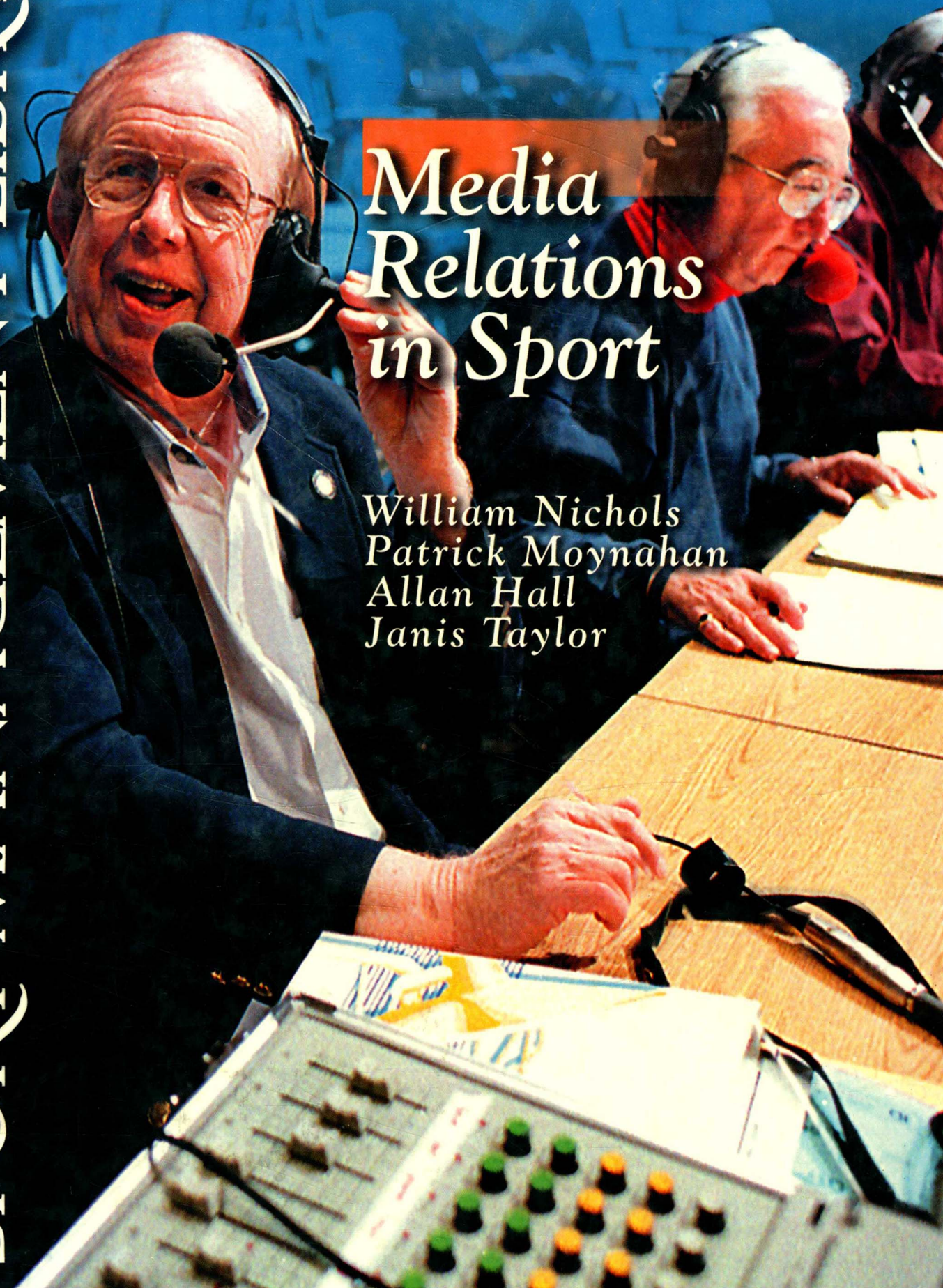


# Media Relations in Sport

William Nichols  
Patrick Moynahan  
Allan Hall  
Janis Taylor



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# MEDIA RELATIONS IN SPORT

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Library of Congress Card Catalog Number: 01-132860

ISBN: 1-885693-22-2

Copyeditor: Candace Jordan  
Cover Design: James Bucheimer  
Developmental Editor: Janet B. Parks  
Managing Editor: Geoffrey C. Fuller  
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Proofreader: Susannah Ryan  
Indexer: Geoff Fuller  
Printed by Sheridan Books

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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# MEDIA RELATIONS IN SPORT

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# Dedications

A text as comprehensive as this is necessarily a group project. In addition to the four authors, many people contributed invaluable during the years the material for *Media Relations in Sport* was being gathered. The authors would like to extend their appreciation for all the professional help and personal support.

