REFLECTIONS OF A SPORTS WRITER

BY **Chris** Korman

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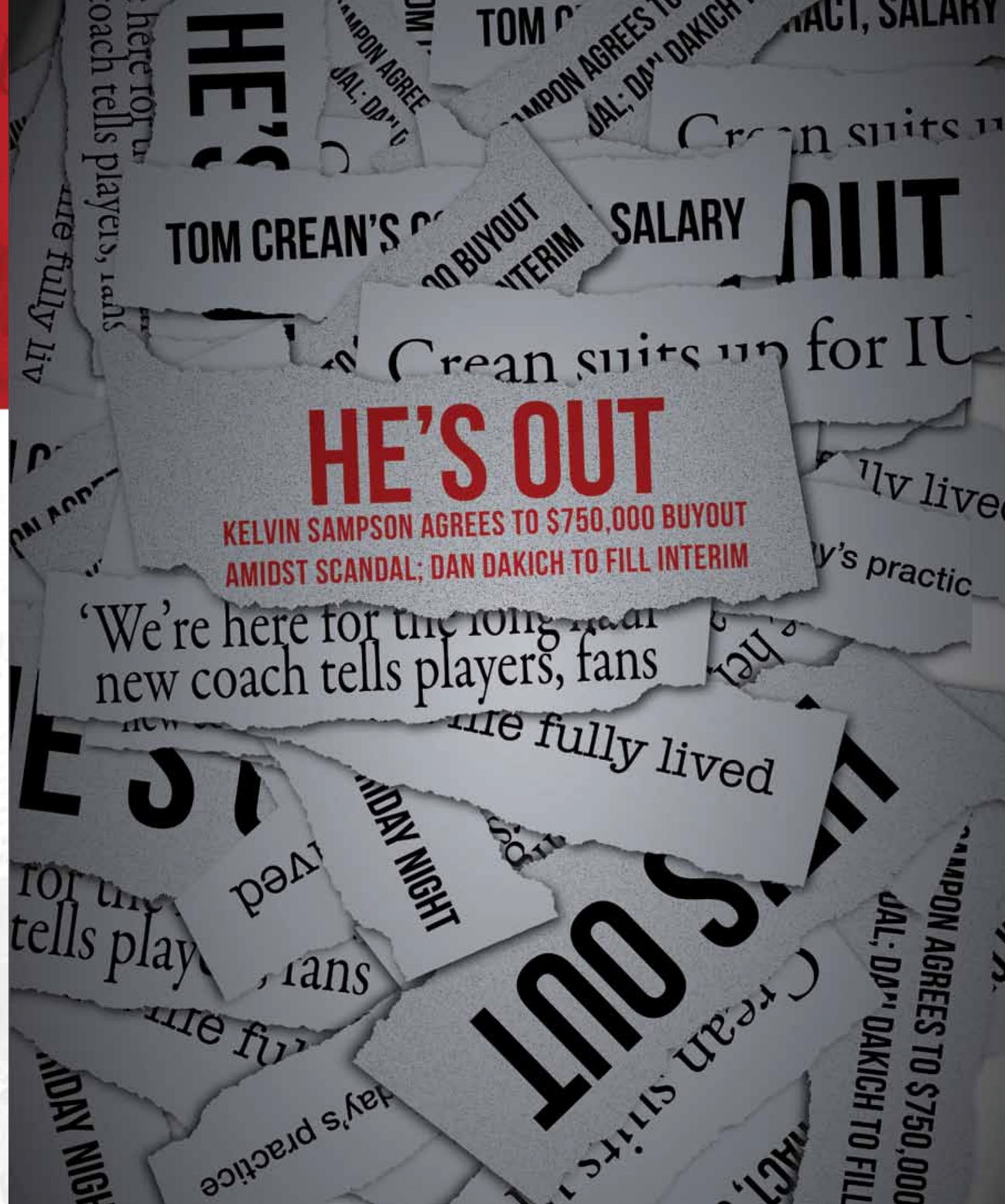
Chris Korman in Baltimore where he now works for *The Baltimore Sun*. Photo by Alissa Swango

IF THERE'D BEEN A SCRIPT—AND THERE MOST ASSUREDLY WAS NOT—IT WOULD HAVE BEEN ALL TOO TRITE.

