

Pen Pals

In the male-dominated world of sports journalism, two former *Targum* writers stand up—and stand out.

by Bill Glovin

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ot that she would tell anyone how to do his job, mind you, but Kelly Whiteside (RC'90) has a suggestion for me. "If you're *really* looking to write a story about women in sports journalism, you should also talk to Tara," she says, scanning the crowd of reporters in the bustling media room at the Rutgers Athletic Center. She quickly points out Tara Sullivan (RC'90), an easy feat considering the preponderance of testosterone in the room.

Whiteside and Sullivan. Sullivan and Whiteside. While the two don't look at all alike, they swear they could have been separated at birth. Both are the youngest of four siblings. Both played and watched sports while growing up in suburban New Jersey. Both graduated from Rutgers. Both wrote sports for the *Daily Targum*. And both are now part of a very select group: women sportswriters working at major daily newspapers.

Whiteside joined *USA Today* this past September to write college football and features, while Sullivan covers college basketball and football and professional sports at *The Record* of Hackensack. Together, Whiteside and Sullivan wrote *Theresa Weatherspoon's Basketball for Girls* (Wiley and Sons, 1999), an instructional book from the New York Liberty star. Whiteside is also the author of a previous book, *WNBA: A Celebration* (Harper Collins, 1998).

The pair can hardly believe a decade has passed since they spent every spare minute in the offices of *Targum*, Rutgers' largest-circulation student newspaper. As seniors, Whiteside was the paper's editor-in-chief, Sullivan was the managing editor, and they shared a room in an off-campus household of seven women. "We

KELLY WHITESIDE (LEFT) AND TARA SULLIVAN, WHO MET AS STUDENT WRITERS ON THE *TARGUM* SPORTS BEAT, RETURN EACH YEAR TO TEACH A SEMINAR FOR THE PAPER'S CUB REPORTERS.

weren't like Felix and Oscar," says Sullivan, referencing *The Odd Couple*, "we were more like two Oscars in a house full of Oscars." Says Rebecca Felsen (DC'90), one of their house mates and a *Targum* colleague: "Kelly and Tara were together so much that I used to call them Telly and Kara."

The pair especially look forward to the rare opportunity to relive their cub reporter days by covering the same event. Today's chance provides an extra kick: The game they're both reporting—a regular-season women's basketball game between No. 1 Connecticut and No. 8 Rutgers—is at their alma mater, the place where they met and laid the foundation for their friendship and careers.

Whiteside, covering the game for her former paper, *Long Island's Newsday*, leaves the RAC's media center first to take her assigned seat along the press table near mid-court. Before sitting down, she looks for Sullivan's name tag and finds it two seats away. "I don't believe this gentleman will mind moving closer to center court," she says, pulling the old switcheroo so that her friend will be at her side.

A few minutes later Sullivan takes her seat next to Whiteside. The pre-game atmosphere is so charged and the crowd is so loud that conversation is nearly impossible. "We both covered women's basketball for the *Targum* during the Sue Wicks era in the late '80s, a magical time

for women's basketball at Rutgers, and the RAC never sounded like this," shouts Whiteside as the players warm up. "Fans are finally starting to judge the women's game on its own merits, rather than on the men's game."

Whiteside and Sullivan are still waiting for that kind of acceptance to trickle into the cubby bastion of sports journalism. "One guy said to me, 'If I had a sex change I'd have your job,'" Sullivan relates. "Lots of men think women sportswriters are either jock sniffers, lesbians, or hired based on gender."

Whiteside, who began her career at *Sports Illustrated*, has found more sexism in the press box than in the locker room. "Most people expect women sportswriters to say that we have problems with male athletes and coaches, but I find that the problems come mostly from our male colleagues. There is still very much of an 'old boys school' way of thinking—that a woman can't truly understand or write about sports as well as a man. That affects women writers, especially when they're starting out. It's just assumed that men know sports; women are under more pressure to prove themselves."

Sullivan mentions Mary Garber, a pioneering sportswriter for North Carolina's *Winston-Salem Journal*, who spent much of her career barred from the locker room and press box. Sullivan got a taste of what Garber experienced when she was a *Targum* reporter covering Rutgers football in the

Meadowlands. "Their policy at the time was that women weren't allowed into the locker room," she says. "To this day, I'm still mad at myself for not challenging it."

