

Our letter to members on NCAA seating issues

This letter was sent by email to USBWA members on Sept. 21, 2012.

To our Membership,

It's been a difficult and frustrating month.

NCAA leadership has informed us that an undetermined number of media could be relocated from courtside seating, beginning with the 2013 tournament. NCAA officials said no decision has been made among a spectrum of seating options being considered to present to the selection committee and that no timetable has been set for when a seating policy will be determined.

The NCAA's stated reason for considering the move is to create a more fan-friendly atmosphere.

The USBWA has been fighting on your behalf since first being informed of this possibility during a May 31 introductory meeting that Executive Director Joe Mitch and USBWA President John Akers had with new Executive Vice-President of Championships and Alliances Mark Lewis at NCAA headquarters.

As you are likely aware, over the past several years, the USBWA has developed an ongoing, constructive dialogue with the NCAA basketball committee and staff that allowed both sides to raise concerns and issues. The USBWA has strongly believed – and still do – that our best course of action was to take the high road and offer collaboration and solutions to the NCAA rather than to engage the NCAA in a war through Twitter or other social media. Certainly, that option will still be available to us in the future, but in the interest of reaching the best possible resolution for all of our current and future members, we strongly urge you to refrain from taking that course of action right now. We already are aware of misinformation being spread among our members that is more likely to hurt rather than to help our cause. Instead, please direct questions, concerns, suggestions and your much-needed support to usbwofficers@gmail.com.

After collecting research on this issue, Joe Mitch and the four USBWA officers held two of the half-dozen hourlong conference calls (and counting) that we have participated in over the summer, determining our strategy.

In response, at the invitation of the NCAA, the USBWA sent seven members to NCAA Headquarters in Indianapolis on Sept. 13 to meet with NCAA officials and Committee Chairman Mike Bobinski to address the issue.

The USBWA was represented by Mitch, President John Akers, Vice Presidents Kirk Wessler, Dana O'Neil and Frank Burlison and Board members Pat Forde and Mike Lopresti. The NCAA was represented by Bobinski; Mark Lewis, the new Executive Vice President for Championships and Alliances; Dan Gavitt, the new Vice President of Men's Basketball Championships; Jeanne Boyd, Director of Division I Men's Basketball Championships; Dave Worlock, the Associate Director of Men's Basketball; Greg Weitekamp, Director of Broadcasting; and Cameron Schuh, Associate Director of Public and Media Relations. According to Joe Mitch, it was one of the largest contingents the USBWA has ever sent to the NCAA for a single meeting. The dialogue since that meeting has been ongoing.

The USBWA felt it was our duty to inform you of these possible changes before any decisions are made. We still hold out hope that the NCAA will recognize the value that we bring to the tournament and will continue to provide the seats that you need and that the USBWA has been working diligently to preserve.

John Akers, USBWA President

Kirk Wessler, First Vice President

Dana O'Neil, Second Vice President

Frank Burlison, Third Vice President

Joe Mitch, Executive Director

Saving courtside seats a summerlong endeavor

Looking back on the column that I wrote for the Tipoff last May, I'm not sure if my words were a little bit prescient or just plain naïve.

That's when I wrote that we were entering an uncertain time, given the NCAA's new leadership of its basketball tournaments. So true.

Then I also wrote this: "Writers once

since the NCAA of the value that we all know that we bring to their tournament. For example, we reminded them of an independent study that determined that print and online stories of Butler's 2010 championship game were worth \$465 to the school.

We explained to them that the beauty of basketball – unlike in football and

John Akers Basketball Times President



worried about losing their places on press row of NCAA tournaments to the influence of CBS executives who preferred that our seats be filled by fans. We worry still, though now whether our own employers will continue to spend the money to send us to Final Fours."

May the Cameron Crazies taunt me with chants of "Air-ball!" for that last one.

Our seats actually *were* in danger – in an effort by the NCAA to create a greater tournament atmosphere rather than as a result of CBS threats – which we fortunately figured out by early summer. While it went against our reporters' nature, the USBWA officers kept that fact a secret until only recently because of our determination that the best way to save these seats was to respond to the NCAA with potential solutions rather than a flurry of pointed tweets.

