

## He'll match your March Madness with a February Frenzy

Not too long ago, I believed that the best time in college basketball was tournament time. March is still one of the greatest months on the American sports calendar, with the countless conference tournaments both big and small, and hundreds of teams locked in mad scrambles to find their way into the NCAA men's tournament.

There's a very good reason they call it March Madness. And the conference tournaments were always my particular playground. But over the years, my basketball jones has developed a better sophistication and my appreciation for the subtleties leading up to the tournaments has heightened. As the final days of the regular season move in on us, some folks might make the mistake of thinking that the end of February is the slowest, most uninteresting time on the athletic calendar.

Well, what do they know?

Look closely, as much as I love the thrill of college basketball's postseason, there's one time of the year that quietly rivals every bit of the excitement of March Madness though with much less fanfare. The last weeks of the regular season are the perfect run-up to the Madness because this is where your favorite teams are not quite under the spell of all those things that are not under their control. There is no need to fret over such arbitrary stuff as RPI ratings systems, strength of schedules, Top 25 polls or the many mysteries of what does or doesn't influence the members of the tournament's selection committee.

This is the simplest time of them all.

In February, all you need to do is win.

One of the more fun aspects of the season is that it has two distinct and occasionally unrelated lives. The regular season is the lengthy preamble to a shorter, but more impactful postseason. Teams that plunder their way

through the winter in dominant fashion are promised nothing by the time they march into spring. Others who spend the entire regular season searching for a glint of prosperity can suddenly discover a miraculous streak of good fortune once they get into the tournament season.

Isn't that why they call it March Madness, that giddy state where logic can be suspended, shocking upsets can happen and crazy dreams can live?

But in the meantime, watching the mad scramble in February is a great kick too. Too often, passionate (and slightly unreasonable) college hoop fans get despondent the moment it is clear that their team is out of contention for the regular-season conference title. But there are always two ways to impress the NCAA selection committee, and winning the regular-season crown is only the narrowest path to the tournament.

The other path is to realize how to best prepare yourself to become a dangerous tournament team. How often do we see the stars of the regular season get bumped out of the tournament in the first weekend, while another team that made a late February surge rolls all the way through to the Final Four, or at the very least deep into the tourney's second and third week?

That's why it's always more fun this time of the year to pretend to be on that selection committee and keep your eyes glued on every available game on the television. That's why I find myself sitting up late at night,

**Bryan Burwell**  
**St. Louis Post-Dispatch**  
**President**



channel surfing to see some of those late-night games on the West Coast, inspecting carefully the middle-of-the-pack teams in the major conferences, or click down the sports dial to check out the mid-major conference games to see who among the sports' vast middle class could emerge as this year's Butler Cinderella.

February is a great chance for a lot of teams to keep n compiling victories and take some of the guesswork out of the hands of those strangers on the NCAA selection committee. Why leave it to the uncertainties that lurk inside that selection board room, with its charts and stats and mounds of research? Why wonder if a close conference loss in late February is less toxic than an unimpressive nonconference victory in December? If you want a ticket to the field of 68, do your job right now.

A lot can happen between now and Selection Sunday, and as Butler showed us last season and so many others have shown us in the past, college basketball does not play favorites like college football.

Everyone has a chance, no matter what their so-called hoop pedigrees look like on paper.

### Texas' Rick Barnes named USBWA's 'Good Guy'

Texas Coach Rick Barnes will be presented with the Good Guy Award at the USBWA's college basketball awards breakfast, which will be held during the Final Four weekend.

Barnes, who is in his 11th season at Texas and 23rd as a Division I head coach, has a reputation for maintaining strong relationships with the media during his stops at George Mason, Providence, Clemson and Texas with candor and humor.

The breakfast will be held on Friday, April 1, at 8 a.m. at the George R. Brown Convention Center in the George Bush Grand Ballroom.



*Rick Barnes*

## Full Court Press is on again in Houston

"Full Court Press," the annual USBWA sportswriting seminar and scholarship competition, will begin on Thursday, March 31 at the Crowne Plaza Houston, the media hotel at the Final Four.

