

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

“OFF-THE-FIELD”: THE ETHICS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF ATHLETES’ PRIVATE  
LIVES

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FALL 2016

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Journalism  
with honors in Journalism

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## **ABSTRACT**

Like celebrities and politicians, athletes have undergone a spectacular transformation as public figures. Through the media's coverage, athletes have evolved from working class heroes to marketable celebrities. Along the way, though, coverage went from admiring an athlete's athletic performance to investigating an athlete's private information. Ultimately, the increasing demands to report newsworthy stories caused an erosion of athletes' personal privacy. This paper aims to show how the media's coverage of athletes' private lives has eroded their current expectation of privacy and examine views about what information about athletes' private lives should and should not be reported. It also explores how technological advancements and cultural attitudes greatly influenced the coverage of athletes and their privacy. Through the analysis of the media's 2009-2010 coverage of Tiger Woods's extramarital affairs and a survey of several different media members, this paper will recommend a journalistic standard for reporting on athletes' private lives.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In 1928, a group of sports journalists travelling in a public train with the New York Yankees spotted Babe Ruth sprinting down the aisle away from a young woman who was holding a knife and yelling, “I will kill you, you son of a bitch!” The writers looked at each other, laughed, and agreed that the event would make “one helluva of a story.” The event wasn’t published or acknowledged until 1976 (Telander, 1984). In 1992, *The New York Times* reported that tennis legend Arthur Ashe revealed his AIDS diagnosis publicly, “only after learning that a newspaper was preparing an article about it” (*New York Times*, 1992). The newspaper was *USA Today*. In 2012, the popular media blog-site Gawker published footage from a sex tape that included professional wrestler Hulk Hogan.

The media has shifted its focus from reporting only on-the-field performance to covering off-the-field behavior. A 2014 *ESPN The Magazine* article, “Athletes’ dating lives are big business,” includes an interview with Randy Charles Morin, the creator of the sports blog Talk-Sports. The popular blog allows users to post miscellaneous content about athletes. According to Morin, the site began getting 10,000 views a day once information on prominent athletes’ dating lives was revealed (Kimes, 2014).

As athletes’ celebrity status has skyrocketed, their expectation of privacy has dwindled. Stories that would have never been previously reported are now front-page headlines. However, athletes’ development into public figures has created ambiguity as to what information can be deemed newsworthy. This paper attempts to answer the question “how far is too far” when reporting an athlete’s private information. Additionally, this paper will trace the transformation of athletes’ into celebrities from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

## Public Figures and Privacy

Professional athletes' heightened public exposure can be attributed to external coverage (the media) and personal decision-making. According to *Strategic Sport Communication*, "professional athletes have realized the value of their persona and are using it to generate significant capital" (Pedersen, p. 349, 2007). Thus, today's media may defend reports revealing information regarding athletes' personal lives as newsworthy material, given their public figure standing. Sponsorships and social media are two contemporary ways athletes establish themselves as public figures, which diminishes their expectation of privacy. Before analyzing how the erosion of athletes' privacy in the media transpired, this section defines what public figures are and what level of privacy they can expect from the media. Additionally, it acknowledges legal cases involving athletes and other public figures, which established limits for the media's coverage of private information.

An individual's public figure status is largely determined by their public recognition and media exposure. Therefore, it is crucial to explain the legal standard, and limitations, that the media must acknowledge and follow when reporting on the private lives of public individuals. In 1890, jurists Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren published the law article *The Right to Privacy*, which has historically been referenced during Supreme Court cases dealing with privacy and the media. They declared that privacy is simply "the right to be let alone" (Harvard Law Review, 1890). However, in legal historian Stuart Banner's book, *American Property*, he notes that the duo cited seven limitations to this right, specifically noting that, "the right to privacy does not prohibit any publication of matter which is of public or general interest" (Banner, 2011).

According to Kelly McBride, the vice president of academic programs at Poynter, the significance of this limitation's inclusion reinforced a journalist's fundamental responsibility to seek the truth and report newsworthy information on particular persons (McBride, 2013). As a result, people with great public exposure began to sue for invasion of privacy (Miller 2012). The Supreme Court case *Roe vs. Wade* affirmed that while the Constitution does not definitively state any right of privacy, there is "a

guarantee of certain zones of privacy...that can be deemed ‘fundamental’ or ‘implicit in the concept of ordered liberty’” (Roe vs. Wade 410 U.S. 113, 152 ,1973). These private rights include marriage, procreation, and family relationships. However an individual’s public status can affect their right of privacy. Public figures do not have the same expectation of privacy rights that a private individual has. Therefore, public figures are prone to having the media publish certain private information regarding their personal lives.

*Galella vs. Onassis* demonstrates that a celebrity cannot always expect the same privacy rights as a private individual when being covered by the media. In the case, Ronald Galella, a freelance photographer who often took pictures of public figures, was arrested for taking pictures of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s children. Galella claimed an unjust arrest and interference with performing his job. Onassis, who was the widow of President Kennedy and a recognized public figure, claimed that Galella had invaded her privacy, amongst other actions such as harassment and assault and battery. The court acquitted Galella but did enjoin him from being within 50 yards of Onassis. However, the ruling did not deem the coverage of Onassis’s private matters to be an invasion of privacy given her public figure status. Instead it was the method of the coverage that the court punished (*Galella vs. Onassis* 487 F.2d 986 [2nd Cir. 1973]).

While *Galella vs. Onassis* established that public figures are not granted the same expectation of privacy, public figures’ private lives cannot be legally covered by the media if they successfully prove a public disclosure of private facts. A public figure can claim an invasion of privacy if three elements can be proved: the disclosed fact is a private fact, the private fact was clearly publicly disclosed, and the public disclosure of the private fact is offensive to a reasonable person of ordinary sensibilities (Reuters). However if the private fact is regarded as public interest or listed as a public record, then a public figure can no longer use the tort of public disclosure of private facts as a reasonable defense for personal privacy (*ibid.*).

Another type of person with great public exposure is a public official. However, public officials knowingly apply for governmental positions of authority. Therefore, their private actions can be considered public interest, because of their public service (2007).

The definitive legal standard among the different variances of public figures, public officials and private persons has given the media precedent when reporting private information. However, athletes were not legally recognized as public figures until the legal case *Chuy vs. The Philadelphia Eagles Football Club*, which established their expectation of privacy within the media. Former Philadelphia Eagles player Don Chuy sued the team after the Eagles general manager provided false medical records of him to the media (Pedersen, 2007). Although the case was about defamation and not an unethical invasion of privacy, it did establish that “professional football garners significant media attention...Chuy was a public figure and athletes assume a role of public prominence” (ibid).

### **Ethical Obligations**

Although there are legal issues that must be addressed to establish what private information the media can publicize, the disclosure of private information is also a major ethical issue. Therefore, it is necessary to articulate a standard that journalists should abide by when revealing private information about athletes.

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) is America’s oldest journalist organization with more than 7,500 members. Its mission statement is “to stimulate high standards and ethical behavior in the practice of journalism and maintain constant vigilance in protection of the First Amendment” (<http://www.spj.org/mission.asp>, 1996). Additionally, SPJ has developed a Code of Ethics that is widely recognized and consulted by journalists and other members of the media as a guide to ethical journalism (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>, 2014). The four principles of the SPJ Code of Ethics are to seek truth

and report it, minimize harm, act independently, and be accountable and transparent. A journalist who seeks the truth and reports diligently reports accurate news while being “honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information” (ibid). The second keystone of the SPJ Code of Ethics, minimizing harm, is respectfully treating all people involved with the news story (including sources, subjects and audience). As stated in the Code of Ethics Preamble, minimizing harm includes “balancing the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness” (ibid). The third principle, acting independently, is to serve the public by avoiding conflicts of interest. Finally, the fourth component of being accountable and transparent is to accept responsibility for any work published and to explain the decision-making process of the story when asked by the public (ibid).

While all four principles in the Society of Professional Journalist Code of Ethics are important ethical guidelines to follow when covering any news story, seeking the truth and reporting it and minimizing harm are the most relevant sections of the code when it comes to deciding to report on an athlete’s private life. Conflict between these two ethical standards can create difficulty in defining what personal information involving athletes can be deemed newsworthy, and, therefore, acceptable to publish. For example, minimizing harm includes weighing the results when reporting private information, whether it be a private or public person (Meyers, 2010). However, the SPJ suggests that members of the media who actively seek the truth and report it are recognizing “a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public’s business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all” (<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>, 2014). Reporting professional athletes’ private lives may be necessary because their public figure status and salaries are reliant on the general public’s interest in their occupation. Therefore, the public is a stakeholder in an athlete’s success and fame.

