previous jobs have you held before this one, and for how long?*
2. *What is your opinion of teams, leagues and organizations hiring their own reporters?*
3. *If you've had any experience working alongside those reporters, can you describe it and explain if it altered the way you were treated by the organization's communications team or members of the organization you covered?*
4. *Are these reporters given special access to athletes/coaches/administrators that traditional media are not?*
5. *Do you believe the trend of hiring reporters to these positions has hurt traditional media? If so, how?*
6. *Do you — and other traditional media members — consider these reporters to be objective? Why or why not?*

7. *What you believe defines quality sports reporting?*
8. *Do you believe this trend has had an affect on the access and stories you were able to pursue because of that access?*
9. *What challenges does this trend present to you and your colleagues?*
10. *What do you foresee as the future of sports journalism, and do you believe this trend has any effect on that future?*

## CONCLUSION

From my research, I expect to find that more traditional sports journalists — newspaper and/or magazine writers, as well as radio and television journalists, believe team- and organization-hired reporters are having an impact on traditional media members. More so, those positions are also being given to younger members of the industry because they tend to command a significantly lower salary. I'd expect the non-traditional sports media members (team reporters) to have a less traditional view of sports journalism, with it being more reflective of their current position in the landscape. I do believe, however, that across the board, all subject groups will hold a similar idea of what quality sports reporting is. Most reporters — no matter who they might be employed by — have gone through journalistic training and know that good reporting and writing is universal. How they get to that good writing and reporting would differ, I expect. More traditional journalists might consider stories that were written by a team reporter to be of less quality because of their allegiance to that specific team, while others in the digital landscape might view it as good journalism all the same. Ethical and journalistic standards are one of the biggest variables in this research, as it will depend on what each subject believes you need to

have to create quality sports journalism content. Is that simply having a good story and publishing it? Or does it have to be autonomous from the subject you're covering to ensure the story's truest accuracy and quality. That's when I am most unsure of and what I intend to find out.

In terms of limitations, my only concern will be the variety of my results. I highly expect there to be a significant variance in the subject's responses, but I cannot be sure that they all won't hold similar ideals of what the roles of sports journalists are and what is defined as good sports journalism. I don't expect to have any issues contacting subjects or getting interviews. I have had good luck in other classes reaching other sports journalists, and with the connections I have developed as a Missouri student, I don't see any limits to the number of quality of subjects I'd be able to reach. I believe my research questions will likely need to be refined somewhat, but I am certain they leave enough of an open end for respondents to give thoughtful, detailed answers that can lead to interesting discussion and follow-up.

In future studies, I'd like to see research done on the rise of these jobs in the new digital sports ecology and how many have been created in the past five, ten or fifteen years. It seems that more and more, jobs in the sports journalism industry are switch to the digital side, and I'd be interested to compare how those have risen to how many print jobs have been decimated in recent years.

# CHAPTER THREE

## PROJECT REPORT

The Oklahoma City Thunder's Tuesday night road game in Utah on March 11 was as non-descript as most of the 81 other regular-season games they'd play this season.

Early in the second quarter, with the Thunder up 26-21 on the Jazz and All-Star point guard Russell Westbrook sitting near the end of Oklahoma City's bench, a verbal altercation broke out between Westbrook and a pair of fans sitting a few rows above the baseline. What the fans, a husband and wife, said to draw Westbrook's ire didn't make it into the Twitter video that soon went viral. Westbrook told reporters after the game that the comments were racially derogatory; the fan vehemently denied it in a postgame interview. But Westbrook telling the husband, "I'll f---k you up, you and your wife," was the threat heard 'round the sports world.

The incident, and that specific video, immediately made its way through social media, into postgame interviews and eventually to major broadcast networks like ESPN and Fox Sports 1. Talk show hosts and sports commentators debated it ad nauseum for the next 48 hours, news outlets opined on fan behavior and Westbrook's quick temper, and the court of public opinion drew its own conclusions, both defending and condemning Westbrook's actions simultaneously.

The story, nor anything about the incident, ever showed up in one seemingly obvious place, though: the Thunder's own team news site. Digital reporter Nick Gallo, who handles writing duties for the team site in addition to working as a sideline reporter for the team's broadcast partner, Fox Sports Oklahoma, penned a recap of the game that night, but there wasn't a single mention of what had happened near the end of the bench.

In the grand scheme of today's sports media landscape, whether the Thunder reported on Westbrook's outburst is little more than a blip on the radar. Dozens of other outside news sources covered it at the local and national level, and in some cases, probably milked it for more than it was worth by talking about it for the better part of a week. But as journalism jobs become more scarce and teams, leagues and other organizations become their own content creators, should we be concerned about who we're getting our news from?

As a journalism graduate student and aspiring sports writer, I've watched this unfold over the past half-dozen years or so, and I wondered whether the growth in these types of positions had an adverse effect on traditional sports journalism during one of the biggest declines in journalism jobs we've ever seen. Through research and interviews with members of outside media and those who work directly for the universities, organizations and leagues they're employed by, I sought to find these answers.

### **Subtle beginnings**

It was Mark Cuban who first put the idea in Rich Hammond's head in October 2009. Hammond, working at the time as a deputy sports editor at the *Los Angeles Daily News*, had read what he remembers as Cuban's personal blog one day, in which Cuban voiced his frustration with the lack of coverage the Dallas Mavericks — the NBA franchise that he owns a majority stake in — were receiving from local and national media. On his website, [MaverickBlog.com](http://MaverickBlog.com), Cuban denounced *ESPN's* Dallas affiliate, which he accused of no longer sending reporters to cover home games.

"The impact of this approach isn't just about the coverage Mavs fans get," Cuban wrote. "It also impacts the business decisions the Mavs make. We have already beefed up significantly the behind the scenes, interviews and game highlights video and reporting we offer on [Mavs.com](http://Mavs.com), and via a wide assortment of Twitter options from our broadcast crew and others. And we will continue to add more."<sup>1</sup>

Hammond had heard similar complaints from the Los Angeles Kings, whom the *Daily News* had stopped sending reporters on the road to cover. Without the everyday news coverage it had become accustomed to, the Kings organization felt that it didn't have a way to reach fans.

A short time later, Cuban tossed out the idea of paying the *Dallas Morning News* to cover the Mavericks independently. The team would cover salary, travel and essentially all other expenses for the *Morning News*, and in turn the Mavericks would receive full-time coverage, which Cuban

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blogmaverick.com/2009/10/11/the-dallas-morning-news-is-killing-espn-dallas/>

said he'd have no editorial control over. (In 2016, Cuban suspended the credentials of two ESPN national basketball reporters because of the company's use of Associated Press wire stories instead of having full-time beat writers for the Mavericks.)

Hammond, who had started a popular Kings blog on the *Daily News*' website a few years earlier, pondered the same idea and sent the link to Cuban's blog to a pair of Kings communications staffers just to kick around in their minds. Over the next few months, it evolved into a conversation about Hammond joining the Kings as a full-time staff writer, and eventually, a job offer to do exactly that. In October 2009, Hammond was officially hired as "an independent writer and blogger for the Kings' team website."

"There's no filter on it," [Hammond told reporter Greg Wyshynski at the time](#). "It's not going through anybody to be edited. It's not subject to any review. I'm not filing to any person; I'm filing to the Internet."

What Hammond was doing, at least as far as he knew, was revolutionary in sports media. Major League Baseball, through a financial agreement by team owners, had already employed reporters for its website, MLB.com, for half a decade. The NFL, as well as a handful of its teams such as the Denver Broncos, had hired bloggers to give fans behind-the-scenes access. And eventually with the addition of the NFL Network TV channel, the league had its own stable of reporters and analysts covering the league. But an individual team hiring away a reporter and giving them full

editorial independence to cover the team, which Hammond insists the Kings always gave him, was unheard of.

Their partnership lasted just three years, though. In the midst of the 2012 NHL lockout, Hammond had followed his journalistic instincts and interviewed Kings player Kevin Westgarth, an active member of the NHL Players Association. Because Hammond was technically a Kings team employee, he was prohibited by league bylaws from communicating with players during a lockout. The NHL league office demanded that he take down the story, but with the backing of the Kings organization, he refused to.

“I tried to let them know that it just that that wasn't going to be acceptable,” Hammond said.

“Given everything that I put out there, and everything that I'd said about what the job was, and the way that I've done it, professionally, I couldn't do it.”

In October 2012, Hammond announced via Facebook that he was leaving the Kings to cover University of Southern California football for the *Orange County Register*. His time with the Kings might have been short-lived, but the trend of teams — and soon university athletic departments — hiring their own reporters and content producers had already been cemented.

### **A new avenue**

Less than a year earlier, and just a few months after it announced a departure from the Big 12 to move into the Southeastern Conference, the University of Missouri announced its own over-the-

top streaming network that would not only broadcast an array of games, but it would also provide subscribers access to behind-the-scenes content and exclusive interviews with student-athletes, coaches and administrators. Despite a strong local media presence because of the school's top-rated journalism school and proximity to major markets in St. Louis and Kansas City, the athletic department wanted a way to produce content that would build its brand, potentially sell tickets and connect with fans without having to go through news outlets to do so.

"We want to be a showcase for what's going on at Mizzou," associate athletic director Andrew Grinch told the *Columbia Missourian* in September 2011. "By doing this as an athletic department, you obviously have access that others don't."

Grinch, who spent a year as Wisconsin-based TV anchor before joining Missouri's marketing department in July 2001, saw the network as an opportunity for the school to not only promote itself, but also to bring in additional revenue through subscriptions that offered exclusive content for \$9.95 per month. The school hired Ben Arnet, a 2003 graduate and broadcast anchor, to serve as the network's main anchor, and has since added another reporter and a handful of producers.

Mirroring what Hammond and the Kings had done four years earlier, the University of Oregon hired Rob Moseley, the *Eugene Register-Guard's* Oregon beat reporter, to become the editor-in-chief of GoDucks.com in 2013. In addition to providing exclusive video content that was similar to what Missouri was offering, Moseley began writing daily reports from the Ducks' football

practices — which he had access to but outside media did not — along with features and other stories he would have traditionally written on the newspaper beat.

Numerous schools followed suit, including the University of Colorado, which hired longtime Boulder sports reporter Neill Woelk to a similar role writing about the Buffaloes football and basketball programs, as well as occasional stories on Olympic and non-revenue sports.

Woelk was hired in 2015 after nearly three decades at the Boulder Daily-Camera, as well as short stints as a student newsroom advisor in Colorado and at newspapers in Oregon and Utah. A living, breathing example of what you'd describe as a newspaperman, Woelk never imagined that he'd go to work for any university, let alone the one he'd covered and investigated for most of his nearly four-decade career. As journalism jobs became harder to come by, especially as news outlets looked to hire younger, cheaper reporters and editors, Woelk saw the writing on the wall. CU's athletic department came to him with the idea of doing something similar to Moseley's role, and despite a bit of early trepidation, he jumped on it.

Much of his role mirrors Moseley's, including him being the only reporter allowed to watch practices and other team sessions, though the outside media have similar access to players and coaches for interviews. Woelk says his role not only helps to fill in coverage gaps — local media almost solely covers men's basketball and football save for a few features or breaking news stories — but it's also a way for CU to reach fans without having to spend additional advertising and marketing dollars.

“Probably what's more important to our marketing department is the ability for us to reach our ticket base on a daily basis,” Woelk said. “They click on a story about the football team; well, there's a link if you want to buy football tickets.”

The athletic department has seen what Woelk describes as a substantial increase in click-throughs for ticket sales, and an ever larger increase in website traffic. On the CUBuffs.com homepage, which was primarily used to access schedules or statistics before Woelk came aboard, users see a list of stories and press releases that resemble a news website meant to engage readers rather than a quick-hit stockpile of information.

What Colorado and Oregon have done to in essence create their own media brands might have been new at the time, but nearly every Division I program has riffed off of those ideas in some way since. Schools now have in-house video production departments, some with anchors such as Mizzou's Arnet, to create exclusive content that even TV partners like ESPN and Fox can't produce. Videographers follow players and coaches through film sessions, team meals, workouts, pre-game and postgame and in some instances, to their homes, all in an effort to build their audience and become content creators. More recently, that access has been monetized with schools selling sponsorship rights to their content. At Missouri, small advertisement bugs for brands such as Bud Light, Purina, Edward Jones and Shelter Insurance appear on or before their behind-the-scenes videos that are shared on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, where the Tigers have a combined audience of more than 150,000 users.

In a recent roundtable discussion, Jason Stein, a media executive who serves on the Board of Directors for Front Office Sports, posited that the next frontier for sports organizations is to become their own media brands.

“As a team, I think you have to think about how to have truly unique and differentiated content that no one else can have,” Stein said. “... No one else has that access. There’s not phones or video cameras on a plane while guys are playing cards at night. That’s sort of an invitation in that teams can offer that no one else can. The teams have to start creating all this content because the only people who have the same access that they do is the players, and they (the players) are bigger media companies than the teams are right now. If you don’t start monetizing it, they will — and they already are.”

### **Opportunities available**

Teams, leagues and universities hiring their own reporters has provided a somewhat unexpected ancillary benefit: jobs in an industry that is losing them by the hundreds, and often thousands, each year. For young reporters, particularly those interested in sports broadcasting, there has seemingly been one career path for the past handful of decades: take a low-paying job in a small market, then once your contract expires after three years, look for a job in slightly bigger market, and so on. Olivia Landis, a team reporter for the NFL’s New York Jets, wasn’t willing to accept that as the only way she could make a career.

Now entering her second full year with the Jets, Landis says she's blown away by the opportunities being in a large-city market, which would've probably taken her 5-10 years to get into as local sports anchor, have created for her. Weekly, she rubs elbows with national reporters from ESPN, Fox, NFL Network and dozens of other outlets. Should she want to move from working for a team to a more traditional network, she believes the connections she's been able to make will be the difference between her and another reporter who hasn't been in the market getting hired.

For BJ Kissel, the Kansas City Chiefs' team reporter, it was an opportunity to work for the team he'd grown up rooting for, while putting his broadcast degree and experience as a sports blogger to good use. After graduating from Kansas State with a degree in electronic journalism, Kissel moved to San Diego with his wife. Removed from any large contingent of Kansas City fans, he began blogging for Arrowhead Pride, SB Nation's Chiefs blog. There, he connected with Matt Miller, an NFL writer for Bleacher Report, who convinced him to join B/R's staff as a part-time writer. Soon after, he got another job offer — this time with Niles Media, a small production company where he worked in stage production, statistics and at certain points, would do sideline reporting for Division II football games. He worked at Niles just a year before he saw an opening for what he considers his dream job — covering the team he'd been a fan of his entire life.

The reviews of working for the organization you cover haven't all been as rave as Landis' and Kissel's were, though. Albert Breer, who worked for the NFL Network from 2010-2016 after a

stint at the Boston Globe, sharply criticized the league after it removed him from covering the New England Patriots because of a line of questioning head coach Bill Belichick didn't like.

"I think when I got there, there was very clearly a wall between us and the league," Breer told a Boston sports radio station in 2016 when it was announced he was leaving for Sports Illustrated.

"It was one of the first questions I asked when I left the [*Boston*] *Globe* is, 'Am I going to be able to do the job the way that I did at the *Globe*?' And the people that were there at the time said, 'Absolutely.'"

"...You're taught for all these years to challenge people, and that's your job and everything else," Breer added. "I think you guys got a first-hand look at what happened when I started challenging people."

Both Kissel at the professional sports level, and Woelk at the collegiate level, have been made aware of the boundaries of their reporting. When it was announced that Chiefs wide receiver Tyreek Hill — who had been arrested and charged in a 2014 domestic abuse case — was under investigation for domestic battery this March, the Chiefs' team site made no mention of it. When head coach Andy Reid holds his first offseason press conference, Kissel won't ask questions about Hill, and he'll likely wait until outside media has finished with all of their inquiries before asking questions for the team-focused stories he and his team will produce.

Similarly, when news broke of University of Colorado assistant football coach Joe Tumpkin being an alleged domestic abuser in 2017, local and national coverage ensued. Tumpkin was eventually dismissed, and head coach Mike MacIntyre was investigated for any role — or lack thereof — he had in reporting it to proper authorities. But all was silent as CUBuffs.com, and today, you won't even find Tumpkin's bio on the team site anymore, despite MacIntyre, who was fired after the 2018 season, still having his there.

Even on issues not nearly as serious as off-field arrest and incidents, team reporters often have their hands tied when it comes to reporting news. When the Denver Broncos were rumored to have agreed to a trade for Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco in mid-February, the team's site was initially quiet. Later that day, it published a story citing reports from ESPN's Adam Schefter and NFL Network's Ian Rapoport. But in the second line of the story contained this disclaimer: "The Broncos cannot comment on or confirm the reported trade." The team site didn't officially confirm the story until a month later, when the new league year began.

### **What's next?**

It's exactly these limitations that allow well-sourced outside media members to keep a foothold in their traditional markets, despite the layoffs that have plagued sports journalism, argues Andrew Haubner, the sports director at KEZI-TV in Eugene, Oregon. Haubner was a student at Colorado when Woelk began working for the athletic department and now covers Oregon athletics alongside Moseley.

Other reporters might view organizations hiring their own writers as a threat to traditional news outlets, he says, but he and the other reporters on the Oregon beat seem to view it more as a challenge to tell better stories and work harder for scoops.

He cites an instance this past fall, where nine Oregon softball players transferred from the Ducks' program after highly successful head coach Mike White left the school amid a contract dispute.

Without much more than a peep from the athletic department, speculation and rumors ran rampant, and fans implored Haubner and other outside reporters to find out the truth. What they uncovered was a deteriorating relationship between White and athletic department officials, which ended with him leaving for a job at the University of Texas and the majority of the Ducks' starting lineup from the year before transferring because of issues with new head coach Melyssa Lombardi.

Even though fans flock to reporters like Moseley because of his separate access to the program, Haubner believes they know what they're getting from a reporter who is paid by the organization they cover.

"I think they understand what the difference between those two things are," he said. "For example, people aren't going to the NFL Network to hear bad news about the NFL. I think people ingesting media are becoming more cognizant of the whole sports media industrial complex."

Woelk adds that local news outlets, including the *Daily-Camera*, have upped their coverage of CU since his hiring. The paper still covers the revenue sports primarily, but it also does regular stories on the school's Olympic sports, as well as women's basketball and volleyball.

The school doesn't necessarily view outside media as competition, simply because their objectives are different — news outlets want as many viewers and readers as possible to drive revenue, while the school just wants its name and brand on the forefront of people's minds.

“It's a one-way competition,” Woelk said. “That's the best way I can explain it. We don't care where people read about University of Colorado, as long as they're reading about University of Colorado. ... It's not a huge difference to us if it's on the *Denver Post*, the Boulder Camera or Channel 9, as long as they're connecting with the University of Colorado. That's what we want.”

The ultimate ramifications of organizations hiring their own reporters and creating their own in-house content are uncertain. Arguments can be made that sites like MLB.com or individual team sites are pulling eyeballs — and the revenue that comes with them — away from newspapers and digital sports outlets like The Athletic. And reporters on both sides of the sports media equation give that theory credence.

Looking at raw readership numbers, though, most media outlets are seeing more interaction with their content than ever. The crux is, because information is immediately available on social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, as well free content aggregators who take content

reported by other outlets repackage it, consumers are less willing to pay for digital sports coverage, particularly at the national level.

According to SportsBusinessDaily, Bleacher Report, whose primary content source is repackaged information from other sports media sites, had 47 million unique visitors in November 2018, surpassed only by ESPN, CBS Sports, Yahoo! And USA Today.

Subscription-based sites like The Athletic have had success in breaking into individual cities because of a lack of national competition and shrinking newspaper stuffs. The company employs more than 300 full-time editorial employees in roughly 50 local markets, but competing with major media companies like those previously mentioned remains a challenge. Even ESPN the Magazine, which began its run in 1999, shuttered its print operations last month, citing multi-million dollar losses and a struggle to entice readers into buying a print magazine subscription. The loss in revenue comes amid a brutal eight-year run for ESPN's television network, which lost more than 14 million cable subscribers between 2011 and 2018, in large part due to cord-cutting and the amount of information available on social media.

At the same time, athletes, empowered by the growth of social media and a desire to reach their fans without going through traditional media, have joined the content creation world. The Player's Tribune, founded by former New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, helps athletes pen personal essays, whether it be about mental health or announcing which team they'll play for next, which Golden State Warriors star Kevin Durant did. Instead of having no editorial control

of how their stories are told, athletes now have the chance to include — or omit — any details they choose. Durant, who recently told NBC Sports that the media "needs him," says players controlling their narrative is simply a response to the number of media outlets trying to create news.

"It didn't start with Uninterrupted or anybody else's own media company," Durant said. "It started with The Score, Bleacher Report, House of Highlights, all of these platforms that aggregate stories from big media companies like NBC and ESPN. It's so easy now to put your own spin, 'cause you have your own platform. So, after a while, players are starting to see how so many random people want to run with their messages and spin it around."

What effect a small number of athletes opting to tell their own stories actually has on media is impossible to discern right now, much in the same way we can't tell the effects of team reporters. A trend line has been started, but it's far too early conclude where sports media is headed and if more entities getting into the fold is actually hurting the industry at all.

As the number of sports media members declines — no specific numbers are available, but journalism as a whole saw a 23 percent drop in newsroom jobs between 2008 and 2017 — sports fans and the people who want to see sports figures held accountable feel the brunt of the impact. Scandals like those at USA Gymnastics, Baylor University and other institutions go unpublished, and those in positions of power are left unaccountable. Even cases of financial malfeasance and corruption — like the college basketball bribery scandal — are often left unpunished.

At the same time, sports fans are increasingly left with fewer coverage options, particularly at the local level. Newspapers and TV stations across the country have chosen to cut down or completely eliminate their preps and lower-level college sports coverage, with the *Denver Post* serving as one of many unfortunate examples. The *Post*'s sports section, considered among the country's best when it boasted writers like Rick Reilly, Adam Schefter, Marc J. Spears, Gene Wojciechowski, Shelby Strother, Jay Mariotti, and Jerry Crasnick, has shrunk by nearly two-thirds since 2005. It now has one columnist, two Denver Broncos beat writers, one Denver Nuggets, Colorado Avalanche and Colorado Rockies reporter each, and a general assignment writer. Long gone are the days when the paper needed an entire sub-section solely for Broncos stories. Now, the sports section is anywhere between 50 and 75 percent wire stories on a given day. After employing reporters to cover preps and college beats, the *Post* rarely covers either save for a one-off feature every week or so. In their place, both the University of Colorado and Colorado State University have hired in-house reporters, and the Colorado High School Activities Association (CHSAA) has created its own digital media outlet to provide high schools coverage. But as with any of the institutions that hire their own reporters, CHSAA doesn't report on its warts, such as the postgame brawl between a parent and coach this past season.

These scenarios are not novel or limited to Colorado. Across the country, as newspapers downsize and media outlets like *The Athletic* scoop up talented reporters, they're often not replaced. Young reporters who demand lower salaries than their veteran counterparts are often a priority, and those elder statespeople are given buyout opportunities or laid off. Readers are left

with less experienced or less knowledgeable journalists covering their beats, and many no longer see the necessity for subscriptions when they can get most of their news and analysis free of charge from social media or bloggers working for little to no money.

Although not having as many sports reporters doesn't portend the dire circumstances that not having news and investigative reporters might, it is no doubt a loss for sports fans and creates a dangerous vacuum for corruption and power to run rampant. "If there's not checks anywhere, there's going to be some bad people that are going to be doing bad things and allowing bad things to happen," Haubner said. "Yeah, and people that stop that are outlets like the Indianapolis Star Outside the Lines. It is you know, any of your local TV or newspaper reporters. And that's the only thing that makes me a little uneasy as what happens if this becomes such a viable option, that all of a sudden, nobody wants to actually be the one putting feet to the fire anymore because it's more expedient not to."

# APPENDIX

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

### OLIVIA LANDIS INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

*Olivia Landis is a team reporter for the New York Jets. She previously worked Colorado State University as a video assistant and at CTV News, the school's campus TV station.*

KP: Um, so I guess what like, attracted you to working with the jets and what kind of like, interested you about kind of going I guess what would normally be like considered a non traditional path for a broadcaster, because I think most people follow kind of the path that like Travis or Keith or somebody like that follows where you go to like a smallish town or city and then you kind of like, hopefully keep moving up. But what kind of attracted you about going to the jets and kind of just jumping right into the deep end of covering the NFL, I guess?

