



Staff illustration by Mariano Santillan

SAY CHEESE!

In the Internet age, student-athletes have to watch their every move, or risk having their shenanigans broadcast for all to see

By Dan Wiederer ■ Staff writer

Since arriving together at the University of North Carolina in 2005, Tyler Hansbrough and Bobby Frasor have been engaged in an impassioned and ongoing debate as to who the better athlete is.

For three years, there's been talk of a knuckleheaded decathlon with everything from miniature golf to bowling to a home run derby to settle the argument once and for all.

For what it's worth, results of this spring's impromptu high dive competition at the Sigma Alpha

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and Hansbrough launched themselves off a second-floor balcony and into a shallow above-ground pool in the yard below. But no matter what witnesses might say, each UNC player is certain his leap was better.

"I got a louder reaction," Hansbrough said.

Countered Frasor: "Look, I didn't leave my socks on like Tyler. For style points, right there I have to win. Plus, he was bragging about how big of a splash he

Epsilon fraternity house on campus will not figure into the equation.

There were certainly plenty of potential judges at the frat party April 25 when Frasor

made. Correct me if I'm wrong, but if I know diving, I think you want minimal splash, right?"

Little did either player know that the incident itself — a college-kids-being-college-kids way to celebrate the last day of classes — would make a splash in the public consciousness.

With digital cameras and camera phones clicking across the SAE grounds, photos of the "Tar Heels Gone Wild" shenanigans found their way to the Internet practically before Hansbrough hit the water.

From e-mails to Facebook pages to blogs all the way up to SportsCenter and "Pardon the Interruption," Frasor and Hansbrough suddenly found their Friday afternoon mischief bubbling up as a hot topic.

Such is the life of today's athlete, where anything they do has the potential to emerge as the next hot-click-du-jour across the Internet, instantly becoming fair game for commentary from bloggers and their readers.

Looking for photos of a shirtless Vince Young swilling tequila straight from the bot-

tle? There are Web sites dedicated specifically to drunk athletes.

Want grimy details and vulgar commentary on Alex Rodriguez's marital troubles? You're a Google search away.

"There used to be a general recognition that people's private behavior would be considered private until it intersected with public issues or the public interest. ... But that's changed in recent times and it's changed in part because across society there's been a general loss of privacy amongst people."

Roy Peter Clark, the vice president of The Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

In the Wild West of the Internet, it seems that everything — Shaquille O'Neal's freestyle rap skills, Brett Favre's tears, Chris Berman's hairy back — is subject to lampoon and ridicule.

No one seems to know where this everything-deserves-attention revolution will take us. But in today's paparazzi-infatuated society, where sports is covered around the clock, there's no disputing that today's athletes have seen their lives altered. And in turn, the sports media seem to be redefining the way they react.

Funny business

So what is the formula that took Frasor and Hansbrough from a frat house keg to a second-floor balcony into a pool below and all the way up to topic No. 9 on the May 1 edition of "PTI"?

Frasor, 21, admits it was a charade fueled by a bit of school's-out giddiness with some youthful indiscretion and booze mixed in.

"Plus, if I had jumped quick," he said, "I don't think there would

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Tyler Hansbrough takes his infamous leap from the Sigma Alpha Epsilon balcony into a pool at UNC on April 25. The reigning national player of the year rates his leap as superior to teammate Bobby Frasier's. 'I got a louder reaction,' Hansbrough said.

Contributed photo

Internet: Journalists face tough decisions in deciding what to print

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have been that many pictures taken. But I was up there, dancing, waving my arms, trying to hype up the crowd. I don't know if that was the smartest thing to do."

Hayes Permar, a producer at WRBZ-AM 850 the Buzz in Raleigh, was the first media member to post photos of Frasier's leap online, four days after the event. Permar doubles as a blogger for the Buzz's Web site, teaming with morning host Joe Oviyes to provide a steady stream of amusing and conversation-starting content to their blog audience. The posts on Hansbrough and Frasier drew 90 comments and a steady flow of traffic to the blog.

The reasons were straightforward: here was Hansbrough, the reigning National Player of the Year and the face of college basketball, and Frasier, just four months removed from ACL surgery on his left knee, risking life and limb for a quick thrill at a party.

Amusing? Yeah. Crazy? Maybe. Worthy of discussion? Absolutely.

"It's pretty simple," Permar said. "When I'm working on stuff for the blog, I ask 'What would people find interesting?' To me, if it's something that as a non-journalist I'd e-mail out to my crew, it's probably worthy of being posted on the blog."

