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Hardaway, the Magic, and the Orlando Media

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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It was about 4:30 on Saturday Afternoon. ABC television and the local affiliate Channel Nine was showing the Michigan-Penn State game as a footnote to the Gator loss. Then suddenly there was a Channel Nine Special Report. Had Aristide been assassinated as he arrived in Haiti or had Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait? Neither. This was a much more serious matter.

On to my TV screen came Greg Warpath with startling news. Channel Nine had just gotten word that Anfernee Hardaway was near to signing a contract with the Orlando Magic. What! Did he say that the Orlando Magic were near to signing Hardaway? Didn't I hear that last night on the eleven o'clock non-news? I'm sure I did. So why the Bulletin?

It would appear that there is only one answer. We are in Orlando, Florida, where sports reporters, still don't know how to deal with major league sport.

As a result they're not able to distinguish between news and non-news, nor have they learned how to cope with ownership, PR people, and other news manipulators who populate the sports scene. So they're ready to report everybody's leak, everybody's small bit of news designed to make themselves or their client look good or someone else look bad.

A small suggestion. It would be news if Hardaway actually signed. It would be news if the season started and Hardaway had not signed. It would be news if Hardaway was traded, signed with a European team, or cold-konked someone in Magic management during negotiations. It is not news that someone said that Hardaway was about to sign maybe, although Penny has not yet confirmed this for us, although there were reports that he had telephoned another player and said he would be at the next practice, but Magic ownership said a deal was not yet done, but progress had been made, the gap was closing, and a signing was expected soon, and there was no comment from his agents.

The other interesting aspect of the Hardaway story has been the way in which the local media has been hammering him for what was alleged to be his asking price, nearly twice what he signed for. The agents denied that such a price was asked. But the good old locals heard this stuff, no doubt from someone in the Magic office, who certainly had no interest in making Hardaway look bad, and was in no way trying to increase public pressure on him.

And so Hardaway is hammered on TV, radio, talk radio, and in the newspaper. Polls are run to ask if Hardaway is worth what someone is saying he is asking as salary. This of course enhances the notion that he is asking this price. The polls, surprise, surprise, show that fans think he's not worth the inflated number that he is allegedly according to some unnamed source asking.

The local media is so caught up on the Magic bandwagon and so serves the interest of Rich, and getting Richer, DeVoss, that it automatically assumes the worst about Hardaway and gives out the Magic party line. Local media want to be on the bandwagon for the Magic championship ride. No one in local media is reporting, they are PR agents for the Magic. And so Hardaway is the new villain. He gets booed at the O-rena.

This is the same Anfernee Hardaway who was such a good citizen last year. The same one who took a lower salary and a one-year deal to get under the salary cap. It is the same one who worked so hard in the community with young people, who was praised as the ultimate positive role model, the modest and self-effacing young gentleman from Memphis.

What was really happening over the last several weeks was that Hardaway and his agents were trying to maximize his salary in the semi-free market. He wasn't holding any hostages, he didn't molest anyone, he didn't stomp on Shaq's big toe. He was just negotiating salary. Unfortunately professional sports salaries are negotiated in public. Each side tries to pressure the other. The player's pressure is applied to the team by a holdout, which is really his only leverage. Management on the other hand tries to discredit such tactics and apply counter-pressure on the player by making him look unreasonable.

This is extremely easy to do in a town where sports reporters don't understand the negotiating process, and where they do their best to serve ownership. Nor is this simple reporter bias, it is in fact a deliberate and calculated corporate editorial policy as well. Owners stick together.

On the other hand there was a fan with a sign at the O-rena Wednesday night which read "Worth Every Penny."

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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