

Get out the vote, attend the awards luncheon

Selection Sunday approaches, bubble and NET chatter percolate, and the NCAA transfer portal awaits the offseason. Such is life as college basketball conference play hits overdrive.

But as Zion Williamson, Grant Williams – 23-for-23 from the line? Really? – and the NET grab headlines, it's been cool to see players such as Campbell's Chris Clemons, Hofstra's Justin Wright-Foreman and Murray State's Ja Morant earn USBWA kudos as national players of the week.

As a projected NBA lottery pick, Morant probably needs no introduction. Regardless, it's well worth your time to read USBWA comrade Pat Forde's late-January piece on how the Racers unearthed Morant.

Clemons and Wright-Foreman rank first and third, respectively, among Division I scorers, and their exploits have certainly resonated here in Virginia.

The 5-foot-9 Clemons hit a 30-footer at the horn to beat Radford on the road 68-67 on Jan. 30. Two weeks later, in an 87-84 victory over Hampton, Clemons scored 48 points, three shy of his career-best, and moved past Danny Manning and Oscar Robertson into ninth place on the all-time Division I scoring list.

In two victories over William and Mary, Wright-Foreman scored 37 and 48 points, the latter after a

David Teel
Newport News Daily Press
President



37-point second half.

In that same contest, Nathan Knight, W&M's gifted big man, continued his superb season with 39 points, 14 rebounds and four assists.

All of which is to remind USBWA members that our all-district teams are a great way to recognize players such as Knight, Wright-Foreman and Clemons. So please vote.

As the season draws to a close, I owe the USBWA my enduring thanks for the privilege of serving. Safe to say, the year has been eventful.

We continued to engage schools on access and seating, and while the results are occasionally discouraging, we will press on.

And just so schools don't view the USBWA merely as critic, we intend to publicly cite those whose media outreach goes above and beyond.

Perhaps most notably, we hired USBWA Hall of Famer Malcolm Moran as our new executive director. His commitment to the organization's mission will be evident to all in the coming months and years.

None of this would have been possible without my fellow officers: Shannon Ryan, Seth Davis and soon-to-be-president Mike Waters. They've been insightful and responsive throughout.

Oh, did I mention Joe Mitch?

I'm not sure the USBWA would still exist without our retiring executive director. His sage counsel remains invaluable, and his nearly four decades of service to us will endure.

Among my perks this season was informing many of our annual award winners of their USBWA honors. The surprise and gratitude they expressed reminded me of how special these recognitions are.

So please indulge with me another round of applause for Hall of Famers John Akers, Jack McCallum, William Rhoden and Dan Wetzel, Katha Quinn winner Mike Sheridan and Most Courageous honoree Ericka Downey.

To hear their stories, join us at our Final Four awards luncheon.

I understand how grueling the postseason is and how tempting some extra sleep is on championship Monday, but trust me on this.

You'll be glad you did.

Oc's legacy continues with beat-writing award

Longtime Associated Press college basketball writer Jim O'Connell has been named the inaugural winner of a USBWA award for beat reporting that will be named for him.

O'Connell, a former president of the USBWA and member of its Hall of Fame, will be honored at the annual awards luncheon on April 8 in Minneapolis, more than nine months after he passed away at age 64 following a series of ailments.

His wife Anne, sons James and Andrew and sisters Winnie and Mary are expected to accept the award, which will be named the Jim O'Connell Award for Excellence in Beat Reporting in 2020.

O'Connell – known throughout the basketball industry as Oc – covered 39 consecutive Final Fours for the AP and served as its national college basketball writer since 1987.

He received the Curt Gowdy Print Media Award



Jim O'Connell

for outstanding lifetime coverage of basketball from the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2002.

"The question wasn't whether to honor Oc," said USBWA president and Newport News Daily Press columnist David Teel. "It was how to honor Oc, and a beat-reporting award that carries his name is perfect. No one embodied the love of the game and often-unseen hours of the grind like Oc, and we hope this award will inspire dedicated beat reporters just as Oc inspired us."

The award will be presented in addition to the annual best-writing contest that recognizes specific articles, columns and projects in multiple categories

and will become an annual tribute to the daily work of reporters who meet the highest standards of beat reporting while exceeding the USBWA Code of Ethics.

O'Connell's AP career spanned the championship game between Earvin (Magic) Johnson of Michigan

State and Larry Bird of Indiana State, the creation of the Big East conference, the growth of the NCAA Tournament to 68 teams and the capacity of Final Four venues to 70,000 and beyond.