It is difficult to determine if a news outlet is acting ethically when revealing private information for public figures, such as athletes, because there isn’t a universal standard that applies to publishing this

personal information. One perspective is from Stuart Banner, a legal historian and UCLA law professor, who says, “the price of fame was a loss of control over one’s image...such characters may be said, of their own volition, to have dedicated to the public right of any fair portraiture of themselves” (Banner, 2011).

Banner also states that some cases involving an athlete’s private information are very complex (ibid). For example, the media’s coverage of Tiger Woods’ affairs (which will be analyzed in Chapter Three) demonstrates the problematic ethics of extensively reporting private information that has no relevance to his golf performance. However there are less complex instances of the media’s coverage of athletes’ private lives that may provide a standard for media coverage. One example was in 2014 when many major media organizations covered the Ray Rice scandal.

Ray Rice was a star NFL running back who, according to the legal precedent earlier in the chapter, is recognized as a public figure. After seeing a video released by TMZ depicting Rice dragging his fiancée out of an elevator, an Atlantic County Grand Jury indicted Rice on a charge of third-degree assault. Months later, another video showed Rice smacking his fiancée in the elevator, prior to dragging her (CNN, 2014). The story, which originally received modest coverage by the news media after the initial story was published, became a national headline, leading off the CBS Morning News (CBS, 2014). Eventually, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell suspended Rice, and his team, the Baltimore Ravens, released him. While this story exemplifies the media reporting on a professional athlete’s private issues, it is ethically sound to report this type of private information. Once the story became a legal issue resulting in a public court record, personal information relating to the story became newsworthy. Additionally, the story directly affected Rice’s athletic performance. Therefore, it is understandable that the media published information about Rice’s personal life, even though it did not necessarily minimize harm (Rice is still not on an NFL roster).

While the coverage of Ray Rice was ethically sound, other media reports about athletes’ personal lives are questionable. For example, a Yahoo article titled “Derek Jeter has possible bachelor party with

three former Yankees” can be questioned as to whether this private information needs to be published (Cwik, 2016). Although this online article has a relatively high comment count, 110 total comments as of October 2016, is Derek Jeter’s bachelor party newsworthy enough to warrant that journalists “seek the truth and report it?” The upcoming chapters will analyze the growth of this demand for private information and how an athlete’s expectation of privacy eroded over time. This paper will also later survey several media members’ views on reporting private information and eventually recommend a standard on the issue that can be applied in today’s media.

## Chapter 2

### Erosion of Privacy

In 1970, the book *Ball Four* changed the public's perception of baseball players. Written by former professional baseball player Jim Bouton, *Ball Four* contradicted the media's depiction of athletes as mistake-free, admirable working-class heroes. Instead, Bouton revealed that the athletes covered in *Ball Four* were as deplorably imperfect as they were talented in baseball. Its exposure of athletes' alcoholism, lewd jokes about women and drug use provided the public with stories that were previously never published. People became equally fascinated by stories about Mickey Mantle's hangovers during games as they were about his home runs (Bouton, 1970). Fueled by the public's interest, the mainstream media started reporting on an athlete's personal life, as well as his athletic performance.

This chapter uses two sections to examine the erosion of athletes' privacy in the media. The first section will trace the history of media coverage of professional athletes in an attempt to show how athletes' private lives became bigger stories than their daily athletic performances. The second section will provide reasons, such as changes in cultural expectations and technology, why the media changed its coverage of athletes and their personal lives.

### Evolutionary Coverage

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is very common for the public to read, watch, or hear about an athlete's relationship status, favorite alcoholic beverage, and vacation during the off-season. However 100 years ago, the public was only aware of an athlete's championships, batting average, and touchdowns. To understand how the media's coverage of athletes evolved, it is necessary to chronicle the press's reporting

style of athletes over the last century and provide examples of the type of information that was being published.

Sports reporting began in America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The introduction of professional baseball in 1890, along with the growing popularity of college football, professional boxing, and professional golf, caused newspapers to create sports divisions. The *Spirit of the Times*, and the *New York Herald* were the first large-circulation newspapers that began covering sports with match reports, recording statistics and final results (Sloan, 2002).

At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sports journalism's coverage primarily remained the same until the era known as the "Golden Age" of sports changed the sports media and transformed athletes into public figures. From 1920-1930, the "Golden Age" gave iconic status to athletes, coaches, and writers due to the public's surging interest in sports and journalists' freedom to "set the agenda for sports coverage" (Pedersen, 2007). According to the *New World Encyclopedia*, newspapers began dedicating an average of 10.4 columns, a 20 percent increase from the previous era, for sports coverage, and 14.6 percent increase for sports advertising (*New World Encyclopedia*, 2015).

Unlike their predecessors, sports writers began to develop relationships with professional athletes by travelling with the team or athlete. One example is journalist O.B. Keeler's relationship with golf legend Bobby Jones. Keeler, who wrote for the *Atlanta Journal*, covered and traveled with Bobby Jones throughout his career, including Jones's historic Grand Slam win in 1930 (Augusta.com, 2012). When Jones was asked about his close relationship with Keeler, he said, "What measure of fame I have enjoyed has been due in large part to Keeler and his gifted typewriter" (ibid).

As demonstrated with O.B. Keeler's coverage of Bobby Jones, the media in the "Golden Age" turned athletes into highly regarded public figures through constant coverage and descriptive, vivid writing. Sportswriters romanticized athletes as working-class heroes with illuminating storytelling and creative nicknames, such as Babe Ruth's "Sultan of Swat." Literary devices such as hyperbole, imagery, and metaphors were often used to only celebrate and commend athletes for their athletic performances.

Many story leads were identified to be “high in embellishment and low in factual details, which dramatically differed from the inverted pyramid journalistic style” (Pedersen, 2007). An excerpt from sportswriter Grantland Rice’s article “Notre Dame’s Cyclones Beats Army,” which was written as a game summary, exemplifies the writing style and content of the “Golden Age.”

“Outlined against a blue gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as Famine, Pestilence, Destruction, and Death. They are only aliases. Their real names are Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley, and Layden. They formed the crest of the South Bend cyclone before which another fighting Army football team was swept over the precipice at the Polo Grounds yesterday afternoon as 55,000 spectators peered down on a bewildering panorama spread on the green plain below.” (Rice, 1924)

Sports journalists continued to depict athletes as heroes during the 1930s and 1940s. However, the impact of a new medium altered and enhanced sports coverage. Introduced in the midst of the 1920s, radio emerged as a new fashionable way to consume information about sports and athletes. CBS and NBC gave listeners the chance to experience select sporting events, which created even greater public interest (Pedersen, 2007). In 1945, the Associated Press created its own sports service, in response to the nation’s demand for more sports coverage (*New World Encyclopedia*, 2015). Sportscasters announced games in the same style as their journalist counterparts, but provided the public immediate reporting that had previously not been available. Additionally, the 1940s saw the rise of specialized sports magazines. According to the book *Sports Reporting*, the abundance of statistics, facts, and literary writing saw magazines such as “*Sports Digest*, *Golf Digest*, *World Tennis and Football Annual* emerge as the market for niche writing arose” (Garrison, 1993).

The media’s coverage of athletes began changing in the 1950s. Television’s insertion into the mainstream media greatly affected the reporting of other media. Sportswriters’ romantic writing could not

compete with television's pictures. Consumers began to value immediacy and relied less on newspapers to detail what happened on the field. Therefore, the sports media started using different methods to cover athletes. The 1960s sports coverage included more interviews, opinion pieces, and analysis shows (Pedersen, 2007).

As television became a universally owned commodity across America in the 1970s, "sporting events became intimate experiences, bringing fans close to the action through a combination of audio, pictures, and dialogue...giving them more outlets to satiate their desire for sport information" (ibid). Athletes began receiving unprecedented media exposure. Sports programming hours nearly doubled (from 787 to 1,356) as the NBA, MLB, NFL, and NHL all signed broadcasting contracts to air their games (Wenner, 1989). The media also started featuring pregame and postgame shows that previewed or recapped matches (ibid).

