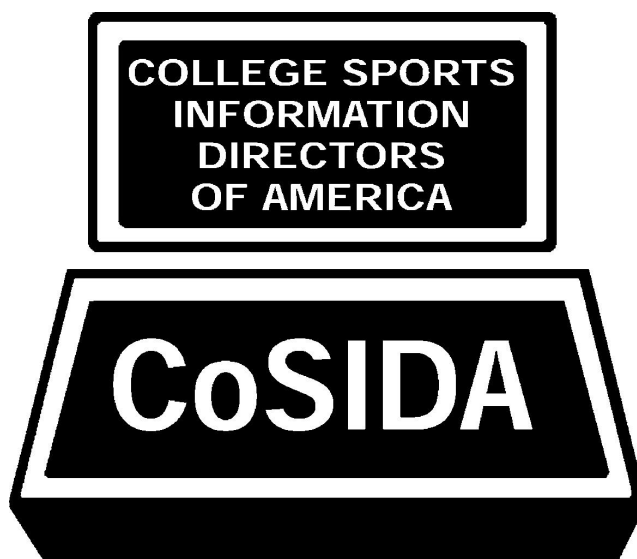


CoSIDA NEWS

Intercollegiate Athletics News and Issues from Around the Nation



AUGUST 14, 2006



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The New Media Department of The Post and Courier

MONDAY, AUGUST 14, 2006 7:43 AM

Why not let colleges play exhibition games?

BY KEN BURGER

The Post and Courier

CLEMSON - Here we are in the dog days of August, waiting impatiently for college football to finally begin.

As usual, college football fans are starved for some action and have to wait and wait and wait for the regular season to begin.

Meanwhile, the NFL is playing exhibition games. Even high schools are participating in scrimmages against other teams.

Not so with college teams, which must be content with week after week of scrimmaging against their teammates.

But at least one college coach would love to see the NCAA loosen up on its rules against colleges holding preseason scrimmages.

"You could do it as a jamboree or a preseason game," Clemson coach Tommy Bowden said Sunday during a get together with the media. "It would be great for us to play Auburn in Atlanta in the SuperDome. Or we could play Tennessee in Charlotte.

"It would give us a chance to work on time management and substitutions. You could charge for it. Let the money go to charity. I'd be in favor of it. I think it would be a good idea."

But good ideas are scarce these days. The NCAA won't allow it.

There is, however, a recollection of Clemson playing Duke in an off-season scrimmage back in the late 1930s when All-American Banks McFadden was playing for the Tigers.

But alas, meetings like that are a thing of the distant past.

Live ammunition

Still, Bowden, thinks it would be a good thing for college football to consider.

In the old days, of course, coaches could simply agree to meet somewhere and let their teams square off for a few hours.

But in today's world, it would certainly turn into a big-money deal that would be televised and hyped.

"I wouldn't mind that either just for the players," Bowden said. "For bench management and sideline management and control and all that stuff. I think the NCAA could benefit with maybe

academic scholarships or some type of relief fund for somebody. I think it would be a win-win if we'd do it."

It would be an interesting concept for Atlantic Coast Conference teams to scrimmage against Southeastern Conference teams. And it would be fun for the players as well as the fans.

Will Proctor, a fifth-year senior who will replace Charlie Whitehurst as Clemson's starting quarterback this year, definitely likes the idea.

"That would be great," Proctor said Sunday. "Obviously, we get a lot of work out of our scrimmages because we have one of the best defenses in the country. But I watch all those NFL exhibition games and it's a chance for all the young guys to get to play a lot, guys you might need later in the year. So, I think it would be a fun thing to do."

And, as coaches will tell you, nothing brings out the best in players like a little live ammunition.

Enduring August

But how much is too much?

High schools may have the right idea, putting on events like this week's Sertoma Classic where teams limit play to a quarter each and everybody goes home happy.

The pros probably over-do it with four televised exhibition games leading up to the regular season.

But despite the pent-up demand of millions of action-starved college football fans, don't expect our college coaches to put their teams on display too much. It's just not in their nature.

"Just one game," Bowden said, remembering that the regular season just expanded to 12 games. "I think one would be plenty."

Even that would make August a little easier to endure.

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This article was printed via the web on 8/14/2006 8:55:36 AM . This article appeared in The Post and Courier and updated online at Charleston.net on Monday, August 14, 2006 .

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Article published Aug 13, 2006

Some fear game's over Win-at-all-costs thinking prevails

By KELLY LYELL
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Pro football players are too busy celebrating their own success at the end of each play to help opponents up. World Cup soccer players have learned that a good flop to draw a penalty is better than a good shot. Some inner-city schools have banned fans from high school basketball games to protect the players and officials.

And earlier this summer, a fight between parents of opposing teams in an 8-and-under youth baseball game in Brighton started a melee that didn't end until 25 police officers had been called in and one coach and one parent had been arrested.

What's happened to sportsmanship?

Some coaches, athletes and administrators said it has declined in the past two decades, while others simply think there's been more focus placed on sportsmanship - good and bad.

"I don't know if it's a decline in the sportsmanship issue, but there's more intensity, more a sense of that immediate gratification," said Al Minatta, executive director and one of the founders of the 29-year-old Fort Collins Soccer Club. "Every game, every issue is a life-or-death situation. They tend to blow it completely out of proportion."

Part of the blame, Minatta and others said, lies with the value our culture now places on sports. Even mediocre pro athletes earn several million dollars a year to play a game.

"When players are making \$40 million and \$25 million and people believe that their kids are going to make that kind of money, suddenly it makes that T-ball game so much more important," Minatta said.

So sportsmanship suffers.

"I'd say it's probably not as prevalent as it should be," said Clint Oldenburg, a senior offensive lineman on the CSU football team. "It's not in the forefront of people's minds as we step on the field. I don't know if that's right or wrong, but winning and money seem to be the most important things any more."

The win-at-all-costs mentality Oldenburg is referring to might explain why Loveland High School football players sprayed their jerseys with cooking oil so their opponents couldn't grab them during a game five years ago.

Loveland's coach, John Poovey, was barred from all playoff games that season by the Colorado High School Activities Association and assistant Ron McCormick was suspended for a game.

Marc Rademacher, who runs youth sports programs for the city of Fort Collins, was the head official for that game in 2001. He said he's seen some other pretty bad examples of sportsmanship while officiating junior high and high school games. But most occur in junior high and sub-varsity contests, he said.

"Really, the higher a level you get (in high school sports), the better the sportsmanship gets," Rademacher said.

But poor sports can be found at any game, any time.

Gary Avischious, a longtime youth sports coach in Louisville who started CoachingSchool.org four years ago in an effort to keep adults from ruining youth sports, said his then-teenage son gave up refereeing soccer after a parent verbally and physically threatened him following an 8-and-under girls game.

"This guy was 6-(foot)-4 and about 240 (pounds), and my son was much smaller and this man wouldn't get out of his face after the game," Avischious said. "My son finally had to tell him, 'Sir, I have a cell phone in my pocket, and if you don't get off the field right now, I'm calling the police.'"

"He came home, and he said, 'That's it. I'm never going to referee a game again,' and it's too bad, because the parents, coaches and kids all said he was one of the best officials they had ever had."

Minatta said most confrontations in the Fort Collins Soccer Club occur in games involving teenage boys and adult males. One adult player was suspended for 25 years for physically assaulting a teenage referee during a match several years ago, Minatta said.

Bobby Warner, who runs youth sports programs for the town of Windsor, said a parent recently went on the field to confront an official during a youth soccer game.

"We sat down with the parent, and after all was said and done, we didn't want to take the sport away from the kid, so the parents don't come to any more practices or games," Warner said.

Poor sportsmanship, Warner said, is deeply ingrained in our behavior.

"Why is it appropriate behavior to go to a Major League Baseball game and yell at the umpires or the players?" Warner asked. "Well, it's tradition. So, what we're doing as administrators is we're having to retrain the thoughts and processes of going to sports (events), so that when your child is up to bat or at the free-throw line, it's not appropriate behavior to be yelling at them."

"It's hard though, because in baseball, when you're rooting for the pitcher, you want the batter to fail; and in basketball, when one player's at the free-throw line, one team wants him to make it and the other team wants him to miss."

