

Making the most of the media – Prep style

You're one of the country's best high school track athletes. College coaches want to talk to you. Fellow athletes want to talk to you. And, at some point, the media will want to talk to you.

As you already know, as a leader on the track and most likely in your schools, being a top-level athlete involves more than just training and competing. You are an ambassador for your school, your family, and your own reputation.

As you continue to compete, and whether your track career extends to high school, college or even professional, one of the key areas for you will be working with the media – traditional, electronic, and social. It's a part of the "job" that can be exciting and a terrific opportunity – depending on what you make of it.

For professional athletes, media exposure can create more competitive and financial opportunities for themselves and for others in our sport. An athlete earns a living through prize money and endorsement contracts, and putting themselves in the public eye can help put them in a position to take advantage of both sources of income.

But what about you? Why should you take the time to learn how to interact with the media?

Well, for one thing, it is fun.

For another, it will help you get noticed – possibly by college coaches.

For another, learning interview skills, how to think on your feet and how to present yourself well will pay off dividends later in life, whether you are a pro athlete, a stay-at-home parent, a CEO, a flight attendant, a Burger King shift manager, or the President of the United States.

It's all about keeping your poise, representing yourself well and being mindful of how you are perceived by others.

The power of "Traditional Media"

Never underestimate the power of the media. Your performances on the track and in the field are, of course, the ultimate measure of your success athletically. But the media and the buzz they help create can do a great deal for your long-term career. An athlete who works well with the media will get favorable coverage; when a people see that coverage, they want to come to a meet to see you compete; when people fill the stands, meets are successful; when meets are successful You get the idea.

We realize that taking time out to speak with the media can at times be inconvenient. Perhaps things haven't been going well for you lately and you're not feeling particularly talkative. But the most successful athletes with the media are those who understand that working with the media is a win-win situation: the reporters get a story, and you, your team and your school gain visibility. If you are naturally shy, don't "force" yourself to say more than you are comfortable with. But practicing being comfortable will help you when a few years from now, you're in a job interview or giving a big presentation.

A phrase we like to use with athletes on all levels is that you must "create your own buzz." That means that you seize opportunities to tell your story to the media, rather than have them write your story without your input or, even worse, have them not write your story at all.

Making Friends and Influencing People

Although their job is usually (but not always) to report objectively, reporters are people, too. Generally speaking, if you treat them well, they will treat you well.

What does cooperating with the media mean? Of course working with the media should never mean compromising your performances or fitness, but there is a lot you can do:

- Your hometown media love you. They can help make you stars. Talk to them!
- Answer questions after a competition, even if you don't do well. If you are not up for talking (you're hurt, you've got another race in 40 minutes, etc), just tell them why you can't speak right now, and let them know when you will be available. They will appreciate it.
- Get to know members of the media by name.

How can you create your own buzz?

- **Go positive, not negative.** Remember that anything you say could appear on TV, a newspaper, a website or in a blog. As a result, do not ridicule your opponents – it will make you look bad and might give them more motivation! If you badmouth the sport, fans or your competitors, you effectively badmouth yourself.
- **Be specific.** In young athletes, what we see most often in interviews is being overly general. You are afraid of saying something "wrong," so instead you say something so incredibly benign that you could have said it in your sleep. Especially after a race, be specific. Describe your start, talk about the strategic turning point in the race. Talk about which jump or throw attempt was most important. Don't get too technical, but talk about what made the competition most significant.

DON'T:

Q: “Tell us about your race today.”

A: “Well, I’ve been training really hard. I knew I could do it. I just gave it all I had and came out on top.”

Or

A: “I just wasn’t jumping/throwing well. I just didn’t have it.”

DO:

Q: “Tell us about your race today”

A: “The pace went out faster than I expected to and I had to decide whether to lead or sit back. My training has been going well so I had confidence that I could hold onto the pace if I took the lead. I felt Jane Doe on my shoulder but with a lap to go I just dug deep and gave it all I had.”

Or

A: “I was having problems hitting the take-off board – I was either way short or was fouling. That made me too cautious and I ended up having a jump that was much shorter than I am capable of. I will go back with my coach to work out my approach to fix it.”

