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CHAPTER 1: SCHOLARLY ESSAY

Introduction

After spending two summers working with the Southern Ohio Copperheads in the Great Lakes Summer Collegiate League, I attempted to branch out into the world of affiliated minor league baseball. In mid-March, the Burlington Royals offered me an unpaid internship as the team’s play-by-play broadcaster. Along with the broadcasts, I was responsible for managing the team’s website, interviewing players and coaches, writing game stories, and working with local media around the Burlington, North Carolina, area. Once I learned about the position, I decided to start researching the team and the league.

The team is one of three rookie-level affiliates in the Kansas City Royals farm system, and it consists entirely of players no more than three years removed from the beginning of their affiliated career. Burlington is one of ten clubs in the Appalachian League, which has teams in North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. This basic background information was readily available through some online research, but I found it challenging to uncover much more on what is referred to as the “Appy League.”

As a baseball fan, I knew that the minor leagues were different than Major League Baseball (MLB), but I hoped to find information on the use of pitchers, the handling of batters, the dynamic in the clubhouse, the creation of the roster, and other aspects of the league that I deemed necessary for a broadcaster to understand. Unfortunately, I went to Burlington for the 2010 season with little information and
much to learn.

Thus, I decided to use my summer in Burlington not only to further my broadcasting career, but also to provide more information on the league that I would cover in incredible detail for two and a half months. As a broadcaster, I set out with a goal of talking to as many coaches, managers, players, and scouts as possible about the specifics of the league with the design of creating a radio series on a fairly unique league only a few hours south of Athens, Ohio. I did follow through on that radio series, and the transcript is available after this portion of the paper on page 29.

However, my time with the Burlington Royals also opened up some new questions about my role with the team and, to branch out even more broadly, any broadcasting or media relations employee with a professional team. Throughout the 68-game season, I had to decide on the proper method of coverage on a regular basis. The Appalachian League, as I discovered prior to my arrival in Burlington, did not garner much coverage from local media outlets; therefore, a significant portion of the available information on league and its teams came from the league and teams themselves.

In Burlington, for example, the only outside coverage that the Royals received came from a beat writer from the Burlington Times News. His name was Bob Sutton, and he would cover most of the home games and a few road games. In my trips around the league, he was one of few who would report on an Appalachian League team fairly regularly. Even Sutton was not completely unattached to the league and its teams. Each week during the season, Sutton would write a feature on notable storylines...
within the league.

In short, coverage of this league came in small doses, and it often came from people who had some affiliation with a team or the league itself. This reality forces people like me, who was responsible for informational distribution in many different forms—online broadcasts, online websites, social media, and blogs, to name the ones primarily used—to wear the figurative “hat” for public relations and for journalism at different times during the season. It is a struggle that many organizations, leagues, and individuals have to balance on a day-to-day basis in the Appalachian League and, for that matter, throughout the sports world.

This part of the thesis project is designed to delve into the literature on the topic, offer some commentary from professionals who have seen this in action, analyze some ethical guidelines that apply to the various aspects of this kind of position, present a real-world example of how sports information can differ from a public relations view and a journalistic view, and create some guidelines that I have developed after facing this situation last summer with the Burlington Royals.

**Literature Review**

The main motivation behind this thesis is to introduce the graying line in sports coverage between journalism and media relations. Journalism is the act of providing “independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information” (Kovach and Rosenstiel 11). A journalist’s first obligation is to provide the truth and first loyalty is to the public, which is his or her audience (12).

Conversely, while media relations members aim to create strong relationships
with journalists, they are supposed to “generate favorable publicity and minimize unfavorable publicity” (Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold 8). Based on these brief descriptions of journalism and media relations, one thing is clear—one cannot act in both a journalistic and media relations way in most instances.

As the section “Establishing Ethical Guidelines” will cover later in this work, many of the most widely used codes of ethics in both journalism and media relations can be contradictory and, as a result, bring about some ethical dilemmas. Merging journalism and media relations, which is slowly becoming a trend in the sports world, brings about many more issues ethically. There is not a well-known code of ethics that deals with this new development, so individuals must try to make their own ethical decisions. The best alternative to a code of ethics is a justification model, which is an ethical formula that people use to work toward a logical conclusion (Black and Roberts 49).

When using a justification model, which can also be referred to as a systematic moral analysis, one should be able to classify the possible actions into four categories: (1) ethically prohibited; (2) ethically required; (3) ethically permitted; and (4) ethically ideal. People will never have all the facts and know all the ramifications, but these are the four outcomes (Elliott and Ozar 22).

There are many examples of justification models. When an ethical challenge pops up, mostly to a media relations employee, the Rotary Four-Way Test poses four questions: (1) Is it the truth?; (2) Is it fair to all concerned?; (3) Will it build good will and better friendships?; and (4) Will it be beneficial to all concerned? This is an
imperfect test, but it has been very popular ever since it was developed in 1942 (Black and Roberts 49).

Some justification models are for journalists, such as the Society of Professional Journalists Model, while others help media relations employees, like the TARES Test. Both of these models offer a handful of guidelines to follow or questions to answer in order to work past a dilemma (50-51).

One of the most popular justification models is the Potter Box, designed by Dr. Ralph Potter of Harvard University’s Center for Population Studies. The Potter Box can be a valuable model for people in many fields, including both journalism and media relations. The Potter Box is a four-step process: (1) define the ethical situation or dilemma objectively and in detail; (2) identify values that relate to the situation; (3) inject moral philosophy; and (4) choose to whom one is ultimately loyal. After going through these four steps, one should have a resolution, but there is more than one right answer. The Potter Box is simply a guide, and “people who use the box may reach different ethical decisions, based on their individual input...The goal is not to force a choice, but to help the individual understand and ethically justify a decision” (53).

The Potter Box’s fourth and final step zeroes in on the biggest issue in the struggle between journalism and public relations—loyalty. In a piece about Scott McClellan’s highly critical memoir *What Happened*, a work published after McClellan served as President George W. Bush’s White House Press Secretary, Poynter’s Roy Peter Clark poses the idealistic view of coverage that “journalism and public relations are incompatible because of a different vision of loyalty.” He claims that this belief is
unfair in real life, but loyalty is key in differentiating the two fields (Clark).

Media members must deal with the possibility of conflicting loyalties in addition to the threat of conflicting interests. Journalists deal with conflicting loyalties when covering emotional situations or following people extensively, two possibilities in the world of sports (Banaszynski 238). It is acceptable to care about the subjects in these situations, but journalists must be able to have a stronger passion for the truth than the subjects in order to report in an ethical way. Media relations employees can be a little more lenient in these situations, but they should strive for the truth without influence from emotion, too (242-43).

The concept of conflicting loyalties can also appear in the relationship between journalists and media relations personnel. There must be a professional distance between the two fields. Journalists should not accept gifts from a media relations department, and those departments should not offer anything. It furthers the current dilemmas between the fields of journalism and media relations (Banaszynski 237; Hall, Nichols, Moynahan, and Taylor 255).

The idea of combining the fields of journalism and media relations into one role also sparks discussion about the concept of conflict of interest. Edward Wasserman defines conflict of interest as “a variety of situations where undeclared obligations or loyalties exist that might plausibly stand between journalists or journalism organizations and the public they principally serve” (Wasserman 250).

These conflicts of interest affect how people think when reporting, which cannot be done if one wants to act in a journalistic fashion. However, because this
conflict is present, reporters look elsewhere for stories, uses different facts, or focuses on different angles. While it is not a perfect match, this concept does touch on the differences between journalism and media relations. Anyone who works in media relations has a conflict of interest when producing material because he or she is employed by another entity. While media relations employees provide the public with information, he or she does not have to act with the public’s best interest in mind. On the flip side, journalists are not supposed to have a conflict of interest between them and those who read the newspaper, watch television, or surf the internet for information (250).

Nonetheless, some conflicts of interest do exist. There will always be competing factors, which oftentimes pit the people they serve with the company that employs them. This battle is much more defined within media relations, but it is still present in journalism. Ultimately, this creates a dynamic backdrop for covering events important to the public. The reality is that these people gather information “within partly overlapping layers of obligation and loyalty—personal, professional, and institutional” (253).

Journalists specifically must put their obligation to the public above all others, but it is important to understand that, in the mind of a specific journalist, other factors may have equal, or near equal, claims to the journalist’s decision making. In the end, these factors “sometimes overlap and sometimes clash, and those areas of agreement and discord are etched onto the journalism that results” (253).

With all of this in mind, Wasserman developed a two-prong system to break
down conflicts of interest. The first part analyzes how many of the conflicts are common within the field and how many are unnecessary or unrelated to reporting. For example, because journalists depend on sources to do their job, avoiding newsworthy stories that would negatively affect those relationships is an understandable conflict of interest. On the flip side, actively campaigning for a political candidate or a school levy is not a prerequisite for the job, so it is an extraneous conflict of interest (255-56).

The second prong tries to discern how much these conflicts affect the coverage. This is much more of an open category. While many organizations prevent all of their employees from going to a political fundraiser, even if some will never produce content regarding politics, Wasserman believes that some of these conflicts may not have any ramifications. However, he does offer a few examples that could bring about conflicts of interest—a high-profile journalist appearing as a speaker or a writer using his or her reporting to boost other professional endeavors (256-57).

No matter what the perceived consequences are, Wasserman offers three possible solutions to any conflict of interest. The most direct way to handle a conflict is to simply eliminate it. Secondly, one can disclose the conflict, but Wasserman believes that this rarely suffices ethically. Finally, media members can simply manage these conflicts, which includes the following actions: discuss the conflicts within the news organization, provide someone within the organization to oversee the conflicts, segregate the reporting and the money-making departments within an organization, regularly rotate the staff’s responsibility and beat, and strengthen the influence the ombudsman possesses (259-60).
With all of this literature as a background, it is important to talk with some baseball and media professionals regarding the merging fields of journalism and media relations in sports.

**Professional Commentary**

Even though there is not a specific code of ethics pertaining to the graying line between journalism and public relations in sports, professionals in the field recognize that this is taking place. Tim Franklin, who was the director of Indiana University’s National Sports Journalism Center until leaving for the editor-at-large job at Bloomberg, believes the dynamic is changing rapidly in the world of sports.

“I would say it’s more blurred than even it was two years ago, because sports public relations departments are getting into the news business,” Franklin said.

Franklin mentioned professional sports leagues such as MLB and the National Football League (NFL) are creating their own news departments and allowing beat writers to provide much of the content available on teams’ websites.

“Increasingly, MLB.com and professional sports teams are breaking news on their own sites,” Franklin said, “rather than cede that story or cede that ground to ESPN or local news organizations.”

One of the most profound examples of a league-owned media entity reporting a story was January 11, 2010, when Mark McGwire, one of eight players in baseball history to hit 600 or more home runs, admitted to using steroids during his career. McGwire initially revealed his admission in a statement sent to various news outlets during the afternoon of January 11, 2010, but he spoke publicly in an interview with
MLB Network’s Bob Costas later that day (Leach).

MLB.com’s coverage of the admission was significant. On the left bar of the story detailing McGwire’s admission, the site had linked 19 related stories, six videos pertaining to Costas’ interview with McGwire, and 10 videos containing other people’s reactions. In the middle of the story, MLB.com linked another nine related items to the main article. Throwing aside the debate of legitimacy in MLB.com’s coverage of the league’s players, it is fair to say that the website, at the very least, offered a great deal of material to fans of its sport.

“It was unthinkable even two, three years ago that a huge national sports story would be broken on a league-owned network or a league-owned website,” Franklin said. “I suspect that the Mark McGwire story is an example of one that we’re going to see repeated over and over in coming years, which is breaking big news on league-owned websites and TV stations.”

Ultimately, Franklin believes that leagues and teams are changing their approach in order to gain more viewers and more hits, which can change, if not compromise, the world of journalism. One example of a journalistic dilemma just began in Austin, Texas, in late August. ESPN launched the “Longhorn Network,” a station dedicated to the athletic programs at the University of Texas. A member of the Big 12 Conference, Texas is traditionally one of the best athletic programs in the country, which means that the school receives a significant amount of coverage. Ever since ESPN and the school struck a 20-year, $300-million deal, journalists have criticized the “Longhorn Network.”
In an article from July, *Sports Illustrated’s* Stewart Mandel responded to the “Longhorn Network”: “ESPN and Texas are now one and the same, and you can't tell me it won't affect the way *College GameDay, SportsCenter, Outside the Lines*, et. al., cover [Texas football coach] Mack Brown's program. In a sport where many fans already live in a constant state of paranoia that the media is propping up someone else at their expense ... well, ESPN is flat-out doing it” (Mandel).

Even former ESPN contributor Pat Forde was worried about the ramifications of the “Longhorn Network,” and he shared his feelings on ESPN’s *Outside the Lines* television program: “It singles out a specific school as opposed to a collective. And when you do that, you are essentially playing favorites. … If it gets into an uneven playing field, and ESPN is part and parcel of creating an uneven playing field, then I can understand why fans of other teams would have a problem with that” (Covering Texas is About to Become the Hardest Beat at ESPN). Forde has since left the network.

No doubt there are issues for networks, leagues, and teams, but individuals also have to work through this new era of sports coverage. Gary Mihoces has been with *USA Today* since its inception in 1982, and he is primarily an NFL writer for the publication. He has seen NFL teams hire journalistic writers and let them write on their official websites. “There have been some people who have been wearing a lot of different hats under one job,” Mihoces said. “I think the rest of us are starting to catch up now.”

“There might have been a time when you couldn’t do both—you’re either a
journalist or you work for the team,” Mihoces continued. “On a personal basis, what you’re doing isn’t that much different than [a professional team] hiring newspaper guys to go in there and write whatever they want.”

No matter which side someone may be on, there are forces affecting you within this new dilemma between sports public relations and sports journalism. This concept was addressed at the Kent State Media Ethics Workshop. Mediator Kelly McBride of Poynter Institute discussed these influences by saying, “If you are a consumer, you have no idea how many forces are trying to guide a writer as he writes whatever it is he’s writing” (McBride).

What complicates the matter is each team’s goals in coverage. Journalists’ jobs are to report stories, but a team can make the discovery of those stories easier or more difficult. For example, in the Kent State Media Ethics Workshop, Andy Baskin of WEWS in Cleveland discussed the Cleveland Indians’ willingness to address and define the involvement of one of the team’s reliever’s involvement in a pornographic film. The Indians have also created the “Social Media Suite,” which is a free offering to active bloggers and tweeters of Indians baseball. On the flip side, Brian Windhorst, who covers the Miami Heat for ESPN’s “Heat Index,” mentioned that Heat public relations staff members have lightly pushed him in the past to ask players about positive stories pertaining to the team. Windhorst terms the Heat as a “tight ship” that would like coverage to be as vanilla as possible (McBride).

Regardless of how much coverage a team desires, many journalists, especially the local members of the media, need to maintain a positive working relationship with
their subjects. While Windhorst covered the Cleveland Cavaliers with two different newspapers in Northeast Ohio, he recognized that the team ran advertisements in the publications and that his employer benefited from the team being successful. While working as an on-air talent for Cavaliers’ telecasts on Fox Sports Ohio, Baskin recognized that most things that happened on the road would not appear in his coverage. All in all, the key word is “loyalty,” which McBride discussed to sum up the various forces working against sports media:

It seems to me like your ultimate loyalty is, or at least should be, your audience that you’re serving, but you also have a loyalty to preserve your access and to observe these unspoken rules and to be aware of what they are...Layered on top of that is the loyalty that your organization might have to the team that you’re covering because of partnerships, either formal or informal...And then you add a gazillion PR people trying to spin the story, and you really have an entanglement or a spider web that the average reporter has to navigate just to get to the story (McBride).

The topic of my project, minor league baseball does not warrant the popularity that leagues such as Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association do. However, as I will discuss specifically to my experience with the Burlington Royals, many of these discussions are relevant because minor league baseball’s popularity is rising steadily.