He also attended every Big East tournament from 1980 through 2017 and covered 20 Maui Invitational tournaments.

O'Connell covered the Olympic Games from 1984 in Los Angeles through 2004 in Athens, and according to FIBA, he held the unofficial distinction of covering more Olympic basketball games than any reporter.

But friends, colleagues, athletes, coaches and administrators understood for years that O'Connell was at least as comfortable while sitting in tiny gymnasiums, watching overlooked teams compete in one-bid leagues, always in search of that next story.

"He was the source on college basketball," former AP sports editor Terry Taylor said in the AP obituary that appeared last July. "He knew coaches, players, games, dates of games and final scores – all manner of factoids – off the top of his head. And when you looked it up, he was always right."

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Awards dinner in St. Louis will be final act with USBWA

My final act before the curtain closes on a 39-year career with the USBWA will be to oversee our season-ending College Basketball Awards dinner in St. Louis on April 15.

The dinner has been a fixture of the USBWA landscape since the first one was held, also in St. Louis, at the 2005 Final Four.

The dinner started out as a fundraiser for the USBWA but has also become a celebration for college basketball. This is the only awards dinner in the country that is open to the general public where the top players in the country congregate at one site to be honored for their achievements during the season.

The USBWA has hosted a dinner 13 of the last 14 years, honoring the nation's player of the year with the Oscar Robertson Trophy, the freshman of the year with the Wayman Tisdale Award and the coach of the year with the Henry Iba Award.

This year for the first time, the USBWA will honor the nation's best women's player with the Ann Meyers Drysdale Award. The USBWA plans to expand the women's awards in the future by honoring the coach of the year.

The USBWA is partnering with the Missouri Athletic Club to bring the CBA dinner to St. Louis this

Joe Mitch
USBWA
Executive Director



year and the next two years. The MAC also hosts the Herman Award dinner each year honoring the national player of the year in college soccer.

"The College Basketball Awards dinner is an annual highlight on the USBWA calendar, replete with the game's luminaries," said USBWA President David Teel, columnist for the Newport News Daily Press. "We're grateful to the Missouri Athletic Club for hosting this event."

The USBWA awards presentation was held during the Final Four for many years before moving to Oklahoma City for five years. After a one-year hiatus, the dinner returned to St. Louis last year, with the MAC successfully hosting the event before a sold-out crowd of over 500 people.

"We are thrilled to partner with the USBWA on this prestigious event," MAC President Wally Smith said. "For one night each year, the college basketball world is focused on St. Louis."

Mitch closes out his career after 39 years with USBWA

Joe Mitch is retiring on May 31 after 36 years as executive director of the USBWA. He served three years as Tipoff editor before taking over the executive director's post in 1983.

During his career with the USBWA, membership grew from a few hundred to over 900 sportswriters and journalists covering college basketball.

Under Mitch, the USBWA initiated programs to promote college basketball and sports writing. He started a Hall of Fame for the organization. The USBWA began awarding college scholarships to students pursuing careers in sports journalism and sponsored a best-writing contest each season for stories written by students about college basketball.

The USBWA established partnerships with the NCAA and the NABC to improve working conditions for writers in such areas as access to players and coaches, security and seating at games. The USBWA began providing pool reporters for NCAA tournament games and partnered with the Associated Press Sports Editors to provide APSE representatives and assistance to media coordinators for all tournament games.

The USBWA began hosting a season-ending College Basketball Awards dinner each year that served as a fundraiser for the organization and honored the nation's best players and top coach.

The USBWA increased its role promoting women's basketball by naming an All-America team each season

and selecting annual awards for player and coach of the year.

"Back in the day, the USBWA was a feel-good organization," said Dave Dorr, a member of the USBWA Hall of Fame and president in 1979-80. "Presidents' roles were largely honorary. Members were happy with their seating at big games."

"When money began driving college basketball decisions, the USBWA faced new challenges. Joe's management style of patience, sensitivity and ability to find sponsors carried the day. He transformed the USBWA. He's leaving with the organization at its apex. Members will long benefit from his legacy down the road."

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www.usbwa.com
Annual dues: \$50

Joe Mitch leaving behind a tough act to follow

I'm the guy in front of the classroom at IUPUI in downtown Indianapolis, reminding the next generation of media professionals that while operating on deadline, saying never is never a good way to go about your business.

Then I wait to see if there are any smiles.

Within that context, I would offer one never that would seem to be safe in the corner of the hoop world that we occupy, and another that is a lock.