We'd also like to tell you all about what was said in our meeting with the NCAA at their offices on Sept. 13, but we entered into that meeting with a promise of confidentiality that would allow for free conversation. But that doesn't prevent me from telling you in this limited space at least some of what we brought to that discussion.

First and foremost, we tried to con-

baseball – is in the intimacy that allows us to see and hear those things that even CBS' cameras can't catch. We are able to leave our seats after the games and find the parents, siblings and girlfriends who help distinguish our stories from the impersonal pieces that one might expect from NBA coverage.

In later conversations, we reminded them of a Michigan State-Kentucky game that was played at Detroit's Ford Field five years ago. The media was going to be sent toward the dome's rafters. Tom Izzo discovered a situation that needed to be corrected and moved the media to court-side.

We also warned the NCAA of the potential dangers that would come with moving the majority of media from courtside, not the least of which would be where to put us as each arena varies from one to the next in size and structure. As one of our officers put it so well in a follow-up letter to the NCAA: "The answer will be rife with uncertainty, from venue to venue, round to round, season to season."

We have done what we can to prevent such a calamity from occurring – even by showing restraint when that was our best, and most difficult, course of action.

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USBWA’s membership benefits are too much to pass up

There’s never been a better time to be a member of the U.S. Basketball Writers Association than now.

The USBWA is experiencing record growth, with membership expected to surpass the 900 mark set a couple of years ago.

Sponsorships that provide funding for USBWA programs and services to members have been on the increase also. The newest corporate sponsor to come on board is AFLAC, which has signed on as presenting sponsor of the Oscar Robertson Trophy that is awarded to the college basketball player of the year.

The USBWA’s “Oscar” will be presented in April the weekend following the NCAA Final Four at a college basketball gala in Oklahoma City benefiting a foundation in the name of the late NBA and Oklahoma great, Wayman Tisdale. The USBWA’s coach and freshman of the year awards will also be presented at the gala.

USBWA members are eligible to vote on the association’s player, freshman and coach of the year awards, in addition to the all-district and All-America teams for both men and women.

One of the biggest benefits to members is the USBWA’s annual directory that lists the names, email addresses and phone numbers of members, the contacts at every NCAA Division I school in the country and the beat writers, columnists and broadcasters who cover them.

The directory is a “must” for every SID and writer in college basketball. For many, it is worth the \$50 cost of membership alone.

There are several other benefits for members as well besides the directory. They include:

• **TIPOFF.** The association’s newsletter is published four times a year and edited superbly by *Basketball Times* editor and publisher, John Akers, the current USBWA president. The Tipoff includes the latest news and happenings in the USBWA and features columns from USBWA officers and board members. It is sent via U.S. mail and available in a printable version online at www.usbwa.com.

• **BASKETBALL TIMES.** Members receive a complimentary seven-issue subscription to the magazine, considered to be “The Voice of College Basketball” for over 30 years. *Basketball Times* combines award-winning writing with incredible amount of inside information. Each issue includes columns from some of the top sports writ-

ers in the country.

• **HILTON HOTELS.** USBWA members can get 20 percent off the best available rate at Hilton hotels and properties that include Doubletree, Embassy Suites, Hampton Inn and Homewood Suites and earn Hilton points with as little as four stays or nine total nights in 90 days, four times faster than normal. Members need to enroll in Hilton’s Fast Track program (www.hiltonhonors.com/FastTrackMVP) to receive the discounts. To make reservations, go to www.HiltonFamilyMVP.com.

• **BROOKS BROTHERS.** Members receive a 15-percent discount off the original retail price on all merchandise from this high quality men’s and women’s national clothing store, often located in major airports throughout the country. Apply online at membership.BrooksBrothers.com (organization ID: 11355, pin code: 76322).

• **AMERICAN AIRLINES.** American offers members selected discounts for air travel to major events and meetings as part of the airline’s BusinessExtraAA program. To receive the discounts, members need to add the USBWA account number (848168) to their personal AAdvantage profile by going to American’s website at www.aa.com.