In 1990, the issue of women in locker rooms captured national attention when Lisa Olson of the *Boston Herald* accused Zeke Mowatt of the New England Patriots of exposing himself and making lewd remarks while his teammates cheered. Although Whiteside and Sullivan say that they have never experienced anything quite so traumatic, they point out that the issue of women writers in locker rooms still rankles. In the last two years or so, such prominent athletes as Reggie White of the Green Bay Packers and Charlie Ward of the New York Knicks have criticized league policy that requires teams to provide equal locker-room access to women.

"I've grown so used to working in the locker room that I hardly think about it anymore," says Whiteside, adding that most male athletes have also grown accustomed to the presence of women journalists. Still, she says, "it's certainly awkward to interview someone in a towel." Whiteside points out that the WNBA has an open locker-room policy, but that its players wait until all interviews are completed and doors closed before heading for the showers, a policy the men's leagues might do well to adopt.



HALL OF FAMERS

Rutgers' Olympic Sports Hall of Fame—which recognizes accomplishment in sports other than basketball and football—includes 11 women athletes.

RENEE CLARK (DC'88) earned All-Atlantic 10 Conference softball honors and All-Northeast regional honors in softball and field hockey.

LORI MCCAULEY (LC'85), a seven-time All-American in middle-distance races, won the AIAW indoor 440 in 1982.

LIZ MCGUIRE (DC'85), who played field hockey, received the Rutgers Outstanding Senior Female Athlete Award in 1985.

JUDY MELICK (DC'77), an All-American in the 100-yard breaststroke, was a member of the 1972 and 1976 US Olympic swim team.

DEBBIE DEUTSCH (RC'81) was a three-time All-American in track and the AIAW National Indoor Champion in the 60-yard hurdles.

KELLY GALLAGHER (DC'88) holds Rutgers' career softball pitching records for wins, shutouts, complete

games, strikeouts, innings pitched, and saves.

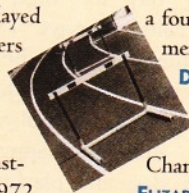
JULIE SMITHERS (RC'85) was a three-time All-American hurdler and a member of the 1982 Olympic Sports Festival East team.

ELLEN WALLACE-TURNBULL (RC'80) was a four-year All-American swimmer and a member of the US Pan-American Team.

DESIREE SCOTT (LC'87) became Rutgers' first Penn Relays Champion and qualified for the NCAA Track Championships 11 times.

ELIZABETH FERRARA (DC'85), a regional All-American lacrosse player, was a member of the US National Women's lacrosse team.

SASKIA WEBBER (DC'94) was a First-Team All-American, National Goalkeeper of the Year, and member of the 1999 World Cup Championship soccer team. □



Whiteside prompts Sullivan to talk about an incident that occurred during last year's baseball season. Sullivan, seated in the tiered Yankee Stadium press box, looked down to find that a male writer sitting in the tier below her had downloaded pornography onto his computer, and the images were directly in her line of sight. "When I objected, some of my male colleagues claimed that I was the one at fault because I shouldn't have been looking at his monitor," explains Sullivan. "I left the press box for a few minutes, pretty upset, and called Kelly. She backed me up 100 percent. The writer apologized that evening, and eventually I also received an apology from his editor. But neither Kelly nor I will soon forget that initial response from our colleagues."

Part of what made the situation particularly hurtful is that Sullivan considered many of them her friends. Sportswriters are part of a close-knit community who find themselves together on plane flights and in hotel lobbies, at pre-game meals, and in press boxes and locker rooms. "I haven't felt excluded by anybody I respect or care about, or felt the need to change my personality, which tends to be outgoing and talkative," says Sullivan.

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Both women grew up in families that not only encouraged but required participation in athletics. Whiteside, the daughter of Joe Whiteside, the recently retired Rutgers senior vice president and treasurer, was brought up in a household of crazed Scarlet Knights fans. As a youngster, she was a regular at basketball and soccer camps held by Rutgers coaches and a member of the crowd at every major athletic event. "Unfortunately, my birthday has always been a bit of a nuisance because it falls on national signing day for high school football recruits," she says. "I've eaten popcorn at the RAC since the third grade and once aspired to be James Bailey's ball girl. What can I tell you?"

