PRIMER A
ETHICS: SPORTS WRITERS CAN'T ACT LIKE FANS

Fans don't really understand sports journalists.

Fans' vision of the profession: hanging out with sports stars, getting into games for free, receiving autographs and team jerseys, and rooting for the home team.

Reality: dealing with athletes who sometimes don't want to speak with you, getting to games several hours early and staying several hours afterward, arguing with folks at the front gate who still want to charge you, declining all memorabilia offers, and rooting for the best story. Oh yeah, and driving hours through back roads to cover prep sports, chasing down coaches before they reach the locker room, and walking the sidelines or sitting in the bleachers when it's raining, freezing, or sweltering

"Covering sports presents the constant challenge of rejecting offers of meals, tickets and gifts," says Vicki Michaelis, a former sports writer for *USA Today*. "I follow the twenty-five dollar rule in these circumstances. I don't accept anything more than twenty-five dollars. And the majority of what I do accept (usually because it comes to me in the mail so it's difficult to return), I give to charity."

Ethical challenges can be far more difficult to resolve than legal ones. Is it OK, for instance, to text or follow high school athletes on Twitter? To report on a prominent quarterback standing on a cafeteria lunch table, moving suggestively and making vulgar comments to a young woman? Or to interview an athlete in class?

Reporters are split on whether to follow teenage kids on social media. Kate Harman, who covers prep sports for @RallyPhilly, says she doesn't follow any high school students on social media, nor does she mention them in tweets. "I'm only 28 years old but people tend to think I'm a lot younger," says Harman, "and I don't feel comfortable mentioning or following high school students on any form of social media. Further, I personally find it a little unprofessional

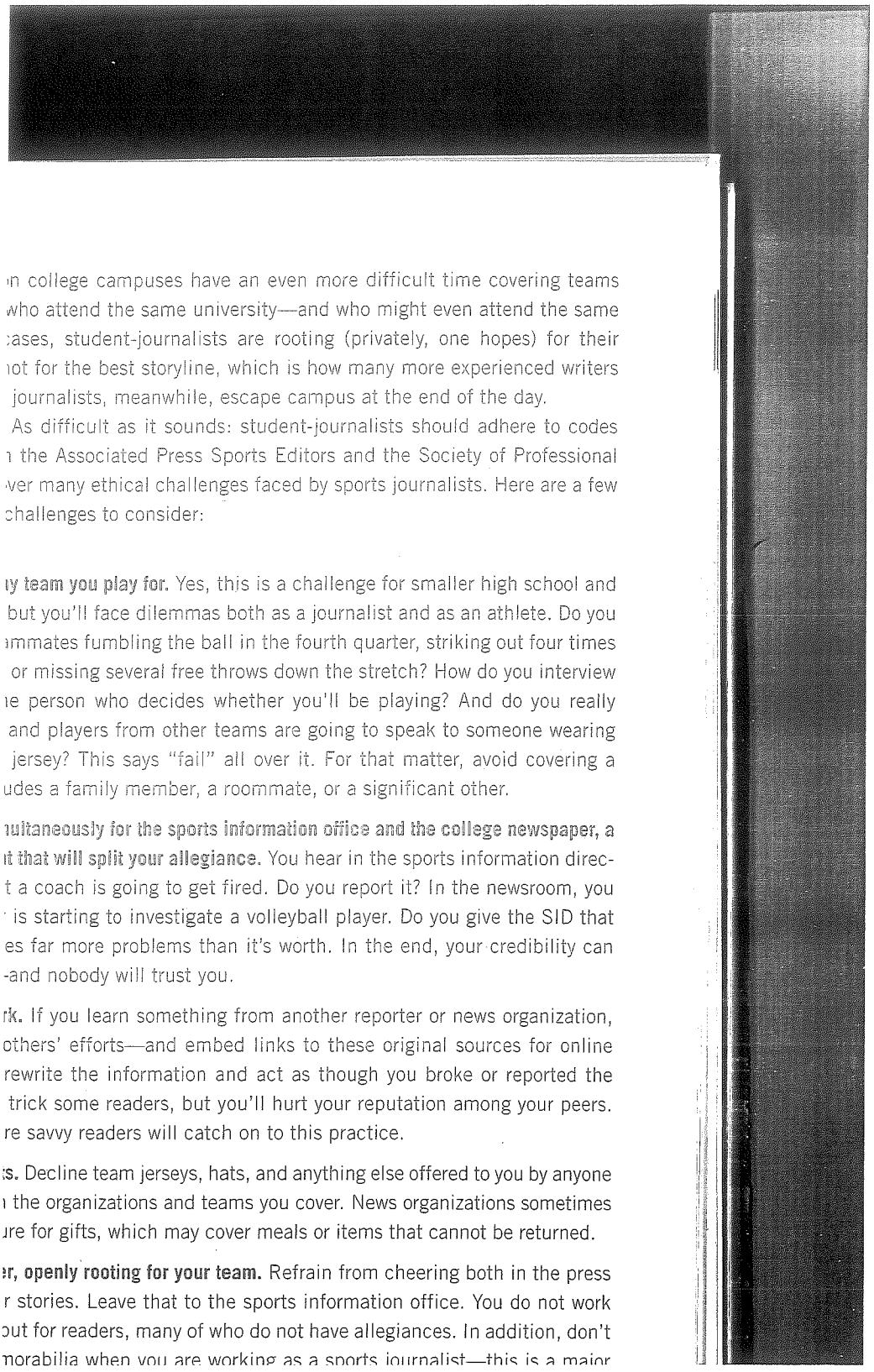
to follow or mention teenagers, but that is my own personal opinion and I know a lot of people who feel the opposite of me. I understand why reporters do it but if I really need to find something out, it is relatively easy to find a kid on Twitter even without following them. The only exception is that I will answer a question they pose to me on Twitter. So if a student asks me about a score/game or whatever else, I will answer them back."

