



## Winners in 19th annual Best Writing Contest named

Jon Solomon of *The Birmingham News* became a unique double winner when the results of the collegepress-box.com 19<sup>th</sup> annual FWAA Best Writing Contest were announced.

Solomon won in the Game Story and Feature Story categories, along with fellow *Birmingham News* writer Don Kausler Jr. in the latter category. Peter

Kerasotis, most recently of Florida Today, picked up a first place in the Column category and also added second place in Game Story. The other first-place winner was Curtis Eichelberger of Bloomberg News in the Enterprise Category.

The FWAA will announce a new fifth category winner, "Best Beat Writer for the 2010 Season," later in the fall.

### GAME

**First Place:** Jon Solomon, *The Birmingham News*

**Second Place:** Peter Kerasotis, *Florida Today*

**Third Place:** Brett McMurphy, *AOL FanHouse*

**Honorable Mention:** Kevin Armstrong, *New York Daily News*; Mark Anderson, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*; Parrish Alford, *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*

### COLUMN

**First Place:** Peter Kerasotis, *Florida Today*

**Second Place:** Pat Forde, *ESPN.com*

**Third Place:** Bud Withers, *Seattle Times*

**Honorable Mention:** Gene Wojciechowski, *ESPN.com*; Stewart Mandel, *SI.com*

### ENTERPRISE

**First Place:** Curtis Eichelberger, *Bloomberg News*

**Second Place:** Pete Thamel, *The New York Times*

**Third Place:** Al Lesar, *South Bend Tribune*

**Honorable Mention:** Pedro Moura, *ESPN.com*; Michael Casagrande, *The Decatur Daily/Anniston Star*; Charles Robinson and Bryan Fischer, *Yahoo! Sports*

### FEATURE

**First Place:** Jon Solomon and Don Kausler Jr., *The Birmingham News*

**Second Place:** David Hall, *Freedom ENC Newspapers*

**Third Place:** Kevin Armstrong, *New York Daily News*

**Honorable Mention:** Brian Hamilton, *Chicago Tribune*; Dave Matter, *Columbia Daily Tribune*



September 2011

Vol. 49, No. 3

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# President's column



**TOMMY  
HICKS**

And we're off. The beginning of the college football season—and the latest round of conference realignment stories – is in the books (and newspapers, blogs, Tweets, emails, sports radio talk podcasts). I trust everyone made it through the summer. As with all things in our profession,

it is time to push forward to the next game, the next story, the next web post.

This has been a busy time for the FWAA as well. Our membership roster is holding strong at about 1,200 and while the focus of our recruiting efforts for new members has passed, keep in mind that we accept new members throughout the year, so continue to encourage your co-workers and friends who may not be members to join our number. It's a simple online process and is beneficial to the members and the organization.

I'm sure you have all received your copy of the 2011-12 directory and have noticed that it is perhaps the best directory the FWAA has produced. The return of the school listings in alphabetical order regardless of conference affiliation has been overwhelmingly well-received and the information provided in its pages is of great value to everyone. For that, we extend a huge pat on the back and attaboy to our friend Ted Gangi, who worked tirelessly to produce the directory and its contents that help us all do our jobs in a more efficient manner.

Throughout the season some members will be called upon to participate in projects closely associated with our organization. These projects not only continue to keep our name before college football fans, they are also additional ways in which we play a part throughout the season. These efforts include the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl National Team of

the Week voting and the National Defensive Player of the Week voting.

Many members have asked about the progress of the FWAA's negotiations with the Marriott to reinstate the discount program previously available to our members. Trust that all efforts are being made toward a resolution and we will make everyone aware of the results of those efforts when an answer has been reached.

If you have a moment in the coming days, I would appreciate your feedback concerning a possible future project. Over the years I have been asked to participate in media awareness or freshmen/team media orientation sessions at various schools. Often, I (or another sportswriter) am joined by a TV and radio representative to speak to college or high school teams or freshmen classes about our jobs and how we go about conducting interviews. The main area of concentration in these sessions has been to educate athletes, not only on how we go about our jobs, but what to expect in an interview situation.

Mock interviews can be used to demonstrate the difference in questions asked on deadline and those asked in non-deadline situations. We have the chance to let athletes and coaches know the types of questions they might expect from us as well as explain our jobs to them in more detail, which I have found often leads to better communication among all parties.

My question to the membership is this: is there any interest among our number in creating a list of members who would make themselves available for such sessions? The plan would be to have a few writers in each area of the country who would be willing to participate in a media awareness/orientation session if requested. Obviously, the more participants the better so that no one writer or one news outlet is slammed with requests. The FWAA would make schools aware that member writers in their area were available for such projects and would assist in connecting the school and writer.

