

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

Any time a writer/reporter breaks an exclusive story, it's a major rush of adrenaline. If that kind of thing is your stock-in-trade, and the story carries a high degree of importance, you feel as if there's nothing more worthwhile you can do.

So just What Is an "exclusive?" Well, let's start with what it is NOT. And perhaps some people need enlightenment in this area. When you are the first to get a press release and post it on your website, that is NOT an exclusive. It is NOT an exclusive when you get a piece of news and did something with it fifteen minutes before anyone else. And it's NOT an exclusive when you're telling essentially the same story that's been told before, only in different words. Interviewing a fighter who's already been interviewed a hundred times doesn't necessarily constitute an exclusive, even if that fighter is quoted differently than he has in the past.

Being the only person to interview James Butler in jail after his alleged murder of Max Kellerman's brother WOULD be an exclusive. See the difference?

I've given interviews to my share of writers, and consider myself certainly willing to do more of them, if the situation were to arise. Because of that, no interview with me would be exclusive. But if I shut myself off from the world and consented to talk to only one writer in particular, that would be a whole other story, assuming of course that there was any great demand for a few minutes of my time.

To my way of thinking, an exclusive has to meet at least a few criteria:

* IT MUST BE SIGNIFICANT AND/OR NEWSWORTHY. Reporting that a four-round fighter has broken his ankle and is out for a few months doesn't qualify as an exclusive, because few people really care.

* IT MUST BE ACCURATE. Exclusive stories can't be wrong. It's as simple as that. If it's not true, it's not even a story, much less an exclusive.

* IT MUST BE YOURS AND YOURS ALONE. You have to virtually "own" it and be on top of it, and whatever is written in the future along the same lines by others has to be somewhat derivative of what you have already uncovered.

For anyone who's lucky enough to get himself a real exclusive, there has got to be a few moments of anxiety before he's ready to turn it loose on the world, at least if he's feeling any sense of responsibility. If it involves scandal, he's wondering, "Where am I going to get the reprisals from?" or "Can I withstand even the most vehement denial?" If he's reporting something as breaking news, he may be asking himself, "Am I sure I got this whole thing right?" Because if one part of the story is not believable, it tends to contaminate the credibility of the rest of it.

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay

Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

Of course, if the story turns out to be true despite all resistance to its legitimacy, you've got quite a coup. And if you've got something all by yourself for a period of weeks, you've truly hit the mother lode.

I recall one such occasion in August of 2000.

I was sitting on a giant exclusive. It had to do with the alleged fixed fight that was about to take place in Las Vegas between heavyweights Thomas Williams and Richie Melito. I could have compiled something right away about the rumors surrounding this fight, but decided to hold off, not once but twice - first, because I wanted to be able to confirm the story by way of validating the facts, and then again because I was told that posting something before the bout was to take place might get in the way of an FBI "sting" operation. I figured moving in that direction would be the most responsible way to go.

Even so, as I had constructed the final draft just a couple of hours after the conclusion of the Williams-Melito fight and prepared to release it to my large email list, there was still that second or two where I was wondering what was going to happen if, by some chance, the story was a washout, knowing that, once I hit that "Send" button, there was literally no turning back.

Indeed, after the piece was made public, to the mailing list, internet newsgroups and on my own website, the denials started coming. Some were innocent enough. Marc Ratner of the Nevada State Athletic Commission said the punch that knocked out Williams in the first round looked legitimate to him. Another internet writer, Pedro Fernandez, who happened to be one of the few spectators allowed inside to see the fight, said the same thing. Some of the other denials were a little more mean-spirited, if toothless. One of the boxing writers in Las Vegas questioned whether a low-level opponent like Williams had to be paid to lose a fight, rationalizing that such things could be simply built into the matchmaking (not always, mister). Another just went around town telling people the story was complete "B.S." Of course, the "B.S." has since resulted in the indictment and conviction of Williams and Bobby Mitchell, the matchmaker/agent who helped arrange the fix.

One of the writers who was chasing the story but didn't catch up to it - Wally Matthews of the New York Post - reached out to me after my story was published. He wanted to know all the details - most of which he had been unable to uncover. I committed a mistake I hope to God I never commit again and which I advise any internet writer not to make if ever contacted by a newspaper reporter; I was forthcoming and open with him. I basically told him what the story was and how I got it. I thought it would be great for the website and for me to have the phrase "as reported by TotalAction.com" appearing in a New York Post story. That was wishful thinking. Next thing I knew (actually two weeks after my original story ran), the essentials of my story were laid out in a piece under the byline of Matthews and Jack Newfield, carrying the label "NY Post EXCLUSIVE" in very big letters. Please let that serve as an example of what an exclusive most definitely is NOT.

