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## How do Softball Athletes Construct the Media?

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HOW DO SOFTBALL ATHLETES CONSTRUCT THE MEDIA?

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Master's Project

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Bowling Green State University

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## **Abstract**

The media serves as an extremely important source for many Americans to get information. Mediated sports are extremely popular in today's society, and commercial sports even have more influence over the press than daily news. The relationship between sports and the media can be seen as a type of partnership (Stead, 2002). When it comes to sporting events, viewers become extremely invested in the games and the athletes that they are watching. Many athletes are forced to give interviews right before games or after heartbreaking losses whether they want to or not. Despite how often sporting events and athlete interviews are on television, there is hardly any research or information as to how the athlete's feel regarding dealing with the media. This paper attempts to give collegiate softball players an opportunity to share how they construct the role of the media in their sport. I chose softball because of my background of being a collegiate softball player. I conducted in-depth phone interviews with each one of my participants. Each participant was a member of a Power Five Division I softball team (University of Arizona, University of Iowa, Oregon State University, or UCLA). Through the data collection from these interviews I was able to uncover that these athletes all believe athletes have a duty to cooperate with media, won't cooperate fully with media if they feel violated, journalists have a code of ethics even if it is not always followed, and that athletes should be held to higher standards than other people who deal with the media.

## **Introduction**

It is almost impossible not to be surrounded by some sort of media outlet several times during each day. The media uses the influence it has “to form social space with behavioural patterns on offer; it supplies various types of information and constantly intrudes on people’s everyday lives” (Zabraznik & Topic, 2013, p. 47). For the purpose of the paper, “the media will refer to individuals who publicly report or make public statements relative to an athlete’s performance. In this context, media can be newspaper reporters, paparazzi, television newscasters, or fans and critics who publicize their critiques of athletic performance through the use of public forums or blogs” (Ott & Van Puymbroeck, 2008, p. 5). The media brings us information that connects us to those we do not see in our lives. The media gives us a connection to people we watch on television such as elite athletes.

Similar to the media, elite sports are also part of the everyday lives that we live. The world of elite athletics and media have become somewhat entangled. These two industries are tied together in a series of complex and dynamic relationships. Athletes across the world are receiving more and more media attention every single day. The nature of an athlete’s life and career is completely determined by news editors, camera angles, producers, and images that the media forces viewers to see. Media sources need drama and gossip in order to survive so they choose to use images and information that force the audience to believe in the reality they choose to create. In effect, the public is now not only interested in an athlete’s sport achievements but also in their private lives and the way they interact with the media.

We know that viewership is growing when it comes to watching sport on television, but the audience is tuning in to watch for very different reasons than they ever were before. Media

sources that are dedicated to sport such as “TV channels, radio stations, and publications have appeared in ever increasing numbers. A Henley Centre report has gone as far as to suggest that people in the UK spend nine hours a day consuming media in its various forms, with television viewing occupying the equivalent of a day a week” (Stead, 2002, p. 186). Coaches and athletes alike want to get their sport as much exposure as possible to promote what they are offering. When it comes to the sports-media complex, “sport has a largely dependent role, that is, sports organizations have little or no control over the nature and form in which ““their”” sport is televised, reported, or covered” (Maguire, 1991, p. 316). Increased media attention has brought new issues and demands to athletes across all sports and leagues.

Now that the media has become such an integral part to the sporting world, the National Football League has even implemented a media policy. The policy states that “star players, or other players with unusually heavy media demands, must be available to the media that regularly cover their teams at least once during the practice week in addition to their required postgame media availability” (Ostiller, 2014, p. 5). Athletes can no longer simply worry about sharpening their skills in their respective sports, but they must worry about being trained and ready to deal with the media. Media policies that speak on behalf of the athletes are not limited to professional athletes. For example, King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, has a media policy that states:

**Interviews:**

Members of the media wishing to conduct an interview with a King’s College coach, student-athlete, or staff member should direct the request to the Sports Information office at least 48 hours in advance to schedule arrangements. Arrangements will be made for interviews at a mutually-agreeable time and place. Practice is open to members of the media only if prior arrangements have been made in advance.

**Phone Interviews:**

Requests for telephone interviews must be made through the King’s College

Sports Information Office. All interview requests will be arranged according to a player's class, study, and practice schedule. Interview requests with staff members will be arranged based on the staff member's availability.

**Press Services:**

Programs, game notes, and other pertinent information will be supplied to credentialed media members in the press box, press row or where applicable. Complete box scores will be available shortly after the completion of athletic events for football and basketball only. Box scores and stats for all sports are posted to the athletic website [www.kingscollegeathletics.com](http://www.kingscollegeathletics.com) as soon as possible following every home game.

**Post-Game Interviews:**

Players or coaches are available for post-game interviews after the NCAA-mandated 10-minute cooling off period following the completion of an athletic event. Please contact the on-site sports information contact to make a request for individual interviews.

**Athletic Photography:**

Photography at King's College athletic contests and functions is limited to spectator areas only. Photographers may be granted additional access only if such credentials are requested and approved by the King's College Sports Information Office 48 hours in advance.

Reuse or public distribution of any photographs or likenesses of King's College student-athletes, athletic staff, and/or facilities is not permitted without the approval of the King's College Sports Information Office. The photographer, who retains copyright ownership of photos, may require additional usage permissions. For all photography and credential requests, please contact the King's College Sports Information Office.

**Media Requests:**

To request a headshot or action photo of a King's College student-athlete or staff member please contact the King's College Sports Information Office (Kings College Athletics School Website).

