

Shaheen welcoming writers with new open-door policy

I'm not entirely sure how the Chinese New Year works or even when it starts.

For USBWA purposes, which is what we do here, let's think of 2007 as a Chinese New Year, minus the dog, snake or monkey, not to mention the Gator and the Bruin.

Let's call this the "Year of the Open Door."

This is a new year, in more ways than one. A new day for USBWA's relationship with the NCAA and the time of year we affectionately call "March Madness."

When it comes to our jobs and how we do them, particularly in March, our relationship with the NCAA traditionally has been good. Functional. But there was definitely a wall there. It felt like a one-way relationship. And you know which way that went. We could lobby and voice complaints. But was anyone listening?

Now, under the leadership of Greg Shaheen (Vice President of D-I Men's Basketball and Championship Strategies) and David Worlock (D-I Basketball Media Coordinator), the USBWA/NCAA relationship is going to new, unprecedented levels. The door, or doors, are now open.

1. In early February, over 20 USBWA members – current officers and board members and assorted past presidents – will travel to Indianapolis to participate in a NCAA Mock Bracket event, in which we will spend a day in the official Basketball Committee "War Room" and put together a mock NCAA tournament bracket using all of the committee's actual formulas, RPI and tools. Yes, then we get to write about it. This was the NCAA's idea.

2. The NCAA has invited 15 USBWA members to attend its annual "spring meeting" with the committee and CBS. The meeting is held each year at the next year's Final Four site (this year, San Antonio) and is used as a way to discuss and evaluate the previous NCAA tournament and Final Four. We will meet with Shaheen, Worlock and members of the committee (and CBS, too, I hope) for most of one day and discuss how the media operations and work room.

Typically, we try to do this every year at our annual board breakfast, with two or three committee members, for about 30 minutes. This will give us more of a voice from more USBWA members, in greater detail. This is an extension of what several of us did last June in St. Louis. At that meeting, I asked Shaheen if there was any way we could do this every year, and meet with the committee on an annual basis. His shrugged and said, "Why not?" He then proceeded to invite us to this spring meeting.

3. Speaking of our Final Four board breakfast, we are moving that from Friday to Saturday morning. Another suggestion from Shaheen, so we could all attend the Oscar Robertson awards breakfast on Friday. Shaheen said the committee would accommodate us on Saturday morning.

4. An online media work room and operations evaluation form will be sent via email by the NCAA to USBWA members after the Final Four. Rather than hear from a few of us at the board meeting, the NCAA will hear from more

of a consensus group. That will help both organizations.

5. Shaheen and Worlock have offered to promote USBWA events at the Final Four.

Get the picture? It's pretty clear. The door is open.

And yet, some will be leery of walking through. What's waiting for us on the other side? A trap? Why so nice? Are they setting us up to take away our seats?

Why now?

I asked Shaheen to give his take on that question, via email. Here was his response:

"My take is pretty simple. For years before being part of the staff, I was an avid fan of the event and the coverage thereof. I was an avid fan of the event and the coverage thereof. In consuming all of that information and perspective, my first selection weekend (in 2001) was even more fascinating. It wasn't as it had been described – there was no counting of teams per conference, there wasn't the careful setting of match-ups (through all rounds) that would bring up storied games (coach vs. player, mentor vs. protégé, etc.) It wasn't like that at all.

"As the committee would discuss coverage after-the-fact, it became clear that there was limited engagement of the media in the discussion, in the process, to have a sense of what goes on in the process. C.M. Newton and other committee members had evolved the course of overall discussion very well in the past several years, but it seemed more progress could be made if we could avoid the conspiracy and focus on how to make it better. Having accurate ongoing dialogue can only help, it seems to me.

"Sure, there were (and always will be) policy and schedule issues to discuss re: to media and the championship, but this was more than that – how could one effectively characterize what is going on unless you've lived it? So, walking through the selection process, or giving all the information on how we build our a wireless system, or laying out how we are working on the future Final Four buildings, etc.

"When Dave Worlock joined our staff, and brought a raw love for the game and the event, we explored our interest in having dialogue with the media because, quite honestly, it is a good story to tell and the more one understands what the committee and staff are doing and trying to do, the more accurate the take on how we do it. And it solidifies Dave's

Tom Shatel President, Omaha World Herald



role in working with you and your colleagues.

"So, it was simple, it was a matter of sitting down and listening. We can only do the best we can, but above all, talking things through can't hurt. Healthy skepticism is just fine; we get that. But, by working to share more about what we're working on and what we're thinking, I'd hope it lends credibility and accuracy to the perspective of those who cover the sport and the championship. And we may disagree from time to time re: policy or decisions that we're making, but at least we can agree to disagree, which is progress.

