

THE JOHN CURLEY CENTER FOR
SPORTS JOURNALISM
A T P E N N S T A T E

**From outside the press box:
The identities, attitudes and values of sports bloggers**

A report of the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism
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Although often berated by professional sportswriters for reporting that veers sharply from journalistic standards, independent bloggers say their work fills a void left by mainstream outlets and should be considered journalism.

But they do see themselves as having more license – in key ways – than their counterparts in the press box, according to a new survey by the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism at Penn State.

The survey of more than 210 daily bloggers, conducted in the spring, included those from some of the most popular sports blogs on the Web.¹ Respondents were young – most were under 40 – and nine of every 10 were men. More than half said they spent at least two hours a day on their blogs. Almost one-third of the bloggers reported focusing exclusively on baseball, the most popular sport among respondents.

Most bloggers – 75 percent – say they do not see themselves as rivals of professional reporters. Even more – about 85 percent – say they believe blogging is a form of sports journalism and fills a void left by mainstream reporting.

They do, however, believe their reporting standards differ from those of professionals. For instance, an overwhelming majority -- more than 9 in 10 respondents – agreed that sports journalists should be held to high ethical standards. A smaller percentage – about 8 in 10 – said they also believe bloggers should be held to high standards. When asked about verifying material before reporting it, respondents are far more likely to agree that this is a responsibility for professional reporters (96 percent) than for themselves (81 percent).

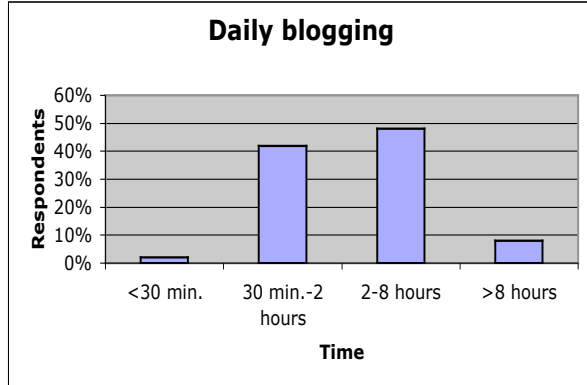
Most do not have journalism training or newsroom experience, but seven in 10 said they'd take a job at a mainstream outlet if offered one.

Respondents also rebutted some disparaging myths about sports bloggers as “couch potatoes” who don't want to be active or accountable.² More than half said they use their real names in conjunction with their blogs, and more than half said they considered “original reporting,” such as attending games or press conferences or interviewing athletes or coaches, a key

element for good blogs. Thirty percent of respondents report having incorporated some original reporting in their blogs, and about four in 10 said they had applied for a media credential to a sporting event at least once.³

Blogger Demographics

Survey results indicate that, as in the general blogosphere,⁴ most sports bloggers are men. The largest age group in this survey was under 30. Respondents are also educated: 62 percent graduated from college, and 29 percent earned graduate degrees. About one in every five respondents who attended college majored in journalism, and the same number report having worked for campus media. Some also bring newsroom experience to their blogging; about 15 percent reported that they had covered sports as journalists before starting their blogs.⁵

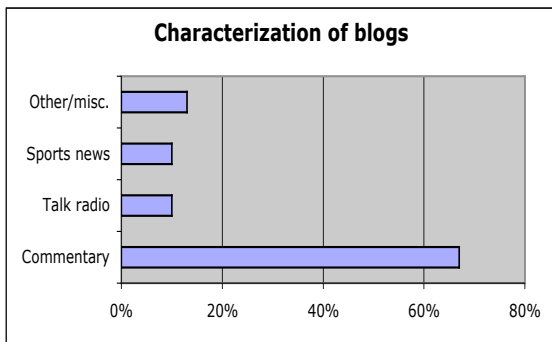


Most respondents to this survey, however, have not been blogging for long. Most (65 percent) have maintained their blogs for less than five years, and fully one-fifth have been blogging for less than a year. They are willing to spend considerable time each day on their blogs, with 8 percent spending 8 or more hours. Although most write for only one blog, about 30 percent write for two or more, and 64 percent say they have made an income – even if very small – from blogging.

In concert with traditional sports coverage,⁶ four of every five blogs focus on men’s professional sports. Although almost one-quarter of respondents say they write about a variety of sports, many focus on those that also get the most attention in the nation’s newspapers: Baseball (31 percent), football (16 percent), hockey (12 percent) and basketball (10 percent). Other sports, such as golf and mixed-martial arts, were also represented.⁷

Bloggers’ Beliefs About Their Role in Sports Journalism

Although public skirmishes between sports journalists and bloggers – from the Buzz Bissinger-Will Leitch exchange on Costas Now last year to the recent controversy over blog comments about baseball player Raul Ibanez⁸ – might suggest otherwise, most bloggers see themselves as more alike than different from mainstream journalists.