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# Game winner: Jon Solomon, Birmingham News

*Comment by the judge, Gene Duffey: Tastefully handled story of player's passing without being too maudlin. Good quotes from the player's sister and also the Mississippi State athletic director. Worked in good information explaining the rare disease.*

**By Jon Solomon**  
*The Birmingham News*

TUSCALOOSA -- Little things remind the family of Bessemer's Nick Bell that he's gone, such as Mississippi State buses pulling up Saturday to Bryant-Denny Stadium to the echo of cowbells ringing.

Few experiences replicate the pageantry of the pre-game sendoff in the South. For players and their families, that moment can validate that the player is making it in life.

Monica McAlpine, Nick's sister, would normally wait for the bus with her 3-year-old son Zion so they could see Uncle Nicky, a starting defensive end for Mississippi State.

"It has started to hit me this is the first game without him," McAlpine said Saturday. "My stomach is starting to hurt because I don't see No. 36 and my brother get off the bus."

We interrupt Alabama fans grieving over the end of their SEC West dominance to remember Nick Bell, who died Nov. 2 after a battle with cancer. We pause the Cam Newton saga for a moment to remember there are worse things in life than allegedly shopping a player for money.

Alabama's 30-10 rout of Mississippi State was as much about the Bulldogs still grieving as it was about the Crimson Tide still having pride. Crimson Tide fans even suspended Rammer Jammer out of respect.

"Athletics is supposed to be an escape from life," Mississippi State Athletics Director Scott Stricklin said. "It's been hard for our kids to cope with death. In a way, playing a game again seems like the most normal thing."

Bulldogs safety Charles Mitchell wore Bell's No. 36 jersey. Next week it will be tight end Kendrick Cook, followed by defensive end Pernell McPhee.

"It's weird seeing No. 36 on the field," Stricklin said.

Eight relatives and friends of Bell's attended. They dressed in maroon and black No. 36 jerseys and Nick Bell pins as they entered Bryant-Denny, the place where Nick badly wanted to play while in high school at Minor and Jess Lanier.

"Knowing that he's in heaven with God, knowing that he's with his father, that's the only thing that's keeping

## Jon Solomon

*The Birmingham News*

**Age:** 35

**College:** Maryland

**Background:** I am approaching six years at *The Birmingham News*, where I am a columnist and enterprise reporter. Despite difficult economic times for newspapers, I am extraordinarily grateful to my sports editor, Tom Arenberg, for giving me the time to dig into meaningful subjects, even if it means no stories from me for a period of time. Tom is as good a sports editor as you will find, in terms of editing copy, challenging reporters and fighting for stories. Before Birmingham, I covered the Clemson beat for seven years at the *Anderson (S.C.) Independent-Mail* and *The (Columbia, S.C.) State*. I also previously covered high school sports at *The Washington Post*. My amazing wife, Mandy, graciously accepts the life of a sportswriter's wife while pursuing her own goals. We have two cute boys, Daniel, 4, and Josh, 2, who put up with their dad's crazy schedule.



me going," said Linda Bell, Nick's mother. "He's still alive."

One day, Bell's death may keep someone else alive. Birmingham's Children's Hospital has created a fund to help fight against synovial sarcoma, the rare cancer that killed Bell only five weeks after his diagnosis.

Approximately 30 percent of patients with synovial sarcoma are younger than 20. Because it's a slow-growing tumor, a person may not notice symptoms for some time or mistake them for conditions such as arthritis and bursitis.

Mississippi State set up a memorial fund to help the Bells pay for funeral and hospital expenses and raised \$17,000 in the first week, Stricklin said.

The Bell family has been touched by the support from Mississippi State fans. McAlpine received more than 500 friend requests on Facebook from strangers wanting to offer condolences.

"I always knew my brother was special, but just to see how special he was to all these many other people is just mind-boggling," she said. "It's like I have a new extended family. His frat brothers pledged to be my son's uncle."

But it's still not Uncle Nicky. McAlpine didn't bring her 3-year-old boy because it would be too painful not to be able to replicate their pre-game ritual.

"He tells me all the time, 'Uncle Nicky is in my heart.'"

# Column winner: Peter Kerasotis, Florida Today

*Comment by the judge, Mickey Spagnola: A very difficult category to judge this year, but this column makes a succinct and sustained argument that Florida coach Urban Meyer cared more about his 60<sup>th</sup> victory than the 30 players who had run-ins with the law. Nice job of combining fact, passion and emotion that in the end made you wish for even more.*

**By Peter Kerasotis**  
*Florida Today*

The University of Florida football team won its 60<sup>th</sup> game Saturday under head coach Urban Meyer.

It capped a week where the 30<sup>th</sup> player during Meyer's five-plus year tenure had a run-in with the law, the latest being Chris Rainey, whom police charged with felony aggravated stalking for threatening to kill is on-again, off-again girlfriend.

It makes you wonder: What kind of program is Meyer is running?

Or not running?

And does the university and its fans care? Which number, pray tell, is more important to UF and Gator Nation – 60 or 30?