The safe one is this: The men's game will never see a team match the UCLA achievement of seven consecutive national championships and 10 within 12 seasons.

The lock is this: Never will any USBWA executive director begin to approach the impact that Joe Mitch has had on our industry over the last 36 years.

Need convincing? Just go to the NCAA Tournament, stop and look around.

Those breakout sessions at the Final Four, the ones that create the possibility of more personal, less-stressful engagement with individual players, evolved from suggestions and discussions on Joe's watch.

The required availability of teams before they leave campus for the Final Four site, which helped reduce the nightmares of local beat writers and allowed outsiders to collect insight in a relatively low-key environment, resulted from his leadership.

The pool reporter with access to a game official to ask about a complex decision or ruling on deadline was the result of years of persistence and negotiations.

Malcolm Moran



The formal, annual recognition of the best of the women's game succeeded from the start because Joe was behind the idea from the start.

The awards celebration on the Monday of the Final Four weekend, honoring the best practices in our industry and the most courageous of the people we cover, took shape more than three decades ago as a result of his imagination and vision.

All of this is to say that while the opportunity to become your executive director is an honor as great as the responsibility that accompanies it, the prospect can be more than a little unnerving. How do you follow that act?

Here is one thing to do. The carefully developed improvements in working conditions that have taken place over more than three decades, with the cooperation of NCAA staffers from Dave Cawood to Jim Marchiony to Dave Worlock, have become so familiar, such a part of the fabric, that it's easy to forget all the effort that went into the improvements.

The most important thing that can be accomplished

by our organization is to establish the value we all receive from our annual commitment of membership dues, value that has been built over decades and all the important work to come. Just as we recognize the best work that is done by our members, we can identify the programs that give us the best chance to do our jobs in an effort to raise the standard.

It did not take long once I made the transition from industry to the academy more than 12 years ago to discover that

one of the biggest differences is that service, a volunteer calling in industry, is a non-negotiable requirement in the academy. I have developed an even greater appreciation for the women and men who are willing to serve on our committees, build conference calls into their schedules, reach out to students during the annual Full Court Press seminar and put in the time to give our awards the credibility they have earned.

So thanks, in advance, for your dues-paying faith in our organization, for your involvement, your ideas, your energy, your imagination, your service. Thanks, Bob Hammel, the former president and USBWA Hall of Famer from Bloomington, Ind., for taking the time in a press room in East Rutherford, N.J., nearly 40 years ago to suggest to a kid from New York that joining would be a good thing. The kid could not have known how good it would be.

And thanks, Joe.

Thanks for everything.

By the way, is it OK if I call you tomorrow?

Hampton's Six, ACC's Finch earn women's honors

By MEL GREENBERG

There's nothing unusual about Hampton competing for a Big South women's basketball championship and an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

What's different is that Lady Pirates coach David Six has kept his team in the hunt without missing a game while recovering from a stroke that he suffered last summer.

There's nothing new about Atlantic Coast Conference senior associate commissioner/women's basketball Nora Lynn Finch chatting with media members as she goes about her duties.

What's different is that this will be the last time she will be going through March Madness prior to her retirement in June.

Both of them will also be on the dais at the annual USBWA women's awards news conference in Tampa Bay in Amalie Arena several hours ahead of the national semifinals to receive special honors.

Six will receive the Pat Summitt Most Courageous Award named for the late legendary Hall of Fame women's coach who battle dementia at the close of her noteworthy career at Tennessee.

Finch is this year's Mary Jo Haverbeck Award winner, named for the late pioneering Penn State women's sports information director that goes to an individual helpful to USBWA members covering their beat. It is equivalent to the Katha Quinn Award on the men's side.

Six, a 55-year old native of New York, suffered his attack on June 27 while driving his wife Angela to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore for treatment for a muscle disease.

"It was a near death experience," Six told AP na-



David Six



Nora Lynn Finch

tional women's basketball writer Doug Feinberg, a USBWA member, when the team played at Columbia in New York after New Year's Day.

Despite medical opinions that it could be a year before returning to coach, Six threw himself into an extensive rehab program determined to be in the gym at the start of preseason practice.

In November, he earned his 200th victory before Thanksgiving. Though Hampton struggled to a 4-7 record on the sort of rigid non-conference schedule that Six usually creates, the squad was just a game out of first with only two Big South setbacks in mid-February.

