

Oscar! Oscar! for that name on the USBWA trophy

One of the perks of this business is that you sometimes get to hang with interesting (and famous) people outside the confines of work. At the annual Thursday night Final Four dinner for USBWA board members and past presidents in San Antonio, I was seated next to Joe Mitch, who was seated next to Oscar Robertson.

One thing I knew about Oscar, beyond his basketball career, is that he has opinions. We talked a little hoops, but he really opened up when we got to politics. He does not like the current administration in Washington D.C., not even a little bit. We talked about everything from Iraq to Obama, with a little basketball mixed in. Just as he did on a court, Oscar looked in all directions.

When we decided to honor our Player of the Year with the Oscar Robertson Trophy, it seemed a natural fit. It has even been better than we hoped. Oscar has embraced it. And we are proud he let us honor him.

People can argue about the greatest player of all time. It often depends upon your age and how you view the game. One thing is certain. Trying to name a player more accomplished than Oscar in high school, college, Olympics and the NBA is impossible.

We've all seen "Hoosiers," the story of Milan High. Sadly, we never saw the story of Crispus Attucks, the

Indianapolis high school that won the Indiana state championship in each of the two years after Milan. The star player on those Crispus Attucks teams was Oscar Robertson.

Oscar "averaged" 33.8 points in his three seasons at the University of Cincinnati. His last two teams played in the Final Four. Along with Jerry West, Oscar was one of the stars on the legendary United States 1960 Olympic team.

In his first appearance at Madison Square Garden, as a college sophomore against Seton Hall, Oscar scored 56 points. Seton Hall scored 54. Oscar was 22-for-32 from the field, 12-for-12 from the foul line. The Bearcats won 118-54. Those who were there that night never forgot what it looked like and how it felt. They were there for the revolution and the evolution. They just did not know it. Playing for the Cincinnati Royals, Oscar averaged a triple double for the 1961-62 season (30.8 points, 12.5 rebounds, 11.4 assists). Far more points were scored in the wide-open NBA of that era, but the numbers are still mind-boggling. A triple-double in a game is news these days. A triple-double for a season is not imaginable. But Oscar did it.

Oscar did much more than score points or win games. He stood for something when sitting near the front of buses was prohibited in some parts of our country for citizens with dark skin. Slavery and the Jim Crow laws that came in its aftermath are our great national shame.

It took anonymous people like Rosa Parks to get peoples' attention in the 1950s. It took famous people such as Oscar Robertson to give it a voice.

It is easy to become comfortable, once you have attained some status in life. Oscar always spoke out, even when the times

Dick Jerardi Philadelphia Daily News President



suggested he should keep quiet. If he upset a few people with what he said or how said it, it never stopped him from saying it.

In 1997, Oscar donated a kidney to his daughter Tia. She was suffering from kidney failure because of lupus.

In 2007, the University of Cincinnati awarded Oscar an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters.

He has a street named after him in Indianapolis.

When somebody says "The Big O," there is no need for explanation.

There is no cheering in the press box, but when you get to have dinner and conversation on the River Walk with a man who is a living history of the game and is now so closely associated with our organization, some inner clapping feels just about right.

Writing contest deadline set for June 15

The deadline for submitting stories and columns published during the 2007-08 basketball 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 fall issue of 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 the 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 3 x 5 card and staple it to the article.



Tyler Hansbrough, Oscar Robertson and trophy. (Photo by David Smith Photography.)

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Final Four breakfast another huge success

The USBWA had another great turnout for its player and coach of the year breakfast at the NCAA men's Final Four in San Antonio, with nearly 300 people in attendance on a Friday morning, the day before the semifinals.

Hosted by the San Antonio Sports Foundation, the breakfast honored North Carolina's Tyler Hansbrough as player of the year and Drake's Keno Davis as coach of the year.

Hansbrough received the Oscar Robertson Trophy as player of the year from USBWA President Andy Katz and "The Big O" himself. Davis was presented with the Henry Iba Coach of the Year Award. North Carolina Coach Roy Williams followed and spoke about how fortunate he was to be able to coach a player of Hansbrough's caliber.

