

CASES

CASE 4-A

FAIR OR FOUL? REPORTER/PLAYER RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SPORTS BEAT

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On New Year's Eve 2013, Red Sox third baseman Will Middlebrooks posted a photo of himself on Twitter with New England Sports Network (NESN) reporter Jenny Dell making "official" a romantic relationship that many both inside and outside the organization had already known about. Dell had been covering the Red Sox for two seasons and was becoming more popular with the Red Sox Nation. While they are married today, their relationship raised a months-long conversation about reporter/source relationships in one of the most storied franchises and largest markets in professional sports.

According to Yahoo! Sports (Oz 2014), a month after the tweet, NESN announced Dell would be reassigned to working two smaller roles that would lower the profile she had with the Red Sox. The network and Dell parted ways in May 2014, and Dell landed a job ten days later as an NFL reporter with CBS.

Dell had 100,000 Twitter followers while reporting for the Red Sox. The NESN Red Sox reporter position is a respected role among sports media, and the position tends to lead to more prestigious roles as witnessed by the fact that Dell's predecessor had left to be a reporter with the MLB Network. The job is one of the most popular media jobs in baseball due to the popularity of the team.

It had been reported that Dell was receiving offers for more prominent jobs (Finn 2014), such as a position with FOX Sports 1. The *Boston Globe* wrote, "There was frustration among management that she was entertaining offers and considering an attempt to get out of her contract" at the time her relationship with a player became public.

The fact that Dell was reassigned to smaller roles with NESN led followers to believe Dell was moved because of her relationship. Though NESN never confirmed the reassignment was about the relationship, Red Sox chairman Tom Werner acknowledged, "We came to the conclusion and Jenny came to the same conclusion, that it would be a distraction for her to be a reporter. We decided that in the end, it would be better to move on and not have it be a distraction" (Finn 2014).

Dell's job was not the same as a typical television news reporter. Dell's position with NESN was solely an in-house media role for the Red Sox and objectivity was not required. Her job was to report what was happening within the Boston team, and the job rarely required her to report on controversial topics or do any investigative reporting.

Some of the competitors to NESN thought that the relationship was a conflict of interest. Bleacherreport.com claimed that the relationship gave Dell an edge, and numerous Boston news outlets stated that Dell was reportedly reassigned to a different position in an effort to combat any conflict of interest concerns that might arise from a sideline reporter interviewing the same person she was dating.

The two did not interact professionally very often, if at all. Middlebrooks's rookie season was in 2012, Dell's first year with NESN. In 2012, Middlebrooks played well until he was injured in August. The following season, he only hit .192 and was optioned to the Red Sox Triple A team in June. Middlebrooks was not in Boston for much of the 2013 season. Dell was taken off the Red Sox beat before 2014 spring training and season.

Although the New Year's Eve post was the first public confirmation of the relationship by Middlebrooks or Dell, many people in the Boston area already assumed the two were together. Breitbart.com said their relationship "was never a well-kept secret" and the *Boston Globe* said the tweet confirmed what was one of "the worst-kept secrets in the city."

However, NESN waited until the couple made their relationship "Twitter official" before reassigning Dell.

Sports Illustrated reporter Richard Deitsch conducted a survey of female reporters to see if they believed it was okay to be in a relationship with an athlete on the team they are covering (Allen 2014). He found few female reporters who agreed with what Dell was doing. *Boston Globe* sports reporter (and former Red Sox beat writer) Amalie Benjamin said, "Never. Ever. And more, it hurts the credibility of every female reporter doing it the right way." *USA Today's* Lindsay Jones said, "Never, never, never. Did I mention never?" And Deitsch's colleague at *Sports Illustrated*, Joan Niesen stated, "Under no circumstances. None whatsoever. No, no, no."

Micro Issues

1. Is there a real potential for a conflict of interest in this case, or is this largely about keeping up appearances on the part of NESN? Justify your answer.
2. Does your opinion change knowing Middlebrooks was not a major star of the Red Sox? That NESN is not an objective news source?
3. When the story broke that Dell was involved with a potential source, should she have been fired rather than transferred? Why or why not?

Midrange Issues

1. How does your opinion of this case change if the athlete was a female and the reporter was a male?
2. Does it make a difference that Dell was working at NESN, where the Red Sox are treated as a “home team?”
3. Does it matter that Dell is not a “hard news” reporter expected to be fair and objective, or expected to do investigative reporting?

Macro Issues

1. Is what Jenny Dell and others do at networks such as the NESN “real” journalism?
2. Critique the comments by the three females interviewed by Deitsch. Are they correct that this hurts all female reporters when one acts like Dell? Is this an overreaction given her job and his relative lack of success as a player?

CASE 4-B

TO WATCH OR TO REPORT: WHAT JOURNALISTS WERE THINKING IN THE MIDST OF DISASTER

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Millions saw it live. A CNN crew including Ed Lavandera, producer Jason Morris, and cameraman Joel De La Rosa filmed and then helped volunteer first-responder Austin Seth as he pulled 86-year old Elmore Jones, his 83-year-old wife JoAnne, and his daughter, Pam, from their Houston home in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey.

Lavandera wasn't the only journalist to make this choice. “I’m a journalist, but I’m also a human being,” said David Begnaud, who helped Houston residents out of a flooded house and into a rescue boat where he had been riding. The whole event was streamed live on CBSN digital.