OL: I think what first attracted me to the job with the Jets was the market. New York City is obviously the biggest market in the US, let alone like the world, you know, one of the biggest in the world. And I think for me, that was a huge selling point. Because even though I'm technically a digital recorder, right, like we, we go live on our own platform, but like, you know, network reporter so I'm not reaching like, millions and millions of people, it's still within the New York market. So I think that was what initially attracted me to the job. And then second of all, what I really, really liked about the team reporter position, as opposed to, like you said, going through traditional way where you're at a new station is you kind of are thrown into it right away. Like you have access to the players, and the coaches and the team and the storylines. Right at Really?

Your hand. Yeah. Whereas if you're like external media, you know, it's, it's handled a little bit differently. So I'm in that locker room during the season four to five times a week. So I'm developing these relationships with these guys, and being able to tell these stories and do this kind of reporting that I'm not sure I'd be able to have the access, if I were like a TV station.

KP: Do you feel like part of kind of the draw of that, like big market, whether it's New York, or I mean, if you went and worked as a team reporter and kind of any big city market is that you have the ability to, to make connections with like, in a way other potential employers. So I mean, if down the road you want to work for, like, the NFL on CBS, or something like that you by being in that big market are already kind of being exposed to those people and having a chance to connect with them in a way that you wouldn't if you're in a smaller market somewhere that there obviously isn't an NFL team or something like that.

OL: Yeah, 100%. And I'll tell you why. Because, you know, people, like ESPN reporters, or NFL Network reporters, or CDs reporters, when they come to the locker room, what's the games and record on these teams, like, people start to recognize you, you know, people start to recognize, oh, this girl is always with the team grows always with like the Jets, the Jets, 360. Crew, like, they start to recognize that you are associated with the team. And I think, from what I've been able to experience so far, you know, it helps me to be able to like kind of allow people to be more comfortable with me, I guess, in a way, because we kind of it brings a sense of familiarity. And away, you know, they're covering this team. And they know that this reporter is always with the scene, she works for the team. So I think it's been able, it helps me be able to work sorry, by the way, I'm literally walking, I know.

It helps me be able to see these people more and more be exposed to them, because I'm always with it. So I've been able to kind of develop relationships with them just by seeing them all the time. Yeah.

**KP:** Is it kind of the the same way with I mean, being able to go to things like the combine or the draft where there's obviously like a ton of other national or like other big city media, where you're kind of able to rub elbows with those people. And I know that you, I mean, that's part of what you guys do at the combine in the draft. I mean, you talk to some of these analysts, or some of the the hosts or things like that, that you're kind of able to get in front of them and make a connection with them, that you wouldn't be able to. Otherwise, if you weren't going to those things on a regular basis.

**OL:** I really do think so because I mean, first of all, just being able to go to those events is like really big deal, you know, because if you're a local reporter, and you know, when I say these things, I'm obviously not talking about the now networks like ESPN and CBS.

But if you're a local reporter, you're like, they're not going to find that a top priority always like go to these events. And when you're working for a team is 110%. a top priority, right? Like, these are our guys, this is the teams players. So we have to go to those events. And, for example, if you walk up to Adam Chester, and you say, Hey, can I get time like I work for your dress? I'd like to, you know, hear your opinion on who they might think. Number three, overall, he's most likely to give you time of day that opposed to someone who's associated with the team. Yeah.

**KP:** Are their stories, that I mean, by being a part of the team and being around them as much as you are probably more show than the the traditional kind of external media? Do you feel like

there are stories and I don't know, relationships that you are able to build with players, or coaches or people in the front office, that are different than traditional media? Who doesn't have the same access? And who isn't going to have the same amount of face time with those people on a regular basis?

**OL:** Yeah, I really do think so. Because, you know, like I said, I see these players, five to six days a week, during the season, you know, positive, I would say a damn, you have to kind of be biased, right? Like, you have to always paint the team in a positive light, which is different than what we were going to journalism school. So, you know, sometimes that's been a hard adjustment. But the upside is these players can trust you know, that. You never want to put something bad on them. And you're never going to report something that's going to paint them in a negative light. So that helps build trust with the player. Yeah. And then it's, you know, off the field stuff, the clue human interest stories, you know, you're able to talk to like build those relationships. Well, as even people on the national level, they don't see these guys and develop these guys. relationship with them as much as we do.

**KP:** Is there like a, I don't know, a protocol for how you guys handle a story. So I mean, obviously, like, I don't know, if a player gets arrested, for example, or something like that, you're obviously not going to, to write that. But if there's like, I don't know, trade rumors or something like that. That's a little bit more like dealing with the team on the field. Is there a protocol for kind of how you guys handle that? And the reason I asked this is because like, the with the Broncos like they do, for example, when they had like the Joe Flacco trade rumors, and kind of like that, that he was going to eventually come to the Broncos, they posted a story on their

website that said, like, all of these outlets, all of these, like traditional news outlets are reporting that like Joe Flacco was coming to the Broncos. But like, basically, as the official team website of the Broncos, we can't confirm any of that, because we're like, an official arm of the team. Is there like a process that you guys go through for that kind of stuff? Or do you kind of just stray away from anything that would deal with like, breaking news or things like that?

OL: I'm trying to think how to answer this. I will say off the record, we, for the most part with my department, we try to handle things in a way where we don't really bring a lot of attention to like what outside media sources are reporting in regards to like off the field stuff. So your example with like, you know, that's a great example, because we've actually talked about stuff like that, within our own department talking about, you know, like, why, you know, why can't we report what other people are reporting, but not confirmed? That it's like, you know, Yeah, true or not yet, you know, so I think that's, it's a, it's a tough line to walk, you know, because when you work for a team, obviously, that's, you know, you always want to paint them in a positive of light and report, what's official report? What's been, you know, like, what is official and when it's official? So we have restrictions in that kind of terms. But you know, we have, I don't know, if we've necessarily we have a protocol, as we call it, you know, what I mean?

KP: Are there stories that I don't know that you guys as like a kind of reporting team of the Jets want to pursue ever that you're kind of, I don't know, discouraged from? Do you guys have a pretty good idea of kind of what the limits of what you guys are supposed to be doing? Is and

kind of stick within like, these are kind of the the day to day things that we're going to do? And we're not going to kind of try to stray outside of that?

OL: I think, um, these are tough questions. You might be like a journalist. I think for the most part, we kind of have another have an understanding of kind of what we want to write about what we want to report on. We have priorities, obviously, just like any other team, like what's going to take priority as one of the most important things to report on why it's important. So I think for the most part, our team is really good about that. And when I say my content team, yeah, I think we're really good about establishing, okay, what's important, why is it important?

KP: And you know, how are you in terms of kind of interaction with, I guess, traditional media? And I mean, you can tell me this on on background or off the record, or whatever, if there's something there, but have you ever felt any, like, I don't know, animosity, or any sort of like strain on how you interact with kind of the traditional media, because you work for the team? And because you're kind of in this especially big media market? And I mean, the New York media market is is, I don't know, considered one of the tougher media markets in terms of like, how tough traditional media is on the team? Do you ever get any or sense any kind of backlash to the fact that you guys have not just you, but kind of a whole team of people that are involved in creating content specifically for the Jets?

OL: You know, I really don't feel I don't think so. I think and I think a lot of it has to do with our PR department is really great about giving equal opportunity to everybody even like, you know,

the outside and together, they try it, make sure that they give equal access to the players. Because even though we do work for the team, you know, we're still technically media, we're still, you know, reporting on a lot of the things that the outside media wants to report on. So I really don't I haven't in my past two years, so any animosity towards me like coming from them, which is good. Yeah. I mean, they're tough blues me like, like, you know, like you said, The New York media is tough, but that's more so unlike the players and the questions, they asked him, but not so. Yeah, not so much on us. Really good relationships. That's a lot of, okay.

KP: Well, and it was interesting, because I was talking to this guy that he's, I think his title is digital reporter, but he works for the Chiefs kind of in a similar role to what you do. And he was saying that. For him, he's never really liked sense that in part, because they kind of have a hierarchy of like, who asked questions and kind of how that all goes. So like, there's one guy, I forget who he works for, but he's kind of a traditional media member who's kind of the longest tenured guy on the beat that like, usually ask the first question or two, and then kind of everyone else starts to get in there. And then at the end, is usually when the Chiefs guy like steps in and asks, like the couple questions that he has. And he said that that seems to he thinks kind of appease the the traditional media, because then they don't feel as though him being there is taking away from like, the reporting that they're trying to do.

OL: Interesting. Yeah, that's actually yeah. Yeah. Think, you know, I think we really tried her. Outside you yeah, I really do. Because a job to do, ya know, like, even though we look to the team made for the job. So I think, for the most part, we do a really good job is kind of just

respecting by allowing them to do their jobs. But then again, maybe, I don't know, like my experience.

KP: Do you think what you guys do in terms of kind of creating content for the website and things like that? Do you think or do you view I guess, the traditional media's as competition? And do you think they view you as competition? Or is it more so that they kind of view each other as their competition and that you guys kind of have your own thing that you're doing that is somewhat separate from what they are going to do on a day to day basis, because you guys are obviously going to focus? More so on the team, man, I mean, on the positive aspects in some regard, but your stories that you're doing are going to be different than what they're doing on kind of a day to day basis?

OL: Yeah. Um, I would say, you know, maybe in some aspects, they could be competition, you know, just because if you have a really good story, you always want to be able to be the first person to tell it. Yeah, you know, but I think in regards to what we kind of, do, we kind of stay in our own lane, honestly. And I don't know if that's just the mentality of my department, or if that's just the mentality of the team in general. But I feel like we're doing our job. They're doing theirs, but it's not necessarily in totality, a competition with them. Because, you know, we're limited to certain things that we can. Yeah.

KP: Do you think kind of looking at this from like, a broader picture, do you think that this, especially these type of jobs, whether it's working for the team, like you are or going and

working for MLB.com,, which I have a couple friends that are doing that, do you think that in a way kind of provides a, I don't know, a different avenue for people coming out of college, and I mean, kind of early in their careers, that is appealing to be able to go to some of these different places, because even in like the, in the, I don't know, more like newspaper or like writing side of things, I mean, we have a similar thing, where you're kind of expected to go to a, like, smallish to medium sized market, and then you work there for a couple of years and eventually work your way up. Do you think that this kind of trend becoming more prominent offers? People coming out of school, some different opportunities, then then kind of what were previously available? Or maybe what we thought were available with like traditional media?

OL: Yes, 100%. And I think it's, it's a great building block, because I will say, at these kind of, to turn this up, you know, like, I'm fortunate enough to work with people who have supported, and who has really helped assistant, my growth as a broadcaster. And at this kind of job, and at this kind of level, like a professional, obviously, it's still reporting, because they say digital reporting was different it is, but like, social media is also taking over the world. But a lot of our stuff isn't live. Yeah, we do do live stuff. But a lot of our stuff isn't life. So there's not always the pressure of one can't mess up, we're at a network, it might be like, you know, it'll be harder to mess up. Because it's live. And like, you know, it's really important to like, kind of be a little bit more. But, yeah. So, yeah, I think it provides an amazing opportunity, not only for that, but also just to see the stepping stone of learning what it's like to be a broadcaster, what it's like, more importantly, work with professional teams of functional athletes and how to handle certain situations. And it gives you kind of an outsider view, hey, I can like look at other reporters, for

networks, and still interact with them and still talk to them while still doing my thing as a professional. So I think it's great. And you see more and more teams, like you mentioned going towards this? Um, I don't know, a lot of times it makes me kind of it's funny that you, this is what you're reporting on, because I've actually had conversations like, what does this mean for broadcast? Live? network?

KP: Do you think, I mean, this is kind of a, I don't know, this is a big question to answer. But do you think ultimately, like, over the course of, of our careers, that I mean, this has any sort of effect on what you're talking about with? I mean, the, the traditional broadcasters or traditional media, or do you think that kind of, I don't know, ecosystem? And kind of that, I don't know, the the decline of print newspapers? And I mean, eventually, I think broadcast stations will at least have to kind of alter how they do things. Do you think that that will have anything to do with what you guys are doing? Or do you think that that's kind of its own separate thing that's happening? And you guys are just kind of, in a way? I don't know, off to the side of that and not really having like, a an impact on how quickly that happens? Or, or how it happens?

So like team reporters, do you think that having their own reporters ultimately has any sort of negative or positive impact on kind of the the the outlook of traditional media? Or do you think that that is you guys are kind of just doing your own thing, and what you do doesn't really have a big effect on how things change within within sports media?

OL: It's a great question. And honestly, I've asked myself that question before, and I don't know if there's any right answer, because it's so new. Yeah. And he just kind of started picking up if you think about it, I mean, just within the last few years teams, like team reporter,

So if you want my honest opinion, I feel like it's probably going to affect it at some point. And in some degree, right. Yeah. Because I just I don't see how it couldn't, because so many teams and, and the league, their leagues, they're all kind of leaning towards it. So do I think it might eventually affect it? Possibly. I mean, I'd love to sit here and say, How can I really just don't know. It's so new. And it's so it's just such a different way of reporting, and connecting, but I mean, ultimately, I feel like people are still always going to go to the big networks. Because it's too They know, it's what they know. And they're just reporting on such a different type of level. Yeah. And instead different ways. And they provide you with a lot of things that team reporters and websites can't or don't. Yeah, you know, so you, you'll have your two different outlets. And I think you'll always be able to know what to expect from each one. Yeah. But I imagine it has to have some kind of effect.

KP: Yeah. And that's kind of what I've been, like trying to trying to figure out. And I think what you said is exactly kind of what I have figured out is like, Yeah, I would expect that it has some impact. But it's so early. And it's so I don't know, it's just so hard to predict that without having like, more, more kind of history to back that up and say like, Yeah, absolutely, this will have an effect or no, it absolutely won't like yeah, it probably will. But I think what you're saying is absolutely correct that like, yeah, people are still going to always want like, Adam Schefter, or Ian Rapoport, or I don't know any of these NFL guys to like, break trade news, or to break news about free agent signings or coaches being fired or things like that. And so there's always going to be, I think, a, like want for that and people that are are willing to pay in some way for those things.

But, yeah, I mean, it's kind of the, I don't know, the the answer to this whole question of like, what is what is this trend doing? I don't think there really is an answer at this point, which in a way, for me is kind of cool. Because I didn't really want to, like, decide the answer and say like, yes, these team reporters are like, absolutely hurting traditional media. Like I wanted to leave it open ended. But in a way, it's also kind of, I don't know, in a way it's going kind of frustrating, because I'm like, Well, I would like to be able to answer the question that I kind of came into this with, but I think, like you're saying it's just so new, and there's just not anything to like, really base a like, justifiable, like smart answer author, because there's just not anything to say like, yes, this is having a huge impact, or No, it isn't having any impact at all.

OL: Well, yeah. And honestly, if you think about it, think about just social media in general, what kind of impact social media has had on broadcast. Broadcast world upside down. Force changes, it's made them like, being creatively it differently, because honestly, broadcast is is number one anymore social media for like, getting breaking news, and it's for free by Twitter and Instagram, you know? Well, yeah. Yeah. It's just, it's, it's different. I think broadcast is always gonna have to like, find its niche and like, be like, okay, you can't get this on social media. You can't get this from a team reporter.

KP: Yeah. You know, so, well, that's what the guy that I was talking to from the Chiefs, he made an interesting point that like, even in just like the last four or five years, while he's been doing this, like, how they approach what they do with the Chiefs is completely different than they did five years ago, because five years ago, they weren't putting a bunch of stuff out on Twitter, or

Facebook or things like that, like they were spending a lot of time doing these, like, long feature stories, whether they were video packages, or whether they were writing and so they'd have like a five to 10 minute video package that they do about one of the players who had a really interesting story, or they do a 5000 word written piece on it. And they're just he told me he's like people just aren't, aren't really engaging in that the way that we had hoped they would. And now they want everything or most everything in like digestible social media bites. So they want like a one minute recap from you, for example of like, what you guys learned at the draft on day one, they don't want like, this whole, I don't know, 15 minute production, that you guys spend a bunch of time and energy on, they want like, give me the information as quickly as possible, because I'm like scrolling through my Twitter feed, and I only wanted in these, like, short bits, because I want to be able to go to the next thing. Yeah, it's true. It's honestly, it's all based off the consumer. consumer wants. Yeah. So yeah, it's it's such a hard question to answer because it changes so often and so much.

OL: Well, and I think ultimately, like both in broadcast and print, more so than like, I don't know, team reporters, or I don't know, anything like that, I think I mean, social media has had the greatest impact on on our industry. Because now, I mean, we we have to write so that people are attracted to it on social media. And so we have to think of headlines or teasers or stories themselves that are, are going to pop out to people and you guys kind of on the broadcast side, have to figure out how to boil all of this work that you do at the NFL Draft, or example, down into like a five minute segment that you guys can post on, on Facebook or on the team site, because that's how long people's attentions are now. And that's just what they expect. Everything

to be is short enough that they can get all the information they need, in the short amount of time without kind of having to go through all of the work that you guys went through to put it together.

## **NEILL WOELK INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

*Neill Woelk is the contributing digital editor for University of Colorado athletics. He previously worked as a newspaper reporter and editor in Colorado, Utah and Oregon.*

KP: Okay. Um, was what you were talking about earlier of this being a good path for young kids getting into this? I mean, getting into sports writing, do you think that that has changed from I don't know, I mean, obviously, 5, 10, 15, 20 years ago, that I mean, kind of the path that you were supposed to take, especially this something that Andrew and I talked about, I mean, on the broadcast route, that I mean, you go to a small station in Casper, Wyoming, and then you move up to a little bigger station, and then you move on, then you keep moving up, and Moving up? Yeah. And yeah, do you think this has the ability for people or I mean, especially younger people to kind of come in, and they can get into bigger media markets? I mean, whether it's in Boulder, Denver, or I mean, New York City, that there are opportunities to then I mean, do the networking and do all of those things that you wouldn't be able to do from some of these smaller places? And is that kind of a new opportunity for people to get into?

NW: Exactly, I think you I think it's twofold in that regard. Because, number one, newspaper jobs are becoming fewer and fewer, they're just your newspaper jobs than there were, you know, 10, 20, 30 years ago. So that that is that that dynamic is changed. The second part of that is, is

this is a new, this is relatively new, that universities, professional teams are hiring their own reporters. And what that gives what that what that gives a young person especially is a chance just to write on a regular basis, if a chance to get in there cover, you know, a pro team or a college team. And then you use the right word there, it also gives them a chance to network, as soon as they're covering those pro teams that are around a lot of reporters that around ever editors around broadcasters, and it gives them that chance to build relationships with those people. And, you know, chart a career path that may not have been there. 20 years ago, if you're the you know, for example, if you are the sports editor, let's say it's a *Windsor Beacon*.

And you're covering Windsor, high school, you know, the path to covering an NFL team is going to be a long arduous path. Yeah. But it's you're just coming out of college and you take a an entry level job working for the Denver Broncos website, are you automatically you're around TV, people, radio people, and major metropolitan newspapers, around people who work for them, and you're able to build a network of contacts, that probably is is more, a more widespread and definitely more well connected right away. So that gives you that chance.

KP: Do you think that that is something that has changed over the last, I don't know, 10 years or so. And that that is something where I mean, I don't really know that there were that many people trying to do it anyways. But I would assume that I mean, before these team reporter positions and stuff like that, that there weren't many people in kind of the the journalism side that we're going to go and hire somebody from a communications job with the Broncos or something like that. But now having the ability to actually, in a way be a reporter. And I mean, even though it says we

talked about I mean, it's mostly PR, but you're still writing, you're still a writer, you're reporting what's happening.

NW: You know, that I stopped, I stopped short of saying that they are they're pure journalists, because you have to adhere to a company like, yeah, you know, and there's, there's no doubt about that, you're going to have to follow a company line and a degree and you can't, you don't have complete freedom to write whatever you want to. But if that, that that's an avenue wasn't there 10, 12, 15 years ago, obviously, more and more teams are doing it. More and more franchises, more and more teams, more and more universities, more and more programs. And it's a it's an interesting dynamic in the sense that as the number of medium shrinks, as, as the number of newspapers shrink, as the number of TV stations that are able to cover things as they become, they shrink, it's becoming more important for schools franchise, to get their own reporter to make sure that they can get they can reach their audience. And so that's created at a bigger need for jobs that are disappearing. They're appearing in other places.

KP: Do they view your role and your position as a way to kind of draw people to those and as a way to tell the stories of those people?

NW: Yeah, we can definitely you know, we can we reach out to we can tell stories that that that the other media entities that cover Colorado we can we can tell stories that they're not interested in, or that they won't take time to do simply because they don't have the manpower to do it anymore. You know, they the local newspaper in Boulder has, they now have two people there to cover see you but it's mainly football, men's basketball, and they do some women's basketball,

volleyball, some of the other Olympic sports when they have time, but their to their to their bread and butter is football and men's basketball. Well, we can tell the story about the national championship cross country team, we can tell the story about the volleyball team going to the NCAA tournament, who can tell the story about the soccer team, we can tell all those stories. And we can reach are we didn't reach our constituency, direct. You know, they have this thing called the internet, where we don't have to wait for other people tell that story. Yeah, we can reach, you know, we can reach our audience we can reach the people are boosters, our fans, our donors, we can reach them directly. And so that gives us the ability to to get out there and and tell that story right away. We don't have to wait for them to come to come to us and cover it. Yeah. We don't have to, you know, beg them to cover our cross country team don't have to beg them to cover up soccer team, we can cover it and we can reach our audience and not have to worry about whether they cover it or not. Yeah, benefit. We can do things like we can tell the story about the new facilities that we built, how much they're helping our student athletes, how much is going into academics or how our academics have improved. We can tell all those stories. And we know that people are reading it, analytics chosen tells us people are reading it, gauging with us. So in a weird way, what this has done is it has eliminated the middleman don't have to wait for the media to tell our story. Yeah, because we can't we we do have I mean, our our sports information department, we have our own broadcast. Now Mark Johnson works for us, he now works directly for us, he's no longer at KOA, he works directly for us. He's on our staff, with our video department. We can we can you know, we can broadcast TV, we can do all of those things. We have, you know me as the full time writer, and then we have all our sports information directors will also do some writing. So in a sense, we become our own media company.

You're seeing more and more teams and programs doing exactly that.

KP: Is there a, I mean, I would have assume so is there a benefit from a financial standpoint? Because obviously, I mean, I think you told me when we spoke about this a while ago, but that there was I mean, a very, very significant growth and traffic on the website. And so, guys, you were able or not you but the the marketing department is able to sell these different advertisers on the fact that I mean, you guys are getting this many eyeballs on your site. And then in a sense, like you're saying can kind of become your own media company. And you're I mean, basically able to make money, the coverage that you're doing.

NW: And it's twofold in that regard. It's kind of interesting, because yes, we are the eyeballs on our website has no doubt increased, increased steadily over the last three to four years. Every year. Our website traffic grows and it grows, you know, it goes into good. I could I'd have to look up the number 8-10 percent, whatever that number is great. And it continues, you know, and continues to grow. So yeah, that helps with the advertising and we get a little bit more advertising and marketing people are able to sell that. Probably what's more important to marketing department is the ability for us to reach our ticket base on a daily basis. We can go out there they look, they click on a story about the football team. Well, there's a link, you want to buy football tickets. What am I single tickets for this game coming up? Do you want to buy season tickets? Are you interested in buying tickets to the PAC 12 tournament? It's a great way for us to reach to reach our our ticket base and and potential new customers in that regard. And so that's probably the biggest advantage, or the biggest key that we made is just reaching potential ticket

buyers and donors. Yeah, on a regular basis. They're clicking on those stories. They're seeing it. And we can put a little link on there. If you'd like to, you know, if you'd like to donate to the new champions center, if you'd like to donate to academics, there's a link right there. And we we've seen a good uptick in that regard. Yeah, the other one was a peripheral benefit, I guess you sort of these are the other peripheral results has been because we are doing this, the local newspaper has increased its coverage dramatically. It's a one way competition. I get that's the best way I can explain it. We don't care where people read about University of Colorado, as long as they're reading about University of Colorado. Yeah, that's what we want. We want people to read about the team football team, she basketball can keep track, whatever. So as we're writing all these stories, the local newspaper has increased its coverage. And according to the numbers that I can put together over the last two or three years, they've written their their coverage of our programs have gone up, as far as story counting by about 20 to 22%. So they're writing more story every day about our programs and on. They need eyeballs. That's how they are making their money. Yeah. For us, it's for us. It's a peripheral benefit that we can sell a little more advertising on we're selling tickets for them. They have that's how they're making their livingis people clicking on their website. Yeah. So they need they need the eyeball. They're afraid that we're taking their eyeballs. And I understand. I was on that side of it. They're afraid that we're taking their eyeballs. So they're increasing their storytelling to keep the eyeballs on their website. That's fine with us. We're not competing for eyeballs only want his eyeballs on the University of Colorado? Yeah, it's not a huge difference to us. If it's on the Denver Post, the Boulder Camera or Channel 9, as long as they're, you know, connected with the University of Colorado. That's what we want.