"He bounced back quickly," Hampton freshman Laren VanArsdale told Feinberg. "A lot of people don't come back from strokes, but he came back stronger than ever."

Saint Joseph's grad player Avery Marz, herself a

stroke victim who returned to action and won the Summitt Award last year, will help present Six as well as a representative from the Pat Summitt Leadership Group.

Meanwhile, Finch had not yet announced her retirement when informed of her USBWA honor.

"Wow," she said. "That's terrific. I always considered that award to be special."

Finch, who served the first eight years as chair of the NCAA women's basketball tournament committee from 1981-88, has since been announced as a member of this June's Women's Basketball Hall of Fame induction class in Knoxville, Tenn., as a contributor.

She was the top basketball assistant to the late Hall of Famer Kay Yow at North Carolina State before becoming the Wolfpack's senior women's administrator and then moving to the ACC.

"Nora Lynn's contributions to college athletics, and specifically women's basketball, are beyond significant," said ACC Commissioner John Swofford. "For over four decades, her enthusiasm, energy and integrity have benefited everyone she's worked with, and the respect and awards she's earned are well deserved. I congratulate her on adding the USBWA prestigious Mary Jo Haverbeck award to her career accomplishments."

Added USBWA member and broadcast analyst Debbie Antonelli, who played for the Wolfpack: "Nora Lynn has always been media savvy. Coach Finch is an administrator who served in many capacities in women's basketball. She crisscrossed roles as a player, coach, referee, administrator and visionary in our game for decades. Her leadership and caretaking roles in the game served countless men and women. Basketball has evolved because of her leadership and unconditional spirit to move the game forward."

Hooray for Hollywood's Rising Star winner

Fittingly, the USBWA discovered a Rising Star in Hollywood.

Yet glitz and glamour have little to do with the latest winner of the award given to the organization's top basketball writer under the age of 30: Sam Vecenie.

Vecenie, 28, is a roll-up-the-sleeves kind of guy as a senior writer at The Athletic specializing in the NBA draft. He must be an expert in the worlds of both the NBA and college basketball – and on the top prep players as well. Then he must determine where those prospects would fit best on NBA teams and be able to convey that knowledge in an entertaining manner.

The all-encompassing nature of this relatively new genre of sports writing is what excites him.

"There are so many contextual factors that go into every player and every situation," Vecenie said. "That's what's interesting to me. That's what gets my mind going."

Few, if any, navigate the worlds of preps, colleges and pro better than Vecenie.

"With Sam, I could talk to him about the Peach Jam, the NBA trade deadline or Selection Sunday, and he would be well-equipped to discuss any of it," said Gary Parrish of CBS Sports, Vecenie's former colleague.

Vecenie's fascination with player development, which began as a kid building rosters on video games, translated as an adult to a curiosity about how it worked in real life.



Sam Vecenie

He switched majors three times at Ohio State, accumulating enough coursework that he could easily have graduated in three years. Vecenie instead added film studies as a second major, along with strategic communications, and then enrolled in a graduate program in entertainment and industry management at the prestigious Carnegie Mellon in his hometown Pittsburgh.

That led to life in Hollywood, where he served internships at Starz and MGM and worked fulltime at Nielsen.

Yet even as a grad student, Vecenie was gravitating back to basketball. He studied modern basketball strategy

in order to better understand what he was watching and wrote for blogs and SB Nation, particularly on the draft.

Once Vecenie took the dive, he went nearly all in.

"I had a pinky toe in the entertainment industry," Vecenie said, "and nine toes in the deep end of writing about basketball."

Matt Moore of FanSide was among those who took notice.

"He was able to put the conversation around draft picks and prospect analysis and put it into relatable terms for the reader," Moore said. "That's really big. That's something that I think is missing in a lot of prospect analysis."

Moore moved to CBS Sports and thought of Vecenie when there was an opening to replace Jeff Borzello, who left for ESPN, with the emphasis shifting to the

NBA draft rather than recruiting. Vecenie spent nearly two years at CBS before losing that job to a layoff. After a year of freelancing, Vecenie found a new home with the creation of The Athletic in July of 2017.

The Athletic's subscription-based model fit well with Vecenie's views about the need for shake-up in the media industry. His Game Theory regularly ranks among iTunes' top podcasts.

Vecenie said he might begin a typical day by watching an NBA and a college game on Synergy, then catching a couple more live games that evening. Saturdays, he might watch as many as 10 games by having two on at a time. He also reaches out to sources and updates his large, well-organized scouting document. During summers, he travels to all-star games, grassroots events and NBA summer leagues and watches NBA tryouts held in L.A.