The session will begin at 8:30 a.m. with a panel discussion led by USBWA members.

The 11th anniversary event provides opportunities for college and high school students interested in a career in sports journalism to meet leaders in the industry and compete for a \$1,000 scholarship. Students may enter a writing competition for a scholarship in honor of the late Larry Donald, the only two-time USBWA president and the founder and longtime editor of *Basketball Times*.

At the center of the seminar is a 90-minute panel discussion featuring USBWA president Bryan Burwell of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and past president and USBWA Hall of Fame member Jim O'Connell of the Associated Press. The discussion, which will include a question-and-answer session, is expected to include topics such as

the influence of social media, the state of the job market, navigational skills in a 24/7 digital era and survival tactics to deal with increasingly difficult deadlines.

The seminar is being organized by the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State University. The Curley Center, the first of its type in the nation when it was founded in 2003, is directed by past USBWA president Malcolm Moran, the school's inaugural Knight Chair in Sports Journalism and Society. Moran will be the moderator of the panel discussion.

Students electing to participate in the writing contest will receive assignments to cover events surrounding the men's championship, including news conferences and practices on March 31 and April 1. One student will receive a credential to cover the national championship game at Reliant Stadium on April 4.

Contest participants will be notified of their specific writing assignment about a week before the event.

The deadline to register for the event is March 15.

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# Hall of Fame selection, induction remain highlights

One of the real joys of being Executive Director of the USBWA for as long as I have – 28 years now to be exact – is to welcome the organization's newest Hall of Fame class each year and to see the smiles on the faces of those being inducted at the USBWA annual awards breakfast at the NCAA Final Four.

When we first established the Hall of Fame 23 years ago in 1988, our intention was to honor members – past and present – for lifetime achievement in sports journalism and for contributions to the organization.

We might have been one of the first writers' groups to establish a Hall of Fame. Nonetheless, the time was ripe to recognize those who made – and continue to make – the USBWA a vital and necessary organization to serve the needs of writers who cover the great game of college basketball.

The committee that selects the recipients each year takes its role very seriously. While there are many worthwhile candidates every year, the committee has kept the number of inductees to a small and select group to make the induction ceremonies especially meaningful for those who are enshrined.

The inaugural class in 1988 was the largest ever – five in all – and included four writers – Smith Barrier, Dick Herbert, Ray Marquette and Jay Simon—who set the standard for their coverage of college basketball.

The fifth charter member was Wayne Duke, who helped form the USBWA in 1956 and authored the organization's original constitution.

Since that first year, the size of each Hall of Fame class has averaged two inductees per year.

In the future, the committee is looking at ways to possibly expand each class to three annually that

Joe Mitch  
USBWA  
Executive Director



would include one writer who has passed away, a veteran writer who has been in the business 30 years or more and another who meets the minimum 20-year standard.

The induction ceremony itself has been one of the real highlights of enshrinement Monday on the morning of the NCAA championship game.

Some have cried during their acceptance speech. Whether shedding a tear or not, all have been genuinely touched by the honor bestowed on them.

It's especially heart-warming to see family members of the inductees attend the ceremony. The sister of the late Pete Axhelm, the legendary *Newsweek* columnist and author, felt it was important for her entire family travel to Detroit from New York to accept the Hall of Fame plaque on behalf of her brother.

As evidence of how important it is to be recognized by your peers, one of this year's inductees, 87-year-old Mickey Furfari, said: "I am so very grateful. This is as cherished an award as I've ever had." Furfari, who is legally blind and still writing two columns a week on West Virginia from his home in Morgantown, will be accompanied to Houston by his daughter.

LODGE NOTE: Shannon Shelton, newly-appointed District V representative, has left the *Detroit Free-Press* for a public relations position out of sports with the University of Dayton. She is replaced on the board by *USA Today* columnist Mike Lopresti.