I can tell you what appears to be most important to Meyer. Better yet, I'll let him tell you. When asked Thursday if he was concerned about a growing perception that he's running a dirty program, Meyer replied, "I don't care. We do our best to win games."

Yes, win games.

Sixty of them now, thanks to Saturday's 31-17 victory against Tennessee.

You'd better believe it's the 60 wins that are most important.

Never mind that one of the jokes spreading across the country is that UF stand for University of Felons.

Gator fans, though, are no different from other fans. They pretend to care, but really don't. Not as long as the wins keep coming. If the ratio is one arrest for every two wins, so be it. If it's 15 arrests per national championship, then bring on the squad cars. Outfit the team in orange and blue prison pinstripes, and be done with the charade.

And it is a charade.

It's all as phony as Urban Meyer's cocky words at his 2004 introductory news conference. That's when Meyer said he was going to recruit "only the top one percent of the one percent."

Of what? Thugs?

"We are the felons from ol' Florida ..."

**Peter Kerasotis**  
*Gainfully Unemployed*

**Age:** 53

**College:** University of Florida

**Background:** The bad news is that, three days before learning I'd won this award, 22 years at *Florida Today* newspaper ended with another bloody round of layoffs. The good news is that, on the very next day, I got an email from a gentleman in Nigeria who needs to funnel \$26 million to this country. He needs my help to do it; and he's willing to split the sum with me. So I should be set. If not, I WILL NEED WORK. So what is my résumé? I've been writing for 33 years. I've worked at the *Dallas Times Herald*, the *Los Angeles Daily News* and *Florida Today*, where I was the columnist the past 18 years. As a beat writer, I've covered the Los Angeles Rams, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the Miami Dolphins and the Florida Gators. Keep all that in mind, because if that Nigerian dude doesn't come through I WILL NEED WORK. I've won numerous writing awards, including first place finishes in APSE and the Florida Sports Writers Association for column and feature writing. The past three years in the FWAA writing contest, I've finished third, third and honorable mention for column writing. And now this -- a first. Which is good, because if that big payday from Nigeria doesn't come through, I WILL NEED WORK..



Again, UF doesn't care, because the team is winning. Just like FSU didn't care about Bobby Bowden's Mr. Magoo act whenever his players got into serious trouble, until the mediocre seasons started piling up. The frat house incident/confrontation that ultimately got Ron Zook fired from UF never would've mattered had Zook taken care of business on the football field.

That's why Meyer is safe.

He should care, though. So should the university and its fans and alumni. Perceptions are hard to shake. Some people still think of the University of Miami as Thug U, even though the Hurricanes have had only one arrest during head coach Randy Shannon's three-plus years there. Which, by the way, also dispels the idiotic notion that all major college programs have these types of problems. They don't. UM is proof of that.

Meyer also said this on Thursday:

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# Enterprise winner: Curtis Eichelberger, Bloomberg News

*Comment by the judge, Gene Duffey: Revealing story for all those people who think bowl games are such a wonderful deal. Good reporting of facts and figures and excellent quotes to support the story.*

**By Curtis Eichelberger**  
*Bloomberg News*

Rutgers University celebrated its 8-4 record last football season with a trip to the St. Petersburg Bowl in Florida. Big East Conference schools got stuck with a \$740,000 bill.

The Scarlet Knights' story isn't unique in college football. Payouts for all but the biggest bowl games seldom match teams' expenses, and the rest of the schools in the conference have to subsidize them, according to financial records obtained by Bloomberg News using open records laws.

There were 33 bowls played last year, not including the national championship game. At least 13 schools spent more to play in the game than their conferences received in compensation. According to figures from public universities where open-records laws apply, those losses totaled more than \$3.8 million, even as taxpayer subsidies for athletic departments are on the rise and athletic programs are falling deeper in debt.

"Bowls have become network-owned, commercial enterprises, in some cases, pitting average teams in money-losing bowls for the benefit of a few," said Charles E. Young, 79, president emeritus at the University of Florida and a member of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. "I think the losses are higher than anyone knows."

League commissioners including Wright Waters of the Sun Belt Conference, who are usually responsible for negotiating the money-losing bowl agreements, say these games aren't about profit; they're meant to promote the school and give athletes a chance to experience postseason play.

## Find Balance

"At what point does the projected economic impact of a bowl reach the point where you say, 'This makes sense, it's a win-win,'" said New Mexico State Athletic Director McKinley Boston. "As opposed to, 'You win, I subsidize your tourism business, and the economic impact is great for you, but it destroys everybody else's budget.'"

