

### **Experiences as a Minnesota Timberwolves Intern**

The role of the sports journalist is to bring the clubhouse into the consumer's living room. In this way, the sportswriter is the liaison between a sport, its games, its players and the fan. If we created a sports hierarchy, it seems, athletes would be at the top, followed by coaches and front office personal, followed by credentialed media members, followed by other team personnel out of the public eye and at the bottom, peasant fans, perhaps ironic that fans drive a sport's existence.

I worked in the Minnesota Timberwolves' Interactive Services Department, responsible for web content administration and reporting. I was lucky to be one of two interns to interact with the players and other Twin Cities prominent and influential individuals in the sports journalism profession on a daily basis. Given that the Wolves were in disarray record-wise throughout the entire season, "work" for these individuals was a challenge: Is there a responsibility to report the positives (back-to-back road wins late in the season, winning two straight for the first time, etc.) on an inflated scale? Is there a responsibility to represent the team in a positive light – by looking at the rebuilding process in terms of the future and first-round draft picks rather than the past and poorly-executed moves on the part of the general manager – or is this strictly up to the writer?

When the sports section first became popular in the 1880s and continuing on into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sports journalist was typically a fan above all else, and through his writings, attempted to boost the popularity of their respective sport, team and

players. In today's media-crazed society, however, the journalist seems to be either an un-biased witness or bitter writer with cruel intentions. The Minnesota sports culture falls somewhere in between these two spectrums, but slightly toward the latter. For instance, the Wolves essentially "started over," brought out their "rebuilding" plans, and were praised for this, and the local media (Jim Souhan, Dan Barreiro) told Wolves fans that they'd have to be patient and that the Wolves would see some dark days in the days ahead. Yet during a treacherous stretch, to rip a young team to shreds accomplishes nothing, and contradicts earlier columns and radio appearances. Is the journalist's responsibility to stir a reaction? Maybe. But not at the expense of the question of what a certain media member truly believes.

Moral of the story: The local media has not done the Wolves' organization any favors. Whether that is why timberwolves.com and content streamlined for team reporting was introduced two years ago or not, content on the Web is generated admittedly for the media-savvy consumer. In addition, content is created knowing that fans want information quickly and efficiently, more often than once per day as in the daily newspaper cycle. Team sites in the NBA provide the most in-depth look at respective teams and their players through the eyes of full-time team reporters. These team reporters are around their teams for entire days, some on road trips. The Internet has capabilities that newspapers do not; on timberwolves.com, we post extended interviews, post-game discussion, and there is a level of respect there for people that (still) care about Timberwolves basketball despite a dismal record. They'll say hello at the games, and they appreciate our coverage and dedication to a team that otherwise is awful record-wise.

That is what I appreciated the most about my work for timberwolves.com and for a franchise in serious need of an additional piece to contend in a terrific Western Conference. I appreciated that we weren't the beat writers, writing one article per day, going to practice, holding a recorder, and calling it a day. Not only were we responsible for five times that content, but we had to make something interesting that by the looks of it (the season) was very, very uninteresting. We had to look into the players' lives for untold stories that could make fans care, even for a brief moment. We had to make interesting a game that had little implication and was lethargic with no climactic pull.

Working for the Timberwolves was about appreciating hope, and getting our readership and fans ready for what "could be." The sports journalist must be excited, even in dismal times, and convey this excitement. I was given this chance working for timberwolves.com, writing "outside the box" game stories, features (for example, about the team's radio broadcasting duo) and other pieces.

Professional sports were an experience, and a process that one cannot begin to comprehend even by watching all 82 games of the regular season on television. The season is grueling. You have to be around these players on a daily or weekly basis to understand that they come to work, early in the morning, perform gruesome workouts, learn offensive and defensive schemes that don't compare to even the most complicated collegiate gameplans. The NBA life, albeit accompanied by some forms of glitz and glory, is business, most of the time.

Unfortunately, a vast majority of Americans don't give NBA players the time of day. The perk of my internship was a season ticket package, single-game tickets to be given away at my leisure. Admittedly, tickets were tough to give away at times, given the

logistical challenge of most of my would-be contacts forced to make the 50-mile commute from Northfield. On these days when I'd have free tickets and no personal contact to give them to, I'd look downtown for a pair of could-be basketball fans. This was difficult. "The NBA," one middle-aged man said. "No way. You know how much they get paid? And you know how smart they are?"

If that's not racism at its best, then what is? When working in an NBA office, and in an NBA city, you hear mumblings such as this in every direction. You never hear about the NHL (Wild) or Major League Baseball (Twins) needing a salary cap, both predominantly white sports. But the Vikings and Timberwolves, football and basketball, sports with an African American majority, are criticized for multi-million dollar contract extensions. The NBA's image suffers especially because these athletes are especially close to the court in which they compete, tattoos on display, vulgarities heard and a black culture in a white neighborhood very close to home.

I came in with this same mindset – I was about to work for an organization in which athletes are paid a very ridiculous sum. Embracing this mindset was what made this experience valuable. The last five or so years the NBA has seen its worst years in its history, while the Timberwolves could say the same. Quite frankly, I am not an NBA fan. I came in with the same thoughts that many critics have about the League before the internship began. But you have to really *see* it, watch a practice, watch the focus, see a scouting report, see the system that is the NBA before jumping to judgments that our society is prone to make. If I had to pinpoint the single biggest challenge of this internship that would be it: Balancing the general population's preconceived notions about the League with content that had the potential to not only make interesting, but

force people to remember that the NBA involves a game (basketball) played by very talented *people*. Too often, professional athletes are not people but figureheads for their respective teams. The personal side is lost in a world where the individual is lost more and more everyday in the wake of such a fast-paced lifestyle.

Professional sport certainly lends itself to this fast-paced culture – perhaps too fast-paced for me. There is certainly a hierarchy in place (coaches, players, GM, president, VP marketing/communications, etc.), and getting anything done efficiently takes considerable time. Beyond this, sports at the most basic level, from their inception onward to what they are today, are about relationships, and it was difficult to build relationships, albeit cliché, in this current setup. Systems theory in this corporate setting was certainly in play here, and each department (PR, ticket sales, interactive services, marketing) seemed to work together to produce what was thought to be a good product for consumers by some and not by others. There were simply so many employees in so many different arenas that people felt comfortable negating departments' work or adding on their own layers, so in the end, things got very convoluted. There was no sense of community, when a community was really needed.

For me personally, I can comfortably say that I am proud of the work that I did for the Wolves. Although stressful at times, it was certainly rewarding, especially in the finished products that timberwolves.com was able to publish. However, I am at two ends of the extreme here; for one, a position as a web editor may open in the future with a team such as the Timberwolves, and this could be a great way in to the industry for me. I'm just not sure, however, if a career in professional sports is what I want.

Sports are about the fun, and I'm not sure that an NBA game capitalizes on that fun. Perhaps it does to some degree, but I'm convinced there may be other options where working with people is a higher priority; where working with people to create that fun, to bring out that fun, to convey that fun is the goal. Of course, at the time of this reflection, we have a former Major League pitcher accused of a decade-long affair with a then-15-year-old, a running back accused of boating while intoxicated, NCAA teams failing to meet academic standards, and other stories that breed negativity. The issue isn't necessarily that these things happen, but that these stories are reported more frequently than the games themselves.

Sports are games, a collection of stories, reflections. That's what I want to be involved in. I'm just not sure how to do that quite yet.