#### **USBWA 2011 NCAA MEN'S SCHEDULE FOR HOUSTON FINAL FOUR**

<u>Thursday, March 31</u>	USBWA Sportswriting Seminar, 8:45 a.m.-10:45 a.m., Crowne Plaza, San Jacinto Rooms 1-4.
<u>Friday, April 1</u>	USBWA College Basketball Awards Breakfast, 8 a.m.-9:15 a.m., George R. Brown Convention Center, George Bush Grand Ballroom (third level). Tickets are \$75 each. Order online at <a href="http://usbwa.com">usbwa.com</a> .
<u>Saturday, April 2</u>	USBWA/NCAA Basketball Committee Breakfast Meeting, Crowne Plaza, Alamo Room 1.
<u>Monday, April 4</u>	USBWA Awards Breakfast and Business Meeting, 9 a.m., Crowne Plaza, Grand Ball room 3.

## Freshmen, Duke duo highlight Robertson, Tisdale finalists

Kentucky's Terrence Jones and Ohio State's Jared Sullinger were named to USBWA watch lists for both the Oscar Robertson Trophy given to the nation's best player and for the new Wayman Tisdale Award going to the nation's best freshman.

Defending national champion Duke placed two players – Nolan Smith and Kyle Singler – on the 10-man Oscar Robertson watch list.

Others named to the list for player of the year were

Jimmer Fredette of Brigham Young, Jordan Hamilton of Texas, JaJuan Johnson of Purdue, Marcus Morris of Kansas, Kemba Walker of Connecticut and Derrick Williams of Arizona. Fredette, Sullinger and Walker were unanimous selections.

Three other freshmen joined Jones and Sullinger on the Wayman Tisdale watch list: Perry Jones of Baylor, Brandon Knight of Kentucky and Tristan Thompson of Texas.



# Kazemi, Abdul-Qaadir named USBWA's Most Courageous

The winners of the U.S. Basketball Writers Most Courageous Award – Arsalan Kazemi of Rice and Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir of Memphis – are pioneers who have gone through extraordinary lengths to play collegiate basketball.

Kazemi, a sophomore forward, is believed to be the first Iranian-born athlete to play NCAA basketball. Three U.S. immigration officials questioned an 18-year-old Kazemi for six hours after he arrived from Iran at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental Airport.

Abdul-Qaadir is the only Muslim woman who played Division I basketball this season. She was the only Division I player who wore the hijab, the traditional head covering worn by women when in the presence of men.

Kazemi dreamed of playing in the U.S. after watching NBA games. He turned down professional opportunities to pursue a most difficult dream.

The officials doubted Kazemi when he told him that he had flown to the U.S. to play basketball. For six hours, they refused to believe him.

"I'm not a terrorist," he told them. "If you don't believe me, deport me."

They didn't deport Kazemi, who knew all along that it would not be easy to play in the NCAA after arriving from a country that was blacklisted by President George W. Bush. He would need a visa to play in the United States, and the U.S. had not had an embassy in Iran since Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran nearly 30 years and held U.S. diplomats hostage for 444 days. Kazemi had to travel more than 500 miles to Dubai and secure his visa.

Once in the U.S., Kazemi played at The Patterson School in North Carolina and was warned, fearing anti-



Arsalan Kazemi

Iranian sentiment, to avoid telling people where he was from.

Yet, according to the *New York Daily News*, Kazemi told the truth when a man at a North Carolina gas station asked him where he was from.

"The guy said, 'I am going to kill you,'" Kazemi recalls. "Then he said he was joking. At first, I was scared. If you are me, wouldn't you be, too?"

Kazemi, a 6-foot-7 sophomore, has given coaches a reason to consider recruiting players from the Mideast in the future. He led Conference USA in rebounding and was among the leaders in field-goal shooting percentage.

Similarly, Abdul-Qaadir hopes to inspire Muslim girls to become basketball players.

Her teammates at Memphis became accustomed to watching Abdul-Qaadir leave practice in order to pray.



Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir

She continues to attract attention, however, because she wears a scarf, or hijab, and plays with Under Armour covering her arms and legs. There was a time when she played while wearing cotton sweatpants and shirts.

"People ask me why I cover," she told the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. "I don't mind the questions. Questions are good. I've answered a lot of them."