The late 1970s and 1980s is when the media started to cover athletes' personal information. Stories began including information about salaries, sponsorships, and relationships (Pedersen, 2007). One example was WNBA (women's professional basketball) players, who were recognized for their athletic talent, but publicly identified by their relationships (Pompper, 2016). Also, 24-hour news networks such as ESPN and CNN provided instantaneous new content, allowing viewers to be constantly updated. With so much additional content, the media depicted athletes as global superstars as well as role models (Smart, 2005).

While sports journalists began publishing athletes' private information in the 1980s, the media from 1990 to the present day regularly reported "exclusive stories" covering athletes' celebrity personas and private relationships. Stories covering an athlete's private life commonly piqued public interest more than stories about an athlete's performances, but were often driven by allegation rather than confirmation. One example is the media's coverage of Michael Jordan's gambling. In a 1993 ABC News nightly report, journalist Dick Schaap's leading story critiqued Jordan for his lackluster performance against the New York Knicks. Schaap cryptically asked viewers whether "Jordan was worn down by the Knicks's

aggressive defense or was he (Jordan) to blame for his own demise?" (Andrews, 2001). Schaap speculated that Jordan's decision to gamble at Atlantic City the night before the game caused his poor performance and declared that "the most rich and famous athlete in the world is not supposed to go to a gambling casino" (ibid). Eventually the media suggested that Jordan had a gambling problem that was affecting his performance. Later that year, Michael Jordan won his third consecutive NBA championship. However, the media reported on Jordan's gambling again after he won his first NBA championship following his father's death. *New York Times* journalist Michael Janofsky connected Jordan's father's death to a gambling debt the athlete may have owed. The police investigating the murder concluded that there was no relation whatsoever, contradicting the media's reports (CNN, 1993).

### **Factors that Contributed to Change in Coverage**

The media's coverage of athletes evolved from celebrating athletic achievement to covering "off-the-field" issues. As journalistic competition increased, media outlets faced new challenges to retain audiences. This section will examine how these new challenges (new technology, changing athlete-media relations and cultural expectations) eroded athletes' expectations of privacy within the media.

The technological advancements in media have significantly affected how journalists cover athletes and their personal lives. New media also greatly impacted cultural expectations and athlete-media relations, explaining why athletes' privacy expectations eroded over the last 100 years. The first major technological advancement that affected sports journalism was radio. While the introduction of radio did not initially change how the media reported on an athlete's private life, it did spike the public's interest in athletes and contributed to the growth of athletes' public figure status. Prior to radio's existence, newspapers were the only journalistic source of sports information. However, newspapers only allowed readers to experience the event from the perspective of a journalist after it had occurred. Radio gave listeners the platform to listen live, which sparked more public interest in sport and athletes (Chicago

Radio Commission, 1937). Radio also enhanced the consumer's experience with "actuality sound"-- the noises from a live event that are overheard on the radio (such as cheering, referees' whistles, or the sound of a baseball bat), which intrigued listeners and made radio a "must-have" commodity (Andrews, 2005). Despite The Great Depression, radio ownership increased from 12 million to 30 million people during the 1930s (Pedersen, 2007).

The second major technological advancement that changed the sports media's reporting on athletes was television. Television greatly affected other media's sports coverage and helped morph athletes into celebrities. TV combined radio's sound and newspaper's reporting, but mainly attracted audiences with its instantaneous visual coverage (ibid). According to Bruce Garrison's *Sports Reporting*, television "required journalists in the print and audio media to search for different angles to maintain a fresh approach. As a result the media addressed fans' new obsession with athletes' lives on and off the field" (Garrison, 1993).

An example of how television changed sports reporting was network television's pre-match segments. In the 1976 Olympics "Howard Cosell and Chris Schenkel presented 'up close and personal' segments on athletes, adding emotional human interest stories that earned top ratings in most time slots" (Castleman, 2003).

The new reporting style on television also influenced other media to cover private stories to remain relevant amongst the public (Pedersen, 2007). One example of this was Arthur Ashe's admitting to having AIDS. In 1992, Ashe, a retired Hall-of-Fame tennis player, uncomfortably announced that he had contracted HIV. He noted that he had been aware of his condition for more than three years and was not planning on publicly revealing the information (Reimer, 1992). Ashe stated that he only made the announcement because he feared the news would be released after a *USA Today* reporter called him and inquired about his HIV diagnosis (ibid.).

Television has also impacted the coverage of athletes' private lives by morphing athletes into celebrities. According to Barry Smart's *The Sport Star, Modern Sport, and the Cultural Economy of*

*Sporting Celebrity*, athletes became celebrities through their presence in advertising (Smart, 2005).

Sporting events' large television audiences led the public to be more interested in athletes. In 2013, a television marketing association called Thinkbox conducted a study that backed Smart's claim. According to the study, people become more curious about a person the more frequently they see them on TV (Thinkbox, 2013). During the 1970s, athletes became marketing tools and endorsed many brands. Therefore, people associated athletes with advertising they had seen on TV. Also the 1970s accounted for astronomical television sales, which bolstered athletes' publicity through the commercial advertising available on TV (Smart, 2005).

The latest technological effect on athletes' private lives in the media is the Internet. According to an article published in the *International Business Times*, the Internet "has massively disrupted sports journalism, bringing fans an unprecedented range and volume of content choice while simultaneously altering legacy business models in sports media" (*International Business Times*, 2016). Since the Internet is the most instantaneous medium to post news, journalists face new pressures to report news quickly and accurately. Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook allow ordinary citizens to report newsworthy, and sometimes false, news before journalistic institutions. Blog sites like Gawker.com, Deadspin.com and SBNation.com have grown large audiences by publishing stories about an athlete's relationships and livelihoods.

One example is Deadspin.com reporting that Manti Te'o, a former Notre Dame college football player, had a fake girlfriend. According to the report, Te'o learned that his girlfriend, whom he met online, was a hoax (Deadspin, 2013). Deadspin.com was the first news website to publish the story. The story was subsequently covered by news outlets such as *USA Today* and ABC News, and became the most trended, and mocked, tweet on Twitter for 24 hours (Gleeson, 2013).

The Internet has also changed the media's sports coverage because professional sports teams can now release their own news content. Since every professional major league team in America has its own website (Prosportsofficialteamsites.com, 2007), teams no longer rely on the media as a direct informer to

the public. Meanwhile, social media has provided professional athletes multiple platforms to publish personal information at their own discretion.

The erosion of athletes' privacy in the media can also be attributed to the deteriorating relationship between athletes and journalists. Prior to television's emergence, athletes had cordial relationships with media members. While the media heralded athletes' athletic achievements, journalists generally agreed to refrain from reporting private information for the sake of the mutual prosperity of the media and athletes (Telander, 1984). According to an article in *The Sociology of Sport Journal*, Fred Lieb, a respected baseball reporter who covered stars like Babe Ruth said, "nobody reported because we were in the business of creating heroes, not tearing them down" (ibid).

Over time, athletes stopped relying on sports journalists' portrayal of their athletic accomplishments. Electronic media, such as television, intensified public interest, which increased their fame and wealth, thus diminishing sportswriters' worth to athletes. This development eventually caused reporters to cover stories that were previously never published (Laucella, 2002). Eventually reporters' "frequent misquotes, quotes used out of context, the use of off-the-record material and a discussion of an individual's private life spur sports figures to be leery when interacting with the media" (ibid).

Another reason why athlete-media relations worsened is because athletes identified less with the reporters who covered their sport. Early sports journalists didn't reveal salacious details about athletes because "many were friends, shared similar interests and earned similar wages" (Robinson, 1998). One example is Grantland Rice, a journalist in the 1920s. His yearly salary matched Babe Ruth's salary in the mid 1920s (ibid.). However, thirty years later, lucrative television deals helped significantly increase athletes' salaries. In 1960, Arnold Palmer became the first prominent athlete to sign with a marketing agency (Futterman, 2016). Five years later, Sandy Koufax signed a \$125,000 contract extension. By the 1970s, athletes started earning one million dollars a year (ibid.). Today, most professional athletes are millionaires while the average salary of sportswriters is \$49,000 (simplyhired.com, 2013). The large disparity in income and fame contributed to the estrangement of athletes from sports journalists.

Cultural expectations have influenced the media's reporting style on athletes. The coverage of national political scandals and postwar attitudes greatly influenced the sports media's reporting style.