This policy makes no mention of asking the student athlete's permission or even checking with them to see if they would be willing to participate in an interview with a given media source. According to this policy, the student athlete is told where to go and when to be there in order to be interviewed whether they want to or not.

When athletes are able to concentrate solely on their sports they "can conserve physical energy by maintaining good technique and focus. They can execute their skills properly, and

push through pain and fatigue barriers. Time spent fretting over distractions, such as the media, drains mental energy so that performance suffers” (Ott & Van Puymbroeck, 2008, p. 7). There are even services now that offer to train athletes in dealing with the media. They teach things such as clarity and strategy when answering typical and atypical questions, bringing energy and personality to interviews, staying engaged when speaking, and avoiding common mistakes athletes make in interviews. Athletes can even be compared to politicians when it comes to speaking and dealing with the media. If a politician is running for office, “every public statement is a potential minefield. After a while, you realize that no one is actually listening to what you’re saying. They’re just waiting for you to make a mistake then they can pounce” (Leitch, 2015, p. 17). It is not just high profile politicians and movie stars that have to watch what they say; it is elite athletes as well. Elite sports used to only be concerned with athlete well-being and successful performance, but now their biggest concerns are lucrative television contracts and the image they portray to the media.

With added media influence making such an impact on sport, the emphasis is now on making a spectacle, the personalities of the athletes, and the financial gain they can receive. Sport has been sold to the highest bidder for showbiz and in some instances can be similar to Hollywood productions. Athletes usually desire peace and quiet before and after games in order to collect their thoughts or prepare to compete, but with media demands, that is simply not possible. Coaches and athlete representatives have even had to step in and defend athletes at certain times in an attempt to protect them from the media. For example, in 2005 and 2006, Japanese figure skater Miki Ando’s athletic performance began to decline. After she was selected by the Japanese Skating Federation (JSF) to be on its “2006 Olympic woman’s figure skating team, the press said she did not deserve to go to Torino. The JSF was so concerned

media coverage would negatively affect Ando as she prepared for the Olympics, they sent formal written requests to several magazine publishers asking them to cut back on their coverage” (Ott & Van Puymbroeck, 2008, p. 4). In a day when so little is in our control due to technology and the internet, athletes are stuck in a money-hungry power struggle between media and sport. I am choosing to focus on collegiate athletes because universities, much more so than professional teams, depend on the attention they receive through the media drawn by their college sport events and athletes. The more sports related media coverage a school receives the more benefits, such as improvements in enrollment and positive images towards the university. This topic is especially fitting for this time because of the ever growing use of the media in college sports. Not only does the media have the ability to paint athletes in whatever light they choose, but they also get to choose who they portray. Universities feel the pressure of allowing media the access to their athletes, but they don’t stop to consider how the athletes feel about the media.

The specific collegiate athletes in this study I will be using are Division I softball players. I chose this group specifically because I am a former collegiate softball student athlete. I know what it takes to play the game itself and the added stress that dealing with the media can bring to an athlete. Softball is a game that has achieved worldwide popularity over the last hundred years and continues to grow with the increased television exposure that female sport continues to receive. I dealt with the media on almost a daily basis and at some points multiple times in a single day. Moments or even seconds before a big game I had cameras, notepads, and tape recorders shoved into my face with reporters trying to get information that had no real relevance to the game. On the contrary, I would be forced to interview with a reporter mere seconds following a crushing and heart wrenching loss to explain what went wrong during the game. The emotions that any athlete experiences can hardly be described or put into words due to the long

tireless hours that goes into the preparations of an athlete. There is very little research done in the sport of softball at all and even less that tries to look into the personality and insight of a softball student athlete.

This study will attempt to reveal the real relationship that exists between the media and collegiate softball athletes as well as their overall attitude towards the media. The purpose of this study is to answer the question: how do softball student athletes construct the role of the media in their sport?

## **Literature Review**

### *Shaping the Athlete Image*

Elite sport stars are now more famed based on who they are dating or what sponsorship deals they have rather than their athletic performance. The media intrudes on the lives of these sports stars and tries to paint them as “flawed or damaged heroes”. Traditionally, sport stars were seen to the public as heroes, however the modern sport star is shaped by media functions. The term “hero” is used in different ways, but when it comes to sport athletes it typically refers to an athlete with common qualities such as courage, will power, national and social characteristics (Lines, 2001). As Holt et al. (1996) suggests, it is difficult to identify high profile sports without the sport stars or “heroes” we have come to know. What the audience knows about and identify with certain sports stars is closely associated with the information that the media professionals selected to bring to their attention (Lines, 2001; Hoffman, McGannon, & Schinke, 2012). Due to the fact that the media needs drama and gossip in order to survive, they use selected images and information to force the audience to believe in whatever reality they choose to create. The implementation of this tactic has made it hard to sustain the sports hero image that we as an audience had once been accustomed to.

There has become a heightened interest from fans to develop a public profile for athletes, however when we see something we don't want to know, the athlete's image turns negative (Morgan & Summers, 2008). Simply being efficient in your respective sport does not seem to be enough in this age of unlimited access to knowledge and information. In a study done by Morgan and Summers (2008), they found that many fans agreed that they participate in the idealization of sport celebrities, even if they do not let it affect the loyalty to their favorite teams or players. Fans also admitted to being prepared for their favorite sports stars to have transgressions and for those with families they were prepared to explain these things to their children. Athletes earn their specific labels in many different ways, but it is the sport media narratives that attach these labels to a certain athlete and effect how these athletes are seen in the public. The job of the media as a whole is to keep viewers interested and entice them to continue coming back. Even though they might simply be trying to create entertaining and positive atmospheres, they do not stop to consider how these images and portrayals affect the athlete as a person (Bruce & Desmarais, 2008).

