Courtside seats safe for now, but for all right reasons?

I’ve been a member of the U.S. Basketball Writers for at least 15 years. I’ve served as president of the organization for less than a month.

For as long as I’ve been a member or as long as I’ve been the president, one topic has always wiggled its way to the top of the USBWA agenda: What is the status of our courtside seats at the NCAA Final Four?

Funny you should ask. A number of us asked five members of the NCAA Tournament Selection Committee who were kind enough to meet with us for several hours during breakfast at the New Orleans Hyatt on April 4, the morning before the NCAA Final Four tipped off.

I believe I can summarize the thoughts expressed by committee member Bob Bowlsby, athletics director at the University of Iowa, this way:

“We’re safe, but not secure.”

In other words, the status quo rules. For now.

Bowlsby said that while the committee continued to support courtside seating for the media, he also said that the committee was receiving increasing pressure from university presidents as well as from CBS Sports to move the print media from its traditional location. And, at the Louisiana Superdome, our location was three rows on the side of the floor across from the team benches, plus an additional two rows behind those benches.

Perhaps the most alarming thing Bowlsby said was that one reason the writers have remained at courtside is that nobody has created another spot that is superior logically.

Which is not exactly saying something like what I had in mind. “We respect the heck out of the job that writers and newspapers perform during the regular season as well as the post-season tournaments.

“Although CBS is the network that carries the tournament into the homes of our TV viewers (and pays a remarkable sum of money to do it), it is the print media that serves as the true eyes and ears of all of our basketball fans for our 300-plus Division I teams.

“You’re the folks who cover the teams all year, from summer recruiting through the first days of October practice through holiday tournaments through conference play through the dog days of late February through the conference tournaments and all the way through all three weekends of the NCAA Tournament.

“You’re the folks who are always there, reporting on the sprained ankles as well as the buzzer beaters. When Keith Bogans twists his ankle in the regional semifinals, you’re the ones who cover it from the medical angle, the substitute angle and the opposing angle. Sometimes we’re blown away by the passion of your coverage during the tournament with all the charts and graphs and match-up boxes and statistics.

“You’re the folks who bring us all the up-close flavor of the individual match-ups. And one reason you can do it so well is you’re sitting right there where you can smell the action. You told us about the great time Gerry McNamara of Syracuse and T. J. Ford of Texas had talking to each other through every dribble of their national semifinal game. Nothing trashy. They were just having fun. You’re the ones who described how incredibly fast Kansas moved the ball downcourt for layups against Marquette. You told us how they did that.

“You’re the ones who noticed the amazing ovation that former UCLA coach John Wooden received when he stood up and walked out of the championship game. CBS didn’t catch that. You’re the ones who captured the prolonged and heartfelt embrace that Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim and Kansas coach Roy Williams shared after the game.

“Because of you, there will always be a history of the huge pile of Syracuse players at the end of the game, punctuated by Kueth Duany jumping on the very top.

“CBS has taken this tournament coast to coast, enhancing the tradition established by NBC more than 20 years ago. CBS does remarkable work. But so do you print folks.

“Long ago, well before the Final Four created its place as the second-most loved sports event on the calendar, it was the writers who embraced the NCAA Tournament, filing their colorful stories from Kansas City, Freedom Hall in Louisville, Cole Fieldhouse at Maryland and other historic college basketball addresses.

“And now the USBWA has only enhanced that tradition. One of the highlights of Final Four weekend is always the USBWA breakfast the morning of the championship game, when the writers honor their Most Courageous Player as well as a top person in the sports information business.

“I defy anybody to attend one of those breakfasts and not leave feeling better about the game. It’s a reminder of how much the writers truly care about the game. And good luck trying to walk out of that breakfast with a dry eye.”

The writers have always been there. And they’re always going to be there covering the Final Four – as well as the entire college basketball season. Let’s hope the committee remembers that courtside will always be the place we can do our best work for the readers who depend upon us to serve as their eyes as well as their ears.
The USBWA concluded one of its best years ever as an association with an awards program at this year’s NCAA men’s Final Four in New Orleans that will be remembered for many years to come.

The couple hundred people who attended the breakfast at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on the morning of the national championship game most certainly were moved by the remarks they heard from various speakers, including those who received awards from the USBWA.

Inspiring stories were told on two fronts. First, Jack Watkins, assistant commissioner for media relations with the Missouri Valley Conference, gave an emotional speech about his daughter Kate, born prematurely with a brain, eye and muscle disability and was only three feet long and weighed 32 pounds when she died at the age of 6 last April.