It doesn't need to be that way.

Frank Martinez, who runs and coaches basketball and wrestling programs at Fort Collins' Northside Aztlan Community Center, said he routinely congratulates players on opposing teams for making nice plays during games, a practice he said sometimes draws the ire of parents of his players.

But the kids, Martinez said, tend to respect one another and often display better sportsmanship than their parents.

"I've got a Down syndrome kid on one of my basketball teams; and we were playing the other day, and when he got the ball, the other team eased off him a bit," Martinez said. "The coach didn't tell them to do that, they just wanted him to score."

Still, kids don't learn to be good sports without some guidance.

"We believe sportsmanship begins with the coach," Rademacher said. "If the coach displays good sportsmanship, the players and parents follow behind."

CSU volleyball coach Tom Hilbert agreed, pointing out that even at the highest levels of NCAA Division I sports, the coaches set the tone.

"It's a trickle-down thing," Hilbert said. "I think that the coaches in the Mountain West (Conference) respect each other and like each other a lot, and that's different than a lot of leagues across the country. I talk to my peers, and it's not like that everywhere."

"My players pick up on that and respect each other and their opponents, because the coaches like each other."

Dale Layer, coach of the CSU men's basketball team, said sportsmanship has to be stressed daily to counter the negative images athletes are bombarded with whenever they turn on "SportsCenter."

"We talk to them all the time about how you treat officials, opponents, fans, visiting venues," Layer said. "You can't get caught up in the emotion of competition in a way that doesn't represent your university and your team in a positive way."

Dustin Osborn, a senior receiver on the CSU football team, said most college athletes are good sports.

In football, they help each other up, handing balls back to the officials at the end of a play and offering their congratulations when an opponent makes a good play.

"In anything you do, there's always a few that give everyone a bad name," Osborn said. "When somebody helps somebody up after a hit, or they get knocked out of bounds and give the referee the ball - nothing like that ever makes headlines like the bad things do.

"For the most part, I think everybody plays fair, and they're in it because they love playing football and are just out there having a good time."

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Article Launched: 8/13/2006 01:00 AM

college football

Conference now calls its own signals

Mountain West officials leave the safe haven of ESPN and launch into an innovative, but risky, television agreement.

By Natalie Meisler
Denver Post Staff Writer
DenverPost.com

If the Mountain West Conference could have patented its concept of a 24/7 conference television channel and bartered it for an automatic bid to the Bowl Championship Series, it could claim victory before the first football game kicked off in September.

As it stands, MWC fans are just hoping for a cable distribution agreement in time for the games.

Following the MWC's lead in jumping to recent start-up venture CSTV, the Big Ten will launch its network in 2007. The Big 12 and SEC are exploring the possibility of doing likewise.

The Western Athletic Conference and Division I-AA Big Sky have Internet streaming packages for their games this season.

"We're not oblivious to what goes on in other conferences and the impact that they have on recruiting and things of that kind," Big 12 commissioner Kevin Weiberg said.

It's unlikely any of the BCS conferences will leave the security of the "mother ship," as ESPN is known. The Big Ten Channel will be on Fox, while its main network will remain ESPN. Weiberg has said he wants to renew contracts with ESPN.

"Leaving the mother ship, while risky, is beneficial in other ways," said media consultant Ray Harmon, a former CBS executive who helped launch the Cleveland Indians regional network. "Yes, there's a risk for a young conference to go out on their own and match up with a young network. A lot of people like to be on the cutting edge, not necessarily the bloody cutting edge. There's a lot to be said for the courage of (Mountain West commissioner Craig Thompson) and the university presidents."

Media analysts have applauded the league for innovation while wondering about the long-range impact of losing ESPN's national coverage.

"They got more money but they've given up some exposure," Fox Sports Networks president Bob Thompson said.

Added Kevin O'Malley, a former CBS executive who serves as a consultant to colleges on TV rights, "The Mountain West took a very aggressive entrepreneurial position to not get into another situation with ESPN. College sports needs increased outlets to come on like CSTV, Versus (OLN) and the regional Fox networks."

O'Malley and Harmon said a conference channel won't work for all leagues, but the MWC is the ideal testing ground because key league schools such as Utah, BYU, UNLV and New Mexico don't have competition from pro markets.

Two years ago, the MWC signed a seven-year, \$82 million pact with then-embryonic CSTV. The deal replaces ESPN's seven-year contract for just less than \$49 million, which just expired.

But the pioneering concept does little good if fans can't watch their teams play. Now, only fans in Colorado, Utah and New Mexico who have Comcast cable can get games. Negotiations with national satellite carriers DISH and DirectTV, along with cable operators in San Diego, Las Vegas, Wyoming and Fort Worth, Texas, are expected to continue until the first games, if not longer. The same is true for internet streaming rights.

There will be eight national games on CSTV, including the most high profile, such as Colorado-Colorado State and Notre Dame-Air Force. There will be 30 MWC home games on The Mtn., a subsidiary CSTV started that has a joint partnership with Comcast. Comcast also will put eight games on OLN (which will change its name to Versus next month).

Meanwhile, ESPN and ABC are rolling out a big combined Saturday night college football package this fall which will not include any MWC games. But ESPN spokesman Josh Krulewitz said, "We will aggressively discuss any emerging teams, regardless of what conference they

are in. If there are news stories, rest assured we will be addressing those topics."

If fans within the league have trouble finding their teams, what about voters for college football's various polls?

"Whoever desires information will find it," Craig Thompson said. "We only had eight games on ESPN last year. I don't know what people think they are missing."

Many MWC football games not on ESPN a year ago were carried in local markets by outlets such as FSN-Rocky Mountain.

Unlike the Big Ten's partnership with Fox for its own channel, and other conferences forming dual partnerships, the MWC was placed in an all-or-nothing deal with CSTV.

Fox's Thompson said there were preliminary talks with the MWC, but the network was not interested in an all-MWC channel. Craig Thompson said CSTV's exclusivity was "a tradeoff to develop the first and only channel dedicated to a single conference."

The Comcast-The Mtn. partnership is regarded as a coup for the MWC.

"What Craig has going for him and the conference is this deal with Comcast," Harmon said. "They will have the opportunity to score early. They are coming into the ball game with a lot of subscribers in their pocket. It's a huge plus for them. Did they foresee it two years ago? Probably not."

Denver Post staff writer Chris Dempsey contributed to this report.

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Sunday, August 6, 2006
Updated: August 9, 1:27 PM ET

Media training aims at producing scandal-free athletes

By Lauren Reynolds
ESPN.com

You have probably heard of Reade Seligmann. You probably haven't heard of Matt Ward.

You might have seen the photos of the Northwestern women's soccer team's hazing rituals. You probably didn't catch the Wildcats' overtime win against Oakland.

You're not alone. For every person who heard about the events surrounding the Duke lacrosse team's party or saw the various hazing photos posted on the Web site badjocks.com, only a fraction witnessed those same players in action on the field. Although Ward led Virginia to a national title and is the reigning male lacrosse player of the year, Seligmann, one of the three Duke lacrosse players accused of rape, has received countless more hours of press because of what occurred off the field on March 13.

Incidents like these cost universities millions of dollars in alumni donations, hurt admissions and recruiting, and tarnish an image that decades were spent building. To combat negative incidents, or to ensure it doesn't happen at their school, an increasing number of athletic directors are employing sports media trainers to educate their staffs, coaches and athletes about the pitfalls and advantages of life in the limelight.

Student-athletes behaving badly is nothing new. The advent of social networking sites that allow people to post pictures, videos and information about themselves to a worldwide community -- sites like MySpace and Facebook -- have put the private lives of students-athletes in the public domain. Digital cameras and cell phones with picture and video capability allow the public to catch athletes in private moments, whether in a dorm or at a bar, and easily share those pictures with the rest of the world.

It's a whole new world for coaches and athletic department staffs who previously only worried about what sports reporters had to say. The popularity of fan-generated content, which reports every rumor -- accurate or not -- is a beast few collegiate programs are equipped to handle.