As presented earlier in the chapter, the sports media's coverage during the "Golden Age" era was synonymous with hero worship (Pedersen, 2007). Hero worship was common in the 1920s because of the emotional and physical impact of World War I on society (Inabinett, 1994). Professional sports "offered the greatest fund of national entertainment and cured the lonesomeness so many people faced after the war" (ibid). Therefore the media romantically wrote about and celebrated athletes as heroes, "which offered renewed hope to the American dream and society" (Laucella, 2004).

While the Roaring Twenties rejuvenated and celebrated American culture, the 1970s political scandals and postwar frustrations created skepticism amongst the public and the media. The Watergate scandal and waning support for the Vietnam War made the public distrustful of the government, its leaders and other large institutions (Copeland, 2010). The nation's growing distrust of public figures created a public obsession with investigative journalism that filtered into sports media (Pedersen, 2007). Journalists ceased glorifying athletes and began publishing revealing private information. Books like *Ball Four* became popular as they exposed athletes' darker, and previously unpublished transgressions (Wenner, 1998). Sport reports began to include more exclusive interviews, human-interest stories, and investigations of athletes' private lives (ibid).

Today, news consumers expect to be immediately informed, or they will lose interest (*International Business Times*, 2016). As competition increases and people's patience wanes, media companies must decide whether to break fascinating news stories that will attract viewers, and thus keep the business operating, or risk audience loyalty by publishing information that may already be available. This modern cultural expectation has caused certain media "to use private information on celebrities and even sensationalize stories to ensure captive audiences" (Pedersen, 2007). The next chapter will analyze the Tiger Woods scandal, which interested much of the public, but exposed very private information about one of the world's most famous athletes.

## Chapter 3

### Tiger Woods Case Study

“Some have written things about my family. Despite the damage I have done, I still believe it is right to shield my family from the public spotlight. They did not do these things. I did. I have always tried to maintain a private space for my wife and children. They have been kept separate from my sponsors, my commercial endorsements... However, my behavior doesn't make it right for the media to follow my 2½-year-old daughter to school and report the school's location. They staked out my wife and pursued my mom. Whatever my wrongdoings, for the sake of my family, please leave my wife and kids alone.”

– Tiger Woods, 2010

On February 19, 2010, Tiger Woods delivered a thirteen-minute public apology regarding his widely reported extramarital affairs. In his statement, Woods admitted to his actions, apologized to fans, friends, and sponsors and pleaded that he and his family be granted immediate privacy. Over the next few months, Woods lost several sponsors, checked into a sex rehabilitation center, and received relentless media coverage.

Tiger Woods and the media's coverage of his extramarital affairs will serve as a case study for this paper. At the time of the coverage, Woods was one of the world's most famous athletes. His success on the golf course and great marketability made him a highly regarded public figure. Conversely, his introverted persona and privacy created much speculation as to who Tiger Woods really was. However, after November 23, 2009, the former number-one ranked golfer in the world had his private life publicly examined like no other modern athlete.

This chapter will provide a timeline of events of the Tiger Woods affair scandal. It will analyze the media's coverage of Woods' private life and demonstrate how this coverage reflects modern reporting

on athletes (as referenced in Chapter Two). This chapter will also examine Tiger Woods' public figure status and his private persona to understand whether Woods deserved such intense coverage on a very private issue.

### **Tiger Woods: The Person**

On November 28, 2009, prior to the world learning why Tiger Woods crashed his car into a fire hydrant, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published an article titled "The Private Life of Tiger Woods" with the headline "Why so many wild theories about Tiger Woods' car crash? Because nobody in the media world knows him well enough to ask what is going on" (Elliot, 2009). While Tiger Woods' success and marketability has made him a globally recognized public figure, the world's first billion-dollar athlete is an extreme introvert who hid his private life from everyone. This section will describe Tiger Woods' personality and analyze his public interactions to demonstrate that public figure like Woods can also be an extremely private person.

Woods was the only child of his mother and father, Earl and Kultida Woods. He has often said that his father was his best friend and the closest person he had in his life. A 1996 *Sports Illustrated* cover story explained that Tiger was raised to be "the chosen one of golf" by his father Earl from the age of two (Smith, 1996). Therefore, Tiger did not experience a normal childhood. Instead of playing with friends after school, Tiger practiced golf.

Earl surrounded his son with a "team" that would resemble the supporting cast of a professional golfer. In professional golf, a golfer's personal team consists of select people whom he or she trusts to aid with golf performance. This often includes family, a swing coach (personal instructor who works with a golfer's swing), personal trainer, mental coach/psychologist, agent, caddy and close friends. While it is very common, and expected, for a professional golfer to have a "team," it is extremely rare that any child before high school develops this sort of helping cast. However, largely because of his unprecedented

talent, Tiger had a swing coach by the age of four and a mental coach by the age of twelve. In the documentary “Tiger: The Authorized DVD Collection,” Tiger explains that from a young age his team consisted of the closest people in his life (TWDOC).

Although Woods changed members of his team as he got older, he insisted on trusting a small group of people. From when he turned professional in 1996 until the affair scandal in 2009, Tiger Woods had only had two caddies, two swing coaches, and one agent. Additionally, Woods identifies only a few fellow PGA Tour players as friends, specifically mentioning Mark O’Meara and Arjun Atwal (both of whom befriended Woods after being neighbors and members of an extremely exclusive golf club, Isleworth).

The few people who are a part of Tiger Woods’ inner circle have noted that he is much more private than his public image suggests. In an ESPN story, journalist Wright Thompson describes Tiger’s personality as “shy, awkward and basically well-intentioned, as unsuited for the life in public as he is suited for hitting a ball” (Thompson, 2016). Thompson quotes an unnamed friend in the piece, who says Woods is the prototypical introvert:

“Frankly, the real Tiger Woods isn't that marketable. There isn't a lot of money to be made off a guy who just wants to be left alone to read a book. Or left alone to play fetch with his dog. Or left alone to play with his kids. Or left alone to lift weights. Or left alone to play a video game. Do you see a trend? Tiger was a natural introvert, and the financial interest for him to be extroverted really drove a wedge in his personality. Being a celebrity changed him and he struggled with that -- and he struggled with the fact that he struggled with that” (ibid).

People outside of Woods’ circle are also aware of his private personality. In an interview for this paper, ESPN and GolfChannel.com reporter Jason Sobel, who has reported on Woods for more than fourteen years, said, “He is one of the most private people I have ever covered.” Former Golf Channel

senior producer David Kamens added that Tiger's reticence was so great that "nobody in the media knew who he was away from the golf course." Even by his own admission, Tiger, who named his yacht "Privacy," explained in a Charlie Rose interview that he does not like the publicity and that his shy personality stemmed from a speech impediment when he was a kid:

Rose: "You were so self-focused in thinking about the game. You didn't seem to pay attention to other people."

Woods: "The people who are closest to me yes. Also, I was very uncomfortable being out in public."

Rose: "So it was more shyness rather than arrogance and being a jerk?"

Woods: "No I was always very shy. I have always been very shy. When I was little I had a speech impediment. I used to stutter pretty badly.... If the teacher called on me, I couldn't speak. So I didn't want to speak to anybody...having to go through that difficult time early on in my childhood, probably shaped me into what I am now." (Charlie Rose, 2016)

Prior to the media's coverage of his extramarital affairs, Tiger Woods was very private about his marriage to his ex-wife, Elin Nordegren. The Associated Press reported in 2004 that the couple married in Barbados, but Woods had hired "the island's only helicopter charter- a move that prevented journalists and photographers from flying over the event" (Associated Press, 2004). CNN also reported "a small army of armed security personnel patrolled the hotel and beach area, keeping onlookers, paparazzi and the curious at a distance" (CNN, 2004).

Woods' private personality is also evident from his lack of social interactions throughout his tenure as a public figure. For example, it is very common for professional golfers on the PGA Tour to interact with the public by signing autographs either before or after the completion of their rounds. Golf is referred to as a "gentlemen's game," and there is an expectation for professional golfers to show mutual respect to fans, as opposed to athletes in other sports. While big-name golfers do not often sign as many autographs as players who aren't as popular, star golfers such as Phil Mickelson and Arnold Palmer, who was known to sign hundreds of autographs per signing, are celebrated for their willingness to interact with fans. However, Woods is often criticized for signing only a few or no autographs after his rounds (Castonguay, 2015).