Social media has changed how sports reporters cover actions outside the lines. For example, journalists would likely report on the cafeteria incident, thanks, in part, to social media. Odds are another student probably captured video and/or immediately posted comments about this incident, which you'd likely reference via embedded text, retweets, and screenshots across multiple media platforms. Afterwards, expect angry responses that say, essentially, something like this: This incident would probably not be news if a relatively obscure sociology major had acted in this manner, so why report on this football player's actions? For one thing, students on campus will be talking about this. Secondly, behavior by a highly visible student-athlete reflects more widely on the university than does an obscene action performed by a relatively unknown student. Athletes are expected to follow a code of conduct that often includes language, such as this section in UCLA's 2015–16 student-athlete handbook, which you might ultimately cite in your own stories:

> "UCLA student-athletes are expected to represent themselves, their team and the University with honesty, integrity, and character whether it be academically, athletically or socially. Participation on an intercollegiate team is a privilege, not a right, and should be treated as such. It has many benefits and brings with it a responsibility to be positive and effective members of the team, department, university and broader community."[1]

Student-journalists do not require permission to speak with athletes—or with anybody else, for that matter—but you should probably refrain from asking questions in class or posting responses from class discussions. Unless you are holding an open reporter's notebook or are extending a recording device, student-athletes should justifiably assume they are speaking off the record to a fellow student. So if you ask the starting point guard how he's feeling, and he replies that he probably won't be able to play that night because his ankle is still sore, you really shouldn't report that conversation. That's not to say that you can't ask that same question later that day after practice. Be sure that athletes understand whom they are talking with each time you chat: reporter, student, dorm resident, and so forth.

Obviously, covering sports for a living has many more advantages than disadvantages—watching sports, talking with interesting people, and being outside (most of the time)—far, far from cubicles and cranky bosses. But sports writers certainly have to act much differently than fans, whose instincts are to get a "piece" of their favorite players and teams. Sports writers should take only notes.