Enter sports media trainers, a relatively new trend in the collegiate public relations landscape. These specialists work with athletic departments to determine how they would like their schools to be viewed in the press. They also work with coaches and players to make sure they best represent the school's desired image.

"People who are really into doing what needs to be done to protect the image of their school understand that it doesn't matter if it's a juco kid who got into a fight in a town bar, or it's Duke's J.J. Redick making a U-turn and getting stopped by the police -- it is going to have an impact on the way the community views your school," explained Kevin Long, president of MVP Sports Media Training. "Twenty people probably did the same thing as [Redick], but he's the only one who got reported on. It was a great lesson for other student-athletes."

Long says regional sports television, an increasing number of cable stations dedicated to showing college sports and the live streaming of Division I, II, and III games on the Internet have allowed fans of nearly every school to watch their team in action, even if they live hundreds of miles away. Because of this increased exposure,



MVP Sports Media Training president Kevin Long does a mock interview with Coast Guard pitcher Colleen Perry.

sports are playing a larger role in the identity of smaller, obscure colleges.

"Media training is something every school is going to need to do," said Long, who has worked with Purdue, Colorado State, the Coast Guard Academy, Arkansas and George Mason, among others. "The reputations of the chancellor, provost, president and everyone at the university are on the line every time these teams are on the air. They have 18- to 21-year-old kids with no formal training representing their livelihood, their school, and their fund-raising efforts."

Big-time college sports are big businesses, and managing the school's image and reputation is vital when millions of dollars and prized recruits are on the line.

"Sports media training is a staple of most of the best programs," said Kathleen Hessert, president of Sports Media Challenge, one of the first media training companies to work specifically with athletes. "But it has clearly trickled down to midtier and smaller programs as well. Just recently, I worked with Rice's football team and New Mexico's basketball coaches. I've worked with most of the sports teams at Stanford and a lot of schools where football and basketball aren't the biggest sports."

John Heisler, Notre Dame's senior associate athletic director for media and broadcast relations, believes the exposure that the lacrosse and hazing scandals received sent a strong warning.

"I don't think there was a student-athlete in the country that wasn't aware of how much exposure those situations received," he said. "It doesn't make a difference what the sport is -- it was a lesson for everyone in today's media culture."

Hessert teaches her clients the three components of success today: performance, image and exposure. Universities are pouring millions of dollars into coaches to ensure that performance is up to par, but have only recently realized the importance of investing in image and exposure. To effectively manage a school's reputation, athletic directors need to know what both traditional media and new media -- fan-generated sites, blogs, etc. -- have to say about their brand.

An ounce of prevention

"Getting blown out in a basketball game is a lot like rape. If it's inevitable, you may as well sit back and enjoy it." -- Bobby Knight

You never know what someone is going to say. But you can guess what reporters might ask.

The basic tenets of sports media training are preparation and awareness. Before starting MVP, Long worked on Capitol Hill with members of Congress, U.S. and foreign officials for more than 10 years. Although the issues in sports and politics are different, the principles of dealing with the media and protecting an image are the same.

Long simplifies the lesson for his clients: If your mother wouldn't approve, don't do it.

"We try to teach them the things you need to look out for and avoid, and to stop and think before you go into an interview. We practice avoiding bad situations and avoiding crutch phrases," Long explained.

Many media training services use mock interviews to prepare athletes for the questions they'll face from the press. Some services, like MVP, video tape the interviews to provide instant analysis for their clients and provide the tapes to the school to reinforce the lessons.



Kathleen Hessert preps Peyton Manning before his announcement that he will return to Tennessee for his senior year.

"After the first day of practice, you don't go and play Duke," Long said. "The same thing goes for doing interviews. The more you do, the better you get at it. Knowing how to react in tough situations is a great skill to have."

Both the athletic directors and media experts agree that the point isn't to make the athletes into media-savvy robots, but to make them more careful and more comfortable in front of the camera, allowing their personality to come through.

"Dealing with the media can be a positive experience," said Heisler. "We try to get the kids to have fun with it."

Getting through to 18- to 21-year-olds can be a challenge, but both Long and Hessert say their clients are responsive to the training. Of course, both bring instant credibility to the table; among Hessert's many clients is NFL MVP Peyton Manning, who first began working with Hessert while he was at Tennessee.

"The NBA has done a great service to all of college athletics, in terms of overall media training, by mandating a dress code and media training for everyone," Hessert said. "Now I can go into a room of college athletes and say, 'Guys, a few months ago, I was standing in front of Dwyane Wade and Shaq doing this -- and they've been living with the media a whole lot longer.'"

Paul Krebs, the former athletic director at Bowling Green and current New Mexico AD, has employed Sports Media Challenge at both schools, for different reasons.

"At Bowling Green, we knew [quarterback] Omar Jacobs was going to receive an incredible amount of publicity as a Heisman hopeful. We wanted to put him in the best light possible, and we had not had that kind of media attention before. We also had a lot of first-time head coaches who knew their X's and O's, but didn't have a lot of experience with the media," Krebs said.

While Hessert's team focused on the coaches and high-profile players at Bowling Green, they've undertaken brand management at Krebs' new post.

"At New Mexico, we're the story in the marketplace in terms of sports; the bulk of the media attention is focused on Lobo athletics," he explained. "I wanted to make sure our staff and coaches were ready for that media scrutiny and had positioned ourselves in the best possible light."

Many schools approach sports media training from a life skills perspective.

Notre Dame, which was one of the first schools in the country to employ sports media training in 1988, now offers the service to all of its athletes as part of a life skills initiative.

"The approach we've tried to take is that we have 700 student-athletes, not all of whom are going to receive dozens of interview requests," Heisler said. "This training, however, translates very well to anyone who has to make a presentation for class or in a business setting. Interpersonal skills go a long way."

At Stanford, where Sports Media Challenge works with both revenue- and nonrevenue-generating programs alike, Hessert says the approach is the same: to build "communication champions."

"We teach everyone that as student-athletes, every time you open your mouth, what you do or don't do represents the school," she said.

Hessert takes it a step further, too. She teaches her clients about the ripple effect -- where one negative action affects a player's family, school, future employment -- as a way of driving home the point. The opposite can be true as well. After George Mason's unlikely run to the Final Four of the NCAA basketball tournament, experts

estimated that the publicity the school received was equivalent to a \$50 million marketing campaign.

Long began working with the team long before Selection Sunday, and saw the results of the training pay off for the Patriots in spades. In fact, a number of the questions he had peppered the players with were asked by the media during the team's unlikely run. Long's teachings -- being humble in victory, gracious in defeat and using the spotlight to talk about the team and the university -- went a long way toward proving that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

The cost of employing outside media trainers is something not every university can afford for every team. Heisler points out that there are many ways to get the information into coaches' and athletes' hands. At Notre Dame, Heisler and his staff produce a brochure on dealing with the media, which includes the names and jobs of local and national reporters, as well as tips for student-athletes. Cost-effective measures like these are one way smaller schools can teach their athletes about working with the media.

Managing nontraditional media

When Hessert begins a presentation, she often asks the student-athletes in the room to raise their hands if they've ever posted anything to a social-networking site like MySpace or YouTube. According to her estimate, about 90 percent of those in the room raise their hands.

"And the 10 percent who didn't are probably just lazy," Hessert joked. "The younger generation has a different sense of privacy. It's like there's no need for it -- and that's fine, as long as they are accountable."

Fan blogs, MySpace profiles and YouTube postings provide both a boon and bane for administrators. Some schools have banned athletes from posting information on these sites or have put restrictions on who can view the profiles.

"It's a losing battle to ban MySpace," Hessert said. "Social networking sites are not a fad, and administrators need to acknowledge that. They need to teach accountability."

While the pitfalls of these sites are apparent, the positive opportunities these sites present are just beginning to be realized.

"There is real concern about the implication of these sites, but at the same time, appreciation for word-of-mouth marketing," Hessert said. "These sites can create advocates and evangelists of their brand."

It has taken years of convincing -- not to mention more than a few scandals -- for athletic directors to see the power behind nontraditional sites.