Jack Maloof played in the minor leagues from 1971 to 1978 everywhere from Auburn, New York, to Tacoma, Washington, to Honolulu, Hawaii. He began his
coaching career in the San Diego Padres organization, and he has made stops with the Florida Marlins, Atlanta Braves, and, currently, the Kansas City Royals. Maloof is a special assistant to player development within the Royals system, and he visits all of Kansas City’s affiliates at least once each season. In his 40-year career in baseball, the vast majority of which has been in the minor leagues, Maloof has seen the popularity for minor league baseball grow greatly.

“You can get on the internet and follow all of the leagues on a given night and see what players are doing,” Maloof said. “There’s just greater interest. And the players, I think, respond to that, and then know that there’s more to it.”

Mark Davis, a professional baseball player from 1979 to 1997 and the National League Cy Young Award winner in 1989 with San Diego, agrees with Maloof’s belief.

“There’s more things that go on with the game that’s readily available for fans everywhere,” said Davis, who is the Royals’ new minor league pitching coordinator after spending the 2010 season as the pitching coach for Kansas City’s rookie-level affiliate in Surprise, Arizona. “People know exactly what you are, where you from, what you like to do, how you pitch, so I think that the spotlight on the players is quite a bit earlier than it was when I played.”

The public’s level of interest is going up while the number of people on the inside is declining. The trend in sports broadcasting, especially in baseball, seems to be to condense a couple of different roles into one position, similar to what my job entailed with the Burlington Royals. One of the most popular job forums in the sports
broadcasting world is located on the official website of the Sportscasters Talent Agency of America (STAA), and it proves the fact that a team’s main provider of print content is oftentimes its broadcaster. The typical hiring period for baseball play-by-play positions runs from October to January, and STAA’s forum sniffles out many of these opportunities. In advance of the 2011 baseball season, STAA had individual posts that detailed the job or internship requirements for 54 teams in minor league baseball or in summer collegiate baseball. Of those 54 teams, 41 explicitly mentioned some form of media relations or writing as a part of the broadcasting position. Thus, 76 percent of those postings involve a dual role within a baseball team’s media relations department (Sportscasting Jobs: Radio).

The line between journalism and media relations is changing while the desire for minor league baseball information is increasing. Teams are also demanding that play-by-play broadcasters also take part in media relations and writing. Without much literature on this unique and developing dilemma, the next few sections will attempt to bring some clarity to the ethics for those toeing the line between journalism and media relations.

**Establishing Ethical Guidelines**

With very little literature that can be applied to the dual responsibilities of journalists and media relations, yet with a need for some based on the progression of sports coverage, it is this thesis project’s goal to come up with some guidelines that can aid people who fit into these roles. In order to do this, the following pages will examine an entire season of Ohio University football coverage that I read and an entire
season of Burlington Royals baseball coverage that I provided. First, however, it is important to examine the established guidelines for various fields in either journalism or media relations that play into the discussed roles.

On the journalism side, I will summarize the codes of ethics from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), the Radio Television Digital National Association (RTDNA), and the Online News Association (ONA). As for the media relations side, the two primary codes of interest are the ones associated with the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA).

The SPJ code of ethics reiterates something that is important to note before getting into the specific guidelines from these five organizations: “The code is intended not as a set of ‘rules’ but as a resource for ethical decision-making. It is not – nor can it be under the First Amendment – legally enforceable” (SPJ Code of Ethics).

According to SPJ, journalists should abide by four guidelines: (1) be fair, unbiased, and determined in reporting information; (2) keep in mind that all of those people involved in the news are human beings who must be respected; (3) act only with the public’s right to know in mind; and (4) understand that they are accountable to the public (SPJ Code of Ethics). At first glance, these guidelines seem to conflict each other a bit. However, journalists must balance these four codes in order to fulfill all of them properly. For example, it is important to tell the truth because the public has a right to know, but information should only make its way to the public that does not cause needless harm. Also, journalists must be accountable to the public, but there
must be a proper balance between a journalist’s accountability and his or her independence (Black and Roberts 52).

RTDNA also hits on the idea of “public trust.” This organization’s code of ethics stresses that professional electronic journalists must “understand that any commitment other than service to the public undermines trust and credibility” (Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct). Not only is that sentence in the fourth paragraph of the ethics page of RTDNA website, but it is bolded as well—two clear indications of its importance.

In addition to the stress put on the idea of public trust, RTDNA emphasizes five other guidelines that flow closely to the code of ethics within SPJ. RTDNA’s code of ethics establishes that electronic journalists should always seek the truth, treat subjects fairly, act with integrity, report the news without influence from the subjects, and realize that they are accountable for the news they report (Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct). Although the SPJ and RTDNA codes of ethics are worded and organized differently, both tend to convey the same ethical guidelines, and both require the type of balance described earlier.

Compared to the well-known SPJ and RTDNA codes of ethics, any similar information in the world of online journalism is not as firmly established. The “Values” published on the ONA’s website is one of the most organized, consistent lists of ethics in the realm of Internet coverage, which is, according to ONA, “the most powerful communications medium to arise since the dawn of television” (Mission).

The five ethical demands that the ONA lists in its “Values” are the following:
(1) editorial integrity; (2) editorial independence; (3) journalistic excellence; (4) freedom of expression; and (5) freedom of access. The only notable difference in the ONA’s ethics compared to that of SPJ or RTDNA is the fact that two of them—numbers 4 and 5—are directed at the people who are the news instead of the people who provide that news to the public.

Before delving into the media relations side of ethics, it is important to this piece to acknowledge the ethics for two aspects of the online world—social media and blogging. There is not a set of ethical guidelines that is accepted worldwide, but RTDNA has released its version of rules. As usual, RTDNA makes sure to include such guidelines as truth and fairness, but it also asks more questions about the meaning and the reasons for the posts on Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media platform. Journalists must ask such questions as “what are your journalistic motivations,” “is this a story of great significance,” and “does the source have the legal right to the material posted?” RTDNA also emphasizes the importance of understanding that the immediacy and the limits within social media are not “excuses” for mistakes or for ethical mistakes (Social Media and Blogging Guidelines).

What makes social media and blogs so unique is the ability for readers to react and respond to posts quickly. While Twitter users do not have to worry about this too much because people’s responses do not show up on their profile, this is an issue on Facebook and, to a higher degree, within blogs. This is why gatherers at an O’Reilly ETech conference tried to come up with a “code of conduct” for social media users and bloggers to use with regards to comments. Owners of a Facebook with its new
“tagging” feature and creators of a blog should “take responsibility not just for your own words, but for the comments you allow on your blog” (O’Reilly). This aspect of commentary “increases accountability to a level ‘not found in traditional media,’ and it is part of the transparency norm, which constitutes, as mentioned above, the most important ethical standard in blogging” (Debatin 827).

Ultimately, there are forces working against the ethical standards that ONA, Debatin and others have tried to derive. New media “appear in too many forms and have too many agendas, too many diverse practitioners, and too many differences in accountability...to determine how to regulate them” (Black 113). Some online bloggers or new media users do indeed outline ethical codes and follow them, while others utilize the online forum to prove their disgust toward professionalism and regulation (113).

Multiple outlets also provide codes of ethics within the public relations field. PRSA owns one of the most widely accepted codes, and the organization pushes people to be honest, experienced, independent, loyal, and fair. Furthermore, PRSA promotes the free flow of information by stating in its code that “advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society” (Ethics). CoSIDA has a very similar code of ethics, and this organization helps sports information directors in their day-to-day tasks.

However, there is one key difference in PRSA and CoSIDA’s codes that set it far apart from SPJ, RTDNA, and all of the other codes described in pages four through
six. PRSA makes it easy to find by bolding it and putting it very near the top of its code: “We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent” (Ethics).

CoSIDA also puts the concept of “advocacy” very high on its list by saying, “those professionals…serve the interests of the various entities by acting in a professional manner” (CoSIDA Code of Ethics).

Like SPJ’s unique “truth vs. harm” dilemma, there are some competing codes within public relations. How can a person who works for a company advocate that company’s product if he or she must be honest about it, especially if honesty must include its positives and negatives. The concept of fairness also makes these codes difficult to thoroughly follow (Black and Roberts 343).

As this section details, there are many codes of ethics that journalists and public relations employees must follow, and these codes can spark some interesting ethical debates. When one must attempt to abide by all of these codes, both from a journalistic and a public relations standpoint, it is obviously to run into some problems. The primary battle comes when a journalist’s requirement to be unbiased collides with a media relation director’s obligation to advocate his or her cause. It is impossible to be unbiased when advocating an entity. As a result, one who must fulfill both journalism and media relations responsibilities must discard any ethical guidelines that contradict ones from the other side of the spectrum.

However, there are values embedded in various codes that can be utilized by journalists and media relations members combined. In the previous few pages, ideals
such as respectfulness, fairness, and transparency can be found in codes of ethics for journalism and media relations. These can be referred to as “universal values” or “citizen ethics” when discussed in a global context (Black and Roberts 181). They are essential to all kinds of writing, whether the writer reports to the public or to a company. As a result, the conclusion derived for writers who work within the confines of journalism and media relations is twofold: (1) follow those guidelines that appear in codes of ethics associated with both journalism and media relations and (2) avoid those guidelines that disagree with other rules in the opposite field. The next portion of this chapter breaks down journalistic writing and media relations writing for a college football team. The featured writers in this section follow this two-part conclusion, which brings about similarities and differences in content and information.

**Difference in Content and Information**

To display the difference between a journalistic goal of loyalty to the public and a media relations goal of loyalty to an entity, one must study both forms of media focusing on a singular topic. To do this, the following pages will break down the coverage of the 2010 Ohio University football team’s 13 games from both a journalistic and media relation perspective. I am qualified to discuss this topic because of my involvement with the team’s coverage in the local Athens, Ohio, area. I attended seven of the 13 games and either watched or listened to the remaining six games. It was my third year covering the Ohio football team, so I already had some background information on the team.

The beat writer for Ohio football, along with many other Bobcat programs, is
Jason Arkley, a veteran journalist from the *Athens Messenger*, the only daily newspaper unaffiliated with the university in Athens County. Arkley attended all 13 games during the 2010 season and wrote recaps on all 13 contests for the *Athens Messenger*’s print publication and website.

The sports information director of Ohio University, in addition to his role as the main football contact for all media members, was Jason Corriher, who had been with the school since July of 2007. He then left the school to accept a similar position within Marshall University’s athletic program. Corriher, like Arkley, was with the Bobcats for every game this past season. His articles were published on Ohio’s official athletic website shortly after each game.

In the next few pages, I will briefly compare and contrast all 13 post-game recaps that Arkley and Corriher published and offer some consistent similarities and differences between the two men’s work before using those values to analyze my role with the Burlington Royals and how I balanced competing responsibilities.

First, however, there is a basic rule that I will apply when breaking down the work of Arkley and Corriher. As Corriher described to me during an interview, there are four categories that a media relations employee distinguishes happenings within a sporting event. These four categories encompass all actions during any sporting event, and they are the following: (1) the positives for the team for which the media relations employee works; (2) the positives for his or her team’s opponents; (3) the negatives for the team for which the media relations employee works; and (4) the negatives for his or her team’s opponents. The simple difference between a journalistic writer and a
media relations writer is how many of those categories are addressed in the context of their work.

While a journalist is responsible to, at the very least, weigh the four and determine which ones factor into the decision of the game, “we are going to touch base on three of those four pods,” Corriher said on behalf of the Ohio University media relations department. “We’re going to talk about our positive and their positive…and then their negative.”

This concept is clear right from the outset of Ohio’s 2010 football season. The Bobcats defeated Wofford College 33-10 in the season opener September 4. Both Arkley and Corriher’s game recaps feature a significant amount of coverage about the Bobcats’ dominance defensively (Ohio did not allow a single completed pass) and efficiency offensively (Ohio’s rushing attack mustered 253 yards). However, there is a huge difference between the two pieces because of a key injury to Ohio’s starting quarterback, Phil Bates.

Arkley addresses Bates’ second-quarter hand injury in the topic sentence, which says, “The Bobcats won their season-opener, but may have lost a quarterback in the process.” Five of the first ten paragraphs reference Bates’ injury in some way (“down Terriers”).

Compare that with Corriher’s recap, which mentions Bates’ replacement—senior Boo Jackson—in the second paragraph in terms of his 97 passing yards. In the sixth paragraph, Bates’ name comes up because of the scoring drive he contributed to during the first quarter. Then, the release notes the fact that Jackson replaced Bates,
but there is no discussion of an injury. The transition used says, “Jackson entered the
game with 9:44 left in the first half,” and the rest of the paragraph talks about a
scoring drive of his own in the second quarter (“Grounds Wofford”).

Neither Arkley nor Corriher’s writing styles are inaccurate in any way, but an
injury to a key player can be qualified as a “negative” for Ohio. Thus, Corriher’s recap
did not focus on that, while the starting quarterback exiting the game with an injury
was something that Arkley deemed important to the Bobcats’ fan base, so he featured
it as a storyline equally important when compared to the final score and how Ohio
won the game.

The coverage of injuries is very different within journalism and media
relations, as is coverage of a loss. Ohio football’s first loss came in its second game, a
20-13 defeat to the University of Toledo. While Corriher discusses Ohio’s defensive
successes, Arkley uses some hard-hitting vocabulary to break down Ohio’s offensive
struggles. Arkley includes phrases such as “not pretty,” “got nothing,” “gave away,”
and “both teams tried to lose” (“Rockets knock”).

Not only does the vocabulary drastically differ, but the presence of trends
brings about different emotions, too. Corriher includes a milestone field goal for Ohio
kicker Matt Weller in the middle of his story, which is obviously a positive note for
the Bobcats (“Rockets Best”). On the flip side, the trend that Toledo has defeated Ohio
on the gridiron 12 straight times appears in the seventh paragraph of Arkley’s game
recap (“Rockets knock”).

The next week, Ohio lost to Ohio State University 43-7. The recap on Ohio’s
athletic website focuses on as many positives as possible, including a two-interception day for Donovan Fletcher, a blocked punt by Billy Gonzales-Santos, and six lengthy punts by Paul Hershey. However, the journalistic story features Ohio State’s ability to score early and often. Arkley also says, “Ohio was completely punchless offensively, turned the ball over five times and was whistled for six points” (“OSU squashes”), which explains why Corriher does not mention the offense—outside of Hershey’s punting—until the penultimate paragraph (“Bobcats Defeated”).

Ohio’s losing streak continued in a narrow 24-23 loss at Marshall University. This game featured a late Marshall rally, a buzzer-beating touchdown by Ohio in the fourth quarter to pull within one, and a failed two-point conversation on the game’s final play. When comparing the two post-game releases, one still picks up on the varying characteristics and the use of three of the four sides of the story by Corriher and Ohio’s media relations department. One also notices, however, a topic that has not been discussed—the volume of coverage on one topic or action within a game. Arkley’s recap breaks down the final two plays of the game for the first 14 paragraphs of what was a 34-paragraph piece (“Marshall clips”). Conversely, those last two plays were in the third-to-last and second-to-last paragraphs of Corriher’s release (“Just Short”). This paper will not delve into the topic of journalistic structure versus public relations structure when analyzing writing, but it is important to mention this example because of its noticeable place in the post-game recaps following this very unique game.

Over the next seven games for Ohio football, the journalistic game recaps and
the media relations pieces more closely resemble each other. The reason was simple—the Bobcats won seven straight games. Still, there are a few lessons to be learned about the differences in the writing during this run of success for Ohio. In the Bobcats’ win over Eastern Michigan University, which was the team’s first since its opening-week win over Wofford, Arkley made sure to bring up Eastern Michigan’s recent struggles. At that time, EMU had not won a game in almost two years, and Arkley included that fact before the score (“Ohio swoops”). On the flip side, Corriher not only avoided that detail, but he did not include Eastern Michigan’s current 2010 record, which was 0-5 after that early-October loss (“Davidson Delivers”).