• **HERTZ.** To receive discounts, members should enter the USBWA corporate account number (1646337) online at www.hertz.com or provide it to the operator when making reservations.

• **BEST WRITING CONTEST.** Members are eligible to enter stories and columns in the USBWA’s annual writing contest, sponsored by the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame. Entries can be submitted in five categories: column writing, moderate-length features, magazine-length features, spot/news game coverage and enterprise/investigative stories. Plaques and cash prizes are awarded in each category.

• **BLUE RIBBON COLLEGE BASKETBALL YEARBOOK.** Editor and publisher Chris Dortch offers USBWA members a 15-percent discount on the annual price of the yearbook that features rosters and schedules of every NCAA Division I school in college basketball.

For full details on the association’s member benefits program, go to the USBWA website at www.usbwa.com.

And if you haven’t joined the USBWA or renewed your membership for this season, do so today by again going online to the USBWA website. You’ll be glad you did.

Joe Mitch
USBWA
Executive Director



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Aflac

Don't let media days go way of media guides

The news trickled out last spring, via Twitter and text messages, so it hit newspapers around the Missouri Valley Conference like blows from a bunch of little hammers. But it was no less crushing to reporters and columnists who cover the league than if one grand announcement had dropped on them like an anvil.

Preseason basketball media day had been abolished by a vote of member athletics directors.

I don't know when the Valley began its annual hoops media day, but I know it was before the first one I attended, in 1976, when an excruciatingly shy Indiana State sophomore transfer named Larry Bird tried to disappear into the wallpaper of a hotel conference room in Tulsa. MVC fortunes have risen and fallen and risen again through these past five decades, but media coverage has been constant.

This fall, Creighton's Doug McDermott is the Valley's first preseason All-American in 25 years. Creighton is parked in most top-25 rankings. Illinois State, Northern Iowa and Wichita State give the league a legit shot to put three teams in the NCAA Tournament. A publicist's dream: Media day in centrally located St. Louis – easy in/easy out, one-stop shopping with one-on-one interviews and stories for local, regional and even national reporters – could have provided the MVC with a wealth of publicity.

Instead, plans were being made for a routine teleconference with coaches at the end of October.

Reporters have grown accustomed to teams and leagues making our jobs more difficult. Press-row locations, elimination of printed media guides, closed locker rooms, ever-more restricted access ... Hey, we know there's a vast institutional conspiracy to drive us out of business. Eliminating media days figures to be the next step.

But I did some checking and found that's not necessarily the trend. After all, the six "power" conferences still do media days. So does the Atlantic-10. And the Patriot League and Big South Conference. I randomly checked a few other places and found this:

- The Horizon League brought back media day for the first time in at least a decade. A news conference and one-on-one opportunities with coaches and players were provided. Communications boss Bill Potter acknowledged that fewer media outlets might travel to media day than a decade ago, but "that doesn't mean the day is any less important to us. We can still put on a show that is valuable to our member institutions and the media."

- The West Coast Conference abandoned media day several years ago, but voted to bring it back last season, said Jeff Tourial, assistant commissioner for communications and new media. Pressers and one-on-one access with coaches and players were provided for print media. This year, the WCC conducted media day at the studios of a TV partner, but with no print media on site. The event included an interactive piece streamed live on YouTube, with fans asking questions via social media and print reporters encouraged to participate, Tourial said.

- The Mountain West did away with traditional media day this year, because of a lack of media participation, said

Kirk Wessler
Peoria Journal-Star
First Vice-President



Javan Hedlund, associate commissioner for communications. The Mountain West office is sending a team to each team's media day, where they'll obtain video for the league website. They also planned to use Google Hangouts to conduct Q&As between out-of-town print reporters and each team's coaches and players.

Still, Hedlund was disappointed by the lack of participation that led to the decision. "A traditional media day is very important so that media can have face-to-face interaction with coaches," he said. If local, regional and national media attended, "it would make the coaches' time and costs to the conference worthwhile," he added.

Hedlund gets it. See, there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. Those encounters are the single biggest benefit of media day. Reporters and coaches can chat casually in an environment that is not packed with the intensity and emotions of a postgame setting. We get to know each other, if even just a bit. We establish relationships. Sometimes, those relationships might birth a measure of trust. And that's good for everyone.