"About five years ago, I was giving a crisis management program at an AD conference, and I was talking about the impact of these sites on sports entities," Hessert said. "A few people asked me, 'Why should we pay attention to this? They don't know the facts.' They're talking about your brand -- right or wrong -- and it's affecting how people view your brand."

Hessert likens fan and social-networking sites to buying a new car. Before making a major purchase, you research online and talk to friends about their experiences. People make decisions about schools in much the same way, and what is said on the Internet could affect admissions, recruiting, alumni donations and potential new hirings, among others.



George Mason's Folarin Campbell prepares for postgame press conferences during a session with MVP Sports Media Training.

Sports Media Challenge now offers Buzz Manager, which allows administrators to keep tabs on what the traditional and nontraditional media are saying about their brands. The company believes the tool will not only help schools communicate directly with their fan bases, it will also provide unfiltered data to aid in marketing.

Buzz Manager is a tool in crisis management which monitors sites and sends up red flags at the first sign of rumors, such as recruiting violations or the status of a coach's job. The schools can then decide their course of action. Conversely, Buzz Manager also monitors traffic to particular sites, so schools know where to market their products most efficiently.

"There are a lot of schools and conferences which are slowly coming to the realization that they don't have the money to launch a big marketing campaign through classic media outlets, but they can still send a message and engage their fan base on multiple platforms," Hessert said. "New media is one place they have to educate themselves about and start maximizing their potential."

Hessert points to fiercely loyal and often displaced fan bases as the major users of these sites.

"Clearly there are communities that are advocates and evangelists of your brand," she said. "Look at Longhorns, Volunteers and Notre Dame fans. Those are passionate fans who will perpetuate your brand voluntarily. There are very good things there -- you just have to understand the strengths and weaknesses."

Cost vs. benefit

In a day and age when even mascots aren't safe from a hazing scandal, sports media training seems like a no-brainer. Not so, says one expert.

"A lot of coaches and [sports information directors] are not on board with media training, don't see the benefit, don't see it of being a value to the program," Long said. "But as the Internet and the 24/7 news cycle continues to highlight the things athletes do wrong, there will be an increased need for training at this level. I can even see a time when high school athletes will need it. ... It's still not regarded as a necessary skill, but it's going to get there. After a few more Dukes or Northwesterns, schools will start doing [sports media training] as an insurance policy."

The athletic directors who have used these services agree.

"It's hard to argue with it," Heisler said. "I don't think you'll find anyone who will say this is a bad thing to do."

"You pay for it on the front end or on damage control," Krebs added. "In the Internet age, there is so much information out there."

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August 14, 2006

SEC caught in a rush

Pass-happy offenses have given way to much more balanced attack

BY DAVID JONES
FLORIDA TODAY

In the mid-1990s, back when Florida and Steve Spurrier were producing some of the greatest offensive shows college football had ever seen, it wasn't unusual to see the Gators go for it on fourth down at midfield . . . and rifle a pass into the end zone for a touchdown.

Spurrier was ahead of the game during that time. Often he would spread the field with four or five wide receivers, once causing a frustrated defensive back to throw his hands in the air in frustration while sprinting across the field to reach an official and call timeout.

Alas, he was too late. There were only three defensive backs in the game and Florida had five wide receivers on the field. Result? Touchdown.

But as the '90s moved on and college football stretched into the 21st century, defensive coaches got smarter. One used the phrase "grass basketball" to describe the wild air attacks more and more teams were adopting. They countered those offenses with more defensive backs, blitzing from various angles and countering the strategy of those offenses -- by attacking.

The end result was more quarterbacks flat on their backs, more turnovers and more defenses solving the Spurrier-like offenses.

The basic Southeastern Conference strategy in this decade has changed dramatically. Now, teams use the offense to build a lead, then hand it over to the defense and running game to shorten close games.

"Defense is certainly a lot stronger in our conference than back in the early '90s," said Spurrier, now at South Carolina and often following that new strategy to win by modest scores. "Obviously when we started in the early '90s at Florida, nobody threw it around the way everybody does now. I think that's what gave us a little bit of an edge."

With better defenses and more teams able to throw the ball like the old Spurrier teams did, it meant the need for change, in many areas. For one thing, it has become a necessity to play better defense to keep all those talented offenses off the field. For another, the running game is once again important.

"Balance is crucial, whether you spread or not," Georgia coach Mark Richt said during the SEC's preseason media days gathering recently in Hoover, Ala. "You can't rely just on the passing game or the running game alone. You've got to keep defenses off-balance."

"If you're just a running team, our defensive coaches in our league are too smart to allow you to do that. If all you're going to do is chuck it, they'll wear you out. The balance is the key. Whether you spread or not, balance is more important than what formation you're in."

Florida coach Urban Meyer came into the SEC last season with the reputation as an innovator. His teams at Utah and Bowling Green found almost instant success using the spread option -- with players flanked all over the field and receivers often taking pitches and running with ball.

But Meyer had to take a step back after running into some early woes. He brought back the position

of fullback, something he didn't use much at Utah. It became obvious Meyer had to tinker with his scheme to match the SEC defenses' speed and talent.

"I think it goes back to being able to be efficient and score enough points," Tennessee coach Phil Fulmer said. "The defenses this day and age have gotten so sophisticated that you're kind of in a cycle right now offensively of trying to figure out how to make a first down, how to make sure you're playing the game to help you win, not lose chunks of yards, that kind of thing."

Even Spurrier has realized he can't just fire the ball down the field and win championships. He's working on developing a better running game in his second year at South Carolina. But he already changed the way teams defend in the league, if not college football, in general.

As Spurrier's teams started to score more and more points in the '90s, other SEC schools countered by putting more and more of their fastest recruits on defense. By the time he left UF at the end of 2001, Spurrier found more defensive backs able to run with his blistering-fast receivers and cover them.

Now it's the defenses that like to gamble in key situations. Fast linebackers can cover receivers. More teams use the corner blitz, and man-to-man defenders are noticeably better.

"Our defensive personnel matches up so well with our offenses across the league, we don't have these prolific, high school offenses (anymore)," Richt said.

The statistics back up Richt's statement. In 2005, the SEC had six of the top 19 teams in total defense in Division I-A. It's not by chance that all six earned bowl bids.

Great defenses have put the offenses back on their heels.

"The goal offensively is to make the defense play defense again and take some of the aggressiveness away from them as you play down after down," Fulmer said.

That means more and more SEC teams have gone back to an offensive attack that would have made those coaches in the 1980s proud. Establishing the running game is, once again, very important.

"I just feel like our philosophy has been, hey, we want to be able to run the ball and stop the run, then you want to create that balance," Arkansas coach Houston Nutt said. "To me, that's the recipe."

It wasn't in the '90s, when Spurrier had the league back on its heels. But today, it's the formula everyone seems to want. The deep passes and wild offenses may still be sexy to some, but not to SEC coaches who want to save their jobs.

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Article published Aug 14, 2006
Aug 13, 2006

Protecting Athletes' Futures

By MARINA BLOMBERG

Sun staff writer

Keith Lerner

- PERSONAL:

Married, three children

- BEST BOOK HE'S READ:

"Amazing but True Sports Stories"
by Steve Riach

- BEST MOVIE HE'S SEEN:

"Shawshank Redemption" with Tim
Robbins

- DREAM PARTNER FOR

FOOTBALL/LUNCH/HANG OUT WITH:

Warren Buffett

- BEST ADVICE HE'S RECEIVED:

"If you can work for yourself, do it,"
from his father

- WHAT IS PLAYING IN HIS CAR:

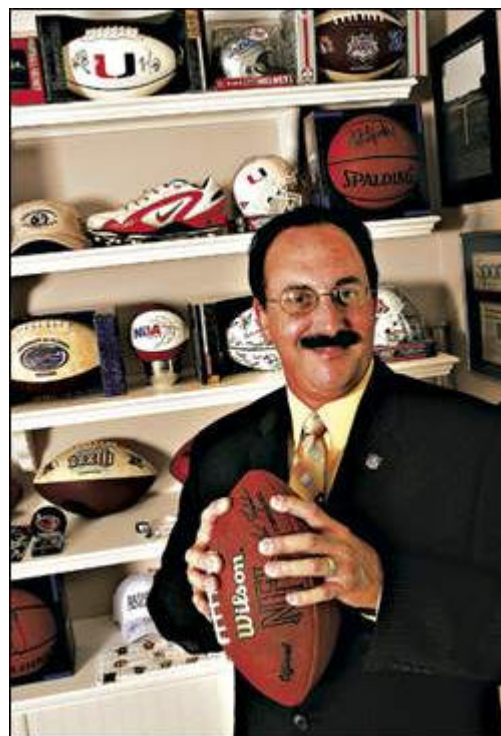
Listens to XM satellite radio

Worklife Profile

Keith Lerner, president of Total Planning, insures this country's top college and professional athletes

When University of Georgia running back Herschel Walker took out a Lloyd's of London disability insurance policy for \$1 million on Aug. 18, 1981- a year before he was named the Heisman Trophy winner - it made national, if not international, news.