June Baughman, Chair, Health Physical Education and Recreation, Baldwin-Wallace College; Tom Bochenek, Former Sports Information Director, Mount Union College; Tom Cammett, Hiram College; Carol Cronquist, Ashland University; Angela Dudziak, Information Director, Ohio Atlantic Conference; John Finn, The College of Wooster; Tom Gaffney, *Akron Beacon Journal*; Dale Gallagher, Sports Information Director, Kent State University; David Glasier, *The News Herald*, Willoughby, Ohio; Julie Dalpaiz Herman, Former Sports Information Director, John Carroll University; Todd Jay, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania; Ron Linek, Baldwin-Wallace College; Al King, Ashland University; Merle Levin, Retired Sports Information Director, Cleveland State University; Dino Lucarelli, Cleveland Browns; Ken MacDonald, The University of Akron; Dr. Fred Martinelli, Ashland University; Jim McGrath, Butler University; Sue Penicka, Retired Sports Information Director, Case Western Reserve University; Jessie Perry; Kristi Perry; Bob Price, Director of Media Relations, Cleveland Cavaliers; Kevin Ruple, Sports Information Director, Baldwin-Wallace College; Dr. Ella Shannon, Ashland University; Brian Sullivan, NCAC; Paulette Welch, Sports Information Director, Cleveland State University; Chris Wenzler, Sports Information Director, John Carroll University; and last, but by no means least, Jean Nichols, for her undying support throughout the project.

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The cover photo highlights Leo W. "Jack" Fleming, Jr. As "Voice of the Mountaineers," Jack covered the West Virginia University football and basketball teams for 42 years, and was a major supporter of WVU and its hometown of Morgantown, West Virginia, where Fitness Information Technology is based. Jack also spent 28 years as the radio voice for the Pittsburgh Steelers, and in that capacity called what has been described by NFL Films as the most replayed moment in football history, Franco Harris's Immaculate Reception in a playoff game against the Oakland Raiders in 1972. Jack passed away on January 3 of this year and is sorely missed by many, many people.

Photo taken by Dale Sparks and reprinted by permission of *The Dominion Post*. Special thanks to Tim Lilly, editor, *The Dominion Post*, and to Shelly Poe, Sports Information Director at West Virginia University.

# Photo Credits

- p. 3** "The competition among the media is intense . . ." Bill Belichick at a postgame press conference in the media interview room at Cleveland Stadium. Photo by John Reid. Reprinted by permission of the Cleveland Indians.
- p. 7** "The advent of television forced radio to find a new approach to sport. . . ." Rookie Martin St. Louis speaks with fellow University of Vermont alum Jim Donovan from WKYC. St. Louis later signed a multi-year deal with the NHL's Calgary Flames. Photo courtesy of the authors.
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# Foreword



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## Creating an image.

In essence, that is the main objective of the sports public relations professional as he or she works together with other sports marketing personnel within a university athletic department or a professional sports organization.

On a daily basis—through the discipline of media relations—no one affects the image of an organization more than the public relations staff. Throughout the years, I have come to realize that the PR in sports public relations actually stands for *Planning Right*.

Creating an image encompasses many aspects of the sport business world, but on a consistent basis, it is the public relations staff who is challenged with the task of sharing that message through writing news releases; conducting press conferences; operating a press box; promoting executives, coaches, and players; planning special events, etc.

*Media Relations in Sport* provides a wonderful understanding of the functions and workings of the sports media world. For those students who are planning careers in sports management or athletic administration, this guide is a must-read. It is a must-read because it provides you the foundation from which the basic skills of *Planning Right* are based.

Enjoy the book and good luck as you continue your education.