DURING THE FINAL DAYS OF KELVIN SAMPSON'S DISASTROUS REIGN AS BASKETBALL COACH AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY, IT NEVER SEEMED TO STOP PRECIPITATING SOMETHING COLD. BUT THERE WAS NOTHING ENCHANTING ABOUT IT AT ANY POINT, NO MAJESTIC SNOWFALL THAT WOULD ALLOW KIDS TO GET A DAY OFF FROM SCHOOL AND GO SLEDDING. WHAT WE GOT, INSTEAD, WAS A CONSTANT SPITTLE OF ICE AND SNOW AND RAIN. AT TIMES IT SEEMED LIKE ALL THREE WERE FALLING AT ONCE.

WHICH IS JUST HOW SOME FILM DIRECTOR WOULD WANT HIS SCENE TO LOOK SO THAT IT COULD REFLECT THE MOOD IN BLOOMINGTON AT THE TIME. I WAS COVERING THE HOOSIERS BASKETBALL TEAM FOR THE HERALD-TIMES THEN, SLOGGING THROUGH THAT WEATHER, TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THE HELL WAS GOING ON WITH ONE OF SPORT'S GREATEST INSTITUTIONS.



Kelvin Sampson (left) agreed to a $750,000 buyout. Athletic Director Rick Greenspan ran IU Athletics as a "cold-hearted businessman," in Chris Korman's opinion.
AP Photo/Tom Strattman

each morning that week in February 2008, I bundled up and carved my way through town to the parking lot outside the south entrance to Assembly Hall. By then I had become expert at staking out the building, which is not a lesson they teach in any journalism school I know.

During those days, though, no one from IU was speaking on the record about the scandal and I quickly figured out how to wedge my Pontiac Vibe between two large SUVs in such a manner that I was afforded a decent view of the building even though the vehicle itself was hidden. From there I'd work the phone and watch.

Our stories became a pastiche of tidbits passed on by sources who couldn't be named, combined with my observations from the scene: "Sampson left, he wore an Indiana sweatshirt, his hair was a bit messy as if he hadn't had time to see a barber, and a source who asked not to be identified indicated he went home to eat a ham sandwich." Stuff like that. Those days were so frantic, yet all we did was wait and speculate.

Sampson wore black

To the average Hoosier fan, the most memorable day of that week was Friday, February 22, the day Sampson agreed to a buyout. He walked down the ramp from his office in mid-morning, wearing mostly black. It was the first time I'd seen him wearing anything other than a suit (for games) or clothing emblazoned with an IU logo. He'd known for a few days—everyone had known, really—that his time with the Hoosiers was over.

There's no way the school could keep him after the NCAA proved that he and his staff had made illegal recruiting calls, violating not only standing rules but the terms of sanctions he was given for the same offense at his Oklahoma job. All that was left was some legal wrangling. And a lot of it.

The university scheduled several press conferences throughout that Friday, and by 1 pm at least 50 reporters had descended outside Assembly Hall. You've seen in movies where they all stand in a gaggle and move toward anyone who might talk, a hounding amoeba of useless badgering. Well, that happened.

I generally stayed toward the outside, in case one of the bewildered 18-year-old athletes, who'd come to IU because they could play basketball, said anything noteworthy on their way into the building that was supposed to be both their shrine and sanctuary. None did.

Any news to be broken now would come from other sources. An investigative reporter always seeks aggrieved parties, and upset parents and former high school or club team coaches were the obvious choices. They understood that Sampson—whom most of them trusted implicitly—had made the mistakes, but what bothered them more was the silence from administrators.

