



VOLUME 43, NO. 4

May, 2006

Final Four seating issue is here, and it's serious

It's here.

Yes, my presidency. My term, on your terms. I am honored and humbled to be your USBWA president until next April in Atlanta. Or, until Billy Packer does the Missouri Valley Conference tournament, whichever comes first.

But that's not why you hear that fire alarm in the distance. (Then again, maybe it is!)

No, it's here. The day we all knew, in the back of our minds, would come eventually, but hoped we wouldn't be around to see it.

The NCAA/CBS/press row seating issue is upon us.

Is it imminent? Is it a done deal? Are we headed up to the baseball press box?

No. No. No.

Is it on the table? Is the NCAA Men's Division I Basketball Committee going to discuss the issue?

Yes. Yes.

So, should we get in the game and have a say in our fate? Or sit on the sidelines and hope and pray?

Easy choice. We're getting in the game.

The good news is, as we learned at the Final Four in Indianapolis, the NCAA wants us in the game.

We invited David Worlock, the new NCAA media coordinator, to join us at our annual Friday morning board meeting with the basketball committee. We were pleasantly surprised by an appearance from Greg Shaheen, the vice president of Division I men's basketball.

I began the meeting by asking Shaheen if he could clarify some rumors that several writers had heard, mainly that the NCAA was considering a move on press row for the 2009 Final Four at Ford Field in Detroit.

Shaheen admitted that the topic has come up with the basketball committee, but mostly because the configuration at Ford Field is different than most domes. For instance, rather than having the court pressed up against one end zone, like most domes, the court may be in the center of Ford Field.

He also noted that CBS has raised concerns about having so many press tables in full view – especially when writers leave to go work in the pressroom and they are empty. This is not new. We have heard this for years. Is CBS finally going to get things changed?

Not necessarily. Shaheen said the NCAA staff and the basketball committee are not pushing a change and not even considering it at this point. But they do want to discuss it.

At that point, Shaheen made my day: He invited the USBWA to join the discussion.

We accept.

I have appointed a committee, commission, task force, etc. I call them the "Grumpy Old Men" committee. It will be made up of past presidents, our heaviest hitters, who have relationships with the NCAA and the committee. They still have a great passion for USBWA and all of the issues in our ever-changing world. They still want to get involved.

Tom Shatel President, Omaha World Herald



So they shall. I welcome their passion, and their involvement. This might be the most important thing our organization does. I want our big guns in there, fighting for us, offering their wit and wisdom and suggestions. I feel confident our side will be heard.

I also feel confident a compromise can be reached, if one is needed at all.

I say that nothing is imminent.

But you should know that Shaheen suggested we talk immediately. He said the Basketball Committee is going to discuss this topic at its June 15 meeting. He suggested we get together as a group before then to get the ball rolling, so to speak.

(As a side note: We, as a board, will begin meeting with the Basketball Committee several times a year, not just annually at the Final Four.)

Here's something I didn't know: Worlock told us that there are 65 seats to a row. With five rows, that's over 300 seats on the floor. I've been to the World Series, Super Bowl and BCS championship games. The NBA now has most writers in the end zones or on press rows halfway up.

Thus, I believe the Final Four has the biggest "main" press box of any of those events.

Does that mean we should be thankful and give up spots?

No way.

But, Shaheen did say the committee felt there were spots on the floor given to organizations that did not necessarily cover a team on a regular basis.

I don't know if that's true or not. Frankly, I don't want us to get in the business of deciding who gets a credential, or, how many. That's a dangerous road.

But when it comes to where we sit and do our jobs, that's our business.

We all have a passion for that courtside seat. We know how it translates into better stories, more accuracy, more compelling coverage of the greatest event in sports. We need the NCAA to hear that, too.

They will hear it. That, I can promise.

I can't promise what will happen, whether we'll lose

some seats, who will sit where.

But I will promise that you will be heard. And the NCAA will listen. I firmly believe they are telling the truth when they say they want us to have "ownership" in the tournament.

Perfect. And that goes for you, too.

If you have any concerns or questions, please feel free to call me at 402-444-1025 or email at tom.shatel@owh.com.

This is the most important thing our organization will do.

We're going to do it right.

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Second USBWA breakfast also becoming Final Four staple

The USBWA's Monday morning breakfast on the day of the men's national championship game has become pretty much standard fare for the members of the organization and their guests who attend the event each year.

The breakfast has grown in popularity to where attendance is now well over 100 people. It is at this breakfast where the USBWA inducts the newest members into its Hall of Fame, honors the organization's most courageous award winner and recognizes various people in college basketball for their contributions to the sport.

The USBWA also has guest speakers appear at the breakfast to brief those in attendance about their college basketball-related organizations. This year's speakers included Jerry Colangelo of USA Basketball, John Doleva of the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., and Burke Magnus of ESPN. (ESPN is the primary sponsor of the breakfast, and the Basketball Hall of Fame is a presenting sponsor.)

When members think of the USBWA breakfast at the Final Four, the Monday morning one comes to mind.