KP: Do you think, I mean, I think they're probably multiple ways that you can look at this. And people's perspectives are going to depend on what side of this they're on. But do you think in a way, this hurts traditional media?

NW: The local TV stations, we provide as much video audio as they want to TV and radio, we can give them because we have our own video services. If they want some B-roll from a football practice, we can give it here it and we ship it out to them, all they have to do is run it. And I also think it did it for the local media. It keeps the University of Colorado front and center. And so when people read stuff on the bus and they see Colorado's hiring a new football coach, it's going to make them want to go another place and get the other get more of a viewpoint on and get more. So I think you I think it's actually beneficial to local media to a certain degree because it helps people create interest. They go to other places they go to other sources to find more about the topic that they're interested in. Do you guys get, I guess probably pushback from fans or people?

NW: Yeah, well, when they want I mean some sort of columns saying "Well, I mean, Tad Boyle maybe isn't the right coach for the program?" Yeah, I wouldn't call it substantial at all. People who say, well, you guys, don't tell the whole story. You're not giving us the entire story. And my response was, well, no, we're not. We don't, we don't claim to tell the whole story. That's not our goal. That's not our agenda, our agenda to tell you about the University of Colorado, things that are happening. And so there, there's there's a little pushback from people. But what we found is those people keep coming back to our website.

Even when they might be upset about it, they still come back to our website, because one thing we do have this daily stuff. And we do have access, you know, you know, we know what Mel Tucker is doing with his football staff. And we know how he's getting his spring program ready. And so we can talk to Mel and we can ask them those questions. Same way with Tad Boyle. And we have access to practice during football. And so you know, people still want a little bit, you know, they still look that inside information. And we can provide that to a degree. And so they may be upset once in a while, but they're not getting the whole story. They're still getting more than if we didn't exist. Yeah. And so they'll still take, I'll take what they can get, of course,

KP: Did the the athletic department, did you expect to receive pushback from some of the local media? Thinking that I mean, you guys were trying to kind of I don't know, step out? Yeah, push them out?

NW: No, you know, I think I think what the local media has found out to a large degree is that we're never going to replace them. That's not our goal. Our goal is not to replace, we do not want to do that. That's not our end goal. Our agenda is just provide very basic information about University of Colorado athletics, from top to bottom. And I think once the media realize that they've been much more receptive about it. I think they originally believed it might be when when Colorado first started doing that there was a, there was a fear that if that every quote, scoop, would come from the University of Colorado, whether with a coach firing, player injury, you know, changes position, new starter, whatever it might be, there was a fear that that was always going to come from, you know, the University of Colorado website, and I think they've

discovered that most of that stuff does not come from us, we're not going to be the first to announce injury to a player, we're not going to be announced. Word gets out too quickly. Yeah. And so, you know, that's not our job. In fact, we don't speak our role as having, you know, in the journalistic sense, we don't, that's, that's not our that's not what we believe our role is our role is to provide information. So that's what we try and do.

KP: When I was talking, because I kind of talked through the same thing with Andrew, I mean, he was saying that, essentially, I mean, if you are a good reporter, and you're on this beat, or your on any of these beats, where there are still I mean, there are team reporters there are still opportunities for you to get those kind of scoops and to get some of the breaking news and things like that. Because I mean, that's not that that opportunity has gone away.

NW: Not at all. In fact, I think there's there's even more opportunity to some degree, if you look at the Denver Broncos, you know, the Denver Broncos give me their website, they have full time reporters, they have full time video people. The Denver Broncos didn't break the news that Joe Flacco they were going to trade for Joe Flacco. The Denver Broncos website didn't break the news that they were going to trade Case Keenum. The Denver Broncos didn't break the news that they were hiring a new assistant coach or that they were firing Vance Joseph.

So all those things are still out there in the table. Those kinds of scoops are always going to be there for the enterprising journalist, the enterprising sports reporter who's seeking those things out, whether it be TV, radio, or print journalist. We, you know, on my side business now, we're not in the business to do that. That's why we're there are our number one goal is to tell the story

about the University of Colorado athletic, tell the student athlete story itself coaches to story tell people what's going on with the program? I don't think it's been near. I think there was a worried that it was going to be the end of the world for sports journalism. And and, in fact, I think it's all it's done is it's it's increased the emphasis on good reporting. Yeah. And so I think I think it's made some, you know, reporters in some areas may be that they've had to get better, whereas they were the only game in town and not anymore.

KP: Do you think this kind of in the grand scheme of things, I mean, as we look 20, 25, 30 years down the road? And I mean, we all see kind of the the decline that journalism jobs are on and some of these places are on do you think, especially from the sport standpoint, that these positions coming open, whether they be at the University of Colorado, whether they be at MLB.com I mean, whoever it is, do you think these escalate that descent in terms of how fast those things are going? How fast jobs are going to go away? If they don't figure out a an advertising model and all this stuff? Do you think that has any effect? Or do you think this is just part of kind of the natural progression?

NW: I think it's I think it's more than natural progression. I don't think the two I don't think the growth of in house in house reporters or in house writers, in house video people. I don't think that's going to have any, I don't think that has an effect one way or another on the decrease in in overall journalism presence. I think this is the you know, the ability to make money through journalism is still the answer that people are trying to answer. Yeah. And I think the one, you know, once that shakes out, I think there are a few places that are starting to figure it

out to a degree. I think the advent of The Athletic is a wonderful development. That makes it I hope, I hope they continue to do that. So and I think those things will continue to show up. And they'll figure it out. I just I think I think journalism will continue to change, but I don't think the development of in-house people in the sports world will have any, any major effect one way or another.

### **ANDREW HAUBNER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

*Andrew Haubner is the sports director and anchor at KEZI-TV in Eugene, Oregon. He was previously the sports director and anchor in Casper, Wyoming, and he studied journalism at the University of Colorado.*

KP: I mean, you have some, I think, some good understanding of kind of this trend, one from kind of dealing with it as just like a more traditional media member at at CU, but even kind of, in your experience working for the athletic department, why do you think they've kind of taken it on themselves to almost create their own kind of news networks and their own news sites for kind of their program or their entity?

AH: I think it goes all the way back to New York. And I think people look at the, you know, two of the two of the pro teams back in city, you know, the the Yankees and the Knicks, and they have the YES Network. The big reason the Yankees have been so profitable over the last 20-30 years is because they had a TV network that was owned by their team, and they removed all the rewards from that. And I think what people started to realize was, you know, this is an additional revenue stream that we haven't necessarily tapped into yet. And it's something that we can give, you know, our own people more access to, they can be more part of the team and give fans a

different look. But it's also controlled, you know, the narrative is also ours, we can show all the good without, you know, having that person be the person to be digging into all of the bad things that our program or our team might be like to do it. I think once teams kind of, you know, got hip to this notion that, you know, you control the content, and you control the narrative. And that also opens up an additional, you know, stream of revenue and additional stream of eyeballs that will be looking at your product. I think people realize, well, why have we not been doing this the entire time, and, and then it slowly started to kind of shift in I mean, if you look at pro teams right now, you know, there's plenty of teams right now that are exploring the idea of, you know, their own sports network. You know, that they want to do for themselves, you know, the Cubs walked away from NBC Sports Chicago with the idea that they were going to do this on their own, they partnered up with Sinclair, but the idea was, it's going to be a Cubs owned, yeah, broadcast network. And so I think a lot of a lot of teams are doing this, I think, you know, you look at what leagues are doing with the NFL Network, and NBA TV. And it's basically a way of monetizing your own work, while keeping everything kind of narrative intact, and not having to deal with that other aspect of journalism, which, at its core is pretty adversarial towards teams and players and and what they're doing.

KP: Do you think what they're trying to sell to fans or whoever is going to be consuming their content is kind of this idea of special access that I mean, fans, so much of it seems like what they want out of I mean, being a fan of a team is feeling like they're kind of a part of it. And by offering kind of this access, that they can see, I mean, interviews with specific players that the

media wouldn't otherwise get, or things like that is that kind of the, the selling point of this is that you get access through the team that you're not going to get anywhere else.

AH: You know, partially because I think that, you know, your insiders are always still going to be the same that fans will look to because fans want to access but more than anything else, fans want information. You know, they want to know about what's going on within the team that you know, you know, the the writer for The Golden State Warriors can give you all of you know, these great sit down interviews with all these players that the media doesn't get. But you know, when Ethan Strauss turns around, and pens a story that's sourced about how unhappy about Durant being unhappy is going to be the story that gets more clicks, because that's a story in which you, you have more information about who they are then just kind of this prepackaged stuff. So I think there's a selling point that the teams do have to a degree with that is, you know, yes, you you will we can talk to people that you don't talk to will will show things that you don't normally see. But the fan, desire, I guess, is probably more but you know, the desire there for information on really what is going on inside the team, from the palace intrigue, to who's injured and who's starting and who's playing. That kind of stuff is still what fans are going to want. First and foremost.

KP: Yeah. And there's actually I mean, I had a conversation about this before, this idea of or came to my mind, but had a conversation with one of the professors at CSU, and he's a big Royals fan. And he basically said, like, when the Royals are winning, and everything's going great, like, I'll probably read MLB.com the most. But when things go bad, and I want to hear that

things are going bad, and I want to know who's upset, and all of those things, I'll read the Kansas City Star. And I think that's a good summation of kind of what this is like, yes, people are interested in like the good news and all of that stuff. But I think ultimately, at least in markets, where there are media covering the team, people are still going to flock to that because those people are going if they have inflammation are going to be able to give that to them without having to worry about I mean, the the team telling them that they can't do it.

AH: I can give you an example of that happening out here in Oregon, you know, when everything was going on with Oregon softball team, you know, they were coming out of making the College World Series, and their coach leaves and a bunch of players start transferring. And yeah, there's a wonder if they're gonna be able to field enough players to play this season. You know, nobody there was pestering Rob Moseley to get an inside story. Yeah, you know, no one was reading, you know, the sunshine that was coming. They were asking, you know, me and my staff, they were asking the writers at the Register-Guard or the Oregonian saying, you know, what, what is going on? You know, what you guys need, essentially saying, You guys need to be the ones to find this out. And eventually, you know, stories did start to come out. But that's that, yeah, it's really when that when the news is bad people turned off, because they know that bull will be the ones that aren't trying to control the narrative the way, you know, some in house people might be.

KP: Do you think for the most part, fans, or I mean, people that that pay attention, I guess, realize this? And are I mean, kind of hip to that the team is only going to give them the

information that it wants to give? I mean, do you think that for the most part, people understand that and then are, at least I don't know, wary? or understanding that if something bad comes out that they're going to have to get it from somewhere else other than the team? Do you think that people get that?

AH: I think they do, I think people kind of have an understanding of what it means to, you know, be ingesting content from a, you know, from a from a team site, or handle or network. You know, it's, you know, people people aren't going over the NFL Network to hear bad news about the NFL. Yeah, you know, I and it's why, you know, and it's exactly why ESPN, you know, is trying to play nice with the NFL now to get some better games on their Monday night schedule, and maybe even try and swing a Super Bowl for ABC down the road. A lot of their Outside the Lines reporting, let's go on into concussions and that sort of thing that stopped. Yeah. You know, basically, trying to play business. And I think I think media people or people who are ingesting media are becoming more and more cognizant of what that kind of journalists, sports media industrial complex, if you will, kind of looks like, you know, maybe maybe 5-10 years ago wasn't as pronounced. But I think consumers are smarter. Now. I think viewers are smarter now. And I think they understand what the difference between those two things are.

KP: Do you think there is kind of something to look at in terms of going and working for these places. I mean, for young journalists that I mean, obviously we hear every day about how bad our profession like how bad the outlook our for our profession is, and all of those things. Do you think that there's some, I guess, temptation, or something like that, for young journalists to kind

of see these opportunities, especially as more and more places are kind of trying to be their own news site? Do you think there's some temptation for for young journalists to kind of flock toward that, because of the security and the idea that I mean, these teams aren't going under anytime soon. Whereas, especially in certain places, there's a lot of concern about newspapers and TV, these stations and things like that, struggling to keep people on staff?

AH: Well, you know, even more than that, I think location has a huge thing, that's a huge piece of that, you know, you look at our generation, and how people are flocking into cities, and how no one don't necessarily wants to live in small towns anymore. Like, that's just not what our generation is doing. And you look at, you know, small town media outlets now used to be the way that you broke in. Now, you don't need to do that. So that so you know, from my personal position as a, you know, as a TV reporter, you know, there's plenty of people I talked to who are coming out of college, you go, you know, why would I go to places like Casper, Wyoming, when I can go to a you know, one of the biggest 50 cities in America and be working for? You know, I personally think, you know, you're not going to get as much out of it. At the start. You know, I think I think you know, kids coming out of school need to learn a little bit more just about what it is to be a reporter. Go through the trenches. I'm old school, that's, you know, I think that, you know, I think I probably take a little bit differently, but, but there's people that love the idea of my first job is going to take me to Miami, my first job is going to take me to Denver, my first jobs going to take you to Los Angeles, and I'm going to go work for this team. And even if you get shoehorned, or even if it's not what you want, like people want location. And so I think the

temptation is big, not just in the sense of there's there may be a little bit more stability. But and there may be a little bit more resources with what I'm more than anything is in a relatively glamorous city, doing what is, you know, a glamorous type of job? Yeah, I think, I think for our generation who for whom location is a huge selling point. That's where the big temptation is not necessarily in the fact that it's more stable, but just the fact that it's in a nicer place than to Des Moines, Iowa, or Casper, Wyoming, or Montana.

KP: Do you think, kind of the outlook for people transitioning from like, they go to their first job, and they work in what is essentially public relations, but I mean, they're a team reporter, or things like that. And they then want to transition to kind of more of a traditional, whether it's newspaper or TV station, or a big broadcast network? Do you think that there is an ability for people to do that? Because I mean, I remember talking to Neill and couple other different people that were like, yeah, I mean, before, you never really would go in and do like a communications job. And then two years later decide to become a reporter, because most of the reporters or the editors or whatever, wouldn't hire you, because you had been spending most of your time and communications and hadn't really shown anything, in terms of covering a team. Do you think that's changed now, now that I mean, like, Olivia Landis that I'm friends with goes and works for the Jets. And I mean, I've talked to her and her ultimate goal, as most people's is, is to work for one of the major, major national networks. Do you think there is a path from kind of going and working for these teams to then going and working at I mean, more traditional news outlets?

AH: You know, why would you leave that to go work for a newspaper? TV? Absolutely. That is that actually is a foot in the door that was not there before and is, in some ways, supplanting that you work your way through the markets and you get to a network?

KP: Do you think that level of access that they're granted that you are not makes a difference in whether people would choose to read them or watch them instead of reading or watching a traditional media outlet?

AH: You know, I think during spring ball, and August practices, you can read their practice reports. And you read the good things that are in the practice reports. And honestly, that's what the media would be doing anyway, no one is walking out of spring practice saying, you know, this player looks terrible. Yeah. So in that way, yes, people will flock to, you know, writers like Rob or Neil a bit more in those periods of time, because that's what they want to hear is who looks good. In spring ball, who looks bigger, you know, in these practices that normal media people can come up, you know, can come into? You know, I think, look, I think their role is primarily, at least in my view, I think I think the role of a team reporter is primarily to be telling more feature type stories, you know, and schools and as SIDs use them a lot as people to kind of fill in the blanks in terms of just straight up content of previews, recaps, gamers, all that kind of stuff. But I think what, what teams that do it the best do is they give you a really good look at who these guys all are. Because you get the access that the reporters don't get, you know, the reporters can handle the cameras and the breaking news and all that information. The best team reporters, I think Neil does a great job. And I think Rob does to certain spots is, you know, they

they do a good job of working on that feature stuff. That's what people kind of want to see him why people flock toward that kind of thing.

I think that one thing that teams and universities in particular, that have these in house writers do well, what is the fact that they could, you know, they can highlight women's lacrosse, they can highlight track, they can highlight all of these things that, you know, your media is not going to pay a ton of attention to. And, you know, with that, it's, you know, it's needed, because those sports deserve all of the same amount of coverage, that all of these other teams, you know, the the revenue sports get. And so I'd like to see more traditional media covering that stuff. It's just really a numbers game of, you know, do people care enough about this, that it, you know, from a opportunity cost standpoint, like its it worth the work. In TV, you know, in places like Eugene and Casper? Most times, the answer is yes, because it's just, if anything, it's content to fill 30 more seconds at the end of the show. But for the writers, that's a whole different story. So people like Rob and Neill, to kind of fill in that gap is, you know, I think it is helpful. I think it's, you know, really good that they do it just because who else would?

KP: Do you think, ultimately, I mean, teams and leagues and universities, hiring people to these positions has a bottom line, negative effect on traditional media? I mean, whether that's readership viewership, any of those things, do you think that has any effect? Or do you think it's more so that they're kind of just filling this? I don't know, not so much a whole, but just this kind

of gap that they view as necessary to kind of promote their program, but ultimately, it doesn't really infringe or harm? The kind of traditional media that's covering this team?

AH: Oh, no, I think it's terrible for traditional media. I think I think it is, it's, you know, the big issue that, that, you know, the all of this in house stuff is, is it not only it gives another career path for people, which I understand. But in the process, it puts a massive dent in not only the business of journalism and sports media in particular, but also the desire to go on and do it. Yeah. You know, and like I mentioned, you know, small papers are the heart of this country, in so many ways, from a journalistic standpoint. And if, you know, with everything becoming centralized towards these big cities, all of these small town papers are dying. And the first thing to go most times is your sports department. So it gets taken, chopped all the way down to one. You know, and so I think having, having those kind of roles, and lines blurred a little bit really doesn't help the traditional model. And it's only going to get worse, just from the sense of you get the feeling, you know, not to get too political. But you get the feeling that this is all calculated to avoid negative press. Yeah. You know, is this is this is the equivalent of Sinclair trying to buy Tribune, so they can put their message out there to everybody. Yeah, that is what the YES Network is. That's what the Chicago Cubs home network is. That's what the NFL Network is. They are networks designed to not have to face the uncomfortable questions that's around their teams or their leagues whenever something goes wrong. And I do think that it is a little bit not scary, but it's it is a little bit nerve-wracking to see what might happen 20 years down the road, when all these teams kind of pull away and say, we're going to do our own thing or all these leaks, pull away and say we're going to do our own thing. And that's where everyone watched

you because that's what the stability and the money is going to be. And who's going to be there to be the check. Yeah, you know, that. And look, we've seen it time and time again, in collegiate athletics, from Michigan State gymnastics, all the way to Baylor football, there's, if there's not checks anywhere, there's going to be some bad people that are going to be doing bad things and allowing bad things to happen. Yeah, and people that stop that are the Indy Star, it is Outside the Lines. It is you know, any of your local TV or newspaper reporters. And that's the only thing that makes me a little uneasy as what happens if this becomes such a viable option, that all of a sudden, nobody wants to actually be the one putting feet to the fire anymore, because it's just, it's more expedient. It's more money, and you're living in a better place. Yeah, you know, it's, it's all for, you know, your your career becomes so much for, you know, your friends on Instagram that no one's actually paying attention to what the hell is that? You know, really going on in the inside the work? Yeah. So, you know, it's like, more jobs for people in media is always a good thing. And I, you know, it's nice that as some of these traditional places are contracting, some of the best writers are finding places on their feet, where they can showcase their work and still have a career. And it's also good for young kids that are just coming out into TV that there is an avenue for them to go into. You know, I think he's cheating a little bit, frankly, but like, yeah. But, uh, but you know, it's, it's something for them. My issue is just, what is it going to be down the road? What, where are we going to be in terms of how we operate? A lot of teams and leagues in the future? And what does this kind of pivot to team-owned media, what does that portend for the future?

KP: Do you notice any sort of disconnect in terms of I mean, traditional media's relationship with a guy like, Rob or with a guy like Neill, because I mean, for the most part, everyone on a beat is competitive, but for the most part, everybody typically gets along with each other at least, like outwardly. But do you think that from any sort of local media, in those places or and other things that you've seen that there is a disdain or whatever the word is, for kind of these team reporters, and kind of just what you're talking about, that these traditional media might see them as kind of threat to them? Maybe not immediately, but 5,10,15 years down the road, that they might be the ones that ultimately are kind of putting them out of a job?

AH: You know, that's a tough question, because I think I'm still a little young for that. You know, I think this particular age, I'm still in this spot where I look at everybody as not necessarily a colleague, almost something of a superior in a way. Yeah. And I think due to that, you know, I don't look at them with the same degree of, you know, competitiveness. However, I definitely think that some of these older writers are kind of thinking, you know, you're, you know, what, like, what, what are you doing here? It's, it's not necessarily a sellout, but it's kind of a, it's kind of, OK, you know, you, you went over to the dark side, a little bit, so to speak. But, you know, I think, you know, I think for me, I don't, I don't view anyone like that as though there are, they are my competition, because I know if I put together better work than them, that people will watch my stuff and not theirs. You know, that's, and that's pretty much what it comes down to is if you know, if the work that you're putting out is good, you have no reason to be scared. And I think for some people in traditional media, you know, and this is no one in particular, it's just kind of a, you know, media as a monolith. You know, I think the big issue that did by media, when things

started to go down, is I think a lot of people have kind of become comfortable in their spot resting on their laurels. They didn't have to push the envelope in terms of content writing, you could do the same tired column every week. And I think what I think what they people like that might be upset, what about now is, you know, shit, there's so much competition that I actually do have to kind of bust my ass and find new angles and find new stories that I wasn't necessarily needing to do before. And, you know, I don't think I'm competing with Duck TV or BuffVision when I was at CU or anything like that. Because, from my perspective, if my story looks better than Duck TV, or my story looks better than you know, what the Trailblazers or the Broncos could put out, then, then people are gonna want to my story.

KP: Do you foresee there being almost the expectation from whether it's the athletes are covering or fans that are reading or things like that? Do you think that having some of these means team or university own news outlets, asking questions, and especially as kind of the softball questions and never really challenging them on things? Do you think that creates an more negative perception of kind of the traditional media? I mean, there's this whole, this whole Grantland story that Brian Curtis did, I think, I don't know, four or five years ago, about kind of the disconnect between reporters and the players on the thunder. And he said in part of that the thunder beat reporters feel as though the players now kind of expect them to go easier on them, because they have the thunder has its own reporters that are basically just going to ask them these softball questions, they're not going to ask them about what happened the other night with Russ blowing up at that fan. I mean, they're, they're going to avoid any sort of confrontational or difficult subject. So that kind of creates expectation for players and maybe even coaches, that that's what

kind of traditional media should do. Do you think that is realistic? And if so, have you seen any of that?

AH: You know, the two people that I dealt with Neil and Rob, I think we're very cognizant of that. And I think that they do a good job of asking questions that, you know, they might be soft with their specific questions, and they give us answers that we want to hear to, and their answers that are drawn on, from what they've seen as well, that we haven't seen. And I think if team reporters do that, then I think that, you know, the that the ecosystem still kind of works. Because, look, some of us are always going to have softballs, I think it comes with the territory. You know, the issue comes in, when every single question you're asking, is a softball. But, you know, but all of us do that from time to time, because we need a certain sound bite, or there's a storyline that we're chasing, and we don't really care what the answer is. We just need an answer to the question. Yeah. And, you know, I, but I think that, at least for the two guys, the 2g reporters that I've worked alongside, I think, I think they understand that aspect of how people are viewed. But I think that they are doing it. I think they do. Well, you know, I think they, they do a good job with asking, of asking those questions that are not too soft, you know?

KP: And then, finally, do you see this kind of as where sports journalism is headed, I mean, with with the realities that we all know about? I mean, in terms of, of subscriptions, and digital advertising, and I mean, all of the stuff that we've heard a million times, do you think this trend, from now until whenever only becomes kind of more prominent and more of a thing, especially as, like we've talked about, I mean, there's not only the kind of long time, newspaper guys or

women who want to transition into something that is a little less stressful, a little bit less shitty into these kind of jobs. And then you also have this idea of what you're talking about with, it provides an opportunity to people that they don't have to go to these small town, no name places, and grind their teeth for three years until they can get on to the next beat, and then do that for three years until they can finally get on to the college beat in some sort of mid level town. Do you think that with all of that, that this is kind of something that people should expect to see more of as we get further down the road?