President Obama took notice, inviting Abdul-Qaadir to dine at the White House last year to break the Ramadan fast. Obama told the crowd: "She recently told a reporter, 'I'd like to really inspire a lot of young Muslim girls if they want to play basketball. Anything is possible. They can do it too.' As an honors student, as an athlete on her way to Memphis, Bilqis is an inspiration not simply to Muslim girls; she's an inspiration to all of us."

Abdul-Qaadir has had to deal with anti-Muslim sentiment.

"In high school, someone called me Osama bin Laden's daughter," she told the *Commercial Appeal*.

Abdul-Qaadir, the 2009 Gatorade player of the year in Massachusetts, was the first high school player in state history, male or female, to score 3,000 points, playing for New Leadership Charter School in Springfield, Mass. She scored 43 points in her high school debut, as an eighth-grader. Her school moved a game to a larger gym to accommodate the interest when she broke Rebecca Lobo's state scoring record, and the game was stopped for 10 minutes when she made the record-setting free throw.

Abdul-Qaadir, who's 5-4, sat out her first season at Memphis after injuring her ACL. She averaged 3.8 points through the Tigers' first 24 games this season..

Abdul-Qaadir is majoring in pre-medicine with an interest in cardiac surgery.

## For real courage, look to this year's Most Courageous winners

How many times every season do we sit in a post-game news conference and listen to a coach talk about the "courage" it took for a player to step to the free-throw line in the final seconds of a game and make two shots to secure the victory for his team?

I don't know about you, but I cringe when coaches frame such accomplishments as "courageous" or "heroic." It doesn't diminish the player to say what he/she did required skill and tough-mindedness, or "heart" – however we might define it. It does, I think, put us at risk of diminishing people from whom real courage is required simply to live each day, let alone play sports?

There's no shortage of real courage in the college basketball world.

When it comes to the USBWA's annual Most Courageous Award, the tough task isn't finding candidates. Coaches and athletes all around us are battling serious physical afflictions. Thanks to advances of modern medicine, it's becoming easier to find coaches and student-athletes who are cancer survivors. Unfortunately, due to societal ills, it's much too easy to find stories about young men and women who have overcome harsh childhoods surrounded by drugs and death. The Internet makes their stories easier than ever to dig up.

I thought the task of putting together the list of nomi-

nees would be daunting. I was wrong. It was humbling. On every Google search, I clicked from story to story, wanting to know more about these remarkable people. The tough task belonged to the Board of Directors: Choose one man and one woman.

Courage is revealed in countless forms.

We considered young men who are refugees of the civil wars that ripped the Balkans and The Sudan, and others who are refugees of urban America's mean streets. We mulled one young woman who resumed her career after having a non-functioning kidney removed and another who plays with the knowledge that one day she'll require a kidney transplant.

We looked at young people who performed at high levels in the immediate wake of family tragedy, at coaches and players fighting cancer, at a coach who stopped on a highway to help rescue complete strangers from an auto wreck, at a Division I player who plays with one arm and another who plays with no hearing.

Kirk Wessler  
Peoria Journal-Star  
Third Vice-President



How do you differentiate?

We considered nearly 20 finalists, and every one of them deserves respect and recognition. Every one has exhibited true courage, on and off the court.

We settled on two young people with similar backgrounds. Bilqis Abdul-Qaadir of Memphis is the first woman to wear traditional Muslim garb in Division I games, and Arsalan Kazemi of Rice is believed to be the first Iranian-born athlete to earn a D-I basketball scholarship. They've endured and overcome a level of bigotry and discrimination most of us can only try to imagine.

We're inspired by both of them. You will be, too.



# Connors, Furfari, Spander named to Hall of Fame

The U.S. Basketball Writers Association's Hall of Fame class of 2011 is comprised of three writers who combined for more than 150 years in the business.

Bill Connors, Mickey Furfari and Art Spander are this year's Hall of Famers.

Connors, who died in 2000, was an iconic columnist in Oklahoma during his 47 years at the *Tulsa World*, where he was the sports editor from 1959-94.