"I have no idea," Moore said, "how Sam keeps all that information he has in his head."

Vecenie said it helps to be both curious and analytical, with an entrepreneurial spirit and a good memory to boot.

His career has been aided, he said, by great friends and mentors, such as Moore, Parrish, writers Matt Norlander and Jeff Goodman and editors Sergio Gonzalez and Marcus Nelson.

Vecenie also will be getting married in late August to his fiancée, Laura.

Life is good.

"It's the best," Vecenie said. "I get to work from home. I get to hang out with my dog and two cats. I get to live in Hollywood."

"It's an unbelievable life. I'm incredibly lucky."

Luncheon highlights Final Four weekend

The USBWA's annual luncheon from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Monday, April 8, at the Minneapolis Convention Center will feature the presentation of these awards:

- Katha Quinn Award to Mike Sheridan SID Mike Sheridan for his service to the media.
- The Rising Star Award to Sam Vecenie of The Athletic for excellence in sportswriting for writers under 30.
- Most Courageous Award to Ericka Downey, the wife of Northeastern State (Okla.) basketball coach Mark Downey, for giving a kidney to someone she never met before, former UTEP, Texas A&M, Kentucky, Texas Tech and now Ranger (Texas) College head coach Billy Gillispie.
- Induction into the USBWA Hall of Fame of John Akers of Basketball Times, Jack McCallum of Sports Illustrated, Bill Rhoden of the New York Times and Dan Wetzel of Yahoo Sports.
- Ray Marquette Award to David Teel of the New-

port News Daily Press for his leadership as USBWA president.

ESPN served as the main sponsor of the luncheon and has been the major sponsor dating back to the mid 1980s. Other sponsors include USA Basketball, NABC and the American, Big Ten and Pac-12 conferences.

The luncheon and short busy meeting to follow conclude a busy weekend for the USBWA.

The USBWA's schedule of events starts with the Full Court Press sportswriting competition and seminar at 8:30 a.m. on Friday, April 5, at the media area of U.S. Bank Stadium.

The seminar will be followed by a news conference announcing the winner of the Oscar Robertson Player of the Year Trophy, from 9:15-9:45.

On Monday prior to the awards luncheon, the USBWA board of directors will meet in executive session before meeting with the Division I men's basketball committee.

USBWA members among NSMA winners

Several members of the USBWA were named the top sportswriter of their state by the National Sports Media Association.

USBWA President David Teel of the Newport News Daily Press won in Virginia for the 12th time. Other winners included John Clay of the Lexington Herald-Leader (for the sixth time in Kentucky); Ed Graney of the Las Vegas Review-Journal (sixth time in Nevada); Tom Shatel of the Omaha World-Herald (fourth time in Nebras-

ka); Robert Gagliardi of the Wyoming Tribune Eagle, for the fourth time; Joe Rexrode of the Tennessean (who has also won in Michigan); and USBWA First Vice-President Mike Waters of the Syracuse Post-Standard (a first-time winner in New York).

Dave Krider, 79, the only prep writer to be inducted into the USBWA's Hall of Fame, died of complications from heart surgery on July 4. Krider was a pioneer who wrote about prep sports nationally for USA Today and other publications.

Lodge Notes

Duke pair named to final Watch list

ST. LOUIS – The U.S. Basketball Writers Association has selected 12 standout players for its Oscar Robertson Trophy Final Midseason Watch List. Members of the association's board of directors chose the players that will be considered as contenders for the National Player of the Year.

The Oscar Robertson Trophy will be presented by its namesake at the Final Four in Minneapolis in April and the winner will be honored at the USBWA Awards Dinner on April 15 at the Missouri Athletic Club in St. Louis.

Three players from both the Atlantic Coast Conference and the Big Ten Conference are on the 12-player list.

The ACC is represented by Duke's outstanding freshmen, R.J. Barrett and Zion Williamson, and Virginia sophomore De'Andre Hunter.

The Big Ten is represented by Carsen Edwards of Purdue, Cassius Winston of Michigan State and Ethan Happ of Wisconsin.

Two players from the Big 12 Conference – Dedric Lawson of Kansas and Jarrett Culver of Texas Tech – were named to the list.

The nation's assist leader, Murray State's Ja Morant, is represented. Tennessee's Grant Williams is the Southeastern Conference's leading scorer. Others named to the list were Rui Hachimura of Gonzaga and Markus Howard of Marquette.