"The committee has made very clear its objective to preserve the integrity of the event while simultaneously improving the experience for everyone involved. In the past few years, we've started talking to fans (through surveys, polls, etc.), teams (all 65 complete a survey and we personally visit the Final Four teams on their campuses), coaches (we're working better with the NABC than we ever have in our history), hosts (each of our sites complete a complete review of our procedures and policies), etc. You and your colleagues are key in the mix of participants in this championship as well and making this relationship and dialogue a priority is very important.

"So, this is just part of who we are now and where we're going.

"I'm just a miniscule part of the big wave, that is made up of an extraordinary committee, staff members and stakeholders that have their eyes on making this Division I Men's Basketball Championship the best it can be.

"It really is that simple."

Look, when it comes to the NCAA tournament, the No. 1 issue on all of our plates will always be seating. As Shaheen told us last year, the seating should remain status quo through 2011 in Houston. Will it always be that way? Who knows?

That's where the open door and the above events come in. With an open line of communication, at least get a voice in how things work and how we are treated. That's what our organization is all about. That's why we have a USBWA, to protect our members, fight for them and how we do our jobs. We have voiced our opinions and displeasures in the past. We will no doubt do so again.

Now, we'll have an audience.

Save a date for USBWA's Friday breakfast in Hotlanta

The U. S. Basketball Writers Association will announce its national player and coach of the year winners at a breakfast during this year's NCAA Final Four in Atlanta.

The breakfast, scheduled for Friday, March 30, the day before the national semifinal games, will be held on the basketball court at Phillips Arena, home of the Atlanta Hawks, in downtown Atlanta.

The breakfast will be open to the general public and figures to be one of the highlights of the Final Four week-end.

The USBWA will present the Oscar Robertson Player of the Year Trophy and the Henry Iba Coach of the Year Award at the breakfast. The "Big O" will be in attendance to help present the player of the year award.

This will be the third straight year that the USBWA has presented its player and coach of the year awards at a breakfast during the Final Four.

The first year was at the 2005 Final Four in St. Louis and was followed by a second breakfast in Indianapolis last year.

Both events were sellouts to over 500 people each.

This year's breakfast will be hosted by *Score Atlanta*, a weekly newspaper devoted to covering sports – both college and professional – in the Atlanta area.

Score Atlanta will sell and handle ticket sales for the USBWA, handle publicity and marketing for the breakfast and handle all logistics of the event.

Past USBWA President Tony Barnhart, a sports writer and columnist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, recom-

Joe Mitch Executive Director USBWA



mended using *Score Atlanta* to work with the USBWA on the Friday morning breakfast.

Barnhart has agreed to emcee this year's event. He also served as emcee last year.

A portion of the proceeds from the breakfast will go to the local chapter of the National Kidney Foundation in honor of "The Big O." The Kidney Foundation is the charity of choice for Robertson, who donated a kidney several years ago to save the life of his daughter Tia, who was suffering from kidney disease.

The USBWA has donated over \$5000 to the Kidney Foundation.

The Oscar Robertson Trophy is the nation's oldest player of the year award and the only one named after a player.

Robertson, recognized by the NABC as the all-time greatest player of the 20th century, was the USBWA's first player of the year in 1959.

The USBWA renamed its award after Robertson in 1998. The trophy, in the form of a bronze statue of Robertson rebounding a basketball with his legs spread-eagled, is on permanent display in the foyer of Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis.

With the USBWA holding its player and coach of the year breakfast on Friday during Final Four weekend, the NCAA has agreed to move its annual confab with USBWA board members and past presidents from Friday to Saturday

morning to avoid a conflict with the USBWA breakfast.

For the past decade or so, members of the NCAA Division I men's basketball committee have met annually with the USBWA at a breakfast also to review media policies and discuss issues related to covering the NCAA tournaments.

But the NCAA recognized the importance of the Friday player and coach of the year breakfast to the organization, realizing that most of those attending a meeting with the NCAA also wanted to be at the player/coach breakfast but couldn't due to the conflict.

Greg Shaheen, NCAA senior vice president and tournament director, and NCAA media coordinator David Worlock, suggested the change and it was approved by the USBWA board on a recent conference call.

The USBWA is working on holding a sportswriting seminar at both the men's and women's Final Fours. Plans will be announced in the next issue of Tipoff. Journalism scholarships will be awarded to students who attend the seminars and cover various events at the men's Final Four in Atlanta and the women's championship in Cleveland.