### *Gender Differences in the Media*

Title IX brought the hope that female athletes would finally be able to experience full societal acceptance, but the media has yet to advance with the changing times. There was also a perception that women would no longer be denied the same participation opportunities as their male counterparts. While participation in female sports has skyrocketed since the implementation of Title IX, the increase in participation has not linked to increases in media attention. Studies found that less female athletes are photographed for media than any other section of the newspaper. As of 1994, only 55 females had graced the cover of Sports Illustrated compared to 782 males. Only 15 percent of all newspaper sports coverage was about female

athletes. (Fink, 1998; Rintala & Birrell, 1984). Although women's participation in professional, Olympic, intercollegiate, and interscholastic sport has reached unprecedented highs, research shows that media coverage of female athletes still lags behind that of men's (Fink, 1998, Guiliano & Knight, 2001). The media will even speak with differing language and undertones during sporting events that involve females as opposed to males.

In a study done by Angelini (2008), he examines how the different ways commentators speak and production broadcasts male versus female athletes. He also examined how those different styles affect the members of the viewing audience. He decides to focus on if males and females view sports differently and what they really want to see when they are watching sport. The author found that television offers an opportunity to assist those who watch to witness gender stereotypes as well as "appropriate" gender roles in action. The job of the sport announcers is to reinforce national stereotypes that will help them relate to the public they are trying to appeal to (Bruce & Desmarais, 2008). Female sports on television tend to focus on individual sports as opposed to team sports. Angelini also argues that there is also a difference in how males and females watch sport. Males prefer to view male athletes because it reinforces the societal hierarchy of gender while females will watch females in order to help improve social position. In general, female athletes tend to receive more media exposure if they are described as attractive and are perceived by society as positive. These athletes help fans to transition from the stereotypically tough, strong male athletes to a female athlete. On the other hand, male athletes who would traditionally be seen as attractive are perceived negatively more often. This often occurs due to the fact that a man's athleticism should be the main focus and not his attractiveness (Knight & Giuliano, 2001; Whiteside & Hardin, 2011; Daniels & Wartena, 2011).

## *Sport, Society, and Media*

Mediated sports are extremely popular in today's society, and commercial sports even have more influence over the press than daily news. The relationship between sports and the media can be seen as a type of partnership. Even though partnerships are encouraged and seen as a positive, "partnerships are not always equal, stable or constructive for those involved" (Stead, 2002, p. 6). This is especially true when it comes to the sport and media relationship. Sport has evolved from a playful activity done for intrinsic joy to a participation-oriented activity resembling a corporate form guided by commercialization and entertainment. Due to this, status of sports in society is largely dictated by how much media exposure they are receiving. Studies have shown that while the media has had significant influence on the character and development of sport, there is little evidence to show that the media does not contribute to the commodification from athletes and the sports bodies themselves. (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Karen & Washington 2001; Stead, 2003). This puts athletes in a difficult struggle of whether to continue to allow the media to help promote their sport knowing it may come at the expense of their image and overall well-being. Whether they win or lose, "an athlete's performance and life is publicly dissected by the media. Winning brings about media glorification and expectation, and/or jealousy and criticism. Losing brings forth negative judgement and more criticism" (Ott & Van Puymbroeck, 2008, p. 5). The media can be instrumental in the overall performance and mental state of an athlete without even being aware of it. In August of 2004, China lost the gold medal in the men's springboard and the China Daily blamed it on the media giving distorted buildup of gold. The article claimed the buildup caused the athletes to become "overconfident and resulted in athletic incompetence. Chinese diver Peng Bo agreed. After his partner's last minute error cost the men's springboard double gold, Peng Bo said, "We're ordinary people.

We feel pressure, sometimes we can't help having some distracting thoughts.” (China Daily, 2004; Ott & Van Puymbroeck, 2008). Famous athletes and high profile elite athletes are constantly under intense media scrutiny and it impacts them regardless of whether it is positive or negative.

The commercialization of sport has even led to changes in rules and formatting. Elite sports have been taken away from their core and turned into somewhat different activities altogether for the enjoyment of the spectators. In football, for example, the forward pass and the narrowing of the hash marks were changed to make football more appealing to viewers and spectators. The locus and focus of sport has moved from player/participant to the manager and audience (Frey & Eitzen 1991; Stead, 2002). It is now more important to attract viewers or audiences than it is to maintain the integrity of the playing process. Sports have become driven by profit and the market. Large media players have even begun to involve themselves in franchise ownership and not simply in broadcasting. The spread to media intrusion has allowed them to become an even bigger player on the sports stage where they can create the scripts they benefit their own financial interests (Washington & Karen, 2001).

#### *Why Student Athletes?*

Student athletes are the prime group when it comes to a study such as this due to the fact that they have complex layers added to their daily lives. Professional athletes can leave the playing field and only focus on their sporting events; college athletes do not have that same luxury (Watt and Moore, 2001). Student athletes face all the challenges that non-athletes do during college, but also have their sport related obligations. Professional athletes simply worry about their sport, non-athletes worry about their given professions, students spend their time in their studies, but student athletes must focus on all of those things. A non-athlete college student