Sincerely,

Bob DiBiasio  
Vice President, Public Relations  
Cleveland Indians



World Series Champions

1920 • 1948

American League Champions

1920 • 1948 • 1954 • 1995 • 1997

Central Division Champions

1995 • 1996 • 1997 • 1998 • 1999



# Introduction

The working relationship between sport management professionals and the media was relatively simple in the first half of the 20th century, when athletics were more recreational than revenue generating. School administrators and coaches supplied local newspaper and radio reporters with schedules, statistics, pictures, and interesting facts about players and teams in hopes the journalists would “promote” the sport and help attract audiences. Athletics officials set up press tables, arranged telephone connections, and provided anything else needed to facilitate coverage of games for reporters working under deadline constraints. They also provided scores and highlights to newspapers and radio stations that could not send reporters to games. Success in promoting a school depended to a great extent on the sport manager’s interpersonal skills and personal relationships with local reporters—the ability to promptly serve and satisfy their needs for news and information about players and games. The good sports liaison was adept at fostering positive relationships and managing negative news.

The birth of televised sports at midcentury dramatically changed the relationship for both sport organizations and journalists. Television added an entertainment function to the sport management equation and a revenue-generating potential to sport promotion. It also added a heavyweight competitor to the media mix—a competitor willing to pay the sport organization that helped generate advertising revenue. The broadcast media quickly learned that advertisers were willing to pay substantial amounts of money to television and radio operators for the right to insert commercial messages between breaks in the sports action. Television networks, in turn, began to offer significant amounts of money to sport organizations for exclusive broadcast rights to an event, and so did their broadcast counterparts in radio.

This economic motive spurred a tremendous growth in television coverage of sports and expansion of athletic teams over the second half of the 20th century. Advances in technology and an increase in government deregulation of media ownership contributed to a corresponding explosion in the number of radio and television stations, which in turn created an intense competition among media companies for advertising revenues. The coming of TV and the competition for audience forced newspapers to seek new angles on news. They turned to more nongame stories, including investigations into finances, crime, and corruption in sport organizations. Competitive bidding drove broadcast rights to astronomical levels, providing significant revenues for sport organizations. The additional monies contributed to an increase in sport offerings at the high school and collegiate levels driven in part by federal Title IX legislation in the 1970s, which boosted athletics opportunities for women. Amateur and professional leagues enjoyed similar growth, propelled by TV coverage and by expansion into new cities across the country.

No longer were written and interpersonal skills sufficient to do the job of sport information management. The good sport information specialist now needed to know something about audio and video production, and needed to understand finance and

law, needed to learn marketing and negotiation, needed to plan and organize game coverage setups to satisfy dozens of reporters with diverse technological support needs—even the print reporters, first with electronic word processors, then with computers connected to the home office via telephone lines.

Sport organizations of every kind began to strengthen their sport information operations, both to accommodate the increasing media hordes and to tap into the broadcast-generated revenue stream. Colleges and, to a lesser extent, high schools developed self-standing sports-information or publicity departments to produce media guides, organize press conferences, and manage game coverage. They assigned sport information directors or athletics administrators to solicit and negotiate broadcast contracts. Athletics conferences formed, broke apart, and reformed as athletics directors sought the “right mix” of schools to attract the most lucrative broadcast bids. They asked conference administrators to package deals for members and to provide league statistics, player profiles, and other data to the media. Amateur and professional leagues expanded into cities with large TV markets; developed revenue-sharing plans for affiliates; and created management-level, multifaceted sport information/promotion units to disseminate information, oversee entertainment (broadcast of events), and manage media relations.

Any individual aspiring to a career in sport management today must understand the complex, interdependent relationships among media industries and sport organizations and each component’s influence on the daily practices of the other. Modern professionals still must provide the information needed by sportswriters, reporters, producers, and announcers—much as their counterparts did at the start of the 20th century. However, to perform the job in the 21st century, sport information specialists must recognize the influence of economic factors, ideological concerns, equity issues, and legal and ethical constraints on information and entertainment management. The larger and more organized the recreation or athletics program, the more complex the task. The recreation director for the local YMCA may work only with the local newspaper and TV station to gain a little public recognition for members of its golf team or swim club. The president of the sports division of a major television network, on the other hand, may engage in negotiations on a multibillion-dollar contract for broadcast rights to all the Olympic Games at various sites around the world for a decade, or longer.