This year, there will be 34 postseason bowl games

## Curtis Eichelberger

*Bloomberg News*

**Age:** 44

**Colleges:** Maryland, Georgetown

**Background:** This is my eighth year as Bloomberg's enterprise reporter, after five years as its NFL at-large writer. I tend to write more about finance than any other subject. This might include pieces on how high school athletic directors are snookered into signing one-sided contracts to show their football games on cable television, articles on the increasing levels of subsidy in college athletics or stories detailing how professional athletes are investing their money. I won the FWAAs enterprise award in 2005 and finished third in 2008. I started my career at the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver, where I was a beat writer covering the University of Colorado, Denver Broncos and Denver Nuggets during an eight-year span. I live in Washington, D.C. with my wife, Judit, a recent Duke University MBA grad, who always provides the first edit.



excluding the national championship, ending Jan. 9 with the Fight Hunger Bowl. The championship game, pitting Auburn University against the University of Oregon, will be played the following day in Glendale, Arizona.

The five games comprising the Bowl Championship Series are the most lucrative. Six conferences -- the Atlantic Coast, Big East, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-10 and Southeastern -- are under contract to send their champions to those bowls; each received \$18.9 million last season, according to Bill Hancock, executive director of the Prairie Village, Kansas-based BCS.

Schools that play in lower-paying bowls burn up some of the money that is coming into the conference from the richest ones.

## Rutgers's Bill

The Big East, for instance, received \$400,000 for Rutgers's participation in the St. Petersburg Bowl last season, according to college sports' governing body, the National Collegiate Athletic Association. It cost the Scarlet Knights \$1.14 million to attend, according to Rutgers financial records. The league pools money from all of its bowl appearances, pays expenses to the teams that played in them, then divides the rest among all schools.

The difference in what Rutgers earned for the league

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# Enterprise (continued)

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by appearing in the bowl and what it spent to go came out of that pool, reducing the cut that each school got when the money is split up. Big East Commissioner John Marinatto wouldn't disclose the formula the league uses to determine how much each university gets from bowl payouts.

According to Rutgers's financial records, the conference gave the New Brunswick, New Jersey, school a \$1.33 million revenue-sharing check -- based on the BCS distribution, bowl payouts and conference television revenue.

The Big East also booked losses from South Florida's appearance in the International Bowl (\$428,000) and Connecticut's appearance in the Papajohns.com Bowl (\$430,000), university records said.

## Bowl Losses

Other examples of bowls where participants spent more to attend than they earned for their conferences in the payout include the New Mexico Bowl, where Fresno State spent \$390,000 more than the Western Athletic Conference received; the Texas Bowl, where Missouri spent \$467,000 more than the Big 12 Conference received; and the New Orleans Bowl, where Middle Tennessee State University's appearance cost the Sun Belt Conference at least \$50,000.

"I buy television, and I buy bowl access," Sun Belt Commissioner Waters said in an interview. "I do it for the exposure for our schools and the enhancement of recruitment, and all the things that go with additional TV and bowl opportunities."

An NCAA report released in August for fiscal year 2008-09 said 14 athletic departments of the 120 schools in college football's bowl subdivision had an operating profit, down from 25 in 2006-07 and 2007-08.

Growth in athletic revenue slowed to 5.8 percent in 2008-09, from 17 percent the previous year, while median expenses grew 10.9 percent, compared with 5.5 percent a year earlier, the report said.

## Rutgers Debt

Rutgers is an example of a school that spent its way to national prominence, playing in five straight bowl games, while mired in debt.

The Scarlet Knights' athletic department received almost half its \$58.5 million in revenue in 2008-09 from state subsidies and student fees, with \$17.9 million coming from the university and \$7.8 million in student fees. The school cut six sports teams to reduce expenses in 2007. None of its programs were profitable in the fiscal year ended 2009, according to the school.

Rutgers Athletic Director Tim Perneti said attending bowl games helps him build his football program and neither he nor the conference wants to give them up. Instead, they'll look more closely at expenses.

"The best-case scenario is the payouts going up," Perneti said in an interview. "But we also have to focus on keeping our budget tight and constantly look for ways to trim costs."

This year, Rutgers finished 4-8 and won't play in a bowl.

## Change Unlikely

Former Stanford Athletic Director Ted Leland, now vice president for external relations at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, says the system isn't likely to change.

"It's too late to put any kind of controls on the conferences anymore," Leland said in an interview. "Everyone's economic interests from the coaches to the commissioners are aligned now and they all benefit from playing in a bowl game."

Leland notes that teams can qualify for a bowl with a 6-6 regular-season record and a losing conference mark. Texas A&M (6-6 overall, 3-5 in the Big 12), Minnesota (6-6, 3-5 in the Big Ten) and UCLA (6-6, 3-6 in the Pac 10) were among eight teams that played in a bowl game last year without posting a winning record.

## Bowl Participants

This year, 14 schools will play in a bowl game after finishing 6-6. Illinois, Georgia and Tennessee are among them.

"If you are a conference commissioner and vote not to go to a bowl game, you'd lose your job," Leland said. "The athletic director would be viewed as disloyal to the football program and to the coaches who want their bonuses."