AH: I would say so. Yeah. I, you know, I think it's one of those things that is here to stay and, you know, we're not, you're not just the planet, you're not gonna get rid of it as teams kind of become more insular. I think it's, it's very much a part of our ecosystem now, and people can get mad about it or get pissed about it. But you know, it's one of those things where, you know, you just, you gotta get used to it. Yeah, it's there. It's there to stay.

## **RICH HAMMOND INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

*Rich Hammond is a staff editor for The Athletic. He previously worked as a staff writer and editor at the Los Angeles Daily News and Orange County Register. He also served as the team reporter for the Los Angeles Kings from 2009-11.*

RH: OK, so we started 2000, middle of that decade, and we started slow but our blog became very, very popular very quickly. So that kind of led them to say, well, we should try it, you know, with other sports. And we had kind of, I think it's fair to say we kind of middling success with with other sports just didn't catch on, you know, sometimes it was more popular than others. And at some point, I said, you know, I'd like to do a Kings blog, I thought it was fine. It was something I'd never done before, I thought it was a good way to kind of complement, you know,

what we were doing. So they said, you know, okay, we'll give you one. But if you if you start when you actually have to use it, yeah, you know, it's like, it was like, you know, your parents might have been able to better use it.

So they started wanted, of course, you know, I had no idea what to do with it, you know, I guess I had it, like, I don't know how to use this, I don't know how to how to make people read it.

Nobody's reading it, I, you know, I don't know, I don't know what to do. So that that went on for about six months. And then it kind of caught fire to be honest. And you know, there was one day where the Kings made a trade the trade it for Jack Johnson. And, and I did an item on it, it wasn't anything, you know, special, it wasn't anything spectacular. But for whatever as, as these things happen online, you know, just kind of caught on. And Kings fans caught, you know, start paying attention to it started reading it more, that encouraged me to, you know, post more to do more content. And it just kind of snowballed and got more and more popular to the point where it was our most popular pro sports blog, it still wasn't as big as the as the UFC blog, but it was actually are more most popular pro pro blog, so was getting even more hits than the than the Lakers and Dodgers, that sort of thing. So. So I enjoyed that. That was good. People were happy with it. And I continue doing it for a while. But then in 2008, so believe late in 2008, they asked me to come in and be the deputy sports editor, which is basically like an assistant. So I went in the office and, you know, basically worked at a desk just kind of planning the next day sports section and planning a lot of our online coverage to during the day. So I enjoyed that. But it did take me away from from the Kings coverage. So I kept that going for a while, but it wasn't, it wasn't really sustainable. I figured, you know, one point I was gonna have to do one or the other. Like, it wasn't, it wasn't something that was going to last forever. So I kind of had that in the back of my

mind. And then the way the inside we think got started actually was at least on my end. Yeah. The Kings may have different, you know, well not tell the story. But today, I actually was sitting in the office one day, and I came across a I think it was his blog at the time Mark Cuban, I think was just doing a blog, or maybe he is he was posting on his website. I don't remember what it was exactly. But he wrote something in which he kind of had this this fear this idea, you know, because he like, like, a lot of other, you know, teams are a lot of other outlets. You know, I guess the Mavericks weren't getting quite the same coverage that they used to make it a local paper was having cutbacks, and, and all that. So so he wrote something that was along the lines of well, you know, what if theoretically, what if I Mark Cuban, you know, gave X number of dollars to the Dallas Morning News and said, You use this money to cover the Mavericks, you know, you use this money to pay the beat writer salary to pay for travel, pay for whatever, you know, Cuban saying I don't I don't control the editorial. I don't control what the writer writes. I don't you know, he doesn't report to be, but you use my money to to fund the team or to fund the cover? Yeah. And I thought, wow, that's interesting. And that literally was my thought, like I did. You can look at it and go well, that, you know, there's there's 10 different reasons why that would work. But I never heard anybody say that. Yeah, right. And I thought, wow, that's, that's something. So I emailed to the Kings. There are two primary public relations people, communications people, and basically just said that as that, you know, I sent the link and I said, this is really interesting, you know, what do you guys think of this? Just, I was playing like, curious, you know, as they were, they were two people who I, you know, respect it. And I was genuinely curious, you know, what they thought of it. And just from, you know, from the perspective of the team. And the next thing I got, I got back was from one of them saying, 'Would you like to have lunch and talk

about this?' And I thought, well, that's not what I thought was, you know, I just, I just thought about, well, you know, maybe we, you know, briefly talk about, yes, but, so I went to lunch with them. And and, you know, long story short, they explained to me that, you know, they really had never had that particularly particular idea before, but they had had the idea of hiring somebody, you know, bringing somebody in, and I guess it was it was a road that they had explored previously. And for whatever reason, it didn't work out, or they didn't, you know, they didn't, they didn't come to fruition for whatever reason. But, you know, they said that it was something that had thought about and, and during the course of that lines, we talked about, well, you know, what would that what would that look like? What would How would that work? Would it work? You know, what would the job the who would that person be who was hired, and it was a good discussion, you know, and we just talked about, you know, the level of independence that would have to, that would have to be maintained, you know, exactly how you would do your job, how much how much input the team would have, what kind of communication there would eat between the writer, and, and the team. And so, it was a good talk, but we didn't, we didn't really go into it was kinda like, you know, it was interesting, because, you know, we talked about it, but it wasn't like, they're ready for implants. Well, you know, let's keep talking about this. And that was probably like, march of 2009, it was pretty early 2009. And, you know, then over the next like, six months, I mean, we would kind of periodically come back to it, or, you know, that they would talk and come back to me, and, you know, we kind of dialogue about it again, and, again, a lot of it was along those lines. So, you know, hey, you know, the one thing I told them from the from the get go, that it would have to be independent. Yeah, you know, that it would have to be and frankly, I thought, when I said that, I thought that, that that would just be a no-go. Non-

starter, because they would go well, we can have they can have that on our website, but they were surprisingly, you know, open to it. And so so we continue to talk about it, you know, what, what would involve? You know, it would involve you're traveling, have a team play, hotel, off doing around the players all the time, you know, what would that needs? What would be circumstances where you wouldn't write about something? What would be the, you know, how would the communication you How would you let you know, how would you let the team know what was going to be appearing on their website, so that it's not a surprise to them? When the when they open the computer, every board? Yeah. So these are the things that we talked about, again, on and off for, for six months. And, and it came to the point where, you know, kind of progressively got more serious and, and look like, it could actually be something that God would be able to get done. So, you know, I went in for several rounds of talking, I went to talk to the general manager, I went in and talked to Tim lie wiki, who was the CEO at that point. You know, I talked to the team president at that point. So again, just a different kind of a series of just conversations about not job interviews, per se, but just kind of talking like, OK, what is this? What does this mean? And, you know, then finally around, it had to be September of that year, you know, during right before the start of the season. We kind of said, Well, you know, do we want to do this? And we decided that we did, you know, so we launched it in? You know, October, I think it was early October of that year. 2009. And, you know, again, if you have specific questions, we can go more into it, but, you know, I can tell you more kind of about how it went during that time, but the way that it ended, you want to jump ahead was was 2012. And the short version of the story was that everything and from my perspective was going very, very well. And then in 2012 there ended up in player lockouts. And I did something that caused my

departure, which is I talked to a player. So, so I did an interview. And by the way, for the record, I, you know, I interviewed Kevin Westgarth because he was he was a big part of the players side of things. pretty heavily involved in the union. I went to the league and said, 'Hey, could I talk to somebody from the league?' Yeah, it wasn't, it wasn't a one side thingd. It wasn't a, you know, players, you know, favoring the players in the league said, I, when I went to the league, the league said, 'No, we're not going to talk.' So they weren't represented. Yes. So it was an interview with Kevin Westgarth. And then a few days later, I found out that it was apparently against the league policy, during the lockout to have any type of interviews with players or anytime, you basically couldn't even really mentioned any players on an NHL website during the lockout, which, as you can imagine, is pretty problematic. Yes. For for any number of reasons. So we entered into a very long discussion, because the league wanted that item taken down. And further, they didn't want any, you know, they didn't want anything of its source. Yeah. During the lockout, and I, and I said, Well, and, you know, tried to do this as respected respectfully as possible. Because, you know, my relationship with the Kings was fine. Yeah. But I tried to let them know that it just that that wasn't going to be acceptable. Yeah, you know, couldn't given everything that I put out there, and everything that I'd said about what the job was, and the way that I've done it, I could not, you know, professionally do that. I couldn't take it down. I couldn't, you know, I couldn't, I really couldn't go along with what they want. It wasn't what the league wanted to do. So we have very long discussions about you know, what, how could we resolve that, you know, was there a way to work around it? Was there a way to, you know, kind of shut things down until the lockout ended or whatever. So, the Kings that, you know, they really went above and beyond and, and actually, you know, didn't take the item down. I mean, they had the

league, going to them, you know, very frequently say, you got to take the stand, you gotta take this down. And, you know, as we were trying to work it out. Nobody forced me to take it down. Yeah. And I was very appreciative of that. And, again, very appreciative of how, you know, they, they tried to work with me to get a resolution on that, but, but ultimately, I decided, and kind of concurrently I had, you know, as fortune happens to go, sometimes I had somebody at the Orange County Register, you know, call me and say, hey, we've got these job openings. Not even knowing what was going on. Yeah, you know, with me during that time, and, and so ultimately, it was my decision completely. And I just decided, you know, what, we might be able to work out something, but it just it didn't feel it didn't make me feel great. Yeah, no, I mean, the whole thing didn't make me feel great. And, you know, a little bit uneasy, like, you know, no matter what, I was going to compromising myself a little bit. So ultimately, I decided to leave and, you know, went to the Orange County Register, things ended very well, with me and the Kings, there was never any acrimonious, there's still, you know, I still consider them. People I, you know, I mean, it's weird to say friends, but I think you know, what I mean? Yeah, yeah, the relationship is, you know, it didn't impact the relationship with Holland. And in fact, I went, you know, I went back to cover them, again, a bit, you know, when I was at the register, so. So that was the next six, six and a half years, I was working at the register and covering USC covering a little bit of the Kings. And then with Rams move back in January of 2016, started covering them. And so that was my last three years was doing that. And then, you know, just recently here with the athletic, expanding into Los Angeles, was able to connect with them. And now I'm on as kind of a split. My, my role is actually staff editor. But they also, I'm also going to be doing some writing for

them. So so it'll be a little bit of a split. So. So that's it, long story short. So feel free to fill in any gaps there. Anything that? You know, any specific, that's excellent, you want to ask? Feel free.

KP: So with kind of that role with the Kings was there especially because it sounds like, at least at that time, and kind of from what I have, or haven't found in kind of looking at this historically, that was, was a pretty early iteration of kind of what this job has turned into. It doesn't seem like there were that many positions like that, before you guys had kind of agreed to do it was

RH: Yeah, yeah, that's, that's, that's true. And again, you you might get some debate for people or some, you know, questions. I know, that the one that I know, as the Chicago Bulls had something, and yeah, so you got into that. Again, that's one of those where you don't really know, you know, me, you don't really know what the actual job is, but the way that they describe the job, it sounded similar. The other comparison that people drew was was the MLB.com reporters who were hired early on, but I think if you talk to anybody who's who's done one of those jobs, you were in that? I mean, I don't know, technically, I don't know what they say what their disclaimers are. But, but there is oversight. I don't know what they claim. But but they're not. They're not completely independent. They do so. So in terms of that the the Chicago one was the only other one at the time that I was aware of. Yeah.

KP: Was there pushback? I mean, toward you, or toward the Kings from media people, whether locally or or otherwise about? I mean, kind of this partnership and and what it would mean, and what it would do to these kind of traditional media outlets? Did they think that it was going to be

harmful to them? I mean, was was Yeah. Was there pushback, or animosity toward you? Or toward the Kings? Once this kind of came to fruition?

RH: I don't know whether it's a animosity, there certainly was a lot of skepticism, and people just outright, you know, outright thinking that I wasn't telling the truth. You know, I mean, I remember I did like an NPR interview. And they were, I mean, they were frankly, they were relatively hostile. So, so I encountered different levels of that, you know, people well, there's no, there's no, you know, this isn't what it's going to be or, you know, the first time that, you know, something goes, Well, there's no way that the Kings are going to, you know, going to stand behind this, though, they'll just, you know, do whatever they want. And, and I consider that to be perfectly frank, I mean, I, I thought about that, too, you know, because from my perspective, I sat there and thought, Well, you know, yeah, they're saying all the right stuff right now. But gosh, what happens the first time, you know, a player gets arrested or something, and you know, what's going to happen? Like they're saying all the right things right now. But you know, you never really know until it actually comes down. So I understood that part of it. I didn't appreciate the the insinuation that I was just flat out lying. Yeah, you know, that, that we were just being untruthful about what this was going to be? Because we were we were completely upfront and honest about what was what it was going to be. But, I understood the skepticism about, you know, OK, what's going to happen when, you know, I did, I did understand that. I don't, I didn't sense a whole lot of animosity in terms of like, this is, this is going to kill newspapers, just because frankly, it was from from, from my perspective, it was a response to the fact that newspapers weren't covering the team full-time anymore. We had long since stopped traveling

with the team. I think we had stopped traveling three years earlier, maybe even four years earlier. The L.A. Times was kind of on and off, they would go through periods where they would travel so from my perspective, it was it was a response to that. It wasn't like, it wasn't like a strike against against newspapers. Like, you know, hey, we're going to steal away your audience. Yeah. It was more like you've kind of turned away from the audience. So we're, we're going to fill a void that you have left, because, you know, if there wasn't a void there, I'm not sure that this would have worked. Yeah. It I think it worked in large part because people were hungry for coverage that they weren't getting from other places. So so I don't think I ever really got that part of it. Like, oh, you know, you're, you're, you're out to kill newspapers or anything like that. I think people kind of understood that. It was more the other side, like, you know, are you really going to be, you know, what you say you are?

KP: Was that, I mean, kind of filling in the gaps? Was that something that you guys received feedback on and people saying that, I mean, kind of that they appreciated that there was, again, someone really dedicated to covering the Kings, because obviously, there's, there's a fan base there. And I mean, like any of these places that are, are kind of starting to explore these opportunities, it is usually in part because they feel as though there's just not the coverage that they want. Were fans pretty receptive and saying like, this is this is something good for us, because we're not really getting it from these other outlets?

RH: Yeah, that's exactly. That's exactly what it is. Yeah. I mean, I I sense that, you know, like I said because my blog at The Daily News was so popular, so I'm sitting there going, like, these

people are just so hungry for anything. Like, I'm not going on the road, I'm not even going to all the practices, but yet, you know, whatever I can, whatever I provide to the to the fans, they're just like gobbling up there, you can tell that they're hungry for info. So that told me right there, there was an audience for it. If I didn't think there was an audience for it, then, I don't think I would have done it. I don't think I would have, you know, made a big move like that. But, I just kind of got the sense, you know, knowing the market and knowing the fan base and kind of knowing what was out there. I thought, wow, there's there's a real opportunity here to go out and kind of kind of capture that that fan base. And, you know, I think it turned out pretty well. But that certainly was, you know, I don't think I would have let's put this way, I don't think I would have done it if it was the Lakers. Yeah, because you know, the Lakers are so well covered. And everybody has a beat writer, everybody travels, you know, they're on ESPN all the time. There really isn't that that void there where you say, wow, you know, we really need somebody in town to cover the Lakers. That that's pretty well covered. But But I thought in this in this circumstance, that you know, there was something that, you know, could be impactful. And that was a big reason why I did it.

KP: Do you think there are some of these leagues and even teams like you're saying, I mean, the Lakers, probably the Knicks, some of these, especially bigger market teams that are kind of immune, at least for the near future to kind of this lack of coverage that would necessitate them going out and, and kind of trying to find this position for themselves?

RH: Yeah, I think there's certain there's certain ones that are bulletproof. We gotta say, I mean, I think in LA, it's the Lakers and Dodgers. Yeah. It seems you know, like I said, that's been here for but I've been here my whole life. But I've been working here for, you know, almost 25 years, and it doesn't matter Lakers Dodgers, and they can be amazing. They can be, you know, terrible. And it doesn't matter, they're still there still at the top of the heap, they're always going to be pretty much anybody else in this market, whether it's Kings, Ducks, Clippers, Angels, you know, they kind of ride right at the time. Yeah, they're good, they're really popular. If they're bad, nobody cares. You know, it is the Rams, and Chargers are in the middle of that, you know, the Rams are kind of right in the high right now. So I think just using that, as a microcosm, I think you can spread it around. I think it varies from market to market. You know, I mean, like the Packers in Green Bay are always going to be here. You know, but in Chicago, for instance. You know, the Cubs are always going to be big. Not so sure about the White Sox, you know, the, the Blackhawks have been, you know, they were huge for a while, and now they're kind of waning a little bit. So see, I think like you said, there are certain teams or programs Alabama football, the New York Yankees, you know, that that are always going to be, you know, at the top of the heap and never going to fall into that category. But, but I think in every city, yeah, you have those teams, who are, you know, just kind of falling down the pecking order. And, you know, just by the nature of, you know, where we are as media nowadays, they don't get the same kind of coverage that they used to.

KP: Yeah. Do you think I mean, I guess, can speak to your experience with the Kings a little bit here. But do you think there is a way that they can get unvarnished real coverage of a team, when

the team is, is providing the payment for that person covering it? Or do you think they're still obviously going to be things that that they're not going to want them to talk about?

RH: Yeah, I think that completely depends on the team, or, you know, whoever's providing, whether it's, you know, like we say MLB.com or whether it's an individual team, you know, hiring somebody, it completely depends on the team. I mean, the, you know, the Kings and I came to our understanding, you know, somebody might come to a completely different understanding with the Cincinnati Bengals or somebody like that. So I think it really, you know, like I said, I got really lucky because the Kings said, you know, you do what you need to do. And that's the reason why I'm so blindsided by the by the Kevin Westgarth thing is because that was literally the first time I had heard anything in three years. And and obviously, that didn't come from the Kings, it came from the NHL level. But that's why I was so blindsided, because I had just gone along for three years. And, you know, nobody said to me, I mean, we had, you know, Coach got fired, player got arrested, assistant coach got arrested. Yeah, you know, the team was awful. Missed the playoffs. I mean, you know, basically anything bad that can happen to a franchise happened to that franchise, during those three years that I was there. And, and I didn't hear a word, you know, I got the GM fined \$50,000 because he shot off his mouth after a game. And, you know, you it's one of those, like, you keep waiting, like, oh, you know, this is going to be the one right, and this is gonna be the one that makes somebody finally, you know, know, say something, and then they never did. So anyway, I said, I just because that's not going to be the same for everybody. Yeah, you know, I consider myself really lucky that I was able to have that relationship with the Kings, and that they had that trust in me to know that, and that's also the flip

side of it is you also have to trust in the writer to know that they're not going to embarrass you, that they're that they're going to be professional, that they're not going to get something wrong, that they're not going to do something that, you know, that reflects poorly on themselves as a writer, and then, you know, makes the entire product. So that part was on me, you know, I had to make sure that I did that, you know, that I was always professional, and fair and accurate, and everything that I did. But that was the relationship that I had with them. So that's what you know, and people have asked me, you know, but not so much anymore. But, but at the time, you know, like, Oh, is this something that can work? Is this something that can, you know, be duplicated? And the thing that I always said is? It totally depends on the team. Yeah, it totally depends on how dedicated they are to actually having that, you know, if they if they say it's going to be fully independent, does it going to be Yeah. And that's, that's the only people who can answer that question. Are the people from the team, and the writer or the reporter who's being hired? So I think it's something that can work. But it's, you know, it's like, I don't know how to say it exactly. But it, you know, you can't have any cracks in that wall. Yeah, you know, like, you can't, that the moment that one thing gets called out, then the whole, the whole thing falls apart. So you know, you if I that's what I would tell a team, who's you know, going to do something like that is if you going to do it, make sure, make sure you're in for it, you know, don't, you know, know, know what you're getting into? And then make sure you're okay with it. Because otherwise, it's just not going to end? Well.

KP: So do you think for, for these teams, or I mean, universities, it's kind of a fine line in

hiring someone and having them write about your program, whatever it is, without embarrassing you, but also giving them the freedom to write things that are interesting enough for fans to read, because in talking to people that, that have done this or do this currently. I mean, one of the challenges is that, I mean, there are certain things that people are going to go to read on, I mean, the L.A. Kings team website, but then there are also things that they just need, they're not going to get basically a straight story from the king. So they're going to go to the LA Times or whoever it is that is providing the more objective color, is it kind of a balancing act for them to try to make this actually interesting, so that people would be interested in reading it and knowing that it's not basically just the team trying to pump out its own press? Basically.

RH: Yeah, the you know, that's a really interesting point. And I think that's actually evolved, you know, because when, when I started, when I started this 10 years ago, I think the I think the profession has evolved a little bit. Because, you know, when when I kind of grew up in it, or when I started out, and for quite a while, you had that real clear distinction, like the writers were not opinionated, you know, beat writers did not write stories that said, I think this should happen, or they didn't really analyze things. Beat writers were very kind of straight reporter. And, that's the way I grew up. And that's really the way I wrote for for a very long time, even, you know, into the times when, when I got hired as the insider. And I did take some criticism for that, because people would say, you know, you don't give your opinion on anything, you know, the team is terrible, how come you're not saying the coach should be fired? Well, because that's not how I was trained. That's not what my conception of really anybody's perception of a beat writer at that time. Now that the thing is, and what complicates all of this, that you're talking about? Is that really where it's almost flipped the other way now, you know, be writers when, you know,

right before I left the register, and then we were actively encouraged to be more analytical to, you know, to, you know, not give opinions necessarily, but to, you know, kind of, you know, steer our stories in a certain way. Yeah. So, so that changed. So, you know, if I was doing that now, I think it would be different. Because it's not just kind of the straight, you know, people would say, you know, I heard sometimes like, oh, all you do is just transcribed the quotes and put them out. And it's like, well, yeah, that was part of it. You know, but that's what we did. Yeah, we were we were putting out information. And at that point in time, it was more like a, you know, we're going to put it out there you you draw your own conclusion, you draw your own opinion. Yeah, it's not the beat writers jobs, tell you what think we're, we're here to, you know, kind of inform you and let you make your own decision. So I think that's evolved a little bit, and it probably does complicate that relationship, you know, with a reporter and a team. Because suddenly, you know, you have a reporter on your website, potentially giving opinions are saying, 'Oh, you know, this, you know, maybe the first line should be the same. And these wingers or maybe, you know, maybe they should trade the goalie for draft picks, or whatever.' Like, I'm certain, I'm obviously not in the middle of that anymore. But I'm certain that that, you know, changes things, because reporters in general are so much more analytical and, and, you know, even opinionated than they were so, so yeah, I'm sure if I were if I was still doing that job. It definitely would look different right now.

KP: Do you think that I mean, kind of leans toward more analytical writing or opinion based writing? Because I mean, obviously, you know, just as well as anyone that I mean, for the most part, people are not interested in a straightforward game story, they're not interested in a

straightforward. I mean, this is what they did at practice, I mean, they want either a kind of inside information, or they will want some sort of opinion that they can either agree or disagree with.

So do you think that kind of, in a way, widens kind of this gap between objective reporting, and or kind of this traditional media, and a team-hired reporter, because the team hired reporter is obviously going to be very wary of giving any sort of opinion? And so does that, in your mind, kind of give them less credibility almost with readers, because they know that no matter how much they want it, they're not going to get opinion? And they're not going to get an insider stuff that our team doesn't want out there?

RH: Yes, it will. Not to, you know, turn it into a commercial for The Athletic. But I mean, one of the things that, that kind of drew me to them, it was kind of their model is, is a lot of what you're saying there, they despise game stories. So they are very aware of that. And, and I think acutely aware that it's not where we should be going, our time should be spent just writing. You know, this is what happened in the second quarter that this is what happened in the third quarter. It's archaic, and nobody really reads. Yeah, but what what their model is, is more of is, go find an interesting story, go find even, you know, one play within the game, or one, you know, play call, or, you know, maybe something that didn't even happen during the game, he said, you know, go find a story, go find something interesting. And just write the heck out of that, you know, make that go find yourself a story, and just read, write and report the heck out of it, you might not even write about, you know, 99% of what happens in the game. Or you may not even mention, you know, a big touchdown that was scored. Yeah, doesn't matter. They don't care, they want you to find interesting stories that go beyond just the final score was 3-2. So that I bring that up, just

because I think that's a that is a model that anybody gets to do. I mean, it's the model that there championing right now. And and I believe in it, but, you know, newspapers aren't really following it, because they still kind of are playing, you know, they're they're kind of trying to manage the newspaper versus online. To where, you know, if they don't put a game story in the newspaper, the readers are going to go, 'What do you what do you wackos doing where's my games?' So so they're still trying to advantage that versus trying to come up with those interesting stories, and kind of more of the model of the athletic. So I say that because I think a team reporter could could do the same thing. Team reporter can be people who give opinions, though, they write, you know, can unique stories and columns or whatever. But most of the stories aren't like that. Yeah, you know, most of the stories are either in-depth features or analysis or, you know, some kind of trend story or whatever. So, there's, there's no reason that I can think of that, that a team reporter couldn't couldn't do that same kind of story now, and and not, you know, not just be opinionated or whatever. I tend to think, I mean, it's just purely my opinion. But, you know, I tend to think that the stories are, that are just opinion aren't really all that interesting, anyway. Yeah. You know, I would rather if you have an opinion, or if you have a theory, and you back it up with a lot of evidence or some interviews or some stats or whatever, then that's cool. You know, that's, I like that. Yeah. But I don't really like people who just kind of rant and give their opinion inside, I don't particularly find that really interesting. Yeah. So I think anybody can do that. It's just a kind of a matter of, you know, what, what do you want your coverage to look like? And what kind of stories do you want to write?