Another example of Woods avoiding intimate public interaction is through his social media presence. As shown in Chapter Two, social media has provided athletes with supplemental fame and public interaction. Thousands of professional athletes, including some of America's most popular and influential athletes such as LeBron James and Tom Brady, use social media to provide personal content and opinions that would otherwise not be publicly available. For example, both James's and Brady's Twitter accounts each have more than 3,000 tweets, including many uploaded personal pictures and videos showcasing their private lives (Lebron James, 2016). Although Woods does have Twitter and Facebook accounts, the style of writing suggests that somebody other than Woods writes many posts and that Woods uses social media as a marketing tool rather than to publicly express his thoughts. As of October 31, 2016, Tiger Woods has only 562 tweets since he started his account in April 2009 (Tiger Woods, 2016).

## Tiger Woods' recent tweets:

**Tiger Woods** @TigerWoods · Nov 3  
 Hanging in The Woods Jupiter is an artistic representation of one of golf's most famous trees. Can you guess which one?

9% Lone Fir @ Chambers Bay  
 10% Bogey Tree @ Riviera  
 62% Eisenhower Tree @ Augusta  
 19% Joe DiMaggio @ Cypress Pt

17,116 votes · Final results

39 retweets · 147 likes

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**Tiger Woods** @TigerWoods · Nov 2  
 Read what Tiger's son thought of his childhood home.

**Tiger Woods Found.** @TWFoundation  
 Today we spotlight the man behind the vision, @TigerWoods. #TWF20  
[tigerwoodsfoundation.org/newsfeed/artic...](https://tigerwoodsfoundation.org/newsfeed/artic...)

49 retweets · 243 likes

## LeBron James' recent tweets:

**LeBron James** @KingJames · Oct 26  
 😂😂😂😂 My bad @Channing\_Frye!! You're my guy.

**Bleacher Report** @BleacherReport  
 Why @KingJames do this to Channing Frye though?!

15K retweets · 28K likes

---

**LeBron James** @KingJames · Oct 25  
 I accept @DwyaneWade!! 1-0 #RallyTogether

**UNINTERRUPTED** @uninterrupted  
 The #WorldSeries bet is on! @DwyaneWade (@Cubs) sends @KingJames (@Indians) the official wager.

7.8K retweets · 17K likes

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**LeBron James** @KingJames · Oct 25  
 all of this! Take it all in cause it's all for you guys! Couldn't think of a better place for this moment tonight! #AllForTheLand #LetsRock

## **Tiger Woods: The Public Figure**

In the summer of 2016, ESPN ranked the world's 100 most famous active athletes. The rankings were determined by a formula calculating an athlete's fame based on his/her salary, endorsements, and social media following. According to the list, Tiger Woods, who has not competed since August 2015, ranked 7<sup>th</sup> on the list (ESPN, 2016). Even though the Official World Golf Ranking ranks him as the 831<sup>st</sup> best golfer in the world (OWGR, 2016), Woods remains the world's most famous golfer and one of the most recognizable athletes ever. This section will examine how his celebrity status was bolstered by his athletic achievement, his sponsorships, and other public honors received.

In 2006, ESPN journalist Gene Wojciechowski wrote an article titled "Tiger Woods is greatest individual athlete ever." The article was written after Woods had won his 12<sup>th</sup> major victory. In golf, there are four tournaments every year that are recognized as majors, which are equivalent to championships in other sports. The victory put Woods on pace to win 24 majors before the age of 40 (breaking the all-time major victories record of 18). Wojciechowski wrote, "Woods has escaped golf's gravitational pull and moved into a planetary system that includes your one-namers (Pele, Babe, Jack), your initialers (MJ), your nicknamers (The Great One, The Greatest), your oldies (Jim Thorpe, Willie Mays, Joe Louis), your Olympians (Mark Spitz, Carl Lewis)" (Wojciechowski, 2006).

Tiger Woods had accomplished everything in golf. As of November 2016, Woods has 79 PGA Tour victories (third-most wins all-time), 14 major victories (second-most majors all-time), and more than \$110 million in career earnings (PGA Tour, 2016). Woods also has the best winning percentage of all-time, winning 25 percent of the events he has played in. The next closest player at 17 percent is Jack Nicklaus, who is considered by some to be the greatest golfer ever. There is also an entire article on GolfChannel.com that lists Woods' 40 greatest golf records, which, according to the post, proves that Woods' records are "the most dominant, relatively speaking, by any one athlete in the history of sports" (Golf Channel, 2015).

Tiger Woods' athletic dominance is reflected in his impact on television. During Tiger's athletic peak from 1999-2006, television ratings for a tournament were 25 percent lower when Tiger did not compete (Tuchman, 2015). A recent example of this phenomenon known as the "Tiger Effect" was proved with Woods' absence from the 2014 Masters. According to a *Forbes* article, the 2014 Masters, which is golf's most celebrated and historically watched tournament, recorded its lowest television ratings since 1993 (ibid). Since Tiger has played in every Masters since 1994, there is a direct correlation between Tiger Woods competing and people watching the tournament.

Woods' racial identity may have further bolstered his public figure status. Golf's demographics have always been overwhelmingly identified as people who are white and affluent. Relative to other sports, golf requires significant financial investment to play and practice on a regular basis. Someone who plays golf must pay for his or her own balls, clubs, gloves, shoes, bag, and greens fees (the cost to play). Many people who live in poor urban areas can't afford to play golf. This can explain why Woods, who grew up in a low-income household, is one of the few minorities who competes on the PGA Tour. Since Woods' professional debut in 1996, there have only been two African-Americans, Joseph Bramlett in 2010 and Harold Varner III in 2015, who have "earned their card" (achieving eligibility on the PGA Tour for at least one season), but neither has won a tournament (USA Today, 2015). Woods' unique African-American identity in a predominantly white sport has only magnified his athletic achievements and generated more public interest (Rosaforte, 1998).

Another way Tiger became a public figure was through his unrivaled marketability. Prior to the affair coverage, "Tiger earned \$100 million a year in endorsement income, more than any other athlete" (UC Davis, 2009). Woods' sponsors included Nike, Accenture, Tag Heuer, AT&T, Gillette, Gatorade, Electronic Arts, and Upper Deck. Woods also was the first athlete to have his own Gatorade brand drink, and was Electronic Art's only active athlete to have an annual titled videogame, "Tiger Woods PGA Tour" (Gregory, 2009). In September 2009, *Forbes* recognized Woods as the first billionaire athlete in the history of sports (Badenhausen, 2009) and, along with Lance Armstrong, is one of only two athletes to

appear on *TIME*'s Most Influential People list twice (*TIME*, 2009). Woods also has the third-most cover appearances for *Sports Illustrated*, with 24 total cover stories, behind only Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali (Burt, 2015).

### **The Media Coverage**

As demonstrated in the previous section, Woods was undoubtedly aware that his public figure status warranted exceptional media attention. In 1996, Woods announced his professional status in a widely covered press conference, saying, "I guess, hello, world" (Dorman, 1996). A few days later, 20-year-old Tiger Woods gave his first exclusive interview as a professional and admitted that he expected all of the immediate attention.

"All the attention I have been getting hasn't been easy. But then again, I've accepted the fact that this is the reason (golf) that caused it. My golfing abilities caused all of this. So I'm ok with all of that." (PGA Tour, 1996)

This section will review the media's reporting on Tiger Woods' car accident and extramarital affairs, and consider whether the revelations about Woods' personal life were necessary.

On November 25, 2009, the tabloid newspaper *The National Enquirer* reported the story that Tiger Woods had been having a long affair with a woman named Rachel Uchitel (*The National Enquirer*, 2009). However, the story was widely disregarded, given the source. Journalist Jay Busbee, a former contributor to ESPN.com, *USA Today* and Yahoo Sports, encapsulated the initial public opinion by dismissing the report as a "non-story" and told readers to "make of this what you will" (Busbee, 2009).

Two days later, November 27, Tiger Woods reportedly crashed his Cadillac SUV into a fire hydrant near his home in Windermere, Florida at 2:30 A.M. The accident was reported approximately 12

hours later with a statement released by the Florida Highway Patrol citing Woods' involvement in the accident and stating that he was in serious condition (Starcasm, 2009). Major news outlets, including CNN, NBC News, ABC News, and ESPN, immediately covered the story and revealed that Elin Nordegren, Woods' wife, used a golf club to break a car window. According to ESPN.com News Services, "speculation increased regarding the nature of the crash and surrounding circumstances. Various theories are tossed out" (ESPN, 2010).