These days, that kind of coverage is almost routine and the payout amount is almost chump change. College athletes who



Chartered Financial Consultant Keith Lerner of Gainesville-based Total Planning Sports Services poses in his office Tuesday morning, surrounded by memorabilia given to him by clients. Lerner insures college athletes against the possibility of career-ending injury before they have a chance to go professional. (Kristin Nichols / Special to the Sun)

anticipate a lucrative professional career are taking out insurance policies up to \$5 million to cover any potential loss of income if they are injured - either in their sport or otherwise - during their tenure on the field, track, course or court. And professionals are doing the same.

A pioneer in this industry is underwriter Keith Lerner of Gainesville, president of Total Planning. For the past 18 years he has insured hundreds of athletes who want to secure their financial futures in case of a disability. Among them are names familiar to University of Florida fans: Jesse Palmer, Ed Chester, Javon Kears, Kevin Carter, Jabar Gaffney, Danny Wuerffel and Gerard Warren.

Two of his newer clients are Lamarcus Aldridge from the University of Texas, the No. 2 draft pick for the National Basketball Association (NBA), and Kameron Wimbley from Florida State University, a 2006 first-round draft pick by the National Football League (NFL).

While most of his clients are football players, he also insures basketball and hockey players and wrote policies for the first golfer and tennis player in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) history.

In one of his more publicized transactions, Lerner insured University of Miami running back Willis McGahee, who took out a \$2.5 million policy two weeks before he played in the Hurricanes' double overtime loss to Ohio in the national championship in 2003.

During that game, he injured his knee, which could have ended his career and made him \$2.5 million richer one year later. But he didn't collect, because his doctor deemed him fit to enter the NFL draft three months later. He was on the Buffalo Bills' first round selection in 2003 and still plays for them.

Creating a niche market

Protecting athletes' futures wasn't what Lerner, 44, started out doing, but he's perfectly happy this is where he is now.

"I had never envisioned this," he says.

The son of an insurance underwriter, he graduated from UF with a bachelor's degree in political science in 1984. Growing up, he played a lot of sports and loved watching teams, so he said he wanted to work in some capacity with college and professional athletes.

At 26, he began insuring a handful of college athletes who hoped to become pro. "There were few people at the time selling these kinds of policies. I guess you could say I refined the market, and I found I could survive selling disability insurance to college and professional athletes.

"The problem then was gathering information on which players were the good ones. NBA and NFL scouts had all that information, but for individuals, it was difficult. Now with the Internet I can find information for players even down to high school ranks. I can easily find my target market," he said.

College policies are in effect until the athlete signs a pro contract; professional policies are taken out on a yearly basis. While many individuals are taking them out, Lerner said some teams are taking them out on their high-profile players. "If the teams give a \$20 million signing offer, and the player can't play, then they will recoup some of their money."

Paying for the policies is no big deal to pro athletes, Lerner said, because their bonuses and salaries "in the last 15 to 20 years have gone off the charts. Their need to protect themselves has become greater than paying for a \$5 million policy." A \$1 million policy costs about \$15,000 a year.

Beneficiaries must be the players themselves or the team they play for. Coverage is 24 hours a day, so if an athlete is in an accident and can't play the professional sport - such as what could have been the outcome when Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger was injured in a motorcycle accident in June - they can still collect. The disability can not involve drugs or any other felony. The payout can't be more than earnings.

He doesn't have too many players cashing in their policies, and that's just fine with him. "I'd much rather have a player never collect than not be able to go out and play."

The determination of the amount of insurance is made by the the "worth" of the players, with No. 1 draft picks getting the largest amount, No. 2 drafts perhaps 25 percent less. Since policies are written a year or so before the pro drafts, Lerner relies on scouting services and personal experience to ascertain where the players stand. "That's what I'm known for, I've become proficient at that. The majority of the policies I write are for No. 1 and 2 drafts."

His expertise has led him to a job as a consultant for "one of the major professional sports leagues, which requires me to go to New York City for six to eight days a month. I work on insurance, salary and collective bargaining issues." He said he was not at liberty to reveal which league or even which sport; "I had to sign a 20-page confidentiality waiver," but it was a testament to his years of work.

A selective fan

Lerner has to distance himself from being a fan of any college team, even the Gators, because it affects his impartiality when insuring players. "At this point it's all business. I don't root for any school because I found out about 15 years ago, when I made a rival campus visit, they said 'Do we have to get someone from Gainesville to work with our athletes?' "

But that's different for pro teams. Lerner grew up in South Florida and is an avid Dolphins fan, attending as many games as possible. Kevin Carter, a client of his for about 12 years, is on that team. The former UF football player also played for the St. Louis Rams and the Tennessee Titans.

Over the past 18 years, Lerner has collected signed photos and memorabilia from more than 250 college and pro players, and the walls and bookcases of his office - and another office at home - are chock full of framed jerseys, footballs, shoes and photos. "And I don't get signed photographs with all the players; sometimes I forget my camera," he said. But this is his own collection; he doesn't trade or sell any of them.

"Every photo is a victory, because I am up against huge firms with unlimited advertising budgets. My business is spread by word of mouth. My name and my company is all out there. I am dealing with every NFL team and almost all the NBA. I get calls from schools and teams from all over the country, with increased business from the West Coast. People are finding out about me from referrals and the Internet," he said.

His company has three or four employees and some interns. One of his interns is his son, David, a rising senior at Buchholz High School, who is on the school's football team. David has expressed interest in going into the business, his father said.

His other children are likewise sports-minded: Andrew is on the tennis team and daughter Emily plays soccer and tennis. The family's northwest Gainesville home has a two-thirds size football field in the back yard - complete with the same turf as Florida Field - and very often there are some "pretty serious" games at gatherings of family and friends.

Lerner's days are full and long. "I'm always working, even when I'm at a game Saturday or Sunday. Evenings I am on the phone making calls to the West Coast.

"When I was 26 I started this with no clients. I knew no players or team owners. But I learned if you do research and your homework, and find something no one else is doing on a day-to-day basis, you achieve the American Dream. I still work at this every day, getting more clients, climbing up that ladder people keep trying to pull me down on.

"As my great-grandfather always said, 'The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary.' "

Marina Blomberg can be reached at 374-5025 or blombem@gvillesun.com.

Rebs drill behind closed doors

- Orgeron, changing course, says barring media and public will take pressure off players

By Robbie Neiswanger
rneiswanger@clarionledger.com

OXFORD — Peeking over the fence that surrounds Ole Miss' football practice fields is prohibited.

Parking your car in the line of sight, hoping to catch a glimpse of the action is not allowed. In fact, simply being in charge of Ole Miss' athletic department might not be a permissible excuse to watch the Rebels' practice this season.

"I don't know if I'm allowed in there," athletic director Pete Boone said. "I haven't tried yet."

Ole Miss is breaking in a new offense, a new quarterback and plenty of other new players, but one of the most noticeable changes this preseason has been the "closed" signs outside the Rebel practice fields. In reality, Boone is safe to enter, but the same can't be said for the media or the public, who are not permitted to watch the Rebels prepare for the season.

The change signifies a 180-degree turn from the open-door policy Ed Orgeron instituted in 2005, but the second-year coach has one concern on his mind: The welfare of his program on the heels of a 3-8 season.

