

Case 10-B

Bob Costas and Jerry Sandusky: Is sports entertainment or journalism

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Sports journalism functions, in some ways, by its own set of rules. First, it is enormously important to audience members and profitable for all involved. Some studies suggest that about 30% of newspaper readers read the sports pages and literally nothing else. Cable television offers packages allowing sports fan to follow their favorite sports and teams—all for a monthly fee. ESPN is among the most watched broadcast offerings. Sports journalists are boosters—of their local high school teams to professional franchises. Objectivity, or even fairness, sometimes takes a back seat to rooting for the locals. And, the money is enormous. The creation of a college football championship series in 2012 was predicted to be so lucrative—projected in excess of half a billion dollars—that it would certainly provide the broadcast networks with a continuing source of revenue in difficult times.

And, that revenue wouldn't hurt the universities with big-time sports programs, either.

Among the schools that were expected to profit was Pennsylvania State University in College Station, Pa. There, legendary coach Joe Paterno, had lead the program for more than four decades. He was the winningest coach in college football history, his student-athletes graduated and many went on to play professional football, and his loyalty to Penn State had raised untold dollars not just for the athletic department but the school's academic mission. Paterno's success also was attributable to his staff, including long-time assistant coach Jerry Sandusky. Paterno and the Penn State program had been considered models of how college athletics should be run and managed. There had been little to no critical coverage of the program or Paterno and his staff. Local and national sports journalists were on-board with the narrative of Penn State as a example of "best practices" in college athletics.

It all fell apart in the fall of 2011 when Sandusky, who was later convicted and is now in prison, was accused of child molestation. Sandusky recruited several of his victims through a charity he established; one of his inducements was access to the Penn State program and locker room where, according both grand jury and court testimony, Sandusky was seen molesting boys. According to that same testimony and an independent investigation by former FBI director Louis Freeh, Paterno was aware of the problem and, instead of confronting it, had urged the university and its officials not to act. The scandal itself was so profound that the university president of 16-years was fired, Congress and many state legislatures considered legislation, that would make it a crime to fail to report suspicions of child sexual abuse, and the national began a conversation about the ethical responsibilities of adults who discover that a crime of this sort is being committed and do nothing to prevent a recurrence.

If there was a single media event that captured the nature of the problem and the depth of the scandal, it was Bob Costas' interview with Sandusky, conducted before his trial. Costas, widely regarded as among the best sports journalists—himself legendary for his knowledge and his preparation—interviewed Sandusky for a total of 36 minutes, about 8 of which were broadcast on the NBC evening magazine news program *Rock Center*. (You can access about half of the complete interview at: <http://deadspin.com/5919340/did-jerry-sandusky-admit-his-guilt-to-bob-costas-in-portion-of-interview-nbc-never-aired>). During the interview, Sandusky

admitted that he “horsed around” with young boys and made other statements that, many viewers and critics, characterized as creepy. Costas’ questions were characterized as tough. He asked Sandusky directly whether he was innocent of the charges. Costas’ work was nominated for an Emmy in 2012.

However, the interview—and the network’s editing of it—was not without some controversy. NBC and Costas were criticized for omitting the following exchange from the broadcast, an omission that came to light only after prosecutors subpoenaed the out-takes from the interview. Media critics questioned whether Sandusky, in this passage, admits his guilt, even though he had denied it minutes before.

19:00:28:00 But isn't what you're just describing the classic MO of many pedophiles? And that is that they gain the trust of young people, they don't necessarily abuse every young person. There were hundreds, if not thousands of young boys you came into contact with, but there are allegations that at least eight of them were victimized. Many people believe there are more to come. So it's entirely possible that you could've helped young boy A in some way that was not objectionable while horribly taking advantage of young boy B, C, D, and E. Isn't that possible?

JERRY SANDUSKY:

19:01:01:00 Well—you might think that. I don't know. (LAUGHS) In terms of—my relationship with so many, many young people. I would—I would guess that there are many young people who would come forward. Many more young people who would come forward and say that my methods and—and what I had done for them made a very positive impact on their life. And I didn't go around seeking out every young person for sexual needs that I've helped. There are many that I didn't have—I hardly had any contact with who I have helped in many, many ways.

Micro Issues

1. Should a sports reporter have done this interview or would this have been better left to an investigative journalist?
2. Should local sports reporters be looking for this sort of story in their local markets?
3. Based on what you can access on the web, did Costas invade Sandusky’s privacy? Was such an invasion appropriate?
4. Who else should Costas and other journalists have interviewed?
5. Would you characterize this interview as fair? Link your response to ethical theory.

Mid-range Issues

1. Should NBC have aired this interview in prime time when children might well have been watching?
2. Does this interview harm Sandusky’s constitutional right to a fair trial? Depending on your answer, does this mean the network should not have attempted it?
3. Evaluate the portion of the interview the network omitted in light of your answer to the previous question.

Macro Issues

1. Is this the sort of reporting that deserves an award? Would a local journalist having done the same interview have received the same nomination?
2. How would you define the role of the sports journalists in your community? Provide an ethical justification for their approach.
3. The foregoing questions have assumed that sports journalism shares much in common with news. If sports journalism is considered entertainment, do the ethical standards change? Should they?