None of the parents were oblivious to how complicated the situation had become, nor were they unclear on the fact that young adults they loved were being yanked around in the process. By the time the day ended, I had sent or received nearly 500 text messages and spent a few hundred minutes on the phone. Basically I'd receive a piece of information from a source and then route it to Doug Wilson, then the *H-T*'s sports editor, back at the office.

I rarely paused. After not eating all day I grabbed our intern and we ran to Smokin' Jack's Rib Shack, where we each ordered a pork sandwich and allotted ourselves two minutes to eat them. By mid-afternoon, people were growing restless; IU kept pushing the press conference back and made no one available to talk in the meantime. About then I heard from a source that practice was taking place and that many of the players hadn't shown up. Dan Dakich, the former Indiana basketball player who'd joined the coaching staff that season, was supposedly running the session. The source thought he'd been named head coach.

I wanted to check this out before calling the paper. It felt like something we should see with our own two eyes. Problem was, I couldn't meander away. Another reporter would have followed, or building personnel who recognized my face would have become suspicious. So I sent the intern. Zak Keefer was boyishly handsome and benign. He had his run of the place because he looked like what he was: just a student. I had him walk off as if he had to head to class, and within minutes he had infiltrated the gym and we had the scoop: Dakich would lead the team for now, a decision that caused several players to boycott his first practice.

Once he was in the NBA, Eric Gordon would tell *The Indianapolis Star* that drug use by his teammates ruined his one season with the Hoosiers. It may have been a factor, but athletes in general usually do party like their peers (yes, college kids smoke weed). Gordon's team, it seemed to this reporter, was ruined because no one had any emotional energy left due to the turmoil. They just couldn't care anymore. Say what you will about Sampson, but he was the force that gave them meaning. And he was gone.

On the day he was ousted, news of Sampson's exact buyout amount—$750,000—did not leak until about 7 pm, and the press conference started after 9 pm. In many ways it was a reporter's dream: total chaos. IU fans needed answers, and the charade usually put forth by the athletic department had been eroded by its mishandling of the crisis. Everyone—including major stakeholders such as former players and even trustees—was sick of it. And they relied on the media to sort it all out. From a professional standpoint, few days over my four years in Bloomington were as exhilarating.

Yet when I look back, I always recall the night before. Athletic Director Rick Greenspan and his top deputy Tim Fitzpatrick had holed up in the administrative offices at Assembly Hall, and a small group of reporters was determined to wait them out. So we just sat there for about six hours, until almost midnight. At one point, Greenspan's wife Jenny and son Ben arrived bearing McDonald's and pillows. This was, we suspected, an attempt to convince us that two middle-aged gentlemen last seen wearing suits were planning some sort of epic all-nighter.

We responded to this gesture by ordering sandwiches from Jimmy John's. There were only six or seven of us—an Associated Press writer, someone from *The Indianapolis Star*, two *IDS* reporters—and things got punchy. We were sitting near two cubicles where the administrative assistants worked during the day. As they left for the night, they put these ludicrous ropes across the entrance to their workspaces, from which signs hung, warning stragglers to stay out. This got funnier and funnier as it got later and more snow fell outside. We eventually decided somebody should go ahead and explore each of the forbidden four-foot by four-foot areas to see what warranted such security measures.

About then, though, something happened. From the door nearest us emerged Greenspan's wife and Fitzpatrick. We stared at them. Until we heard rustling from down the hall. Greenspan and his son had ducked out a side door and were walking rapidly to the north exit. A trick play! We gave chase, catching Greenspan as he ducked into the car his wife had pulled around. Somebody asked, "Rick, can you tell us where things stand?" He said, "No comment."

When we walked back around to where our cars were parked, we found Fitzpatrick trying to brush a few inches of fresh powder from his windshield. We probably could have tried to get something out of him. But instead we just went home.