After graduating near the top of her class and playing three sports at East Brunswick High School, Whiteside made a beeline for Rutgers. "I made the soccer team, but tore knee ligaments and herniated two disks on the first play of my first game my freshman year, which has to be some sort of record," she says, laughing at her misfortune. As soon as she could walk again, she headed for the *Targum* and volunteered to write sports.

Sullivan spent afternoons in grade

school trading baseball cards, scratching out touch football plays in the dirt, and rooting for the Yankees. "I was a tomboy all the way, except for the Irish dance lessons that I started at age five," she says. She spent summer vacations perfecting her steps while staying with relatives in Ireland, and she danced with a troupe at Radio City Music Hall. But she also found the time to earn 10 varsity letters in soccer and track at Paramus High School.

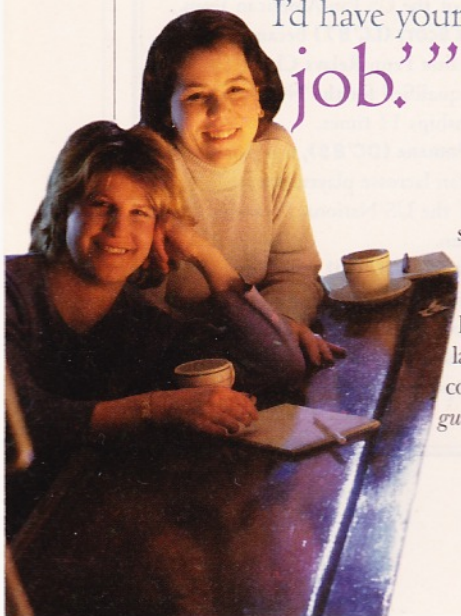
Following an older sister to Rutgers, Sullivan remembers meeting Whiteside at the *Targum* caucus in their sophomore year. "We instantly connected," she recalls. *Targum* was an unbelievable experience. We could hardly believe that we were on the road covering major college sports and crafting our own columns. At the same time, we were also learning and writing about Olympic sports." Under their direction, *Targum* was cited as one of the top college papers in the country.

Despite living together and working side by side as seniors, they went in completely different directions after graduation. Sullivan married two days after receiving her bachelor's degree in history; within a year, she was raising a son as a stay-at-home mom. Whiteside, with bachelor's degrees in English and journalism, began pursuing a master's degree in journalism at Columbia University.

An internship at *Sports Illustrated* helped jump start her career. She became a reporter for the magazine in 1991, was promoted to staff writer in 1994, and enjoyed the kind of access to athletes that few sportswriters receive. During one stretch in 1995, she was invited by Dodgers catcher Mike Piazza to shag fly balls with teammates while covering the major league baseball strike. Soon after, she found herself shooting baskets with Kevin Garnett as part of a plum assignment to write a profile of the teenage sensation who jumped from high school to the NBA. As much as Whiteside enjoyed the access to high-profile athletes, *SI's* ability to shape public opinion also led to awkward moments, like the time star outfielder Barry Bonds made her the focus of a locker-room tirade shortly after the magazine ran a story with cover lines that read, "I'm Barry Bonds, and You're Not!"

The atmosphere at *SI* soon soured as the number of choice assignments dwindled and her female colleagues began leaving. "*SI* is dominated by males and is not welcoming to women," she contends. "The few women who were on staff felt they weren't getting the same kinds of opportunities as the men. Almost every female senior colleague I know has left or moved on." In 1997, she bid farewell when *Newsday* offered her the opportunity to write sports features and cover major events. Three years later, *SI's* masthead still lists only five females in its list of close to 60 senior editors, senior writers, and staff writers.

Sullivan's climb up the sports-writing ladder was longer and more circuitous. When her son was two years old, she started feeling the itch to start a career but had little hope of landing a sports-writing job. "There are so few jobs in this field, and I didn't have a lot of confidence," she





recalls. "Kelly was amazingly supportive. She told me that I was still *that* person who had displayed all this talent writing for *Targum*, and that I shouldn't doubt my abilities."

In 1993, her *Targum* clips and a tip from Whiteside led to a job covering high school sports part-time at *Newsday*. For two years, Sullivan commuted 90 minutes each way from her home in New Jersey's Sussex County to Kew Gardens, Queens. She moved to a similar part-time job at *The Record* and a full-time gig at the *Daily News* before her big break came when *The Record* offered her the opportunity to leave high school sports behind and cover Scarlet Knights football and Seton Hall basketball in November 1997.