ın college campuses have an even more difficult time covering teams who attend the same university—and who might even attend the same cases, student-journalists are rooting (privately, one hopes) for their not for the best storyline, which is how many more experienced writers journalists, meanwhile, escape campus at the end of the day.

As difficult as it sounds: student-journalists should adhere to codes ı the Associated Press Sports Editors and the Society of Professional ver many ethical challenges faced by sports journalists. Here are a few challenges to consider:

ıy team you play for. Yes, this is a challenge for smaller high school and but you'll face dilemmas both as a journalist and as an athlete. Do you ammates fumbling the ball in the fourth quarter, striking out four times or missing several free throws down the stretch? How do you interview ıe person who decides whether you'll be playing? And do you really and players from other teams are going to speak to someone wearing jersey? This says "fail" all over it. For that matter, avoid covering a udes a family member, a roommate, or a significant other.

ıultaneously for the sports information office and the college newspaper, a it that will split your allegiance. You hear in the sports information direct a coach is going to get fired. Do you report it? In the newsroom, you is starting to investigate a volleyball player. Do you give the SID that es far more problems than it's worth. In the end, your credibility can -and nobody will trust you.

rk. If you learn something from another reporter or news organization, others' efforts—and embed links to these original sources for online rewrite the information and act as though you broke or reported the trick some readers, but you'll hurt your reputation among your peers. re savvy readers will catch on to this practice.

s. Decline team jerseys, hats, and anything else offered to you by anyone ı the organizations and teams you cover. News organizations sometimes ure for gifts, which may cover meals or items that cannot be returned.

er, openly rooting for your team. Refrain from cheering both in the press r stories. Leave that to the sports information office. You do not work out for readers, many of who do not have allegiances. In addition, don't norabilia when you are working as a sports journalist—this is a major

credibility killer. (For that matter, do not wear ripped jeans or T-shirts that promote any team, beer, or ridiculous statement. Dress professionally, even at practices.)

6. **Ask questions from a third-person point of view, refraining from the words "we," "us," and "our" in questions or in stories.** For example, do not ask a question such as this: "Do *we* have a chance to sign that top-ranked basketball prospect?" Nor should you write or state on video or a TV news broadcast: "After a tough first half, *our* boys finally started to play tenacious defense." Instead, use the team nicknames: "The *Panthers* started to play tenaciously in the second half." For questions, replace "we" with "you."
7. **Avoid interviewing and writing about friends, relatives, roommates, significant others, and anybody else who could create a conflict.** If you cannot avoid this situation, inform your senior editors and discuss options.
8. **Don't make excuses for any team's play.** Your job is to act as a neutral observer, not as the team's public relations representative. Get the entire story about controversial decision making by coaches and calls by referees in order to report the entire story. Sure, fans might troll you on social media, chastise you in the comments section below stories, and berate you outside a class room, but that's part of the landscape today. So learn to ignore or to diplomatically address comments—usually by offering clarification, not by engaging in a heated argument that frequently wastes both time and energy.
9. **Ethics apply to social media, too.** Refrain from making biased comments or sharing scathing remarks about players, coaches, or referees on social media, because such writing can severely damage your credibility with players, coaches, fans, editors, or potential employers. You should instead create a professional account for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Google+, YouTube and other social media, which will eventually become part of your résumé, or portfolio.
10. **Don't write negative comments about coaches or players because they refuse to speak with you or have angered you.** Cover them the same as you would any other person associated with the team. Columns are not a place to vent about confrontations on the beat. First, readers don't care about your problems. (Remember: fans think you have a dream job, hangin' with their favorite players.) Second, you'll destroy your reputation in the locker room, prompting coaches and players to stop speaking directly with you.
11. **Don't accept favors given because of your job as a sports journalist.** That means you can't purchase extra tickets to the Rose Bowl from someone in the athletic department, an offer that is probably made because you cover the team or work as the sports editor. Ask yourself: Could anybody else purchase these tickets at this price? Or would they have to pay far higher fees from ticket agents—if they could even find someone to sell one? If the answer is no, then you should decline such offers.