Ohio’s most lopsided victory to that point, a 49-25 win over Bowling Green State University, brought about many similarities in Arkley and Corriher’s releases. The vocabulary from Arkley—“racked up,” “thumped,” and “efficient”—could have appeared in Corriher’s piece, which features words like “comprehensive,” “resounding,” and “electrifying” (“Ohio racks,” “Bobcats Fire”). The performance by Ohio was so solid, in fact, that Arkley includes many records that the Bobcats set during the day, something that is almost always a staple in Corriher’s releases.

The same can be said about the Bobcats’ 38-10 win over the University of Akron the next week, as both Arkley and Corriher focus on a record-setting day by Ohio senior receiver Terrence McCrae. McCrae caught two touchdown passes to give him 16 for his career, which set an all-time record in Bobcat history. Each recap’s headline alluded to McCrae’s record—“Bobcats bash Zips, McCrae sets record” is Arkley’s headline, and “Bobcats Victorious in Historic Homecoming Game” is
Corriher’s.

Trends are once again at the top of both recaps after the Bobcats defeated their rival, the Miami University RedHawks, for the fifth straight season in week eight. That fact, along with Ohio’s streak of seven straight road victories within Mid-American Conference play, is among the first handful of paragraphs in both pieces (“Bobcats ravage,” “Ohio Trounces”).

Unlike the previous three victories, all of which came in convincing fashion with positive trends involved in the game, the Bobcats’ ninth game was a hard-fought win against an unfamiliar opponent. Thus, Ohio’s 38-31 triumph over the University of Louisiana brought with it a pair of recaps that differ much more than the ones produced after the last three wins. In the game, Jackson, the Bobcats’ starting quarterback, set the all-time record for most touchdown passes in a career. However, he also threw four first-half interceptions. Arkley’s angle is Jackson overcoming those interceptions to lead the way to a victory, and he simply adds the fact that he set the record right after attributing him to a quote (“Ohio holds”). It was quite different in Corriher’s piece, as Jackson’s record is established in its first ten words. Corriher did include Jackson’s four interceptions in the first paragraph, but that figure came after his other statistics were listed, and no context was offered regarding his run of four interceptions in six attempts (“Ohio wins shootout”).

Ohio won its final home game of the season five days later, 34-17 over the University at Buffalo. Like the recaps after Ohio’s victories over the likes of Bowling Green, Akron, and Miami, Arkley and Corriher’s recaps share many similarities
because it was a game that the Bobcats controlled for most of the night, with Jackson’s four-touchdown effort and Ohio’s six-game winning streak focal points (“Jackson does,” “Bobcats Best Bulls”).

Between this victory and the Bobcats’ next game on the road at Temple University, Jackson suffered a concussion in a fight outside a bar just off Ohio University’s campus 11 days prior to the game. As Arkley’s story recaps, Jackson was not cleared to play medically until the morning of the game in Columbus. It was a story that was reported shortly after the incident, and it was a topic on campus and on the main message board dedicated to Ohio University athletics—Bobcat Attack. While Arkley mentions Jackson in six of his first eight paragraphs, Corriher included only Jackson’s numbers during the victory (“Ohio knocks,” “Ground Attack”).

Also of note during Corriher’s recap was an absence of a positive story for the football program. With the victory over Temple University, Ohio’s magic number for a trip to the Mid-American Conference Championship Game was reduced to one. After Arkley summarizes Jackson’s clearance and performance, he mentions the Bobcats’ current place in the standings. These two significant discrepancies between Arkley and Corriher’s pieces prove one thing: the presence and volume of outside circumstances and consequences during a journalistic recap and a media relations recap vastly differ. This will be discussed more in my conclusions from studying their work during the football season.

Ohio’s season finale at Kent State University brought with it a 28-6 loss which, like the Bobcats’ lopsided loss to Ohio State earlier in the season, prompted one of
Corriher’s shortest releases of the season (“Kent State Upends”). As detailed above, the vocabulary between the two works is quite different. The loss motivated Arkley to say, “It was a Black Friday [the game took place the day after Thanksgiving] indeed for the Bobcats, whose litany of self-inflicted wounds would make any martyr blush” (“Kent denies”).

This trend, to no surprise based on the content present during the Bobcats’ three-game losing streak in September, continued when Ohio lost to Troy University in the R+L Carriers New Orleans Bowl 48-21 December 18. It was a blowout from the beginning, and Arkley, in his first two paragraphs, makes sure his readers understood that, saying, “Given a second chance to craft a happy ending to their season, the Bobcats instead sunk to new depths. Outmatched in every facet, the Ohio University football team was destroyed 48-21 Saturday night in front of 29,159 in the 10th annual R+L Carriers New Orleans Bowl inside the Louisiana Superdome” (“Big Queasy”). It was so bad for the Bobcats that, for only the second time during the 13-game season, Corriher features the opponent’s successes very prominently in the first three paragraphs of his release. The only other time Corriher did this was in the Bobcats’ loss to Marshall in week four, which was a much closer game than this one (“Trojans Speed”).

After analyzing these 13 games and the game recaps that stemmed from them, one can come up with many differences in the journalistic coverage of the Bobcats’ 2010 season and the media relations coverage of it. The primary one is that a journalistic piece will include the main flow of the game from an unbiased fan’s
perspective, with both teams’ ups and downs included, just to a varying degree based on who wins or loses. However, a release by a media relations department will steer away from the negatives for the school for which they work as long as it does not leave a huge hole in the story. Secondly, Arkley, like most journalists would, included any relevant background outside of the action, such as injuries, suspensions, or medical clearances. However, Corriher, like most media relation directors would, kept the game in its own vacuum and dissected only what happened on the field.

Those are the two main differences between Arkley and Corriher’s lines of work. There are other differences that were documented in the previous pages, such as a difference in the vocabulary used, the order of the content, the value of program records, and more. In the next few pages, though, I will focus on the two main points listed above while discussing my summer position as the play-by-play broadcaster and website manager for the Burlington Royals.

**Personal Experience**

Clearly, the responsibilities and the writings that stem from a beat writer’s coverage differ greatly from that of a media relations employee, as one can see from the study of Ohio University football. However, as explained in the introduction, I was placed in a unique situation during my internship with the Burlington Royals. It was a play-by-play position, but it, along with many like internships and full-time jobs in the broadcast field, also involved jobs like managing the website, writing press releases, and developing other media endeavors, among other duties.

Once the season began, I had created or continued four different forms of
coverage for the Royals: (1) the online play-by-play broadcast, which was available through minor league baseball’s broadcasting directory; (2) the website’s game recaps following each of the team’s games on BurlingtonRoyals.com; (3) the team’s new Twitter feed at Twitter.com/BRoyalsKC; and (4) a pro blog dedicated to Burlington through the MLBlogs’ server, available at BurlingtonRoyals.MLBlogs.com. All four of these forms of coverage were available online only, and they were all updated each day during the 2010 season.

As detailed in the introduction, the Royals only received consistent coverage from one outlet—the Burlington Times News’ beat writer, Bob Sutton. Sutton or a stringer with the newspaper attended every home game during the season, but no one on staff would attend any road game outside of the team’s seven road games against the Danville Braves, which is the club’s shortest trip within the Appalachian League. When one compiles everything, the Royals’ received no outside coverage for 29 of its 70 total games this season, which calculates to 41 percent of its contests.

There is certainly interest in the Burlington Royals both within the Burlington area and the Kansas City Royals’ fan base. In 33 games at Burlington Athletic Stadium, the team’s home stadium, the Royals were one of four Appalachian League teams to surpass 30,000 fans. An average of 917 fans attended each of those games in 2010, a mark that was good for fourth in the Appalachian League.

Also, Kansas City’s fan base has embraced the organization’s farm system. Kansas City’s big league club has not made the postseason since 1985, and the organization has had a winning percentage below .500 and finished either fourth or
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fifth in the five-team American League Central all but once since the 1998 season. The only season that the Royals avoided those fates—2003—the Royals were 83-79, barely above average in the big leagues. It is understandable for a group of fans to turn their attention to the farm system if their team has not been successful in the major leagues because that is where future big league players begin their career.

Combine this idea with the fact that Kansas City’s minor league system is loaded with talent according to many scouting outlets, and one can understand why Kansas City fans will keep track with Burlington and other affiliates. For example, one of the most highly regarded prospect ranking sets stems from the publication *Baseball America*. Each year, *Baseball America* publishes a book detailing the top 30 prospects in each of the 30 major league organizations’ farm systems. In March of 2010, the publication ranked the Royals’ minor league system 16th in baseball, which is right around average. However, a few trades and a June draft later, and there was buzz during my time with Burlington that Kansas City was building something special in the minor leagues. That idea was proven in *Baseball America’s* preseason team rankings in 2011. Kansas City’s system was ranked the best in baseball prior to the 2011 minor league season (Baseball America 12).

*Baseball America* also comes out with a top 100 prospects list each season, and this is where Kansas City’s farm system became regarded as one of the best of the modern era. Kansas City was the first ever organization to boast nine prospects in the top 100, and based on a “points” system that *Baseball America* concocted, the system paced all others during the 22 years of the rankings’ existence (Cooper).
According to this system from J.J. Cooper of *Baseball America*, “You could argue that the formula is a little too simplistic…but it is a nice and simple measure of the top prospect classes of all time.” Cooper also said that the distance between Kansas City’s 2011 class and some of the others on the list is “not particularly close.”

All of this proves that the Burlington Royals 2010 season was, at the very least, newsworthy, and I was one of the few people who was in a position to give them fair and significant coverage, especially considering Burlington general manager Steve Brice granted me the right to provide coverage on the team through the organization’s media efforts. However, the front office staff with Burlington and with most minor league organizations acts separately from the team. The Kansas City organization’s personnel determine which players will suit up in Burlington and throughout their eight-team farm system. As a result, I had another group of people—the players and coaches on the team—that I worked around all season. While I was not hired by the Royals’ organization, I had to continue a positive working relationship with them in order to do my job.

As one likely surmises, this was a challenging ethical conflict within which to work. Without much experience in the field and with all of the responsibilities within the team’s media department, I decided prior to the season to handle the dilemma by dividing the content into two groups. If the content were available directly on the team’s website, I would act with a media relations mindset similar to Corriher’s in his job with Ohio University. On the flip side, if the contest were simply linked to Burlington’s website but originated on another platform, then I would take the
approach of a journalist.

When using this philosophy as a point of reference, I made sure that all of the game recaps and any other articles posted on BurlingtonRoyals.com were written with the organization in mind as my first concern. Recaps following both wins and losses accentuated the successes of the Royals while glossing over or completely overlooking their negatives. Any player features that appeared on the site only discussed the positives of his career.

However, the team’s Twitter page, blog, and broadcast originated on different pages, even though you could access all of them on the team’s official website. The broadcasts and the Twitter account were available under the “Multimedia” tab, while the blog was listed at the bottom of the “News” tab. All three of these special additions to the team’s coverage have different backgrounds, and they do not come with the website packages that are offered to minor league baseball teams through MLB’s Advanced Media program. Thus, I decided to satisfy the type of coverage that Kansas City fans, and even some Burlington fans, hoped for during the 2010 season.

This split satisfied Brice and the members of the Burlington Royals’ front office, and it also helped the club get some publicity. I was invited to a podcast by a Kansas City blogger in the middle of the season, and the blog was ranked in the Top 50 of MLBlog’s Pro Blog category in August of 2010, which was just the second full month of its existence (Latest Leaders). Also, the Twitter feed that began for Burlington gained approximately 300 followers during the season. In October of 2011, @BRoyalsKC reached the 700-follower plateau, which placed it second in the
Appalachian League in Twitter followers. Only the Danville Braves has more, as the club is closing in on 1000.

Even though there was a great deal of success that stemmed from this dilemma, there were also some challenges because of the complicated endeavor that I assumed while with the Burlington Royals. While I had a very strong working relationship with Burlington manager Nelson Liriano, he pointed out a few notes from the team blog that he did not feel were appropriate. I examined all of those situations and even tweaked some of the words used in the blog, but I never deleted any information that was already available. Liriano never allowed this to affect our relationship, which was a huge benefit to me because I requested to interview him prior to every game.

I also encountered two players who did not want to be interviewed, one of which avoided these conversations primarily because of what I had said about him in the blog based on his statistics. Fortunately, the ability to do my job with Burlington both from a journalistic standpoint and a media relations standpoint was not drastically affected because a couple of players who did not want to take part in interviews. Each day, I interviewed no more than two players in addition to Liriano, so I could easily get enough content for the blog and for the broadcast without that small group.

Finally, there were a few items, such as roster moves and award announcements, with which I had to take a media relations approach. I was instructed to do so by all involved (both Brice and Liriano, for example) because the items were time sensitive. If I were strictly a journalist, I would have been aggressive in reporting
these happenings. However, I did make this an exception to the rule of thumb I established for myself and refrained from posting any information about these roster changes or award announcements until I received the go-ahead by both sides in order to avoid jeopardizing the organization.

All in all, the internship in Burlington produced a great deal of coverage both from a journalistic and a media relations standpoint. There is no way for me to know whether or not I handled the situations properly because of the unique nature of the position. However, I did learn plenty about the way to handle these situations. In the final few pages before the radio series transcript, I will outline four guidelines that I have derived after experience a season of being a journalist and a media relations member for the Burlington Royals.

**Conclusion**

The main lesson that my position with the Burlington Royals and my research for this project taught me is that there are no right answers when put into a situation that calls for both journalistic and media relations work. As proven by the study on the coverage given to Ohio football, it is impossible to marry the two crafts. However, as men like Franklin and Mihoces discussed, the two fields have gotten closer and closer as time has progressed, and at times can mingle. So, what should one do if put into a similar situation where both journalistic and media relations work may be required? With the Potter Box as the main justification model I used, here are four new guidelines I derived.

First off, it is essential to establish one’s position with the people with whom
one will work and for whom one will work. My role with the Royals brought with it conflicts of interest, which was discussed earlier in this chapter, and one of the ways to handle these conflicts is to disclose all of the information to those I work for and around. This transparency, which Debatin described as a crucial aspect of coverage on page 21, brings with it “self-awareness” and “self-criticism” that can better many relationships inside the organization (Wasserman 259).

In my situation, I periodically mentioned my position with the Royals on the broadcasts last season, but I never explicitly outlined my role with the team and my rationale for the coverage within the team’s blog, website or Twitter. After working on this piece, I regretted not describing my position so that people could read my material both from the media relations-slanted website and the journalistically-slanted blog and Twitter account. Also, it was important for me to discuss these unique circumstances to both the Royals’ front office and the team’s players and coaches. As Windhorst and Baskin described on pages 24-25, every team’s desire for coverage differs, so it is important to have a plan in place right away, especially when both journalism and media relations are involved.

Secondly, one must be willing to act against self-imposed rules if one believes that it is necessary. According to A. David Gordon and John Michael Kittross, codes of ethics can, and in some situations should, be tweaked based on the situation. These codes “cannot be universal in their application, given human ingenuity in creating unique dilemmas...codes can’t possibly be tailored to every situation where media ethics issues arise” (63). As a result, media members created justification models, such
as the Potter Box and the TARES Test, to tweak their ethical approach when
necessary. From a personal perspective, this philosophy is how I came up with the
procedure of handling roster moves and awards. The only reason I received the
information regarding these two things was because I was in the Burlington Royals’
clubhouse on a daily basis, so it would be unfair to apply my rule of media relations
on the main website and journalism within the other media venues.

The worlds of journalism and media relations are very dynamic, and those who
work in one field or the other, or both, must be willing and able to adapt when a new
challenge presents itself. Ultimately, because these rules, whether they are widely
accepted or personally derived, are occasionally tweaked based on the situation, “each
choice about what to do is also a choice about whom to be—or, more accurately, who
to become” (Lebacqz 83).