“might want to get good grades so as to avoid the wrath of a parent or guardian, the student athletes also has obligations to the coach, team, and the rules and regulations of the National Collegiate Coaches Association (NCAA)” (Watt & Moore, 2001, p. 7). Within the sub set of student athletes is the differences that these athletes have from each other depending on what sport they choose to play. Participating in athletic activity, regardless of chosen sport, can lead to life experiences that go far beyond the game you play. Sports can have both positive and negative effects on its participants, but with college athletics being such an integral part of society today, it is unlikely that athletes will get the help they truly need to excel. With pressure coming from every aspect of their daily lives it is just natural that “athletes blame the pressure of the media for their failures. Journalists often follow athletes every step and force themselves on athletes, disregarding their privacy” (Zadraznik & Topic, 2013, p. 56). While athletes usually agree to deal with the media regardless of their feelings, they know it is simply due to the fact that they realize the importance that the media plays in today’s society. Even if an athlete is offended or has a complaint about the media they rarely complain or ask for an apology. Student athletes are thus forced into a situation where they must speak with the media, but are not able to truly speak their mind or stand up for themselves. Professional athletes have more incentives to cooperate and speak with the media, such as contract extensions and lucrative sponsorship deals. College athletes do not have the luxury of earning money and simply must comply with media demands regardless of schedule or attitude towards the media.

### *Collegiate Softball*

Softball is a game that originated from an indoor version of the popular American sport of baseball. It wasn’t until the 1930’s that “the sport was officially recognized with the name “softball”” and was largely played as an outdoor sport” (Flyger, Button, & Rishiraj, 2006, p.

798). This game has since grown dramatically and become a national and international success. When a softball game is played, it is contested between two teams that consist of nine players each. Their playing surface is a large, diamond shaped field with dirt in the infield and grass making up the outfield. Games are a maximum of seven innings with the teams alternating between batting while on offense and fielding while on defense. At the collegiate level, fast-pitch softball is played which “allows two main underhand pitching deliveries; one that involves an entire revolutions of the pitcher’s arm and the other where the arm can swing backward and forward” (Flyger, Button, & Rishiraj, 2006, p. 798). Softball is a fast-moving sport that requires considerable motor abilities, tracking skills, and advanced vision. In a study done by Hubbard and Seng, they examined whether professional baseball batters actually need to watch the ball from the pitcher’s hand to their bat in order to hit the ball. The study found that batters do not attempt to track the ball closer than 2.4-4.5m from the point of contact. This study led to advanced studies on vision and fast twitch muscle techniques that are crucial in executing the sport (Hubbard & Seng, 1954, p. 56).

There is no other sport where timing and advanced technique skill is crucial. Softball players are also at an extremely high risk for injury and bodily harm. People tend to think that it is a safe sport because it is not a contact sport and should not be as harsh on your body as other sports. In a study done by the National Athletic Training Association (NATA), the percentage of injuries requiring surgery was identical between football and softball players (1.4%) and a little lower for baseball players (1.1%) (Powell & Barber-Foss, 1999, p. 280). Unlike other sports, softball has rarely been the topic of research issues.

Softball is a sport that takes significant athletic ability and concentration to perform and pursue. In order to perform at an optimal level in this game, endless hours of practice and

repetition are needed. Collegiate student athletes have their sport and school to worry about with softball players needing an extended amount of time to excel at their given sport. Dealing with media interviews and having to spend time discussing techniques on how to deal with the media should not be something that college softball athletes should be worrying about during their hectic and stressful days.

Majority of the research done to date has been from the perspective of the media. This research attempts to give athletes a safe place to share their true feelings regarding dealing with the media, where they do not have fear of retaliation or punishment.

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

To answer the posed research question, a qualitative method was taken during the information gathering process. Qualitative research methods allow for much more complex descriptions and insights for any type of research topic. Using this method was a way that I could be provided with insights into the behaviors, emotions, beliefs, and relationships that the athletes and media have to one another. The issues in this topic may not be readily apparent and I needed to use methods that allowed me to access information that is not traditionally available. I decided to use in-depth telephone interviews to try and uncover the necessary opinions and information needed from current Division I student athletes.

The in-depth telephone interviews allowed me to use open-ended questions. The in-depth interviews added specific narrative and stories that participants may not feel comfortable sharing in a group setting or if they were given survey information. Interviews done via telephone “are largely neglected in the qualitative research literature and, when discussed, they are often depicted as a less attractive alternative to face-to-face interviewing” (Novick, 2008, p. 391).

Telephone interviews are thought to have less contextual and nonverbal information, but at the same time they can allow participants to feel more relaxed. When participants feel more relaxed they are able to disclose sensitive information and the quality of the data they choose to respond with will be more valuable to the questions asked. “There is little evidence that data loss or distortion occurs, or that interpretation or quality findings is compromised when interview data are collected by telephone” (Novick, 2008, p. 397). The use of telephone interviews allowed me to be more versatile in the participants chosen for the study as well as cost effective. These type of interviews “have practical and administrative advantages over face-to face interviews, particularly when the respondents are scattered over a wide area” (Colombotos, 1969, p. 773). Telephone interviews can be highly effective and yield high quality data that make up for any shortcomings that they may have. The important answers to these questions will allow me to focus on the individuals answering questions in their own words.

### *Participants*

The participants I used were collegiate softball athletes that have had personal interactions with the media at one point or another during their playing careers. I interviewed twelve collegiate softball players from four different Division I universities. The participants were from all over the United States, but the either attended The University of Arizona, The University of Iowa, Oregon State University, or The University of California, Los Angeles. All of them were between the ages of 19-22 and of different races, ethnicities, and cultures from African American to Caucasian to Samoan. I found the participants’ contact information on their school websites and obtained their email addresses from the public directory.