On November 29, the Associated Press released the audio of a 911 call from a neighbor reporting the car accident. The audio confirmed speculation that Woods was found lying unconscious, but breathing, outside of his crashed car (Fox News, 2009). Later that day, Woods issued a statement saying he was taken to the hospital after the crash, but had recovered from his injuries and was never in serious condition. Woods also took responsibility for the crash, confirmed that no alcohol was involved, and noted that his wife "acted courageously when she saw I was hurt and in trouble" (Tiger Woods, 2009). Woods also dismissed widely published reports that his wife had attacked him and requested privacy regarding the specifics around the story (ibid). Fox News also reported that Rachel Uchitel denied the story in *The National Enquirer*, saying that she was not having an affair with Woods (Fox News, 2009). The next day, November 30, Woods announced his withdrawal from the Chevron World Golf Challenge, which is an event that is hosted by Tiger with proceeds going to his personal charity.

On December 1, usmagazine.com, the website of tabloid magazine *Us Weekly*, reported that another woman, Jamiee Grubbs, claimed to have had a 31-month affair with Woods. The following day, the tabloid released a voicemail from Woods asking the woman to remove his name from her phone and warning her that his wife may be calling. Gawker reported that *Us Weekly* paid \$150,000 for the recording (Busbee, 2010). Tiger's alleged infidelity and voicemail was covered by notable media such as Yahoo Sports, ABC News, CBS News, *The Telegraph*, and NBC News. The same day, Woods released an apology saying, "I have let my family down and I regret those transgressions with all of my heart. I have not been true to my values and the behavior my family deserves" (Tiger Woods, 2009).

From December 4-10, at least ten women claimed to have had affairs with Woods. An example of the reporting can be seen on ABC News's website. The article "At Least 9 Women Linked to Tiger Woods in Alleged Affairs" profiled each woman and their possible relations with Woods (Goldman, 2009).

On December 11, Woods announced his indefinite leave from professional golf to work on family issues. Over the next few months, the media covered Woods' registration at a sex rehabilitation clinic, his loss of sponsors (specifically AT&T and Accenture), his public apology (which was the first time he openly admitted that he had affairs and cheated), and his announcement of his return to professional golf for The Masters. Eventually on March 21, Woods participated in his first public interviews since the original allegations with ESPN and The Golf Channel (Busbee, 2010).

Reports on Woods' private life began to slow down once he resumed competing. However, significant damage had been done to his reputation. According to Marketing Evaluations, the company that researches a celebrity's Q score (a rating that surveys the public's opinion and likability of an athlete), Woods experienced a 33 percent drop in likability, with nearly 40 percent no longer favoring Tiger (Lefton, 2010). Prior to the scandal, Tiger was heralded by many as the ideal role model. According to an ABC News article, Woods was so private and had such a reputable public image that "this is a fall from grace that is not just about sports" (Goldman, 2009).

On December 14, 2009 former entertainment and current sports journalist Dick Friedman wrote an article on golf.com claiming that the intense coverage of Woods' extramarital affairs generated more buzz than any non-political story he had ever covered (Friedman, 2012). According to Nielsen Wire, Tiger Woods was the second-leading news story, behind only Barack Obama, from November 30 to December 6 (Bernstein, 2012). Nielsen Wire also reported that 80 percent of Internet searches relating to Tiger Woods were about his affairs rather than golf or his accident (ibid). Friedman mentions in the same golf.com article that the story's coverage was so widespread that even political shows were reporting on it.

The media's coverage of the Tiger Woods affair story has two dimensions. The first dimension is reporting the car accident of a prominent public figure, while the second dimension is the reporting of a prominent public figure's personal transgressions. The coverage of Tiger Woods' car accident can be classified as ethical reporting. The media has a responsibility to seek the truth and report it, especially when police are involved. Therefore, Tiger's car accident, and the documentation, including the 911 recording, from the Florida Highway Patrol are necessary to report because a public figure is involved with a public record. However, seeking the reasons as to why Woods crashed his car is what makes this case, and the issue of reporting on athletes' personal lives, difficult to completely ethically justify. As mentioned earlier in this section, Tiger immediately accepted responsibility and requested privacy regarding an internal issue with him and his wife. Although it is newsworthy to report Woods' registration at a sex clinic, the media must be sensitive when covering specific aspects (such as the released voicemails) of an athlete's private life since it does not minimize harm nor respect the subjects of the case.

The media's coverage, which focused more on Woods' affairs, was similar throughout much of the industry. While it can be expected that sensational journalistic companies like *The National Enquirer* or *Us Weekly* would focus on gossip surrounding the story, such as *The New York Post* putting Woods' affairs on the front page for 20 consecutive days (breaking the previous record of 9/11 with 19 straight cover stories) (Ashford, 2009), it should be noted that traditional, highly regarded journalistic institutions published the same stories. One example of a respectable news outlet reporting sensational content is NBC News, which published an article on December 3, 2009 condemning Tiger's affairs and critiquing how he handled the situation. Another example is the conversation that occurred on "The View," which is an opinionated television show hosted by female celebrities. On December 7, 2009, host Barbara Walters, who is a seasoned, respected journalist, discussed unconfirmed rumors of how many women Woods had slept with (YouTube, 2009).

Only three weeks after Woods crashed his car, *Washington Post* journalist Paul Farhi wrote an article criticizing several other mainstream media institutions for reporting speculative material. According to his article, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *New York Daily News* and the *Boston Globe* all reported different sums that Tiger paid his wife to remain quiet about the affairs. However, there was never any confirmation that Woods had paid her (Farhi, 2009). Another instance is Gerald Posner's attempt to compile a timeline of Woods' affairs in relation to the timing of his accident. Posner, an experienced investigative reporter who wrote a book on JFK's assassination, published a lengthy theory on *The Daily Beast*, a popular news reporting website (*Daily Beast*, 2010). However, like most of the media, Posner treated Woods' alleged transgressions as fact and used unnamed sources and speculation to support his assertions. Tiger Woods continued to experience invasive reporting well after his scandal.

In 2012, Woods' former swing coach, Hank Haney, released a book titled *The Big Miss*. The book revealed fascinating but private information that Tiger had never disclosed, including his Navy Seal training following the death of his father, a former Green Beret. Woods expressed his distaste for the book in a press conference a few days after the book was released. Woods only answered one question about the book and, according to a *USA Today* article, "anger crept into his voice" when he was continuously questioned about it. The article also revealed that the moderator demanded that the media only ask questions about golf during the press conference (*Weir*, 2012). This demonstrates that the sports media disregarded Woods' request for privacy and continued to seek information about his personal life.

Essentially, the mainstream media stopped reporting news that was ethically newsworthy (the car accident) and began speculating on gossip (the affairs) that had not been publicly confirmed nor denied by Woods. The next chapter will examine what different media members learned from the coverage of Tiger Woods' affairs and correlate how that reportage applies to the media's current coverage of all professional athletes' personal lives. It will include interviews with six different members of the press to consider if there is any consensus about which aspects of an athlete's private life should be made public.

## Chapter 4

### Interviews with Media Professionals

In 2014, sports reporter Dan Patrick, winner of the 1998 Emmy for Most Outstanding Sports Personality-Studio Host (IMDb, 2016), appeared on the Golf Channel's television show "Feherty." Hosted by former professional player and on-course reporter David Feherty, the program includes one-on-one interviews with prominent public figures within golf and sporting culture. During the episode, Feherty asks Patrick for his opinions on the media's coverage of Tiger Woods's scandal in 2010. Patrick, a former lead sports reporter at CNN and longtime ESPN sportscaster, says that the coverage was completely wrong.

"The only thing I ever cared about is how would this affect him as a golfer- that's it. I didn't care on who he was dating, what he did in his personal life, or if he ruined his marriage- THAT'S PRIVATE. The public Tiger is what I was interested in. But we got caught up in the salacious details and we (the mainstream media) went at it with a tabloid frenzy. I really had a problem with that." (Golf Channel, 2014)

This chapter examines several media member's opinions about coverage of athletes' personal lives. I conducted each interview, over the phone or in-person, to learn if members of sports and news media agreed, or disagreed, with publishing an athlete's private information. This chapter will profile each individual who was interviewed, as well explain the questions that were asked. Additionally, it will present each question along with the interviewees' responses separately.