The third lesson I picked up during my summer is that criticism will be
directed at you for one reason or another. This can be considered somewhat of an
extension of the second guideline. For example, I received multiple e-mails from fans,
some who had a connection to a certain player and some who simply were Burlington
Royals fans, questioning my approach to the coverage. According to Black and
Roberts, people in these situations “cannot be accountable to audiences without
revealing themselves and their motives” (399). The public must also have the ability to
comment on stories, which was permissible with almost all of my content during the
2010 Burlington Royals season.

Not only will the public have thoughts on the coverage, but people within the
organization will, too. A few times during the season, manager Nelson Liriano criticized my blog. He believed that I covered the team in such a journalistic fashion that I put undue pressure and spotlight on them. I also had a tough time relating with a handful of players on the roster throughout the season. Even though I may believe that I was going about my unique job correctly and ethically, I must also be willing to cater to the beliefs of my subjects. Once again, justification models, along with Wasserman’s two-prong system to resolve conflict of interests, could help in these types of scenarios.

In a post on his personal blog in 2007, Wasserman discusses the unique dynamic of a beat, which is a fair comparison to my role with the Royals in 2010. Wasserman believes that “the reporter’s success in covering his or her beat depends on the cooperation of the people being covered and not just their cooperation, but their good will.” A beat writer is only successful when he or she has a positive working relationship with those involved with the beat, and many things can jeopardize that relationship. As a result, beat writers must absorb this criticism and, if necessary, tweak their approach to satisfy their subjects’ desires (Wasserman). This struggle is something that Windhorst and Baskin, among others, must deal with daily, too.

Finally, the most important lesson I learned during my time with the Burlington Royals is that it is a mistake to let the many dilemmas take away from the position’s main goals—providing information about a rarely-covered topic. There is quite a dilemma in terms of the type of coverage based on to whom I report the information. After all, journalism involves “information,” according to Kovach and
Rosenstiel’s definition, while media relations has to do with “publicity” per Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold’s definition. Still, as long as I have successfully outlined my role with the team to those who I work with (the members of the team and the front office) and who I work for (the front office and the public), then I can get information out about the Burlington Royals. After all, when looking back at the codes of ethics detailed earlier in this chapter, one of the few key concepts that permeated all of them was the release of information. Is it a perfect backdrop for journalism or for media relations? Of course not, but it was the situation I had in front of me, and I still turned over news to the fans and for the organization on a timely basis and as fairly as I could.

The ethical divide between journalism and media relations is still very defined and very strong. Unfortunately, though, there are internships and jobs available, especially in minor league baseball, that demand elements of both practices. Currently, there are not any perfect solutions to this new challenge in the world of coverage, but there are ways to make these responsibilities as fair as possible to both the employee within the organization and to the people digesting the information. This paper has helped to provide some guidance for those who embark on this professional lifestyle.
CHAPTER TWO: RADIO SERIES

Project Background

Throughout the 2010 Appalachian League season, I talked with many people who had a tie to the league to learn about the roots of what is a very unique ten-team, rookie-level minor league. I recorded interviews with more than 50 people throughout the season, and many of those people will be heard during my three-part radio series that delves into one of the least-publicized minor leagues in the country.

This series, entitled *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*, is scheduled to air during November. It will air during the sports talk radio program, the “Sports Fan Presented by J&K Contracting,” which runs from 6:06-7 p.m. Monday through Friday. Because of planned commercials that are set to run during that time period, the approximate length for each of the three episodes will be 35 minutes.

The first episode is an introduction to the Appalachian League’s background, rules, schedules, and much more. The second episode details the transition that players new to the Appalachian League must make on the field. The third episode features the adjustments that players and journalists alike must make off the field when playing in this league. The script of the radio series is available on the following pages.

*Episode One: Introduction to the Appalachian League*

(Broadcast open: approximately one minute)

2010 American League Most Valuable Player Josh Hamilton, now with the Texas Rangers. The most recent entrant into the 600 home run club, longtime
Cleveland Indian Jim Thome. The Iron Man, legendary Baltimore Oriole Cal Ripken. What do these big-name players have in common? Other than carving out their own spot in baseball history, Hamilton, Thome, and Ripken, along with thousands of Major League Baseball players past and present, passed through the Appalachian League en route to the big leagues. Hi, I’m Brian Boesch, and *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League* is a three-part series on the rookie-level Appy League after my time with the Burlington Royals as their broadcaster during the 2010 season. Over the next three episodes, you’ll hear from players, coaches and managers in the league, along with various team personnel. Part two of this series is tomorrow night, and it wraps up Friday night from 6:06 to 7.

The Appalachian League is one of 18 leagues directly affiliated with a Major League Baseball team, and it is classified as a rookie-level league. All big league teams have at least two rookie-level affiliates, which are considered entry-level opportunities for young players to try to climb the ladder to Low-A, High-A, Double-A, Triple-A and, maybe one day, Major League Baseball.

A ten-team league that possesses four teams in Tennessee, three in Virginia, two in West Virginia and one in North Carolina, the Appalachian League began exactly 100 years ago with six organizations. The league has folded three times—in 1914, 1925, and 1955—yet it has been going strong since ’55. Currently, the league is divided into a pair of five-team divisions, and the club’s nicknames mirror that of its big league affiliates. The Western Division consists of the Bristol White Sox, Elizabethton Twins, Greeneville Astros, Johnson City Cardinals, and Kingsport Mets,
while the Eastern Division includes the Bluefield Blue Jays, Burlington Royals, Danville Braves, Princeton Rays, and Pulaski Mariners.

The Appalachian League’s season begins in the middle of June and runs until the end of August. All ten teams are scheduled to play 68 games over the course of 71 days, with every team receiving three off days. As former Burlington Royal Ryan Stovall says, the Appy League season is not easy.

“You just gotta grind, and when it comes to that point you just gotta fight through it.”

While the experience of playing almost every day is new to the players who compete in the Appalachian League, this ten-team haven for baseball is largely old school and unknown. While many other minor league teams compete in modern facilities, the Appy League owns only one stadium built in this century. Six of the ten facilities are at least 35 years old, and two were built before the end of World War II.

The Appalachian League currently does not have a big city in the mix. Towns like Pulaski, Virginia, and Princeton, West Virginia, do not have the population to attract anything other than a low-level minor league club, and while the league’s attendance has steadily increased in recent years, rarely does the figure significantly dwarf the 300,000 mark. Only one team averaged more than 1,000 fans per game during the 2010 campaign. That was the Greeneville Astros, a franchise that has a state-of-the-art stadium built in 2004.

Still, the league continues to stay afloat despite regional competition with the South Atlantic League and the Carolina League, two leagues that boast higher
affiliations. There are plenty of unique quirks in the Appy League that spark interest. Johnson City’s home ballpark—Howard Johnson Field—has a hill that runs from center field to the right-field foul pole. Bluefield’s Bowen Field is on a piece of property that occupies land in both West Virginia and Virginia. The league is just different. Elizabethton skipper Ray Smith has been with the Twins’ rookie-level affiliate in this league for 18 seasons, and he puts it into words.

“There’s been a lot of enthusiasm. This is a throwback league. I think it is, what, over 100 years old probably, Appy League is. And I’m kind of a throwback, old-school type guy, as are our staff guys, as is our organization, so we like that sort of thing, and there’s a lot of history associated with the Appy League.”

History that continues here to this day. However, for the players, this is oftentimes a very early step in their professional career. Only players who have less than three years of affiliated baseball service are eligible to play in the Appalachian League. Rosters are littered with players drafted that year or the year prior, and prospects from other countries fill out many of the other spots. This is a league of newcomers, and it is a league designed for players to prove their worth. Paul Runge, who is now the Houston Astros’ minor league field coordinator, managed Danville from 2005 to 2010.

“Well, no, the Appy League is a learning phase for a lot of these players. You serve like an apprenticeship. You obviously need to live up to certain expectations at each level before you’re promoted, and the Appy League has proved (sic) well over 100 years to be an instrumental part of the learning process.”
So who goes through this apprenticeship? Plenty of players in what is a highly dynamic league each year. Big league rosters contain only 25 players, and some minor league levels have a lower maximum. On the flip side, in the Appalachian League, a squad can carry as many as 35 active players at any point. With promotions, demotions, signings, releases, and injuries thrown into the mix, most teams will employ the services of many more than 35 players during the course of the 68-game grind. During the 2010 season, 417 players competed in the Appalachian League, which calculates to an average of 41.7 players per squad. The majority of those men, 216 to be exact, were pitchers. As a result, more than 21 pitchers would be on a team throughout the season, which means that there are not many innings to go around. If a team plays all of its scheduled 68 contests and had the league average of 21 pitchers, and if those men all received an equal number of innings, they would only pitch 29 frames each. Obviously, this is far from an exact science, but it shows that rosters in the Appalachian League are flooded with players.

Take catchers for another example. Rarely do big league teams carry more than two catchers. However, 45 catchers—or 4 and a half per club—appeared at one point or another during the 2010 Appalachian League season. Round the number down to four catchers per team, and evenly distribute the 68 possible starts, and each catcher would get 17 games, or two and a half weeks worth of baseball.

Einar Diaz played 11 seasons in the big leagues and made his managerial debut with Bluefield in the Appy League in 2010. He felt the pinch of bloated rosters.

“The thing is for us is that we have almost two teams over here—19 [position]
players—and we’ll have to shuffle a little bit and see if everybody can have a chance to play a little bit and see what happens. It’s tough.”

The league is also loaded with players from different countries. We will delve much deeper into the transition for foreign players later in the week during this special, but it is important to note the strong influx of talent from outside the United States. Of the 417 players who competed in the Appalachian League during the 2010 season, 133 were born outside the U.S. This translates to almost 32 percent, or just shy of one-third, of the league. 62 players are from the Dominican Republic, 35 are natives of Venezuela, and ten call Puerto Rico home. In all, 19 countries were represented in the Appy League during the 2010 season, which symbolizes the “melting pot” characteristic that permeates all of minor league baseball.

The wide-reaching aspect of the game of baseball creates a very unique angle within the minors, particularly in the Appy League because this is very low in an organization’s totem pole. Many players from overseas debut in stateside affiliated baseball in the Appy League, and others come to this ten-team league after one year in the obscure Arizona League or Gulf Coast League. Those two leagues lack fans at games, coverage by the media, or even websites that have anything more than the schedules and statistics. And after the season, foreign players oftentimes return to their native countries.

Needless to say, this poses a challenge to how coaches and managers deal with players who speak different languages. For example, during my time with the Burlington Royals over the course of the 2010 season, only two people on the team
knew both English and Spanish, the two main languages used in the Appy League and throughout baseball here in the United States. One was the manager, former major league infielder Nelson Liriano, and the other was Claudio Bavera, a left-handed relief pitcher. The issues stem throughout the league, as Atlanta Braves hitting coordinator Leon Roberts explains.

“The first thing I do is I find a person who is bilingual or has got interpretation skills. Me, I know about 50 words of Spanish, and I’m not too good at it yet. But I don’t know if I’m ever gonna get good at Spanish. But I can pass out things in broken English to them.”

It is an obstacle in terms of the learning curve, but it can also be of benefit to a team. After all, the 2010 Appalachian League champion—the Johnson City Cardinals—had the second highest percentage of foreign players in the league. 15 of the 40 Johnson City players were from the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, or Panama. On the flip side, the Bristol White Sox competed with 46 players at one point or another during the 2010 slate, with 42 of those being American-born players, and they finished with the third-most losses in the league. T.J. Tijerina managed Burlington in 2008, and he enjoys the “melting pot” backdrop of the Appalachian League.

“It’s a great learning experience, for the American players as well to integrate in with Latin players, and it really helps build the team atmosphere. I think both sides get as much out of it.”

There is no doubt that American-born players and foreign-born players come
from different baseball backgrounds. However, what makes the Appalachian League, along with other low-level minor leagues, fascinating is that the Americans who enter into this league are split into a few different groups. First off, there are players fresh out of high school who have been drafted and, although raw, have talent. Secondly, there are newly-drafted college players who do bring with them personal expectations and organizational expectations. Finally, the third group consists of players from college who are there to fill in the gaps throughout the minors, so priority number one is to simply continue to play the game they love.

High school prospects are traditionally brought through the minor leagues at a very slow pace because of the steep jump in competition level from high school to the professional game. In high school, players do not play nearly as many games, and starting pitchers normally throw once a week. In the professional ranks, a starter is, for the most part, expected to work every fifth day.

One of the most prestigious prospects to pass through the Appalachian League last season was Mike Foltynewicz, who was Houston’s first-round pick in the 2010 Major League Baseball Draft out of a high school in Illinois. Foltynewicz worked more than 70 innings during his high school season, which is much shorter than an Appy League slate. However, in his first professional season, Foltynewicz worked only 44 and two-thirds frames for the Greeneville Astros. In his first full season with Houston’s system, Foltynewicz worked more than 100 innings with Low-A Lexington, but he is still rarely working past the sixth inning. The process is slow for young arms.
Crawford Simmons is another example of a high school product entering the professional ranks in the Appalachian League. A 2009 draft pick, Simmons did not pitch for the Royals’ farm system in his first calendar year, partly because of his youth and partly because of a long negotiation process regarding his signing bonus. Simmons debuted in affiliated ball with the Burlington Royals in the Appy League, and he posted more innings than Foltynewicz. Still, he was on a strict pitch count. As Simmons explains, the jump from high school to professional ball is a significant one.

“Mentally and physically it’s a big difference coming from high school when you throw on Friday, with six days rest as opposed to every fifth day. I feel fine physically, but mentally it’s kind of tough.”

So how about the college players? No doubt there are adjustments for collegiate draft picks and signings to make as well, but there is a difference in approach in these situations. Once again, here’s Leon Roberts from the Braves’ system.

“The high school kid, obviously, he’s a little bit raw, so you’ve gotta go slower with him. You get a college guy who’s been in a decent program, you can accelerate your teaching, your methods, to him.”

You can tell that college prospects, for the most part, have a better grasp on the mental side of the game at this level because they have at least three additional years on their baseball résumés. This is even clearer among players who have expectations within their organization. Take Mike Giovenco, a 14th-round pick by Kansas City in the 2010 Draft. He was sent to Instructionals after the season, which is a one-month
program that mostly consists of players an organization wants to work with even more. Here’s Giovenco talking about the differences for a pitcher in college versus the pros.

“Ohviously, any good hitter will beat up mistakes and pound mistakes, but I feel you get away with a lot less here at this level, where in college, you can get away with an up fastball when you’re behind in the count or a hanging curveball every once in a while or slider, where here it’s pound it every time.”

Even though the Appalachian League is “lower” than most in minor league baseball, there are plenty of Mike Giovenco’s out there—players who catch an organization’s decision makers’ eyes despite being at a low level. However, minor league baseball is also smattered with players who will never make it to Major League Baseball. If you do the numbers, it makes sense. At any point during the season, there are 750 players in the big leagues—30 teams with 25 active players. This year’s annual Major League Baseball Draft contained 1,530 selections, which is more than double the number of spots available in the major leagues. Case in point, most people who play professional baseball will not get to the big leagues. Burlington’s 2010 hitting coach Damon Hollins did get there during four different seasons.

“The minor leagues period, not just this level, but the minor league period is almost like practice for the guys that’s going to get to the big leagues and play a while up there.”

So what about the players who don’t make it? Surely, there are players who do not make it to the big leagues who garnered legitimate expectations from their
organizations. What is unique about the Appy League is that there are players who understand that they are not necessarily in the long-term plans of their current organization, or any of the 30 organizations for that matter. For example, a reliever with the Burlington Royals told me he was stunned to learn he was signing a big league contract. He said he would have been willing to take a bus from his home in Michigan to get there, and he was even more tickled when he received a plane ticket. In another example, Bluefield led the league in catchers last year. The Baby Birds used nine different backstops at one point or another during the 68-game slate, yet they brought a local product who worked on their grounds crew to be a bullpen catcher and play in a few games. The stories are everywhere.