The NCAA says the responsibility of signing contracts with bowls falls directly on the conferences. The NCAA has no plans to require bowls to increase payouts enough to cover teams' expenses, something that would probably decrease the number of bowls, said Nick Carparelli Jr., chairman of the organization's bowl licensing subcommittee and Big East Conference associate commissioner.

Requiring bowl owners to reimburse school expenses would be foolish because they'd have no control over those costs, said Pete Derzis, senior vice president and general manager of ESPN Regional Television. The Walt Disney Co.-owned network televised 73 percent of

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## Enterprise (continued)

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bowl games last year and owned seven, according to the company.

### 'Arbitrary' Number

"I don't think we would be willing to meet some arbitrary expense line-item that some institution submits," Derzis said in an interview. "Our expectation is that the conferences know what they need to make their business work."

Bowls have their roots in promoting tourism. Michigan played Stanford in 1902 in what would become the Rose Bowl in an effort by organizers to show off Pasadena, California's weather to Easterners, according to the Rose Bowl's history.

Today, hosts still benefit. The New Orleans Bowl in Louisiana last year, where 30,228 people watched Middle Tennessee defeat Southern Mississippi, had an economic impact of \$15 million, according to the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau. The five BCS games in January 2009 had an economic impact of about \$1.2 billion on the host cities (Miami, New Orleans, Pasadena and Glendale), according to the BCS website.

### Ticket Sales

The Mid-American Conference had negotiated an agreement with the Little Caesars Pizza Bowl where their school's payout was based solely on how many tickets it could sell, Ohio University Associate Athletic Director Dan Hauser said in an interview.

The Athens, Ohio, school received 10,000 tickets valued at \$450,000. It sold 2,181 tickets, generating \$98,150, for a game in Detroit about 278 miles north, at 1 p.m. the day after Christmas.

Since its expenses were \$164,464, the school lost \$66,314 playing in the game, according to university records.

"There was a cost, but this is our business," Hauser said. "We're about getting kids to the postseason in every sport, men's and women's. And they all cost money."

### Extra Practice

Athletic directors like Rutgers' Perneti and Idaho's Rob Spear say one of the biggest advantages in playing a bowl game is the extra two weeks of practice coaches get to work with underclassmen. The NCAA limits the number of practices a team can have each season, but gives bowl teams an additional two weeks.

"Where it really made the difference was this spring," Spear said in an interview. "We are getting into more homes and we've been able to talk to better caliber student athletes. Does that mean we'll get that kid at the end of the day? I don't know, but at least it opens the door."

Bowls also mean payouts to coaches and administrators.

Rutgers paid \$186,250 to the coaching staff for its participation in the St. Petersburg Bowl, including \$50,000 to head coach Greg Schiano. Non-football staff received another \$89,517. Perneti didn't get a bonus, according to the school.

Perneti said even the greatest supporters of money-losing bowls are being forced to consider the expense of playing in the games.

"There has not been an AD meeting with the commissioner and league where we have not discussed the issue," Perneti said. "We talk about it constantly."

## President's column (continued)

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If you believe this is a worthwhile project to undertake in the future or if you believe it would be a waste of our time and efforts, please send a note to me ([thixx25@aol.com](mailto:thixx25@aol.com)) or executive director Steve Richardson ([tigerfwaa@aol.com](mailto:tigerfwaa@aol.com)). If you would be willing to take part in such a project in your area, let us know that as well. Again, this is only an idea for which we are seeking your feedback.

Thanks to everyone for your help as we move for-

ward this season. I have been lucky to have the assistance of some respected and engaged people in my short time as president and the experience has been a positive one for me, as I fully expected would be the case. If I can do anything for you or if you have a FWAA issue you feel deserves attention, please contact me at [thixx25@aol.com](mailto:thixx25@aol.com) or on my cell phone at 251-610-7808. Thanks again.

Have a great season.

# Feature winners: Jon Solomon and Don Kausler Jr., The Birmingham News

*Comment by the judge, Steve Richardson: The writers went behind the scenes and performed the difficult task of putting together a picture of a star player's unsettling past when the principal wouldn't talk.*

**By Jon Solomon  
And Don Kausler Jr.**  
*The Birmingham News*

From behind barricades at The Quad in Tuscaloosa eight days ago, Alabama fans kept crying out Rolando McClain's name.

Sparser shouts came for Javier Arenas or Mike Johnson, the other Alabama captains who joined McClain at the Walk of Fame ceremony. But then, there have been few players in school history like McClain, who waved in the direction of nearly every shout.

Tonya Malone, McClain's mother, didn't accompany her son to the ceremony. Neither did McClain's father, Roland Ervin Jr.

For three years, the story has been told of how McClain's skills and smarts made him the best linebacker in college, a two-time Dean's List student, and the leader of Alabama's first national championship team in 17 years. How he emerged from a troubled upbringing in his hometown of Decatur to reach wealth last week in the NFL Draft is another story.

