**HOW THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CU FOOTBALL TEAM AND THE MEDIA HAS EVOLVED**

**BY: Eric Bean**

**RESEARCH QUESTION/THESIS: “How can media relations be bolstered in college athletics, particularly in revenue sports, through the advancements with media, including social media, legacy media, and streaming, and evolve the media landscape?”**

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Media interactions in sports have garnered plenty of attention over the past few seasons with the prevalence of social media, press conference moments going viral more often, and the emphasis being put on mental health.

Members of the media are tasked with covering players thoughtfully and fairly. Athletic departments and their members are required to conduct themselves with the interests of the department at the top of their priority list. That means if a coach only wants certain players to speak to the media, only those players can. The media needs to cover the team fairly to maintain trust between the team and themselves.

In my job as a student assistant in the sports information department, I have been around the football team quite a bit. I was around them daily during fall camp in August, which is basically college football’s preseason. I have been around them 1-to-2 times a week since the season has started. There are players that enjoy talking to the media and there are players that try to get out of talking to the media.

There was one instance where a CU football player discussed his mistrust of the media with me during a day on my job as a student assistant in the CU Sports Information Department. It was in response to when Buffalo offensive lineman Carson Lee got arrested. This player did not like how the media covered this incident. He felt it was unfair to the program. He said that the reporter was able to profit off covering a story. At the end of the day, reporters have a job to do, and players have a job to do. It is quite the interesting dynamic, however, that reporters get paid for their coverage and university players do not get an hourly wage or a salary for being on the football team, even though there are plenty of other benefits (scholarships, access to amenities and meal plans, Name-Image-Likeness deals, etc.) of being a college football player.

Trust is a huge aspect of athletic media relations. It is up to reporters to build trust with players. If players do not believe that the program should be covered a certain way, they usually keep these thoughts to themselves rather than broadcast them to the media. There are plenty of examples of players who have shown their disdain for the media, including now-retired NFL running back Marshawn Lynch. His most famous example of this was before Super Bowl XLIX when he answered every question with eight words: “I’m just here so I won’t get fined.” There are players on CU that have expressed to me they would rather focus on football than have stories written about them.

There was one defensive player that asked about what the benefit of speaking to a reporter is. One thing I thought of was that the reporter could tell a sandwich shop about the player, and the player could have an opportunity to sign a Name-Image-Likeness deal with the company if they played well enough and maintained good athletic media relations.

Name-Image-Likeness is becoming increasingly prevalent in college sports. CU athletic director Rick George stated in an interview I did with him for this project that inducements (giving players money to play for the university) have become too large of a part within NIL. The intended purpose of NIL is to give players the opportunity to sign what basically amount to endorsement deals with entities independent from the university itself.

Additionally, social media has had a massive impact on players being able to interact with fans. Firstly, it gets rid of the middle person in interactions between players and fans. Media and sports information staffs cannot have absolute jurisdiction over how a player uses social media. Sure, there are rules set up by athletic departments, but they are not followed all the time by players. Players are guided on how to act responsibly with social media, but there are always situations where a player may get in the news for something they do on social media. The consequences for violating guidelines could be suspension, even though the athletic department prefers to keep discipline private. However, the team would try to make sure that situations that arise do not get picked up by the media.

Social media has challenged the media landscape. Within the context of a college football program, players can broadcast whatever they want to the public. Of course, athletic departments set rules about what they want their players to talk about on social media. However, players still go to social media sometimes when they are frustrated.

For example, a CU player, wide receiver Keith Miller III, went to twitter on (October 2) to talk about the lack of playing time he has received this season. This drew reaction from others on Twitter, but it is fair to say it is not something that the team wanted to be released out into the public. If reporters really wanted to report on this, they would have. However, with the trust factor taken into account, reporters may not report on everything until they talk to people within the organization first. Miller transferred to Texas A&M University-Commerce after the season ended.

At the beginning of the season, one reporter got wind of two players being out for the season when CU’s head coach, Karl Dorrell, did not want this to be public knowledge. The reporter got tipped off, and he could have run with the story right away. He ended up releasing the info right before fall camp started.