I will use the thoughts of the media members interviewed, as well as the information presented in prior chapters, to recommend an ethical standard to be used when reporting the private lives of athletes.

### Interviewee Profiles

Tiger Woods's scandal is a prime example an athlete's personal life being considered newsworthy material by all different kinds of news outlets. I interviewed six different media members, who are currently working or have extensive journalistic experience in order to learn what they think about the coverage of athletes' private lives. They include two sports journalists, one former sportscaster, one former news anchor, one former news editor and one former political reporter:

- Jason Sobel, a senior writer for both ESPN.com and GolfChannel.com. He has won eight awards from the Golf Writer's Association of America and four Emmys while working in production for ESPN. Sobel also has contributed to shows such as ESPN's *SportsCenter* and *Outside the Lines* and has been covering professional golf since 2004 (ESPN, 2015).
- Michael Collins, senior golf analyst for ESPN.com since 2011. Collins has hosted his own digital series "Cover It Live", in which he reviews and previews major storylines during PGA Tour tournaments. Prior to joining the media, Collins worked in golf as a professional caddy. (ESPN, 2015)
- Jack Whitaker, the leading sportscaster and voice of CBS Sports throughout the 1960's and 1970's. He has covered some of sport's biggest events including the Super Bowl, The Masters, and horseracing's Triple Crown. In the 1980's, Whitaker began working for ABC covering the Winter and Summer Olympics, and appeared as a sports reporter for programs like "Nightline," and "ABC World News Tonight." He has also won an Emmy for Outstanding Host or Commentator and won a Lifetime Achievement award during the 2012 Sports Emmys ceremony. Whitaker was inducted into the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association's Hall of Fame in 2001 (Sandomir, 2012).

- Bill Hutchinson, a former lead evening news anchor for CTV in Canada for 27 years. Before that, he served as a reporter and a producer for CTV and ITV Edmonton. He is currently a journalism professor at Seneca College and contributes to Poynter Institute (Linkedin, 2015).
- John Sanchez, a former employee in news for 22 years and currently a journalism professor at Penn State University. Sanchez was named a 2015 Distinguished Professor in the Schreyer Honors College. His expertise is in journalism ethics.
- Russ Eshleman, a political reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for 15 years and now the Head of the Department of Journalism at Penn State University. While at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Eshleman won an award from the American Society of Newspaper Editors for distinguished writing. He also appears as a political commentator for Pennsylvania radio and television programs.

### Questions

In total I conducted six interviews, which included two that were interviews face-to-face (Sanchez and Eshleman) and four by telephone (Sobel, Collins, Hutchinson, and Whitaker). I asked each interviewee the same five questions to survey if reporters from different areas of the media agreed or disagreed on reporting athletes' private lives.

The questions are as follows:

- “Should an athlete’s off-the-field behavior be reported if it does not involve legal infractions?”
- “Is today’s media too intrusive when reporting on athletes’ private lives?”
- “Is the *New York Times* slogan ‘all the news that’s fit to print’ outdated in journalism?”

- “Have changes in culture affected how public figures are being covered? And if so, how?”
- “How far is too far when reporting on the private lives of athletes?”

Below are the five questions and answers from every media member interviewed for this paper.

*Should an athlete’s off-the-field behavior be reported if it does not involve legal infractions?*

**B. Hutchinson:** “Tiger Woods is a turning point on this issue. That is because he was a role model. Athletes are role models to the public. If they are involved in allegations, then I think the public does have the right to know because their children might be looking up to someone who is not a suitable role model. Anything an athlete does consciously is fair game.”

**J. Sobel:** “I don’t think it’s necessary to know information that doesn’t affect his performance. If a guy can hit a ball 300 yards or hit 30 home runs, that doesn’t mean I need to know what is going on in his personal life.”

**J. Whitaker:** “I think they should have their own privacy. It’s not my business to know what he or she is doing in their private life.”

**J. Sanchez:** “If they did not do something that includes a public record, then that is nobody’s business. There is certain private information, like sexuality, that doesn’t change their performance on the field.”

**R. Eshleman:** “I don’t think an athlete’s should have their private lives completely covered, but I don’t think we should protect these people. Public money helps pay for their salaries. It’s a case-by-case basis but they (athletes) have to understand that they are public figures and do create public interest.”

**M. Collins:** It depends who you are. If you are a sports journalist, you don’t want to burn bridges so you are not going to report private information that really doesn’t need to be reported. But when an athlete is so popular for other reasons than his athletic performance, other journalistic fields are going to report it. So you don’t want to act like three monkeys and pretend it’s not happening. It’s hard.”

*Is today’s media too intrusive when reporting on athletes’ private lives?*

**J. Sobel:** “Yes, it depends on a case-by-case basis. However, not all media is created equal. What I do is versus what a guy on Fox News does- they are different sets of standards as to what can be considered intrusive within sports journalism versus hard news.”

**B. Hutchinson:** “Well it’s always a judgment call. However, because athletes are in the public eye, they should expect that everything in their lives can be covered.”

**J. Whitaker:** “It depends on who is doing the reporting. But the media shouldn’t make the athletes tell everything about themselves. It becomes an ethical problem when an athlete’s private life becomes a bigger story than what is going on in the field.”

**J. Sanchez:** “I’ve been in journalism for 45 years. When we reported athletes, it was about accomplishments. Wife, children were off limits. Today, it seems like everything is fair game. It seems we dig to try to find something bad about an athlete.”

**R. Eshleman:** “No, but there is a lot of information that is reported that meets the borderline on bad taste, which comes from abundant coverage.”

**M. Collins:** “I don’t think sports journalists are as willing to cross the line on reporting really private information like other kinds of journalistic media do, but that line has narrowed a lot over time. However, I think sports journalists are on track to recreating good relationships with athletes again.”

*Is the New York Times slogan “all the news that’s fit to print” outdated in journalism?*

**M. Collins:** “It’s funny because it’s ‘all the news that’s fit to print’ because there’s an editor at the New York Times. Today, what that saying should say now is, ‘all the news that’s fit to print...that will sell’”

**J. Sobel:** “If a story covers Rory McIlroy’s (professional golfer) new putting versus a (theoretical) story that covers Rory canoodling with a woman that isn’t his fiancée, which one are you going to read? I don’t know if people are going to read about his new putter. It’s just not as interesting to the public. That is probably why more media are covering stories that wouldn’t have been reported on in the past.”

**B. Hutchinson:** “I think it is, but less so than when I started 35 years ago. There used to be certain standards, but I think there are very few now. The competition today has made the mainstream media chase after private stories because they attract the audiences.”

**J. Whitaker:** “Well back in my day we would report the same newsworthy stories that are being reported on today. But we reported in good taste. Just the facts. That doesn’t seem to happen anymore.”

**J. Sanchez:** “Today, that slogan does not mean anything. It doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

**R. Eshleman:** “I think as long as it sells is the addition to that slogan. Sixty years ago they were making tons of money because there wasn’t any competition. But now, you have to report and publish the story that will sell, especially if it is about a public figure’s private information.”

*How far is too far when reporting on the private lives of athletes?*

**J. Sobel:** “It’s a case-by-case basis. If an athlete uses certain aspects of his private life for his marketability, such as Tiger who carried the image of a family man, then it’s fair to report information that contradicts the public impression that he helped create.”

**B. Hutchinson:** “In theory, there should be a line drawn. In practice, it’s difficult because if someone is going after it, you’re probably going after it. However, I think that a private tragedy, such as someone’s child who has been hurt or killed is invasive.”

**J. Whitaker:** “Today that’s difficult to determine. It seems like today people report every detail that isn’t necessary because, like everyone else, athletes are entitled to their sense of privacy. So I think any story that focuses on an athlete’s family should not be reported.”

**J. Sanchez:** “I would not report someone’s sexual preferences. I would not report the names of children that were attacked or abused, absolutely regardless of the relevancy of the athlete.”

**R. Eshleman:** “Almost everything is a case-by-case basis, but I think publishing medical records is an invasion of privacy. Also stuff involving people’s children, including public figures. That is off limits. I get really squeamish about that because a child becomes a victim for the parent’s actions.”