Yet, despite the strain he and his wife Genny faced caring for a disabled child, Watkins continued to do his job for the conference at a high level and in a fashion that inspired those who knew him. And it was for this reason that the USBWA wanted to honor Watkins and present him with this year’s Katha Quinn Award for service to the media and lifetime inspiration. When he was introduced by former USBWA president Steve Wieberg of USA Today at the breakfast, Watkins received a standing ovation.

“Jack embodies the spirit of Katha and what this award stands for,” said Wieberg, who nominated Watkins for the award, named after the late St. John’s University sports information director who waged a personal battle with cancer before passing away in 1988.

Later in the program, the human spirit was again recognized when the USBWA honored Virginia Tech women’s basketball player Rayna DuBose with the Most Courageous Award. DuBose was a freshman at Tech last season when she was stricken with a rare brain and spinal cord bacterial infection that led to her losing parts of all four of her limbs. She has since been fitted with prosthetics on each limb.

DuBose, too, was given a standing ovation when introduced by her coach Bonnie Henrickson, whose words of love and admiration for her former player moved many of those in attendance to tears. A short video produced by CBS, which aired on the network during the Final Four weekend, also told Rayna’s story.

Earlier, the USBWA inducted two new members into the Hall of Fame – Bill Jauss of the Chicago Tribune and Jim O’Brien of Street & Smith’s Basketball Magazine. This Hall of Fame honor, recognizing those in the profession for their career achievements, has become a highlight of the USBWA awards breakfast and is an obvious source of pride for the inductees. That was quite evident in both Jauss and O’Brien’s acceptance speeches, each showing a life-long passion for their jobs and the sports journalism profession.

O’Brien remains active in civic functions in Pittsburgh, and Jauss continues to write sports for the Chicago Tribune. He was scheduled to cover the NCAA Women’s Final Four in Atlanta, but the Tribune assigned him to cover the men’s Final Four, instead, when his editors learned that he was to be honored by the USBWA in New Orleans.

Also at the breakfast, the USBWA recognized a former president for his work helping sportswriters to do their jobs after leaving the sports-writing profession to start a new career in administration and public relations. The USBWA honored Bill Benner, USBWA president in 1998-99, and his brother David for their efforts handling press operations for the World Basketball Championships in Indianapolis last summer. Bill left the Indianapolis Star a couple years ago as a sports columnist to become vice president of communications for the Indiana Sports Federation. David is PR director for the Indiana Pacers.

Finally, the USBWA presented its player and coach of the year awards. For the first time in recent memory, both recipients were in attendance to pick up their trophies. Tubby Smith of Kentucky received the Henry Iba Coach of the Year Award, and David West of Xavier the Oscar Robertson Player of the Year Trophy.

The USBWA’s sports-writing seminar for students, held annually at the site of the NCAA Final Four, was also a huge success. Some 75 college and high school students from the New Orleans area attended the seminar, hosted by Loyola University.

Representing the USBWA were board member Lee Feinswig of Baton Rouge and past presidents Mike DeCourcy of The Sporting News, Malcolm Moran of USA Today and Blair Kerkhoff of the Kansas City Star. Peter Finney, columnist for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, served as moderator.

The NCAA, through the cooperation of media director Bill Hancock, provided the students with press passes to cover the NCAA’s Hoop City, the Friday practices and press conferences for the four Final Four teams and the press conference of NCAA President Miles Brand. Andy Gerken of the NABC granted passes to cover the coaches’ all-star game with the Harlem Globetrotters. One student also was given a credential by the NCAA for the championship game Monday night. Students were asked to submit their stories in a writing contest, with three winners selected to receive a $1000 scholarship each from the USBWA.

I want to thank friend and colleague Steve Richardson of the Dallas Morning News for serving as USBWA president this past year. “Tiger,” as he is affectionately known in the business (he is an alum of the University of Missouri Tigers), doubled as president and executive director of the Football Writers Association of America, no easy task considering the demands that come with one writers’ organization, let alone two of them. A job well done, Steve!
Reporters have responsibility to ask the tough question

By TONY BARNHART

The coach has to understand that once the game is over, he is just one part of a very large process. Everyone in that process has to understand and appreciate that each participant has a job to do. And it can’t work any other way.

