Always A Cardinal: Ball State Men's Basketball

An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

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Abstract

Society embraces sports more than any other phenomenon in media. Yearly, the most watched television programs in the United States are major sporting events. In Indiana, one sport transcends television and history-- basketball. Native Hoosiers worship basketball in cathedrals built with wooden planks and iron rods. At Ball State University, the men's basketball program continues to rebuild itself toward its once proud tradition. Documenting the 2010-11 season drives past the passion and fanaticism of spectators to reveal how the team congealed and dealt with adversity.

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College basketball in America is one of the top sporting events followed yearly with the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Tournament every March. This event features teams of varying backgrounds, from nearly perfect seasons to struggling Cinderella-like teams who find themselves poised to stun the nation. The men's basketball team at Ball State started the season with hopes it would be a part of this year's tournament. As a member of Ball State Sports Link, I had the opportunity and accessibility to interview members of the team and the coach, film press conferences, practices, and to film highlights of all home games. My undertaking resulted in a short point of view documentary about the life of the team.

I. Rationale

During my studies at Ball State University, I ventured into filmmaking and television production. I worked on a pair of feature films within the lighting and audio departments. As a student, I took on leadership roles on several student television productions as an executive producer and coordinator for a sports shows and newscasts.

However, I spent the majority of my college career in sports production. For the past two years, I have been a member of the immersive learning program Ball State Sports Link. The program has given me the opportunity to tell athletes' stories and also work on live broadcasts more than any other program at Ball State. In Sports Link, I have produced numerous feature stories on athletes, produced seven live broadcasts, and contributed countless hours to working on various projects. The program has given me opportunities I never would have had, including a summer job as a television director and a trip to witness a National Football League broadcast in San Francisco. The best way to
encapsulate my experiences within telecommunications would be to do an in depth story about Ball State Athletics.

II. Process

My endeavor began as any other academic research with a proposal to the Sports Information Director for the team, Matt McCollester, who is charged with media relations for the program. I also forwarded this proposal to Billy Taylor, the head coach. The proposal to these key individuals included requests for locker room access, ability to film multiple practices, interview requests throughout the season, and ability to film the lives of players outside of practice. I imagined an in-depth story, which would document every moment of a team’s life, from locker room to study tables. Many of the in-depth requests were denied, but with the presence Sports Link has at press conferences and on court for highlights, I adapted to the situation.

Before the season began, I worked with other members of Sports Link to gather player interviews and practice footage for the beginning of the story. The other source of preseason footage came from Fan Jam. The event introduced both the men’s and women’s teams to the general public.

When the season began, either I or other members of Sports Link would attend each home basketball game and film highlights for our archives and use in feature stories. After the games, I would attend and tape the press conferences where Coach Taylor and key players would share their reactions to the game.

Throughout the season, I attended weekly press conferences in which Coach Taylor and requested players would update the media on the progression of the season.
These occurred every Monday throughout the season. In total, I had over 10 press conferences to capture Coach Taylor’s reaction to the season.

On a few occasions, either I or another member of Sports Link, traveled to road games, including Butler and Western Michigan, to film highlights of important games. Other footage included in the documentary comes from games that Sports Link produced. I produced every basketball broadcast the program aired, indicating I planned the content and execution of the television broadcast. Late in the season, I conducted one last personal interview with Malik Perry to film his emotion and anticipation to senior day, his last day playing at Ball State’s Worthen Arena.

The style of my filming contains lessons I have learned in Sports Link. In my two years in the program, I have honed my ability to follow the ball and to focus on the excitement of individual plays. For this semester, everything was shot on full high definition (HD) cameras. The cameras used for interviews and game highlights were Sony EX-3 cameras with full 1080 progressive HD as the resolution setting. This technology made extremely crisp and detailed footage in the final product. The style of shooting for sports is hand-held camera, meaning no use of a tripod or steadying device. The cameras have a shoulder mount, which allows users to rest the camera on their shoulder to make the shots steadier. Because basketball and all sports feature kinetic and constant motion, the theory of handheld style of filming fits the action on court. Natural motion from the camera operator’s body adds subtle motion to the image, and makes the highlights feel more realistic when viewed. Interviews and press conferences are treated differently. Tripods are used for both situations so the viewer is not distracted away from the subject by unsteady motion.
To end the season, the men’s basketball team played in Cleveland, Ohio at the Mid American Conference Tournament and reached the semifinals before losing. I made sure the tournament was filmed for highlights and postgame press conferences. Coach Taylor’s final press conference after elimination provided great closing remarks about the entire season.