KP: Well, and it seems like, with, I mean, the, the access that a lot of these team reporters get that just the stories that you're talking about, I mean, kind of these, whether it's behind the scenes, or some sort of analysis, that they are going to get the ability to talk to people that I mean, traditional media members might not or might not have time to, that they would have the ability to really kind of go into those stories and provide some interesting insight, whether it's from their perspective, or that of people who were involved in it, that seems like one of the real things you should take advantage of in that position is the access that you've been given.

RH: Yeah, and that that was the big thing to me is when, you know, when I started, when I took on the insider job, it was, so and it's not and again, this, this goes back to every, you know, every relationship is different. Every, you know, every team is different, every writer is different. The thing that I told the Kings, and this was my decision, and they were supportive of it, but it was something that was it was important to me was in that role. I didn't want I didn't want special access. I didn't want, you know, I didn't want anything that the L.A. Times couldn't get. That doesn't mean I wouldn't ask, and they would give more, but I didn't want you know, oh, the locker room was closed now. But rRch, you can stay in for another half hour, get more stuff. I didn't want that. Now, some teams, I know, they they employ reporters, and, you know, they do do that. Yeah, you know, and, and they do give their people special access, and they get some really good behind the scenes stuff. And, you know, the stuff that the, you know, beat writers, there's no way we would ever get into that. So again, that's their call that's there, they do want that, but I found it beneficial even to just have the access that I did. Because, again, I was on the road I was with the team every single day. You know, I was around them just just having that

access. And then it's how you use it. You know, do you ask for the extra interview? Do you go to the extra community event? You know, what, what do you do with that access that you have? So, again, I think it kind of comes back to, what's your goal with your team reporter? Want your team reporter to, you know, be to, you know, kind of be the behind the scenes person? Or do you want them to be kind of the one who's, you know, yeah, I think it's it's kind of how you define the role. That the thing that frustrates me a little bit sometimes is that, I don't know whether whether teams always make it clear to fans, what that role is, yes. And if I had one wish for that, for that whole kind of industry, it was that it would be that the teams were a little bit more upfront, and with whatever it is, and I'm not I'm not being judgmental or say they have to do it a certain way. But just tell us what it is, you know, is your team reporter fully independent? Is your team reporter subject to editorial review is your team reporter, you know, what is this job? You know, I think transparency is very important. And it was very important to me when I started that job. And that's why it was so important for me to to maintain it. Because you know, the first time you betray that, you know, the first time you are something that you say you're not, then you've you've blown that trust to hell. Yeah. Because, you know, why should why should anybody believe you?

KP: From a more kind of, I don't know, 30,000 foot view, do you think these positions popping up, and kind of the growth of this since it really started 10-12 years ago, do you think that is or will have any sort of heightening effect on kind of the decline of traditional sports reporter jobs and things like that? I mean, do you think that this is, is taking away from the traditional sports media industry? Or do you think that that kind of, in and of itself, is exclusive to all of the

things that are just happening in media and not really reflective of what's going on with team right being hired?

RH: Yeah, it's kind of a chicken or egg question, isn't it? You don't really know, you know, what's causing, you know, is the, or the cutbacks in media are leading to, you know, more of that stuff? Or is it that stuff that's causing traditional media to recede a little bit at? That's a great question. I, I don't know, there's probably a little bit of both. I can say that, if I had to pick one, I probably say it's, you know, media kind of killing itself more than anything. Because, you know, I mean, these cut back started, I mean, shoot the first, you know, I actually wouldn't my very first job was the paper, little paper in Santa Monica, which was a sister paper of the daily breeze and, and that paper shut down in 1996, probably 96, or 97. So obviously, that's way, way we know any of this. So I think the slide, certainly the slide of media, you know, strictly from the from the jobs and content perspective started way before any of this now, is some of this kind of height hastening that I don't know that that's a good question. And it probably is, you know, it probably is, you know, it's maybe diluting the market even further to where, you know, a newspaper suddenly doesn't have the monopoly on coverage of that team anymore. There's other places where people can go, and, and maybe, you know, instead of reading, you know, instead of reading all, all 10 of your stories, as a beat writer, maybe people are only reading five of them, and they're reading stuff somewhere else. So that's certainly possible. And there probably is some of that going on, just you know, because of the dilution of it. But I would say, you know, kind of, you know, and again, that the insider thing by being a good example of that, that wasn't, you know, that that doesn't happen, if there's a strong media presence covering the Kings. Yeah, it

certainly doesn't happen with me. Maybe it happens with somebody else. But that doesn't happen unless kind of things have already started to, to reduce on that end.

KP: And then finally, I had somebody kind of give me an interesting, I guess, thing to take away that these positions have, in a way challenge kind of traditional media to rethink how it does things. And obviously, I mean, with, with what we were just talking about with game stories and things like that, that's kind of already happening. But in a way, it's kind of opened traditional media's eyes that I mean, there is going to be competition, especially in some of these places where there's only, I mean, one newspaper covering the team, or there's only one news outlet that was kind of just like, well, we'll always have people to read us. Do you think that that this has spurred on a little bit of these places realizing that I mean, they have to remain competitive, and that they have to innovate and do things different so that they can continue to get kind of the readership that they're looking for? Because obviously, I mean, if they want to read a game story, they could just go to the team site, but if there's somebody from the newspaper that has as kind of this different analysis that can kind of change how they've been doing things.

RH: Yeah, I think so. And I mean, from my perspective, I don't think that's necessarily, you know, I look at it, you know, when I covered the Rams, and, you know, the Rams would would, you know, have some great feature on one of their players who I want to write down, or, you know, I wish I had gotten that angle. So I think it pushes you a little bit, and maybe it's not something I could have gotten, you know, because maybe it was some kind of special access that they got, or whatever, but yeah, it pushes me kind of on a competitive level, even though I've

been like, 'Oh man, I, I need to get stories like that.' I think that's, I think that's healthy. You know, I mean, I don't think you want to be obsessed with it, or whatever. But I think it's healthy to have somebody, you know, push you, I mean, I worked with, you know, I worked alongside Gary Klein at the LA Times. He's one of the best beat writers, you know, to work alongside, and, I hated it. But I loved it on another level, because I knew Gary was the best of the best. And, you know, he was always going to push me and I was always going to be, you know, looking out of the corner of my eye going what's scary doing what was he working on? And so I think that's good. You know, it's always, you know, the, the challenge for us, is, you know, we, we've got to keep readers' eyeballs, you know, or viewers' eyeballs, and we can't do it. It's clear. Now, we can't do it the same way that we did it 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago. So you know, whether it's keeping an eye on what other people are doing, or whether it's, you know, finding ways to on our own, we've got to always evolve. And again, that's one thing that, you know, I'm excited about, at least with The Athletic is that they're trying something new. I think that's what it's going to take to kind of maybe spur a little bit of a rebound in this industry is, you've got to try something different. You know, wherever that comes from, you know, whether it's a team website or whoever. I don't, I don't really think that's a bad thing.

## **BJ KISSEL INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

*BJ is a team reporter for the Kansas City Chiefs, previously worked at SB Nation and Bleacher Report as a sports blogger, as well as at Nile Media Group, a small sports production company*

KP: Can you give me kind of the cliff notes version of kind of your background and how you ended up in your position with the Chiefs that you're in now?

BK: Yeah, so I went to college, with the idea of being a broadcaster. I started off college at Central Missouri State, University of Central Missouri. But I went there after high school to play baseball. And my degree was always electronic journalism. So I always had a pretty good idea that's what I wanted to do. At that time, I thought that it would be more baseball centric. And then when I transferred, my baseball coach got the job at Kansas State and ended up transferring with him to play my last three years of eligibility there, but I transferred over this degree was just electronic journalism. And even to that, at that point, I thought that I was going to go into like baseball broadcasting. And so about six months before I graduated from K-State, I had a company that I was familiar with from growing up. But they were starting a collegiate summer baseball team just outside of Manhattan in Junction City, and they needed somebody to help run the team. And so they offered me a job with them before I graduated college, so it kind of to be away from my degree a little bit other bits and pieces of my degree that I would use. But for the most part, I wasn't, you know, a broadcaster at that time. So I worked for that team was a summer job, I worked for them for four summers. And after that was done, kind of a long story. I'll give you the cliff notes version. But my wife and I moved out to San Diego. And when I was out there, I found the blog Arrowhead Pride, and I I wasn't doing it to necessarily use my degree. I was living in California, and there weren't a lot of fans out there to talk with. So I just got on the internet on the blog, started writing for them. And the guy who ran the site, like when I was writing that, he said, 'Hey, go put more effort into this. If you want to do this more consistently, we can start paying you to be like a front page contributor is what it was called at that time. So I did that for a year and a half. And then they said, Hey, we're starting a YouTube channel, you

want to be in charge of it, and I started a podcast with them. And so it just kind of grew Arrowhead Pride. My wife, I moved from San Diego back to Kansas City, and I'm still kind of doing that stuff on the side; it was never a full time job. But I remember having a conversation with my wife, and I said if this is something I want to do like full time, I want to turn this writing and kind of covering a team reporting on the team. So I want this to be like a career, a full time job. I need to get in front of athletes. I can't just be like a blogger on the side need to figure out a way to get in and interview them. And at that time, the best opportunity to do that for somebody that didn't have a lot of experience was actually the Senior Bowl, a week long event down in Mobile, Alabama, with 110 of the best seniors in the country that are going to get drafted. And so they're pretty open to credentialing people. And so I went down there was all on my own dime, went down there and networked with people. I met Matt Miller from Bleacher Report. Long story short, he wanted me to work for them. He said, we've got some more resources for you, and we can pay you more money. So still a part-time job. But I went to Bleacher Report as a part time job. Around the same time, there was a position open at a small sports production company in Kansas City, a company called Niles Media Group. And they had a job open as a production coordinator. And so that was right after I started the Bleacher Report. And so I got hired as the production coordinator there, which was a lot of behind the scenes logistics of live sports and broadcasting. And they were they recruit me to do different events. So I would work stats, I would be a production stage manager, I did sideline reporting for Division Two football games, And that's when I was still writing for Bleacher Report and doing analysis, breaking down doing scouting reports on draft prospects and doing long form storytelling, I'll do a little bit of everything. And so when the Chiefs job opened, I they wanted somebody who knew the Chiefs. I

grew up a fan, I've been covering them for a long time. And so it sounds like there would be a huge pool of people.

KP: In your role, I mean, so essentially kind of what this project is, and what ultimately kind of the story is about is kind of the the growing number of teams like the Chiefs or leagues like MLB.com, that are starting to hire their own reporters and kind of what impact that has on traditional sports journalism, but then also, having interviewed some other people, this is kind of becoming more of an option for like younger journalists that are kind of coming out of school and looking for opportunities, especially in broadcast to kind of break into a bigger market rather than going to I mean, some of these really small towns and kind of having to to spend five or six years in these small markets and then maybe be able to jump into a big market. Do you think That I guess, is there any sort of, or what is your relationship like with kind of the traditional media that cover the team? And do you feel like that is that you are kind of a part of the group of people that are just covering the team on a day to day basis? And that? I don't know that you're not separate from them? Yeah, because you work for the organization.

BK: Yeah, it's a fun, dynamic, I enjoy it because I enjoy. It is interesting and unique in that way. And I can't speak for the dynamic across the league. With a lot of these, a lot of people who cover the teams and so on, become friends of mine. So like I have a journalism degree, I went through that whole process, I just kind of everybody, there is kind of competing to put out the best coverage possible. And we're trying to do the same thing. So I'm respectful of the job they have to do. They're all respectful of the job that I have to do. We kind of understand where each

other are coming from during press conferences, or media availabilities, or requests for exclusive interviews and that kind of stuff. So it is a unique dynamic. And I'm very lucky because you know, all the people who cover the Chiefs, they're really good people. And so I spent during the offseason, a little different, because there's not as many many opportunities for people, the outside media, they're not around as much. Yeah. But during the season around, you know, all the people who come in team, whether it's the writers, or the TV, like TV cameras, or the TV talent, like, all around each other all the time. Yeah. So we all kind of share content. If you've been in scrums, you kind of know how it works. For everybody just ask questions, and everybody uses each other's questions. So I've gotten feedback that you know, and I always see that there are questions that I asked that other people use for content and vice versa. And I think that that's the best way to do it. And I know that they like the fact that I am asking questions that can lead them to, you know, creating content, which is what we're all trying to do — to create content that people want to look at. So they can sell advertising, or they can brand it through a sponsor, or whatever it is. So we all kind of have the same goal, I'll try to figure out how to do it the best way we can.

KP: It's interesting kind of that you bring up the the brand and the advertising, because a number of different people that I've talked to have kind of brought that up. Because I think the main thing when people going into this, think about teams and leagues, hiring their own reporters is so that they can kind of draw audience away from traditional media, and they kind of have all of these preconceived notions about it. But one thing that people have told me, that is, in a way, almost a more prominent goal is being able to kind of create some different revenue strategies and some

advertising and things like that. And I know that I mean, there, there are people within the Chiefs that I mean, that's their specific job. But is that something that kind of a goal that has been discussed with you is that I mean, not only are we trying to make this content that hopefully people will want to read and watch and things like that. But it also gives us an opportunity to kind of reach out to some brands and some advertisers and bring in money and bring in some different streams of revenue through those.

BK: It is not my job to sell it necessarily, but there is an emphasis on creating. I got a lot more videos this year than I've done in the past. A big reason for that is the way that people are consuming media. Now, I used to write like, five to 10,000 word long form stories, because I love telling stories, but the analytics behind the number of people that are reading those stories compared to the resources that he was taking and calling myself as a resource, it takes so long to write those in the payoff in terms of the analytics and the cues and all that it wasn't adding up. We had to figure out a way to create videos with what you're doing, it's easier to sell a video, but also the way that people are consuming, which is the same thing that advertisers are looking for, is, you know, one of the most high level, you know, and I think that's kind of why things are changing so much in the digital media landscape is, you know, the money is going where the people are going. And so you just kind of follow whatever is popular, or whatever is generating the most interest. So right now, that's, you know, short form video on social is a huge, you know, for that. So the task or the responsibility for the content creators on the team side, I talked to other team reporters, the ideas are all pretty similar as using to create content that people want to see. And then in turn, hopefully, they can sell that. And so I guess the biggest focus is just

making a series, making it something that you can do every week. If somebody did want to sponsor it or branded with their their company's information, then it's something that they know what kind of return they're going to get.

KP: In terms of I mean, kind of the the content that you guys produce and mean, how you interact with fans and things like that, are fans pretty knowledgeable that I mean, you guys are are working directly for the Chiefs? And that unlike maybe I mean, the the Kansas City Star or some of the Kansas City TV stations, I mean, you're not going to cover certain things like some of the stuff with Tyreek Hill or I mean, something that kind of strays away from the traditional kind of game previews or features or things like that? Do you get feedback from people expecting information about those things? Are people pretty understanding that? I mean, you are working for the team?

BK: I think people are pretty understanding and my life has really changed over the last five years since I've had this job. Whereas now I see like my goal is just to be one of the relevant voices who covers the team. Because nowadays, there's so many different people that cover the Chiefs, whether it's, you know, the six or seven beat writers who are there every day, whether it's a blog like Arrowhead Pride, or whether it's local TV, or whether it's national media, whether it's just people on Twitter, that just watch the answers and you know, kind of comment on everything or the the analysts that are breaking down tape, there's so many different people that are putting information out about the team. And for fans, if so many different places that you can get information from, I think all of us you cover the team, I don't want to speak for them. But I feel

like we're all just trying to be a relevant voice in that big, you know, conversation that taking place about the Chiefs. So I can't cover every single angle of everything that happens with the game, despite working for, you know, I think most people understand as long as you're bringing something to the table that they can't find anywhere else. And for us, it is a lot of video because we have access to an entire team of producers and shooters and videographers. So the video side of it, and then on some levels of access to the players to tell their stories and that kind of stuff. And some other things here and there. But I think for the most part, we're just trying to be a relevant voice in the big conversation taking place. That kind of comes along with people knowing there's certain things that are not going to step out or talk about those kinds of situations. It's not my job.

KP: Do you think I guess this is kind of my my final question, because I don't want to keep you much longer do you think that this has any sort of I'm kind of this trend of hiring reporters has an impact on traditional sports media? I've had people tell me that they think that I mean, this, this hurts traditional sports media, because in a way it's taking away eyeballs and things like that. But I've also had people tell me that they think it has, in a way helped them because it is another competitor in the market that is challenging them to bring new and interesting content, and that they can't kind of just rest on the fact that they're going to be the only place that they find Chiefs content. For example, do you think that that this ultimately has an impact either way, in terms of positive or negative on kind of what we consider the traditional sports media?

BK: That's a hard question to answer and I don't have any of the numbers behind to prove my point — I've never looked anything like that up. But I don't think it necessarily would be a direct

correlation to this hurting traditional media. I think just in general, the way the media landscape changing with social media, and so many more people having access to platforms to write, because now anybody can start their own website or their own blog and start their own podcast, I think it's just watered down might not be the right way to put it. But there's just so many more places to find information that is kind of watered down the market. And so I think that, you know, the best content rises. And so in that way, I think it probably has done a good job of creating better quality content for the consumer, for the fans. Because you've got to figure out a way to be different, to create really good content that kind of separate yourself from everybody else. But I always tell people in class when I talked to students, so when I have classes come to the facility, and I say to them that, you know, working for a team, you know, there are no differences and being you know, a traditional media, then being a traditional beat writer, but you know, the way things are changing, like you said create revenue to create content streams, with the access all the different things that you can do, teams are going to hire their own reporters. So I feel like my advice to them is that it is a great place to go. Because, you know, with advertising in newspapers, who knows what it's going to look like in 10 years, but you know, the team is going to want their own person to be there because our jobs aren't necessarily as directly tied to advertising dollars as say, a newspaper would be, although it's becoming a focus for us now to is to create content that a lot of people want to go see.

## FIELD NOTES

### January 21-27 (Week 1)

#### **My work:**

- Met with Michael during the first week of the semester to discuss what my role would be and who would be involved in the sports enterprise unit
- Brainstormed ideas and possible packages for our group to work on, including one about the SEC, one about health in youth sports and another individual feature story ideas
- Concluded our team would be made up four other writers: Nick Kelly, Bennett Durando, Alec Lewis and Peter Baugh
- Reviewed feature pitch ideas from each writer and met to discuss goals for the semester

#### **Analysis:**

This week was hectic, mostly because of the new semester starting with *Vox* and trying to get our True/False special issue off the ground before it publishes in a few weeks. Michael and I have had a few good meetings to comb through the finer points of what we see this position being and how it fits into the rest of the sports section. The idea of having a team of writers was something we'd discussed last semester but weren't sure would actually come to fruition because of people's schedules. I was initially excited to simply be writing these stories, but I think it's an even better experience to be involved in the entire production of them from start-to-finish.

**Project:**

- Revisited names of potential interview subjects I had proposed last semester
- Contacted three subjects about interviews but didn't hear back from any of them
- Researched articles on Columbia Journalism Review, Poynter and NiemanLab about my subjects or tangentially related to my subject
- Read three to four articles about the "future" of sports writing

**January 28-February 3 (Week 2)****My work:**

- Met with Michael and the group of independent study students to come up with a more finalized plan for what we want to accomplish this semester
- Mentioned the South End Zone story I'd been working on, which spurred the idea of an entire package on Missouri's move to the SEC
- I sent an email proposal to Ruby Bailey, the *Missourian's* executive editor, and Mike Jenner, the print journalism endowed chair, about the possibility of being paid for my work during the semester
- I sent a follow-up email to both Ruby and Mike when I didn't hear back from them after four or five days, and they both responded asking to meet with me the next week.
- I sent Michael a copy of my South End Zone story and he made initial edits on it

-Wrote and co-wrote two stories for the *Missourian* — one on Missouri athletics' postseason ban and how much it could cost the school, and another with Nick on the financial reports MU sends to the NCAA each year

**Analysis:**

This was one of the more challenging weeks for me, not just because of the timing of our True/False issue, but also because asking to be paid for things isn't something I am particularly strong at. It was a bit of a struggle to even get the email sent to Mike and Ruby — and I should've done it much earlier — but Michael was extremely helpful in reviewing and crafting it so that it came across in the best way possible.

On the whole, I think something the J-school, and universities in general, could provide more guidance on is how to negotiate salary/benefits. Many students that I know get to the job application and/or acceptance season and have no clue how to discuss these things with potential employers. Some are concerned that employers would pull an offer altogether if they ask for too high of a salary or too big of a benefit package, and others simply just accept whatever the company offers them because of it. I'm not sure what the logistics of teaching those skills would look like, but I do think it's an important life skill, and especially for seniors or graduate students about to head out into the job world.

**Project:**

-I contacted two more sources, one of whom said they could do an interview in the next month or so and another who said they would prefer not to.

-I revised and came up with a more final list of potential sources and made a checklist of when I contacted them and what their response was.

-I read three more stories on the Players Tribune and a handful of other related topics. One of the stories was about Rich Hammond, who I ended up adding as an interview subject.

### **February 4-10 (Week 3)**

#### **My work:**

-Met with Michael, Alec, Peter, Nick and Bennett to finalize which stories we'd individually be working on.

-Assigned Nick to write about the SEC's impact on academics, Bennett to write about Columbia's economy, Alec to write about athletic donations and Peter to write about the athletics teams' success since moving into the SEC.

-Set deadlines for two weeks from now for first drafts

-Edited another draft of the South End Zone story with Michael

-Began discussing potential publishing dates for the SEC project

#### **Analysis:**

This felt like one of the more productive weeks I've had with the SEC package, especially coming off the previous week where so much of our focus was on the news dropping that Missouri athletics had received NCAA sanctions. One of the tougher parts of running an enterprise team that doesn't meet each day is keeping people on task and on time. Even in the first few days, it was a bit of a challenge to get in touch with a few of the writers or to get them squared away on the stories they are working on.

It was a bit of lean week in terms of my project because of the focus on both the True/False special issue and the formation of the SEC package, but it is what I signed up for!

**Project:**

- I contacted two more sources, neither of which I heard back from.
- I read two stories on political campaigns attempting to create their own "news" networks

**February 11-17 (Week 4)**

**My work:**

- I had another meeting with Mike Jenner to finalize my payment for the semester as essentially an 8-hour-per-week teaching assistant.
- I began writing a story on Mizzou's ticket sales and filed open-records requests with every public SEC university for their financial documents they are required to give to the NCAA.

-I helped Nick and Bennett through troubles reaching potential sources for their stories, and I showed Peter how to find Mizzou's season results going back to the early 2000s.

-I began working on the longer intro to the SEC package

### **Analysis:**

Something that really stood out to me this week was how young sports reporters are often confounded about how to find information that isn't readily available to them. I was the same way as an undergraduate student at Colorado State because I hadn't really ever been trained to cover anything that didn't have stats provided to me or interviews already set up. One of the things I had to help both Nick and Bennett quite a bit with was sourcing and how to contact those people when their information isn't readily available. I hope that if this group of students takes something from working for/with me, it is how to improve your reporting chops by stepping outside of the traditional ways we are used to having things handed to us.

### **Project:**

-I reached out to one source, a former peer of mine that I met during my undergraduate time at CSU about being an interview subject. He said he couldn't immediately but would be able to in early March.