Ultimately, it comes down to respect. The reporter can respect a coach, be sensitive to his circumstances and still ask the difficult question. And if the coach doesn’t want to answer the question, then, as a professional, he has to put a lid on his emotions and respectfully decline.

The coach has to understand that once the game is over, he is just one part of a very large process. Everyone in that process has to understand and appreciate that each participant has a job to do. And it can’t work any other way.

I thought about Irwin when I got back from the Final Four and finally had a chance to watch the interview between Kansas coach Roy Williams and CBS reporter Bonnie Bernstein.

Bonnie is a good reporter and was faced with a situation that is familiar to all of us: Having to ask a coach a tough question after a difficult loss.

Kansas had just lost a close game for the national championship, but the whole world knew that it was very possible that Williams had just coached his last game for the Jayhawks. All during the Final Four, Roy made it clear that he did not want to discuss reports that he was the leading candidate to be the next coach at North Carolina.

But as soon as the national championship game was over, the dynamic changed. Yes, it was an uncomfortable and emotional situation for Williams. Yes, it was an uncomfortable position for the reporter. Okay, so everybody’s uncomfortable. You still have to ask the question.

Roy did not handle the question well and let his emotions get the better of him. He used the word “insensitive” before throwing out the “S” word in front of Bernstein and a national TV audience. He knows better.

Roy was coming from a place that many coaches feel must be sensitive to the pain and disappointment that Williams was feeling at that moment. Of course not.

Off the air, Bernstein let Williams know the question was coming, as a good reporter should. You don’t blindside a guy in that kind of situation.

Now, does this mean that we, as reporters, should not be sensitive to the pain and disappointment that Williams was feeling at that moment? Of course not.

Some of my television friends would argue that Roy’s emotional reaction was the news. On that, we will simply have to agree to disagree. I’ll stick with Irwin Smallwood’s Rule No. 3.

Rule No. 3.

The initial effort has to be made. The coach’s decision to answer or not answer any question that is put before him. He is free to say “Yes,” “No,” or “It’s none of your damned business.”

Likewise, the reporter has to be free to ask the tough question. Once it becomes clear that there will be no response, the reporter can and probably should back off.

But the initial effort has to be made. The coach’s decision not to answer a question has to be put on the record.

The coach has to understand that once the game is over, he is just one part of a very large process. Everyone in that process has to understand and appreciate that each participant has a job to do. And it can’t work any other way.

USBWA Application Form

If you have not yet renewed your membership to the U.S. Basketball Writers Association now is the time to act. For your $35 membership fee you will receive the most complete directory in college basketball and you will also get all 12 issues of Basketball Times and, as well, you will be eligible to enter our Best Writing Contest.

Send a check for $35 and let the USBWA make your job of covering college basketball easier.

Title

Newspaper/Publication/ College

Address

City_________STATE_________Zip_________

Home Address

City_________STATE_________Zip_________

Office Telephone______Home Telephone______

Fax__________________________Email Address__________________________

c/o Missouri Valley Conference 1818 Chouteau Avenue

June 13 deadline set for contest entries

Entries are now being accepted for the USBWA Best Writing Contest for stories and columns written and published during the 2002-03 college basketball season.

The deadline to submit stories is June 13.

Entries can be submitted in five categories: columns, moderate length features, magazine length features, spot news/game coverage and enterprise/investigative stories.

Only dues-paying members of the USBWA are eligible to enter the writing contest. Members may enter more than one category but may only submit one entry per category.

Plaques and cash prizes will be awarded in each category, with $200 given for first place, $175 for second, $150 for third, $125 for fourth and $100 for fifth.

Winners will be announced in the fall issue of The Tipoff and posted on the USBWA website.

Send all entries to:

Joe Mitch

USBWA Writing Contest

1818 Chouteau Ave.

St. Louis, Mo. 63103

(314) 421-0339

or e-mail entries to: mitch@nwc.org

For entries submitted by mail, print the name of the category, the author of the story, the publication in which the article appeared and the date of publication on a 3 x 5 card and staple it to the article.
Sights from the USBWA's annual Final Four breakfast