The offer from *The Record* couldn't have come at a better time. Sullivan had considered leaving sports writing entirely when a *Daily News* editor began questioning her commitment. "When the baseball writer took time off to coach his son in Little League, that was all right," she says. "But if I had a personal commitment, then I was portrayed as a working mother in the wrong profession, or someone who wasn't ambitious enough."

Whiteside contends that a major issue for women sportswriters is striking a balance between family and career. "When I first started out, many of my female colleagues left the business in their mid-30s to start families," she says. "Women like Tara have demonstrated that they can do both."

In the past year, the friends have covered events that some sportswriters and most sports fans attend only in their dreams. Whiteside was at college football's Sugar Bowl, the WNBA championships, the World Cup finals in women's soccer, and the Final Four in women's college basketball. Sullivan was at major league baseball's World Series and the Final Four in men's college basketball. One of the most satisfying perks of their jobs has been the chance to chart the progress of women's athletics. "At the women's World Cup in 1995, the U.S. media contingent consisted of myself and less than a handful of writers," says Whiteside. "But at this year's World Cup, it seemed like every sportswriter in America was there. That says a lot about how far women's sports, not only women's soccer, has come in a short time."

As Rutgers and Connecticut return to the court after a final time-out, the two writers put their memories aside and turn back to their assignments. "Tara's so much faster than I am that she's

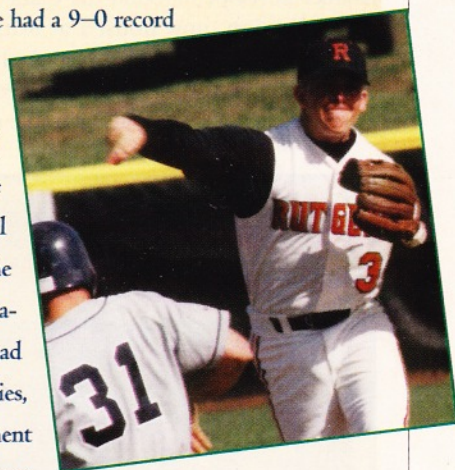
always stuck waiting for me to finish my story," apologizes Whiteside. She's alluding to a long-held tradition, left over from their *Targum* days, of catching up somewhere once their stories are filed, but she's also hinting that it's time for me to close my notebook and let her open hers. For her part, Sullivan deflects the praise: "There are few people I respect more in this world

Diamond in the Rough

A Lackluster Finish Can't Dull the Shine of a Record-Setting Year

Scarlet Knights baseball completed its most successful season in history this past spring, winning the Big East championship and tournament, setting a school record of 40 wins, and finishing the season ranked 15th in the nation. Rutgers capped the year by hosting the four-team regional NCAA tournament at Yogi Berra Stadium in Little Falls, marking the first time a regional has been played in New Jersey. • The team was led by senior shortstop Darren Fenster (below), the Big East player of the year and a second-team All-American. Freshman pitcher Bob Brownlie had a 9-0 record

in the conference and was the Big East tournament's most valuable player. The team's leadoff hitter, junior outfielder David DeJesus, scored 66 runs; and junior outfielder Joe B. Cirrone led the Big East in batting with a .457 average. • Despite all the success, the season ended on a sour note when the Scarlet Knights, who came into the NCAA tournament as the No. 2 hitting team in the country and had aspirations of going to the College World Series, scored a total of just 11 runs in three tournament games after having averaged eight per game in the regular season. "There are a lot of positives to talk about this year, but for some reason we just didn't play in the tournament the way we did all year," says Fenster. □



than Kelly, both as a writer and as a person. I wouldn't be where I am today without her."

While their memories may still be fresh, they know that nothing is quite as stale as yesterday's newspaper and that tomorrow's story is all that counts. Their pre-game prediction proves prophetic: The favored UConn Huskies—who, two months later, are crowned national champs—eke out a victory over RU's Scarlet Knights in the final minute. As the crowd shuffles out of the RAC, Whiteside and Sullivan join a small army of male writers, broadcasters, and technicians who march back to the media center to wait for the post-game press conferences to begin. The pair take their seats, flip open their laptops, and get to work—more comfortable, no doubt, to be once again asking the questions instead of answering them. □