When it was suggested in the newsgroups - by other writers, I might add, including Dan Rafael of USA Today - that the Post duo had "borrowed" the story, I received an email from someone who was asking:

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay

Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

*"What's the big deal about who breaks a story? I never remember which network or newspaper first broke a story, I just remember the story I think it's just some kind of gamesmanship between the members of the media that the general public doesn't give a f*** about."*

Since with that question and statement this guy had walked right into my "wheelhouse," I felt compelled to set him straight on the issue. I replied:

It has to do with a little concept called "intellectual property." To a creative person, one's work is one's property. And that's something that is held very precious. When someone infringes on that property, it constitutes a breach of ethics, if not something even more serious.

Credit often means commerce. That's why screenwriters, songwriters, authors, playwrights, and other creative people closely safeguard their work. That's why laws like the Lanham Act exist to protect copyrights and trademarks. For God's sake, that's why I can't reprint a story from a daily newspaper and post it on my web site under my own name. Not only is it wrong, it's downright illegal. Do you think I should have the right to do it just because YOU don't care where the story came from?

I don't know what you do for a living, but just imagine if someone in your workplace wanted to take credit for your work, and demanded to reap the benefits, whether those benefits manifested themselves in the form of prestige, status, money - whatever? And it didn't matter to most people in your surroundings because all they cared about was that the work got done.

But would it matter to YOU? Would you sit still for it?

*Maybe you "don't give a f****" about where a story comes from. But your lack of concern is of zero concern to me. What I'm concerned about, when I sweat and toil over a story, especially when the subject matter has not been published before, is that the ORIGIN of my story is not misrepresented.*

When someone else puts out a story that says something like "FBI Investigating Fixed Fight Scandal" and it contains much of the substance of a previously published story, and they slap the term "EXCLUSIVE" on it, they are misrepresenting the origin of the story. If it makes the wire services, it exacerbates the situation. And I am well within my rights - my property rights - to protest that level of irresponsibility.

Gamesmanship? Don't be silly. If I walked into your home, snatched your TV set, and said "I'm bigger than you, therefore this TV is mine," you'd have a perfect right to do anything to stand up for yourself. Where does "gamesmanship" really enter into it?

As someone from a medium that still, for some reason, doesn't get the rightful respect it deserves, I applaud the fact that a member of the traditional print media, and a large outlet at that (Dan Rafael), had the integrity to set the record straight. Integrity seems to be a concept that gets thrown out the window when it comes to the consideration the print media gives to the internet media.

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay

Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

See, to you it may mean little. But all a writer has is his words and ideas. I happen to protect mine. And guess what? I'm not apologizing about it.

There was no better illustration of what I was describing than what happened with Teddy Atlas of ESPN. In January of 2003 I had written a chapter in Operation Cleanup 2 called "If You're Thinking Cleanup, Remember Alamo," covering the appearance of conflict of interest in having Tony Alamo Jr. on the Nevada Commission at the same time his father, Tony Alamo Sr. was a Senior VP in charge of all boxing-related matters at the Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino, which by Nevada law is required to be licensed as a promoter. This had been mentioned by others before, but only in passing. I was the first to do any in-depth exploration into the ramifications of such a state of affairs. And I pounded it hard, following it up with other pieces, including a story detailing how Senator John Ensign, who sat on the Senate committee (chaired by John McCain) that was pushing federal boxing legislation, was the son of Michael Ensign, Mandalay Bay Resort Group's Chairman and CEO, in effect making him also the son of a de facto "promoter." The stories created a minor uproar within the boxing community, and got a few people nervous in Las Vegas.

I don't know whether Atlas was carrying out a personal agenda or not, but he jumped on the stories, regurgitating them - in some cases almost verbatim - on "Friday Night Fights," doing his best Walter Winchell imitation in the process. The problem was, instead of attributing the specific information to TotalAction.com, he was pushing it as a "Teddy Atlas investigation."

In doing THAT, there may indeed have been a personal agenda at work. In July of 2002 I had called Atlas out for putting his heavyweight, Michael Grant, in a fight with the aforementioned Thomas Williams (who by this time had been indicted for the fix), then denying he even realized who Williams was, this just a couple of years after he had been touting the forthcoming phony "exclusive" by Matthews and Newfield on an ESPN telecast. For a guy who seems to recall a lot of stories about training a 14-year-old Mike Tyson so many moons ago, this seemed unusual to me.