Folks at NCAA must understand: Seeing is believing

I have watched basketball games from the corners, behind fans, through chronically waving pom pons and with a pep band directing its entire horn section at my eardrum.

I get that our seats aren't the priority to most folks. We don't pay the money. We don't cheer. We just sit there and type, or now, tweet.

And so when NCAA staffers invited a few of us to discuss exactly what to do with us at future NCAA Tournaments, I could see where they were coming from.

I only wish someone could see where we are coming from, quite literally.

More than great wireless (though please don't take that away), salty snacks and quick stats, we need to see the game to tell the game.

This isn't about us liking our cushy courtside seats – though, OK, we like our cushy courtside seats. This is about doing this particular job right and doing it well.

The beauty of basketball is in its intimacy – fewer players, no helmets to mask grimaces and emotions and no barriers between the playing surface and the public. It's right there, right in front of you, exposed for the world to see and watch.

It makes for a better product and it makes for better storytelling. It is one thing to be able to say where Ali Farokhmanesh sunk his ballsy 3-pointer to beat Kansas. It is another to see his face and sense his emotion after draining that incredible winner.

As the NCAA's unofficial storytellers, we help bring that intimacy to life. The television can capture only so much; we can fill in the blanks, the after stories of the shin-

ing moments, if you will.

I, like plenty of you, have more than my fair share of time climbing into the stands to find the parent or sibling of a star player, taking the time and making the effort to make a simple story a better one. It's hard to do those interviews if you can't find the parent or sibling and if you can't physically get to them.

Despite the big business shifts in college athletics, college basketball remains an entirely different animal than its professional peer.

I have always told people that the real beauty of college basketball is the setting. It's the pep band (even when it's punctured my eardrum); it's the students (even when the Cameron Crazies leave white chest paint residue on my black shirt); it's the cheerleaders (even when their pom pons incessantly wave in front of my face) and it's the coaches and players, whose raw emotions are so much more real because the game is about something much bigger than a paycheck.

Three years ago, Eric Devendorf's sneakers landed approximately three feet from my laptop after the Syracuse player thought his team had beaten Connecticut in regulation in the Big East Tournament on his buzzerbeater.

He was wrong, but he made my story anyway because

Dana O'Neil
ESPN.com
Second Vice President



I saw it all – his face, the fans' response to him and then the reaction after the officials decided that nope, we'd go to overtime.

Or, as it turned out, six.

Could I have written a six-overtime story without all of that? Sure. Would it have been as good? Would people who weren't in the Garden or who fell asleep going to know all of that? Maybe.

More than likely not.

Of course, beyond all of that sort of ethereal viewing is the reality – it's hard to see if a charge should have been a block if you can't see the court; it's difficult to determine whether a ball is in bounds or out if you can't see the court; it's impossible to know who set the screen to spring Gordon Hayward if you can't see the court.

Seeing, as they say, is believing.

Hopefully some folks in Indianapolis see that and believe it.

Indiana, Zeller are No. 1 combo

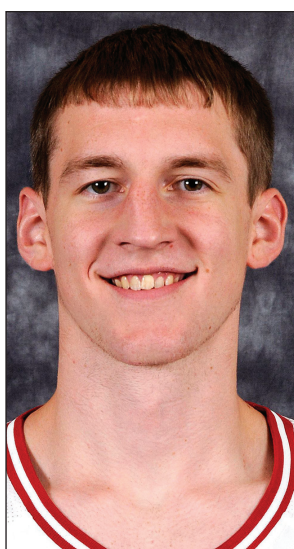
The USBWA's pre-season favorite is led by the player it expects to be the national player of the year. If the poll is an accurate indicator, Cody Zeller and his Indiana Hoosiers will be hauling a number of honors this season.

Shabazz Muhammad of UCLA was the USBWA's choice to win the Wayman Tisdale Award given to the nation's top freshman. Kentucky's Nerlens Noel earned the second-most votes.