A special "thank you" goes to Ted Gangi of Dallas for redesigning the organization's membership directory. Gangi, who oversees the USBWA's website, made the directory smaller in size but more user-friendly. Many long-time members have commented that it is the USBWA's best directory ever.

The United States Basketball Writers Association
1818 Chouteau Avenue
St. Louis, Mo. 63103
Visit us at: www.usbwa.com
314-421-0339
Fax: 314-421-3505, 314-421-6120

PRESIDENT

Tom Shatel
Omaha World-Herald
Office: 402-444-1025 Home: 402-493-5189
email: tom.shatel@owh.com

FIRST VICE PRESIDENT

Andy Katz
ESPN.com
Office: 860-712-0754
email: andy.d.katz@espn3.com

SECOND VICE PRESIDENT

Dick Jerardi
Philadelphia Daily News
Cell: 215-313-3079; Home: 215-295-8097
Fax: 215-295-8197
email: jerardd@phillynews.com

THIRD VICE PRESIDENT

Steve Carp
Las Vegas Review-Journal
Office: 702-387-2913; Home: 702-243-9109
Cell: 702-528-2790; Fax: 702-387-0145
e-mail: scarp@reviewjournal.com

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Joe Mitch
Missouri Valley Conference
Office: 314-421-0339 Home: 314-227-9113
Fax: 314-421-3505
email: mitch@mvc.org

USBWA Membership Application Form

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

For your \$40 membership fee you will receive:

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

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

Title _____

Newspaper/Publication/ College _____

Address _____

City _____ STATE _____ Zip _____

Home Address _____

City _____ STATE _____ Zip _____

Office Telephone _____ Home Telephone _____

Fax _____ Email Address _____

USBWA
1818 Chouteau Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63103

Regular-season access to games becoming our No. 1 issue

Final Four seating for the media isn't the most pressing issue facing an organization that seeks access.

Nope. The growing problem, the one that we, as sports-writers cannot complain in the mainstream media, is that the access to the court during the regular season is becoming increasingly limited.

And there is no reason to think that it will get any better unless local beat writers/editors address it with their respective schools.

Wisconsin was the latest school to sell its press row, at an estimated \$10,000 a seat for the season. No one is debating the Badgers' athletic department's right to sell its seats for a profit. If there is a market for it then they should sell the seats. Clearly, schools look for any way to make money in today's tight economy. And if fans are willing to shell out this kind of dough to be courtside then that is within their right, as well.

The press row seats for the Badger games were kicked up to the hockey press box where the view is need of binoculars and the atmosphere a bit hollow. The media ends of watching, rather than having that participatory feel being so close to the action and the fans to be able to document with more detail.

Texas Tech sold its press row, as well. Plenty of other schools have done this and moved the media to the corners like Ohio State or in the stands like North Carolina and Pitt. These last three are perfectly viable options but there's no guarantee that the choice seating will be available for long. The Wisconsin media claims it wasn't given a choice. The sports information department within the athletic department said there really was no other place to put them

Are we getting to the point where newspapers and the dot-coms will have to pay for their seat in order to get a better one? Colleges might have put this inadvertently to the forefront. Ultimately, this could hurt coverage if less go to games, especially teams that are struggling. But there's no question that covering some teams is getting more difficult.

along the baseline. But there also doesn't seem to be enough proper communication between the two, either.

Will the day come when television and radio are booted upstairs as well?

The reason that might not happen is that both pay a rights fee of some sort for their seat.

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Some other thoughts midseason:

Credit goes to President Tom Shatel and the NCAA's Greg Shaheen for working out the mock bracket day for some members of the USBWA. The cooperation between the

two might be at an all-time high. Access is the key and any way that writers get a chance to educate the public through our own knowledge is a plus for everyone.

The sports writing workshop at the Final Four is a huge plus but we may want to consider also giving back to a younger set of folks to show the positive role modes of being reporters/writers.

We can discuss some options at the Final Four.

I encourage the membership to promote our Most Courageous award candidates and ultimate winner. This award is the gem of the organization and the highlight of the Final Four weekend outside of the actual games.

Year of the Freshman changes our Pursuit of the Story

One of the best parts of this job is getting to know players over four years. You can establish relationships and a certain trust factor. You do this long enough and you can sense when to push hard and when to pull back. Be fair and you are far more likely to get a chance at some real insights.

Which brings us to the 2006-07 season, the Year of the Freshman. Nobody would dispute this is one of the great freshman classes in recent seasons. Nor would anybody dispute the reason: All those great freshmen would be in the NBA if it were not for the new rule that won't let them in the draft until the year after their high school class graduates.