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But now, there is a second USBWA-hosted breakfast for members to think about when attending the Final Four and should not be confused with the Monday morning event.

The other USBWA breakfast is on Friday morning, the day prior to the national semifinals, at which time the USBWA honors the association's national player and coach of the year.

Started last year at the Final Four in St. Louis as a fundraiser for the organization to support the USBWA's scholarship program and underwrite various member services, this year's Friday morning breakfast drew a sold-out crowd of 370 people at Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis..

North Carolina's Roy Williams was presented with the Henry Iba Coach of the Year Award, and Gonzaga's Adam Morrison and Duke's J.J. Redick received the Oscar Robertson Trophy as co-winners of the USBWA's player of the year award.

It is the first time in the 50-year history of the USBWA that the organization has selected co-players of the year.

The breakfast also marked the unveiling of the Oscar Robertson Trophy display case that will be permanently displayed at Conseco Fieldhouse. The exhibit will feature a sculpture of Oscar patterned after the famous photograph of him, with legs spread-eagled, grabbing a rebound in game when he played at Cincinnati. A replica of the sculpture is now used as the trophy for the player of the year award.

Oscar, who first earned national fame playing for Indiana state prep champion Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis, was present to unveil the display and had help doing it from another famous Indiana native son that morning – Larry Bird.

Early in the program, the USBWA honored Indiana University's national championship teams of 1976 and 1981, marking the 30th and 25th anniversaries, respectively, of each team's NCAA title. The 1976 team is the last Division I national champion to go through the season unbeaten.

Several players from both teams were in attendance, including Quinn Buckner of the '76 Hoosiers and Landon Turner and Ray Tolbert from the '81 team. The USBWA provided each player with a personalized memento honoring them on their team's respective national championship and also presented Indiana University with a four-foot plaque that is slated to be hung inside

IU's basketball arena, Assembly Hall, for the start of the 2006-07 season.

Another major event that the USBWA plans to continue each year at the NCAA Final Four is a sports-writing seminar for student journalists.

Indiana University's School of Journalism hosted this year's seminar on the IU campus, with some 60 students attending a two and one-half hour session.

Retired *Bloomington Herald-Times* sports editor and past USBWA president Bob Hammel moderated the seminar. Panelists were Bob Ryan of the *Boston Globe*; Malcolm Moran of *USA Today*; Mike DeCourcy of *The Sporting News*; Tony Barnhart of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*; Billy Reed, retired columnist for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and *Sports Illustrated*; and Avani Patel of the *Chicago Tribune*.

Students attending the seminar were given assignments to write about various events during the Final Four that included team practices and news conferences and the NABC college all-star game with the Harlem Globetrotters. One student was given a credential to cover the national championship game.

A \$1,000 college scholarship will be provided by the USBWA to one student whose story from the Final Four was judged the best overall in a writing contest.

The USBWA and the NCAA have entered into an agreement to co-sponsor the sports-writing seminar annually both at the men's Final Four and starting next year at the women's Final Four.



Oscar Robertson and Larry Bird unveil the trophy on permanent display at Conseco.

Friday morning breakfast will continue to get bigger, better

The USBWA breakfast at Conseco Fieldhouse was a huge hit and should be our annual marquee event.

But we might need to expand it, even more.

There's no reason to get rid of the Monday morning breakfast, but I did notice a different tenor to the two and felt like we cheapened one of our most cherished awards.

I'd like to see us incorporate the Most Courageous Award as part of the player and coach of the year Friday morning breakfast. Every year, without fail, I get choked up when our most courageous recipient receives his or her honor.

That was the case again this April. The entire basketball community, not just the core writers, should have seen Tennessee Tech coach Mike Sutton and how courageous he was to continue his quest to coach. They should have heard his story, his struggle to return to the bench. And everyone needed to hear him thank his beloved wife Karen for the courage that she has shown in helping him through his rehab.

The program Friday morning had its highs by honoring the Indiana teams from 1976 and '81. But it could have been shorter with maybe only one question instead of three per person. If you include the most courageous award winner as part of our program, then you're putting that person on a larger stage. The award should be shared with as many people as possible, not just in a banquet room where the numbers aren't as high and more people are thinking about bolting for the Hall of Fame announcement or some other event.

Andy Katz Vice-President ESPN.com



Joe Mitch and Co. did wonders with this event. But we can make this better and more inclusive.

A few issues:

We need to continue to push for more wireless access at all arenas around the country. The dial-up situation is archaic. The cost is an issue, but I'd like to know how many editors are concerned, or if this is more of reporters worried about turning in the high expense. Even though it can be a high expense, using the wireless is worth it and less stressful.

The food needs to change in the NCAA Tournament. I may be speaking only for myself, but I know I'm tired of

being drawn toward the salty snacks. I know I'm not alone here. I'd be glad to pay for regular lunch meats. Maybe it's a self-control issue, but the choices make it difficult. We are covering an athletic event, right? Yet, the food is clearly not something you'd want to eat around any kind of exercise.

A thank you to David Worlock and Greg Shaheen for their hard work on making the NCAA Tournament a success again.