They do, however, express contrasting expectations of journalism by mainstream outlets and by blogs. They see their obligation to “high ethical standards” as lower than that of mainstream journalists, and they also see a lower obligation to verify what they report. Further, more than half (58 percent) said the

media sports content they trust most is neutral or unbiased; the exact same number disagreed with the suggestion that neutrality is a characteristic of the most trustworthy blogs.

Generally, bloggers report seeing their work as a form of sports commentary. Six of 10 surveyed say they believe “attitude” is an important ingredient of successful sports blogs. Most (63 percent) also see blogs as an “equal playing field,” where everyone has a voice in a democratic forum.

This is not to say that respondents do not think critically about the content of their blogs. For instance, more than half (54 percent) say they have hesitated to post about the off-field behavior of athletes. Three-quarters report having been compelled to censor comments from readers.

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¹ Trained students in the Center’s Sports, Media and Society class conducted the survey by phone in April and May after inviting bloggers by email to participate. A list of blogger emails for initial contact was generated through a general Web search and close search of SBNation.com, a popular network of blogs and fan communities with a general focus on professional and college sports. “Blogrolls” – lists of links to other blogs – were used to expand the sample beyond SBNation.com’s blogs. Only blogs – as opposed to fan forums or link aggregators – were included in the compilation. Blogs included on the contact list also had to be updated an average of at least once a day and could not be affiliated with a mainstream media outlet (such as a newspaper or Yahoo!). Other criteria for inclusion were that the blog could not be maintained by a sport participant (such as an athlete or coach) and also could not focus on sports outside the U.S.

Blogs that met these criteria and included at least one email address were compiled, and a message was sent to each email address, asking the blogger to participate in a phone survey. After email bouncebacks, the list included 783 addresses. A total of 214 bloggers provided a phone number and then completed the survey, for a response rate of 29%. Bloggers who participated in this survey include some, but not all, listed on such Web sites as Sport Media Challenge’s “Sports Blog Index,” Wikio’s “Top Blogs- Sports” and Alexa’s list of blogs in its “Top Sites – Sports” category. The survey lasted about 10 minutes and included a series of Likert-style questions along with requests for demographic and behavioral data. This report includes frequencies tabulated from the surveys.

² For instance, see Jay Mariotti, “Steroid Guessing is Bad Journalism,” *AOL Fanhouse* (29 June 2009); John Gonzalez, “Beware, Sports Bloggers,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (23 June 2009); Adam Reilly, “Bad Sports: While Old and New Media are Mending Many Fences, They’re Still Squaring Off in Jockland,” *Boston Phoenix* (18 June 2008).

³ Credentialing has been a source of controversy; incidents include the ejection of a newspaper blogger from an NCAA press box in 2007, Mark Cuban's banning of bloggers from the Dallas Mavericks' locker room last year and the NBA's response, and the ejection of a blogger from the Edmonton Oilers press box, also in 2008. Some sports organizations, such as the Washington Capitals and New York Islanders, have credentialed independent bloggers. For more, see "Media Policies in the era of new media: An analysis of how sport organizations approach bloggers and blogging," a presentation to the North American Society of Sport Management in Columbia, S.C., May 2009, by Stephen W. Dittmore, G. Clayton Stoldt, Jordan R. Bass, and Laura Biery.

⁴ See Technorati's "State of the Blogosphere Report 2008" for general blogger demographics. The report estimates that two-thirds of bloggers are male; our survey found the percentage of male sports bloggers to be higher (and roughly equal to that of men in professional sports journalism. See The 2008 Racial and Gender Report Card of the Associated Press Sports Editors.

⁵ Some predict this could become a trend as sports journalists take buyouts or are laid off from jobs in traditional media. See Simon Owens, "Laid off sportswriters find new life online," *MediaShift* (3 June 2009).

⁶ See "Box Scores and Bylines: A Snapshot of the Newspaper Sports Page," a report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (22 August 2005).

⁷ The distributions for gender, level (e.g. professional, collegiate, high school, recreational), and sport of focus may be partially a function of the study's sampling. SBNation, for instance, features blogs and fan communities largely focused on men's professional and collegiate competition. SBNation was a primary source, but not the sole source, in compilation of the blogger email list. See Endnote 1.

⁸ For more about the Bissinger-Leitch exchange and other public feuds between bloggers and professional journalists, see Adam Reilly, "Bad Sports." For more on Raul Ibanez' response to a bloggers' recent speculation that Ibanez could be using performance-enhancing drugs, see John Gonzalez, "A cheap shot at Ibanez," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (9 June 2009).