And of course there is, ultimately, a chance that this breed of minor league players can make it. For example, Mark Hamburger was a pitcher who showed up to an open tryout at the old Metrodome in Minneapolis. He had not pitched in almost a year, and he ended up latching on with the Twins. He even made 27 appearances in Elizabethton in the Appy League before getting traded to the Rangers. Four years after his tryout, Hamburger suited up for the Rangers in the heat of a playoff chase for his big league debut in August of this year.

2010 Burlington Royal Ryan Jenkins hopes he has a Hamburger-like rise through Kansas City’s system, but he is one of those who has the odds stacked against him. Jenkins was a five-year player at Auburn University before joining the Royals’ system at the age of 23. He understands the culture.

“I think any time you get to keep playing, to me, that was what I wanted to do,
so I don’t really feel that I’m at a disadvantage because of my age. I still got some stuff to work on just like everybody else, and if I can put everything together maybe I can move up the ladder.”

After being Burlington’s primary catcher during the 2010 season, he played with three different Kansas City affiliates in 2011 and hit just .236 in 49 games. No word yet on whether or not Jenkins, who will turn 25 in the offseason, will be back with the Royals’ farm system, but he and plenty of other prospects like him will sweat out the fall and winter.

Players are not the only ones trying to prove themselves in the Appalachian League. We’ll discuss who else develops within this rookie-level league. Also, why is winning not necessarily the biggest priority in the Appy League? All of that comes up when we return. You’re locked into Part 1 of A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League right here on 970 WATH.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

We welcome you back to Part 1 of A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League. I’m Brian Boesch. Here in part one, we have introduced you to the Appalachian League. We left you before the break with some analysis on what kind of prospects play in the Appy League. No matter what background they come from, they are trying to advance to the next level within minor league baseball.

After all, every player in the minor leagues wants to eventually play in the big leagues. To do that, one must scale the organization’s mountain. Well, the same can be said about managers, coaches, trainers, and strength and conditioning coordinators.
When zeroing in on the managers and coaches, one can see a trend—there are many former players who have decided to try their luck at once again moving through a minor league system, this time as a manager or coach. During the 2010 Appalachian League season, six of the ten managers played in the big leagues. The names are not necessarily household names, but Bluefield’s Einar Diaz caught for five different teams over the course of an 11-year career. Burlington’s Nelson Liriano also played for 11 seasons with six clubs as an infielder. Danville boss Paul Runge spent eight seasons with Atlanta after being the Braves’ ninth-round selection in 1979. Longtime Elizabethton manager Ray Smith played with Minnesota over three years in the early 1980s. Greeneville’s Ed Romero played in the bigs for 12 years and even made it to the 1986 World Series with the Red Sox. And Mike Difelice, the skipper for Kingsport, was a journeyman catcher who played for seven teams over the course of 13 seasons.

Three other managers—Bristol’s Ryan Newman, Princeton’s Michael Johns, and Pulaski’s Eddie Menchaca—did play in the minor leagues, but they did not get to the majors. Obviously, it is not a prerequisite for a manager or coach at the minor league level to play the game at that high of a level; after all, the lone manager who did not play professional baseball—Johnson City’s Mike Shildt—led his Cardinals to the 2010 and 2011 Appalachian League championships. Still, it is a trend in the minors that former players are now trekking through an organization as a manager or coach.

Similarly to the players, the managers and coaches are, for the most part,
relatively inexperienced when they enter the Appalachian League. Elizabethton’s Ray Smith is a rarity, as he has been in the league for almost two decades. As Romero and Johns explain, this short-season league is great for aspiring big league managers.

“I thought this is a good chance for me, so basically this is a short season where, you know, not that many games, and basically the traveling is good and I think this is a good opportunity.”

“It really helped out the transition, just learning the speed of the game and these type of players.”

The job of an Appalachian League manager, however, is much different than that of a big league skipper. In Major League Baseball, the manager is a critical part of the evaluation process. They have a sizable say in who joins the team and who leaves the team, and they can decide how much playing time each player gets. In the Appy League, things are handled much differently, that according to Kansas City’s assistant general manager, J.J. Picollo.

“The teams are set to go in and coach the players and to develop the players, not necessarily to evaluate guys. We leave that to our scouts. The way we look at it is every one of our staff members, their job is to get them from one level to the next, regardless of what round they went in, how much money they were paid because, as we all know, there are a lot of good Major League players—Hall of Fame Major League players—that weren’t drafted very high. So, we gotta treat everyone the same and do what we can to develop guys from level to level.”

The reality is, very seldom do Appalachian League managers get to make
decisions regarding the playing time of a certain player or the placement of players in the lineup or the rotation. I encountered this reality multiple times throughout the Burlington Royals’ season. Here is a prime example of this from a pre-game interview I did with Burlington manager Nelson Liriano. It is focusing on the spot in the order for outfielder Alex Llanos, a sixth-round pick, which means he is an important part of the Royals’ minor league system. Take a listen.

“One shuffle in the lineup today—Alex Llanos pushed out of the leadoff spot. Motivation behind that decision? Is that just trying to jumpstart the offense a little bit?”

“The front office people, you know, they called me and they told me to move Llanos to number six and put Piterson and McClure first and second, so they like to see something, so we just do it and go for it.”

Whether or not Liriano wanted to move Llanos to the six spot, he had to do it because the front office told him to do it. Ultimately, the office wanted to see one of its high draft picks attempt to bat in a different spot in the order. The key word is development. It is what separates this league, along with much of the minor leagues, from the big boys in Major League Baseball, a 30-team battleground where winning and little else matters. Here in the Appy League, the approach is much different, as Johnson City skipper Mike Shildt explains.

“Development is always going to be number one. People basically talk about developing and winning going hand in hand, and I definitely believe in that, but, push comes to shove, when I make a lineup out, it’s development-oriented. We’re not
making our best winning lineup everyday.”

The concept permeates the minors. Yes, winning is great, but development is the name of the game. The win-loss record for an Appy League team matters little, but the long-term effects on individuals who pass through will truly determine the success of a certain season. Shildt continues.

“It’s all about value for the organization and the player having a career. I talked to these guys about—this is not your job, this is your career, and we want you to have a career. Last year, we had a good season in Johnson City and everybody was real complementary. We finished second, had the third best record in the league, and everybody said, ‘Hey, great job, you know, you really did a good job,’ and I felt good about that. But, I know that really the true measure of what kind of job I did is moving forward, and the thing that I feel best about is our Midwest League club made the playoffs in the first half. Our Palm Beach club finished second in the first half in the Florida State League. Both those clubs are still doing good in the second half, and the kids we had off our club are contributing and having success, so how we end up this year—I don’t have a crystal ball for that. But, I do know that every day is a preparation for these guys to move forward, and the success will be when we turn on the TV in four or five years and these guys are there [in the big leagues] contributing, and I’ve had that experience now with several guys on our big league club, and that’s ultimately what it’s about. I’d rather have the [St. Louis] Cardinals go to the playoffs than us this year, and then feed this group into the Cardinals going to the playoffs in 2014. That’s what matters the most.”
Shildt isn’t the only one who focuses on the developmental side of minor league baseball. Bristol skipper Ryan Newman furthers Shildt’s statements.

“My job isn’t to win the Appy League pennant. My job is to get these guys to the next level as quickly as possible, and that’s what we’re here for. We’re here to get these kids to the next level, and whatever we have to do to do that, that’s what we’re gonna do.”

It is tough to look at the 2010 or 2011 Appalachian League seasons and try to convince the average fan that a season below the .500 mark may actually be a success. However, if one examines a season a few years ago, one can sometimes see the benefits of a season that may not have had as many wins as players and fans alike would want. Take the 2008 Burlington Royals. They finished the ’08 slate with a record of 24-41, which was the worst in the league. However, that club helped to produce Salvador Perez, a catcher who finished this season with the big league squad in Kansas City. To this point, only five of the ten Appy League teams from 2008 have provided at least one player to its big league team. The two division champions from that Appalachian League season—Pulaski and Elizabethton—have yet to provide their big league team—Seattle and Minnesota, respectively—with a player. Here’s the manager of that ’08 Burlington unit—T.J. Tijerina.

“The importance of winning is not as important from our perspective of the success of players on a day-to-day basis at this level. We don’t harp on it. We don’t get down on them when we lose ballgames. As long as we’re playing the game right, we’re playing it hard, the byproduct of winning will come as we go when we find the
players who get it—the winners that are on the field.”

We’ve heard that managers do not handle in-game situations to win in the Appalachian League. Also, we’ve heard that development trumps having more runs than the other team in this rookie-level experience. So where, exactly, does winning fit in with the Appy League? While it is not necessarily a priority, winning is always a preference. You play the game to win. The game is a player’s life for those two and a half months during the summer, and baseball is more fun when you win. Once again, here’s J.J. Picollo, Kansas City’s assistant general manager.

“Then, when it comes game time, we want the players to go and play and win the game, and I think the morale is a little bit higher when you’re winning games. I think it just makes for a better atmosphere when they’re walking away with a win each night.”

Not only is it more fun to walk away with that much-desired “W” every night, but it also breeds further development for these players, that according to Elizabethton skipper Ray Smith and Atlanta hitting coordinator Leon Roberts.

“It’s not all about winning, but yes I think winning is a big part of the developmental process. It’s a team game. You’ve got to learn how to help your club win ballgames. I think that’s what winning players are all about. We want to maintain that enthusiasm level. We want to come out here hungry everyday with the priority to make ourselves better players.”

“Well, I think they both go hand in hand. You can develop your players real good, and as a result of their development they play good and your team gets more
wins. The biggest thing is you want to develop winning, championship-type of players, so if you can develop winning, championship-type of players, they gotta be used to both ends of the spectrum when they get to Bobby Cox in Atlanta.”

So, there are plenty of reasons to want to win. Many baseball folks do believe that winning breeds development. And let’s face it, all ten teams are in the same position. No major league decision maker is going to say—“we need to load up the Appalachian League affiliate to get a championship there”—even though there are a few teams that have the reputation of being strong in the league. Regardless, there are plenty of very young players in the league, all of whom are just trying to learn the ropes in the minor leagues and eventually move up on the farm system’s totem pole.

How does this desire to win compare with the need to win at the major league level? There is a difference, no doubt. Mike Difelice finished his playing career in 2008 with Tampa Bay. Two years later, Difelice was a manager for the Kingsport Mets. He has an idea on the difference between winning in the bigs and winning in the Appy League.

“Finishing a career at a level where that’s all it was about—it was about winning. Once you’re at the top of an organization—the top team in an organization—it’s about winning. If you’re not doing your job, they’re going to find somebody to do it, so there is a fine line, but this is a development level, and we want to develop the individual player to help in the long run. Part of that, they have to be a team player, and they have to be a winning player.”

The conclusion: In the major leagues, the goal is for the team to collectively
come together and form a winning unit. In the minors, especially at the lower levels where inexperience runs rampant, the hope is to develop players who have winning qualities and who can be a cog to that winning big league squad sometime down the road. Whether or not that development brings with it many victories while going through the Appalachian League all the way to Double-A and Triple-A is, for the most part, irrelevant.

A big reason why those victories are thrown out the door is because the play at the major league level is so different than that in the Appy League. Here’s Greeneville’s 2010 skipper, Ed Romero, once again on some of those discrepancies.

“Consistency is very different. Execution is very different, and that’s why these guys are here in rookie ball. Although they’re younger, it takes a long process for these guys to absorb and play the game and minimize the mistakes they make as far as at the plate offensively, pitches they take, swings that they take at bad pitches, recognizing breaking balls, changeups, and doing situational hitting, concentration at the plate, concentration on the mound, making pitch when they have to, pitching ahead in the count. All this stuff, that’s why these guys are here working on all that, so they get consistency, so they can move up the ladder to the major leagues.”

What makes this end goal so fascinating is that there are no clear guidelines on how to reach it. If you work in sales, the end goal is a dollar amount. If you work in production, the end goal is a certain number of that product. In minor league baseball, stats are present, but they do not act as the be-all, end-all facts in the never-ending quest to move players from one level to the next. There have been batters with a .250
average promoted over men hitting above .300, and there are guys with earned run averages north of four moving on up while guys who post ERA’s below three are stuck at their current level. And the lower you go in the minors, the foggier statistics become. Here’s Burlington pitching coach Bobby St. Pierre, who has been with the B-Royals for the last four seasons.

“I think the numbers are important, but only to a certain degree, and you gotta look inside of what’s really going on. At the same time, early in the year, we had some guys that were successful, but we’d like to see a few more things from them, and they’ve delivered on that in most cases. By the same token, we have some guys whose numbers aren’t all that great, but they’ve been doing a lot of good things and they’ve had some hard luck, or some bad scorekeeping, or some different things, but you’re right in the sense that you do have to look past the numbers a little bit.”

While organizations keep keen eyes on the Appalachian League, it is easy for outsiders to give this level the cold shoulder. Every league involves a weeding out process, and this is one of the lowest professional ranks in the country. However, as this first episode establishes, the Appalachian League is filled with unique stories, aspiring big leaguers, former major league players, and much more. And this is still baseball. Nine innings, 27 outs, a baseball, a bat, and a field. Baseball is baseball, no matter where it is played and who is playing it. Many adore this league, including Marty DeMerritt, the Princeton Rays’ pitching coach since 2007. DeMerritt played in the minors for six years and then went into the coaching profession. He was the pitching coach for two different Major League squads. However, he remains in the
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Appy League, and he loves it.

“It’s rookie ball, but it’s played much better than that, and it’s just really neat baseball to watch and watch two teams battle it out and watch some really handsome prospects play this beautiful game of baseball.”

Tomorrow in part two of this three-part program about the Appalachian League, we discuss the actual game within the 68-game Appalachian League season. How does it differ from the big leagues? How are prospects handled on a day-to-day basis? How do managers make decisions in the heat of battle? All of this comes up tomorrow night at 6:06 here on the Sports Fan Presented by J&K Contracting here on 970 WATH. I’m Brian Boesch, and this is A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League. Thanks so much for listening.

Episode Two: How Baseball Is Played in the Appalachian League

(Broadcast open: approximately one minute)

Welcome to part number two of A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League. I’m Brian Boesch. Did you miss the first episode? Here’s a quick refresher on our introduction to the rookie-level Appalachian League within minor league baseball.

“There’s been a lot of enthusiasm. This is a throwback league.”

“You serve like an apprenticeship.”

“You just gotta grind, and when it comes to that point you just gotta fight through it.”

“We gotta treat everyone the same and do what we can to develop guys from
level to level.”

“Push comes to shove, when I make a lineup out, it’s development-oriented. We’re not making our best winning lineup everyday.”

“My job isn’t to win the Appy League pennant. My job is to get these guys to the next level as quickly as possible.”

“We want to develop the individual player to help in the long run. Part of that, they have to be a team player, and they have to be a winning player.”

As discussed last night in the first episode, the Appalachian League is a ten-team league located in four different states that includes players who have not been in minor league baseball for very long. Winning must make way for development in terms of the “end goal.” Development is king in the minors, especially at this level, a level that does not have a great rate of producing Major League talent. However, there is talent in the Appy League. And it is quite a priority for big league organizations to monitor.

But how does play within the Appalachian League look? After all, this is a league that features youthful players and predicates itself on development. It has to be different from the cut-throat, multi-million dollar enterprise that is Major League Baseball. Ed Romero managed the Greeneville Astros in 2010. He has also been a bench coach with Houston in the bigs. According to Romero, a former big leaguer himself, the players differ greatly as human beings.