"It really helps us for sure," Orgeron said. "Just knowing that we can be by ourselves and make position changes and guys can make mistakes and it's not printed all over the place. A guy can miss a kick and it's not night and day. A guy can drop a ball and it's not night and day. ... I think those things take the pressure off the football team."

Most of Orgeron's Southeastern Conference colleagues already operate primarily behind closed doors. The only difference? Ole Miss is the one school that has undergone a drastic change in a year.

In fact, a survey done last August by The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette revealed Ole Miss was the most wide open among SEC schools. Now, it could be considered one of the strictest.

Aside from Media Day (Aug. 14) and Meet the Rebels Day (Aug. 19), Ole Miss forbids anyone from watching practices.

Most SEC schools open practice for the first 20 to 30 minutes to the media and then close the gates. Like Ole Miss, Kentucky does not open any portion of practice.

"I think last year was one of those things where, if I go out to eat and I have fried shrimp and fried catfish and fried hush puppies and fried french fries and I don't want that anymore," Boone said. "So it may have been that there was so much openness maybe it was overwhelming to a certain extent."

"It may be that this is just a natural reaction to that."

Orgeron - who worked under loose conditions at Southern California - had no qualms when he was hired, inviting media and fans to attend preseason practices. It was obvious he would be taken up on the offer the first day of the preseason, when roughly 500 fans crowded around the practice field to watch.

Practices were regularly attended last season. Orgeron said it became problematic because information such as injuries and position changes, which he intended to keep confined to the field, became public knowledge.

"I wanted things to be open," Orgeron said. "We wanted (the media) to have all access and it would be good publicity for our team, just like other schools I've been to. But things just worked where there was a lot of adversity that hit us and there were a lot of situations that we had to face and we felt that some of the situations were unfair. And we felt that the openness was taken advantage of."

"So we decided to close (practice)."

Boone believes the Ole Miss fan base understands the reasons behind the change. As of Monday, he hadn't fielded any significant complaints since practice began. But Boone realizes disappointed fans were used to watching practice or getting detailed practice reports from media outlets.

OMSpirit.com publisher Chuck Rounsaville and RebelSports.net publisher Grant Gannon have heard some frustration. The two, who run Internet sites that include message boards, said the closed practices and the alteration in the way they have been able to provide information like their popular practice reports have been hot topics.

But Rounsaville and Gannon said the adjustments haven't hindered business.

In fact, neither have lost subscribers because of the new practice policies.

"It was kind of a shock at first," Gannon said. "Our readers really enjoy the practice reports. But at the same time, I'm pretty sure they would enjoy a bowl game more than practice reports."

Tight end Robert Lane said the open practices never distracted players, but believes the changes will help Ole Miss achieve that postseason goal. He said closed practices should help police the amount of information that falls into opponents' hands each week.

Offensive coordinator Dan Werner likes the fact he can install his offense behind closed doors this month.

"Obviously, we don't want people knowing exactly what we're doing," Werner said. "They're going to have an idea because of what I did at Miami, but I don't want them knowing. There may be a few tweaks or things that we throw in there that I don't want anybody to know about until we play."

Under the new practice policies, Werner and the Rebels will get their wish.

"I think there were some negatives to (the open practice policy)," Boone said. "Whether or not this is the perfect way of doing it or not, I think (Orgeron) just wanted to change it up."

"Let's go another direction and see if that is better."

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Wednesday, August 9, 2006

ERIC CRAWFORD

Coaches beware: Message boards have gone wild

Talk turned to Internet message boards at last month's Southeastern Conference football media days, and from the strong reactions of coaches, you'd have thought someone was proposing another round of academic reform.

"You really want me to say?" Tennessee coach Phil Fulmer said when asked about the boards. "I don't know if I can say all that and you can print it."

Florida's Urban Meyer said, "The whole Internet thing, it just horrifies me."

Horrifies, Coach?

"I have a 15-year-old, a 13-year-old -- my wife is tough as nails," he went on. "Guess what? We don't have it anymore in our house. I'm going to have her take all of the instant messaging out of the University of Florida, if she can. I don't think she can do that. ... It's a different era, man. I read some of that stuff. My gosh."

Advertisement True, some of the criticism on these boards makes Simon Cowell look like a guidance counselor. But what really is spooking these coaches? You get the feeling from some of them that it might be more than just coincidence that the message board is al-Qaida's publishing tool of choice. Think about it.

Loss of control

The truth is, these boards play on two of coaches' basic instincts.

The first is a need for control. Ingenious (alleged) University of Kentucky fans recently took things to a new level when some of them contacted a basketball prospect on his MySpace.com page, prompting the school to report itself to the NCAA.

The University of Louisville has responded to a similar situation by asking the Big East Conference how to proceed. The Big East asked the NCAA, which is expected to respond.

UK compliance director Sandy Bell ventured onto the boards herself. She posted 775 words of instructions for permissible posting, and the screen names of 16 suspected troublemakers.

Good luck with that. NCAA rules versus freedom of expression. This ought to be a good fight. You can no more control what people post on the Web than you can control what they think -- which often are one and the same. And the anonymity of posters makes it impossible to police, which plays into the second instinct of coaches.

Paranoia. That suspicion that "catfan4eva" may not really be an actual Cat fan. And even if he is, he might not be one 4-eva. He might be up to no good. Welcome, fans, to the media's world.

But it was UK coach Rich Brooks who hit on the most compelling aspect of this issue -- that the discussions on the boards are influencing media coverage, and, by extension, public perception.

Small percentage

The number of fans on the boards is growing but still small as a percentage of the overall fan base. A Courier-Journal Bluegrass State Poll last year showed that only about 6 percent of fans in Kentucky and Southern Indiana had visited a board in the previous year. Tell most people to click on Firefox and Google somebody's MySpace page, and they think you're from outer space. Or California.

But Brooks is right. A Nexis search showed that newspapers cited Rivals.com, the largest of the Web recruiting sites, nearly 400 times in the past month. And that's not counting the message board leads they followed up on.

Rivals.com has agreed to provide recruiting news to USA Today's Web site, further propelling it into the mainstream, according to Rivals' chief operating officer, Bobby Burton. At last month's Reebok ABCD camp in New Jersey, there were more credentialed online reporters (161) than players (156).

This is how it's going to be. The NCAA made a mistake when it allowed recruiting to become an industry. It erred in turning a blind eye to boosters becoming quasi-media. It can't now jump on the average fan ranting on a message board.

So go ahead and hide the women and children, Urban. The fans are going online, and there's not a pep talk in the world that can keep them from saying what they want.

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Targeting: Who Controls Your Brand?

by Mark Green, August 2006 issue

Are you a traditionalist? Do you target from a broadcast viewpoint? If you are wondering what "broadcast viewpoint" means, then you are a traditionalist. Broadcast viewpoint is the perspective that the function of media is to communicate a message enough times to shift someone's intentions and/or drive a sale. The traditionalist analyzes brands from a product perspective to determine which consumers are interested in specific attributes.

After determining who the potential purchasers are and their product relationships, media strategists don broadcast eyeglasses to specify who they want to target in order to shift intentions and close the sale. The communication objective is to reach and persuade people. So we calibrate the message, the engagement of the exposure, and the number of exposures required to persuade, and then execute by broadcasting relevant and timely messages.

While this is a logical line of thinking, it makes an increasingly flawed assumption: that marketers control the messaging and imagery around their brands.

Nearly 100 million American adults use the Internet every day, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, while 77 percent use e-mail and 63 percent use search each day. In previous columns, I've reported that 81 percent of Americans ask friends for advice before making big decisions, and I've discussed social networks. What does all this mean to marketers?

Type "Iams" into Google and see what happens. The Iams text ad, enticing you to click for information on the "Smart Puppy Formula," appears on top in the premium paid position. Along the side, you see rivals enticing consumers with their reasons to click.

When you scan the non-paid search results, the Iams Web site appears in the premium position. Iams clearly knows how to optimize its own site so it performs well. But in the No. 2 position is "Iams Cruelty," and No. 3 is "Iams and animal testing." In the fourth and final first-page position is "Walmart.com free sample of Iam Savory Sauce."