### **February 18-24 (Week 5)**

**My work:**

- Received and edited first drafts of Nick, Peter, Bennett and Alec's stories
- Met individually with each writer to discuss the initial drafts and what more reporting and writing we needed
- Created a potential lineup for how the package would run in print
- Interviewed Nick Joos, Missouri's associate athletic director, for the South End Zone project story
- Interviewed James Kahler for the South End Zone project story

**Analysis:**

My main takeaway from this week was just the sheer amount of time necessary to edit four different stories, each of which were a minimum of 1,000 words. I likely spent about 10 hours in that alone over the course of a few days, in addition to interviewing and transcribing the interviews for my South End Zone project story. Thankfully, we were only working on the March issue for Vox, as we'd previously been working on both March and True/False. Learning to balance my time between those two things and getting my project finished has been one of my biggest challenges. Even with a somewhat finalized timeline for my project, it is unfortunately easy to push that off because it doesn't need to be done immediately. With Vox and the Missourian package, there are more immediate deadlines and therefore I prioritize that work

ahead of my project. My goal over the next few weeks is to flip that and really focus on getting interviews done and starting to write this.

**Project:**

-Interviewed one source for about 40 minutes, which I think went extremely well. They provided me with a lot of insight and detail into the reasons that teams, leagues and organizations are beginning to follow this trend.

-Read a few stories on The Athletic, sports media's newest national entity, and how it hopes to upend traditional newspapers and sportswriting as a whole.

-Researched a few transcription services, including Otter and Trint, both of which were suggested by people who had used them. I was also directed toward Rev, which a few of my friends and colleagues had used for their transcriptions

**February 25-March 3 (Week 6)**

**My work:**

-Received a publishing date (March 17th) for the package and mapped out with Michael which stories we want on which days.

-Edited and revised second drafts of each writer's story

- Contacted Alexis Allison with the *Missourian*'s graphics desk and discussed potential ideas for graphics to accompany the package
- Made Michael's edits on SEZ project story
- Wrote a full first draft of the package intro
- Received and organized Missouri's ticket sales data for 2016-2018
- Received and organized data from SEC open records requests
- Research in the *Missourian* archives for stories about the move to the SEC

**Analysis:**

This was another heavy week of editing and revising, especially because writers' first drafts were quite a bit different than the second versions. For a couple stories, there was simply too much data involved, and the stories really got bogged down. It's an easy habit to get into when you know the story so well, but you have to look at it from a readers' perspective and make sure that it all lines up and makes sense without being an overwhelming amount of numbers and data points that all run together.

It felt really good to get back into the writing mode again with the ticket story and the South End Zone project interviews/revisions. I've been doing a decent amount of writing at Vox with monthly editor's letters and a couple other stories, but with this I felt like I was finally getting back into a groove.

**Project:**

- Interviewed one source, Neill Woelk.
- Created an outline for the final story based on some of the recurring themes in my interviews
- I contacted a pair of MLB.com writers, but didn't receive word back from either of them. I'd assume they are pretty swamped right now with spring training coming up.

### **March 4-10 (Week 7)**

- Wrote parts of story on Faurot Field attendance numbers.
- Sent records request for partnership contracts between Mizzou Athletics and Shelter Insurance.  
Was told none exist, that it's done through a separate third-party entity.
- Met with Michael on different occasions to discuss process of editing for SEC package.
- Edited Alec, Peter and Nick's stories for the packages.
- Assisted Nick with contacting Christian Basi at university PR.
- Contacted and set up a time to meet with Alexis Allison to work on graphics for SEC package
- Edited South End Zone Project story

### Analysis:

This week was one of the first I've had where Vox work wasn't taking up the majority of my time, so I was really able to buckle down and focus on getting people contacted and trying to get interviews set up. We finally got a set publishing date for the SEC package, so I worked quite a bit to begin finalizing those stories and prepping them to be packaged with graphics and photos. I've had to do a substantial bit of editing on a few of the stories, and on one of them, we were waiting until late this week to get a source on the phone for an interview. For the most part, I'm happy with where the package is at and am excited to get it published at the end of next week.

### Project:

-Contacted three of the ten sources to set up interviews this coming week. I was able to confirm two, but I am still waiting back to hear on a specific time and day.

-Searched for and found two more email addresses for potential interviews.

-Reviewed possible transcription software options.

-Met with Jen to lay out my schedule over the next few months, including first and final draft dates, as well as the drop dead day of my defense. Now there's some alliteration!

**March 11-17 (Week 8)**

-Finished attendance story, and it ran online today and will run in print tomorrow.

-Met with graphics, photo and outreach to plan production of SEC package

-Edited Alec, Nick, Bennett and Peter's stories and formatted them for online production

-Edited South End Zone Project story

-Promoted SEC package via social media and released first three parts of it on Sunday and Monday.

Analysis:

This week was one of the busiest for the SEC project that I've had. I edited each story and worked with the writers on structure, word choice, etc. a few different times. I met with Michael on numerous occasions to plan out the print and online aspects of the package, and we finally got it off the ground Saturday night/Sunday morning. We presented what of the package we'd already published to the Missouriian, while a couple folks from the Wall Street Journal and WIRED were in the room, and got really positive feedback. We still have a few more stories to pump out this week, but I'm happy with how it's come together overall.

Project:

-Interviewed three sources (Neill Woelk, Andrew Haubner and Rich Hammond) for the project, each of which went really well, in my opinion.

-Set up two more interviews for this week, and I am contacting a few more possible sources for interviews Thursday or Friday.

-Did a bit more research on how team reporters cover specific events, such as Russell Westbrook's blow-up with the fan in Salt Lake City. I think I'd like to use that as the lede or at least a lede to one of the sections.

### **March 18-24 (Week 9)**

My work:

-We published our entire SEC package between Sunday and Friday. That included a 200-word introduction and seven stories, each of which I edited or wrote. We got a ton of compliments on it, and for the most part, I was really happy with how it came together. There were a couple issues with the graphics team — mostly miscommunications — but we got all of those resolved and put a series that was both interesting to read and visually appealing. Michael told me that as of Thursday, we had four of the top six most-read stories on the Missourian's website last week, including my tickets story, which got a bunch of traffic early in the week.

### Analysis:

I think this week was a great example of what the Missouriian is capable of with a talented group of writers and editors. We tackled an important and necessary topic in a way that was more interesting to read than just a bunch of numbers and data sets. It was also a great reminder of just how much work and time has to go into quality journalism. Not only were we trying to edit stories and make them as strong as we could, but we also had to focus energy on making them easy to read and comprehend with photos and graphics involved.

### Project:

It was a pretty slow week overall for my project. I got some transcribing done later in the week, but with Vox production being by main focus early in the week, I wasn't able to get people on the phone for interviews. I've reached back out to a handful of people who I hadn't heard back from, and I'm hoping to get at least one more done before I leave for spring break Tuesday-Friday.

Once I get back, I should be able to get another interview done over the weekend and then go fully into transcribing on Saturday and Sunday. Hoping I can get a couple more done Monday or Tuesday and then really start cranking out a first draft.

I was able to create a draft outline for the story, which I think was shaped a bit by my early interviews. I want to look at this trend as a sort of three-headed trend: 1) what is it doing (or not)

to traditional sports journalism? 2) what effect does it have on young journalists entering the industry? 3) what does it do to help the entities that are themselves hiring reporters?

In each of the first three interviews I had, the theory that leagues/teams/organizations are doing this more as a way to create a brand and market themselves as a media entity came up. So I want to make that a focal point alongside the journalistic questions.

I think that's all for this week. I'm a bit behind on my field notes backlog, but I'm hoping to also get some — if not all — of that knocked out over the break.

### **March 25-March 31 (Week 10)**

#### **My work:**

-With this being the week of spring break, I did not work on any Missourian projects.

#### **Analysis:**

-This week was a much needed reprieve from the hectic schedule I'd been running. I finally got to breathe a bit, and I spent most of the week in Las Vegas.

#### **Project:**

At the end of the week, I spent a handful of hours transcribing, but I ultimately decided to use a service.

### **April 1-April 7 (Week 11)**

#### **My work:**

-I met with Michael this week to discuss the next stories we'd be working on, focusing mostly on young athletes and health. I'd been wanting to do a story about female athletes and ACL tears for quite some time, so I proposed that, as well as a story about overweight high school football players and something to do with mental health.

-We assigned Bennett Durando and Joe Noser, a reporting student, to the overweight players story. And we assigned Peter Baugh to the mental health story because of his connections within the athletic department.

-The group of us met to discuss our stories and how we would co-write them.

-I did some research into medical studies about ACL tears, particularly among female athletes, and I read a handful of stories that dealt with similar topics.

### **Analysis:**

I was really excited to get started on this story because it's one that has fascinated me for quite some time. Unlike the South End Zone project story or really any of the others I'd done in the SEC package, this was really going to focus on the human element of these injuries and how it can affect people in both the short and long term. Much of why I'm interested in writing is because of the ability to delve into people's minds and learn about their strengths, weaknesses, fears and aspirations.

### **Project:**

-I wrote the outline for my draft and read a few more stories. This was a big Vox week, so I didn't really get as far into it as I would've liked.

**April 8-15 (Week 12)****My work:**

- Met with Nick Kelly to discuss our story on ACL injuries in female athletes
- Wrote an outline for the story and discussed potential sources
- Contacted a source who works directly with Missouri's team doctor and young athletes
- Received contact info for the doctor
- Talked to Peter Baugh about his direction for the Mizzou athletics mental health story
- Researched medical studies and other information about female athletes tearing their ACLs

**Analysis:**

This story, and this collection of stories, has provided a much different challenge than the SEC package. They're much more focused on people and solutions journalism, while also having a good amount of research behind them to scientifically back them up. Also, with it being the final third or so of the semester, it's been a bit of a challenge to get people organized while they're also working through other stories and work for other classes.

**Project:**

-This was a big writing week for me. Pretty much all of my work was focused on writing and a little bit more research for the draft. I'm about 1,500 words into the story at this point, and so far, I'm pretty happy with it.

**April 16-22 (Week 13)****My work:**

-I text messaged and called Dr. Patrick Smith at the Columbia Orthopedic Group about an interview for the ACL story. He told me would have time to talk the next week, so there wasn't a whole lot else to do on my story until I could talk to him.

-I met with Peter to discuss the direction of his story and make sure it was focused on what exactly I was looking for.

**Analysis:**

-Much of my focus during the beginning part of the week was on getting a draft of my entire project to Michael and Professor Rowe. Again, with *Vox* on a final production week, it was pretty hectic for me to get that done, in addition to all of the editing and reading I was doing for the issue. It was also a bit of a challenge getting in touch with Dr. Smith, who I was told was very excited to help me with the story. Such is the life of a reporter trying to get in touch with doctors.

**Project:**

I turned in a draft to Jen and Michael (printed it was about 160 pages).

**April 23-29 (Week 14)****My work:**

-Called and emailed Dr. Smith, who told me he could talk Tuesday night but then never responded to me.

-Began filling in some of the outline for the story with research Nick and I had done.

-Edited Nick's sections of the stories and read over the transcriptions of his interviews.

### **Analysis:**

This was a challenging week from the standpoint that I couldn't get Dr. Smith on the phone. I could reach out to other ACL doctors in other cities, but because the athletes we're focusing on are here in Columbia, we want to talk to a local doctor. After some frustration, I researched a few more orthopedic doctors in town, and I found Seth Sherman, who I will hopefully be able to get for an interview.

### **Project:**

I began cleaning up some of the transcriptions in my draft, but other than that, I was mostly waiting on edits from Professor Rowe and Michael.

### **April 30-May 3 (Week 15)**

#### **My work:**

-I received an email back from Dr. Sherman late Friday afternoon, and I am working to set up an interview time with him early next week.

#### **Analysis:**

-An unexpected challenge to co-writing this story with Nick is trying to match our pacing and voice. We have two distinct writing styles, and I've been editing his sections of the story without trying to make them sound too much like my own writing.

**Project:**

-I defended my project (successfully!) in front of Professor Rowe and Michael on Thursday. They gave me lots of great feedback and suggested I also add the stories I've written for the *Missourian* into the appendix of my final draft.

## EXAMPLES OF WORK

### **Big 12 dysfunction behind Missouri's move to SEC**

*By Keegan Pope*

Seven and a half years ago, a single television network broke the Big 12 for good. Years of infighting and disdain for the league's self-appointed leader, the University of Texas, had laid the foundation. As the Longhorns reaped the benefits of one-sided media contracts, their conference counterparts fell further behind. Texas was one of the first three schools nationwide to amass more than \$100 million in athletics revenue in a single fiscal year in 2006; no other Big 12 program, save for Oklahoma State, which in 2006 received a \$165 million gift from booster T. Boone Pickens, hit that mark until 2010.

When news surfaced of Texas' potentially eschewing a league-wide television network in favor of an exclusive 20-year, \$300 million deal with ESPN that featured a channel devoted solely to the Longhorns, its league partners had enough. Colorado, an original member of the Big Eight, left for the Pac-12 in June 2010. Nebraska escaped to the Big Ten soon after; and with the threat

of the league's implosion looming, Texas A&M, which had nearly bolted for the Pac-12 a year earlier, announced its move to the SEC in late August 2011.

Left to decide its own fate was Missouri. Two years earlier, Missouri governor Jay Nixon had floated the idea of a move to the Big Ten. But an offer never came, and Missouri stayed in the Big 12, the league it helped found 15 years earlier.

Days after Texas A&M's announcement and an unsuccessful last-ditch attempt to convince the Aggies to stay, then-Missouri athletic director Mike Alden, Chancellor Brady Deaton, Interim System President Steve Owens and Interim General Counsel Phil Hoskins met on a roof atop the press box during Missouri's season-opening game at Memorial Stadium to assess the school's future. They determined a future in the Big 12, or at least what was left of it, wasn't viable. Two months later, Missouri became the 14th member of the Southeastern Conference.

Deaton called the move "an opportunity to fulfill the expectations and the promise and the potential of the University of Missouri and its athletic program in a way that we have not had the opportunity in the past to do."

In the 7½ years since, Missouri's success in its new home has been inconsistent. The men's basketball team has made the NCAA Tournament twice, once in 2013 under Frank Haith and last season in Cuonzo Martin's first year helming the program, but it also suffered one of the worst three-year stretches in program history (an overall record of 27-67) under Kim Anderson's leadership.

Under former head coach Gary Pinkel, the football program won consecutive SEC East titles in 2013 and 2014. Since then, Missouri is 24-27 overall, with a pair of bowl appearances in each of

the last two years under Barry Odom. Volleyball and women's basketball have seen a substantial uptick in success, combining for eight NCAA Tournament appearances since joining the league.

Financially, MU Athletics has amassed more revenue during each of the past six years than it ever had previously. But it also spends more than ever before, and the athletic department has now operated at a budget deficit for consecutive years. According to documents obtained by the *Missourian*, MU Athletics' fiscal year 2018 revenue ranked 11th out of the 12 SEC teams that responded to requests for mandatory NCAA financial reports. The department is significantly behind the majority of its conference counterparts, especially upper-echelon athletic programs at schools such as Alabama and Georgia, in revenue from ticket sales, licensing, advertisements and sponsorships.

Recent efforts to grow the department's donor base are underway, but declining football ticket sales since 2015 — when protests over the school's racial climate roiled the campus — have had a major impact on the bottom line. And most recently, the football, softball and baseball programs were hit with one-year postseason bans and recruiting limitations by the NCAA for academic fraud. Missouri is appealing those sanctions, but if they are upheld, they could cost the department more than \$8 million in revenue.

Back in the Big 12, Texas and Oklahoma now reign as the conference's bell cows, with the Longhorns pulling in more than \$210 million last year and the Sooners amassing a record-high \$155 million of their own. The rest of the league remains far behind; West Virginia is the only other school with more than \$100 million in athletic department revenue. Missouri's former Big 12 peers such as Kansas, Kansas State, Oklahoma State and Iowa State have remained within spitting distance of the Tigers, money-wise, with Missouri's growth in donations and increased

media rights since joining the SEC providing the biggest difference between the Tigers and their former counterparts.

Attempting to discern where Missouri would stand today if it had stayed in the Big 12 is nearly impossible. When they left, the Tigers were legitimate conference title contenders in both football and men's basketball, but after Pinkel's departure in 2015 and coaching instability in the basketball program, it's a mystery whether they would've been able to maintain that success. For MU athletic director Jim Sterk, who didn't come to the school until 2017, the SEC is a move he's happy the school made.

"I think there was an opportunity that Missouri couldn't turn down as far as joining the SEC," he told [AL.com](#) in 2017, "and it's proven to be a really prudent move."

As Missouri completes its seventh year of competition in the SEC this spring, the *Missourian's* team of reporters set out not to determine whether the decision made on that press box roof on Sept. 3, 2011, was the right one, but to provide readers a compelling and in-depth look at the impact the Southeastern Conference has had on MU, its athletic programs, its students and the town of Columbia.

*Supervising editor is Michael Knisley.*

## **South End Zone Project exemplifies SEC's unrelenting arms race**

*By Keegan Pope*

When Missouri opened its 2018 football season against UT Martin on Sept. 1, it did so in the shadow of a nearly 200-foot-tall crane, a symbolic reminder of the athletic department's most

ambitious capital venture yet. Nearly seven months later, a steel and concrete skeleton covered in yellow protective wrap stands in the stadium's south end zone. The \$98 million project, expected to be fully operational by the time Missouri hosts West Virginia in its 2019 home opener on Sept. 7, stands as a monument to life in the Southeastern Conference, where stagnation can mean disaster. It represents the "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality that the school understood when it joined the league in 2012, yet has failed to fully embrace because of the financial commitment it requires.

Of the 12 public universities in the SEC that responded to the Missourian's records requests — as a private school, Vanderbilt isn't required to disclose its financial records — Missouri ranked in the bottom third in both ticket sales and athletic donations in fiscal year 2018, and its \$1.23 million in revenue from licensing, advertisement and sponsorship was at least \$10 million less than six of its conference counterparts. Its football facilities lag behind nearly all of its league peers, something SEC commissioner Greg Sankey made a point to mention when he met with newly hired athletic director Jim Sterk in August 2017. Left unsaid from that conversation, or perhaps not, was the notion that without substantial financial growth, Missouri would struggle to keep pace with the rest of the league, which boasts 13 of the top 32 revenue-generating athletic departments in the country.

Amid college football's ongoing attendance crisis — attendance dropped by more than 7 percent across Division I football in the past four years — Missouri opted to follow the path of a number of its peers, choosing to downsize its venue and bank on premium seating to offset declining football ticket revenue. The project, which has already raised more than \$50 million in donations — the remaining balance will be paid by revenues bonds — is expected to bring in roughly \$6 million per year in revenue, according to school officials.

It was just a decade ago, and in Missouri's case, within the past six years, that the answer was thought to be bigger, not better. Schools were taking their newly made millions from college football's television explosion and building their stadiums on a monstrous scale. In 2015, Texas A&M, which joined the SEC in the same year as Missouri, finished a \$485 million expansion of Kyle Field that added more than 20,000 seats. When Missouri entered the SEC in 2012, then-athletic director Mike Alden introduced plans to expand the capacity of Memorial Stadium to accommodate the masses of fans he and school officials believed would come to games in Columbia.

But as attendance numbers continued to plummet and expenses added up, Missouri abandoned most of that project. Now, nearly seven years later, the athletic department has reimagined its stadium renovation in hopes of not only attracting wealthy donors, but also paying for upgraded football facilities needed to keep pace in the best college football conference in America.

### **Following a trend**

Missouri, and the other athletic departments that have undertaken similar projects in recent years, were by no means pioneers in their thinking. Stanford senior athletic director Ray Purpur drew the ire of school alumni in 2006 when the university's Board of Trustees approved a \$95 million plan to shrink its stadium capacity from 85,000 seats to 50,000, even though the Cardinal's football team drew fewer than 35,000 fans for most games. Much of that criticism centered around the "lavish spending" associated with intercollegiate athletics, according to the New York Times. Stanford took a gamble on a program that finished 1-11 the previous season and hadn't recorded a winning season in five years.

The project, originally meant to replace single-game ticket buyers with season-ticket holders and ultimately make Stanford Stadium a more attractive venue for possible Olympics bids, came at

the beginning of a trend that has proliferated through university athletic departments across the country. Arizona State, Kentucky, North Carolina and even traditional football powers like Notre Dame, Ohio State and Penn State have approved or finished projects to decrease seating capacity over the past three years. When it demolished Floyd Casey Stadium in 2014, Baylor opted to replace it with the smaller, 45,000-seat McLane Stadium.

It's a trend that James Kahler, the executive director of the Center of Sports Administration at Ohio University and a former Cleveland Cavaliers marketing executive, doesn't believe will end any time soon. More sports fans each year, including at the college level, are choosing to watch from the comfort of their own homes rather than braving traffic, long concession and restroom lines, and oftentimes poor weather to watch in person.

Concurrently, the production quality of TV broadcasts — and the actual devices fans watch on — have improved exponentially over the past dozen years. Ahead of the College Football Playoff National Championship in early January, ESPN touted “vantage points from unimaginable angles,” using 250 cameras to broadcast every aspect of the game, and it even offered channels with different commentators for viewers to customize their experience.

This past season, 12 of Missouri's 13 games were broadcast nationally, and the one that wasn't could be streamed over the Internet anywhere in the country with a Wi-Fi connection. A decade ago, Missouri was lucky to have half that many games televised; and before the school's move to the SEC, they were typically limited to regional networks you couldn't get outside of the Midwest.

“Your phone is your new TV set so you can get it on the go, and the number of games you can watch is at an all-time high,” Kahler said. “It wasn't too long ago that you could only watch two

or three college football games on a weekend. ... For the older generation, it was a big deal to go to a game, and we didn't have a 55-inch TV to watch multiple games on. The experience at home in the family room has gotten a lot better."

### **Cable can't fix it**

In late June 2012, just days before Missouri was officially accepted into the SEC, the university's Board of Curators announced a \$72 million plan to expand Memorial Stadium's capacity to roughly 75,000, adding 5,000 upper bowl seats and 1,000 club level seats to the east side of the stadium. It was touted by Alden and then-head coach Gary Pinkel as Missouri's first big foray into competing in the SEC. The stadium expansion would lift Missouri into the upper echelon of stadium sizes to accommodate the increase in attendance it expected to see.

"When it's all said and done, we'll be up there in the top half of the SEC," Pinkel said in 2012. "And the top half in that league is compared probably to the top 10 in college football. We're doing the right things."

After winning the SEC East in both 2013 and 2014, two seasons in which Missouri's average attendance reached more than 63,000 fans per game, expanding Memorial Stadium seemed to make sense. As the Tigers' program continued to win, the thinking went, more seats would be necessary.

But Missouri finished just 5-7 the next year, marking just the second time since 2003 that the Tigers hadn't finished with a winning record. The on-field struggles were compounded with the football team threatening to boycott practices and games amid racial unrest on campus.

Ultimately, the team played its final three games of the season, including an emotional 20-14 win over BYU a week after the boycott began, but the damage to its fan base was done. Missouri's

attendance dwindled after the 2015 season — 8,216 fewer season tickets were sold in 2016 than the year before, and overall average attendance dropped by nearly 13,000 people per game.

Associate athletic director Chad Moller told The Associated Press in November 2016 that it was not only Missouri's struggles on the field that caused the attendance drop but also backlash from the football team's decision to join campus protests amid racial tensions at the school.

"Naturally, as we get back to playing winning football, the attendance will work its way back up," Moller added. "We're confident of that."

But a 7-6 record in 2017, capped off by six consecutive wins to close out the year, and an 8-4 mark in 2018 didn't make a dent.

An argument can be made that Missouri's inability to return to the same success it reached between 2008 and 2014 has had a more profound effect on overall attendance than the 2015 issues.

Whatever the reasons, one fact remains: Missouri hasn't drawn more than 60,000 fans for a game since Oct. 10, 2015 — the final home game before the protests.

Average announced football game attendance dropped from 65,120 in 2015 to 51,465 in 2018, and just over 24,300 tickets per game were actually scanned in 2018, according to documents obtained by the *Missourian* through an open-records request. Athletic department officials say that drop is due to faulty ticket scanners, which are affected by weather and spotty Wi-Fi at the stadium.

Regardless of what the real attendance numbers are, Missouri's overall ticket revenue has plummeted in the last half-decade. The football program's ticket revenue alone dropped by nearly 31 percent between 2014 and 2018; and last year, the athletic department operated under a budget deficit for the second consecutive year. In its most recent financial reports filed with the NCAA, Missouri reported just \$17.5 million in total ticket sales, putting it second-to-last among the SEC's 13 public universities. Florida, which had the seventh-highest ticket sales in the conference, brought in more than \$32 million last year, and LSU, the league's bell cow in ticket sales, totaled over \$40.2 million, nearly 85 percent of which came from football.