“In the big leagues, you’re dealing with older guys, more mature people, and guys who take care of themselves as far as their careers. Down here, it’s more
instruction, instruction, repetition, repetition, repetition, and it’s the base for all these young kids in the organization to make it to the big leagues. It’s a lot of hard work, but it’s very gratifying when you see these kids make it to the big leagues.”

As we’ve discussed here in this series, not everyone will make it to the big leagues. For every Kirby Puckett, Manny Ramirez and Nolan Ryan who pass through the Appalachian League, there will be countless others who will never make it all the way to their organization’s highest point. To take it even further, there will be plenty of Appy League alumni who fail to make it much further than this rookie-level. More than 50 players join an organization every calendar year via the draft and free agency, and those individuals are all vying to advance. This is what the minor leagues is all about, according to former big league catcher and 2010 Kingsport manager Mike Difelice.

“Not every player is going to make it to the Major Leagues, so you’ve got your select guys that you have to develop, and you sacrifice some things hoping that those are the one or two that are gonna help in the future—the major league club—to be a championship team.”

Difelice’s response prompts a pair of questions. First, who does a person new to professional baseball turn to during their time in rookie-level leagues such as the Appalachian League? Well, imagine important changes in your life. It is likely that you reached out to multiple different people in these situations. After all, these are trying times, especially for young men who are rarely ever older than 23 years old at this level. Here’s current Princeton Rays skipper Michael Johns.
“I know these guys are getting a lot of advice from either their hitting coach, their roving hitting coach, the agent, their parents, their girlfriend. Everybody is giving them advice.”

All of this desire for advice comes from the fact that players are facing completely new challenges during their time at the rookie-ball level of minor league baseball. Jack Maloof, a special assistant to player development in the Kansas City organization when I chatted with him during the summer of 2010, presents just some of those challenges.

“They get into their first year of professional baseball and start mainly swinging the wood bat, if you talking about their hitting, and that’s different. Being away from home and traveling, that’s different. Playing every day and kind of the competition that they have to face every night, that’s different. And so they tend to run into some adversity things that they’ve never had to deal with before, whereas guys who have gone on and had success at High-A, Double-A—that thing and what guys are going through now, they’ve experienced that. If you want to call it experience, that’s a big part of it, but the adversity can play on a guy’s mind and take away from what they need to do on the field, and I think that hurts them.”

The second question that Difelice’s response about development at the Appalachian League level prompts is this: what exactly does a minor league affiliate sacrifice in order to develop those soon-to-be contributors in the big leagues? As we discussed in episode one, many times it is the best chance to win. Winning is secondary, with development being king. So how does this change the approach for a
position prospect and for a pitching prospect? Let’s attack the position prospect discussion first.

When discussing the offensive side of baseball, there are two things that matter much more in the big leagues than they do at the Appy League level—statistics and lineup placement. First off, as we discussed in part one of this series, the stats at this level are not all that important to an organization, especially with the prospects who that organization believes can be a contributor in the Major Leagues. When those types of players are competing at the rookie level, numbers are not everything, that according to Kansas City’s assistant general manager, J.J. Picollo.

“We look at it, but we don’t put as much into it. We still stick with our scouting evaluation on their tools and what they’ve done in the past, where they play in the summer, what type of program were they at, and that will help us more so project where they should be next year.”

This approach permeates the Kansas City organization. Andre David is a hitting coordinator at the lower levels of the Royals’ minor league system, so he does not delve into hitting prospects much higher than the two “A” units. He does not worry about stats, either.

“I’m not concerned with the batting average. I’m more concerned with the approach they take from understanding their swing. I’m not concerned with whether they’re 4-for-4 or 0-for-4. It’s just the other things—the intangibles, getting good pitches to hit, do they understand situational hitting, being able to handle the bat, a solid, firm two-strike approach, so it’s not about the outcome. It’s about understanding
the purpose of what they need to do to be successful.”

David, like many figures within the Appalachian League’s structure, is not too concerned about the statistics. Another aspect of the game that has a much stronger emphasis in the big leagues than in the Appy League is each player’s placement on a lineup card. In Major League Baseball, a player’s slot in the order, more times than not, can give context clues regarding what kind of a player someone is. The leadoff hitter is normally a speedy, contact hitter that boasts one of his club’s best on-base percentages. The two-hole hitter normally follows this path but may have a little bit more power. A team’s third hitter is supposed to be the team’s most complete offensive option—a combination of speed, power, and contact abilities. The middle of the order, those hitting fourth, fifth, and sixth, are the run producers and the power hitters. The wiggle room oftentimes exists in the bottom third of the order—those batters can be very strong offensive pieces, too. However, they can also be strong defensive players or speedy men who can help set the table when the order turns back over to the top.

Appalachian League managers also try to formulate lineups that mimic these structures. Still, with the way minor league baseball operates, a player who fits into the three-hole in the Appy League may project as a six or seven-hole swinger at higher levels. Thus, the roles are a bit expanded, as Leon Roberts, the Hitting Coordinator of the Atlanta Braves, discusses.

“The biggest thing is you got to encourage them or set up situations where you might have your number four hitter bunt in the Appalachian League. If or when this
guys goes to the big leagues three or four years from now, he might not be batting fourth. He might be batting seventh, or a leadoff man might be batting eighth, but you gotta expose them to the hit and runs, the suicide squeezes, the moving runners, the hitting with two strikes, the man on second, nobody out, shooting the ball oppo[site field], man on third base, infield in, infield back. You gotta expose them to all those things so as they get higher up, they develop some kind of a comfort zone that, ‘I’m not surprised on a hit and run, or I’m not surprised when the manager gives me a sac bunt, or I’m not surprised when a manager asks me to move a runner,’ or something, so you gotta expose them to a lot.”

So, the spot in the order does not matter all that much in the Appy League or in other rookie-level leagues in minor league baseball. Also, the side that a player swings on does not move the needle much for managers at this juncture of the baseball journey. While Major League Baseball’s 30 managers all have their own belief system regarding the importance of avoiding lefty-lefty or righty-righty matchups, there is not much room in the Appalachian League for that kind of thought process because this is a developmental league. Organizations need to find out if these young prospects can hit against both groups of pitchers, as Johnson City skipper Mike Shildt explains.

“We have left-handed hitters, and we’ll face a left-handed pitcher, and yea, I try to give us the best chance to compete when the game starts, but the point is, I let the lefties face the lefties. If we don’t find out whether they can hit lefties now, when are they going to learn?”

Regardless of one’s spot in the order and one’s side in the batters box, one
must be able to do a single thing in the Appalachian League to be a success offensively and to eventually earn a promotion. As former big leaguer and 2010 Burlington hitting coach Damon Hollins says, Appy League swingers must be able to hit the fastball.

“They have to be in position to hit the fastball basically, and that’s what our organization stresses, especially at this level. This is rookie ball, so you gotta be able to hit the fastball here. You can’t worry about the secondary or the third pitch, you know what I mean. You gotta be in position to hit the heater, and for the most part I think that’s what our guys have been working on.”

Clearly, hitting prospects in the Appalachian League face many challenges, some of which are unique to these low-level ranks in affiliated baseball. The same can be said for the men who start getting paid for throwing the baseball. During the 2010 season, the majority of the players in the Appalachian League, 216 to be exact, were pitchers. In this ten-team league, more than 21 pitchers would be on a team throughout the season, which means that there are not many innings to go around. Still, there are plenty of fascinating aspects within the Appalachian League for the pitchers who compete in it. At this level, especially for those who are making their professional debuts, there actually is not a great deal of coaching. It’s more of a feeling out process, according to Houston’s minor league pitching coordinator Britt Burns.

“We’re careful to just let guys just go out and pitch—get settled in, not overwhelm them with a whole lot of, if any, information. Let them go out and do what they do. Show us what you got. If we see something we think we need to address, we
ease in and do it. We don’t rush into it unless there’s something going on that we feel like the guy may hurt himself then we obviously take care of that, but we let these guys come out here and play and get their feet on the ground and start working with them, maybe making some suggestions and tweaking some things little by little.”

Pitchers in the Appalachian League must also deal with a unique change in their workload. At the high school or college level, hurlers are not necessarily required to pitch as often. However, they are normally depended on more when they do pitch, especially those who are the top handful of arms on the club. Rookie-level pitching coach Mark Davis, a professional baseball player from 1979 to 1997 and the National League Cy Young Award winner in 1989 with San Diego, expands on this topic.

“They’re probably throwing a lot less (sic) pitches with us in professional baseball than they would at their college team, so we’re cutting pitches down, but we’re also getting them a little bit of daily throwing, obviously a side in between. But, like you had mentioned, the daily play is probably the biggest adjustment that all of the players have to go through.”

A few minutes ago, we heard from Damon Hollins, the former big league hitter who began his coaching career in 2010 in the Appy League, and he said that hitting the fastball was key for offensive prospects at this level. Managers, coaches, and roving instructors emphasize the fastball for pitchers, too. Without a fastball, a pitcher is very unlikely to make it into full-season minor league baseball, let alone the big leagues. Here is Burns on the importance of fastball command for pitchers in the Appalachian League.
“We try to put the emphasis, and every organization does, on young pitchers throwing more fastballs now than they probably will up the ladder, but it’s giving them those reps and opportunities to gain command of their fastball. It’s about probably 70, 75 percent use of the fastball, and sometimes it might be more. It isn’t necessarily conducive to getting as many outs sometimes as you might like. Higher up the ladder, they’ll be times when guys may be 50, 55 percent, depending on the day, but at this level it’s important that they learn to use and pitch off their fastball to have those reps to get command and to build some arm strength.”

As Burns mentioned, the pitchers in this league are instructed to throw plenty of fastballs, which at times is not the pitch that should be thrown in certain situations. This is yet another example of big league organizations stressing the development of each player more than the winning of each team in the Appalachian League. Another one is the design to teach pitchers how to retire big league hitters instead of Appy League hitters. There are times when a pitcher at this level could retire the men in front of him but not develop properly. Here is the Burlington Royals’ veteran pitching coach Bobby St. Pierre.

“Hey, you did great. Good job. Happy for you, but this is our goal and this is what we’re striving to be, and you may not get away with that down the road.”

Britt continues.

“We’re keeping the bigger picture in mind. Some of these kids, we want to see them pitch in the big leagues some day. We teach and think in terms of things that are more relevant to getting people out at the big league level, not necessarily at Low-A
So what is the most widespread change for many pitching prospects at the Appalachian League level? The answer is coming up right after the break here on part number two of *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*, right here on the Sports Fan Presented by J&K Contracting’s special presentation on 970 WATH. (COMMERCIAL BREAK)

We welcome you back to part two of this three-part series, *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*, right here on the Sports Fan Presented by J&K Contracting’s special presentation on 970 WATH. Brian Boesch back with you as we delve into this rookie-level league within minor league baseball. As we’ve discussed during the first half of this episode, the play on the field is fascinating. It is unlike most levels of baseball, from high school and college ball to Triple-A and the big leagues. And while we have discussed the challenges and changes that hitters have to go through during their time in the Appy League, we have yet to touch on the most widespread adjustment that some players tackle each and every season in the rookie-level leagues. Many players must transition from starting during high school or college to being in the bullpen in the professional ranks. Casual fans of the game of baseball may think that pitching is just pitching. You go to the mound, latch up with the rubber, wind up, and let it go. However, a starting pitcher has everything ironed out for him. The team’s trainer and strength and conditioning coach will put each starter on a specific regimen in advance of every outing, which comes at the professional level almost every fifth day. In high school or college, a pitcher normally starts once a
Bullpen hurlers have a different lifestyle. While there is some regimented work throughout the season, the timing and frequency of a relief pitcher’s appearances are oftentimes unknown. A pitcher will have to be ready every day to take to the mound. Burlington’s pitching coach, Bobby St. Pierre, was a starter for the University of Richmond before the Yankees selected him in the seventh round of the 1995 draft. While he did start some in the minors, St. Pierre was primarily a reliever during his five-year minor league career. He understands the challenge for these starters-turned-relievers in the Appalachian League and throughout minor league baseball.

“It can be very difficult, and, speaking from experience as a player, I was in that same sort of boat in the middle of my pro career, having pretty much started my whole life, and it was very difficult for me. It was a different mindset, and I think the most important thing is the preparation. It’s a little easier to prepare yourself as a starter. You got a set time. You know what you’re gonna be doing every fifth day, whereas a reliever, that’s obviously a little more difficult. Your name is called, and you get up and go in the game.”

Multiple players on the Burlington Royals during the 2010 season made that transition. Two of them, in particular, enjoyed a great deal of success. First off, Robbie Penny was a perfect five-for-five in save opportunities and boasted a 1.49 earned run average in his 18 relief appearances spanning more than 40 innings of work. Here’s Penny on his summer in the ‘pen.

“Coming out of college, I was a starter, and being in the bullpen for the first
time, you just gotta get used to it. I think after the first few times out there, I finally got used to it, got rolling. I’ve been making better pitches, been making quality pitches, so just trying to get guys out and not trying to do it all yourself.”

You don’t just have to possess monster stats to settle into a bullpen role. Jon Keck made nine relief outings and turned into a left-handed specialist, holding lefty swingers to just a .175 batting average. His overall numbers weren’t elite—the southpaw finished the year 3-3 with a 4.68 earned run average. Still, Keck, a 42nd round pick in the 2009 Major League Baseball Draft, found a role this past season and made 39 combined relief appearances between Low-A Kane County and High-A Wilmington, which is quite a jump for that low of a draft pick. His 2010 skipper, Burlington’s Nelson Liriano, discusses this phenomenon in the minors.

“When you sign to play professional ball, you have to be open until you show a lot of people you can do some kind of role.”

In the game of baseball, roles switch as days, weeks, and years progress. However, a manager and his coaching staff would like to have players slot into certain spots as much as possible. Earlier in this episode, we discussed the roles that hitters can play in a lineup. This is also the case in the bullpen of most baseball teams. The bullpen contains such roles as left-handed specialists like the aforementioned Keck, long relievers, set-up men, and closers. As is the trend in the Appalachian League, affiliates at this level do not necessarily have these roles set in stone. In fact, many clubs begin the season with the simple goal of distributing the innings fairly evenly to the arms in the bullpen. The performance by these hurlers dictates how the coaching
staff will give out these mid-season roles. Once again, here’s St. Pierre.

“It’s not as clear cut at this level in terms of your closer and your set up guy and your long guy. Some guys fall into that as we go a little bit, but it’s a little more scheduled in terms of when they pitch and when they get in the game.”

It all stems back to the everlasting theme of the Appy League and of minor league baseball as a whole—development trumps winning. While a certain reliever may be head and shoulders above the rest of the bullpen, that man will not always be the closer because the organization needs to know if others can do the same job down the line. This rationale is also applied to the other roles we discussed for a squad’s bullpen.

Speaking of development in the bullpen, most organizations’ philosophies at this level involve an extra emphasis on time off between appearances. During Burlington’s season, which consisted of 68 regular season games and a pair of playoff losses, only once did a pitcher appear in back-to-back games. It was Claudio Bavera during the final series of the regular season, with the Royals in the thick of the playoff chase. Bavera tossed one inning in each of those games and only faced one more batter than the minimum. Maybe Burlington’s coaching staff made a rare switch to a winning mentality instead of a developmental one in order to boost the club to its first playoff appearance since 1993. Maybe the organization wanted to see Bavera work on back-to-back days. Whatever the reason may be, it was a very rare occurrence. Other organizations adhere to the same policy with its arms at the rookie ball level, such as the Houston Astros. Here’s their Appy League affiliate’s manager, Ed Romero.
“What I try to do with my guys in the ‘pen is rotate them every single day so, at least, no matter what, they pitch an inning, two innings, they have an off day after they pitch, so they’ll be fresh for the next time they come back in, so what I try to do, since we have ten, eleven pitchers in the bullpen, we try to rotate those guys every single night. We don’t use guys two nights in a row out of the ‘pen, so those guys are fresh and we’ll end up—the guys in the ‘pen—with about the same amount of innings, each one.”