*Have changes in culture affected how public figures are being covered? And if so, how?*

**J. Sobel:** “The thing now is everyone is media because anyone can get that message out there. If you see an athlete with a woman who is not his wife, you can generate that story. Media is no longer limited to people who work at media companies. But athletes should understand that there isn’t privacy anymore.”

**B. Hutchinson:** “The culture change has eroded the standard of privacy. Sites like Gawker will report whatever they can find. The mainstream media, which used to say ‘we are not going to go there’

are now forced to go there because they don't want to be beaten by online media. It's all competition, so you have to go get this stuff now."

**J. Whitaker:** "It used to be the score and who won or lost. That was it. But everyone has lost privacy. They are reporting things that we wouldn't even touch back in those days. But that is the culture change. It's a whole different world that I don't recognize."

**J. Sanchez:** "People in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that are interested in journalism are interested in being first with something new. When I was working in journalism, we would ask would you? And most of the time we said no. Today we don't ask that question often. We just report what we can find."

**R. Eshleman:** "Social media and the advent of 24-hour news networks have made people want news as fast as possible all the time. Thus a network like ESPN has to report something because they have to give their viewers something fresh. Back in the old days, we didn't report that kind of information."

**M. Collins:** There was a book... *Ball Four*, that changed how the media covered athletes. Since then, people, over time, realized that it's profitable to report about celebrities and in today's culture athletes are now celebrities. And because everyone has a cellphone, everyone can take a picture or video of an athlete and expose their private life.

### Recap

This section will examine the interviewees' responses and attempt to identify if media members' experience and type of media correlates their views.

The first pattern I noticed is that the sports journalists disagree with the news reporters. Sports journalists Jason Sobel, Michael Collins, and Jack Whitaker all believe that the sports media is not intrusive when reporting on athletes' private lives, but that the news media is more willing to publish stories about their private lives. Conversely, former news media members Bill Hutchinson and Russ Eshleman think athletes should understand that their public figure status sometimes warrants coverage of their private lives, even though both admit that "it's a case-by-case basis."

I also noticed that interviewees who have similar years of work experience did not have corresponding opinions. For example, two news reporters, Professor Sanchez, who has been in journalism for 45 years, and Bill Hutchinson, who was an anchor for 27 years, disagreed on whether the media was too intrusive with its coverage of athletes' personal lives. Hutchinson said that it depends on the circumstances, stating "it is a judgment call," while Sanchez thought the media is "digging to find something bad about an athlete."

The interviewees did agree on two questions: "How far is too far when reporting on the private lives of athletes?" and "Is the *New York Times* slogan 'all the news that's fit to print' outdated in journalism?" All the media members interviewed believed that the slogan is outdated because reputable news outlets, like the *New York Times*, are willing to publish stories that were previously ignored in other eras because of exponential increase in media competition. Additionally, each interviewee believed that an athlete's children is an example of the media going to far and should not be covered when reporting on athletes' private lives.

The following chapter will review the content of this paper and use the insight provided from the media professionals, as well as the information presented in Chapters One to Four, to formulate an ethical recommendation on the media coverage of athletes' private lives.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

My goal for this paper was to explore the legal and ethical limits on media coverage of athletes' personal lives. I also wanted to apply the lessons I learned from my research for this paper to formulate a recommendation when reporting on such an ethically challenging topic. This chapter will recap my observations from Chapters One to Four in support of my recommendation for reporting on the private lives of athletes.

Chapter One examined the media's legal and ethical obligations and rights when covering athletes' private lives. The Supreme Court case *Roe vs. Wade* and District Court case *Galella vs. Onassis* established that public figures do not retain the same expectation of privacy as private individuals when being covered by the media. The chapter also looked at how athletes became legally recognized as public figures. The case *Chuy vs. Philadelphia Eagles Football Club* serves as the first legal acknowledgement of athletes as public figures because of their constant exposure in the public eye. Finally, Chapter One outlined the ethical complications involved when reporting athletes' private information. The chapter cited the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists, the oldest and largest national journalism organization, to demonstrate why seeking the truth may conflict with other ethical obligations when covering athletes' private lives. It also tried to distinguish between occurrences that warrant news coverage, such as those that generate a police report or some other public record, from information such as an athlete's relationship status or marital problems, that may constitute an invasion of privacy.

Chapter Two analyzed how the erosion of athletes' privacy in the media transpired. It examined how media coverage of professional athletes changed over time, including identifying when athlete's private lives became bigger stories than their daily athletic achievements. It also discussed how

technology and cultural expectations influenced the media to change to its current philosophy on covering athletes' private lives.

Chapter Three was a case study of media coverage of Tiger Woods's extramarital affair scandal. It was chosen because coverage of the scandal raised questions about what information should and should not have been reported. Additionally, Woods's prominent public figure status was not reflective of his private persona.

Chapter Four included excerpts from six interviews with sports and news media members. Each media member was asked the same five questions to gauge if there was any consensus regarding the ethics of covering athletes' private lives. The media members' answers showed that there was a disagreement as to current media coverage of athletes' private lives. For example, some interviewees believed the media was not intrusive in its coverage of athletes' private information, while others disagreed on whether it was necessary to publish an athlete's private information even if it did not any legal infractions. However, all the media members agreed that information involving athletes' children should not be covered.

While this paper provided me insight into the media's coverage of athletes, its limitations must be acknowledged. While I was fortunate to interview eminent media figures, I was limited to interviewing only three active media members and six overall. Therefore, I had a small sample size that might not reflect widespread opinions of the media. Also, the lack of legal cases that would help define public figures' expectation of privacy limited my ability to cite legal precedents. While there are many cases involving public figure's privacy and defamation, there are few that observe a public figure's expectation of privacy rights within the media.

### **My Recommendation**

Based on the information presented in Chapters One to Four, I would like to propose a standard to be used by members of the media when covering an athlete's private life. I believe that coverage of an athlete's private life, with the exception of reporting on an athlete's children (unless it is the death of a child), is ethically justified when the private information clearly affects his or her athletic performance. As Chapters One and Two showed, athletes are public figures, and therefore must relinquish some expectation of privacy from the media. The public has the right to know private information that clearly affects an athlete's performance because the public is a stakeholder in an athlete's income and fame. If an athlete is mentally impaired because of alcohol a few hours before the game, the media should inform the public because his or her condition will affect how he or she competes and entertains the consumer (the public).

Private information should not be covered if there is no clear correlation between an athlete's performance and the private information. Thus, any speculative reporting on, for example, an athlete's sexuality or relationship status, is unethical and the information is not newsworthy. However, I do acknowledge that certain information, such as the allegations of infidelity and marital problems that surfaced in the Tiger Woods scandal, poses an ethical dilemma if an athlete withdraws from competition because of those allegations.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

### **Ryan Worthy**

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#### **Education**

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##### **Penn State University**

- Major: Broadcast Journalism
- Minor: Business
- Schreyer Honor's College Member, Deans List
- Big 10 Distinguished Scholar (3.7 cumulative GPA or higher while earning a varsity letter)

##### **Oxford University**

15 credits (Fall, 2015)      Varsity Golf

#### **Experiences**

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**Electrical Systems Solutions**, Chester Springs, PA      *Summer, 2015-2016*

- Sold non-engineering electrical products during summer and school vacations

**Vocativ**, New York City, NY      *Summer, 2016*

- Produced daily content that is published on vocativ.com and Vocativ's Facebook page
- Conducted market research reports for Vocativ's YouTube channel
- Contributed to pitch meetings for potential project ideas
- Produced videos that have amassed more than 2 million views

**SiriusXm Satellite Radio, PGA TOUR RADIO**, Washington D.C.      *Summer, 2015*

- Produced live content for multiple shows and performed as a co-producer
- Spoke on-air for five minutes regarding the U.S. Amateur on the show "Inside the Ropes"
- Created a three-minute feature promo for channel's coverage of the FedEx Cup Playoffs

#### **Activities and Skills**

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**Men's Varsity Golf**, Penn State University (2012-2014)

- 2 Year Letter Winner of Men's Varsity Golf Team

##### **Gunners Town**

- Wrote several articles for online blog discussing Premier League soccer club Arsenal F.C

##### **The Lion 90.7 FM**

- Weekly DJ and host of own show (BPM-electronic music)

**Software Skills:** Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, Adobe Premier Editing

**Interests:** Negotiation, Sales, Marketing, CNBC, MLS, Golf, English Premier League Soccer