Interviews With Former ESPN Ombudsmen/Public Editors Kelly McBride, Robert Lipsyte, and Jim Brady

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ESPN, the self-proclaimed (yet rarely disputed) “Worldwide Leader in Sports,” has long realized it was much more than an entertainment company. Acknowledging that with great power comes great responsibility, in 2005 ESPN assigned the title of first “Ombudsman” to George Solomon, who functioned much like a referee, ensuring that sport journalism exhibited the standard of being accountable to the ethical norms of the journalism profession. For 13 years, six ESPN ombudsmen served in this role. In May 2018, however, the company discontinued this position, arguing that it had outlived its usefulness against the real-time feedback provided by social media. With the role of ombudsman discontinued, the last three ESPN Ombudsmen/Public Editors were interviewed to ascertain their impressions of the impact of their role and the changing status of ESPN. Kelly McBride is a writer, teacher, and media-ethics expert at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies (St. Petersburg, FL); as part of the Poynter Review Project, she served as ESPN ombudsman from 2011 to 2012. Robert Lipsyte is a sport journalist who started his career in 1957 as an editorial assistant for The New York Times. Throughout his career, he has written for the New York Post and USA Today and has been a correspondent for CBS and NBC, serving as the ESPN ombudsman from 2013 to 2014. Jim Brady is a former sport and executive editor at WashingtonPost.com and editor-in-chief of Digital First Media. More recently, he served as the CEO of Spirited Media. He served as the ESPN Ombudsman from November 2015 to March 2018. These interviews, conducted between August and September 2018, provide insight into the presumed value of this role, the prominent issues each ombudsman tackled, their relationship with ESPN staff, and the challenges that the organization faces in the current media landscape. Altogether, these conversations...
capture a greater idea of the value that this unique position delivered, as well as reflect on what was lost after ESPN decided to eliminate it. Although the interviews were conducted separately, the three responses are combined here for better thematic flow and word economy.

**Authors:** How would you define your role as ombudsman when you served there at ESPN?

**McBride:** We were meant to be “the explainers.” ESPN is such a massive organization. So much of what they do is mysterious and not transparent. There were always so many questions about what ESPN’s true stance was for any variety of journalistic actions that they took. Our role was to sort through those questions, figure out which ones were really interesting and could lead to revelations about the organization, and then pursue the answers to those questions so we could do two things: hold ESPN accountable and educate the public about how ESPN operates.

**Lipsyte:** When ESPN called and asked if I’d like to be on a short list to be their fifth Ombudsman, my first question was “What’s an ombudsman?” They more or less said, “Anything you make of it,” so I said, “Sure.” I went up and met the 30-person editorial group and told them that I had no agenda, although keeping ESPN’s journalism honest would be my first priority, even though conflict of interest would always be the elephant in the room. According to Patrick Stiegman, my handler for the scheduled 18-month gig, I was “appropriately provocative,” which I guess meant I sounded like I might rock the boat but wouldn’t tip it over. I declared that there would be no boundaries for the ombudsman. Philosophy and ethics dogma would be secondary to transparency, I said. Explaining how something had actually happened, whether it was ESPN’s slow response to Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger’s alleged sexual transgressions or the company’s love affair with Tim Tebow, would be my priority. I said that I didn’t plan to be a presence on Twitter; the ombudsman should be reflective not reflexive. I would write once a month, more often if there were a breaking story. I mentioned a few recent incidents I thought had been handled poorly by management, especially the punishments of two employees who had used the phrase *a chink in his armor* when referring to the Chinese-American basketball player Jeremy Lin. Ongoing ESPN problems such as poor supervision and reliance on clichés seemed more to blame than racism. How about using such incidents as teachable moments?

**Brady:** We changed the role a little bit when I took it. We all agreed that we needed to change a little. We didn’t want to spend every week writing three columns about “ESPN suspended this personality because they said this and this is a good decision or a bad decision.” I wanted it to be much more about larger trends inside ESPN, with a focus on journalism matters rather than “police procedurals.”

**Lipsyte:** In a riff that I was told made a particularly strong impression on the board, I said that I envisioned the job as window washing. I would be the window washer, creating transparency. For ESPN, I think, desperate to achieve journalistic legitimacy, an ombudsman offered an honest attempt at integrity. It wasn’t all show, but there was no question there was trepidation. No one likes oversight. And