In other words, performance does not dictate the role. It also does not give any hints on how long a pitcher will work in a single game. At the big league level, the bottom line is the game’s score each night. Hurlers who post zeroes on the scoreboard will pitch more than those who give up hits and runs. Here at the Appalachian League level, the protocol is a little different, that according to Tampa Bay scout Brad Matthews.

“I tell players when they sign that you may come out in this league and you may throw three innings and strike everybody out, but you’re out because you gotta get the next guy in. The same way, if you go out there and you may not have a good game. You may be getting knocked around. Well, you may stay out there to get your work in for that day, so again the main focus is the development.”

What exactly constitutes the work that Matthews is referring to? For the most part, organizations set pitch counts on their hurlers, whether they are starters or relievers. It is the be-all, end-all marker for pitchers’ work in the minor leagues. While such Major League pitchers as Roy Halladay, CC Sabathia, and Justin Verlander are
viewed as workhorses who eclipse the 100-pitch mark on a regular basis, fans will never see a pitcher used like that in the Appalachian League. In fact, after a scoring error that showed a pitcher posted a ten-inning complete game, the pitcher’s manager urged me to get the mistake corrected immediately because, as he told me, he would be out of a job by morning if it stood incorrect. It was a harmless mistake, but it was one that could have carried with it serious consequences. This brief story simply illustrates the importance of pitch count. Here’s Burns again on why it is such a monitored number for every pitcher in a rookie level.

“We are also very careful with the pitch counts until we get to know them and seeing how they’re handling what, in many cases, is a little more work, a little more throwing, a little more being on their feet than they’re accustomed to in amateur ball. It’s a getting to know each other process so that when we get to spring training next year we’ll have a lot better idea of what we’ve got and where they will end up going next year, so it’s really more of a get to know them process.”

So you now know about the process. You know about the way that all players, both hitters and pitchers, are handled during the 68-game season in the Appalachian League. The ultimate goal is to develop talent, and the byproduct of development is advancement through an organization’s minor league system. While there are no uniform guidelines, there is one rule of thumb—the decisions are not taken lightly. Many factors come into play. We don’t know how front offices will handle each situation, but I did learn one aspect of the process. More than a handful of people will contribute to each decision. Here are multiple examples. First off, Elizabethton
manager Ray Smith on the Minnesota Twins’ system.

“That’s probably more up to the farm director and our coordinators. Of course I have a little say in it. I can tell them about makeup. I can tell about the progress that’s being made. That equation about releasing guys and moving guys, there’s gotta be a need up above. I’m just one spoke in the wheel. We’ve got some guys. All of our evaluators evaluate all of our players—all those coordinators and the farm directors, so to say one guy has all the say—that’s not the case. In regard to the decision making process, about ten or twelve guys are involved in making those decisions.”

Like the Twins, the Atlanta Braves tend to stock their Appalachian League affiliate in Danville, Virginia, with some of the league’s best talent. Here’s their hitting coordinator, Leon Roberts, on the player personnel moves.

“What we do is we all have a hand in it or a say in it, and we all sort of communicate, and they’ll be cases where a player is really doing good, and we need to challenge him by going to the next level, so we’ll make recommendations or throw out a potential player move, and if that guy is ready to graduate to the next level, we’ll move him. On the flip side of that, if it looks like a guy should stay at a certain level for the whole year to gain the experience of playing at that level the whole year, we’ll recommend that, too.”

The reality is, however, that many of the decisions come from people who are not directly involved with the Appalachian League affiliate’s day-to-day action. Other members of the front office tend to have the majority of the say in the matter. To prove that, here’s a pair of other perspectives from, when I spoke with them, first-time
managers in the Appalachian League. Pulaski manager Eddie Menchaca of the Seattle Mariners organization and Greeneville skipper Ed Romero from the Houston Astros system.

“They’ll ask. They’ll ask, ‘What do you think?’ Obviously, if the kid’s pretty good and doesn’t belong here, we kind of talk to our boss about it and let him know, ‘Hey, this kid’s good. If you need help somewhere else, this is the guy.’ When it comes to that and decision making, it’s on them. They come to the game. They see reports. Communication is big here, and honestly, we have a little bit of it, but a lot of it comes down to them as far as like, ‘OK, this is a guy that I want. Here we go.’ But they will call and ask, and after that it’s up to them.”

“Basically, what I do, I take a close look at what we have there and we have meetings and stuff, and I’ll suggest and recommend. When they ask me, I’ll tell them what I think, and basically that’s all I can do. They’ll be asking me specifically about this club, so I will definitely tell them what I see.”

So how do we summarize how the game of baseball is played within the Appalachian League? Of course, this is a challenge because most baseball fans are accustomed to how the game works in the Major Leagues. Still, there are noticeable differences, such as the stress of development over winning, the breaking of typical offensive roles, the lack of bullpen assignment, and the refusal to overwork any pitchers, just to name a few. Ultimately, the Appalachian League has been around for exactly 100 years to help organizations discover what type of talent they have at some of their lowest levels. Here’s Johnson City Cardinals manager Mike Shildt.
“I think it’s vital at this level because here you just figure out what you have. What do we have here? What are these guys’ capabilities, and the thing we do need to be careful of at this level is not giving them things that is (sic) too much or they can’t do. It’s a fine line because you want to develop. You want to give them opportunities. You want to hit and run. You want to bunt. You want to bunt for a hit. You want to pinch hit. You want to do all these different things. You want to have guys throw the breaking ball in a 2-2 count to see if they can, but if they can’t, then we’ve got to simplify things and get them to understand, ‘This is what I can do. Let’s get good at it,’ and address where some of the weaknesses are and then continue to work those in based on the situation. That’s probably my biggest challenge is making sure that I put them in a position where they can have success, working on things and then picking a spot where, OK, now is the time, because this guy has had trouble in the fourth inning. Now we got him through the fourth inning. Now let’s get him through the fifth inning, and now, OK, let’s let him go out there for this inning and tell him after his previous start, ‘Hey, look man, you know, you need to battle through that fourth, and now here it is man. You got it, and it’s a 2-2 game, and it’s the 3-4-5 hitters.’ And it’s a tough thing to do because you know your ‘pen is fresher. There’s a better matchup in your bullpen with what’s coming up, but you know what, for that guy to make that next step, it is important that he gets that opportunity, and that’s why we’re here. We’re a breeding ground for opportunity.”

These are opportunities that managers, coaches, organizations, and players will not be able to stage. The game of baseball may be different at this level, but it is still
very random. It is not basketball, a sport where a squad can give the ball to its best offensive player at the end of the game. With the game on the line, the scorching hot cleanup hitter could be up, or the .200-hitting nine-hole man may need to come up with a hit. It is not football, where all 11 offensive and defensive players on the field are somehow involved in almost every play. With two outs in the ninth, the ball could be smashed to third base or popped up to shallow center field. This is not hockey, where the performance of the goalie could sway a team positively or negatively no matter how well the rest of the team is playing. Each batter comes up once every nine times, and a starting pitcher toes the rubber only every fifth day.

Each organization sets up the lineup and rotation for development purposes. From there, it’s up to the game itself to dictate which intricacies of our national pastime will test the young prospects who one day hope to advance to the point where the score means everything. As a result, not everything can be learned. Not every situation will be mapped out, which makes the decisions regarding these players’ futures even that more difficult.

These imperfections and challenges make the Appalachian League, and minor league baseball, a special piece of the sporting world. However, these on-field quirks are not the only things that separate the Appy League from any other. Off the field, players face situations they have never seen before. The same can be said about those who work to distribute information within the Appalachian League. Do you want to find out about these largely hidden aspects during a two-and-a-half month grind of baseball each and every summer? We will tell you about it Friday night at 6:06 here
on 970 WATH for the third and final episode of *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*. Until then, I’m Brian Boesch. Thanks so much for listening.

**Episode Three: Challenges for Players and Coaches off the Field in the Appalachian League**

(Broadcast open: approximately one minute)

Welcome to the third and final episode of *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*. I’m Brian Boesch. Did you miss the second part of our series? Here’s a quick refresher on our breakdown of the intricacies of the game within the Appalachian League.

“All Not every player is going to make it to the major leagues, so you’ve got your select guys that you have to develop.”

“I’m not concerned with the batting average. I’m more concerned with the approach they take.”

“I’ll let the lefties face the lefties, because if we don’t find out if they can hit lefties now, when are they gonna learn?”

“At this level, it is important that they learn to pitch off their fastball—to have those reps to get command and to build some arm strength.”

“It’s not as clear cut at this level in terms of your closer and your set up guy and your long guy.”

“For that guy to make that next step, it is important that he gets that opportunity, and that’s why we’re here. We’re a breeding ground for opportunity.”

If you have caught our first two episodes, you know the background of the
Appalachian League, a ten-team, 68-game entity that is oftentimes a professional player’s first go-around in true minor league baseball. It is a league in which development takes place. The idea of development overrides everything else—winning included. As a result, the game is a little different than the baseball that most fans know from Major League Baseball. It is, as you just heard, a breeding ground for opportunity. It is a place for players to impress their organizations enough to move them up the minor league ladder.

Not only that, but it is one of the first chances to advance in the minor leagues. The Appy League is filled with newcomers—newly drafted high school or college prospects or even foreign players who are new to the United States. Whatever the journey, these rookies of stateside, affiliated baseball have to get used to the culture. Playing in minor league baseball is not as simple as what happens between the white lines. It truly is a lifestyle. After all, the Appalachian League schedule consists of 68 games in 71 days. In other words, a team gets an off day every three weeks or so. Combine that with the facts that there are never off days on weekends and most games begin at 7 o’clock, and people should quickly realize that baseball is the players’ lives during the 68-game grind. Former big league outfielder Damon Hollins, who is now a minor league hitting coach, discusses the lifestyle change.

“I think it’s one of the toughest things, especially coming out of high school or college, where these guys, on campus, they’ve got other things to do as far as schoolwork. When you get to this level, this is pretty much life. Mentally, I played in this league myself, and you’ve gotta be able to take care of yourself on and off the
field, and these guys gotta understand that it’s really no offseason if you want to get to
the next level, but it’s been tough on these guys. A lot of the guys are younger, and
they wear their emotions on their sleeves a lot.”

There is no doubt that the first year of minor league baseball is a challenge for
every player, whether it is a 23-year-old who just played four years of college ball or
an 18-year-old who is fresh out of high school. Adjustments must be made, according
to former Houston Astros bench coach and 2010 Greeneville skipper Ed Romero.

“Now, it’s an every day thing. It’s seven days a week. You might get a day off
every 22 days, 23 days, so they have to adjust their arms more than anything else and
their body and their mind to get ready to play every single day.”

The job description for “professional baseball player” does not include only
the game. While fans only see the players from the time the gates open until the final
pitch of each night’s game, there is much more to the job. During my time in the
Appalachian League throughout Burlington’s 2010 season, I saw players arrive in the
early afternoon for a 7 o’clock game. The vast majority of the time on the road, the
club arrived together at the park around four hours before the games. Prior to each
game, activities such as workouts, running, and batting practice clutter players’
schedules. I mentioned road trips, too. Half, so 34, of an Appalachian League team’s
games are on the road. Therefore, bus rides are very frequent throughout the summer.
Fortunately for Appy Leaguers, the landscape of the league is fairly condensed. No
trip takes more than five hours, while leagues like the Texas League and Southern
League have some 10-plus hour ventures in the bus. For the players, adjusting to
playing consistently better players is tough, but also tweaking their life enough to succeed is an action necessary for success in the Appy League. Here’s current Princeton manager Michael Johns.

“The guys that get drafted, they hear about pro ball. They hear about what it’s about, but until you go through it, they don’t understand the grind, the daily workload. Usually, they do more before 7 o’clock than they’ve ever done in terms of practice and working out, but they’re getting adjusted to it, and I think it just takes time and them gelling with the guys that were in extended [spring training], I think they’ve really come together after the last few weeks. I think they figured they play at 7 o’clock every day and that’s not a big deal so they get there about 5 or 6 and play the game. I think they’re learning quickly that’s not the way it’s done, but they’re getting used to it. Like I said, it is a big transition, and it is their life. There’s not much time for family or wives or girlfriends.”

Family, wives, and girlfriends do have to take a back seat, as does almost everything else that an 18-to-23 year old man usually does. In addition to a lifestyle change, players in the Appalachian League must adjust to being away from what is comfortable. High school prospects have rarely been away from home prior to embarking on the affiliated baseball journey. College draftees spent at least three years on a college campus, which is nothing like life in the minors. Here’s former Danville manager Paul Runge.

“First time a lot of times for them to be away from home, to finding an apartment, to riding buses, living in and out of hotels, having to fend for themselves,
but the night games, playing in front of a crowd, everything counting. You being paid to entertain, I think those are the biggest differences from being an amateur to a professional.”

It is tough being away from comfortable surroundings. For many players in the Appalachian League, those comfortable surroundings are in another country. Many countries outside the United States have contributed players to the game of baseball, and the minor leagues are filled with foreign prospects. During the 2010 season, 417 players competed in the Appalachian League, 133 of whom were born outside the United States. Do the math, and foreign players made up almost 32 percent, or just shy of one-third, of the league. The plurality of the foreign players, 62 to be exact, was from the Dominican Republic. In all, 19 countries were represented in the Appy League during the 2010 campaign, and most of those countries do not use English as the primary language. With the Burlington Royals, I worked around more than a dozen players who spoke very little English, if any at all. Only one player was bilingual in English and his native language. Organizations try to integrate these foreign prospects to the United States as best they can. Most minor league affiliates have at least one coach who can speak Spanish, which is by far the second-most common language in baseball. Many organizations also have English classes to speed up the acclimation process for overseas players. Still, foreign talent has to go through the most profound adjustments in order to play in the minor leagues, and for some of those young men, the Appy League is their first stop in the United States. Does this make succeeding more difficult, Burlington manager Nelson Liriano?
“Yes, really more difficult because when you go in high school or junior college or college, you’re more mature and you can understand easier what coaches talk about the fundamentals of baseball, so it’s easier for them and then they can get better quicker.”

Liriano had to go through this process en route to a long big league career. So did former Gold Glove winner Manny Trillo, who believes that the language barrier is one of the toughest tests for foreign prospects in the minor leagues.

“It’s hard. It’s hard, but it’s always been a big challenge in baseball and outside. In my time, I wanted to learn all these words that I had to say when I’m playing ball. Now, you have to learn that plus how to communicate with teammates or how to communicate with the manager or the front office, and it gets to be hard. I mean, that’s the time that they have to call somebody and say, ‘Hey, help me here.’ At the beginning, like you said, a kid comes to spring training and he doesn’t know any word in English at all, and that’s the time he gotta be looking at what the pitching coach or the infield coach or the outfield is doing—gotta imagine what the guy’s saying.”

So why is the number of players from countries like the Dominican Republic and Venezuela continuing to grow in the game of baseball? Former big leaguer and Princeton pitching coach Marty DeMerritt credits the culture.

“That’s all they do is play baseball. I live in Venezuela during the offseason, and they don’t like football. They don’t like soccer. Baseball is their life, and it is their passion, and they play it all year long, and now with the American kids now, there’s so
many other diversions now—football, basketball, hockey—and then all these other things, which is fine. I’m not disagreeing with that at all, but you can see the difference in the cultures.”

There are differences, no doubt. A minor league clubhouse reflects these differences. One can easily notice a divide—not necessarily in a good or a bad way—within the clubhouse. American-born players gravitate toward each other, as do prospects from overseas, when discussing things outside of the game of baseball, which is common with all the travel time and down time throughout the summer. However, when it comes to the game, it creates a fun atmosphere of winning and learning, according to DeMerritt and former Burlington manager T.J. Tijerina.