The media rights fees college conferences receive from networks like ESPN, CBS and Fox have grown at a remarkable clip — Missouri's revenue from media rights has more than tripled in the past 10 years. But every other SEC school has profited from the same growth, and schools still have to bring money in through traditional attendance and contributions to remain financially competitive.

### **New vision**

In August 2017, less than two years after the protests and a little more than five years after the unfinished expansion had been originally approved, the Board of Curators approved the South End Zone Project. As plans began to ramp up and donations came in, Sterk and other members of the athletic department traveled to schools across the country to look at similar projects at Washington and Purdue.

The south end zone, which hadn't received a substantial renovation since 1977, was the natural spot. Missouri considered a smaller project that would have upgraded the current amenities and added seating, but Sterk, after conversations with staff and donors, pushed for a complete

rebuild. Expected cost jumped from \$75 million to nearly \$100 million, but more than \$50 million has been raised in donations to fund the project.

By March 2018, demolition had begun on the current space, with Kansas City-based design firm Populous hired as the architect. The company has designed dozens of collegiate stadium and arena projects in the past decade, including the \$75 million Mizzou Arena in 2004.

The approximately 10,800 general admission seats that were torn down last spring will be replaced by 16 luxury suites — one of which is given to head men's basketball coach Cuonzo Martin as part of his contract with the school — along with a 750-person field-level club that will allow fans to greet players as they enter and exit the locker room, a 1,254-seat indoor club area with private food service and restrooms, and a general seating area that will hold approximately 1,400 more fans.

The suites, which require a one-time \$100,000 capital donation, will cost between \$32,000 and \$49,000 yearly depending on their capacity. Club level seats require a one-time \$1,500 capital gift, plus an annual \$1,500 donation per seat and the cost of a season ticket, which ranges from \$199-\$399. Access to the field club will cost an additional \$850 per person, along with a \$1,000 capital gift per person.

The school has yet to release information about sales specific to the project, but premium seating at Memorial was completely sold out for the 2018 season, deputy athletic director Nick Joos said.

“There’s a great demand for premium experiences,” Joos added. “You see it in baseball — all the seats behind home plate that the Royals have carved out. Field-level boxes similar to the ones the

Dallas Cowboys did at their stadium. I don't know that you can ever have too much (premium seating) because there's just a high demand for those seats.”

Also included in the nearly 200,000 square-foot space will be a new video board, football locker rooms, a weight room, reception space and coaching offices. The first floor, including team meeting rooms, are expected to be ready when the team reports for summer workouts on Memorial Day weekend. Coaches will move into their offices in mid-June, and the rest of the facility is expected to be finished by mid-July.

The process hasn't been without its challenges, though. A long winter, combined with a shortage of local construction workers — Missouri suffered a 7.2-percent loss in construction employment between December 2016 and 2017 — has slowed progress.

### **Sizing down**

Once renovations are completed, Memorial Stadium's capacity will drop from 71,168 to 65,000, making it the sixth-smallest venue in the SEC, just ahead of Vaught-Hemingway Stadium at Ole Miss.

The success of similar projects at schools such as Colorado, Arizona State and even Stanford is hard to quantify. As a private institution, Stanford isn't required to disclose its revenues and expenditures. At Arizona State, football revenue in fiscal year 2017 was nearly identical to the year before, despite major facility renovations and increased premium seating. In Boulder, the Buffaloes' ticket revenue rose slightly after their project was completed in 2015, and then it jumped up more than \$1.4 million in 2017 after the team played for the Pac-12 Championship the year before.

For Missouri, the \$98 million gamble is a bet on its ability to continue winning football games and ultimately entice fans to keep showing up, despite the across-the-board decline in attendance nationally and its own recent struggles. That more than half of the project's cost is covered by donations — and the fact that the premium seating will be paid for ahead of time regardless of whether fans show up — limits some of the risk that Missouri's revenue projections might be too ambitious.

Athletic department officials hope the additional premium seating options can both entice current fans to upgrade their tickets while also drawing other fans to traditional ticket packages. But unless overall attendance reverses its downward spiral and ticket revenues follow it, the athletic department risks falling even further behind its peers.

“There's not many places like a Nebraska that no matter what your record is, 90,000 people are going to show up every game,” Joos said. “... There's a handful of places like that, and then there's a lot of the rest of us fighting and scraping tooth and nail for a chance to bring in a few additional dollars.”

*Stephanie Hamann also contributed to this report.*

*Supervising editor is Michael Knisley.*

## **Postseason ban could cost MU athletics millions**

*By Keegan Pope*

When the NCAA Committee on Infractions announced Missouri's punishment for academic fraud Thursday morning, the most eye-opening sanction for the program was the one-year postseason ban levied against the football team.

After failing to make the postseason in both 2015 and 2016, Missouri has been to two straight bowls, and the 2019 team might be head coach Barry Odom's most talented team yet. The Tigers added Clemson graduate transfer quarterback Kelly Bryant, who, according to a source close to him, will remain with the program in the wake of the sanctions, and most of the Tigers' record-setting offense also returns. The idea of Bryant handing off to Larry Rountree III and Tyler Badie, and throwing to Albert Okwuegbunam, had fans dreaming of competing for a Southeastern Conference East title and New Year's Six bowl bid.

Those dreams will be on hold, at least for the foreseeable future as Missouri appeals the committee's decision, which is expected to take at least three months.

But the loss of an opportunity for fans to enjoy another possible bowl appearance is hardly the only serious sanction. If the school's appeal is denied, the financial ramifications for an athletic department already operating with a budget deficit could be grim. Although dropping ticket sales or an apathetic fan base might be a concern, the most painful hit for Missouri would be missing out on its share of the SEC's bowl revenue.

Under SEC rules, any program barred from competing in postseason play for that year must also forfeit its share of revenue that the conference receives and then distributes to its 14 member schools. If Missouri's appeal is denied, half of the revenue it receives from the conference's bowl distribution would be given to the other league schools, and the other half would be put in an escrow account that can be accessed in five years if the program doesn't have any major violations in that span.

In fiscal year 2018, which does not include the 2018 football season, Missouri reported \$9.6 million in revenue from conference distributions, \$7.03 million of which came from the football program. Ole Miss, which was banned from postseason play in both 2017 and 2018 after a five-

year investigation into its football program, forfeited \$7.1 million in 2017 and will forfeit more than \$8 million for 2018, according to the Jackson Clarion-Ledger. Based on the SEC's increasing revenues — it reported \$659.9 million in total revenue for 2017-18 — Missouri's expected loss would be over \$8 million for the 2020 fiscal year.

“It'd be a fairly significant impact,” Missouri's deputy athletics director and chief financial officer Tim Hickman said. “It would be about 7 or 8 percent of our budget. It's not this coming fiscal year; it'd be that same 2019-20 year. But that's definitely something we'll have to plan ahead for.”

Missouri also earns revenue from its own individual bowl ticket sales and miscellaneous expenses reimbursed by the SEC, which totaled \$1.3 million for the 2017 Texas Bowl. The school also has to pay for team travel, meals and lodging for the bowl game, as well as the travel of spirit squads, coaching bonuses and uniforms, an expense that added up to more than \$1.4 million.

In the university's most recent financial filings with the NCAA, the athletic department as a whole reported a net deficit of \$1.8 million, down from \$4.5 million the year before in large part due to a \$2 million revenue bump from the men's basketball program's increased attendance after signing No. 1 overall recruit Michael Porter Jr.

But basketball attendance this year has plummeted with Porter Jr. gone and the team struggling to a 10-9 record, and the football program's attendance declined slightly despite an 8-4 regular season record. Barring a dramatic rise in ticket revenue from both programs next season, the expected \$8 million revenue loss from the postseason ban will be difficult to recoup for an athletic department that ranked second-to-last in the SEC in revenue in fiscal year 2017.

Tacked onto that, if the appeal isn't successful, is a 1 percent deduction from the football, softball and baseball program's budgets. The Committee on Infractions does not define what constitutes a program's budget, and Hickman himself was waiting for that clarification. But based on Missouri's most recent revenues and expenses, that fine could be anywhere from \$230,000 to \$360,000. The baseball and softball teams revenues are not specified in Missouri's finance report.

*Supervising editor is Michael Knisley.*

## **Missouri athletics operates in red for second consecutive year**

*By Keegan Pope and Nick Kelly*

Missouri's athletic department operated with a budget deficit for the second straight year, according to documents submitted to the NCAA and obtained by the Missourian. But the department's 2018 operating deficit was significantly less than the \$4.56 million loss the school reported in fiscal year 2017.

A year after reporting a record-high \$97.8 million in revenue, Missouri's operating revenue totaled \$107.3 million, and the department amassed \$109.1 in operating expenses between July 1, 2017 and June 30, 2018 — a difference of \$1.806 million.

The \$107.3 million in revenue marks the first year Missouri's athletic department has generated revenue in excess of \$100 million, and it is the highest revenue figure since the school joined the Southeastern Conference in 2012. Although their documents have not yet been made public for the most recent fiscal year, every SEC school, save Vanderbilt, reported more than \$100 million in revenue in fiscal year 2017, with Alabama's \$174.3 million leading the conference.

Missouri's \$9.5 million increase in operating revenue from 2017 stems primarily from growing contributions, media rights, NCAA distributions and bowl revenues. Contributions, which increased by \$3.2 million, can come from individuals, corporations, foundations, clubs and other organizations designated for the use of the athletics program. They do not include pledges for future projects.

Revenue from media rights, which includes both the conference media rights distribution and radio, television, and digital rights, increased by \$3.2 million.

Overall ticket revenue, however, decreased from \$17.9 million to \$17.5 million in 2018. The men's basketball team, buoyed by the hiring of Cuonzo Martin and subsequent signing of No. 1 overall recruit Michael Porter Jr., saw its ticket revenue increase nearly 70 percent from \$3.035 million in 2016-17 to \$5.1 million in the most recent fiscal year. Those numbers do not reflect ticket sales or attendance for the ongoing 2018-19 men's basketball season.

Because of the ticket sales increase, the men's basketball team saw a significant increase in total operating revenues, growing by \$3.7 million over the previous year. Football also tallied a growth in operating revenue, but not to the same scale. It improved by \$482,974.

Football ticket revenue, though, fell by \$491,380, adding to four consecutive years with decreasing ticket revenue. As the department's major money generator, the football program's descent matches Missouri's overall ticket revenue trajectory.

In 2012, Missouri's average attendance reached 67,476 fans per game, and the football program alone brought in \$14.9 million in ticket revenue that fiscal year. The Tigers won the SEC East in both 2013 and 2014, and their attendance hovered just above 65,000 fans per game in both seasons. But after the 2015 campus protests and consecutive losing seasons in 2015 and 2016,

attendance has dropped to less than 52,000 per game, and the football program's ticket revenue fell to \$10.6 million in fiscal year 2018.

Before the Nov. 2015 protests, Missouri had recorded 16 consecutive games with more than 60,000 people in attendance. It hasn't done so once in the three years since. In its second full year in the SEC in 2013-14, Missouri pulled in \$24.2 million. Ticket revenue dropped to \$19.1 million in 2016, and it has decreased each year since.

The athletics department's total operating expenses increased by \$6.75 million, marking the most amount of money the school has ever spent on athletics in a single year. The 2016-17 fiscal year also marked all-time highs in operating revenues and expenses. The biggest contributors to the growth in expenses were: support staff/administrative compensation (+\$1.3 million), sports equipment in the form of uniforms and supplies (+\$1.06 million), direct overhead and administrative expenses (+\$2.7 million) and bowl expenses (+\$1.4 million).

Coaching salaries, however, fell to \$19.7 million from \$21.1 million, in large part due to a \$1.96 million decrease in men's basketball head coaching salaries.

Football and men's basketball each contributed a significant amount to the increase in expenses allocated to uniforms and supplies. Men's basketball nearly tripled the amount it spent from the 2017 fiscal year to 2018. Football more than doubled its uniforms and supplies expense, jumping to \$1.21 million from \$583,223.

*Supervising editor is Michael Knisley:*

## **Transfer quarterback Kelly Bryant plans to stay at Missouriian**

*By Keegan Pope and Peter Baugh*

When the NCAA Committee on Infractions announced a one-year postseason ban for Missouri's football program Thursday morning, whether graduate transfer Kelly Bryant would remain at the school became one of the main concerns of the program's supporters.

Missouri fans can rest easy, at least on that front.

A source close to Bryant confirmed to the *Missourian* that the transfer quarterback will remain at Missouri for his final year of eligibility.

The NCAA hit Missouri with a one-year postseason ban in football, baseball and softball, among other punishments, after an investigation into academic fraud spurred by former employee Yolanda Kumar. Missouri Director of Athletics Jim Sterk said in a statement that the school will appeal the sanctions.

Under the punishment, Missouri football would not be eligible for the SEC Championship or any bowl games.

After announcing he would leave Clemson on Sept. 26, Bryant was courted by a number of programs, including Arkansas, Mississippi State, North Carolina and Auburn, before choosing Missouri on Dec. 4.

Bryant, who threw for 2,802 yards and 13 touchdowns as a junior in 2017, left Clemson after playing the first four games of the Tigers' 2018 season. Clemson coach Dabo Swinney named freshman Trevor Lawrence starting quarterback, and the team ultimately won the national championship.

In the four games he played with Clemson in 2018, Bryant threw for 456 yards and rushed for 144 more. Due to a change in NCAA rules before the 2018 season, Bryant was able to retain his final year of eligibility since he played in fewer than five games.

Bryant graduated from Clemson in May with a degree in history and remained in graduate school classes after leaving the team. He enrolled in Missouri in January and will play for the Tigers as a graduate transfer.

Bryant has stressed his desire to play in the NFL. If winning a bowl game was Bryant's sole priority, he would have stayed at Clemson. He liked Missouri's offense when he committed and felt it would prepare him for a professional future. The sanctions don't change that. He'll still have 12 games to showcase his talents.

## **MU chief financial officer Rhonda Gibler sticks to her Missouri roots**

*By Keegan Pope*

Two steps inside the door of Rhonda Gibler's third-floor Jesse Hall office hangs a 4-by-4 foot state map of Missouri. No particular spot is marked, but her eyes focus on one naturally: the meeting point of the Randolph and Macon County lines just east of Highway 63, where her late father's farm sits. It's home, she says, a place where she has trekked — with her three kids and husband — for the last 20-plus years to eat dinner with her six siblings and parents almost every Sunday night.

She talks about her upbringing there with fondness, her Midwestern inflection turning "Missouri" into "Missour-uh" every so often. She's neighborly in the small-town sense and at the same time cerebral and precise, rarely misspeaking or backtracking.

She grew up a farmer's daughter in the early 1980s; her family moved 2 1/2 hours northwest from Florissant to Jacksonville so her father could continue to farm during one of the worst agricultural recessions since the Dust Bowl. Her mother, who years earlier turned down opportunities to study computer science in favor of raising a family, always instilled the importance of education in her daughter.

But her map and appreciation of MU's impact on her home state come from Jim Ollar, her former boss at MU Extension, who hung it in his own office and reminded her of one thing on what seemed like a daily basis. "Rhonda, our campus isn't just Columbia," he'd tell her. "It's the 64,000 square miles of the state of Missouri."

She estimates she hasn't seen all of those miles, but she's come close. Before becoming MU's chief financial officer six years ago, she worked in the Extension office. There, she traversed the state, serving as part of the school's outreach and education team, meeting with community members, alumni and donors from Kansas City to Cairo, Missouri.

In January 2013, she replaced Tim Rooney as the university's budget director following one of the largest higher education budget cuts in the state's history. Almost immediately, she was expected to advise university leaders on how to proceed amid impending budget cuts and faculty layoffs. A year and a half later, the school was thrown into turmoil again when the Concerned Student 1950 protests forced the resignation of System President Tim Wolfe and quickened the exit of Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin. The ensuing backlash put the school into one of its biggest enrollment declines ever. The protests — and the spotlight on campus racial tensions — cut Gibler deeply.

“What this university is here to do is to challenge people to think about different ideas than what (they) got here with,” she says before briefly pausing, “and to see what other people face in the world.” The next two-plus years saw a pair of interim chancellors, more faculty layoffs and a number of unflattering headlines in The New York Times, CNN and other major national news outlets. The freshman enrollment drop of approximately 2,000 students between 2015 and 2017 put the school’s budget on the chopping block. Gibler was charged with dissecting the revenue shortfall and recommending cuts. By mid-summer 2017, she and new University of Missouri System President Mun Choi, less than eight months into his tenure, announced the Columbia campus would need to eliminate more than 300 full-time positions due to the budget shortfall.

Uproar echoed across campus as departments tried to make the case for keeping their jobs.

Gibler was then, and still is, implored by outsiders to run the university more like a business by cutting less-profitable sectors and focusing on the school’s biggest revenue generators.

But in reality, Gibler says most people don’t want the university run like a business. “Businesses are much more cutthroat than anyone would allow the university to be. And more so than we would want to be.” She adds that people only look at the aspects of the budget they want to see without considering it as part of a whole system. “You’re doing your damndest, and they just pick it apart.”

She points to the university’s medical school, which she says is less profitable than it could be because the school covers a large portion of the attendance costs to make it more inclusive and affordable for students. If MU were in the business of turning a profit, Gibler’s staff would recommend tuition hikes and layoffs, but that’s never been the goal: education and maintaining the school’s reputation are. Even when other people don’t want to, she has to balance both sides of the equation.

She's become a fixture, Rhonda Gibler. She's had offers to leave and admits that for a short time she thought about it. But that white paper map is home. "When Dr. Cartwright starts talking about the 'University for Missouri,' that's right in my lane," she says, referencing the Chancellor's pseudonym for the school. "That's where my heart has always been."

## **Birds migrated for the winter, but Columbia's bus troubles remain**

*By Keegan Pope*

I miss the small flock of Birds that used to appear on the front step of my downtown Columbia apartment. Typically there were three or four, sometimes standing in a pack, sometimes tipped over by wind or a group of drunken passers-by the night before. They were my ticket to anywhere in town — as long as the battery didn't die before I got there. They're just \$1 ... and then 15 cents per minute.

Birds, which are essentially an electric version of the Razor scooters we coveted as kids, became a popular form of transportation when they were dropped in the city unannounced in August. After a night of recharging, nearly all of them would appear to have landed among Stephens College, MU and Columbia College. A glance at the app would show that a handful made their way into neighborhoods outside of downtown Columbia, but the scooters were limited almost exclusively to an area where there is the disposable income necessary to use them and short distances to travel on them. Students were the most visible customers, but every so often I'd see a young professional in a pantsuit, an orange vest-clad construction worker or even a parent trailing behind their more scooter-educated child buzzing down the street.

## **Buses take a backseat**

Their usefulness is debatable, but for those who live downtown, Birds (and the similar Lime scooters) are more efficient than walking or waiting for a city bus. If I live within a mile or two of where I need to be and don't have access to a car, it's likely there's a Bird within a hundred feet or so. For example, a trip to Hickman High School on North Providence is a 25-minute walk from my apartment, according to Google Maps. By bus, it'd be about the same amount of time to go one way, not including the time waiting at my nearest stop. By scooter, it took me less than 10 minutes round-trip.

Therein lies the question not only about scooters, but about any of Columbia's public transportation: What is the threshold for convenience that Bird reaches but the bus system does not? Birds are designed with the consumer in mind. City transportation is not.

It's unknown exactly how many scooters came to Columbia, but Steven Sapp, the city's director of community relations, estimated in early October that 450 were on the streets. In the first 87 days of operation, the scooters were used 138,000 times and traveled 200,000 miles, according to Bird officials. For comparison, there were just 589,438 bus rides over the entirety of 2016.

The city's bus system, which has tried — and, for the most part, failed — to attract consistent ridership outside of a few select routes, simply doesn't match the needs of a majority of Columbia residents. According to the 2016 U.S. Census, 45 percent of Columbia households own at least two cars, four points higher than the national average. Meanwhile, 78 percent of residents drive alone on their commutes, and just 1.5 percent take public transportation — four points lower than the national average. Despite a nearly 40-percent growth in population over the past 15 years, the city's traffic hasn't yet become so unreasonable that residents consider other transportation options.

Why would they? Recent budget cuts to the city's transportation department have eliminated some routes completely, pushing wait times in certain areas from approximately 15 minutes to sometimes more than 45. The city added a "flex" route in 2017 to remedy areas lacking coverage, but the route was eliminated this past fall amid budget cuts. And in June, the city will eliminate Saturday routes, according to a February story in the Columbia Tribune.

Columbia's City Council also voted in September to end bus service at 7 p.m. and paratransit service at 6:25 p.m., cost-saving measures included in a 7-percent downsizing measure to the city's transportation system. Fourth Ward City Councilman Ian Thomas blasted the board after it rejected nearly all of the proposed compromises for public transportation, saying, "We are making the wrong moral decision ... and a very bad one." A number of citizens backed Thomas at the meeting, and in 2014, more than 60 percent of Columbia residents surveyed said they supported an increase in public transit funding, despite only 25 percent using the service.

### **State of neglect**

The blame doesn't lie solely at the city's feet, though. Across Missouri, funding for public transportation has decreased from \$7.7 million in 1997 to just \$1.7 million in 2018. In Columbia alone, grant money allocated for transportation by the State of Missouri decreased by 92 percent between 2008 and 2012. Kimberly Cella, the executive director of the Missouri Public Transit Association, told the Columbia Tribune in October 2017 that most transit systems across the country receive about 40 percent of their funding from their respective states; .004 percent of Columbia's transit budget comes from state grants.

Proponents of public transportation have implored Columbia to partner with MU, the city's largest employer, to improve ridership. Many of the university's peers, such as Iowa State

University, partner with their home cities. At Iowa State, students account for about 6 million city bus rides per year — or about 94 percent of the city’s total ridership.

MU students were once regular users of public bus routes, too; beginning in 2007, student housing complexes contracted with the city to provide bus rides to and from campus for their residents. Each complex paid the city about \$26,000 to let students ride for free, and during the 2007-08 school year, more than 300,000 riders used the service. After a few years of the agreement, the complexes opted to partner with Green Way Shuttles, and the city lost a substantial portion of its ridership. Columbia Transport Director Drew Brooks estimated in 2014 that students composed 70 percent of the city’s public transportation users. Without students, the city’s annual ridership dropped by 28 percent between 2014 and 2016.

Now, the school has approximately 23,000 parking spaces across 80 parking lots and seven garages, most of which have outstanding debt service paid for by student fees or revenue from the sales of those spaces. Students who don’t drive to campus often have the luxury of private shuttles provided by their apartment complexes. In addition, MU contributes money to the Tiger Line, its free on-campus student shuttle service.

The lack of interest in traditional public transportation and the perceived necessity of alternative options leaves the city in a precarious spot when it comes to scooters. Cities like Denver, San Francisco and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, have all banned Birds, citing inadequate regulation after the scooters were often left splayed across sidewalks in their city. Residents in Columbia have complained that they make certain areas impassable for those with disabilities.

Columbia’s City Council approved a temporary agreement between the city and Bird, in which the company must pay \$1 per day to the city for every Bird scooter in use. Over the yearlong agreement, the city could net a maximum of roughly \$165,000, or about seven times what it

received in transportation funding from the state of Missouri in fiscal year 2016. And theoretically, hosting the scooters doesn't cost the city any money, unlike the bus system, which would have required a budget of nearly \$500,000 before the city approved the cuts in September.

### **Citizens stranded**

Residents who need bus service, especially those who aren't near downtown, are losing options for transportation. Representatives for residents with disabilities have lambasted the city's disregard for their transit needs. And those without the means to pay for services like Uber, Lyft or even Bird have few options to get to work, grocery stores or other places they need to go.

Columbia's city government, without much financial assistance from its state-level counterparts and with a populace that continues to vote down fuel tax increases, has its proverbial hands tied. Will the city address the transportation issues facing a seemingly small portion of its residents by making public transportation a priority, or is individual transportation simply too easy to pass up? We might not know until the Birds migrate home for the spring.