And, once more, a public thank you to the tireless work of the SIDs from the Final Four schools. All were extremely helpful throughout the tournament.

USBWA listened, and so did NCAA selection committee

There was a time that just about everything about the NCAA Tournament committee was treated as a state secret. That is no longer the case.

In recent years, the committee has been more open about what it does and why. The members have gotten more comfortable talking about the process and speaking in something other than generalities.

That was very true in public this year. And just as true in private when several USBWA members met with several members of the committee in Indianapolis the morning before the national semifinals.

We listened, and they listened. Everybody agreed that that we all have similar goals. And the best way to end up in the right places is to communicate.

We discussed Final Four seating, now and in the future. It might change in some way at some point, but nothing has been decided at this point.

We discussed wireless at the various NCAA sites. Was the \$30 per day reasonable? Too much? Should it be free?

Is there a better way to handle availability following games that end well after midnight? When most writers on East Coast deadlines have almost no time to file, would it just be better if the two coaches were quickly available so we could get something? Is that better than following the usual protocol?

Why are players designated for the interview room before the game? Why not just wait to see how the game plays out and let each school's SID make a decision based on who did what during the game?

That especially makes sense for late games, when not as many people have the time to get to the locker rooms, which take some time to open.

The on-line applications worked well enough, but will be better next year. David Worlock, the new tournament media coordinator, said they "plan to tweak the system and make it more user friendly." Next year, Worlock hopes that wireless applications will be available on line.

It was suggested that maybe we could get everyone in the system and then wait to apply for first- and second-round sites after the selections are made. Most of us with specific

Dick Jerardi Vice President Phila. Daily News



teams to cover can't know where we are going unless that team is a top seed eligible for site preference.

The regionals are easier because most publications, if they plan correctly, have some idea which writers will be going where on the second weekend. And, if changes have to be made, they can generally be made with a simple phone call to the site media coordinator.

It was obvious that the committee members understood the issues. It was just as obvious that they are into solving them and helping us do our jobs. It was very clear they understand our historical role in the tournament and still believe that role is vital.

I have been at a few of these meetings. Each has been interesting in its own way. I found this one not only interest-

ing, but also helpful and quite instructive.

Generally, we have one of these meetings per year. We talked about having several of them each year.

The day after our meeting, outgoing USBWA president Tony Barnhart suggested that we should designate a member at each site to list any issues at the site. And when the tournament ends, compile all the issues from all the sites and get them off to the committee so they can be considered when they have time to consider them.

After spending a few hours with members of this committee, it was clear to all us they will consider whatever it is that we think is worth considering.

Listening is a lost art these days. The committee listened to the USBWA members. And we listened to them.

Writing contest deadline set for June 15

The deadline for submitting stories and columns published during the 2005-06 season for the USBWA Best Writing Contest is June 15.

Entries can be submitted in five categories: column writing, moderate-length features, magazine-length features, spot news/game coverage and enterprise/investigative stories.

Only dues-paying members of the USBWA are eligible to enter the writing contest. Members may enter more than one category but may submit only one entry per category.

Plaques and cash prizes will be awarded in each category. Winners will be announced in The Tipoff and posted on the USBWA website.

Send all entries to: Joe Mitch; USBWA Writing Contest; 1818 Chouteau Ave.; St. Louis, Mo. 63103; (314) 421-0339; or e-mail entries to mitch@mvc.org For entries submitted by mail, print the name of the category, the author of the story, the publication in which the article appeared and the date of the publication on a 3x5 card and staple it to the article.

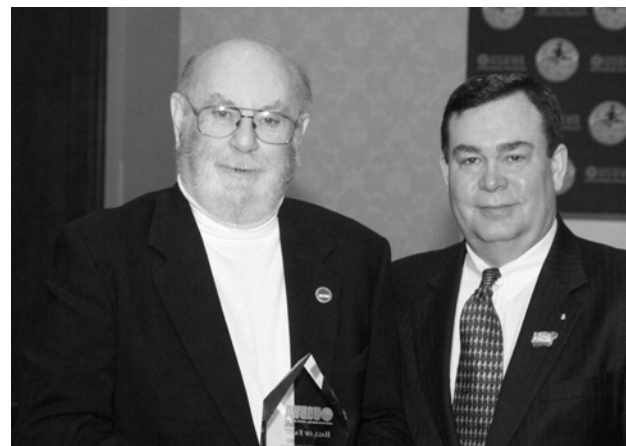
USBWA highlights from a Final Four weekend



New president Tom Shatel takes the gavel.



Katha Quinn winner Wayne Duke, with Malcolm Moran and Jim O'Connell.



Hall of Famer Marvin West, with President Tony Barnhart.



NCAA media coordinator David Worlock meets the USBWA.



Tennessee Tech coach Mike Sutton, Most Courageous winner.



Roy Williams was named the national coach of the year.



Fans packed into Conesco Fieldhouse for the USBWA's Friday morning breakfast.



J.J. Redick and Adam Morrison were the USBWA's co-winners of the Oscar Robertson Trophy.