It is perfectly understandable that when someone is exposed as a hypocrite, he would be looking for some retribution, regardless of how much intellectual dishonesty it carried with it. But what Atlas and ESPN endeavored to do was particularly sleazy, even for them. The network actually sought to market Atlas as a "crusading reformer" based on his "unearthing" of the information about Alamo, and Teddy tried to ride that horse all the way to the finish line. They had managed to dupe some unsuspecting media people, including HBO's Larry Merchant and Phil Mushnick of the New York Post, into believing their fairy tales. Obviously, this image and the way it was created couldn't have ventured further from reality.

The situation reached its nadir a few weeks into the hyping of Atlas. I was contacted by Royce Feour, then a columnist with the Las Vegas Review-Journal. He had written something about the Alamo affair, and in response got an angry call from an ESPN publicist (he told me it was Dan Quinn) who actually scolded him for not crediting Atlas with breaking the story! Royce carefully explained to this operative that Teddy had not in fact broken anything; that Charles Jay had brought this issue out in the open and in considerable detail; and pointed out that I had probably worked pretty damn hard on the pieces. This didn't matter one bit to the ESPN guy,

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay

Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

who had the audacity to insist otherwise. Maybe Teddy told him so; I don't know. But ESPN had enough reason to want to retaliate, since I had not been shy about exposing how its own conflicts of interest had manifested in having Russell Peltz, a promoter, as its "boxing advisor," competing to sign fighters against those to whom he may have been denying TV dates, and extracting "promotional fees" from fighters like Mickey Ward, with whom he never had a promotional arrangement. The way I had surgically pointed out in piece after piece was that ESPN was indeed part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

The funny thing about swiping material and then misrepresenting where it came from is that sooner or later you're going to be "found out." And the ironic thing is that the very medium (the internet) that is looked upon with sufficient disdain by mainstream media people that they feel such liberties are acceptable is also the one that makes it so unlikely they'll get away with it in the end. First of all, there's much too immediacy attached to it; that's how it's possible that something like the Williams-Melito story can be written after the first bout on a card, and be circulating at ringside, 2600 miles away, while the undercard is still taking place, having been read by hundreds of people already. Also, things are documented and time-stamped to the point where substantiation becomes pretty easy. You can go right now into "Google Groups" and see the story of the Williams fight as it appeared the minute it was posted. And if that weren't enough, there are a lot of witnesses; indeed, the whole world can see it if it wants to.

Eventually the effects of this mechanism generated enough criticism of Atlas that he had to (I suspect somewhat reluctantly) mention my name during one of those ESPN commentaries. At least that's what I was told.

By that time, I had stopped watching.

You can shame them all you want, but still, members of the mainstream media will probably never stop trying to appropriate material from the internet without accreditation, simply because they're arrogant enough to believe they can pull it off without any repercussions. That's why I wouldn't disparage any purveyor of intellectual property who wants to stand up for his/her rights.

Yeah, we're real protective of our exclusives.

But we're so excited about them that sometimes we tend to lose sight of a lot of things while pursuing or posting them.

Things like accuracy.

In this era of instant news, one can be so preoccupied with being "first" that there is less attention paid to being correct.

As many of you know, I am the Editor-in-Chief at TheSweetScience.com. Recently, we were faced with a minor situation of our own.

Last week, a staffer at the website submitted a news blurb stating that middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins had signed on the dotted line to fight Jermain Taylor in a bout that would most

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay

Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

likely take place in the summer. Certainly such a thing wouldn't be shocking news; in fact, there are many boxing fans who feel a fight between them is the most logical step for either man.

Eventually, Hopkins and Taylor may sign for a fight, but as of the time that story was posted on our website, they had not. As a matter of fact, it may turn out being quite the contrary. In talking with Taylor's promoter Lou DiBella a couple of weeks ago, I was told that the HBO offers have thus far been somewhat substandard for his taste, that the demand of three options from Golden Boy Promotions (of which Hopkins is now a partner) was excessive, and that he was considering the possibility of fighting WBO champion Felix Sturm in Germany. This sounds plausible enough, given the fact that huge live gates can be generated in Germany, and European TV might be lucrative for a matchup like that. Relatively speaking, DiBella felt the Sturm fight was looking like a better deal.