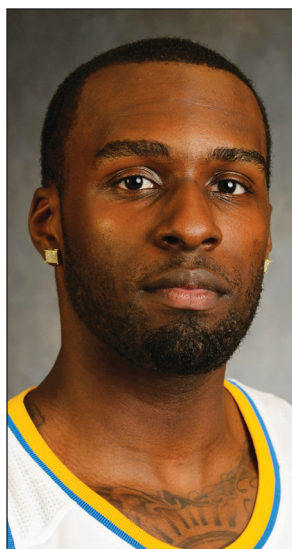
The Hoosiers received 10 of a possible 13 first-place votes, with Louisville receiving the remaining three. Kentucky, Michigan and N.C. State rounded out the top five.

The rest of the top 10 included Kansas, Ohio State, Syracuse, Duke and UCLA.

Zeller was one of only two vote-getters for national player-of-the-year honors, along with Doug McDermott of Creighton, who was the only unanimous selection for the



Cody Zeller



Shabazz Muhammad

Diego State; Pierre Jackson, Baylor; James Michael McAdoo, North Carolina; C.J. McCollum, Lehigh; Michael Snaer, Florida State; and Jeff Withey, Kansas.

Besides Muhammad and Noel, other freshmen to receive votes for the preseason Tisdale Award included Steven Adams of Pittsburgh, Isaiah Austin of Baylor and Alex Pothress of Kentucky.

USBWA's preseason All-America team.

Besides Zeller and McDermott, the six-man All-America team (because of ties) included Isaiah Canaan of Murray State, C.J. Leslie of N.C. State, Peyton Siva of Louisville and Deshaun Thomas of Ohio State.

Receiving multiple player-of-the-year votes were Muhammad, Aaron Craft of Ohio State, Trey Burke of Michigan and Mike Moser of UNLV. Other vote-getters included Noel; Lorenzo Brown, N.C. State; Jamaal Franklin, San

USBWA Board of Directors' Top 25		
1. Indiana (10)	.....	321
2. Louisville (3)	.....	314
3. Kentucky	.....	286
4. Michigan	.....	268
5. N.C. State	.....	245
6. Kansas	.....	235
7. Ohio State	.....	223
8. Syracuse	.....	213
9. Duke	.....	208
10. UCLA	.....	182
11. North Carolina	.....	169
12. Arizona	.....	161
(tie) Creighton	.....	161
14. Florida	.....	160
15. Missouri	.....	141
16. Memphis	.....	130
17. Michigan State	.....	119
18. UNLV	.....	116
19. San Diego State	.....	98
20. Gonzaga	.....	75
21. Wisconsin	.....	60
22. Notre Dame	.....	57
23. Baylor	.....	42
24. Cincinnati	.....	28
25. Saint Louis	.....	26
Others receiving votes – Murray State 25, Minnesota 19, Texas 17, VCU 17, Colorado State 8, Ohio 7, Davidson 6, Florida State 6, Marquette 6, Iowa State 5, Saint Joseph's 5, Tennessee 4, Pittsburgh 3, Miami 2, Stanford 2, Temple 2, Illinois State 1, West Virginia 1.		

Today's challenge: Rush to tweet vs. meaningful discourse

This blog by Brendan F. Quinn appeared on the Knoxville News Sentinels govolsxtra.com on Aug. 29.

A little over an hour after a press release announced Da'Rick Rogers' dismissal from the Tennessee football program last week, Derek Dooley stood before local media following practice.

The news of Rogers' washout was already buzzing on Twitter.

Dooley addressed the press release saying, "It's probably the No. 1 professional hazard – the behavior of 18-to-22 year olds."

He continued on ...

"There's not one member in the whole organization that we're not prepared to go play without."

Dooley finished his opening statement saying that Rogers' absence wouldn't distract the Vols. All attention, he assured, was focused on the season-opener against N.C. State.

Then a long, awkward pause hung in the air of UT's Football Training Center.

Silence.

"Unbelievable," Dooley quipped with a hint of mockery. Attention was focused elsewhere.

In front of the coach, an assemblage of media stood with their eyes trained downward. Thumbs raced – pecking out quotes on smart phones to be fired into the Twittersphere.