This book lays a practical and conceptual foundation for individuals interested in careers in sports information management at any level. It attempts to provide a basic understanding of the formalized working relationships between the mass media and sport organizations including recreation centers and athletics clubs, high schools and colleges, and amateur organizations and professional leagues. The book is structured primarily for students majoring in sport management or minoring in journalism, public relations, or communications. Students pursuing careers as recreation directors, school athletics directors, sports information directors, conference athletics administrators, professional general managers, and administrative staff members also may benefit from the examination of media industries, operations, and practices.

The central focus of the book is the interactions among the people of, and the established operating conventions of, the organizations involved in the flow of information to the public. The objective is to introduce aspiring professionals to information and entertainment management principles demonstrated to be effective. The practical guidelines at the heart of the text are drawn from years of professional experience

among the authors. The techniques included also have been tested in classroom settings. They will provide direction both in discerning what the public and the mass media expect from an organization and in devising strategies to meet those expectations effectively.

In a broader sense, the book offers insight into the economic dynamics of sport management and the application of mass communication concepts to the field of sport information. It does not presume to offer an in-depth examination of financial and commercial concerns. Other books in the Sport Management Library more fully address revenue-generating practices and issues (e.g., *Fundamentals of Sport Marketing* and *Financing Sport*). However, this book provides a framework for understanding the connection between the informational and commercial sides of sports information management.

Nor does the text intend to provide a comprehensive exploration of mass communication theory as it relates to sport institutions. This volume aims to acquaint readers with concepts essential to an understanding of the function of mass media in society and of the influence of sport information on social institutions. For example, the text explores how theoretical concepts relate to the work of sports journalists, media organizations, and sport information managers. Many of the practices presented are addressed in the “sports production complex,” in a model of sport communication developed by Lawrence Wenner of San Francisco State University in *Media, Sports, and Society* (1989). Introduction to the model, based on Wenner’s review of divergent mass communication theories, will help readers understand the interdependent working relationship between media members and sports information specialists.

The principal players in the model are sport organizations, the media, and the public. The thread that holds these participants together is sports information. Someone from the sport organization must manage the information about the athletics event, the team, the athletes, and the coaches, and must deliver that information to the media. The media interpret the information for the public. The public reads, hears, or views that interpretation via newspaper columns, radio talk shows, or television analysts. Each of the participants in the model influences and depends on the others to create and share this sports culture. This text will familiarize readers with the linkages in this interdependent relationship.

The sports information professional must recognize that the commercial underpinning of the sports culture influences the weave of the fabric. In one respect, the coverage of sports represents the selling of sport organizations and events to the public through the media. The sport organization sells broadcast rights to an event to the highest media bidder; the media then sell the event to advertisers. The events that draw the largest audiences command the highest prices. The Olympic Games sell, so TV networks bid into the billions for exclusive rights. College lacrosse does not sell, so TV rarely covers it.

The profit-driven nature of sports media industries raises a number of concerns for the aspiring sports journalist, such as the power of the mass media to influence individuals, organizations, and society at large. The media can create heroes and heroines; emphasize one sport over another; restructure the rules of the game, expose corruption; or elevate an athlete, a team, or an institution to such mythical proportions that he, she, or it becomes an American tradition. The power of selection in coverage and

interpretation of events rests with sports journalists and media organizations. The choices they make ultimately play a role in how all of us view a particular athlete, team, or sport. The media *can* provide opportunities for increased public exposure, fan support, and revenues for a sport organization, but the sports information professional must accept that the profit motive is a factor in the equation.

The media's power to influence society's perceptions of athletes and sporting events is also at the core of concerns about coverage of women and minorities. Some scholars suggest the media create a picture of reality that the public subconsciously accepts. Most often the picture reflects the status quo. That means sports coverage generally reinforces the notion that male competition represents a higher skill level than do women's sports. The result is overreporting of men's competition and underreporting of women's sports, thereby continuing the dominance of men's competition in sports coverage. The sports information professional who researches the disparity in coverage of male and female sports, and the misrepresentation of minorities, is positioned to develop strategies to address the inequities. Furthermore, a grounding in relevant mass communication research may help to generate ideas that will influence changes in the pattern of what Wenner (1989) calls "the fabric of sports culture"—an interwoven complex of information and entertainment created and shared by teams, fans, and the mass media.