It is great to see Greg Oden, Kevin Durant, Brandan Wright and all the rest. I have spoken with Oden, so I can attest to what a high-class 18-year-old he is. I don't know Durant and Wright, but I have not heard anything negative about either. Georgia Tech coach Paul Hewitt told me Thaddeus Young is among the more unique young people he has encountered.

I know Wayne Ellington and Gerald Henderson a little bit because they went to school at Episcopal Academy right across the Philadelphia city line from Saint Joseph's.

I don't cover any of the great freshmen on a daily basis, but I wonder about those who do. Will they be able to establish the relationships that eventually lead to better stories, the kind that tell readers something they do not know or had not considered. It is about the games, but it is also about the people who play the games. Those are the stories that have made college basketball so interesting for so long.

Dick Jerardi
Vice President
Phila. Daily News



Look, this is not a rant against freshmen leaving early for the NBA. I can't imagine why Oden, Durant, Wright or any player with the kind of opportunity they will have would not leave after this season. Staying in school simply would not make much sense.

If basketball is, in fact, going to be their profession, why not get started as early as possible?

This is just an ode to a simpler time, when we really got to know players.

And they knew us as something more than a voice with a notebook or tape recorder.

I had the great fortune to cover Lionel Simmons' entire four seasons at La Salle. By the time Simmons was named national player of the year as a senior in 1990, I knew him and he knew me. He was always willing to share his

thoughts, even when he missed two late free throws that cost his team a big game.

A decade later, I got on board for Jameer Nelson's four-year ride at Saint Joseph's. Media times had changed, but, for me, it was really the same. Keep showing up. Ask questions. Pay attention. Get comfortable with the player so that the player can get comfortable with you. And by the time Nelson was named national player of the year in 2004, I felt like I already knew him.

The best teams to cover this year have to be Butler and Air Force, with seniors all over the overachieving rosters. I don't know the stories there, but I can guarantee they are there.

There are no stars at either school, but lots of seniors. In March and in stories, seniors still matter.

Wahl, Feinstein dominate USBWA writing contest

Grant Wahl of *Sports Illustrated* and John Feinstein of the *Washington Post* took home the lion's share in this season's U.S. Basketball Writers Association writing contest.

Wahl finished first in investigative/enterprise reporting and second in three other categories.

Feinstein took first place for game stories/spot news and also placed second and third with other entries.

Wahl finished first for a story that analyzed the 65-team field for the 2006 NCAA Tournament.

Wahl also finished second in game stories/spot news, magazine length and moderate length features.

Feinstein claimed a first for his piece on George Mason's victory over UConn to advance to the Final Four.

Feinstein also took second in columns and third in moderate length features.

Other first-place finishes were posted by Mike Sielski of the *Intelligencer* in magazine-length writing for his story on a nun who dedicated her life to giving New Jersey players hope; David Jones of the *Harrisburg Patriot-News* in moderate-length features for a piece on the joy and tragedy of the birth of quadruplets for Bucknell assistant coach

Bryan Goodman and his wife, Amy; and Pete DiPrimio of the *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* in column writing for his opinion on the fall of Indiana coach Mike Davis.

Jones also finished fifth in magazine-length writing. Other multiple place-winners were Malcolm Moran of *USA Today* (third in investigative/enterprise and fourth in game stories/spot news) and Lew Freedman of the *Chicago Tribune* (fourth-place finishes in magazine length and investigative/enterprise reporting).

Other place-winners included John Akers of *Basketball Times* (second, investigative/enterprise); Mike Waters of the *Syracuse Post-Standard* (third, game stories/spot news); Bud Withers of the *Seattle Times* (third, magazine length); Phil Chardis of the *Manchester Journal Inquirer* (third, columns); Dick Jerardi of the *Philadelphia Daily News* (fourth, moderate length features); Gene Sapakoff of the *Charleston Post and Courier* (fourth, columns); Tom Kensler of the *Denver Post* (fifth, game stories/spot news); Wendell Barnhouse of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (fifth, investigative/enterprise); Bob Baptist of the *Columbia Dispatch* (fifth, moderate length features) and John Clay of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* (fifth, columns).