McClain grew up dealing with a tough neighborhood, tensions with his mother, and only occasional involvement with his father. It's a situation where one wrong step, or one less helpful hand from a community, can decide NFL millions or unfulfilled promise. Thursday night, the Oakland Raiders made him the eighth player selected. His agent estimates McClain will sign a deal worth \$40 million.

"He made it with the grace of God," Malone said. "He's a fighter."

To understand how NFL riches became possible for McClain, who did not respond to interview requests for this article, begin on the streets of Decatur.

A drive through Decatur presents a picture of McClain's childhood. There, in a disheveled neighborhood, is the housing project where Malone and McClain once lived.

Drugs and violence were prevalent. Gang rivalries

**Don Kausler Jr.**  
*The Birmingham News*

**Age:** 54

**College:** Missouri

**Background:** Starting my third season covering University of Alabama sports for *The Birmingham News*, and now also the *(Mobile) Press-Register* and *The Huntsville Times*. I also covered the 1982 and 1983 seasons ("Bear" Bryant's memorable last season and that intriguing first season after his death). Previously I covered the Milwaukee Brewers for two seasons for the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Later, I was the sports editor of the *Columbia (Mo.) Daily Tribune* for two years and the *Birmingham (Ala.) Post-Herald* for nearly 15 years, then was the managing editor and editor of the *Anderson (S.C.) Independent-Mail*. In high school and college, I worked for the *Columbia Daily Tribune* and served as a correspondent and an intern for *The Kansas City Star*. I also had an internship at *Newsday*. I've pretty much done it all in my career. Why not a do-over? I enjoyed my first stint covering Alabama in a previous lifetime, but I left because my wonderful wife, Kathy, and I had started a family. Now that three children (Rose, Paige and Donald III) aren't children anymore. I can have fun again.



*For Jon Solomon's biography, see page 3.*

developed between the city's two high schools. The kids at Decatur High were known as the "Homeboys," and those from Austin High called themselves "Cash Money Boys." Fights between the groups were common at a local McDonald's.

Some of McClain's childhood friends are succeeding in life, said Bruce Jones, the director of Decatur Youth Services, but others fell into jail or drugs.

Continue driving and there's the recreation center where McClain shot hoops. There's the field where McClain played baseball. There's the Decatur High School football stadium where McClain starred on Friday nights.

Sports became a ticket out for McClain, a place he could unleash emotions he rarely shares and create a different path for his life. Jones, a former North Alabama

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## Feature winners (continued)

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and NFL player in the 1980s before working with at-risk youths in Decatur, saw a talented boy who could be a handful at times.

"Some people would say he even had an attitude, and some will probably say he has that now," said Jones, who met McClain around his fifth-grade year. "But it takes that to be on the level he's at. It's not to say he didn't associate with some of the knuckleheads, because he did. But he was strong-willed enough not to let it pull away from his goals."

Strong-willed describes Malone, too.

"We're so much alike, it makes it difficult for us to get along," Malone said. "We love each other, but we butt heads all the time, like who he chooses as a friend, or me not wanting to let him grow up."

In December 2005, McClain received a court order to keep his mother away from him, according to court records. "We got into an argument," McClain's petition said. "My mom pushed + hit me several times. She left the room and got a knife. She threatened to kill me."

His father, Roland Ervin Jr., was awarded temporary custody and the protective order expired after one year. In an interview last week, Malone denied hitting or threatening McClain and said the incident stemmed from McClain's not abiding by her rules and wanting to live with his father.

"I don't make threats like that," Malone said. "No, no, no. That was just something because he was 16, he wanted to rebel. He was playing with varsity football players and they wanted him to hang out after games, and I was not having it."

McClain didn't stay with Ervin for long. Ervin lived in Limestone County - not Morgan County, where Decatur is located - and said he was told that McClain would be ineligible to play sports his senior year if he lived with his father.

Ervin said he arranged for some of his relatives in Decatur to take McClain in for half of his junior year and his senior year.

"I made sacrifices for him to get where he's at," Ervin said.

When McClain was not living with his mother, he rotated between Anne Irvin, a relative of Ervin's, and at least two other Decatur families during his final two years. Greg and Tammy Hawkins, and Tim and Canitha Thomas all opened their doors to McClain during times he didn't know where else to turn.

"I don't know what would have happened had we not all pooled together," said Canitha Thomas. "It really does take a village to raise a child."

McClain first stayed with Canitha and her husband, Tim, during his junior year. Tim played on the same Ole

Miss basketball team as Sean Tuohy, whose Memphis family took in Michael Oher, the subject of the book and movie "The Blind Side."

Said Canitha, "I'm just like, 'What is it with you guys?'"

McClain knew the Thomases because in the eighth grade he became friends with their son Caleb, now a UAB offensive lineman. McClain, who lived three blocks away from the family, called during dinner from a street corner one day and asked if he could stay with them.

"All he had with him," Canitha said, choking up at the memory, "was his scholarship offer from Alabama and the clothes he was wearing."