COVID has also challenged the current media landscape. Zoom has become an integral part of press conferences. Having a Zoom call in a press conference would have been unheard of in 2019. While CU has not had any COVID issues this season, there are programs that have. Different athletic departments are doing things differently. CU allowed there to be in-person interaction with coaches and players if the reporter is fully vaccinated.

Both social media and COVID have caused there to be evolution into how a college football team is covered. Some of these changes are good, while some reporters and players may prefer things to be ran another way. I want to talk to reporters, staff, and players on what their preferences may be and to better understand how collaborative approaches to sports journalism could lead to better storytelling for news audiences. With that being said, there have been a few studies conducted on how certain factors affect media coverage of a college team, as well as the general sports landscape.

Therefore, my research question is **“How can media relations be bolstered in college athletics, particularly in revenue sports, through the advancements with media, including social media, legacy media, and streaming, and evolve the media landscape?”** I believe that through my lit review, I have equipped myself with tools that will help me towards a hopefully successful project.

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

With a college program, there are numerous challenges with covering a team at a university. First, players must deal with playing their sport as well as going to class, albeit with plenty of support from the university. Second, there is the competitive angle of not wanting the game plan to leak to the media or opposing team that coaches pay attention to. A coach does not want news about an injured player getting to the public because it may put their team at a competitive disadvantage. Both these factors contribute to the reasons why there are internal media relations staffs with college organizations. They serve as the liaison between the media and the team.

It is fair to say that being able to provide and distribute coverage about a college team through means of media coverage is a positive development for society. It keeps fans engaged with the team as well as giving players and the team an opportunity to promote themselves and their brand. Part of the team promoting itself is that they want fans to come to games and provide the university with revenue. The team has to deal with both positive and negative consequences of this, including being transparent about whether players are injured or not, for example.

McGehee and Kellison (2020) talk about controversies in sports media that “are not shaped by one voice; instead, they are aided by new media that allow the public and media to add to a narrative.” When a controversy gets out into the public, there is usually an unnamed source that shares the information with a reporter. That reporter then verifies it (if they’re doing their job well) and shares it with the public. In the days of newspapers, the trickle-down effect would stop there. With social media, the public can comment on the story through social media or can even break a news story. A reporter can also add pieces to their initial story more easily. This phenomenon is a huge reason why media narratives could be looked at as more complex now.

Media and fans can add to the media narrative through social media, but players are not left out of this forum. Players can use social media to promote themselves, their teams, and even endorsement deals they sign with new name-image-likeness laws being signed into place.

Athletic departments will worry about how student-athletes may utilize social media. They do not want athletes using it in ways that may harm the game strategy or the reputation of teams they play for. Umar (2015) discusses how “universities will presumably argue against the contention that that their restrictions on social media are based upon the central content of student athlete speech. Instead, schools will likely assert that these limitations are created regarding controlling the secondary effects of student athletes' online speech.” For example, a player may complain, as CU’s Keith Miller did, about not getting the playing time in a game that they are expecting to get. They may go onto Twitter and say something about it. This could be viewed as a bad look for the program, so that is why they have rules in place to portray a positive image of the university.

Some athletes post tweets that could be seen as controversial, and the athletic media relations staff will not want these tweets to circulate. Players also need to watch what exactly they say on social media. For example, they should not comment about an issue such as a suspension on social media. Things that could be sensitive and portray the university in a negative light are of concern to athletic departments. Sanderson (2011) talks about how “athletes have created a number of public relations problems through their social-media disclosures. Whereas this issue is not necessarily of less concern to professional athletes and sports teams, there are a number of consequences specific to college athletics that social media exacerbate.” These consequences could include suspension. It is fair to say that coaches do not want news of a player failing a class, for example, to become public knowledge. The harm of information like this becoming public is that it could make the player and the university look bad in the eyes of fans or media. There are legitimate reasons for these rules being in place, and it is to protect the players.

Another area of literature that is vital to the success of this project is looking at historical trends versus recent trends within the media. Casotti (1990) talks about the first 100 years of CU football through a historical lens. He talks about some of the most pivotal times in CU history, including coach hires and players’ stories. One story that really stood out was about Sal Aunese, who quarterbacked the team in the late 1980s. Aunese passed away unexpectedly during the 1988 season, and the media coverage was challenging. There was a lot of attention around the team during this time.