The personal opinions and experiences that I received from the participants were key in uncovering the core constructs that the student athletes are experiencing. Previous studies have

focused more on team sports and how the media cannot only influence a single athlete, but a team. Widening the study to how individual athletes are affected by something on a personal level will give the study a well-rounded view. I was also able to reach out to multiple student athletes across different Power Five conferences by using telephone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews. When doing this style, “there are limitations to the telephone interview as compared with the personal interview. Respondents who do not own a telephone or cannot be reached by telephone are excluded” (Colombotos, 1969, p. 773). Luckily, in this age of the cell phone, many of the participants that I reached out to had no problems getting access to a phone that they could use. The athletes could be interviewed in any setting they chose which allowed them to feel comfortable and relaxed. Providing a comfortable and familiar setting for the participants allowed for an open answering session with detailed and in depth responses. This topic could have been sensitive or personal for the participants and providing a setting like this hopefully allowed them to be relaxed and comfortable enough to share their true feelings.

### *Procedure*

I asked each participant twenty-nine questions. These questions allowed for me to best collect the data necessary to answer the proposed research question. I conducted one in depth phone interview that took approximately one hour. During the interview I took detailed notes on my personal laptop and tried not to pause or keep my participant waiting while I typed the responses. In the end, “telephone interviews have practical and administrative advantages over face-to-face interviews, particularly if the respondents are scattered over a wide area and data has shown that there are essentially no differences in the proportions who give socially acceptable responses according to whether they are interviewed in person or by telephone” (Colombotos,

1969, p. 782). The telephone interview falls somewhere in between a personal interview and a study that is done via questionnaire.

The following is the email sent to all participants that fit into the necessary criteria for the study:

“Dear Varsity Athlete,

My name is Brittany Lastrapes-Thackery, and I am a former collegiate softball player as well as coach and I am currently graduate student at Bowling Green State University. I am writing you to request your help in a research project I am conducting. The purpose of this study is to reveal the real relationship that exists between the media and collegiate athletes as well as their overall attitude towards the media. I want to provide a safe environment for athletes to discuss their true feelings and attitudes towards the media sources that they deal with.

As a member of a varsity team at a PAC 12 or WAC or Big Ten conference school, you have been selected to provide the researcher with your opinions about the media and athletics. I would like to conduct one in depth phone interview that will take approximately one hour. Upon completion of the phone interview i may need to set up a follow up phone call in order to clarify answers or ask new questions based on information received during future interviews. The follow up interview will last no longer than thirty minutes. If a follow up phone call is not needed, your participation will be concluded upon completion of the first interview. I know your time is valuable and I thank you for taking the time to consider being a part of my study.

If you would like more information about the study, please read the attach consent document and respond to this email informing me that you would like to set up a time to learn more about the study. At that time, I will be able to go into more depth regarding what the study includes and you will be able to ask any questions you may have regarding the study. If you

decide to participate in the study at that time, I will then ask you for verbal informed consent right before the interview begins.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Brittany Lastrapes-Thackery”

Participants responded to my email stating they wished to take part in my study and contact information was exchanged in a follow up email. The focus of all of these questions was to make sense of how collegiate softball athletes construct the media. The following are the questions that I asked each participant:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What sports did you participate in growing up?
4. What university do/did you attend?
5. How long did you participate in your chosen sport?
6. What profession do you plan to pursue?
7. About how many times have you been interviewed by a media source (5-10, 10-20, etc.)?
8. Have you ever been interviewed on camera?
9. Did you feel it was your duty as a college athlete to be interviewed by the media?

Why or why not?

10. Did anyone ever force you to participate in an interview?
11. Did you see it as a privilege when you were asked for an interview?
12. Were you always willing to cooperate with the media? Why or why not?
13. Were there any topics you would not discuss with the media?

14. How did you decide what you would and would not discuss with the media?
15. How did the media make you feel during interviews?
16. Did the media request interviews before competitions?
17. Did the media influence your ability to perform in competitions? If so, how?
18. Was there ever a mental barrier to get over when it came to the media's position in your life as an athlete?
19. Do you feel that journalists have an unspoken code of ethics? If so, was it always followed in your experience?
20. What qualities do you think make a good journalist?
21. Do you think it is possible for an athlete and a journalist to have a trusting personal relationship?
22. Should athletes be able to trust that the media will only write the truth?
23. Do you think the media has helped to grow your sport?
24. What is the main focus of the media when it comes to sport?
25. Compared to all other Division I sports, how much media exposure would you say that your sport receives?
26. What is one thing you would change about the media and its relationship to athletes?
27. Have you ever felt taken advantage of by the media?
28. Does speaking with the media make you nervous or give you anxiety? Why or why not?
29. Do you think that athletes should be held to a higher standard when it comes to voicing their opinions?

During each interview I took detailed notes on my personal laptop and transcribed them verbatim. Some interviews were longer than others, but most of them took about four pages of

information. I did not include any of my personal opinions or biases when collecting the information. I then analyzed the data in order to find common themes among the participants.

I reached out to the members of four different varsity level collegiate softball teams. I began by asking some general background questions and getting to know them before touching on some of the more personal questions. All of the participants were between the ages of 19-22 and all were females. The participants were all from various backgrounds, locations, ethnicities, and social classes, but they all had the common thread that they are collegiate softball players. Three of the participants had only played softball in their lives, while the rest had played multiple sports growing up. These athletes have been around many different sports including karate, volleyball, soccer, basketball, gymnastics, golf, and track. Having these many perspectives and experiences allows them to see how the media affects all sports and not simply the specific sport they have chosen to pursue collegiately. Three of the participants have only competed at a high level in softball for 5 years or less while the rest of the interviewees had been playing softball for anywhere from 12-18 years. Participants were either members on Pacific-12 or Big Ten conference schools. These participants were chosen because these schools seem to have availability to the top-notch coaching, facilities, teammates, and equipment. Student athletes that attend these universities also have the opportunity to travel around the country and sometimes even abroad for games and tournaments. These conferences have many athletes each year that turn pro and compete on a global stage. These resources tend to attract the best players as well and in return they receive the most attention from the media.