- **Give personal anecdotes.** People love the story-behind-the story. Don’t give away any information you’re uncomfortable with, but little anecdotes go a long way toward establishing an athlete’s public identity. Talk about how you go running with your dog. How your mom taught you how to do block starts. In fact, if any other family member was an athlete, that is something to talk about – “family” stories are always popular. Stories about athletes overcoming obstacles are always, always, great stories. Illness, injury, coming back from a bad performance, the loss of a loved one. Anything you had to “overcome” is something that has made you who you are as a person and an athlete. Talk about it if you are comfortable with it.
- **Smile! Let your human side show.** Some of the most effective athletes at flashing a winning smile are Allyson Felix, Sanya Richards, Dwight Phillips, David Oliver, Reese Hoffa, Anna (Willard) Pierce and Kara Goucher. The media appreciates athletes who are friendly and accessible. These athletes may not always feel like smiling or being courteous when they are approached by a reporter in a crowded European hotel lobby, but they manage to do it anyway. A big, warm smile is the “Beyonce Knowles Effect” – it will immediately put a person at ease and make them inclined to like you. And that is the first step toward raising your profile and getting covered by the media, whether you’re racing in Europe or long jumping in New Jersey.

Patience is a virtue

Of course, athletes **are** human – even if your performances are super-human – and sometimes you get media attention whether you want it or not. We know that

working with the media can be a trying experience, especially when you've been asked the same question approximately 3,214 times ... and it's even more frustrating when it's a "stupid" question. But being patient and polite – or addressing the question with humor – can go a long way.

Athletic success + great personalities + professionalism = positive coverage for you and the sport.

The big stuff

When it comes to the media, if you are yourself, relax and have a good time with it, you will excel. Be engaging, not defensive. Be accommodating, not exclusive. Don't let it detract from your training, but whenever possible, find a way to work it in to your schedule. Give credit to your teammates and coaches. It can pay off for you, your teammates, your family and the sport. Win, win, win!

TIPS FROM THE SPEAKING SPECIALISTS

Know Your Audience - Who are they? What is their level of knowledge and expertise in track & field? What do you want them to know or do? Being prepared with this information before you speak to a group or to the press will help you say the right thing to your audience.

Anticipate Questions - Consider issues and determine answers before you speak or are interviewed; concentrate on your answers to the questions. Do not be caught off guard. Spend some time thinking about what you will say to the press before you go to a competition.

Avoid Jargon - Avoid words or phrases that may be confusing or that your audience will not understand. Keep the message simple. Be careful of acronyms, clichés and technical terms.

Use Physical Animation - Your voice and body work together. Use physical movement to enhance your vocal delivery. Scan the room; maintain high energy.

Keep Your Cool - Don't get flustered or defensive.

Speak Only for Yourself - Don't talk about other rivals or competitors. Concentrate on yourself and your own position.

Avoid "No Comment" and "Off The Record" - Be careful of phrases like "between you and me" or "I shouldn't be saying this, but". If you say it, expect that it will be printed, broadcast or reproduced somewhere. It will also influence subsequent on the record questions.

Tell the Truth - Honesty ultimately enhances believability.

If they go negative - If you are not comfortable with a question a reporter asks you or the tone/line of questioning, there are various ways you can respond. For instance, if you are asked, "I hear you and John Doe are bitter rivals, can you talk about that?" you might reply with something like, "I just concentrate on my own performances and my own training. I don't worry about what other people are or aren't doing or what they are saying."

THE SOCIAL NETWORK(S)

In the last several years, social media – Twitter, Facebook, FourSquare, you name it – have become a global force. Athletes, celebrities, politicians, average folk, your mom, your high school history teacher ... everybody uses these social outlets. The reasons for use vary. Some people want to stay in touch with their friends, others want to promote a project, some just want people to pay attention to them.

Teen-agers are on social media. No way around it. As you wade into the world of social media, especially in 2012, keep the following tips in mind:

- Share your life but protect your privacy. Avoid geo-tagging your tweets, posting specific travel itineraries or circulating photos or information that reveal your home address.
- Don't say anything on social media that you wouldn't want your mother, the media, or your ex-girlfriend's boyfriend to see
- Say whatever you want but remember it's a press conference – the media and college recruiters are following. EVERYBODY can see it. So if you don't want your hometown newspaper to know about your bad behavior, who you're mad at or that you cuss like a sailor ... keep it off Twitter
- All that said – BE YOURSELF! Give insight into what your daily life is like. Be funny. Go ahead and post what you had for breakfast or what you're watching on TV. That's the kind of stuff the public wants to know about. Really! It's what makes you, you.