Earlier in the breakfast, the USBWA honored Josh Porter of LSU-Shreveport as recipient of this year's Most Courageous Award. The audience sat in silence as Porter's coach, Chad McDowell, told the story of how Porter broke the vertebrae in his spinal column in an on-court collision with a teammate the year before. Porter could easily have died from the injury, yet fought back and 10 months later returned to the team and finished his senior season, earning NAIA all-America honors.

Among those in attendance at the breakfast were NCAA executive vice president Tom Jernstedt and various dignitaries from San Antonio, including Bob Coleman, who was honored for bringing the first of three Final Fours to San Antonio in 1993.

Proceeds from the breakfast helped support the San Antonio Sports Foundation's youth initiatives program, the USBWA's sports journalism scholarships and the National Kidney Foundation in honor of Oscar Robertson, who several years ago gave a kidney to his daughter, Tia, who was suffering with a kidney disease.

Other notes from the Final Four:

- The USBWA's sportswriting workshops at the

men's Final Four and the women's in Tampa were huge successes. Nearly 100 college and high school students participated at Trinity University in San Antonio, and some 65 students attended the women's seminar at the University of South Florida. Malcolm Moran moderated the men's workshop. His associate, Marie Hardin of Penn State, was the women's moderator, with assistance from Mel Greenberg of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

The USBWA awards \$1,000 scholarships to one student participating in each workshop based on winning entries in a writing contest. Students were asked to write about various events at each Final Four and submit their stories for a chance to win the scholarships.

- USBWA President Andy Katz was a workhorse at the Final Four. He was busy handling not only his duties as senior college basketball analyst for ESPN.com but also serving on the sportswriting workshop panel, presenting the coach and player of the year awards at the Final Four breakfast and presiding over a breakfast meeting with the NCAA basketball committee followed by the annual USBWA awards brunch and business meeting. Andy had a stellar year as USBWA president, tackling issues head-on and addressing the needs and concerns of the membership in a timely fashion throughout the season.

- Membership news: Joe Gergen of *Newsday*, coming off three years as a USBWA board member, and past president Robyn Norwood of the *Los Angeles Times* announced to friends they are taking early retirement from their papers. Also, board member Randy Holtz has resigned from the *Rocky Mountain News*.

Joe Mitch USBWA Executive Director



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.

Name _____

Newspaper/Publication/Website/College _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Home Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Office Telephone _____ Cell Phone _____

Fax _____ Email Address _____

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Try taking a break this summer, even if your beat doesn't

Some Final Four, huh?

Hopefully, you've managed to catch your breath and you'll get a little time to recharge your battery after what turned out to be a thrilling NCAA Tournament. Of course, with basketball being a year-round endeavor these days, that might be a little tough. But as we've discussed in this space before, a smart editor, a good editor, will make sure their beat writer gets some time off.

My guess is that most of you will take a week off, then get back to it. Some of you still had coaching searches to chase down. There's spring recruiting to finish up, and as we've come to learn, kids are making their declarations in April and May for 2009 as they look to get the recruiting process out of the way. So chances are you're going to be busy dealing with that.

The bottom line is that covering college basketball is no longer an October-to-March gig. It is 12 months a year, and it's not just who's possibly coming to the school you cover, it's also about those who are there looking to leave.

The rumor mill gets cranked up at this time of the year. Is so-and-so staying in school? Or is he going to put his name in for the NBA draft? And if he does, is he selecting an agent or merely testing the waters?

There are eligibility issues you find yourself staying on top of. Sometimes, they got part-and-parcel with a kid's decision to stay in school or go pro.

Steve Carp Las Vegas Review Journal Vice President



Maybe an assistant coach moved on and you've got to build a relationship with his replacement. Maybe there's a whole new staff to deal with. Or maybe it's reacquainting yourself with a familiar face, as the Bay Area writers are doing with Mike Montgomery at California.