## Results

### *A Student-Athlete's Duty*

Many athletes are interviewed so often they often forget that it even happens to them. Each participant in this study by some sort of media source at one point or another in her career. Almost half of them, 5 out of 12, had been interviewed over 20 times during their short careers. It is worth noting that softball has nearly no opportunities to pursue any type of professional playing career following college. The experience they get in their 4-5 years playing on their college team is the only high level, primetime experience that they receive. With the media being present almost every day during their lives many of the athletes I spoke with felt that it was their duty to participate in interviews. Michelle is a fifth year senior from the University of Arizona and she personally believed that it “is my duty as a collegiate athlete because it made me feel special and I know that I stand out to someone watching. I think you owe it to your program you represent and for the future of the program to keep up with the media questions and to create a wider fan base.” Kristi, a junior catcher from Oregon State University, also felt similar in that she feels “that my university has given me a huge opportunity in paying for my education so the least I could do is represent the softball team in a positive light to the media.” Nicole who is currently a sophomore attending the University of Arizona, also felt similar because “the media is a huge part of today’s society and it comes with the territory of playing collegiate sports.”

Many athletes dream of the day they can be on television and a reporter calls their name to interview them. Once an athlete arrives on campus, as many participants here stated, that dream is transformed into a duty. Even if these athletes still feel the privilege that comes with being asked to conduct an interview, any chance they have at disagreeing or declining to be interviewed goes away because of the duty they feel to their teams and universities.

### *Full Cooperation*

While all of the participants feel that being interviewed is their duty, they all agreed that there were certain topics that they simply refused to discuss with the media. In my interview with Beth, a senior star pitcher from the University of Arizona, she was adamant that reporters “sometimes ask questions that are undesirable to answer. They can make you uncomfortable as an athlete and you don’t always tell 100% of the truth because you can’t. I hate getting interviewed after a big loss, I know it is part of the game, but no one wants to answer why they got beat. That’s an internal question.” Heather, a sophomore currently playing softball at University of California, Los Angeles, felt similar to Beth and simply stated, “I refuse to cooperate if they ask personal questions. My personal life is for me and anything personal regarding team injuries, health problems, batting averages, or any kinds of stats are simply not something the media needs to know about.”

While every person in this study is different and has their own personal morals and beliefs, all of the participants I interviewed agreed that they would never discuss anything involving their personal lives, teammate health problems, batting averages, stats of any kind, or any questions about academics with the media. When I probed into why they would not discuss these specific topics with the media many had similar responses to what Michelle said which was:

Every year the Athletic Director of the school would have a meeting regarding athletes and the media. He would often show examples and negative stories of how certain athletes would show off their personal lives too much in the media. This scared me every year and I really wanted to protect myself and keep certain things private. If it’s something that I wouldn’t tell a random person off the street or even an acquaintance, then it is something I wouldn’t tell the media. It was easy because my personal life is personal to me. I don’t believe that the public needs to know the details of every athlete’s life or lifestyle. Our Athletic Director also makes it clear what is and what isn’t acceptable to share with the media.

On the same note Nikki, a fifth year senior from the University of Arizona who has had to overcome two medical redshirts, provided that “if it (questions) were not appropriate or represented the university I would not answer them. I would also not answer if the question was off topic or tried to gain negative information.”

While the participants expressed being nervous and intimidated during an interview they realized that they know there are some issues that they cannot and will not share with the media. Even though the public believes that an interview is an athlete’s complete thoughts and beliefs, they are really only telling half of the story. Even though athletes know that it is wrong to lie to the press under any circumstance, there are still many questions that they refuse to answer regardless of the duty they have to participate in an interview. This study revealed that many softball athletes are willing to participate in the interviews that are asked to do, but not willing to fully cooperate with all questions

### *Performance Affectability*

It is normal to feel anxiety and nerves before an interview and it can even be argued that it is extremely common. The problem that faces the student athletes being interviewed in today’s society is that they have little to no time to prepare for these interviews. Most of the athletes get grabbed for an interview right before they are expected to speak to a reporter and have no idea what they will even be asked. Over half of those student athletes that I spoke with have been interviewed prior to a game or competition. Along with the nerves that already come from being a collegiate softball player, the media is asking to interview with them prior to competition, which will only increase their anxiety and stress. Due to the conflict that could come with being interviewed before a competition, Michelle admitted that:

I try not to let the media influence my performance, but I want to perform so good that they want to say positive things about me while I play. It is exciting to go

back home and watch the game and listen to what the media has to say about you. For me, it is almost reassurance that I am someone and someone out there does know my name. Also, my hard work being noticed is also something that makes me feel good.

This added stress is creating more anxiety to the student athlete experience that is harboring an athlete's ability to perform in their competitions. Many athletes worry that what they say can and will be used against them in a negative way and when you say these things minutes before a competition it is hard to not think about them. Addyson worries that she "can't think quickly enough on my feet and that scares me what could happen if I get a trick question because what I say to them will be seen by a lot of people." Jenn has fear because she "does not like public speaking and I am always afraid I will not correctly convey what I am feeling or thinking. The media is perceived as a big deal in our society and you don't want to say the wrong thing." Being interviewed has almost become a mind game and a puzzle of saying enough to keep everyone happy, but not saying too much that will get yourself or someone you know in trouble. The more you are interviewed the easier it becomes, but for a sport like collegiate softball you get very little practice because the exposure before college is extremely low. The athletes are forced to practice, participate, and learn the skills it takes to give a stress free interview almost simultaneously. This has caused stress that if you lose you might be forced to answer impossible questions, if you win then you won't ever get a break from the media, if you are about to play in the biggest game of your life you must give an interview at the same time you are focusing on the game. The media does affect athlete performance whether they realize it or not.