Rick Greenspan easily could have come out of his office at 6 o'clock that night and explained what was happening. He could have said something for the record and then given us background information. The whole thing could have been normal and cordial, the way dozens of interactions between reporters and officials are each day.

It never worked that way with Greenspan, though. Athletic directors in general have grown in stature, despite running business units of universities that usually lose money and account for a fraction of overall budgets. Compared to the hundreds of interesting, intelligent leaders sprinkled throughout academic departments at major universities, athletic directors have a minuscule impact on students. The way I see it, as an employee of a government-funded institution, Greenspan had a duty to speak publicly because fans, our readers, were his constituents. They are the ones who pack Assembly Hall for games and shovel money into the program in a variety of ways. I believe Greenspan ran IU Athletics as a cold-hearted businessman, not as someone entrusted with a sacred heritage. In doing so, he partially stripped IU Athletics of what made it endearing—and successful. (It should be noted that Fred Glass, the man who replaced Greenspan, has been his complete opposite.)

The good and bad of sports reporting

Stick around long enough, and you realize that sports writing can be sort of absurd. As much as anything, it involves the covering of a glossy narrative—sports as a grand microcosm for life, full of heroes and villains whose actions deliver to readers many life lessons—largely crafted and supported by sports writers.

This mythologizing of sports has been carried out by the men and women (mostly men) who choose to write about it for a career. The insinuation that many of us are failed athletes who wanted to find a way to stay near the games, though, strikes me as absurd. There are other, better ways—coaching, support and medical staff, sports marketing—to be around the games. Sports writers know they are on the sidelines, and even the ones who've shucked all ethical duty and have given up trying to be objective can't possibly feel even an echo of what it might be like to be on the team, to wear the colors, to bask in the glory of shared achievement.

Many of the people who end up toiling in the sports department do so because for a solid 60 years the best writers at most newspapers have been sports writers. Sports is seen as a place where you can tell great stories with more of a literary bent; you're not going to have a managing editor stripping your copy of color or making sure you get the most important facts crammed in the top paragraph. You can be more artful. It's just sports.

The great ones

Great sports writers such as David Halberstam and Frank Deford—both of whom gave public lectures in Bloomington while I was there—dedicated much of their lives to ably using sports as a window into concepts we struggle to understand otherwise. They wrote about race and social justice through the prism of the games we love, but they also touched on the abstract; they wrote about who we are and what matters. They chronicled athletes locked in a struggle to succeed and allowed us to ride along and learn lessons about determination and overcoming adversity.

The problem is that most sports writers start their careers covering high school baseball or the like, and along the way all context gets lost. A vast majority of the sports writers I've known have been dedicated and passionate. They want to provide the best coverage they can, and so they write features and profiles, searching for something larger.

But often we're reaching. There's not much to a lot of what we write about that goes beyond the obvious: young people playing games to stay in shape, have fun, and learn some solid lessons. When I'd get an angry call from a parent whose child had not been mentioned in a routine story, what I always heard was that their son or daughter had worked hard and was dedicated. I'd point out that the same was

true for the clarinet player or the budding watercolor painter at South or North high schools, and that nobody would write about them. But because the newspaper employed several sports writers and had made a habit of writing about almost every athlete—an old regime once did a profile for every senior athlete at South—laudatory coverage was seen as the duty of the newspaper. Celebratory stories about the children of the readership became another ancillary to journalism, no different from the comics or horoscope.

During my final months as sports editor at *The Herald-Times*, I arranged to have the IU women's volleyball team send us a few hundred words from each stop they made on a European tour. It turned out well; we got interesting dispatches from young women we didn't usually cover much. But as I read them day after day, a thought crept in: Was anybody covering the dozens or hundreds or maybe thousands of local people who went overseas each year to do volunteer relief work, or to study at a prestigious university, or to conduct research on stem cells?