I was shooting a piece of video at the time and realized that the crowd was preoccupied. I spit out an obvious follow-up. "How'd you present Rogers' absence to the team?" Dooley rolled along and the press conference ultimately gained momentum.

Why bring this up a week later? If you missed it Tuesday, Ohio State put its head in a media guillotine. OSU spokesman Jerry Emig announced moment's before coach Urban Meyer's weekly press conference that Tweeting by media members in attendance had been banned, effective immediately.

Word of the decision seeped out of Columbus.

The backlash began.

Media members throughout the country pelted Ohio State with criticism. Hell hath no fury like a journalist scorned and Ohio State's decision directly hindered those responsible

for covering the program. A media relations department can't (or shouldn't) forbid reporters from reporting an event that is being live-streaming on its own website and broadcast on live radio. Furthermore, devising a rule that essentially muzzles the media without any prior discussion appeared small-minded and spiteful.

The situation was a whole is irrational, detrimental and insulting. As a result, it was rectified before the 24-hour news cycle ever came full circle. Ohio State lifted the ban later in the day and everyone has apparently moved on.

However, (and now I'm about to welcome the media firestorm that scorched OSU upon myself), I see where Emig and Ohio State were coming from.

The minute I heard of the decision, I immediately thought back to the above Dooley press conference. I remembered looking around and realizing everyone was too engrossed in Tweeting to respond to Dooley's opening statement.

"Unbelievable."

This is, by no means, a jab to the midsection of the Knoxville media. Hell, if I weren't taking video, I probably would have been spurring out Tweets myself. This happens everywhere, all the time, but because my head wasn't buried, I was able to see what Dooley saw. And more specifically, understand the absurdity of it all.

The following night I had a lengthy conversation with a fellow reporter about some of my concerns.

What's the point of being at a press conference if we're just racing to Tweet out quotes? How much is missed by the distraction (i.e. hinderance) of sending live Tweets? We're essentially concentrating on writing one or two sentences (140 characters!), while the interview subject has already moved onto the next point. Is it worthwhile to bend your attention off target just to keep 1,000 or 10,000 or 100,000 "followers" instantly up to date?

(Let's all remember here, Twitter doesn't pay anyone anything – neither the reporters nor the news outlet. Yet it sure dictates how we do our jobs.)

If there's a sports writer out there who hasn't transcribed a full press conference and found an instance where the thought, "Damn, I should have asked xyz follow-up ques-

tion," crossed their mind, I haven't met him or her.

Toss in Tweeting and the chances of overlooking an opening becomes far too likely. If I could discover a latent talent allowing me to partake in a press conference, train all my attention on what's occurring and present a live, blow-by-blow account to the public, none of this would be an issue.

I don't really foresee that happening, though. And I have no problem admitting that. Those who disagree, good on 'em.

According to the Associated Press,

Emig had made the announcement, he said, as a courtesy to both other reporters and Meyer so that reporters weren't fumbling with smartphones and not listening to the questions and answers during the media availability. Emig said he didn't know until after Meyer's news conference that a Columbus radio station broadcast it live, making it even more pointless to restrain reporters from using social media then.

Whether that was actually OSU's target goal is irrelevant. The point made is valid.

In a tiny book entitled "Everyman's McLuhan," a plain-sense explanation of the teachings of renowned media critic Marshal McLuhan and how they translate to the 21st century, author/historian W. Terrence Gordon writes, "Widespread inattention to communication as involvement in a shared situation leads to ignoring the form of communication."

Press conferences are meant to be as much a dialogue as they are a question-and-answer. By ignoring that, we ignore (or are distracted from) the point of the communication.

Tweeting isn't untenable, not by any means. The desire for instant information isn't going anywhere, but issues arising from Ohio State's decision shouldn't be overlooked. They are, if anything, worth discussing. It's easy to assail Ohio State, which brought a media storm (literally) upon itself with what was a laughably shortsighted decision, but the door of conversation among media members that it opened, might be worth walking into.

This here is just a one-way blog post. I'd prefer conversation. The irony, of course, is that any conversation will stem only by me sending this into the Twittersphere.

You win again, Twitter.

Cheers, Quinn