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Out of the four real search results, 50 percent were messages from marketers, and the remaining 50 percent were from special interest groups. While neither is representative of what is actually being said about Iams, it's clear that Iams doesn't control the messaging or imagery on or around its brand.

Broadcasting is hindered in two dimensions. First, broadcasting involves static messages that cannot survive a dialogue, especially when competing with counter claims that are "off message."

The second challenge is that broadcasting talks to large groups of individuals. But grouping individuals by product preferences, geo-demographics, or even shared attitudes doesn't find them in communities. Talking to them as individuals may sway them in the moment, but long-term sales impact is unlikely unless there is also buy-in from the community.

Outsiders can introduce ideas about brands, but they cannot dictate how they are perceived. Ideas are ratified by the community. Influencers have to demonstrate expertise, offer sticky messages, and have good connections within the community to spread the word. Of course, great ideas resonate and can capture the imagination of communities.

As I've previously argued, individuals have taken control of their media consumption. They choose, search, synthesize, and interact with media. They also create, edit, alter, cut, paste, and mash their media. Last year, according to Pew, 57 percent of all teenagers created and published their own media. While these facts spell disruption, the real revolution is in sharing and communities that form social networks.

Marketing with a broadcast viewpoint is increasingly prone to failure because the message is no longer static and the target is no longer just a group of people. Brand managers must understand the communities that touch their products. They need to discern which communities manage the messaging and imagery around their brands.

Finally, they need to target communities and engage them in a dialogue. Broadcasting messages in tandem with such dialogue certainly helps, but community dialogues should be the core communications strategy.

Mark Green is senior vice president, media services, ACNielsen Analytic Consulting, and the founding partner of the Media Learning Institute. (mgreen@vnuinc.com)

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Posted on Sun, Aug. 13, 2006

FLORIDA SPORTS BUZZ

Schedule strategies vary

By Barry Jackson
bjackson@miamiherald.com

College football chatter:

- Want to start a spirited debate among UM, UF and FSU fans? Just mention strength of schedule. Though the Gators' lineup is loaded, they've approached the 12-game schedule era differently than Miami and Florida State.

Unlike UM and FSU, the Gators say they won't leave the state for a nonconference game through at least 2011. The only non-SEC road games booked through 2013 are four vs. FSU and 2013 at Miami.

Why? UF cites the SEC's toughness, the annual FSU game and the desire to have a lot of home games.

In contrast, FSU -- besides UF annually -- scheduled Alabama (in Jacksonville in 2007) and home-and-home series against Oklahoma, West Virginia, Colorado and BYU.

The Canes, meanwhile, booked home-and-home series with UF, Oklahoma, Texas A&M, Ohio State, South Florida and Kansas State; a game at Pittsburgh; and two at home and one on the road against Marshall and Central Florida.

It would be fascinating to see the Gators play a top Big Ten or Big 12 team. But their approach is defensible because of the SEC's strength.

"In one stretch this year, we have Alabama, LSU, Auburn and Georgia," Gators coach **Urban Meyer** said. ``There's no team in the country that plays that schedule other than Florida."

Plus, UF has at least one arduous nonconference game annually (FSU). Miami's only risky non-ACC game this year is at Louisville, but the schedule toughens considerably the following four years.

Unlike UF -- "We don't have an issue filling the stadium," Meyer said -- UM often needs marquee opponents to draw. UM athletic director **Paul Dee** said he would have agreed to meet the Gators more than twice in the next eight years, but Florida would play only when 12 games can be scheduled over 14 weeks.

But UM's **Larry Coker** said two games are enough. "There's not really a need to play teams like Florida, because strength of schedule doesn't play very heavily anymore," Coker said.

Said Meyer: "Miami-Florida is a great game, but you can't play it every year. You just can't." Because the schedule is too difficult? "Oh yeah," he said. ``The SEC and ACC are not like some of these other conferences."

- How involved are ex-Canes in the program? Linebacker **Jon Beason** said **D.J. Williams** and **Jonathan Vilma** text-messaged him *during* the 40-3 Peach Bowl loss to LSU. "They were angry, [saying], 'You guys quit. . . . We never quit.' " But credit Williams, Vilma and **Micheal Barrow** for helping Canes linebackers this offseason. . . . Wide receiver **Lance Leggett** says quarterback **Kyle Wright** -- who has been receiving counsel from **Bernie Kosar**, **Gino Torretta** and **Steve Walsh** -- is "more of a leader" now: ``Last year, he was more in a shell."

- You won't see as many former UM players patrolling the Orange Bowl sidelines. UM is reducing their access (and others') to lessen sideline clutter. Several concerned ex-Canes wrote e-mails to Dee, who is formulating a policy.

- Snippets from UM offensive coordinator **Rich Olson**: He said Leggett has made the most progress of any UM receiver. (Leggett's concentrating on catching the ball with his hands instead of his body.)

And he said **Greg Olsen** ``has taken his blocking to a whole different level. [NFL tight ends] **Algae Crumpler**, **Kellen Winslow** are one-dimensional guys [not] used that much in the running game. This guy can do it all."

- FAU's **Howard Schnellenberger**, 72, said he'll coach through at least 2009, potentially beyond. . . . We hear FIU's **Don**

Strock -- whose contract can be bought out for \$250,000 after any season -- helped his job security with a strong finish last year. But the administration wants to see consistent competitiveness in the Sun Belt Conference.

- One reason FSU's **Bobby Bowden** "feels good" about QB **Drew Weatherford** (besides his mere one interception in the spring): "Our kids love Drew to death. We had quarterbacks our kids didn't love to death." . . . How enamored is Bowden with freshman safety **Myron Rolle**? ``If you had all players like him, you wouldn't have to coach."

CHATTER

- **Alfredo Amezaga's** emergence has been noticed by Marlins opponents. During a game recently, after Amezaga got a bloop hit, Atlanta's **Edgar Renteria** turned to him and asked, ``How do you do it?"

- The Arena Football League said South Florida (BankAtlantic Center) and Boston remain leading contenders for one 2007 expansion team. A decision awaits shortly.

- **Dwyane Wade** likes when athletes and celebs approach and say how much "they enjoyed watching me play and . . . our story as a team." Among those who did that this summer: Steelers quarterback **Ben Roethlisberger**, ex-Steeler **Jerome Bettis** and actress **Ashley Judd**.

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COMMENTARY: Student-athletes must assume responsibility for their grades

By L.C. Johnson
Montgomery Advertiser

August 13, 2006

When I was covering Alabama athletics about 15 years ago, Wimp Sanderson had a great line regarding student-athlete graduation rates.

Asked how many of his Crimson Tide basketball players have earned college degrees, Wimp scowled and barked back rather matter-of-factly: "Everyone of them that wanted to!"

It was vintage Wimp. Humorous, brutally candid and amazingly insightful.

I recall a similar incident from my college days at the University of Akron a little more than 20 years ago -- I know I'm dating myself. Then, a young, fiery coach, Bob Huggins, was equally successful at winning conference championships and "March Madness" basketball tournament bids.

Yet, he also faced scrutiny about the scholastic aptitude of some of his Zips. To which Hugs huffed and puffed and pondered how many college graduates were in a certain veteran sports reporter's household?

I have to admit he was right, too.

So, for all of the hand wringing that the National Collegiate Athletic Association is causing over students-athletes' class loads and graduation rates, I say they don't know their A-C-T from a hole in the ground.

Let's get one thing straight: It's NOT the university's responsibility to see that these kids get a college degree. And it sure as heck isn't the football or basketball coach's job. The only books they care about these kids comprehending are playbooks.

And who can blame them?

To suggest a coach is responsible for graduating players rather than winning games and producing huge streams of revenues for the schools they represent, is about as sketchy as a BALCO urine sample. Show me a coach who graduates all of his players but loses a high percentage of games, and I'll show you a former coach.

Hence, it doesn't take a 1600 SAT to figure out that the outrage over this is completely misguided. That's why, for as much as I would like to commend Auburn President Ed Richardson for acting swiftly and decisively earlier this week in trying to resolve the entire Grade-Gate scandal on the Plains, I'm afraid he missed the point as well.

It is entirely up to the individual student-athletes and their parents to work this out, plain and simple. This isn't something that can be force-fed administratively.