McClain, known as "Boo Boo" to Canitha, could have slept in a king-sized bed; he chose instead to stay in Caleb's room. Canitha would find them watching cartoons together on Saturday mornings.

"Boo Boo is like one of ours," Canitha said. "He's a good kid."

Caleb, Canitha said, was McClain's guiding hand.

When McClain lost his temper at school, it was Caleb who told him to walk away. When McClain couldn't clean himself after suffering injuries in a motorcycle accident, it was Caleb who bathed him.

McClain doesn't open up to a lot of people, Caleb said, but they have a close relationship. "I'm just normal around him," said Caleb, who spent last Monday morning fishing with McClain. "I don't try to sugarcoat anything."

The next time McClain stayed with the Thomases was between his junior and senior years. Canitha said McClain became sick and couldn't swallow, resulting in an emergency adenoidectomy and tonsillectomy.

Canitha spent the night in a hospital bed next to McClain. She recalled them talking at 3 a.m.

"We talked about life, about God, about the importance of having God in your life."

**Stressful case**

Senior year should have been a happy time for McClain. But Malone was arrested in October 2006, accused of threatening to kill "everyone at Decatur High School as well as everyone at the Morgan County Courthouse that had anything to do with her son," according to a sworn affidavit by a police officer. The incident led to a modified lockdown of the high school.

Malone pled guilty in February 2008 to obstructing governmental operations and received two years' probation.

According to a mental evaluation in 2007 on whether she could stand trial - a judge eventually ruled she could - Malone suffered then from a bipolar disorder and Crohn's disease, and has been considered disabled

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since 2006. Crohn's disease is a digestive disorder that McClain was diagnosed with in high school but now says he doesn't have.

Last week, Malone expressed regret for pleading guilty in 2008 and said she made "a bad mistake by trying to fight people with money, and I had nothing but God." Malone said she did nothing wrong and believes powerful people in Decatur wanted her out of the picture so McClain could remain a star player at the high school.

"If you're not at the country club, you're nobody," she said.

Malone took a guilty plea, she said, because fighting the charge was too stressful for her children, including McClain, who was a freshman at Alabama when the case ended.

Malone, who didn't finish high school but became a certified nursing assistant, said she has changed "110 percent" since the case ended, but the case still affected McClain. "I just really think he didn't - and still don't - know how to talk about it."

Canitha Thomas said she and her husband encouraged McClain to keep in touch with his mother. Malone later thanked the Thomases for taking care of McClain, according to Canitha. "I was very thankful she made that acknowledgment because I didn't want there to be any harsh feelings toward us," Canitha said.

On Thursday night, Malone was at McClain's side to celebrate his draft selection.

### Hard lessons

Ervin, McClain's father, had trouble with the law, too. When McClain was 11, Ervin pled guilty to selling cocaine in Madison County. He received three years' probation.

"It was a mistake I made," Ervin said. "I learned from it. I ain't never done that again."

Ervin, who like Malone was 18 when McClain was born, said he tried to do the best he could for his son.

He remembers McClain in diapers in Ervin's summer-school class as he finished his high school degree. "He's been going to school since he was a baby," Ervin said. "I guess that's where he gets a lot of his smarts from."

After high school Ervin had a basketball scholarship offer from Snead State Community College in Boaz but turned it down, he said, for a construction job to help provide for McClain.

"You have your own dreams and aspirations, but I don't regret it at all. Now I'm living my dream through him. He's doing what I wanted to do. That's why I'm so proud of him."

Malone said Ervin stopped coming around when McClain was around 4 years old, but Ervin said he had custody of McClain for many summers. "I wasn't there as

much as I could have been," he said. "When I was there, I made the most of it."

He sought to teach life lessons. McClain and his sister, Tequila, got \$5 for each A in school. "I always stressed a good education," Ervin said.

When he washed dishes at a restaurant in the Huntsville airport, he brought McClain there to show how hard he worked. "I told him I never wanted him to work this hard."

Money has always been tight for McClain's parents. As McClain entered the 11th grade, Malone and her husband at the time declared bankruptcy.

Court documents show that as of November 2008, Ervin owed Malone \$35,824 in child-support payments.

"That's basically true," Ervin said. "Once you get behind, it's hard to get caught up. I've always given him (McClain) what I could give him."

Ervin said he hasn't worked for about 18 months after holding jobs mostly in electronics and assembly lines. He lives in Triana to care for his sick father. "We get by," he said.

### Ticket out of Decatur

By the time he was a teenager, McClain had developed a determination to succeed in sports. In the summer, rather than shooting baskets, he ran sprints in his yard in 95-degree heat.

"He's been in the pro mind-set since he was 14 years old," Ervin said.

At one time, McClain could have been headed for a basketball career. He often told his father he planned to jump straight to the NBA out of high school.

