

College sports have become more important within the media since the turn of the century. The College Football Playoff and the NCAA Basketball tournament, known informally as “March Madness,” have become large media events not only in television ratings — the 2021 men’s tournament final between Gonzaga and Baylor had 16.9 million viewers tune in, per Nielsen ratings (Young, 2021) — but also in the number of articles written about the teams that compete in them. This increased attention, as well as the rise of internet news sites devoted to coverage of sports, has led to the growing number of media requests for interviews with student-athletes. Knowing that they can’t say yes to every request, sports information directors at university athletic departments have become more selective about which reporters they allow to have access and how long the reporters are able to speak to student-athletes.

But, are sports information directors using this as an excuse to assert more control over media access? Are there legitimate reasons to limit access to student-athletes, or are these sports directors becoming gatekeepers who control the messages being presented to the public?

To learn more about this, I interviewed six experienced reporters who cover college sports and five sports information directors from universities primarily in the Midwest, split among tiers — three Division I and two Division II universities. I asked the six reporters whether complete access had been the norm in the past, how access is perceived now, what challenges they face to gain that access, and where they see the situation heading in the future. I asked the sports information directors about their policies, how they implement them, the rationale behind them, and how policies could evolve.

While there were some variables, the reporters spoken to agreed that access has become more restricted over the past few years and that the relationship between reporters and university athletic departments has become “adversarial.” The sports information directors said the reasons for “limiting,” as they referred to it, were to “protect the student-athletes” because 18- to 22-year-olds are prone to slip-ups, especially after a bad loss or embarrassing moment, and they could say something inappropriate and cause a problem for the communications department.

More news outlets means more selectivity

With online sports outlets such as *The Athletic* and *SB Nation* becoming more popular and vying for access alongside the established news outlets, sports information directors, either prompted by the head coach of a particular team or by their own decisions, are becoming more selective about which journalists are given access. This has led to a tug of war that the university athletic departments seem to be winning over the last few years in terms of how much access is granted.

All the reporters for this project laid out common issues that they say limit their ability to get material they need for their stories:

- 1) Having a representative from the athletic department sitting in on interviews with student-athletes, thereby restricting the direction of the interview.

- 2) Head coaches having more control over the scope of access today than they did before.
- 3) Athletic communications departments using their own websites to push the content they want published, thereby reducing the reliance on outside news media.
- 4) Being shut out of locker rooms, thereby not getting a chance to talk to players in a non-structured setting the way they can in professional sports leagues.

During the conversations with sports information directors, primary reasons they listed as for why to “limit” — the term they prefer — how much access outside reporters are given to student-athletes were:

- 1) Not wanting to overwhelm athletes with media requests due to their already busy schedules;
- 2) The fear that someone might say something that can be taken the wrong way;
- 3) The sheer number of news outlets that have popped up thanks to the internet;
- 4) Being cautious of the light in which a story casts the university.

“It’s a lot tougher to identify who is a legitimate outlet these days compared to before,” said Nick Joos, the sports information director at the University of Missouri-Columbia. “The media is a lot bigger now than it was 20 years ago, and because there’s not a lot of time, it’s tough to grant those one-on-ones.”

Joos said his communications department typically fields 10 to 15 requests for postgame comments after football games. He added that whoever the head coach of a particular program is also shapes the policies for teams.

Alabama head football coach Nick Saban has a reputation for being “standoffish” to the media and limiting access to players — freshman for example are off limits to the media except during bowl games, from a 2015 Poytner article by Ed Sherman. Because he is a seven-time national championship head coach, with his most recent coming in 2020, many coaches are going to emulate that model.

“The relationship between athletic departments and the media will always be determined by those making the decisions: the coaches, the athletic directors. If an AD decides his department should be transparent and cooperative, then it will be so. If a coach limits access, is suspicious of the media, prefers an adversarial relationship, then it will be so,” Gene Wojciechowski, a long-time reporter with ESPN said. “The other part of the equation is the conference commissioner. A strong commissioner can help create an open relationship between the media and the programs. My experience has been this: An SID can only be as good as a head coach lets him/her be.”

This was not always the case. Wojciechowski and Pat Forde of Sports Illustrated and other publications have been covering college sports for more than 30 years and said that when they were starting out, reporters were given privileges that have since disappeared.

“There was no specific policy. In college sports, you usually went through the sports information director or that office,” Wojciechowski said. “Colleges have slowly limited the access of reporters to players and coaches. The days of open practices and locker rooms is a distant memory in most cases. Such a shame.”

Forde recalled a time when he was covering the Southeast regional portion of the 1993 NCAA men’s basketball tournament in Nashville. He and another reporter were assigned to cover the Utah-Kentucky game, and they were interviewing Rick Majerus, the coach for Utah.