Recently, there have been challenges within the media because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The past three seasons of CU football (including 2021) have seen different setups in how players are able to communicate with the media. Atherstone et. al. (2021) talks about athletes’ experiences during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and say that “adherence to mitigation measures during athletic and nonathletic activities is important to protect collegiate athletes from SARS-CoV-2, lessen disruptions in play because of quarantine and isolation protocols, and reduce transmission to others in the community.” One of these mitigation measures in 2020 was basically banning in-person media interaction, although some reporters were still able to go to games. They had to be socially distanced in the press box. Through reading about this, it piqued my interest about asking what made the process of writing stories more difficult for reporters, and if the sports information staff thought that the coverage of the team was adequate compared to previous seasons.

Within Colorado athletics, it is fair to say that there have been challenges with distributing the product to the consumer. The Buffaloes play in the Pac-12, which has its own network. However, that network does not reach as many people nationally as other conference (SEC, Big Ten, ACC) networks. To compare, the SEC Network has around 70 million subscribers compared to 14.8 million for the Pac-12. Those numbers are taken from Yahoo and al.com, respectively. The three networks I mentioned all have backing from ESPN or FOX Sports, which the Pac-12 does not have.

The Pac-12 is located on the West Coast. That means that some of their games kick off as late as 10:30 p.m. on the East Coast. Couple this along with the current TV deal situation and one can determine that CU may have a more difficult time getting their product (football games, etc.) to the consumer. Karg et. al. (2019) talks about how “sports consumers can be classified and differentiated according to their consumption channel preferences, (which) has theoretical and practical implications.” A network like DirecTV has never carried the Pac-12 network, while Sling TV, a streaming service, has. A CU fan may want to consider getting a service like Sling TV to watch the Pac-12. There would be the opportunity cost of losing access to other prominent channels because of the limitations with what Sling TV offers them, however. This is one of the many practical examples of how the sports TV landscape is shaped by the preference of the consumer. One could also argue that the Pac-12 schools are not as heavily invested in football as SEC or Big Ten schools are.

Overall, these factors have contributed to how sports teams, including college teams, are covered. College players are starting to gain more control over how much they share through the media, and athletic departments are having to constantly adjust to the times because of that. Through my research, it is my hope that I can illustrate this phenomenon. While this is my preconceived notion to a degree, my hope is to listen to the parties involved so I can depict accurately what is working and what is challenging in the realm of covering a university’s athletic program.

**CHAPTER 3: CREATIVE PROJECT OVERVIEW**

Media interactions in sports have garnered plenty of attention over the past few seasons with the prevalence of social media and press conference moments going viral more often, and also with the emphasis being put on mental health.

Social media has had a massive impact on players being able to interact with fans. Media and sports information staffs cannot have absolute jurisdiction over how a player uses social media. Players are guided on how to act responsibly with social media, but there are always situations where a player may get in the news for something they do on social media.

In the most recent three football seasons (including this season), players and media have been subjected to three very different settings in which media interactions occur. In 2019, there was no COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, there was. In 2021, we are still amid a pandemic, but things are far more open than they were in 2020.

Atherstone et al. (2021) talks about athletes’ experiences during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Their main point, which I touched on in Chapter 2, is that college athletes needed to be protected and try to isolate from the public as best they could during the height of the pandemic in 2020 due to health risks. Because of this, the media were not given the same access to players so that the athletes could adhere to these measures. This meant that players were only made available to media through Zoom calls, making the experience for all parties involved much different. Some reporters believe that they could not produce the same quality of content because of the lack of in-person interaction with coaches and players.

I want to draw on players’ recent experiences with media and how media members and sports information staffs have dealt with the changes. Thus, I want to find out how covering sporting events and media interactions have changed, including with the proliferation of social media and challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to investigate how players, coaches, and legacy media members have dealt with recent challenges. Through doing this, I hope to propose a solution to media coverage that makes all three entities feel more comfortable in the sports environment and the added attention it brings.

