

Sports Blogs: The Wild West of Sports Journalism?

Andrew W. Ishak & Scott R. Stroud
University of Texas at Austin

On August 4, 2010, the popular sports blog *Deadspin* reported that Brett Favre, a married NFL star known more recently for his constant public flirtation with retirement, made sexual advances on Jenn Sterger, a New York Jets employee and TV personality. In a post titled “Brett Favre Once Sent Me Cock Shots’: Not a Love Story,” *Deadspin* editor A.J. Daulerio printed claims from Sterger that Favre sent her pictures of his genitalia, presumably taken with his cell phone, and that he had also left flirtatious voicemails for her. Daulerio framed the information from Sterger as claims, not fact; Daulerio seemingly wanted more details before assigning full weight to the story. He quotes an email exchange that includes Sterger’s plea for confidentiality as well as his own desire to receive, and publish, evidence of Favre’s flirtation. As it turns out, Sterger would never provide the material in question nor would she give explicit permission to Daulerio to publish the story.

Daulerio called his initial post about Favre a “bat signal for whoever else had this kind of information to kind of step forward and talking to us.” His strategy worked, as Daulerio was soon contacted by “Mr. X,” an anonymous source who provided photos, text messages and voicemails in question. Daulerio met Mr. X in a New York hotel room and paid up to \$12,000 in exchange for the materials.

On October 7, 2010, *Deadspin* published the photos, texts, and voicemails in a post titled “Brett Favre’s Cellphone Seduction of Jenn Sterger.” The story was intriguing to sports fans as well as the general public; a star athlete, a buxom model, salacious flirtation, and the potential for a suspension levied by the NFL for sexual harassment were more than enough to garner coverage by mainstream news outlets, including ESPN, the *New York Post*, and the “Today” show. The NFL’s investigation ended in Favre being fined \$50,000 for his failure to cooperate in a forthcoming manner. Favre admitted to sending the voicemails, but denied transmission of the photos. As the NFL season shifted to playoff mode, the story moved to the back page of the public consciousness.

However, debates about journalistic ethics and sports blogging continued. Many seasoned journalists were quick to point out the chasm between newspaper journalism and the work of websites like *Deadspin*, or, as ESPN.com Editor-in-Chief Rob King puts it: “They’re just in a different business with a different mission serving an audience in a different way.”

One debate focused on “checkbook journalism,” or the concept of paying for stories. Daulerio says the Favre story is only the third time that *Deadspin* has paid for information. There is no particular fund for paying sources at Gawker Media, *Deadspin*’s parent

company; instead, the money is borrowed from the site's budget and must be repaid in traffic increases. Daulerio says his job is to decide whether it's worth it: "In this case, I chose right...I don't like to think of it as a business deal, but yes, it worked out very well for the site." There is no question that this particular instance helped *Deadspin's* traffic. As of February 2011, the Favre story on *Deadspin* has generated over 5 million hits, and *Deadspin's* monthly readership has increased almost threefold since Daulerio took it over in 2008. Speaking for newspaper journalists, *Washington Post* columnist Mike Wise says "it's just not what we do," although he admits there has been temptation to pay sources for the ratings bump that comes along with exclusive stories.

Others were concerned with how Daulerio handled the confidentiality of his sources. Sterger initially asked for her name to not be used because she was worried about the potential impact on her budding TV career. Daulerio asked Sterger to change her stance, and he took her non-response to his query to be an indication of her willingness to consent. In the end, he used her name because he felt she was part of the story and he wanted to break the news (he knew Sterger had shared the information with others). Daulerio says the rules of the journalist-source relationship do not apply in this case: "I don't think this was a story that falls under any form of 'journalism' whatsoever. This is gossip. Nasty gossip." *Deadspin* and like-minded sites have, by their own admission, blurred the lines between investigative journalism and the reporting of rumors. Wise says that doesn't matter, stating simply: "You don't screw over a source." Daulerio admits that his confidentiality policy is inconsistent, given that he provided anonymity to Mr. X. Favre's reputation was hurt by these allegations, but he continued to focus on football, playing for the Minnesota Vikings when these allegations surfaced. When asked for comment before a game against New York, he responded: "I'm not getting into that. I've got my hands full with the Jets."

Further Information:

Daulerio, A. J. (2010). "Brett Favre once sent me cock shots': Not a love story." Retrieved August 28, 2011. Available at: <http://deadspin.com/5603701/brett-favre-once-sent-me-cock-shots-not-a-love-story>

Daulerio, A. J. (2010). "Brett Favre's cellphone seduction of Jenn Sterger." Retrieved August 28, 2011. Available at: <http://deadspin.com/5658206/brett-favres-cellphone-seduction-of-jenn-sterger>

Deggans, E. (2010). "Legacy of Brett Favre-Jennifer Sterger story could be the future of sports media ethics." Retrieved August 31, 2011. Available at: <http://sportsjournalism.org/sports-media-news/legacy-of-bretty-favre-jennifer-sterger-story-could-be-future-of-sports-media-ethics/>



Hendrickson, B. (2010). "Daulerio: No regrets over ethical handling of Favre story." Retrieved August 31, 2011. Available at: <http://sportsjournalism.org/center-news/daulerio-holds-no-regrets-over-ethical-handling-of-favre-story/>

Discussion Questions:

1. Did *Deadspin* and Daulerio do the right thing in running this story?
2. Should Daulerio have named Sterger in the *Deadspin* story? Why or why not?
3. What are the differences between traditional journalism and sports blogging? Are there different ethical guidelines that each should follow?
4. Should journalists pay sources for information? Does it matter if the source is taking a risk by giving this information, or if the information is very important?
5. If you were ESPN or a sports editor at a major newspaper, and Sterger came to you with this story, how might you deal with it? Would you run it as is? What else might you do, and why?