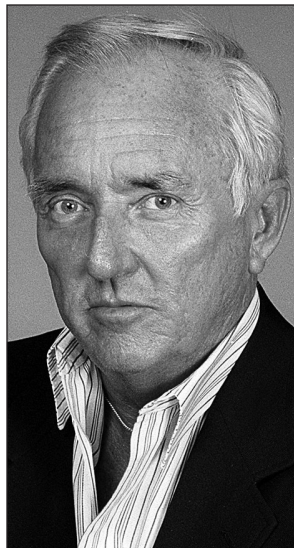
Furfari has covered West Virginia athletics for 65 years, through the basketball eras of Hot Rod Hundley, Jerry West, Rod Thorn and Fred Schaus. At 87, he is retired after 40 years as a daily sportswriter for the *Dominion Post* but still writes for a syndicate of West Virginia newspapers.

Spander began his career as a news writer for United Press International in 1960, moved to sportswriting for the *Santa Monica Outlook* in 1963. He went to work for the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1965 and was named the lead columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1979. At 72, he continues to write for the *Examiner* and *RealClearSports.com* and will be attending his 28th consecutive Final Four.

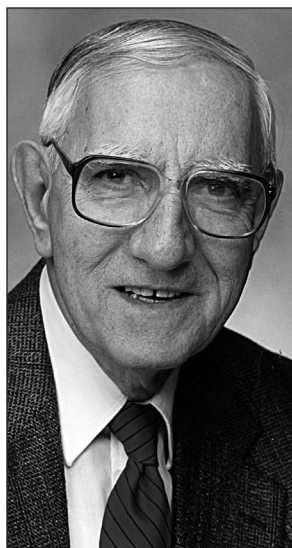
The soft-spoken Connors was from Canadian, Okla., and graduated from Oklahoma State. He was best known for writing columns that were clever, informative and fair to their subjects.

He became friends with many sports legends, including Henry Iba, Eddie Sutton and Bob Knight from the college basketball world.

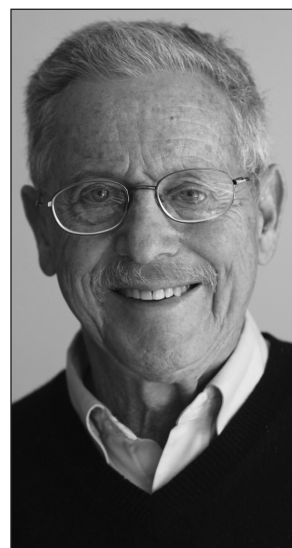
When Connors died, Sutton told the *Tulsa World*, "I



Bill Connors



Mickey Furfari



Art Spander

guess of all the sports writers I've ever seen, he was certainly the fairest and most accurate. I never met anybody that didn't like Bill Connors."

Connors was an 11-time winner of Oklahoma's sports writer of the year and was inducted into the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame in 1998.

Furfari has covered West Virginia athletics since graduating from the school in 1948. The state's dean of sportswriting was voted West Virginia sportswriter of the year five times.

Though he is "retired" on Aug. 1, 1989, and is legally blind, Furfari continues to write a column for a syndicate of West Virginia newspapers. He recently completed the book *Mickey's Mountaineer Memories*. In the introduc-

tion, West called Furfari "a state treasure."

Furfari spent 40 years from 1949-89 at Morgantown, W.Va., as a managing editor, sports editor, Sunday editor and executive sports editor.

Furfari was also the co-sports editor of the *Daily Athenaeum* in 1946-47. He worked for the Associated Press in Huntington, W.Va., before serving in the U.S. Army in World War II from 1943-46. He was the assistant sports editor at the *Charleston, W.Va., Gazette* in 1948.

Spander also rubbed shoulders with legends. He met John Wooden in the coach's temporary office when Spander was a freshman at UCLA in 1956.

Spander was awarded the McCann Award in 1999, earning him a place in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. His golf cover-

age earned him the Masters Major Achievement Award in 2007, the PGA of America Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009. This year, he won the UCLA Award for Professional Achievement in journalism and the Tournament Golf Journalism Award.