Decatur High boys basketball coach Jamie Lee believes McClain was a Division I-caliber basketball player. As a sophomore, McClain made a last-second 3-pointer to defeat Sparkman, a rival of Decatur's and one of the best teams in the state.

"He was the only guy in the gym that I think was willing to take that shot," Lee said. "I knew then we were dealing with somebody special."

Decatur High football coach Jere Adcock saw in McClain a rare athlete who understood the way a game unfolds, no matter the sport.

"When he sat in front of film, he was studying it; he wasn't goofing off like other guys," Adcock recalled. "It was always very important to him that he'd be the best that he could be, and even then he wasn't satisfied."

Even in high school, McClain had a soft spot for kids. Decatur High offensive coordinator Kenny Morson remembers holding a cookout for some players at his house one night and losing track of McClain.

"We went back to the playroom and there's Rolando, sitting in the playroom with my (4-year-old) twins, playing

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with their toys and just keeping them occupied,” Morson said. “What a good heart he had. My kids love him to this day.”

Jones, the director of Decatur Youth Services, saw hopeful signs with McClain, such as attending church with his mother and her efforts to keep him playing sports. Jones believes Malone doesn't get enough credit in Decatur for her son's success.

“Her way of talking to him and dealing with him, some people felt it was more her problem,” Jones said. “I know as he got bigger, she felt she had to do and say harsher things to try and keep him under control.

“There was no man in that house to deal with that big old boy. She was trying to wing it and keep him from hanging out in the street. Maybe she did push him a little too far. Maybe he did feel it was a little too much. But I just saw a mother's love. She truly did not want to lose her son.”

Jones hasn't talked to McClain much since he went to Alabama. In one of their last lengthy conversations before McClain went to Alabama, Jones told McClain he would be a millionaire one day if he would stop jeopardizing his future by acting as a “bouncer-type” on behalf of friends in troublesome situations.

“But that's Rolando. He's true to his friends,” Jones said. “Even now, when he's here, he's hanging with his buddies. When you say, ‘You might have to separate yourselves from these guys (to protect his future),’ with Rolando, that's probably not going to happen. Maybe at some point, but probably not right now.”

Lee, Decatur's basketball coach, said he reminded McClain a few weeks ago when he was back in Decatur that many people will want a piece of his success and that he needs guidance.

“I hope he understands that,” Lee said. “His intelligence is going to help him.”

Ervin described his current relationship with his son as “really good.” He said they talk about once a month, though he has to get his son's ever-changing phone number from Tequila.

“I'm going to support him any way I can,” Ervin said. “Whatever he asks me to do, I'll be there for him.”

Malone said she will not follow McClain to his NFL city but won't stay in Alabama, either.

“He's still a baby and he's going into a grown man's world,” Malone said. “It's a little frightening. I'm afraid of him being around older people who I don't know anything about.”

Canitha Thomas sees McClain gaining wisdom.

“My husband and I talked to Boo that life is all about choices, and you have to make the right choice because you can never alter the past. He's grown up a lot.”

## Column (continued)

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- “If there's something we can improve on, we're certainly looking into that.”
- “If there are other issues in a program, that's our job to get it better.”

Did you notice the word that started those two sentences? If.

Hey Urban, there is no “if.” Your program has a serious problem, and the growing perception around the country – whether you care or not – is that you have a bunch of outlaws. By the way, in case you haven't noticed, you no longer have Tim Tebow to deflect attention away from the thugs you have on scholarship.

This is what else Meyer said Thursday:

- “Some guys make mistakes and we've got to correct those mistakes.”
- “We have to do a better job with correcting some of the people making mistakes.”

That's what he's calling this – mistakes.

Keep in mind that according to the police report, Chris Rainey texted a woman, “Time to Die (expletive) u and ur.” What did he mean by “u and ur”? Did he mean her and her family? Were any children threatened?

But it was just a mistake. Evidently, Rainey meant to text “time to diet.” But his fat thumbs, not his fathead, got in the way. A mistake. Just like when he threatened to “bust out the window” at her apartment. When told she was calling the police, Rainey said, “Wait and see what happens when they leave.”

In his five-plus years at Florida, Meyer has had players tasered while trying to flee police, arrested for being passed out drunk at a traffic light, stolen a laptop and then thrown it out the window when police arrived, fired an AK-47 into the air, stolen the credit card of a teammates girlfriend after she died and used it 70 times.

And that's just a handful of the 30 times his players have been arrested or faced charges.

“The top one percent of the one percent.”

Words. Empty words.

Just like what Meyer has stated as his program's core values – No. 1 is “Honesty” and No. 2 is “Respect Women.”

Honesty from a guy who released a statement, endorsed by UF, saying he went to the hospital after last December's SEC Championship Game because of dehydration, which was a lie.

So does he really care if his player's respect women? Does he really care when one of his starters threatens to kill a woman?

He cares about as much as his university and its fans care.

Which is to say, not much.

Just as long as he keeps winning football games.