When they asked if they could speak to some players, Majerus said: “Have them as long as you want. Just make sure you give them a ride back to the hotel.”

Those days are long gone, Forde said, adding that the relationship between reporters and figures like Majerus has become more tense in recent years.

“I’d say that it’s because the athletic department wants to put the best image of themselves out there, and they don’t want to take the risk in something coming out that is not favorable to them. Of course, these are 18-to 22-year-old kids who are going to slip up at times, but they’re going to find other ways to get their message out. That’s just how it is these days with social media.”

Brett Dawson, a former reporter with *The Athletic* news website and current sports editor for the *Columbia Missourian* newspaper at the Missouri School of Journalism, experienced this change during his years reporting on college basketball. When Dawson covered the University of Kentucky basketball team for the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky for 10 years, the locker room was open for reporters to enter and freely talk to players early on.

Things changed when head coach John Calipari came in before the 2009 season.

Dawson said Calipari would emerge, accompanied by only one player — usually one who had a tremendous game — for the media to speak to, but that was the end of it. Reporters were no longer allowed in locker rooms. Dawson came to realize it was not just Kentucky doing this, but many other schools within the so-called “Power 5” conferences had adopted similar strategies.

“The Power 5 is definitely more restrictive than before,” Dawson said. “Even so, the level of access you get largely depends on the school, who’s in charge, and how high the demand for coverage there is.”

Kentucky was a sharp contrast to Dawson’s first job. For five years, he was a beat reporter covering the University of Illinois basketball team for the *News-Gazette* in Champaign, Illinois. Bill Self, now head coach at the University of Kansas, was the coach during the last four years that Dawson covered Illinois. During his time in Champaign, he

was able to attend practice every day. He wasn't allowed to write about what he saw, but he could bring it up later during post-practice press conferences to see whether it was something worth reporting.

Athletics websites have become a go-to option for universities

Limiting access to outside reporters has allowed universities to bolster the content of their own athletics websites. These sites have news and information on each varsity athletic team sanctioned by the university, providing fans a one-stop location for information about their favorite teams. For example, one can go on the University of Missouri-Columbia athletics page and find news about football, basketball, wrestling, swimming, and other sports that are not in the local paper as often.

Compared to a local news publication such as the *Columbia Missourian*, the MU website provides more information for fans to consume about Missouri sports. Unfortunately for outside media reporters, this has led to more restrictions as the athletics communications department builds its own brand.

Wojciechowski has seen this first-hand.

“They want to control their own narratives and access,” he said. “As schools further strengthen their own content departments, or feel an allegiance to their own conference networks (Big Ten Network, for example) or to their major network partners, it will become more difficult to do your job as a reporter. I hope I'm wrong.”

The battle between television and print continues to heat up

In addition to the contract obligations with conferences that favor television stations, television reporters arguably get more in terms of access than their print counterparts, Wojciechowski and Ivan Maisel said.

Maisel, formerly with ESPN, has been covering college football primarily for over 30 years. At ESPN, he primarily worked as a television reporter and produced video packages for “College Gameday.” As the national reporter for ESPN, he found it easier to get access to the people he wanted to interview than beat reporters working for print publications.

“College Gameday” has been a popular morning show during the college football season for 34 years. In 2019, ESPN reported that the show averaged its best ratings since 2015 with over 1.9 million viewers on average tuning in on Saturday mornings during the whole season. This proves it to be a popular outlet for fans to consume content outside of the games.

In addition to building anticipation for a big game during a weekend, as well as commentator Lee Corso's headgear selection when he predicts who will win that game, the show also airs features that reporters have worked on all week.

Forde surmised that television reporters get more access because not only is television a more popular means of consuming media today than newspapers or magazines but also because journalists are likely to be more willing to abide by restrictions placed on them by the sports communications staff due to television contracts.

The Power 5 conferences have their own television networks (SEC Network, Big 10 Network, ACC Network, and so on), and because of the popularity of television compared to print, universities can leverage these broadcasting contracts for control over a story or the image that is presented.

Print, on the other hand, is not under that obligation, thereby putting its reporters under tighter restrictions. This leads to the idea that university athletic departments are acting as gatekeepers to project the best image of their university and their teams.

Joan Niesen, another former Sports Illustrated writer who now hosts the “Religion of Sports” podcast, said it goes beyond just television versus print. National beat reporters tend to have more access than local beat reporters.

“Sometimes the national reporters have it a bit easier than the ones who are there all the time and it can be frustrating,” Niesen said. “The more comfortable you are within a particular beat as a local guy, it doesn’t tend to equal more access unfortunately.”