pportunity to respond to charges, whether it's one coach saying another ıyer saying another one plays dirty. If you must publish a claim like you contact the person getting criticized.

rks to contact athletes, if you cannot find another way. Even though acebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn is frequently published for public con- ıould find other ways to speak with these players. Develop a profes- ip at practices and after games. You may use these social networks rself and to set up an interview, but avoid using Facebook for the ɔt, perhaps, during a deadline for a serious or late-breaking event.

nybody tells you, never allow a source to approve a story before it gets credibility as a journalist gets crushed if you allow a source to con- ıatter how hard you might attempt to explain that nothing important s outlined in the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, remain independent. At times, you might send a few paragraphs to y information, particularly if the material is complicated or techni- escription of a knee surgery or an explanation of a legal battle. Says a vice president at the Poynter Institute who regularly writes about I'm O.K. with sources seeing regular stories ahead of time as long ındaries about why you change it. It has to be only if something is the source is troubled by the tone."[2] Use this approach sparingly. distrust journalists, so why give them another reason to question

. It might not seem like an ethical issue, but morally, our conduct needs t and faultless. Factual mistakes, which could have been checked, . Say an All-American football player credits a former girlfriend who cess. Corroborate this by checking death certificates and contacting ances and local funeral homes. Athletes and coaches, while typically e lied about performance-enhancing drugs, conversations, loyalties, en their height. It's a sports journalist's job to verify the accuracy of not act as a stenographer by blithely recording information for others.

ig question is—can you eat from the buffet in the press box? A plate of alls, a ham sandwich, or a hamburger will probably not sway a reporter am differently. At some venues, sports writers are stuck, unable to chase a meal elsewhere. That is one reason buffets are offered at ents. Eating the food should be acceptable (unless you try sneaking

Associated Press Sports Editors Ethics Guidelines

1. The newspaper pays its staffer's way for travel, accommodations, food and drink.

   (a) If a staffer travels on a chartered team plane, the newspaper should insist on being billed. If the team cannot issue a bill, the amount can be calculated by estimating the cost of a similar flight on a commercial airline.

   (b) When services are provided to a newspaper by a pro or college team, those teams should be reimbursed by the newspaper. This includes providing telephone, typewriter or fax service.

2. Editors and reporters should avoid taking part in outside activities or employment that might create conflict of interest or even appearance of a conflict.

   (a) They should not serve as an official scorer at baseball games.

   (b) They should not write for team or league media guides or other team or league publications. This has the potential of compromising a reporter's disinterested observations.

   (c) Staffers who appear on radio or television should understand that their first loyalty is to the paper.

3. Writers and writers' groups should adhere to APME and APSE standards: No deals, discounts or gifts except those of insignificant value or those available to the public.

   (a) If a gift is impossible or impractical to return, donate a gift to charity.

   (b) Do not accept free memberships or reduced fees for memberships. Do not accept gratis use of facilities, such

as golf courses or tennis courts, unless it is used as part of doing a story for the newspaper.

(c) Sports editors should be aware of standards of conduct of groups and professional associations to which their writers belong and the ethical standards to which those groups adhere, including areas such as corporate sponsorship from news sources it covers.

4. A newspaper should not accept free tickets, although press credentials needed for coverage and coordination are acceptable.

5. A newspaper should carefully consider the implications of voting for all awards and all-star teams and decide if such voting creates a conflict of interest.

6. A newspaper's own ethical guidelines should be followed, and editors and reporters should be aware of standards acceptable for use of unnamed sources and verification of information obtained other than from primary news sources.

   (a) Sharing and pooling of notes and quotes should be discouraged. If a reporter uses quotes gained secondhand, that should be made known to the readers. A quote could be attributed to a newspaper or to another reporter.

7. Assignments should be made on merit, without regard for race or gender.

Guidelines can't cover everything. Use good judgment when an ethical dilemma arises that is not already covered by these recommendations.

Source: "APSE Ethics Guidelines," http://apse.dallasnews.com/main/codeofethics.html.