I have a 14-year-old son who just entered high school. I'm not sure if he will blossom into the type of

<http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?Date=20060813&Category=SPORT...> 8/14/2006

athlete who will garner scholarship consideration or not. But it would be nice, particularly since his dear old dad is still paying off his *own* college student loans.

But let's say my boy, "C.J.," becomes the next LeBron James, Reggie Bush or Tiger Woods. He will undoubtedly have his choice of any number of colleges. But guess what? Not one of them will be responsible for *making* him graduate.

That's what's so stupefying about what happened at Auburn.

These two Auburn sociology professors started what amounts to a civil war on campus. The problem is this conflict should have been settled at a faculty or board of trustees meeting rather than in the pages of *The New York Times*.

As a result, not only was every Auburn student-athlete caught in the crossfire, but everyone who participates in intercollegiate athletics is in jeopardy of getting sprayed by the Uzi-toting NCAA, which threatens retaliation of revoking scholarships for schools that don't comply.

There's something wrong with that. What gives the NCAA the right to access a university's athletic program based on degrees of difficulty?

ESPN Game Day host Rece Davis made a great point during a recent visit to Montgomery for a speaking engagement. I asked him about the directed-studies issue at Auburn.

Davis insists that each institution should set its own academic mission and agenda and then adhere to them.

"There is no reason that Auburn has to have the same academic mission that Vanderbilt or Stanford or Duke has," Davis said. "Alabama doesn't have to have the same academic mission as the U.S. Military Academy or Boston College. They should set their own academic mission, decide who they are going to admit, and adhere to it."

Want to know something else that's shady about this? College athletes perform what amounts to full-time jobs (in excess of 40 hours per week without wages) for their scholarships. It's not enough that they are bringing wads of money and prestige to the schools. They are now being charged with having to meet arbitrary standards set by some nerds who obviously have biases against sports because of their own athletic shortcomings.

I wonder how many egghead professors would rate as academic casualties if given a test on the Cover-2 zone defense or the West Coast offense?

Similarly, I want Myles Brand, president of the NCAA, and his red-tape consumed busybodies to explain why academic reform is seemingly a top priority now? I don't recall anybody raising an eyebrow a few months ago when NCAA Golden Boy and Heisman Trophy repeat hopeful Matt Leinart took a three-credit hour ballroom dancing class!

And it was his *ONLY* class.

Are you kidding me? Compared to that, Thomas Petee's independent study classes at Auburn must seem like advanced quantum physics.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for educating our youth. But make no mistake, I'm mostly concerned about educating my own. That's why I'll offer plenty of 'Hugs,' but I'm not about to let any kid of mine 'Wimp' out on taking responsibility for earning a degree.

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August 10, 2006**ARCHITECTURE REVIEW**

Dynamism Tamed by Cost-Cutters

By [NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF](#)

GLENDALE, Ariz.

The Arizona Cardinals' new stadium is a rarity in the world of the National Football League: a work of serious architecture packed with the energy of a coiled snake. Unfortunately, this snake lacks fangs.

Designed by the architect Peter Eisenman in collaboration with HOK Sport, the \$450 million stadium is a taut machine whose bulging steel skin and gigantic movable parts fuse a keen aesthetic sensibility with an appreciation for football's glory days.

The site, a parched desert landscape near the Loop 101 freeway, is appropriately surreal: Eisenman says Cardinals Stadium's swollen form was inspired in part by the succulent barrel cactuses that sprout across the Arizona desert.

Viewed from the crest of an overpass on the drive out from Phoenix, the stadium first appears as a shimmering apparition, its silvery skin baking in the desert sun. But the dynamic tension will eventually give way to a tame experience, suggesting that Eisenman made plenty of compromises.

Certainly two cultures are colliding here. Eisenman, 73, is one of architecture's aging bad boys; professional football is about playing within the rules.

That they came together at all is a small miracle. The typical stadium designer today is a corporate servant who churns out formulaic structures, either crudely serviceable or slathered in nostalgic references to the Roman Colosseum. By contrast, Eisenman is an architect who sometimes gets trapped in his own head: he is known for conceptual references that, while playful, can border on the impenetrable.

What got him the Cardinals job, Eisenman likes to say, is that he was the only candidate who could name every member of the Chicago Cardinals' legendary 1947 backfield. (Eisenman is a longtime football fan.)

But if Cardinals executives took a courageous leap in hiring Eisenman, they were also careful to keep him on a tight leash. In doing so, they forfeited the venomous sting that made so much of his early work so delicious.

The project has repeatedly tripped up and threatened to unravel. Eisenman's first attempt at a design, a sprawling sports complex sheltered beneath two interlocking boomerang-shaped roofs in Tempe, Ariz., was the most florid he had

produced in years. But the project was abandoned when the [Coyotes](#) hockey team, which was to share the complex, backed out of the deal. A planned site near Phoenix International Airport was dumped after 9/11, when local government officials began fretting that terrorists might fly a plane into it.

Those familiar with the early renderings of the current design will pick up on some unfortunate last-minute changes. A beige roof has replaced the silvery steel one that would have matched the stadium's exterior shell and lent the stadium a sleeker appearance. And the vertical slots cutting through the exterior skin were originally intended to cut into the surrounding pavement, rooting the stadium into the site; instead, they end at the base.

Still, the slots create a seductive tension: viewed from different angles as the observer circles around to the parking lot, they make it seem as if the building is pulling apart at the seams.

The arena's interior, however, evokes 19th-century bridge technology. Muscular concrete columns support the stands. A pair of gorgeous Brunel trusses support a retractable roof; their bowed top and bottom chords are asymmetrical, so that the trusses seem to press down toward the field.

The design's clarity should allay criticism that Eisenman is lost in a conceptual fog, with little consideration for the little people who use his buildings. The glass slots ringing the main concourse level, for example, are not just part of an intellectual game; they mark the entries into the stadium and offer mesmerizing views of the surrounding valley.

Expanding on the symbolism of the spiral, Eisenman animates the interior by setting it slightly off balance. He routes most of the circulation in the space between the inner stadium's concrete structure and its exterior metal skin, with elevators shooting up through a Piranesian web of crisscrossing steel braces. The winding form of the exterior shell is echoed in the outline of the retractable roof and in the gray-and-red color pattern of the stadium seats.

But it is the stadium's celebration of machinery that sets the visitor spinning. In cooler weather, the retractable roof will be opened to allow natural light to spill into stadium. The football field rests in an enormous steel tray set on rails powered by motors so that it can be moved out of the stadium when it is not in use.

The solution is inventive yet wonderfully eccentric. In recent years, softer artificial materials have replaced AstroTurf, with its notoriously brutal impact on the falling athlete's body. To football purists, there's still nothing like a grass field, but indoor grass remains extremely difficult to maintain. Eisenman's solution is to tend the field outdoors in the gigantic steel tray, then slide it back inside on game days. (This also makes it easier to reconfigure the stadium for events like trade shows or rodeos.)

Yet somehow, the visitor rarely experiences the building in a truly visceral, emotional way. Eisenman is not a detail man: he will never match the structural refinement of, say, a Carlo Scarpa, who could transform the connection between a steel handrail and a stone wall into a work of art. His talent lies in expressing conceptual ideas in architectural form.

Clearly, Eisenman had to make painful compromises on this project. Along with eliminating the slots in the pavement for budget reasons, for example, the Cardinals' cost-cutters jettisoned the idea of continuing the glass slots across the roof. As

a result, they look like mere conventional windows from inside the arena rather than incisions that slice through the entire building.

Developers call this value engineering; to architects, it is a form of water torture, in which a design is eroded drop by drop until the original meaning is lost.

What's more, in a possible bout of cold feet, the stadium owners chose to slather the building with graphics rather than let the architecture speak for itself. Concrete corridors are wallpapered in photos of receivers with outstretched arms. The once-bare concrete walls at one end of the field are now painted a cheerier Cardinal red.

The result is a more timid design than one might expect from an architect like Peter Eisenman. While Cardinals Stadium is a big leap forward for stadium architecture in this country, it is also a strange offspring. From an ornery architect and a culture of macho aggression, we get a polite building.

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