

After ESPN's layoffs, nobody is safe in this business

News came down last Wednesday of around 100 people at ESPN losing their jobs, effective immediately. I'm not here to explain why ESPN had to lay so many people off, whether it was politics, budget or simply just going in a different direction. Heck, it could have been a combination of the three.

Regardless, it brings up another subject that not too many people outside of the journalism industry are talking about. This business is cut throat and it's kind of terrifying. Luckily, I'm in a safe job – or at least I think I am.

I've been a sports writer for four years now, with two years and two months of that time being a full-time writer. This is my second job and I'll probably have many more. There's a good chance, if not a 100 percent chance, that I'll get laid off at least once in my career.



By Camal PETRO

I get told all the time by older sports writers to get out of the business as fast as possible, but that's not what I want to do. I love my job, I love going to games, writing about them and I love building relationships with all of the coaches and players. It's fun, but nobody enters this business to become rich. We do it because it's a passion.

Saying that, ESPN does have reporters, insiders, anchors and producers who make a ton of money, but those people are few and far between. If you don't have that passion for this business, I'd advise them to look into another profession, because this job is not just going to games and writing about it, and I think too many people think that's what this job is all about.

I had a job shadow in March and I thought long and hard about the best advice I could give him days before he came in to work. I'm still young and definitely still learning, but I thought the best thing I could do was not teach him everything I do day in and day out.

My reasoning was, by the time he goes through journalism school and gets a job, day-to-day duties will change. Older sports editors and writers tell me about the past all the time. Before the Internet or computers were around, reporters on the road would call in to the newsroom and basically tell the editor exactly how the story would read. That's one of the many stories I've heard, and there are many more like it.

Again, like most of my columns, I ramble on and get sidetracked, but the ESPN layoffs are just another example of nobody being safe in this business.

College basketball reporter Andy Katz, anchors Jade McCarth, Jay Crawford and Jaymee Sire, SEC football reporters David Ching and Grey Ostendorf, golf commentator Dottie Pepper, NFL analysts Ashley Fox and Trent Dilfer, MLB writer Jayson Stark, college football reporter Brett McMurphy and NFL reporter Ed Werder were among the names that stuck out to me.

Even if I become this famous sports reporter making a good living and thinking I made it in this world, I could still be laid off at any moment. I guess that could be for any job, but I would have thought some of those names I listed were untouchable unless their contract ran out, similar to Skip Bayless and Colin Cowherd, who are two people I don't care for.

As journalists, we have to adapt to the growing industry, but sometimes even adapting won't save you from getting fired.

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Kelly is far from being Mr. Irrelevant

As the last choice of the NFL Draft, Chad Kelly will spend the next year being called "Mr. Irrelevant."

But it says here Kelly possesses the arm strength, athleticism and toughness to become relevant, indeed, in the NFL.

Kelly, at the end of his junior season and in the Sugar Bowl that came later, was playing the position of quarterback as well as anyone in college football. Clearly, he has the physical tools to succeed in "the league."

We'll just have to wait and see if he can develop the discipline.

Obviously, John Elway, who knows a thing or two about pro football quarterbacks, believed it was worth the rather slight risk of using the 253rd – and last – pick of the draft to choose Kelly for the Denver Broncos. At the end of the 2015 season, Kelly was doing a pretty darned good Elway imitation, throwing accurate fastballs and taking off and running when nothing else was available.

Important to remember about Kelly: He became the first Ole Miss quarterback – ever! – to lead the Rebels to victories over Alabama, Auburn and LSU in the same season and then he topped that season off by earning MVP honors in the Sugar Bowl.



By Rick CLEVELAND

Yes, he has had off-the-field problems, two knee surgeries and now a wrist surgery. But anybody who can quarterback his team to victory over Alabama's

defense, at Tuscaloosa, has the ability to play in the league and surely is worth a 7th round draft pick. To refresh memories, Kelly threw for three touchdowns, ran for one and did not commit a turnover in a 43-37 victory over Alabama at Tuscaloosa in 2015. How many quarterbacks can say they did that?

No doubt, several teams hoping Kelly would fall out of the draft all together were disappointed when the Broncos called his name. I thought the Saints might take him with

their sixth round pick. Didn't happen. The Broncos undoubtedly were happy about that.

Some other observations about the draft:

- Color me surprised that Mississippi State's Fred Ross wasn't chosen by anyone. Yes, Ross, who has signed a free agent contract with Carolina, dropped some balls. No, he doesn't have the break-away speed NFL coaches covet. But he makes plays. He is Mississippi State's all-time leading receiver, two times a consensus All-SEC pick. What's more, he doubles as a productive kick returner. The Panthers got a steal.

- The SEC can brag about its draft numbers. Between the first pick Texas A & M defensive end Myles Garrett and the last pick Kelly, the SEC had 51 other players chosen, by far the most of any conference. The SEC's 53 draftees were 11 more than the second place ACC. Perhaps most eye-popping of all, the Big 12, which once produced pros at a pace similar to the SEC, had only 14 players drafted. Only five Big 12 players were taken in the first three rounds. By comparison, Conference USA had

six players taken in the first three rounds.

The SEC had 21 players in the first two rounds alone, indeed 21 of the first 63 players chosen.

- Ole Miss tight end Evan Engram, as expected, was the first Mississippi player taken in the draft, going in the first round to the New York Giants. Engram will do something in New York he has often done in the off-season at Ole Miss. That is, catch passes from Eli Manning.

As he was at Ole Miss, Engram will be a matchup nightmare in the NFL where linebackers and strong safeties are often matched up in one-on-one coverage with tight ends. Not many strong safeties or linebackers can match Engram's 4.43 speed and athleticism. Archie Manning said Sunday his youngest son is thrilled with the Giants' pick of Engram.