Zoom may remain an additional barrier to gaining access

If access to college athletes was becoming more limited early in the 21st century, it took a much sharper turn with the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. With the new measures put in place, college sports and professional sports leagues have used the group meeting application Zoom to conduct postgame press conferences and middle-of-the-week updates.

Reporters during the pandemic have not been allowed to appear at practice or outside the locker room to speak to the head coach or players. That leads some of the reporters interviewed for this project to wonder if Zoom might end up as another means to limit access to athletes by setting arbitrary time limits and preventing them from arranging individual interviews to get original angles for their stories, which the university athletics websites will be able to do much because of their higher level of access.

“Nuanced questions were easier to answer because you were not constrained by a time restriction, thus making it easier to follow up on some things,” Dawson said. “With that, you were able to get something you otherwise would not have. Now, with Zoom, you’re not able to do that.”

“It’s frustrating to get all the same stuff rather than to be able to find your own little angle to work with,” said Bob Holt, of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He has been the beat reporter for the University of Arkansas football team for almost 40 years and has seen access change with each head coach that came along until

Bobby Petrino, whom he said was the most restrictive. “It very well could be another way to limit access if it sticks around, but I can understand the convenience factor behind it.”

That convenience factor has not gone unnoticed by the sports information directors, either.

Hermon Hudson, the sports information director at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas argued that Zoom has made the postgame routine more convenient for both sides.

“It saves reporters from having to travel for road games. They can just hop on the Zoom call and get what they need,” Hudson said. “Because they’re also constrained by their deadlines, they don’t have to go down to the tunnel and wait a while before things get started. They can just stay up in the press box and hop on the Zoom call to get what they need and then get their articles done. I wouldn’t be surprised if it is something that sticks around going forward, but it’s hard to say.”

Division II information directors are more accommodating than Division I directors because of a desire for more coverage.

Division I programs at the highest level of competition have chosen to be more restrictive because of the demand for content and the prominence of their program, which prompts the athletic departments to be more selective about who they permit to speak with student-athletes.

Division II colleges, on the other hand, welcome all the coverage they can get.

The difference between Division I and Division II programs in how they handle media requests is this: Division I has more funding and thus is able to add more staff to the athletic communications department to handle the number of requests that come in. For example, the University of Missouri-Columbia athletics department has a communications staff of 18 while Lindenwood has a staff of only four.

Because Lindenwood is not dealing with requests as frequently, it can be more accommodating to reporters. In the crowded St. Louis sports market, Lindenwood needs to find ways to stand out.

“With us being at the mercy of the St. Louis media coverage, it is tough to get stories out there,” Blake Bunton, sports information director at Lindenwood, said. “The St. Louis media covers the Blues, Cardinals, Mizzou, and (St. Louis University) as their priority. We will have a handful of stories each year with the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, but it is hard to compete with being in a market like St. Louis.”

In order to get noticed and have more coverage, Bunton does his best to be accommodating to reporters looking to do a story on an athlete from the school. During his four years there, he said he has never turned down a request.

This competition to stand out is an issue in other settings as well. Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio, is about halfway between the major cities of Columbus and Cleveland, being 80 miles and 60 miles respectively. Proximity to these markets does not translate into major coverage from the newspapers, so Ashland relies on local coverage and student news organizations.

“It helps that I know a lot of the reporters that I work with a lot,” Dusty Sloan, the sports information director, said. “I can go down to the *Ashland Post-Gazette*, and I’d know the guy there since I used to be there for a while. We have a very good relationship with the reporters, both professional and student reporters that we work with.”

Even so, Sloan said he is always looking to expand his network of reporters.

“We’ve been working to get more coverage in Columbus, Cleveland, and even nationally. The work we do with these outlets puts the university in a brighter spotlight and gives us credibility. Because of that, we do our best to be very accommodating.”

Reporters still have to go through him to set up an interview with an athlete or coach, however. Sloan also makes sure he knows what the story is going to be about so there are no surprises. This is to “streamline the process” for both sides and avoid situations that might create a problem for the university, he said.

What sets Ashland apart from the other schools interviewed, Sloan said, is that they are always looking for new ways to evolve their policy, something none of the other sports information directors interviewed for this project said they did. During Ashland’s summer meetings, staff members assess what worked and didn’t work the previous year and decide whether to adjust their policy.

“We’re always looking for ways we can improve,” Sloan said.

Social media has provided avenues to reach athletes and circumvent sports information directors, but universities have responded by imposing restrictions on athletes

Most college student-athletes have a presence on social media, which has created avenues for reporters to reach athletes. Because some athletes are more outspoken than others, sports information directors such as Sloan have implemented social media policies that outline what student-athletes can or can’t post. Sloan framed this as a way to teach athletes how to be responsible with what they are posting.