David West, Tubby Smith gather USBWA's top honors

USBWA names all-district teams, top coaches

District 1 (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Syracuse)
- Troy Bell, Boston College
- Jameer Nelson, Saint Joseph's
- Ugoonna Onyekwe, Penn State
- Craig Smith, Boston College
- Delonte West, Saint Joseph's
- Drew Schiffino, West Virginia
- Ben Gordon, Connecticut
- Brandin Knight, Pittsburgh
- Julius Page, Pittsburgh
- Keydren Clark, St. Peter's
- Marcus Hatten, St. John's
- Gerry McNamara, Syracuse
- Andre Barrett, New York (tie)
- Steve Blake, Maryland
- Julius Hodge, N.C. State
- Dahntay Jones, Duke
- Ed Davis, North Carolina (tie)
- Brian Cook, Illinois
- Kirk Penny, Wisconsin
- Nick Collison, Kansas
- Hollis Price, Oklahoma
- Dwyane Wade, Marquette
- David West, Xavier

District 2 (New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Washington, D.C.)
- Carmelo Anthony, Syracuse
- Andre Barrett, Seton Hall
- Troy Bell, Boston College
- Keydren Clark, St. Peter's
- Steve Blake, Maryland
- Steve Blake, Maryland
- Marcus Hatten, St. John's
- Gerry McNamara, Syracuse
- Andre Barrett, New York (tie)
- Keydren Clark, St. Peter's
- Brian Cook, Illinois
- Kirk Penny, Wisconsin
- Nick Collison, Kansas
- Hollis Price, Oklahoma
- Dwyane Wade, Marquette
- David West, Xavier

District 3 (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland)
- Keydren Clark, St. Peter's
- Louis Flores, Manhattan
- Marcus Hatten, St. John's
- Gerry McNamara, Syracuse
- Andre Barrett, New York (tie)
- Keydren Clark, St. Peter's
- Brian Cook, Illinois
- Kirk Penny, Wisconsin
- Nick Collison, Kansas
- Hollis Price, Oklahoma
- Dwyane Wade, Marquette
- David West, Xavier

District 4 (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida)
- Jarvis Hayes, Georgia
- Matt Bonner, Florida
- Mario Austin, Mississippi State
- Ron Slay, Tennessee
- Keith Bogans, Kentucky
- Reece Gaines, Louisville
- Erwin Dudley, Alabama
- Marquis Daniels, Auburn
- Chris Massie, Memphis
- Ezra Williams, Georgia
- Player of the Year: Tubby Smith
- Coach of the Year: Tom Crean, Marquette

District 5 (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin)
- Brian Cook, Illinois
- Dwyane Wade, Marquette
- David West, Xavier
- Eddie Rawlings, Ohio State
- Jared Sullinger, Ohio State
- Tommy Amaker, Harvard
- Shawnta Karageorges, Minnesota
- Michael Williams, Oklahoma State
- Michael Watson, UMKC
- Player of Year: Kevin Ollie
- Coach of the Year: Dana Altman, Missouri

District 6 (Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota)
- Kyle Korver, Creighton
- Nick Collison, Kansas
- Hollis Price, Oklahoma
- Hollis Price, Oklahoma
- Nate Wolters, Creighton
- Hollis Price, Oklahoma
- Michael Watson, UMKC
- Michael Watson, UMKC
- Player of Year: Kyle Korver
- Coach of the Year: Dana Altman, Creighton

District 7 (Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana)
- T.J. Ford, Texas
- Ronald Dupree, LSU
- Bernard King, Texas A&M
- Andre Emmett, Texas Tech
- James Thomas, Texas
- Donald Cole, Sam Houston
- Hector Romero, New Orleans
- Kirby Lemos, Louisiana-Monroe
- Michael Southall, Louisiana-Lafayette
- Lawrence Roberts, Baylor
- Player of the Year: T.J. Ford
- Coach of the Year: Rick Barnes, Texas

District 8 (Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Montana)
- Marcus Banks, UNLV
- Ruben Douglas, New Mexico
- Travis Hansen, BYU
- Kirk Snyder, Nevada
- Uche Nwosu-Amadi, Wyoming
- David Bell, Montana
- Britton Johnsen, Utah
- David Harrison, Colorado
- Player of the Year: Banks
- Coach of the Year: Joe Cravens, Weber State

District 9 (California, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, Arizona, Alaska)
- Julius Barnes, Stanford
- Tony Bland, San Diego State
- Ike Diogu, Arizona State
- Carl English, Hawaii
- Jason Gardner, Arizona
- Jason Keep, San Diego State
- Luke Ridnour, Oregon
- Philip Ricci, Oregon State
- Joe Shipp, Cal
- Blake Stepp, Gonzaga
- Player of the Year: Gardner
- Coach of the Year: Mike Montgomery, Stanford