Regardless, it's time you're putting in, and you have no choice. You just have to hope nothing happens while you're on vacation. Because you know what's going to happen; you're at the beach, the cell phone rings. You look at the screen, see it's you're office calling and you say to yourself, "Uh oh."

Sure enough, it's your boss. Something's happened on your beat, and while the boss doesn't want to pull you off that beach, do you have the coach's phone number?

We've all been there. It's part of the beat, a beat that

doesn't get to take many days off.

And yeah, it can be frustrating at times, dealing with all the Internet rumors, chasing your tail to see if your coach is really looking to move on or if he's staying put. But in the end, it's part of the game we love and we accept it as a necessary evil.

Hopefully, all of you will get a little time to yourselves and make it to the beach or wherever they're not bouncing a basketball. And when you get back to it, you'll be energized and ready to go.

Have a great summer, and again, if you've got issues that relate to your daily beat, whether they're seating, access, wireless, whatever, drop me or Dick Jerardi an e-mail, and we'll see what we can do to help improve the situation.

Should USBWA use its voice to question Hall of Fame choices?

One of the best times and greatest mysteries of Final Four weekend is the annual Monday morning of the induction announcements for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame.

Usually, the USBWA breakfast is in a small ballroom next to the Hall of Fame breakfast and news conference, so in the hallway outside the ballrooms, we get the chance to mingle with some of the legendary former players and coaches we have covered throughout the years.

That's the best time. Now for the mystery. How does the Naismith Hall of Fame select its members? I ask that question every year, and every year I get a lot of shoulder shrugs, rolling eyes and confusing explanations. The truth is, whoever knows isn't telling, and whoever doesn't know isn't likely to find out any time soon. But the more I watch the Hall of Fame announcements, the more I begin to ask the same question:

Has Springfield's Hall of Fame stopped being the "basketball" Hall of Fame and steadily become the *professional basketball* Hall of Fame?

Since the USBWA is an organization that covers and cares about the college game, this bothers me. As an officer and board member, I keep wondering if we should address this on an organizational level. I don't know if the rest of the organization thinks this is an issue worth sticking our noses into, but it bothers me when I see this steady shift in Springfield. I love that the Hall has done a much better job of including worthy inductees to honor the women's game, and how they carefully ensure than worthy contributors get the call. I think it's a nice touch that international players and coaches are being honored, but I wonder if that is more of a marketing ploy to continue to spread our American hoop obsession globally.

But I get angry that some of this is coming at the expense of the college game. Off the top of my head, I will offer three names that have been overlooked:

Ralph Sampson, Jim Phelan and Glenn (not that one) Robinson.

Bryan Burwell St. Louis Post-Dispatch Vice President



Over the last 30 years, no one has been as dominant a name in the college game than Sampson, the 7-foot-4 giant from the University of Virginia.

If you are a three-time national college player of the year, you could do nothing at all the rest of your basketball life and still deserve to be in the Hall. In football, this would never happen, because they have separate halls for the college and pro game. Sampson belongs in Springfield.

Jim Phelan, who won more than 800 games as coach of Mount St. Mary's, is not in the Naismith Hall of Fame. Phelan, who coached more games than anyone in the history of the college game (more than 1,300), is the one of only six men to have at least 800 coaching victories. He was just inducted into the NABC Hall of Fame, but he also belongs in the Springfield Hall.

And if the Naismith Hall's hoop scholars can ferret out some legendary coach from the Italian pro leagues, why hasn't it unearthed the successful career of a Division III legend such as Franklin & Marshall men's coach Glenn Robinson, who is the winningest coach in Division III?

Robinson, who holds a 730-284 record at Franklin & Marshall in 37 seasons, became the 25th coach in NCAA history and the 10th active coach to win 700 career games.

His winning percentage of .720 ranks among the top 10 all time. Robinson, who is still coaching at F&M, led the Diplomats to 19 NCAA Tournament appearances, 11 trips to the Division III Sweet 16, five to the Elite Eight and four Final Fours, plus 15 conference titles in his 37 years at the school.

That is a Hall of Fame resume. Yet Springfield has never bothered to call.

Why is this going on, and to whom do we complain?