After gathering all of this footage from the season, I organized it into folders to easily sift through game highlights and interviews. I began the editing process by watching all interviews from the season and cutting good answers into a timeline. The timeline is the visible workspace where cut footage is layered and sequenced together to create a final product. I narrowed down all good answers and morphed these pieces into a story. I found that the natural flow of the story would be from preseason expectations through the end of the season, but my focus was not on recapping games. Instead, I concentrated on the emotional responses to winning and losing streaks to capture the heart of the team rather than every outcome.

After cutting the interview footage and creating a story outline, I wrote a script for my own voiceover to stitch the story together between interview clips. I recorded my voice and placed it between sections of interviews to create a complete story. The visual was not complete without highlight layered on the interviews and voice over. I sorted through all the highlights filmed throughout the season and cut clips down. After placing highlights from this season onto the timeline, my final touch was to find archived footage to connect this season to previous seasons. Most of the archived footage was standard definition (SD), so I created a blurred edge look to fill the rest of the frame, due to the HD frame being wider than standard. This look is the standard within sports to
manipulate standard definition highlights into HD broadcasts. The other way to achieve the HD look from SD footage is to fill the empty edges with wings. Wings are images that have text saying that it is HD. I used this style on one occasion in the documentary, which I used footage and audio from the Sports Link broadcast of Ball State vs. Indiana State.

After completing the visual and spoken audio part of the storytelling, two editing steps remained. The first step was to put graphics onto the video to identify interviewees. The lower corner name graphics are the same design every Sports Link project uses to maintain a standard look to our products. After finishing each graphic, I began searching for music to embed underneath the video. I used the royalty-free music website, Freeplaymusic.com to find music which builds mood and makes the story more interesting. Once I found songs, I cut them to fit each section of the story and then lowered the volume levels to make sure the music did not overpower the rest of the piece. After completing the final audio manipulations, I watched the entire video several times through to make sure the editing, voice over, interviews, and music all flowed well together.

III. Problems

Throughout the entire project I ran into several problems I did not anticipate. I already mentioned my first roadblock: restricted access, which resulted in fewer interviews and less behind-the-scenes footage than I wanted. I worked around the restrictions by using press conferences and scheduling interviews as much as I could. Late in the season, the team lost several important games, which limited access even
more as the team tried to focus on practice rather than media attention. As the season began, I thought the team could achieve a championship, either regular season or post season. The coaches in the conference picked the Cardinals to win the West Division of the Mid American Conference. In the end, the team fell short of its goal of a championship. This defeat changed the focus of my story to be about the turnaround of the program from the past. I also focused on the emotion of being a member of the team.

Fortunately I ran into very few technical problems. In my college career, I have experienced several ruined projects because of corrupt tapes. The cameras I used for this project feature memory cards, which record footage digitally instead of using tapes, which could have issues from machines tearing or distorting the magnetic strips. The only technical problems I faced were audio problems. Some interviews had poor audio caused by microphone interference. Some players did not have a great presence on camera, and gave short unusable answers. These drawbacks limited my choices for interviews.

Through all the minor problems I adapted the project into something I am proud to have produced. I created a story which doesn't focus on the superficial success of a team but instead the emotion and atmosphere of the men's basketball program.

IV. Analysis

The finished film clocks in at 10 minutes with credits. The documentary is the longest single piece produced in the Sports Link program. It also is the longest story I have put together in my time at Ball State. The final title, “Always a Cardinal: Ball State Men’s Basketball,” is from the final quote in the film, stated by Malik Perry as he
graduates from the program. I am proud of the finished film because the focus is on the story behind the season and not the team’s wins or losses.

The production quality, variety of shots, and audio flow makes this piece one of the best projects created by Sports Link. No other story in the program has surpassed five minutes in length, until this documentary. The documentary may not be as profound as it would be if the team won a championship. In the coming years, however, the film will stand as a chronicle of the turning point in the program’s success. Being able to record the most successful men’s basketball season for Ball State since 2002 was a joy and an honor. The story will appear on the athletics website during the summer, and Coach Taylor has offered to use it as a recruiting tool for prospects. The success of this story is due to the personality of Malik Perry and the eloquence of Coach Taylor. Without their willingness and friendliness, the story would have crumbled. The project perfectly captures my study of telecommunications over the last four years at Ball State. “Forever A Cardinal” illustrates college athletics as more than scores and statistics. Sports provide dreams, family, inspiration, and lifelong friendships.