

“How Do I Even Write This Headline?”



The whispers started on Wednesday, rumors of a Thursday announcement by Ohio State athletics, the subject of which was unknown.

Speculation ran the gamut. There was the possibility that it involved the intention to open up The Shoe to full attendance this fall. There were reports that the PAC-12 was just about to name a new commissioner, and OSU’s Gene Smith had at one point been mentioned as a candidate. No school is immune to NCAA violations.

Not one reporter could have guessed what story they would be covering, though.

“I thought I had prepared myself for anything that day, but I was fairly stunned,” said Dave Biddle, editor for Bucknuts. “One, at the seedy and unusual nature of the story. And two, that no one caught wind of it before Ohio State sent the embargoed press release, which included the report from the independent investigation. Typically, a reporter will break a story like this before the organization – in this case OSU – wants it out there. But Ohio State did a good job of keeping them one under wraps until it was ready to release the information.”

“I’ve covered Ohio State for more than 20 years, 17 of those years from down the street at NBC4. I’d argue Thursday’s announcement was among the more confusing and uncomfortable moments I can remember in all those years,” agreed Jerod Smalley.

Investigators hired by the university released a report claiming that a 41-year-old massage therapist had targeted Ohio State football players, using both social media and her State Medical Board-issued license to gain an in with the athletes, with whom she wanted to have sex.

Being so far afield from what they normally cover presented Ohio State’s beat writers with a challenge.

“How do I even write this headline?” Buckeye Scoop’s Tony Gerdeman admitted he thought once he sat down to his computer.

Then he penned a story that he believes nobody is even thinking about today. “These are all consenting adults. There’s nothing illegal. Ohio State has seen too much over the years. They knew to be proactive. That’s what they did.”

There’s another reason the story didn’t capture imaginations, though, and that’s where the great irony lies – as unusual as the particular details made this story to report on, the attempt to exploit college

athletes is relatively commonplace.

“These kids are targets,” Kirk Barton offered simply.

Barton, a founder of Buckeye Scoop, knows this, because he played for the Scarlet and Gray himself as an offensive lineman and was a team captain and All-American in 2007. He pointed out that people were trying to ingratiate themselves with players for their own selfish gain even then, and that’s when there was only Facebook and MySpace.

“It’s worse now than ever,” he said.

That’s actually why Barton maintains it’s at least somewhat of a good thing that the story broke. “I think they’re using her as an example,” he stated. “Come after our guys, and we’ll go after you and your livelihood.”

Other reporters had other arguments they cited for it being good that the news broke.

“I think one reason why Ohio State chose to publicize this story is to shine a light on the fact that men can be victims of sexual exploitation too, in an effort to both educate their own athletes and athletes around the country about situations they could find themselves in and how to handle them,” noted Dan Hope of Eleven Warriors.

Meanwhile, Letterman Row’s Austin Ward says he believes there’s a lesson here in the way head coach Ryan Day runs a program.

“One of the most interesting parts of this situation to me is how quickly Ohio State should be able to move on and how relatively little attention this warranted nationally,” Ward said. “That’s a sign of a program doing a thorough job covering all bases with the investigation, and it’s another tribute to the way the Buckeyes are operating now when it comes to running a clean program — and leaving no room to suggest otherwise. Getting the entire roster and coaching staff to participate in something like this takes buy-in from the leadership, and Ryan Day has certainly established that early in his career.”

Smalley hopes that lessons learned will be applied to a possibly fraught future. “In the new era of NCAA athletics with Name, Image and Likeness on the way (eventually) and the one-time transfer rule, athletes are finally gaining more autonomy. The iron grip schools have historically had on athletes is starting to weaken a bit. That means schools have to rely on education, in major doses, to prevent these kinds of problems in the future,” he said.