## SELF-EVALUATION

Honesty is paramount to me, and so in the sake of transparency, I'll start off this evaluation with some honesty of my own: this semester was one of the most challenging and time-consuming I've experienced in now seven years of secondary education. In a way, I probably bit off a little bit more than I could truly chew, and there are moments where I felt completely overwhelmed by my decision. But ultimately, I wouldn't change it. I'd go back and make the decision to work both a 20-hour teaching assistant position at *Vox*, which in all honesty was more like 30-35 hours, in addition to a 30-hour-per-week internship at the *Missourian* along with completing my project. I was recently asked by a first-year graduate student whether I regretted trying to do this all in the same semester. My sleep schedule might, but I personally don't. I'm incredibly proud of the work we were able to accomplish in these five months at both publications. We've produced five issues of *Vox*, in which I've read every single page of the issue multiple times. I've written both an essay and a profile for our March and April issues, and I've also written a monthly editor's letter as well. Our content has been compelling, rich with detail and reporting, and relevant to a growing local audience. In our profession, that's really all we can ask for. At the *Missourian*, despite some trepidation from other faculty who thought we couldn't accomplish it, we published what I think is the best series of stories at the paper — regardless of section — in the two academic years I've been here. Each story was well-written, thoughtfully reported and meticulously edited by both Michael and I, and the graphics and photo teams did an excellent job complementing our stories with their work. In terms of engagement, our stories were a smashing success. During the week we published, each of our stories was among the top 10 most-read

stories on the website. My story on Missouri's football ticket sales was read more than 10,000 times just in that week. We received praise from across the newsroom, as well as from community members. But most importantly, we informed and educated our audience. Each and every story provided new information and the proper context to go along with it. In my opinion, we painted an extremely clear picture of where Missouri stands in the SEC more than seven years after its move from the Big 12.

And now, we've undertaken three more stories, each on health in sports. We're still in the draft stage, but even just the ability for us to accomplish this with a group of five reporters is impressive.

Now, about that brutal honesty thing. I'd be remiss if I glossed over some of the challenges I (and we) faced over the past few months.

The analysis portion of the project was particularly challenging. I — a bit naively — went in with an expectation of being able to reach any of the sources I wanted to talk to. I was wrong in that assumption. Most of the reporters I emailed or messaged through social media never responded to my requests. A few declined because of their schedules, which I completely understand. My emails came to them in the midst of the NBA and NHL seasons, ahead of the NFL Draft and at the very beginning of MLB spring training. Because of that, I think I was a little less likely to get interviews than I might have been at a different juncture. It forced me to be a bit creative in my analysis and find secondary sourcing that could provide insight and context to the primary interviews I had. If I could do it differently, I'd try to get another interview or two in order to

give some more perspective. I've also considered that it might be smarter to do this in the format of a Q&A where I aggregate the results and create a pseudo-panel. I wonder if that would condense all the information a bit better and help to make the statements and anecdotes more comparable.

Overall, I'm hopeful that my work provides value, both at the *Missourian* and *Vox*, but also in my professional analysis. I spent an uncountable number of hours at Lee Hills Hall this semester, and especially over the last two years, but there's nothing I've put my name on that I'm not proud of. This semester taught me the continuing value of working hard, even when it might be easier not to, and it also taught me the importance of having a work-life balance. My goal is to take this profession as far it will let me, but I also understand that there's more to life than words on the page and tasks to be completed. Maybe I knew that before, but I surely do now. I'm eternally grateful to each of the people I interacted with during this semester, for their hard work, their dedication and attention to detail, and most importantly, at least to me, their patience and understanding. It was one of the greater challenges I've undertaken, but it's also been a wonderful reminder of exactly what I love what I do.

# PROJECT PROPOSAL

A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME: HOW SPORTS JOURNALISTS VIEW  
THEIR ROLE IN A CHANGING ECOSYSTEM

Keegan Pope

University of Missouri — Columbia

Spring 2019

Committee Members:

Jennifer Rowe (Chair)

Michael Knisley

## PROFESSIONAL COMPONENT

In previous work here at the University of Missouri and at Colorado State University, I was involved in all facets of producing longform and other investigative stories, and I also have a substantial amount of previous experience in feature reporting and writing. I've written about coaching contracts and athletics budgets, as well as a number of profile pieces on different athletes, coaches and administrators.

As part of the required professional internship component for the project, I'll be serving as an assistant sports editor at the *Columbia Missourian*, where I'll be writing, editing, planning and executing the sports section's enterprise and feature content. Beginning January 10th and ending April 25th, I'll work 30 hours per week, overseeing a team of 2-3 reporters who will be working on longer-term investigative and feature-length stories, including stories about Athletic Department finances at the University of Missouri.

This team will consist of students doing independent studies with Michael Knisley, the *Missourian's* sports editor. We will not be involved in the daily production of the paper, and we will work on stories over multiple weeks or months, at times in conjunction with Mark Horvit, who teaches an investigative journalism class at the school. This role differs from traditional teaching assistants or reporters because of my involvement in each of the four roles I mentioned above.

My time will consist of meeting with the reporters, discussing stories and/or story packages, macro- and micro-editing, fact-checking, writing, filing FOIA requests and executing the production of these stories with the newspaper's print and digital teams.

## **INTRODUCTION**

For much of its history, sports journalism has been viewed as the journalism industry's black sheep, never truly fitting into what the other iterations of the profession believe it should be. As Anderson (2001) attempts to emphasize, sports journalists have long been viewed as partisan cheerleaders for the teams and industry they cover, letting their biases and relationships with those they cover affect their coverage. Some sports journalists do consider themselves to be "homers," or people who pander to the audience of the team they cover for favorable reaction or less-restricted access.

Before the advent of the internet in the early 2000s and the digital technology that followed it, sports journalists almost exclusively worked in four places: newspapers and magazines (print) and radio and television (broadcast) stations. But like all sections within the journalism profession, sports has undergone a drastic shift in its landscape, seeing more and more stakeholders and players entering the field. Instead of the traditional main sources of coverage, sports now sees a plethora of them. Bloggers — often fans of the teams or leagues they write about — have emerged. Individual teams, as well as the leagues that govern them, now hire in-house reporters to cover teams and the league as a whole from in a positive light. Instead of sending out press releases and hoping reporters would choose to write a story off of them, the

organizations can now tell their own story, framing themselves to potential consumers as they see fit. The trend has even made its way down to collegiate and high school levels, where schools and universities have hired former reporters or young journalists looking to break into writing as communications professionals who write stories that teeter between news and public relations. So what is the role of a sports journalist? Is it to provide entertainment value for consumers? Or to disseminate information gained through access to players, coaches and executives? Traditional news journalists believe their sports counterparts should be more critical of the people and institutions they cover, investigating for malpractice or corruption. As the ecology of sports journalism continues to shift in the digital age, those inside and outside the industry are left to discern what the role of sports journalism in society is, and even more so, what the industry will look like in the future.

The theoretical framework of this research centers around institutional theory and the universal set of occupational standards institutionalized in journalism on a large scale. Cohen (1963) is typically given credit for coming up with the first classification of journalists' roles by distinguishing between a "neutral" and a "participant" role. In the now-changing ecology of sports journalism, what defines a journalist's cultural capital is now uncertain. In the institutional sense, a journalist's calling card was his or her own autonomy and objectivity (Mindich, 1998), but depending on whom you talk to, that might be shifting toward the pre-19th century ideals of partisan affinity for one group — i.e. team reporters or journalists who cover a team more favorably for better access. At the theoretical level, it's important to research this to determine whether journalism — and sports journalism in particular — is shifting away from the

institutional norms of objectivity and instead toward transparency. Kuhn (1970) says that newest entrants to a field are the least educated on the traditional norms of the profession and are then most likely to be people who change those norms. On the practical level, this research is necessary because the other "new entrants" into the sports journalism ecology present a challenge to the idea that the people who cover sports should do so without favor to anyone. In a 2015 article, then-Grantland writer Bryan Curtis, who is now with *The Ringer*, discusses the challenges media who cover the Oklahoma City Thunder face because they are perceived as negative compared to the team's own employed reporters. In my research, I intend to study what currently employed sports reporters — both those of a traditional media background and those who work for the institution they cover — believe their role in journalism is and what they foresee as the future of their profession.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The pair of theories I intend to use for this research are the field theory and the institutional theory. Bourdieu (1985) categorizes a field as a structured social space where "various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field." According to Benson (2010), field theory tries to understand the journalism field by exploring the relationships between practitioners in the field as well as the relationship with other fields. It allows for journalists to be separated into fields and categorized by the goal they're trying to achieve. But the separate actors all have a shared understanding of the nature of their field, called a "doxa" (Benson and Neveu, 2005), which includes the traditional roles of journalists, journalism ethics and other epistemological knowledge. In the context of my research, sports journalists would represent the

”actors” in the field of sports journalism, with the traditionalists struggling to keep the institutional norms of the industry intact while new actors (team reporters) are transforming the field in the digital age. New actors might or might not be educated in what the traditional role of a sports journalist is through journalism training, but their entrance into the ecology causes disruption regardless.

Institutional theory, while somewhat intertwined with field theory, attempts to explain how institutional myths, which are defined as professional ideals, norms and values, and changing everyday practices, shape the occupational values of members of an institution and also shape how outside stakeholders perceive those practitioners (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2005). These myths, often created by stakeholders in the institution, seek to reinforce the traditional ideals of objectivity and professionalism within journalism in an attempt to keep their roles and positions necessary for the foreseeable future. Specifically in the case of sports journalism, more traditional stakeholders like newspaper journalists and television reporters have been critical of new actors entering sports journalism because it 1) threatens their place in the hierarchy and 2) challenges the institutional ideals set forth by them and their predecessors. While fraternizing with athletes and coaches or openly rooting for the team you’re tasked to report on was unheard of in traditional sports reporting, the lines have become blurred as actors with direct allegiance to the team they cover have entered the marketplace. These reporters will sometimes be given preferential treatment by the leagues or teams they cover, especially if they’re employed by them, because more favorable coverage ensues. Not only does this threaten the ideals of

objectivity and fairness, but it also harms the interpretive or critical columnists, whose job it is to opine on those very subjects.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

As (Lewis & Weaver, 2015) note, unlike traditional sports journalism, where stories are more focused on statistics and performances, the current direction of the field is putting more emphasis on the connection between sports, celebrity and pop culture, which Lewis and Weaver find to be more preferential for sports fans. Because of athletes increased exposure to fans on social media and the amount of information available via social media, smartphone applications and other digital sources, sports reporting has changed drastically in the past few decades, especially the last five to 10 years. Instead of being reliant on sports media for coverage and exposure, teams — and even athletes themselves — are now able to communicate with fans and followers directly on Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other platforms. In a 2014 article for Fast Company, author Matt McCue gives examples of how athletes have attempted to venture into the communication space and control their own message. Charlie Villanueva, an NBA free agent, made video clips for fans to follow along with as he tried out for different teams, went through daily workouts and discussed future plans with his agent. But when media reports started surfacing that Villanueva had agreed to join the Dallas Mavericks, his blog went silent. Although Villanueva didn't share the news, consumers were still informed of his decision to sign with Dallas by more traditional media outlets.

For certain sports news consumers, the advent of social media has lessened the need for sports journalists because they receive all of their news in one place — usually Twitter — and don't feel the need to read the actual stories. Sports journalists themselves are to blame for this in many ways because they give away information for free on personal social media accounts without requiring readers to click through to their site.

In their traditional role, sports journalists — like their political, news or entertainment counterparts — were considered to be the gatekeepers of their chosen section of the media landscape, making the ultimate decisions on what and who got covered, how it got covered and when it got covered (Lau & Russell, 1980). Along the lines of institutional theory, they are the actors attempting to maintain that hierarchy, but with each league, organization, coach and player having the option to be its own news outlet, their stranglehold on the news-making industry is weakening.

Much like reporters who travel aboard Air Force One to cover presidential travels or trek daily to the White House for press briefings, sports journalists do the same to gain access to key sources and develop as much insight about their beat as possible. In that same vein, sports journalists also deal with many of the same conflicts as other journalists, be it conflicts of interest due to source relationships, struggles with public relations staff or even the challenge of covering athletes (or politicians) who now have social media as a platform and no longer need reporters to spread their message.

Sports journalism, because of the exponential growth of networks like ESPN and Fox Sports, including specialized networks for leagues, has often been at the forefront of dealing with the technological advancement that is still perplexing many traditional journalists (Boyle, 2017). With the coming-of-age of digital news sites like ESPN.com, CNNSI and AOL FanHouse, traditional outlets (print, radio and television) were dealing with a changing ecology long before their counterparts. Soon after the jump into the digital sports sphere began, blog sites run by fans of the teams they were "covering" started to up. In 1998, Jim Heckman, the son-in-law of former University of Washington head football coach Don James, started a subscription website entitled Rivals.com. For \$10 per month, subscribers could access college sports recruiting information about their favorite school. Similar sites soon followed, and an untapped segment of college sports reporting that no one had thought of as a viable business — recruiting — suddenly emerged as multi-million journalism industry. Over the next decade, fan blogs such as SBNation.com started to make a foothold for themselves, allowing fans to write about the teams they loved — or hated — without any journalistic standards or oversight. With the advent of podcasts and video sites like YouTube, anyone with recording equipment and an interest in sports could have their own sports talk show. And soon enough, institutions — the MLB, NFL, NBA and college universities — realized they could produce their own content now that people could be reached on the internet instead of solely through print publication. In 2009, following massive layoffs at newspapers and media outlets around the country, the Los Angeles Kings didn't feel as though they were receiving as much media coverage as they deserved. So they simply hired their own reporter away from the Los Angeles Daily News. In 2013, the University of Oregon hired Rob Moseley, who had covered the team previously — and at times critically — for the Eugene

Register-Guard newspaper, to be its new editor of GoDucks.com, the university's official athletics site. In between, MLB, NBA and NFL teams have created similar positions, with MLB.com having a designated beat writer for every one of its 30 teams. Like traditional media outlets, these reporters travel to road games, interview players before and after games and write stories. But because of their affiliation to the league or team they cover, they often get special access not granted to other reporters. Neill Woelk, who covered the University of Colorado for more than two decades at the Boulder Daily Camera, now works for CUBuffs.com, the school's athletics website, as a contributing editor. While other reporters are barred from viewing any portions of practice, Woelk is allowed to observe the entire time, taking notes and adding color to his story with that information. Because his role is to shine a positive light on the program and the team rather than objectively reporting what is happening, he's given special access to things that other media aren't.

In sports journalism, shifts like this have created the question of what the role of reporters in society is. Little has been studied on that topic, though. Lifestyle journalism itself has become an important and profitable area of journalism (Bell and Hollows, 2005), but while sports journalism fulfills a similar need as its lifestyle counterpart, there is almost no literature about what sports journalists view as their role in the journalistic community. Should it solely fulfill its role to entertain its consumers and disseminate information, or should it also be engaged in the investigation, analysis and critique that is the legitimate purpose of 'news culture'? (Allan, 2004)

In today's society, sports inevitably crosses over into not only politics — as seen by President Donald Trump's effect on the NFL — but it has also merged into culture, business, lifestyle and even education. The investigation and eventual conviction of former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar is an example of reporting that transcended solely having an effect in the sports world. As journalism jobs continue to decline in the United States, the ability to investigate crimes and corruption in sport does, too. Replacing these traditional media reporters are people like Woelk and Moseley, who are able to produce quality content for readers that are interested in the positive aspects of the teams and organizations they follow. No longer do schools who've hired these reporters send out press releases with this information to be disseminated by traditional media — they can just do it themselves.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research will be guided by the following questions:

*RQ1: What do sports reporters view as their role(s) in the journalism community?*

*RQ2: With the changes in sports journalism due to the emergence of the Internet sports consumption habits on social media, what do sports journalists believe the future of their industry holds?*

## **METHODS**

The sole component of my proposed research will involve semi-structured interviews with a minimum of twenty stakeholders in sports journalism — four each from the following segments:

traditional newspaper journalists, digital-only journalists, viral content producers, and team- or league-employed reporters and bloggers. During these interviews, each participant will be asked a series of pre-determined questions to establish how long he or she has been working in sports media, what their previous and current positions are, what their educational background is and any other necessary information. I also plan to ask them two other specific questions: what they believe their role within journalism is, and what they believe the future holds for reporters in the sports media landscape. Creswell (2009) says to begin these semi-structured personal interviews with icebreaker questions, such as the introductory questions I noted above. These not only give me information to contextualize where each subject fits in my research categories, but it also gives them a few comfortable, easy-to-answer questions before I begin the more thought-provoking and open-ended questions. Once I've done that, I will ask eight to 10 main questions about the sports journalism field, its role in society and what they foresee traditional media's role in it being. This then leaves time, depending on how long participants are able to talk, for follow-up questions, interesting anecdotes, or other relevant information that might not come directly from my questions. I think these interviews being semi-structured is important for that reason. Each participant — even if they are in the same category as another — will provide different responses and therefore elicit different follow-up questions. Much like a journalist would do with a story he or she is reporting on, leaving a certain amount of time for unscripted dialogue and further discussion could lead to better results. Were I to simply do this as a quantitative survey, where each question is scripted for the respondent and likely done digitally, I think responses would be much less genuine and helpful for my topic of interest.

Livingstone (2010) notes that interviews are important in qualitative research because they allow subjects a "voice." In this case, allowing each stakeholder within sports journalism to express his or her thoughts on the industry and the quality of content in it, but it also allows voices that are heard less often — bloggers, team reporters, etc. — to be heard. As non-traditional members of sports media, they are often ostracized by the hierarchy of the industry as less important or having less valid input. As Whyte (1982) illustrates, the job of an interviewer in a qualitative research study is to be an unbiased listener, observing and noting responses without judgment. In this study, I believe it's important for my role to be exactly that — someone who simply records what subjects are saying and categorizes it without making any judgments or conclusions during the interviewing process. As a member of the sports media field myself, it is imperative for me to withhold any personal feelings or opinions on the topic or on the subjects' responses, but I don't see any issues arising because of that. In-depth interviews yield "negotiated, contextually based results," according to Fontana and Frey (2000), and in my interviews, my goal is to glean as much information as possible from my subjects about their thoughts, feelings, considerations and motivations about sports journalism and the role they play in it. Because the research topic deals specifically with sports journalism and its roles, the decision to include sports journalists as my research subjects seemed quite obvious because they would have the most knowledge of their industry. Even so, journalists often make very good research subjects because of their knowledge, the communicative nature of journalism and the reflectiveness they often have because of their experiences (Besley and Roberts, 2010). These qualities allow for better responses because sports journalists have insight into their profession that no one else can provide and because all of the respondents will be reporters who have conducted interviews

before, I believe they'll be more likely to give more thoughtful, detailed responses to my questions.

Although the specific subjects I intend to contact have not been decided upon, I believe Twitter direct messaging and/or emails will be the most effective way of introducing myself and the study, as well as asking for time to set up an interview. In an attempt to get as diverse of opinions as possible from each group, I've chosen not to limit my research to a specific region or area of the United States but will be interviewing only candidates in the country to keep a somewhat uniform definition of sports media, journalism and how the two interact. In these two categories, these are possible positions and employers of subjects I plan to contact:

Traditional newspaper, magazine, radio and television journalists: Sports reporters at newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television stations.

Team- or league-employed reporters who moved from traditional media: From this group, I intend to interview reporters and/or editors that are employed by the organization or league they cover, including the NBA, MLB, NFL, NHL, individual teams in each of those leagues, and major collegiate sports programs. They will also have previously worked at one of traditional media outlets I mentioned above and transitioned into working for the organization they cover.

Team- or league-employed reporters who were hired directly into covering the organizations they work for.

These particular categories and respondents give me more a more specific collection of experiences and opinions, and I believe the amount of respondents — 15 in total — will get me to saturation, or when collecting new data does not any additional information to the study that hasn't already been recorded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). If I reach that point before interviewing all 15 possible subjects, I can revise the study to list on that number of participants or exclude their answers because of said saturation. Listed below are 15 possible interview subjects, representing both traditional sports reporters and team- or organization-hired reporters, as well as those who have had experience in both.

Neill Woelk

Former Assistant Sports Editor at the Boulder Daily Camera

Current Contributing Editor at CUBuffs.com

Thomas Harding

Colorado Rockies Team Reporter, MLB.com

BJ Kissel

Team Reporter, Kansas City Chiefs

Olivia Landis

Reporter, New York Jets

Nick Gallo

Digital Media Reporter, Oklahoma City Thunder

Lauren Holman

Reporter/Senior Producer, Mizzou Network

Rich Hammond

USC Beat Writer, Orange County Register

Former Reporter for Los Angeles Kings

Rob Moseley  
Editor-in-Chief, GoDucks.com

Brittany Ghioli  
Orioles Beat Writer, The Athletic  
Former MLB.com Reporter

Ben Frederickson  
Sports Columnist, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Anthony Slater  
Warriors Reporter, The Athletic

Nicole Auerbach  
Senior Writer, The Athletic

Andrew Haubner  
Sports Director, KEZI 9 Sports (Eugene, OR)

Seth Wickersham  
Senior Writer, ESPN the Magazine

Ross Dellenger  
Senior Writer, Sports Illustrated

I'll ask the participating reporters who have been hired by teams, leagues or organizations the following questions, though additional or follow-up questions might depend on the answers given:

1. *What is your educational background?*
2. *What previous jobs have you held before this one, and for how long?*

3. *Why were you interested in becoming a writer/reporter for the team, league or organization you cover?*
4. *As one of those reporters, what information/stories might you have access to that other reporters don't?*
5. *Is there a certain framing or or light you are expected to show the organization in when you create content? Are you discouraged from pursuing any stories?*
6. *How do you/the organization handle breaking news?*
7. *How do you/the organization decide whether a story is publishable or not?*
8. *Are there any examples of stories or particular angles you wanted to pursue but were asked or told not to because of concerns from the organization you cover?*
9. *Have you ever felt animosity from other reporters who cover the team because of your position?*
10. *As a team or league-hired reporter, are there set limitations on what you're expected to cover/not cover? For example, if a player is suspended for performance-enhancing drug use, would you report on that?*
11. *How do you think your position — if at all — affects the traditional media reporters covering the beat?*
12. *What do you believe is the future of sports reporting? Do you see this trend of teams, leagues and organizations hiring their own reporters continuing?*
13. *What you believe defines quality sports reporting?*
14. *What recent trends do you see affecting sports reporting, whether for traditional reporters or ones who work for the organizations they cover?*

I'll ask the traditional reporters the following questions, though additional or follow-up questions might depend on the answers given:

1. *What is your educational background? What previous jobs have you held before this one, and for how long?*
2. *What is your opinion of teams, leagues and organizations hiring their own reporters?*
3. *If you've had any experience working alongside those reporters, can you describe it and explain if it altered the way you were treated by the organization's communications team or members of the organization you covered?*
4. *Are these reporters given special access to athletes/coaches/administrators that traditional media are not?*
5. *Do you believe the trend of hiring reporters to these positions has hurt traditional media? If so, how?*
6. *Do you — and other traditional media members — consider these reporters to be objective? Why or why not?*
7. *What you believe defines quality sports reporting?*
8. *Do you believe this trend has had an affect on the access and stories you were able to pursue because of that access?*
9. *What challenges does this trend present to you and your colleagues?*
10. *What do you foresee as the future of sports journalism, and do you believe this trend has any effect on that future?*

## CONCLUSION

From my research, I expect to find that more traditional sports journalists — newspaper and/or magazine writers, as well as radio and television journalists, believe team- and organization-hired reporters are having an impact on traditional media members. More so, those positions are also being given to younger members of the industry because they tend to command a significantly lower salary. I'd expect the non-traditional sports media members (team reporters) to have a less traditional view of sports journalism, with it being more reflective of their current position in the landscape. I do believe, however, that across the board, all subject groups will hold a similar idea of what quality sports reporting is. Most reporters — no matter who they might be employed by — have gone through journalistic training and know that good reporting and writing is universal. How they get to that good writing and reporting would differ, I expect. More traditional journalists might consider stories that were written by a team reporter to be of less quality because of their allegiance to that specific team, while others in the digital landscape might view it as good journalism all the same. Ethical and journalistic standards are one of the biggest variables in this research, as it will depend on what each subject believes you need to have to create quality sports journalism content. Is that simply having a good story and publishing it? Or does it have to be autonomous from the subject you're covering to ensure the story's truest accuracy and quality. That's when I am most unsure of and what I intend to find out.

In terms of limitations, my only concern will be the variety of my results. I highly expect there to be a significant variance in the subject's responses, but I cannot be sure that they all won't hold similar ideals of what the roles of sports journalists are and what is defined as good sports journalism. I don't expect to have any issues contacting subjects or getting interviews. I have had good luck in other classes reaching other sports journalists, and with the connections I have developed as a Missouri student, I don't see any limits to the number of quality of subjects I'd be able to reach. I believe my research questions will likely need to be refined somewhat, but I am certain they leave enough of an open end for respondents to give thoughtful, detailed answers that can lead to interesting discussion and follow-up.

In future studies, I'd like to see research done on the rise of these jobs in the new digital sports ecology and how many have been created in the past five, ten or fifteen years. It seems that more and more, jobs in the sports journalism industry are switch to the digital side, and I'd be interested to compare how those have risen to how many print jobs have been decimated in recent years.

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