This power to influence the sports culture heightens the degree of accountability and responsibility shouldered by all who pursue careers in organizations interlinked with sports information. Part I of this book addresses working relationships between journalists and sport organizations that have evolved from traditional coverage of sporting events such as professional football and men's college basketball games. The first section outlines interactional, informational, and financial dynamics of media organizations and their influence on sports culture. It emphasizes the dependency of both the mass media and the mass audience on the sports information professional in high-profile sports. However, the reader can relate this to low-profile sports by paying special attention to the concepts that define the relationships.

The sports information specialist must bear the same degree of responsibility as sports journalists and organizations. Parts II and III offer aspiring information specialists an examination of their role within the sport culture. It is a tenuous position at best, because professionals must try to satisfy both the media organizations with which they deal and the sport organizations for which they work. From a practical standpoint, sports information specialists must be conscious of the accuracy and truthfulness of information they disseminate to the media, while recognizing they cannot control the production or the interpretation of the message. They also must be aware that the content of the message influences the images of the sport organizations and the athletes they represent.

A high-stakes balancing act confronts the sports information specialist: how much information to provide, for what purpose, with what consequence? The type, quality, and amount of information supplied to the media may contribute to their interpretation of the athletic performance (i.e., the picture of reality the journalists present to the public), so sports information personnel must make a conscious effort to articulate their organization's philosophy of sport to the media and to combat misrepresentations of gender or ethnicity reflected in media content. Managing information entails managing concepts, themes, and representations of the organization and the individuals within the organization.

Part II of this text defines the roles and responsibilities of sports information specialists, along with their duties in disseminating information. It provides practical guidelines on everything from writing press releases to preparing media guides to organizing managed events such as news conferences and media days. Part III addresses the roles and responsibilities of sports information professionals in orchestrating events. It offers direction on game-coverage organization and management, on promotion of special events ranging from awards banquets to tournaments, and on development of publicity campaigns. The two sections collectively amount to a practical handbook on sport management operations.

Finally, Part IV confronts the ethics of these formalized working relationships and the ideology they perpetuate. Sports information specialists who work in a high-profile

sport such as men's Division I basketball will command the immediate attention of the mass media, and mass audience. Those in a low-profile sport will have to work at getting the attention of both. They will have to work at capturing media attention and cultivating advertiser and fan interest. In addition, they may have to reeducate the mass audience and the media about assumptions and expectations regarding women's sports. Part IV explores crisis management, the law and regulation of sports, and ethical constructs for media practitioners and sports management professionals. It closes with a glimpse into the future of sport communication, from management concerns to technological advances.

In conclusion, the influence of the mass media can be both a blessing and a detriment to the sport management professional. Media exposure can bring recognition and credibility to the organization, the team, and

the spectators. In addition, media exposure can generate lucrative revenues. Yet sport management professionals cannot control this media exposure; they can only guide it. That means the job demands negotiation, skills, and decisiveness. It also means those in sport management must strive to understand the need always to act as professionals in the context of their role in the sports culture:

*Sport management professionals must strive to understand the need always to act as professionals in their role in the sports culture:*

- *Does "professional" mean the ability to package an athlete, a team, or a coach as a marketable product?*
- *Does it mean getting as much newspaper space as possible?*
- *Does it mean recognizing and capitalizing on opportunities to solicit coverage for low-profile sports?*
- *Does it mean defusing negative press about the organization?*
- *Does it mean withholding certain information from sports journalists?*
- *Does it mean meeting with other sports information specialists to establish a voluntary code of ethics?*

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- Does it mean withholding certain information from sports journalists?
- Does it mean meeting with other sports information specialists to establish a voluntary code of ethics?

This book is designed to encourage examination of these questions and to introduce concepts that will help the aspiring sport management professional answer them. It provides practical guidelines on how to perform the everyday duties of the profession. It offers insight into the job responsibilities of and the constraints on sportswriters, columnists, producers, announcers, and analysts; it also helps explain the broader effect their working relationships have on sports information and the sport culture itself.

The sports information professional must recognize the influence of the profit motive on the one hand and the value of the game on the other. At times the business side will dominate the daily work schedule. Occasionally the value of sport will surface. Balancing the two effectively is a demanding and challenging assignment. Essential to working successfully in such an environment is a thorough understanding of each medium with which one works, from business considerations to job responsibilities to the particular way sports journalists package information and present it to an audience. This knowledge will, in part, define the working relationship with each media representative and dictate what information the sports manager provides.