### *Code of Ethics*

The ethics of journalists comes into question for athletes during this day. I recited the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics to the participants which states that:

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity. The Society declares these four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media. Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Journalists should:

Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.

Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.

Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.

Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story. (SPJ Code of Ethics, 1996, p. 1).

Journalists should be honest and fair, but in an attempt to find the truth they sometimes forget the ethics they once promised themselves they would abide by. In response to this code of ethics, during our interview Nicole stated that, “a mental barrier comes from trying to figure out their purpose. Sometimes the questions they ask can’t be answered and you just have to tell them “pass”. The trick comes with knowing how to direct the questions they ask.” Their goal is to write the best article and that can come at the expense of the person they are interviewing, Kelley, a junior middle infielder at the University of Iowa, mentioned to me that she “can count on one hand how many times they (reporters) took what I said and twisted it so bad to make it sound better for them. A good reporter is someone who doesn’t attack the athlete personally, but asks questions on why things went the way they did.” Kelley is one of many athletes that think the code of ethics that journalists have is a loose set of guidelines that only get followed if it benefits the article they are writing. Nikki thinks that journalists need to be:

Truthful and not manipulate words. They should also have respect for the athletes and the coach. Being able to ask more specific questions instead of general questions that every journalist asks. I think a good journalist doesn’t take words and twist them, but makes it work for them. Also, someone who actually has understanding of the game or sport that they are covering.

The participants in my study made it clear that athletes should not trust that the media will only write the truth. The media only wants a good story and if the athletes don't give it to them then they will create their own. Even though they are hesitant of the intentions that the media has for them they still know it is their duty as a student athlete to participate in interviews because the media is the only way to grow their sport. Unfortunately, the media knows that they have a lot of power when it comes to collegiate athletes because if one athlete, team, or university is not willing to comply they can simply go on to the next university that is willing. It is a constant power struggle to get more exposure in order to get more money, but the athletes are the ones that get caught in the cross fire.

### *Higher Standards*

Every athlete that participated in my study believes that student athletes should be held to a higher standard when it comes to speaking to the media. This is in line with that society believes as well. In the Indiana Law Journal, the state that "athletes in some cases are held to a higher standard because the media's style of reporting creates a presumption in the public's mind that crime among athletes is more rampant than it really is. It also stereotypes athletes as being criminally deviant" (Robinson, 1998, p. 1327). The media is able to twist society into thinking what they want to think. They tell us that athletes should be held to a higher standard, but make them look badly in the public eye.

According to an article written by The Stylus, they stated that "being a part of a team is something special and shouldn't be taken for granted. That's why athletes are held at a higher standard to be responsible and respectful. It's about being aware of your surroundings as well. It's not smart to put yourself in a position that makes you feel uncomfortable. People are watching closely" (2014, para. 7). If you never do anything that could jeopardize your ability to

play the sport you love, you will never have to worry. It's not easy balancing school with sports. The main key is to only balance school and sports. Outside distractions on top of those two will make it very difficult to remain focus on the greater task.

Dealing with the media can be done with practice, but if an athlete shares information that is sensitive or inappropriate they won't be given a free pass because they are an athlete.

Michelle realizes that for athlete, "much more is on the line and at stake for athletes. They have to worry about the university, coaches, teammates, and most importantly, their families."

Melanie, a sophomore athlete at Oregon State University, also wanted to remind me that it is important for athletes to watch what they say to the media because "kids look up to athletes whether they realize it or not and they will pay special attention to what they have to say about certain things. It upsets me when certain athletes talk in a negative way because tons of little kids are being influenced by what they say." Athletes must remember to stay true to themselves when dealing with the media because they are held to a much higher standard than the everyday person. Once something is printed or shown by the media there is little anyone can do to take it back. Beth emphasized this by saying she "thinks they should be careful what they voice. Opinions matter, but when it comes to the media, they will try and change what you say to make it look more controversial."

Student athletes are in an extremely unique and privileged situation so it is hard to remember they are young people still trying to figure out life. They are blasted into stardom and responsibilities that they never thought they would have so quickly that most forget the reason why they play the game they love. Athletes are told repeatedly by coaches and administrators to be careful what they say and how they conduct themselves with the media, but until you are in

the middle of an interview it is hard to know what will come your way. Athletes do not have time to prepare their answers or rehearse ahead of time so it is hard to be ready with the right answers.

### **Conclusion**

While many athletes and fans are extremely grateful for the continued growth and exposure that their sport has been receiving in recent decades, it can be a double-edged sword. The risk of this project was that the athlete would fear that they would seem ungrateful and unappreciative of the fact that their sport is gaining exposure. Some sports have just recently begun to receive media attention and speaking out against the media may lead to their sport being taken away all together. Athletes are often stereotyped as entitled and privileged, so the media painting athletes as a negative figure should not be something that most would feel deemed to complain or criticize for. During the interview process I tried my best to build comfortable and accepting relationships with the participants to make sure they felt that they can share their thoughts honestly. I began many of the conversations by telling them about me and my background. I could tell that the participants were immediately more comfortable after they knew that it wasn't too long ago when I was right where they are now. I began by explaining the study I was conducting and really going into depth about why I wanted to reach out to them in the first place. Many of them were truly honored that I had sought them out to interview and supported the work I was doing as there is very little research done on this topic.