“Kids are going to mess up sometimes, so that’s why we have talks with them to let them know what to expect and what’s acceptable,” Sloan said. “Since we’ve done it, we’ve seen a lot more accountability from our student-athletes, and it’s helped streamline the process for everyone.”

Tom Gilbert, sports information director for basketball at Kansas State University, also believes educating athletes on what is acceptable when it comes to social media is key to preventing mishaps. While he said nothing like that has happened at Kansas State during his tenure, it does not mean it won't.

Even so, social media policies apply only to public posts, not to direct messages, which Forde and other reporters have used when news breaks.

During the fall of 2020, there was speculation that most conferences wouldn't have a football season. Anxious players reached out to reporters, including Forde, to express their thoughts.

"Some of them were asking me for info on whether or not there was going to be a football season, so that's how that worked out," Forde said. "Social media is the new way to reach out to athletes because so many of them are on there in some form or another. You can easily direct-message them, and they'll more than likely respond, or you can speak off the record about things. Most places don't like that very much because of that."

Bunton is hesitant about social media becoming a go-to avenue for journalists. He believes it can be difficult to know who is trustworthy when it comes to the media.

"Before social media really took over, I feel there were a lot of 'true' journalists. Now, anyone can post a quote on a student-athlete or a coach and have that shared with the world immediately," Bunton said. This could lead to some quotes being taken out of context, which can lead to other problems. "I think we have all seen someone or something on social media just trying to get clicks and trying to create a narrative that isn't the truth. To me, that can cause a threat to any athletics department."

Other routes that reporters have taken when they can't get to a subject is talking to people around an athlete, such as parents, friends or others who are not constrained by the athletic department. When New Orleans Saints quarterback Jameis Winston was in the middle of his alleged sexual assault case at Florida State, Forde spoke to other people involved to get his story after Winston declined to speak to him about it.

"I had to do something new in order to get that because I had a story to write, but (Winston) declined to speak," Forde said. "I ended up talking to people who were either directly involved or witnessed something and got a pretty good story out of it."

Wojciechowski and Dawson said limiting the amount of time spent with an athlete forces the reporter to be prepared with questions to ensure they get what they want from an interview. Dawson is passing this on to the student reporters he works with at the *Columbia Missourian*.

"Go where they ain't," he said. "By knowing where to go and what you want, you'll get what you're asking for."

“The restrictive policies put a premium on preparation, artful interviewing, creative story ideas, additional interviews with family member, friends, etc.,” Wojcieszowski said. “It forces you to become more inventive, which is a good thing, I suppose.”

What The Future Holds Next

Sports and the media have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship for the last half a century when sports news became a key component of the daily news cycle.

Whereas professional sports have enjoyed this status since roughly the 1960s, college sports has had this kind of attention for a shorter amount of time as major media draws. The changing media landscape has forced universities to adapt, and college sports are more popular than ever.

However, with this rising popularity, university athletic departments have chosen to be more cautious by limiting outside media access. Coaches and sports information directors have exhibited more control of the situation by only making a small number of players available or having a member of the communications department sit in on interviews. This has made it harder for outside reporters to do their jobs in most respects and benefits the university athletics websites to generate their own unique content for fans.

With access continually being limited and unknowns that may happen when the world emerges from the pandemic, there is a multitude of possibilities for further research on this topic to see how it will look five years and even ten years down the road. One possibility is why schools that are more restrictive have to allow for more open access, in the College Football Playoff for example where locker rooms are open to the media after games, and whether that can lead to one uniform policy through the whole season. If a team makes the CFP consistently, players should learn how to conduct themselves around the media in that kind of a setting so that they can navigate it with no problems rather than having to adjust since they don't do that otherwise.

Other possibilities would be the true impact of Zoom on access if it becomes a permanent policy after the pandemic is over; an analytical analysis between university athletics websites and outside media to see what fans are reading more of; a deeper dive into television reporters versus print reporters, as well as local beat reporters versus national reporters.

While athletic departments have adapted to this new age of mass media, reporters have been doing some adapting of their own. By using social media and expanding their source networks, they have found ways to get what they need to produce quality content so their work stands out. Building relationships with the communications department and athletes goes a long way toward ensuring reporters get what they need in a timely manner, even as more changes have occurred during the pandemic.

The situation will not return to where it was 20 years ago in terms of locker rooms being open or reporters having as much time as they want with student-athletes. As a reporter,

that means using other tools at their disposal such as social media, source building, showing up every chance they get so that they build credibility with the coaches and sports information directors and interviewing sources around the athlete.

Even with limited access, there are alternative ways for stories to come to the surface. For many student-athletes, this is the only chance that they will get to have their stories told because many will not go professional, where the media presence is constant.

The symbiotic relationship between college athletics and outside media has been on a bit of a slide. Even so, there are more ways to rebuild that than previously thought.