

Women in the locker room

Fight against discrimination won equal access right for all writers

By SHARON ANN KESTER

Women are entering the traditional male bastion of sports reporting in increasing numbers. But, highbrowed male colleagues still question their motives with no due respect for the women's professionalism.

Aside from the claim that women cannot cover sports as well as men can, critics have said that women want only to be allowed into the locker rooms to ogle naked athletes and, perhaps, to marry one of them.

"What hurts is that so much of this comes from my professional colleagues, who know why access is essential in our business," said B. J. Phillips, a female sportswriter for *Time* magazine. "It kills me that my peers treat women writers with an attitude that says they're something between a pariah and a sex-crazed thrill seeker."

That was just one of the points which surfaced in the aftermath of the *Ludtke v. Kuhn* case. During the 1977 World Series between the Yankees and Dodgers, Baseball Commissioners Bowie Kuhn banned female reporters from the locker rooms. One reporter, Melissa Ludtke of *Sports Illustrated*, and her employer, *Time*, Inc., brought a lawsuit against Kuhn, claiming that Ludtke's exclusion from the locker rooms had been based solely on her sex — a violation of Ludtke's right to pursue her profession under the due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. Kuhn countered in an affidavit that "he had ordered women reporters kept out of all major-league clubhouses in order to protect the 'sexual privacy' of players who were undressing and showering, to protect the image of baseball as a family sport, and to preserve traditional notions of decency and propriety."

New York Federal District Court Judge Constance Baker Motley, (by coincidence, a woman), decided the case in favor of the plaintiffs on the grounds that women could not be excluded from the Yankee Stadium clubhouses unless men also were excluded. She said the privacy issue could be solved simply by instructing the players to wear towels or by installing curtains or swinging doors in front of the players' dressing cubicles. The Yankee Stadium locker rooms became officially heterosexual on Sept. 26, 1977.

Kuhn and his attorneys appealed the decision to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. But Judge Walter Mansfield, commenting on the "baseball is a family game" argument, said: "the last I heard, the family included women as well as men."

Kuhn not only dropped the appeal, but, one season

later, issued an advisory memorandum to the 26 major-league baseball clubs, stating that the admission of women to the locker rooms would be left to their discretion, (as in professional basketball, hockey and football), but urging that they take steps "to afford identical access in one way or another, to all reporters, regardless of sex."

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It was the "one way or another" clause that had male sportswriters running scared. They feared that the baseball establishment was going to use the arrival of women as an excuse to limit or cut off locker rooms altogether. In the wake of the Motley decision, several alternatives to the open locker room were suggested — the closing of the locker rooms until all the players are dressed, or a 15-minute interview period inside the clubhouse, followed by the departure of all media people.

The latter alternative was adopted by the Atlantic Coast Conference basketball coaches at an annual meeting of the Atlantic Coast Sportswriters Association.

The policy has one drawback, said Mary Garber, a sportswriter for the *Winston-Salem Journal*. She said that once a few weeks go by without a woman reporter in the locker rooms, the guys begin to undress during the 15-minute interval.

"When the woman does show up, the guys ask, 'What in the world is a dame doing in here?'" Garber eliminates this problem by having the sports information director announce ahead of time that she will be entering the locker room.

In football, however, the policy is different, said Rick Brewer, UNC Sports Information Director. "In basketball, it's not such a problem for the guys to wait to undress. But in football, there are so many more players and more standouts. And this means more time."

To alleviate this problem for both men and women, the stars are interviewed in a separate room following a game. Although it is possible to get all of the necessary quotes at this time, men then are allowed to enter the locker rooms. Denied entry for privacy reasons, women may ask to speak with certain players, and the sports information director will bring those players out of the locker room.

Garber likes this arrangement. "I don't know how any one gets anything accomplished in those rooms," she said. "They're so hot. And everyone huddles around one player and you can't hear what he's saying."

The ACC is unique in that the male sportswriters, by sharing quotes, and the sports information directors are quite helpful, Garber said. She said because competition on daily papers is especially keen in the big cities, the women may encounter more difficulties.

Some city sports columnists have been biting in their criticism of the Ludtke decision, suggesting that female writers give sexual favors to athletes in order to get news. Roger Angell, who researched this topic for *New Yorker* magazine, wrote that a favorite joke among these columnists went like this: "Folks, I'm all for equal rights for gals, but what about my equal rights? When do I get into a locker room to interview Chrissie Evert with her clothes off?"

The situation, indeed, was reversed a few years ago during a women's college basketball tournament in Madison Square Garden. Male reporters entered the women's locker rooms for post-game interviews. Most of the players were unabashed and simply delayed changing until the reporters left.

"If we athletes want press coverage, we have to put up with inconvenience," said one player. "Open locker rooms work both ways. I think everyone can handle it."

Former Houston Oilers coach Bum Phillips, for one, could not. "I don't know who's going to drive me out of coaching first — women reporters or referees," he said. "I don't want to cause problems for anyone who has a



job to do. But I don't want an unhappy football team either, and it's embarrassing to my players to have women in there after the games." (In past seasons, individual players were ushered into separate rooms to talk to women reporters. But some began dodging the sessions, prompting complaints to the NFL.)

One athlete who wasn't unhappy with the presence of women reporters in a Houston locker room was former North Carolina tailback Amos Lawrence. "I was surprised to see them" he said, "but not embarrassed. I liked talking to them better than to men. The women asked different questions and were interested in what I said. They didn't try to trick me into saying something I didn't mean."

The hostility among some male writers that is directed at the players has not gone unnoticed. "Obviously, not all the writers are failed athletes," said Stephanie Salter, who covers the Oakland A's and San Francisco Giants, "but there are far too many of them. You hear them asking these smartaleck questions that are meant to show up the players and prove that the writers know as much about the sport as the players do."

Curry Kirkpatrick, a writer for *Sports Illustrated*, (and a UNC graduate), considers Betty Cuniberti, who covers the University of Maryland football and basketball games for *The Washington Post*, one of the best sportswriters. "She has a special sensitivity," he said. "Albert King, for example, is a very sensitive guy. Betty asked him the things he wanted to talk about. She broke through the macho image and consistently got better stories."

Another advantage women have relates to a journalistic principle called the adversary relationship. Women are forced to be outsiders. "This means a lot," said Jane Gross, a sportswriter for *Newsday*, "because I believe that all reporters should keep a great distance between themselves and the players."

But that distance for women often is threatened by athletes' sexual advances, said sports columnist Maury Allen. Janice Kaplan, who has been in men's locker rooms many times, does not consider a sweaty, smelly, noisy locker room the place for a romantic encounter.

Nor does Cuniberti don't jump into the

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professionals. "The only thing that writers is when they doing," said Murray Chapter of Baseball ly the same way ab

What prevents men from respecting women? Lawrie M Cosmos and Ranger locker room force strangers, too. "The much closer to any players, because the same business" she

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Angell agreed. H newspaper readers athletes be transform happens, we can clo our attention to wa did best ... on the

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Sharon Ann Kester Heel.



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