An awareness of the ethics and values that apply to sport organizations is equally important. It will shape the character of the relationship and reflect the value the sport organization places on the business of sports information. Strategic communication ultimately may play a pivotal role in the type of media coverage and public support the sport organization receives. Remember, the public perception of athletics performance is not created solely by the mass media, but also by the type, quality, and amount of information supplied to newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, and cable operators. That puts a high premium on the sports information professional's ability to determine how well various forms of communication reflect the image and objectives of the organization; how well the information engages an audience; what strategies work in gaining access to the media; and what types of working relationships ensure that the media do not ignore the organization, its teams, or its athletes.

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To those unfamiliar with the study of mass communication, the media serve as little more than information and entertainment sources. The major mass media—newspapers, magazines, radio, broadcast and cable television—provide up-to-date news and weather, offer an escape from the stress of the work world, and pitch consumer products. Many people just accept the common belief that “what you see is what you get”—words, sounds, and pictures that inform, entertain, and persuade. They view the media from a functional perspective, giving little thought to the organizations that produce the media, the messages in their content, and their influence on readers, viewers, or listeners.

In fact, most of us do not pay much attention to such weighty matters at all, as long as we are satisfied with the services the media provide. We expect a newspaper delivered to the house every day, a wake-up call from the clock radio, a quick update on the news from television before we go to work. We escape the demands of the workplace by listening to our favorite radio deejays or talk-show stars between home and work. Once the workday is done, we sit down to supper with the network or cable television newscasts within easy view. For relaxation later in the evening, we read a book, go to the movies, watch a videotape, listen to a new compact disc, or return to television for a prime-time situation comedy or dramatic series.

The media have become such an omnipresent element of our daily lives that we simply take them for granted, yet researchers found more than a decade ago that by the time they are teenagers, American children have spent more hours watching television than engaging in any other activity except sleep—even more time than they have spent in school (Baran & Davis, 1995). Similarly, according to industry estimates, adults have spent more than half their waking lives in contact with the media.

In view of their pervasive presence in our lives, we might do well to look closer at the operation and influence of the business of mass communication, particularly as they relate to sport information. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television represent the dominant avenues of sport communication in the United States. The print media, which deliver information through the written word, include everything from a neighborhood flyer to the Associ-

*Consider the scope of four of the mass media in the United States:*

- *Research indicates that American adults spend 3 hours, 38 minutes a day with TV; 2 hours, 3 minutes with radio; 29 minutes with newspapers; and 17 minutes with magazines—that is, more than one fourth of the day engaged by the media (TVB: TV Basics—Time Spent and Daily Reach by Major Media, 1999).*
- *Television reaches 88% of American adults daily; radio, 71%; newspapers, 56%; and magazines, 34% (TVB: TV Basics—Time Spent and Daily Reach by Major Media, 1999).*
- *U.S. advertisers spent \$41 million on newspapers, \$37 million on broadcast television, \$13 million on radio, \$10 million on magazines, and \$5 million on cable television in 1997 (U.S. Advertising Expenditures, Newspaper Association of America, 1999).*
- *Nearly 96% of people 12 and older—that's 210 million Americans—listen to 15 minutes of radio per week (Radar Report, Statistical Research, Inc., 1998).*
- *By 1999, approximately 99.7% of the 100 million households in the United States had a television set; 75.6% had two or more TV sets (TVB: TV Basics—Multi-Set and Color Television Households, 1999).*
- *TV households in the United States averaged 7 hours, 15 minutes of viewing time a day in 1998 (TVB: TV Basics—Time Spent Viewing Per Television Home Per Day, 1999).*
- *The broadcast media counted among their family some 1,204 television stations and 10,532 radio stations (TVB: TV Basics—Trends in Television, 1998).*
- *The United States produced 1,509 daily newspapers—705 morning papers and 816 evening papers—and 903 Sunday newspapers in 1997 (Number of U.S. Daily Newspapers, Newspaper Association of America, 1999).*
- *In 1997, daily circulation of newspapers—the number of copies printed and distributed—exceeded 56 million on weekdays and 60 million on Sundays (U.S. Daily Newspapers in Circulation, Newspaper Association of America, 1999).*
- *Daily readership stood at 58.7% in 1997 and Sunday readership hit 68.5% (Newspaper Association of America, 1998).*