“When you go into a clubhouse, and you have all these different cultures and everything, there is no culture. It’s a bunch of individuals that are working hard every day for that big ‘W,’ and it really is neat. That’s why I enjoy this game of baseball so much because of the different cultures involved and different people, and baseball has just really created I really think a tremendous environment for all this to happen.”

“Bobby St. Pierre, the pitching coach, has a Latin pitcher that knows no English. He finds a way to communicate because baseball is a universal language. You can always get the point across. You can grab [Edul] Escobar, the Latin catcher, and get him to communicate things, and things like that—it balances itself out.”

Whether one is talking about an experienced college player, a raw high school talent, or a displaced foreign prospect, one must realize that there will always be some hurdles for players in the Appalachian League, and any minor league level for that
matter. Some prospects will thrive in the Appy League and move on to full-season baseball quickly. Others will fail at the game of baseball for the first time in their lives. Unfortunately, many players see their professional baseball careers end during or after the two-and-a-half month grind. No matter what the result, though, there are always changes that players must undergo. Sure, workouts are a little stricter, and the wear and tear on the body may be more challenging because of the 68-game, 71-day schedule. However, for the most part, the Appalachian League, like most minor league levels, is filled with players who are adequate or better from a physical standpoint. Phrases such as “raw talent,” “pure ability,” and “toolsy approach” permeate the minor leagues. So why do players not make it in minor league baseball? A lot of times, it is because of the mental approach—the mental grind that professional baseball demands.

There has been a myriad of examples to illustrate this point throughout baseball history. After all, 1,530 players were selected in the 2011 Major League Baseball Draft. One of the most profound examples was first baseman Geoff Baldwin. Baldwin was a likeable, outgoing prospect who the Royals nabbed with their tenth round pick in the 2009 Draft. At the age of 19, Baldwin hit a respectable .251 in 48 games with Kansas City’s lowest affiliate, the Surprise Royals of the Arizona League, which is a common starting point for teenage prospects—both American-born and foreign-born.

Kansas City wanted to see Baldwin head to the Appalachian League in 2010 as the team’s primary first baseman. It was a struggle throughout the year for Baldwin, who hit just .100 in 30 June at bats. In July, things did not get much better. In 21
games, Baldwin hit .177 and drove in just six runs. He struck out 36 times in 79 at-bats. He was failing for the first time in baseball, and when I chatted with him in the midst of this July swoon, he chalked it up to the mental side of the game.

“The biggest thing this year is, honestly, just been mental. I mean, I’ve always had that as a backing, and this last almost since early in spring training—it’s been tough. That, honest to God, has been the biggest difference. I mean, obviously, the game is faster than high school, but you come back in here and if you’re struggling mentally, you’re screwed right out the gate, and I think that’s what happened to me a lot early on.”

It was such a funk for Baldwin that he contemplated his baseball future barely more than a year removed from being a tenth-round selection.

“It really put things in perspective, as I said. It wasn’t just—it was a bad struggle. I mean, it’s not like I was hitting .200 struggling. It’s like, I wasn’t hitting at all, so when it came down to it, I really had to take a step back and say, ‘Is this even what I want to be doing right now?’”

Baldwin battled his way through the rest of the 2010 Appalachian League season, hitting .231 in August and helping the B-Royals qualify for the postseason for the first time since 1993. Still, Baldwin decided to retire from the game of baseball soon after Burlington’s campaign.

All the stories are different, but the reality is constant—the Appalachian League brings with it challenges for the players who compete in it. As a result, organizations are careful not to overrate the efforts of time in any rookie-level league.
Here’s Kansas City’s assistant general manager, J.J. Picollo.

“Yea, this first year, you can go back and look over the history of some great players in the Major Leagues right now, and their first summer—not very good. It’s just the way it’s been, and at the same time, guys that really have great summers, you gotta be careful that you don’t overvalue where they are or where they should be the following year, so this first year, you just kind of take it with a grain of salt. Just coming to the field every day, going through pre-game, B.P. [batting practice], throwing programs, it takes its toll, and it’s an adjustment period, and I think that’s why you see some of the highs and lows.”

There are plenty of highs and lows for baseball players in the Appalachian League. This is what makes the league so much fun to be a part of, according to its commissioner Lee Landers. The Appy League humbles. It teaches. It aids those who play in it.

“I think the league is good at teaching these guys how to handle adversity because you have to remember everybody here was a star in their own little league team or American Legion team or high school team. They were the star. They never had adversity before, and they don’t know how to handle it, so that’s one of the things we have to teach them.”

Overcoming baseball adversity is not the only thing that the Appalachian League teaches. During my time with the Burlington Royals as a broadcaster and a media director, I learned about a very empty side of the Appy League—it’s coverage. There are many ethical obstacles to overcome in positions like mine during the
Appalachian League summer. We will break that down plus we will chat with a pair of men involved with media who are well-known in the Athens area when we return for the final segment of our three-part series: *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*. It’s next here on the Sports Fan Presented by J&K Contracting on 970 WATH.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

For the final time in this three-part special, welcome back. I’m Brian Boesch, and this is *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League*. This week, we have introduced you to the Appalachian League, delved into this league’s style of baseball, and broken down some of the off-the-field challenges that stem from playing here. This final segment in our three-part series features a different topic—the coverage that the Appalachian League receives.

Minor league baseball as a whole receives its fair share of coverage, but the trend is simple—the higher the level, the deeper the coverage. With that as a rule of thumb, it is easy to figure out that the Appalachian League does not get that much coverage. I began this project while acting as the broadcaster and the media manager for the Burlington Royals, Kansas City’s Appy League affiliate. Throughout the 68-game season, I had to decide on the proper method of coverage on a regular basis because a significant portion of the available information on the league and its teams came from the league and teams themselves.

In Burlington, for example, the only outside coverage that the Royals received came from a beat writer for the *Burlington Times News*. His name was Bob Sutton,
and he would cover most of the home games and a few road games. In my trips around the league, he was one of few who would provide coverage on a fairly regular basis.

These realities force people like me, who was responsible for informational distribution in many different forms—online broadcasts, online websites, social media, and blogs, to name the ones primarily used—to wear the figurative “hat” for public relations and for journalism at different times during the season. With the advent of online coverage and presence, this is something that many organizations, leagues, and individuals have to balance on a day-to-day basis.

Journalism and media relations, however, are very different fields. Take it from a pair of men who should be familiar to you if you follow sports here in the Athens area. Jason Arkley works for the Athens Messenger as the beat writer for Ohio University sports. He has no connection to the Bobcats’ athletic department. Here’s Arkley on his job.

“My angle is to try to present the facts in a straightforward manner—let the reader decide—and try to do it in a concise, informative, entertaining fashion. The heart of the matter of any story I write is conveying a message or a story or a thought, and this is something that I think my readers should know and here’s, most of the time, here’s a clear look at it.”

As for the media relations side of things, let’s take Jason Corriher. Corriher spent four years as Ohio University’s assistant athletic director for media relations. He is now in a similar position with Marshall University’s athletic program. Corriher covered events that Arkley did during his time in Athens; however, he employed a
different strategy that differentiates himself from journalists like Arkley.

“There’s four sides to the story, if you will. There’s Ohio positive. There’s opponent positive. Ohio negative. Opponent negative. I think it’s not accurate to say we never touch base on our negative, but one thing I do encourage my guys to do is always—and this is just media training with our student-athletes too—is to, especially if we have a big second-half run, is to say, ‘We started out two for eleven from three but hit five of our last six from three-point range’.” And we can always—you have to be fair to put the facts of the game in there, but you can always turn it around and make it a positive out of that.”

I studied the 13 game recaps that Arkley and Corriher produced during the 2010 Ohio University football season, and their final products reflected these previous comments. From this analysis, I noted two main differences between their work. The primary one is that a journalistic piece will include the main flow of the game from an unbiased fan’s perspective, with both teams’ ups and downs included, just to a varying degree based on who wins or loses. However, a release by a media relations department will steer away from the negatives for the school for which they work as long as it does not leave a huge hole in the story. Secondly, Arkley, like most journalists would, included any relevant background outside of the action, such as injuries, suspensions, or medical clearances. However, Corriher, like most media relations directors would, kept the game in its own vacuum and dissected only what happened on the field.

Based on all of this, it would seem to be difficult to satisfy both of these roles
when covering anything. However, the trend in sports broadcasting, especially in baseball, seems to be to condense a couple of different roles into one position, similar to what my job entailed with the Burlington Royals. One of the most popular job forums in the sports broadcasting world is located on the official website of the Sportscasters Talent Agency of America, and it proves the fact that a team’s main provider of media content is also a broadcaster. The typical hiring period for baseball play-by-play positions runs from October to January, and STAA’s forum sniffs out and posts details to many of these opportunities. During the hiring period in advance of the 2011 baseball season, STAA had individual posts that detailed the job or internship requirements for 54 teams in minor league baseball or in summer collegiate baseball. Of those 54 teams, 41 explicitly mentioned some form of media relations or writing as a part of the broadcasting position. Thus, 76 percent of those postings involve a dual role within a baseball team’s media relations department.

Whether or not this can be viewed as ethical has not stopped organizations from expecting that from their employees. However, this is a trend that is becoming a reality in the world of sports coverage. Gary Mihoces has plenty of perspective in this sphere. He has been covering professional sports since 1969 and has been a member of USA Today’s sports department since its inception in September of 1982. Mihoces recognizes the challenge but embraces the reality of this controversial balance between journalism and media relations.

“That would be pretty tricky, but I’m not saying it can’t be done, and if you’re getting a lot of people reading it, that probably means they view you as a solid source
of information. We’re all in the competition of getting people to pay attention to us.”

There is no doubt that this is happening—sports organizations are breaking news on their sites with writers they have hired. Major League Baseball teams have beat writers who try to get the scoop similarly to newspaper scribes or local television anchors. Most of the National Football League’s teams have hired writers, too. These examples prove that this field is changing, that according to Tim Franklin, who was the director of Indiana University’s National Sports Journalism Center until leaving for the editor-at-large job at Bloomberg.

“It’s transforming rapidly, and it’s transforming not just in kind of the move to different platforms—media platforms—but also in who is doing sports journalism. This is a still relatively new but huge wave that I think is having a profound effect on how consumers acquire news—sports news—and also in the craft and how it’s practiced.”

One of the most profound examples of a league-owned media entity reporting a story was January 11, 2010, when Mark McGwire, one of eight players in baseball history to hit 600 or more home runs, admitted to using steroids during his career. McGwire initially revealed his admission in a statement sent to various news outlets during the afternoon of January 11, 2010, but he spoke publicly in an interview with MLB Network’s Bob Costas later that day.

MLB.com’s coverage of the admission was very extensive. On the left bar of the story detailing McGwire’s admission, the site had linked 19 related stories, six videos pertaining to the McGwire-Costas interview, and ten videos containing other
people’s reactions. In the middle of the story, MLB.com linked another nine related items to what was a huge story in baseball. Throwing aside the debate of legitimacy in MLB.com’s coverage of its own players, it is fair to say that the website, at the very least, offered a great deal of material to fans of its sport. Like any good story, there are two sides to this embodiment of a new way of sports reporting. First, why there is still an ethical divide in these situations. Franklin speaks to that.

“If you’re Mark McGwire, you probably thought you were gonna get a more receptive question or warmer questions if you do that interview with MLB TV as opposed to ESPN or HBO or one of the four major networks.”

On the flip side, Franklin does not expect this trend to change anytime soon.

“I think it was unthinkable I think even two, three years ago that a huge national sports story like that would be broken on a league-owned network or a league-owned website, and I suspect that the Mark McGwire story is an example of one that we’re gonna see repeated over and over in coming years, which is breaking big news on league-owned websites and TV stations.”

The main lesson that this study and my position with the Burlington Royals and my research for this project taught me is that there are no right answers when put into a situation that calls for both journalistic and media relations work. As proven by the study on the coverage given to Ohio football, it is impossible to marry the two crafts. However, as men like Franklin and Mihoces discussed, the two fields have gotten closer and closer as time has progressed, and at times can mingle. So, what should one do if put into a similar situation where both journalistic and media relations
work may be required? Again, it is unknown, but here are a few guidelines that I derived after studying and experiencing both fields.

First off, it is essential to establish one’s position with the people with whom one will work and for whom one will work. In my situation, I periodically mentioned my position with the Royals on the broadcasts last season, but I never explicitly outlined my role with the team and my rationale for the coverage within the team’s blog, website or Twitter. Also, it was important for me to discuss these unique circumstances to both the Royals’ front office and the team’s players and coaches. I did chat with them about this, mostly in a casual way, but someone in my position should always make sure that the background information is readily available and completely understood.

Secondly, one must be willing to act against self-imposed rules if one believes that it is necessary. The cliché, “Rules are made to be broken,” applies in this unique situation, and that is how I came up with the procedure of handling roster moves and awards. The only reason I received the information regarding these two things was because I was in the Burlington Royals’ clubhouse on a daily basis, so it would be unfair to apply my rule of media relations on the main website and journalism within the other media venues. The worlds of journalism and media relations are very dynamic, and those who work in one field or the other, or both, must be willing and able to adapt when a new challenge presents itself.

The third lesson I picked up during my summer is that criticism will be directed at you for one reason or another. The line between journalism and media
relations is pretty clear, and it is a challenge to marry the two practices without upsetting some. A few times during the season, Burlington manager Nelson Liriano questioned content in my blog. I received multiple e-mails from fans, some who had a connection to a certain player and some who simply were Burlington Royals fans, questioning my approach to the broadcasts. Whether or not they truly understood what kind of role—or kinds of roles—I had with the team is not important; however, people in these rare positions must absorb any type of feedback and use it to better adjust their ethical approach in their day-to-day work.

Finally, the most important lesson I learned during my time with the Burlington Royals is that it is a mistake to let the intricacies of the position take away from its main goals—providing information about a rarely-covered topic. There is quite a dilemma in terms of the type of coverage based on to whom I report the information. Still, as long as I have successfully outlined my role with the team to those who I work with (the members of the team and the front office) and who I work for (the front office and the public), then I can get information out about the Burlington Royals. Is it a perfect backdrop for journalism and media relations? Of course not, but it was the situation I had in front of me, and I still turned over accurate news to the fans and for the organization on a timely basis and as fairly as I could. As Franklin explains, this should always be the end result, no matter what obstacles must be avoided to get there.

“If I’m a fan, I win in this new media world because I now have access to much more information than I’ve ever had before about my teams, my players, my
conference, my league, etc. The fan is gonna have to decide for his or herself whether the quality of that coverage is better or not.”

After all, this radio series came about because of my role as a media director and the broadcaster for the Burlington Royals. If one really wanted to delve into this production in terms of its ethics, one could do that. I covered Burlington more than any other team in the Appalachian League. At times during the summer of 2010, I acted as if I were a journalist. I also acted in the same way a media relations director would at other moments. It is a balancing act in these newly formed positions in minor league baseball and throughout sports. The important end result is simple—an individual must be willing and able to stand behind his or her work when trying to marry journalism and media relations, two vastly different practices. I can do that after my coverage of the Appalachian League.

That will do it for our three-part series A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League here on 970 WATH. Thanks to all of the managers, coaches, players, scouts, roving instructors, coordinators, and assistants who spoke with me during and after my 2010 summer in the Appy League. Thanks to Jason Arkley, Jason Corriher, Gary Mihoces, and Tim Franklin for chatting with me about sports coverage during a new era of information. Also, thanks to Major League Baseball’s private portal and baseball-reference.com for much of the statistical and biographical information used during this series.

If you missed any of this series, you can listen to the three episodes online at thesportsfan.mypodcast.com. For the final time, I’m Brian Boesch. Thanks so much
for tuning into *A Hidden Gem—Inside Baseball’s Appalachian League* here on the
Sports Fan Presented by J&K Contracting right here on 970 WATH.
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