Besides his streak of Final Fours, Spander also has covered 44 consecutive Masters tournaments, 34 Super Bowls, 41 U.S. Open golf tournaments, 30 British Open golf tournaments and 26 Wimbledons. He also has attended 58 consecutive Rose Bowls, initially as a spectator and vendor and the last 48 as a journalist.

Spander also has written or co-authored three books and is a frequenter commentator on sports talk radio and a contributor to various sports magazines.

## Gonzaga's Pierce to receive Katha Quinn Award

By MALCOLM MORAN

He was sitting in the lobby of the Benson Hotel in Portland, getting work done on another trip with the Gonzaga Bulldogs, when Oliver Pierce came upon the email from the USBWA. Gonzaga's sports information director examined the subject line and wondered what the email was about, and what information he needed to provide, until he realized it was about him.

"I was blown away," he said. "It exemplifies what sports information is all about."

Pierce will receive the Katha Quinn Award, which has been presented since 1988 to an individual for outstanding service to the media or providing inspiration to the sports journalism profession.

"I was blown away," Pierce said. "It exemplifies what sports information is all about. It's honoring an SID for what an SID is supposed to do."

The link between Quinn and Pierce can be found not just in what they did, but how they did it – a personal touch that spread the word about a private school's team.

"We communicate by email," Pierce said of the state of his industry. "We tweet. We Facebook."

"I still pick up the phone and talk to people."

Pierce's effort has played an important role in the rise of Gonzaga from a respected regional program to one with a consistent national presence. On the Monday morning of the Final Four weekend in Houston, Pierce will accept an award named for the Quinn, the sports information director at St. John's University when she died of liver cancer in March, 1989. She was 34.

Quinn became one of the few female sports information directors in the nation in 1983, five years after she

joined Bill Esposito's staff. In the commitment that led to her USBWA recognition, Quinn supervised the media operation during the basketball tournament at the 1987 Pan American Games at Indianapolis. The assignment became Quinn's goal after she received her diagnosis.

Pierce joined Gonzaga in January 1989, before the Bulldogs made their first ESPN appearance (the 1992 WCC championship game), their initial NCAA Tournament appearance (1995), a trip to the Final Eight (1999) and a first regular-season ESPN telecast (2002). In 2006, Adam Morrison achieved a once-unthinkable status at Gonzaga when he shared the USBWA Oscar Robertson Trophy as national player of the year with Duke's J.J. Redick.

Jim O'Connell, a USBWA Hall of Fame member, former President, and veteran national college basketball writer for the Associated Press, thought of a better-known Gonzaga institution.

O'Connell was thinking of the figure preserved in a statue on the Gonzaga campus.

"It's not true that Oliver and Bing Crosby used to croon together," O'Connell said.

Pierce has been on campus for 22 years, but that is not how he measures his length of service.

"I don't count them by years," Pierce said. "I count them by basketball tournaments."

He accompanied the Bulldogs to a 23rd West Coast Conference tournament. Gonzaga's investment in the



Oliver Pierce

program, with the construction of the McCarthy Center, led directly to expanded newspaper interest, regular national television appearances and dramatically increased demands upon the SID office.

"As the faces of coach Mark Few and several of the premier players became known to fans across the country, the national media had its trust in Oliver," O'Connell said. "There's no reason why professional service to the media can't be accompanied by a smile, and Oliver managed that while always wearing his light blue Gonzaga shirt."

The recognition of Quinn at the 50th anniversary Final Four in Kansas City was preserved in a passage in *Last Dance* by former USBWA President John Feinstein:

"She was funny – as always – making fun of herself, talking about how she'd always wanted to lose weight but not this way. She told stories about writers and coaches and about her coach, (Lou) Carnesecca, who sat a few feet away with tears streaming down his face. She talked about all the friends she had brought to 'her fight' and how very much she loved St. John's and the players she had worked with.

"By the time she finished, the room was utterly silent except for the quiet sounds of her friends all crying. People who had never met her before that day were crying, too. The standing ovation – once people collected themselves – lasted several minutes. The applause still rings in the ears of everyone who was there."