The media has access to everyone and athletes are no exception to this. The media is a very powerful force and “therefore when they successfully corrupt the minds of the athletes as we as the public, the sociological issues multiply. As a socializing force, the media as an institution convey messages, which are often negotiated, articulated and enacted by their consumers, whether the consumers are sports fans, coaches, or athletes” (Clark, 2012, p. 4). For

the majority of athletes, they have a good experience with the media, but for some, they might truly be affected and offended. Giving these athletes an opportunity and safe environment to report their feelings towards the media was the driving force for this study.

I think the athletes in my study felt comfortable enough to tell me their true feelings regarding their beliefs and experiences with the media. They all seemed to be willing to cooperate with the media, but are extremely hesitant due to experiences that they have had or things they have seen done to others around them. All of the participants seemed extremely grateful that their voices were being heard and their concerns were actually being recognized. I think athletes need to have more of an opportunity to voice their opinions and be given a chance to devise a plan with the media that would benefit both sides of an interview. In my opinion, it is not fair to have to worry that if you give an interview, your words might be twisted or manipulated. Dealing with the media adds stress to the student athletes that they don't need because they already deal with so much stress stemming from their sport and academic schedule.

We know now that athletes, specifically softball athletes, do have an opinion on their relationships and interactions with the media. Many universities and organizations do not ask for feedback on athlete interaction with the media because they only care about the exposure that they will be receiving. These women that I interviewed were not shy or hesitant of being interviewed and they truly wanted their voices and concerns to be heard. I think it is clear now that softball student-athletes do not mind being interviewed, but if they could get some support on giving guidelines to the media it would make for a safer environment. An athlete should never feel that their words can be changed or morphed by a reporter and through this study we have found that some athletes have this as a real fear. There needs to be further research and in depth studies on other sports to determine what steps universities and organizations can take to ensure

that their athletes feel comfortable and trusting of the media. With the media playing such an important role in sport, taking the time and using the resources you have on making the athlete and media relationship work would be extremely beneficial for both sides.

### **Implications**

This study shows that there needs to be a much more in-depth look at the athlete/media relationship. The two sides both need each other to make their industries thrive, but the athletes in this study show that there is very little trust there. Universities and the NCAA need to take steps in explaining to their athletes and to the media what their expectations and guidelines are. Universities and the NCAA need to make sure they have proper guidelines in place for the media to follow and what they will and will not allow their student-athletes to discuss or disclose with them. Most athletes begin their time playing collegiately and have no prior experiences with the media and no one has ever discussed with them how to handle an interview. There is more research that needs to be done across sports to discover if other collegiate athletes have these same fears and experiences as the softball players in my study. An intense media analysis must be conducted in order to protect the integrity and purity of our collegiate sport system.

The media should also take a look at the studies being conducted and the implications it can have for their business. If athletes felt more trusting and secure with the intentions of the media, they would get more of the answers they are looking for. When an athlete is guarded in their responses and can never fully relax in an interview then they are only getting a portion of the truth. The media needs to work on having better communication and building better relationships with the athletes and their jobs will only become easier. If more research was conducted, then the media would be able to see where they are falling short and how their behavior is affecting the overall well-being of the student-athletes.

## Summary

The main themes that arose during my interviews were that student athletes have a duty to their universities and sports to participate in interviews regardless of the time or place. Many of the athletes I interviewed agreed that interacting with the media is not only something they are required to do, but an unspoken duty among all student athletes. They are rarely ever given an option in the matter without fear that coaches and university administration will punish them. Even though student athletes are extremely appreciative of the exposure that the media has given their sport, but the more their careers go on the more they realize that dealing with the media is a duty instead of a privilege. They also felt that there was no way they could fully cooperate with the media due to the fact there are some things they simply will not share during an interview. There are personal and intimate details that celebrities and athletes alike do not feel comfortable sharing with the media. Even though the athletes in this study felt that interacting with the media was their duty, they also all agreed that there were certain topics they would not discuss with them. Athletes have personal lives like everyone else and they do not wish to share that part of themselves with the world if they can help it.

This study also revealed that dealing with the media has a mental effect on the ability of an athlete to perform to the best of their ability. In the game of softball, the mental game is extremely important so it does not help to implement the added stress of the media. When you have spent your entire life dreaming of the day that you got to play your sport on a national stage, the last thing an athlete should be worrying about is the media. The media should take into consideration the feelings and emotions that athletes have instead of simply looking to find the best story they can at any cost.

Next, the issue of the code of ethics among journalists was a topic that many participants felt strongly about. They believe that most have a code of ethics, but journalists often cross the lines of truth and integrity. An athlete should not have to fear that what they say in an interview will be changed or twisted to see papers or articles. The athletes in this study agreed that journalists should be honest and fair so that athletes will trust them and be more willing to cooperate with them in the future. Lastly, athletes simply understand that they are held to a higher standard than the normal students, but like their duty to consent to interviews, they know it comes with the territory.

The themes that evolved from this study showed not only the relationship that athletes have with the media, but the similar relationships they have with each other. The ladies in this study were from different backgrounds and schools, but they all had been affected by the media at some point in their careers. The duty of a student athlete does not simply end with playing their games, but goes beyond that into their duty they have with the media.

I think the study did exactly what I set out to do and that was to give a voice to a group of people that felt they had no voices or input before this study. The revelations and themes that came out the interviews are extremely important to future research and study than can be done on other sports and across more conferences.

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