Engram's physical skills are obvious, the elder Manning said, adding, "Evan's a great kid and a hard worker."

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Young Thunder stars and how Westbrook, Harden and Durant impacted the NBA

Before Russell Westbrook began averaging a triple double in a season, before James Harden started his career with the Houston Rockets and began stating his case as to why he should be the NBA Most Valuable Player and before Kevin Durant took his talents from the middle of the country to the bright lights of Oracle Arena, embracing the "Strength in Numbers" theme of the Golden State Warriors, these players were once the young "Thunder" guns in Oklahoma City.

Ten years ago, the Oklahoma City Thunder, a franchise that was then still the Seattle SuperSonics, drafted Durant in the 2007 NBA Draft, where he played in the final year of the Seattle SuperSonics' franchise before the team moved to the Sooner State to become the Oklahoma City Thunder.

While Durant was very talented and respected for his playing ability coming out of Texas, with other players like Nick Collison, Earl Watson, Jeff Green, Chris Wilcox and a 30-year-old Wally Szczerbiak, it is not surprising OKC went 20-62 in its first year.

In the 2008-09 season, after drafting Westbrook in the 2008 NBA Draft, things improved by three games for OKC as the Thunder finished the season 23-59 overall. As a positive, however, Durant and Westbrook had begun to build solid team chemistry with each other to create a structure for what would become a promising future for the Thunder.

Then, in the 2009-10 season, things finally began to come together for Oklahoma City as the Thunder selected Harden in the 2009 NBA Draft. With three young, talented players in Durant, Westbrook and Harden, Oklahoma City seemed destined for greatness. Finishing the 2009-10 season with a 50-32 record, OKC made it to the playoffs and marked the first time the team had reached 50 wins since the 2004-05 Seattle

Supersonics franchise.

After the conclusion of the 2010-11 regular season, OKC made it to the playoffs and reached the Western Conference Finals, where the Thunder lost to the Dallas Mavericks. Then, in the 2011-12 season, the young "Thunder" guns lost to a Miami Heat team that featured the "Big Three" in LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh in the 2012 NBA Finals.

As the story goes, things were never the same.

Following the disappointment of losing in the NBA Finals and unable to work out a contract extension for James Harden, the Oklahoma City Thunder traded Harden to the Houston Rockets and acquired Kevin Martin, Jeremy Lamb, two first-round picks and a second-round pick.

With one player from the original young "Thunder" guns gone, Westbrook and Durant remained.

However, even that would change as injuries began to plague Durant and Westbrook began to take the role of Durant as "being the main man in Oklahoma City." Three more seasons passed and the Thunder failed to make another appearance in the NBA Finals, despite making it to the Western Conference finals in two of the three years.

OKC's failure to compete for a championship led to one of the biggest NBA free-agency trades in which Durant, who had previously lost to the Warriors in the 2016 NBA Western Conference Finals, decided to take his talents to Golden State to team up with the team that he and his former teammates could not beat.

And just like that, the three young "Thunder" guns were no longer the young "Thunder" guns. All three – Westbrook,

Harden and Durant – are now NBA stars leading their respective teams in a competitive Western Conference. Their early struggles of finding their roles as young OKC players to enhancing and adjusting their skills to the NBA level has paid off in huge dividends, allowing them to be the players that they are today.

Don't believe me?

Consider just some of the numbers and accolades of Harden, Westbrook and Durant since being drafted to where they are now. For starters, all three players are in the top-25 scorers in the NBA.

Harden, who averaged nearly 13 points per game in three seasons with OKC, was the 2012 NBA Sixth Man of the Year, averaging nearly 17 points per game and four assists. Now, transitioning from shooting guard to point guard in Houston this season, Harden has averaged 27 points, nearly eight assists and six rebounds per game throughout his five years with the Rockets. In 2013, he received All-NBA Third Team recognition and All-NBA First Team recognition in 2014 and 2015.

Westbrook finished on the NBA All-Rookie First Team in 2009. He received All-NBA Second Team recognition in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2015. The former UCLA Bruin was named the All-Star Game MVP in 2015 and 2016. For his career, Westbrook is averaging 23 points per game, six rebounds and nearly eight assists per game. This season, alone, he averaged a triple double with nearly 32 points per game, 11 rebounds and 10 assists. Then, factor in that he was the second player in NBA history to average a triple double while leading the league in scoring, third in assists, second in assists per 100 possessions, trailing Harden and recorded the high-

est-scoring triple double in NBA history with 57 points to just provide a small portion of his body of work.

Durant received recognition in 2008 as a NBA-All Rookie First Team selection. He was the 2014 NBA Most Valuable Player (MVP), a NBA-All First Team selection in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014. In 2016, Durant received a NBA-All Second Team selection. As a player for the Golden State Warriors, he has averaged 25 points, eight rebounds and nearly five rebounds per game. More importantly, he is on the quest to win his first NBA championship, something that he wants to do more than anything.

Considering their body of work and knowing that Harden has only been in the league for seven years, Westbrook for eight years and Durant for nine years, they have a lot more basketball to play. They have not shown any signs of slowing down.

And honestly, this is scary but in a good way.

If you are a true basketball fan, you have to wonder what it would be like to see them reconnect and play with each other again. If the opportunity ever presented itself for them to play again – although very slim to none – imagine how different the team would be now.

If you think that is interesting, look at teams like the Minnesota Timberwolves and the Milwaukee Bucks. If you do not see that these teams are the future of the NBA, wake up now! They might be young now but they will not stay young forever, just as the young "Thunder" guns did not stay young.

As the 2017 NBA Playoffs continue to unfold and current NBA players continue to elevate their skills, Westbrook, Harden and Durant will also continue to reach new heights in their careers and will continue to change the game of basketball like never before.



By Wilton JACKSON