Think about this, too: Almost all newspapers give far more attention to athletes and coaches than they do to others whose accomplishments are more significant. *The Herald-Times* published but a handful of stories about Elinor Ostrom in the years before she became the first woman honored with a Nobel Prize in economics. Meanwhile, no entity did more to create a skewed view of Bob Knight as coach, mentor, and educator. For decades the *H-T* ignored Knight's flaws or made excuses for them. Readers of the newspaper were never given a rounded, nuanced view of the man. They probably didn't want it—nor did the sports writers of the day want to write it. Sports has become entertainment, now more than ever, and too often it feels like we're only covering the scripted part. The characters, therefore, are supposed to stay within boundaries we've established, and within those lines you'll find few people given the chance to be themselves.

Something authentic and tragic

It is fair to say that covering sports means you are constantly seeking some sliver of real humanity amid the carefully rendered facade. With the case of football coach Terry Hoeppner, who spent most of his two years at IU dealing with the brain cancer that would eventually take his life, we were confronted with something authentic and tragic.

Announcements about his health always seemed to come at the most jarring time. Once, we were in Sacramento after Sampson's team had been eliminated from the NCAA Tournament in the second round, and an e-mail came through saying Hoeppner would miss spring practice. Both he and the university had continued to assure the public that he would be fine, even though it was widely rumored in Bloomington that he'd been diagnosed with aggressive, terminal cancer.

Certainly anyone can understand the Hoeppner family's desire to go through the illness in private. The fact remained that what the public was being told by the university simply did not match up with easily observable facts. I wrote a column saying it was time for us to know the truth, and the first angry call from an athletic department official came at 7 the next morning.

A few months later, the university announced that Hoeppner would not coach the 2007 season but hoped to return after that. I happened to be at Bonnaroo, the music festival that attracts 80,000 people to a farm in Tennessee each summer. So I sat in my car, furiously typing out a column about how Hoeppner had swept in and galvanized the IU fan base and how, just by looking at them together, you could tell how much he loved his wife Jane.

Coach Terry Hoeppner "swept in and galvanized the IU fan base...".
Courtesy of Indiana University

My first inclination is to hope I'll never again feel the searing pain in my stomach that wouldn't go away for a long time after I wrote those pieces about Hoeppner. At the same time, if I don't go through that again it probably means I haven't written the stories for which I'm always searching.

Not that meaningful stories need to be about life and death. Perhaps the opposite is true. Maybe the most fascinating stories are the ones that compile the mundane and give an honest appraisal of how young athletes and their coaches work to succeed in what can be a cutthroat business.

A call from Crean

One fall night before Tom Crean's second season as head basketball coach at IU, I stepped into a bar along Walnut, as I was known to do. Beer in hand, I started discussing our upcoming coverage of the Hoosiers with beat writer Dustin Dopirak. Then my phone buzzed. I ducked out of the bar to talk to Crean, and stood on the curb for the next hour.

During that time I probably said three words, and they were probably: okay, yeah, and wow. Words frothed out of Crean, who had returned from a particularly disheartening recruiting trip. He talked about how difficult it had been to rebuild the program, which led him to reflect on the players—most of them physically overmatched compared to other Big Ten athletes—currently on the roster. Joyce-like, he ranted in a stream of consciousness that could only be the product of a man who'd invested everything he had into the people he was talking about. Some of his stories were endearing. Other anecdotes told of incremental triumphs and how they eventually would be the momentum that brought IU back. Then he began talking about past recruiting visits and the couches he'd sat on, the casseroles he'd eaten, the stories he'd heard in living rooms across the country.

As I walked back into the bar, to a beer that would be flat and warm, I felt defeated. The whole conversation had been off the record. ✲

Chris Korman is a graduate of Penn State University, where he studied English, and of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York. He has written a cover story for *The Village Voice* and has been on staff at *The Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, Pa.) and *The Herald-Times*, where he spent three years as a writer and one as sports editor. He now lives in Baltimore where he is the sports enterprise editor for *The Baltimore Sun*.