Will Leitch, the former editor of the nationally renowned and often juvenile sports blog Deadspin, also posted the Frasier-Hansbrough balcony leap photos not long after they went up on 850 the Buzz's Web site.

Leitch's rule for whether something registers as Deadspin-worthy is pretty simple.

"It has to be funny," he said. "Or it has to have some sort of news value to something going on in sports. I try to ask myself, 'Is there something worthy of discussion here or are we just trying to make the person look like an idiot?' If it's the latter, I won't post it."

Noble enough. But therein lies the fear for critics wary of today's blogosphere, its "Gotcha" tactics and the sarcastic and often ignorant reader commentary that accompanies many blogs.

Sure, Permar and Leitch may simply be looking for a cheap laugh for their respective audiences. But there are plenty of Web sites and cynical readers that seem to take great pride in hitting below the belt with reputation-smearing photos and sneering remarks.

And it's not just sports-centric Web sites taking the potshots at athletes. In April, TheDirty.com made waves when it published photos of Arizona Cardinals quarterback Matt Leinart helping a young co-ed inhale a beer bong at a house party.

Some fans and even some beat reporters pointed to the photos as proof that Leinart wasn't taking his football development serious enough, a heavy argument to make given the limited amount of evidence available.

A slippery slope

So how should beat reporters and other traditional media outlets react to such developments?

"There used to be a general recognition that people's private behavior would be considered private until it intersected with public issues or the public interest," said Roy Peter Clark, the vice president of The Poynter Institute for Media Studies. "There used to be a line you wouldn't cross until you had a journalistic justification. But

WEB OF CONTROVERSY

UNC's Tyler Hansbrough and Bobby Frasier aren't the first ACC athletes to have their ill-considered antics chronicled on the Internet. Here are three other big names from Tobacco Road who wound up entangled in hullabaloo after their mischief spread across blogs.

LOVE LOST IN CHAPEL HILL

As Barack Obama's personal aide, Reggie Love may now have the prestige on his resume to trump pretty much any criticism that's thrown at him. But for a while in the Triangle, the former Duke football and basketball player was best known as the Blue Devil who mistakenly passed out at a fraternity house on the campus of rival UNC and was photographed in, shall we say, an embarrassing manner. Love was suspended by coach Mike Krzyzewski for his transgression.

NAKED BOOTLEG

In January, a nude photo of Wake Forest quarterback Riley Skinner began circulating around the Internet. The picture first surfaced at WithLeather.com, prompting a blizzard of flippant commentary. Wrote one poster: "This has to be the dumbest move by a college quarterback since Eric Crouch tried to go pro."

HE'S GOT A FAST CAR

Former N.C. State defensive end Mario Williams was already with the Houston Texans in 2007 when he returned to campus for the Wolfpack's Red-White game. On that weekend, Williams apparently went for a joyride in his burnt orange Lamborghini on I-40, a speedy and somewhat scary jaunt that was filmed by a female passenger in the car and others in a vehicle following them. The videos surfaced on YouTube but were removed shortly thereafter. As the folks at Deadspin.com lamented, "If Vince Young can have the cover of 'Madden '08', Mario Williams can shoot for 'Gran Turismo.'"

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Steve Kirschner, UNC's associate athletic director for communications, admits he was peeved when newspapers and TV stations began calling him seeking comment on the pool jumping photos.

Tar Heels coach Roy Williams could only sigh when Kirschner informed him of the hullabaloo.

"For what?" Williams wondered. "They're college kids being college kids."

Kirschner wasn't so much worried about damage to Hansbrough's and Frasier's reputations but moreso with the precedents being set across the Internet and suddenly filtering into the standards of traditional news outlets.

In his eyes, the idea of an age where the headline "College kids do stupid things at frat party" becomes commonplace is a scary prospect.

"When did this become news?" Kirschner asked.

Those fearful of the Internet's influence wonder how long it will take before sports coverage recedes into the shady tac-

tics of Hollywood journalism, where celebrities can't even go to the grocery store or stop for gas without being stalked by paparazzi.

That's one reason the coverage of the Hansbrough-Frasier incident struck a nerve with Kirschner.

"The photos, in and of themselves, were a very inconsequential set of photographs," Kirschner said. "And Bobby and Tyler are big boys who can survive the titillation that comes with pictures of them jumping in a pool being viewed. But to me, there's a larger concept of what has news value and what's simply for cheap entertainment value and additional hits to a Web site. I think it's worth asking, 'Is this the direction that newspapers and TV stations and huge sports journalism juggernauts like ESPN really want to go?'"