Both scholarly and creative approaches to this topic have addressed these issues but has not necessarily proposed solutions to them. Scholarly articles have addressed many of the challenges that are seen in athletic media relations. For example, McGehee and Kellison (2020) talk about controversies and news stories in sports media are shaped in part by athletic teams, the media, and the university or team’s public relations or sports information department. As far as the relationship between athletic teams and the media, the team and its sports information staffs are able to filter how much information about the team becomes public knowledge. In the case of a college program, there has not been a creative project looking at exactly what I am looking at. I want to shine a light upon the struggles that all entities go through in getting information out to the public and how to balance the needs of players, coaches, universities and journalists in providing sports coverage. For a team, what is allowed to be disseminated among the public and what should be private? For journalists, what information is vital for the public to know as far as a sports team?

Specifically for my creative project, I want to create a series of podcasts that confront this problem head-on and I hope to contribute a model that could be used to make the relationship between all people involved in a sports team media operation a successful one. I will have four or five podcast episodes, depending on what I learn through the interview process. The first one would feature some of the legacy media members that cover the Colorado Buffaloes on a daily basis. These people are not directly involved with the program, but they are the ones that report content and news to the public. With Colorado’s struggles in football this season, I believe that this season has been one of the hardest seasons covering CU football in recent memory for these daily reporters (at least that is what I have gathered from my limited time around these individuals at my job). I want to talk to these people specifically about how social media has changed how they report. I also want to really dig deep on the issue of the relationship with the team and if they have been able to produce the amount of content they have wanted to this season. I would also include quotes from the sports information staff in this episode. It was a tough season for everyone, and some reporters struggled with covering the team this season due to their struggles this season.

Second, I will create another podcast episode that centers around the main people within CU athletics that work with the team but are not direct members of the team. This includes members of the Sports Information staff. The Sports Information Director position holds a lot of power. They are the liaison between the team and the media. It has certainly been a crazy experience in my college career with the vastly different seasons that I have witnessed during my time at CU. Last season had a different feel from this one, as the Buffaloes ended the season with four wins and two losses, and therefore made it to a bowl game. That was during COVID, however. I want to talk to some people in this department about the challenges of how different the past few seasons have looked, and how important they believe social media is to the future of athletic media coverage. I also want to dig deep on the issue of dealing with controversies with the prevalence of social media. There have been many in the past few seasons, including this season with a lot of fan frustration being portrayed on social media. I would also include interviews from reporters in this episode as it is fair to say they interact with fans more than any athletic department staff on Twitter.

My third podcast would feature coaches from the Buffaloes. I would want to talk about the challenges of coaching a team while having media responsibilities that have to be contractually met. The current coaching staff had a lot more positive coverage in 2020 than they have in their second year as a staff (this season). My hope would be to talk to head coach Karl Dorrell and Athletic Director Rick George on this podcast, as well as players and sports information staff to get a closer look at the team dynamic in the past two seasons.

My final podcast would feature players. The main issue I would want to dig deep with players on would be how hard it is to balance being a student with the media obligations that they face. There are players that are all about football and don’t care about the media and others that see talking to the media as an opportunity to promote their brand. NIL plays a part in this as well, as a company may want a player to tweet or post about their products. I want to discuss their opinions on players expressing themselves via social media versus keeping to a team culture. “How much information about themselves do players believe should be public versus private?” is a question that I want to analyze by interviewing the players. I may also include quotes from coaches, SID staff, and media members in this interview. I would want to gauge how players are protected, how much they should be protected since they are adults, and if certain people are being too protective towards them, and if the media feels like players are honest with them or not.

The media wants to have access to the players, but sports information staffs are tasked with making sure that access is protected. One question I want to tackle through this project is how much grey area there is with this access. I believe that through this process, I will be able to suggest solutions about problems that all sides of a football and sports media interaction deal with. My hope would be that player-media interactions would be improved from my project. Overall, I hope my project will add more understanding for people not directly involved with this process to understand the challenges all parties face. There are so many people within an athletic department and only so many media members that cover the team. It is important to see all sides of this issue and why trust is important between players, the media, and sports information staffs is when it comes to the coverage of a sports team.

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