I also don't expect that Hopkins would roll over so easily for signing a fight with Taylor, unless the money was overwhelming. You have to remember that this is the same Bernard Hopkins who lost a November 2002 judgment in a civil suit brought by DiBella, and even though it is still winding its way through the appeals process, that doesn't mitigate the contentious nature of the relationship. And since Hopkins might perceive that Taylor is one of DiBella's few marketable assets, he may just try to stick it to his former "advisor" out of spite. Is such a thing within his personality? I would say so.

He can rationalize it too. A rematch with Felix Trinidad might make more sense from the pay-per-view perspective, and a fight with Glen Johnson (should he beat Antonio Tarver again) would give him another championship to compete for. If a place in history is what Hopkins is shooting for, he's not going to jeopardize it just because he might refuse to fight Jermain Taylor. However, it may hurt Taylor's cachet a bit if he doesn't win a middleweight belt from Hopkins, but from someone else.

Whether Taylor's people even want to fight Hopkins right now, or would rather just posture like it until the kid has acquired more seasoning and Bernard has aged some more is, well, speculation.

Either way, we blew the story.

And the "risk vs. reward" quotient didn't even justify it. What is really gained by being the first to post a news item like this isn't much, because undoubtedly an official announcement wouldn't have been far behind. It's just not the kind of story where you will hit a homerun, like Williams-Melito was. On the other hand, like all statements uttered prematurely in the name of "scooping the field," there is plenty to lose, in terms of credibility and moral authority, by coming out wrong.

I'll tell you another way in which it is dangerous. When a source emerges with a news tip like that, it usually comes with an agenda of sorts. Maybe it's an attempt at negotiating through the press, as a way of trying to get one side to come to the table. Or perhaps it's in the interest of positioning the adversary - making him deny any fight is going to take place so that he appears very apprehensive about accepting it. It could be nothing more than a "trial balloon" to gauge

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

public reaction, or just a simple case of jumping the gun.

Whatever the motivation is, I don't care. We are not particularly interested in being utilized as an instrument through which negotiators implement strategy, now or ever. There is another website out there seemingly designed to facilitate that kind of thing. We're not built that way.

And I don't fashion myself to be in the business of throwing as much sh** as possible up against the wall in the hope that 50% of it sticks. There are other websites that specialize in that as well. When I came aboard here, it was with the objective of setting a certain standard for boxing journalism, not just for the internet but for any and all media. We have moved rapidly toward that goal in a short period of time, and have gained more and more visitors every day. A gaffe like this has the potential to set us back in that pursuit, although I am confident we have the kind of staff and the earnestness of intentions to overcome it without too much difficulty.

But it stings nonetheless.

You know, I wasn't around when this story was posted (Can I be pretentious for a minute? OK, I was "on the continent," so to speak, not readily available by phone for purposes of green lighting it.) But that hardly matters. It was on my watch, so I have to take the heat for it.

Since the year 2000, I have published close to two hundred stories that had some sort of explanatory, investigative, even accusatory material in them. As far as writing from time to time about boxing scandal, I go all the way back to 1981. Yet this is the first time I can recall ever having to issue a retraction because something within the scope of my responsibility was blatantly untrue.

And I'm not the least bit happy about it.

Part of what I wrote in a January memo to writers at The Sweet Science should serve, in its interpretation, as a pledge the reader can count on as far as our editorial policy is concerned:

"Inasmuch as I am moving into more of a 'hands-on' posture in terms of the content itself, I am taking more of an interest in the validity of assumptions of fact. If there is something about the industry and its mechanisms you don't have a handle on, there is plenty of material already on The Sweet Science site you can refer to. If you need more info on names and dates, there are websites you can reference as well. Accuracy is important, and we certainly can't afford to continue with writers if they are not diligent about this. I know all of you are equal to the task."

Sure, there may be writers along the way who don't consider faithfully following such a simple standard to be of paramount importance. But I can assure you those writers will not last long with this enterprise. We've already had to bid adieu to a couple of them who did not demonstrate that kind of sensitivity.

One thing I'm not here to do is play games.

So while we may have taken a few hits from competing websites over this incident, it's not my

Here's An Exclusive For You - We Take Some Body Shots Too

Written by Charles Jay

Tuesday, 15 March 2005 18:00

desire to make excuses, "spin" out of it, or, as some websites have done in the past, erase it and make believe it never happened. We deserve the abuse if we did something to warrant it.

But if you're one of those sites sharing the marketplace with us and have gotten a snicker or two out of this, let me offer a little "exclusive" information to you: Don't bank on it happening too often.

If you do, you may just find yourself being left in the dust.

Not that we won't leave you in the dust anyway.