Role call

It's a question professional journalists are grappling to answer, particularly in a changing environment where the popularity of independent blogs has changed the landscape.

There's a belief across the business that journalistic standards vary depending on which forum a person is working for in a given moment. But the lines blur when sports writers double as TV personalities and triple as Internet bloggers.

From minute to minute, journalists find themselves wobbling on a tight rope, wondering when to lean in the direction of being enlightened, informative and credible, and when to come across simply as loud, entertaining and attention-grabbing.

David Glenn knows the balancing act all too well. Not only is he an afternoon sports talk host on 850 the Buzz, he also writes a blog for WRAL.com and is the owner and editor of the ACC Sports Journal, a bimonthly print publication that covers all 12 conference schools.

"The definition of news depends on who you are and what you're trying to accomplish as a media outlet," Glenn said. "A traditional daily newspaper looks at things one way and a blog looks at the exact same thing a very different way. The complexity today is that there are very few clear lines anymore to distinguish the various media."

So how did Glenn handle the Frasier and Hansbrough high-dive photos? He decided it "wasn't interesting enough" to merit space in the ACC Sports Journal but was more than compelling enough to stimulate discussion on The Buzz.

"Sports radio is partly about news but partly about entertainment," Glenn said. "And if what people are talking about is UNC basketball players jumping off a balcony at a college party, then absolutely, positively we're going to talk about it on my radio show."

Clark believes the incident was worthy of coverage simply because of the potential disaster that might have occurred. What would Carolina fans have felt, he wonders, had Hansbrough broken his neck?

"I'm not blaming the kid for acting like a college kid," Clark said. "But I also don't think Carolina can have it both ways. You can't prop Tyler Hansbrough up to be this paragon of the hard-working athlete, the lunch-pail icon of North Carolina basketball and then complain when a small irresponsible act becomes the object of attention."

Context clues

Leitch issues a reminder in his defense as well, noting that Deadspin didn't take the Hans-

brough-Frasier photos at the SAE house. The Web site simply ran photos that were already circulating from inbox to inbox.

"Posting something like this," Leitch said, "is a lot different than being the guy who jumps out of the bushes or shows up at a party simply waiting for an athlete to do something stupid."

In the big picture, it's up to each individual Web site and media outlet to formulate its policies and principles, a complicated task given the copycat instincts that permeate the business.

"Our model today is a dangerous model," Glenn said. "The model rewards eyeballs above almost anything else. With a savvy consumer, the model will still reward those in the media who are responsible and those who gets things right. But sorry to say it, most people aren't savvy consumers."

Frasier, an admitted fan of Deadspin for its witty sarcasm, said he's OK with athletes drawing attention for their off-field behavior so long as it's given the proper tone and context.

What worries him, however, is that the general public too often takes one snapshot and quickly makes a broad-brush judgment on an athlete's character.

Frasier was baffled, for example, that the Leinart photos called the quarterback's work ethic into question and could only hope that similar criticism wasn't shot his way.

After all, earlier in the afternoon on April 25 before his Johnny Knoxville-esque cannonball off the SAE house, Frasier had turned in a grueling rehabilitation session on his knee at the Smith Center.

Laughing matter

For the record, it's worth noting that both Hansbrough and Frasier got a kick out of the coverage their indiscretions received, making sure to DVR every local and national news report.

"We joked about it," Hansbrough said. "Bobby said it's the best press he's had in a long time."

Frasier still keeps a snapshot of the "PTI" rail on his cell phone, chuckling that "Pool jump" attracted attention from Michael Wilbon and Tony Kornheiser.

"My dad called the next day and asked me right away, 'Is your knee OK?'" Frasier said. "When I told him I was fine, he said, 'Well it's nice to see you're still having fun in college.' He thought it was funny. My mom and my sister, who's a physical therapist, didn't think it was funny at all. I guess it just depends on your perspective."

Frasier shrugs knowing that the perspective of a moment can look much different from the railing of a second-floor balcony than it does from a desk chair in front of a computer monitor.

Quite simply, these are new times. And for today's athlete, every move is likely being monitored, on the court and off.

"These are the rules now, even for regular people," Permar said. "Whenever you're around anybody holding a cell phone, whatever you're doing in that moment, you have to understand that that snapshot could be seen by the last person you'd want to see it: your mother, your colleagues, your future employer. Certainly that's more true for athletes. But it's not untrue for the rest of us."

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