USBWA Writing Contest Results

Game Stories/Spot News

1. John Feinstein, *Washington Post* (George Mason defeats UConn in an NCAA Regional championship game to advance to the NCAA Final Four)
2. Grant Wahl, *Sports Illustrated*
3. Mike Waters, *Syracuse Post-Standard*
4. Malcolm Moran, *USA Today*
5. Tom Kensler, *Denver Post*

Magazine Length

1. Mike Sielski, *The Intelligencer* (Nun dedicate her life to giving New Jersey high players hope)
2. Grant Wahl, *Sports Illustrated*
3. Bud Withers, *Seattle Times*
4. Lew Freedman, *Chicago Tribune*
5. David Jones, *Harrisburg Patriot-News*

Investigative/Enterprise

1. Grant Wahl, *Sports Illustrated* (Analyzing the 65-team field for the 2006 NCAA tournament)
2. John Akers, *Basketball Times*
3. Malcolm Moran, *USA Today*
4. Lew Freedman, *Chicago Tribune*
5. Wendell Barnhouse, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*

Moderate Length Features

1. David Jones, *Harrisburg Patriot-News* (Joy and tragedy with the birth of quadruplets for



Grant Wahl



John Feinstein

Bucknell assistant coach Bryan Goodman and wife Amy)

2. Grant Wahl, *Sports Illustrated*
3. John Feinstein, *Washington Post*
4. Dick Jerardi, *Philadelphia Daily News*
5. Bob Baptist, *Columbus Dispatch*

Columns

1. Pete DiPrimio, *Fort Wayne News-Sentinel* (The fall of Indiana coach Mike Davis)
2. John Feinstein, *Washington Post*
3. Phil Chardis, *Manchester Journal Inquirer*
4. Gene Sapakoff, *Charleston Post and Courier*
5. John Clay, *Lexington Herald-Leader*

Press-row advocates shouldn't forget the press room

For all of us, the idea of having a place to work seems so elementary, so simplistic in its concept, we probably never give it a second thought.

It's an automatic. You cover a game, you have a place to write.

Or is it?

How many of you have walked into an arena for the first time, only to find the place where you had your pre-game meal also served as your workstation for the evening?

Or worse, as a visiting media person, you come into a building and find there's one "visiting media" spot and there are three of you.

Think about it. When it comes to working conditions, a lot of places are substandard.

I'm not talking about where we're assigned to watch a basketball game. I'm talking about the press room.

That's right, the media work room where you spent your most critical moments, juggling your notebook, tape recorder, final stat sheet and game notes against an unrelenting deadline, trying to make semblance out of what you just spent 2½ hours witnessing, the place where it all hopefully comes together, is a nightmare.

If it's not as dark as a coal mine, there's not enough electrical outlets. If the wireless isn't tilting out, the phone system is so antiquated, you have to dial "7" to get out and your computer isn't programmed to put a "7" in front of the toll-free number your paper gave you.

And it's not limited to old-time buildings such as the Palestra or McArthur Court. How many of you have walked into an ultra-modern building only to find cramped quarters when it comes to finding a place to write postgame?

A lot of the newer NBA buildings (Miami comes to mind), have small media work rooms. At Madison Square Garden, which is not a new building, space in the press room is as valuable as anything across the street on 7th Avenue.

Steve Carp Vice Pres., Las Vegas Review Journal



For the college writers who come into these NBA buildings, it's probably a bit of a shock.

But it's not just an NBA issue. Recently, the Orleans Arena in Las Vegas hosted a Thanksgiving weekend college tournament that featured Florida, then the No. 1 team in the country, and Kansas, which was ranked 10th. The promoters of the tournament were given use of the press room. While it might be big enough for the ECHL hockey team that plays there, it wasn't big enough to accommodate the many writers who had come to cover basketball.

Guys were spread out over the entire room trying to work. It was a chaotic scene. Especially when the game ended at 1 a.m. Eastern Time on a Saturday, which makes it next to impossible to make deadline.

Logistically, things at The Orleans were good. The interview room was adjacent to the press room as was the access to the court. Once the Wi-Fi bugs got worked out, things seemed to move smoothly. The stats got delivered in a timely fashion.

But ultimately, the issue is space to work. What compounds the problem these days is that photographers don't use dark rooms anymore. They shoot digital images and use

their laptop computers to transmit their information like we writers do. They need work space to do their job, as well.

Some buildings have separate areas for photographers to file. The NCAA Tournament has done a good job with this over the years. But at places such as the Orleans or UNLV's Thomas & Mack Center, where there is limited space, it's every man and woman for himself and herself.

There are no easy solutions, given that every building is different and has its own set of unique issues. As always, it's up to us writers to work with our sports information directors to come up with creative solutions, whether it's adding a power strip here or an additional table and chairs there or an extra lamp here.

As we continue to fight the good fight to maintain our presence courtside in the rising tide of turning press row into Gucci Row, we would be negligent to ignore the environment where our final product is produced.

Granted, in the grand scale of things, it's not like working in a mine or a dusty field. But the press room is where we do our work, and anything that can be done to make it a better place should be explored and acted upon. I'm sure our readers would ultimately appreciate it.