Because the Naismith Hall is so royally cloaked in mystery, from the process of election to the people who do the voting, it's difficult to figure out how someone gains entry.

Springfield should be a Hall of Fame for all of the game. Yet, the Hall of Fame in Springfield has slowly but surely turned into a Hall of Fame that is most closely associated with the professional game and the international game.

I don't know if it should be the business of our organization to be fighting to change that perception, but I'd at least like to loudly raise the question. Excellence in the college game should not count any less if that star begins to fade or never gets the opportunity to shine at the pro level.

Breakfasts in San Antonio: Two mornings to remember



Clockwise, from top left to right:

North Carolina star Tyler Hansbrough accepts the USBWA's Oscar Robertson Trophy as the national player of the year.

Sunset Station held about 300 for its Friday morning awards breakfast.

Most Courageous award winner Josh Porter of LSU-Shreveport shows that a spinal injury did not affect his fishing technique.

Keno Davis of Drake accepts the USBWA's Henry Iba Award as the nation's coach of the year.

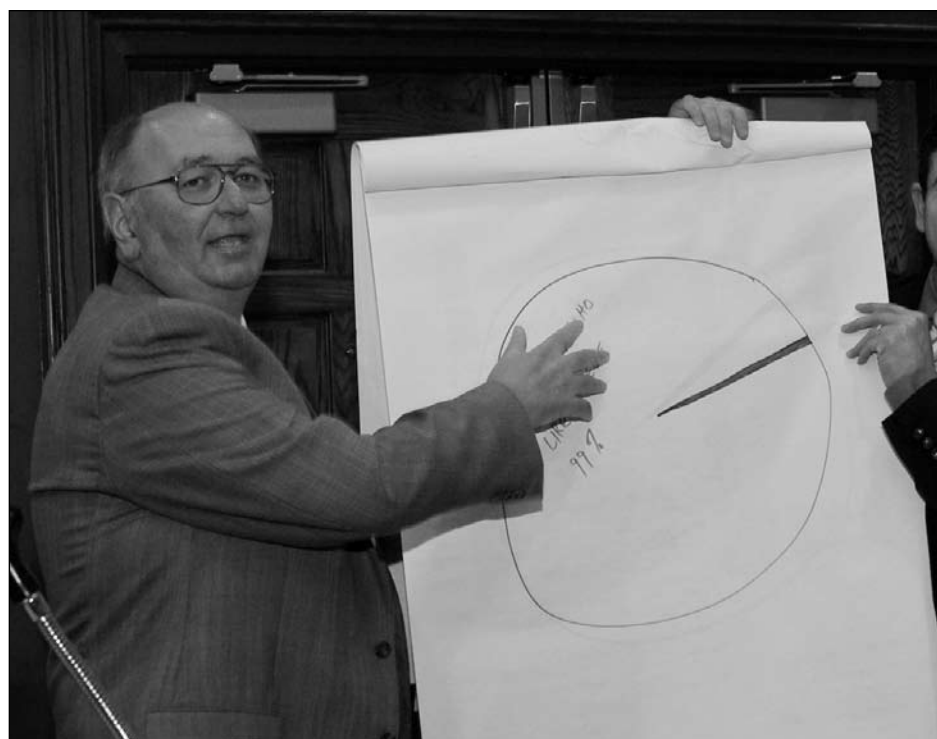


From left to right: Incoming president Dick Jerardi (left) and outgoing president Andy Katz at the USBWA's Monday morning meeting.

Andy Katz, with Katha Quinn Award winners Mike Soltys and Josh Krulewitz of ESPN.

Dick Vitale presents Soltys and Krulewitz as Katha Quinn Award winners.

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Clockwise, from left to right: Jim O'Connell introduces USBWA Hall of Fame inductee Steve Wieberg with a USA Today-style pie chart showing the percentage of readers who approve of Wieberg's new beard.

Wieberg (right) and family got a big laugh out of O'Connell's introduction.

Wieberg gets a standing ovation from the USBWA membership.

All photos by David Smith Photography.