

2-10-2011

## Newsroom: Sulentic '09 in Sports Illustrated

Roger Williams University School of Law

Follow this and additional works at: [https://docs.rwu.edu/law\\_archives\\_life](https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life)

---

### Recommended Citation

Roger Williams University School of Law, "Newsroom: Sulentic '09 in Sports Illustrated" (2011). *Life of the Law School (1993- )*. 213.  
[https://docs.rwu.edu/law\\_archives\\_life/213](https://docs.rwu.edu/law_archives_life/213)

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives & Law School History at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Life of the Law School (1993- ) by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact [mwu@rwu.edu](mailto:mwu@rwu.edu).

# Newsroom

## Sulentic '09 in Sports Illustrated

Katherine Sulentic '09, assistant director of enforcement for the NCAA, appears in this Sports Illustrated piece on the 'phenomenon of elite travel football.'

[Sports Illustrated](#) consults *Katherine Sulentic '09* in this piece on the fast-evolving phenomenon of "elite travel football": "[Seven-on-seven youth football becoming mirror of AAU basketball](#)" by *SI* columnist Andy Staples:

**HALLANDALE, Fla., February 10, 2011** -- Those who drifted over to watch the quarterback group couldn't help but notice the pink socks. When their eyes scanned upward, they couldn't help but notice the player occupying those pink socks. Miami Carol City High sophomore Akeem Jones stands 6-foot-3. He weighs 186 pounds. He's raw, but he can run and he has a bazooka attached to his right shoulder.



Jones came to the tryout for the South Florida Express seven-on-seven team as a relative unknown obscured first by a platoon system and second by a broken ankle this past fall at his school. By Sunday night, he was a member of a team that, a few days earlier, had 10 players from its 2010 roster sign FBS scholarships. A few months earlier, Jones' new team had agreed to an apparel deal with Under Armour that will provide Express players with cleats, uniforms and warmups. (Jones will provide his own pink socks, which he wears to honor the memory of his grandmother, Nelly Kirkland, who died of breast cancer in October.) This spring and summer, Jones and the Express will play teams from other regions of Florida -- and the rest of the country -- in tournaments that match seven offensive skill position players against a group of seven linebackers and defensive backs.

Watching Jones (Class of 2013) and Class of 2014 tailback Sony Michel -- who amassed 3,492 rushing yards and 39 touchdowns against varsity competition for Plantation (Fla.) American Heritage High while in grades eight and nine -- it was easy to see the similarities to another sport's development system. In some gym a few years ago, someone decided John Wall or Evan Turner or Derrick Favors belonged on an elite travel basketball team. The football players are older than the hoops stars were when they were anointed because puberty matters more in football, but the concept is the same.

Two years ago, SI.com introduced you to a series of football tournaments that looked awfully similar to elite travel basketball events. Last summer, SI.com followed the South Florida Express for a week as it traveled to and played in a national tournament. Thanks to a few new wrinkles for 2011, it's no longer a question of if youth football will mirror youth basketball. It's a question of when. At some point in the next few years, the experience of an elite skill position player will be almost identical to the experience of an elite point guard or power forward.



As Jones, Michel and more than 180 other players tried out Saturday at Hallandale High, **Katherine Sulentic [RWU Law '09]** watched from the sidelines. **Sulentic**, an assistant director of enforcement for the NCAA, came to see the phenomenon for herself. She wasn't investigating anyone in particular. She wanted to gather information on the phenomenon that she could take back to Indianapolis and share with the rest of the enforcement staff so that college sports' governing body can try to keep football recruiting -- which is shady enough as it is -- from reaching basketball's level.

The NCAA and some college coaches worry that adding another layer of third-parties will increase the number of people looking for illegal payments to steer players to certain schools. In football, high school coaches remain primary conduits to players in most cases. That changed long ago in basketball. A high school coach, unlike a third-party hanger-on, might lose his livelihood if he runs afoul of NCAA rules. As the NCAA has learned in basketball, there is no such fear among those who hang around an elite travel team. The good news for the NCAA is that its football recruiting rules do eliminate one potential minefield. Unlike basketball, where college coaches can attend certain travel-team tournaments and potentially break NCAA contact rules, football coaches are not allowed to watch the travel team tournaments at the moment.

"In talking to them, there's nothing [the NCAA] can do stop [seven-on-seven football]," said Baron Flenory, the Texas-based former New Hampshire player who founded New Level Athletics and the series of tournaments in which teams such as the Express play. "There's nothing illegal about it. They just want to keep an eye on the people at the forefront of it."

Flenory, who staged his first tournament matching regional all-star teams in 2008, is at the forefront because he devised a way to stage tournaments that drew most of the nation's top players. This year, Flenory is trying to form a governing body he calls the New Level Athletics Association to help raise money for teams to travel to tournaments. He said players flocked to tryouts in New Jersey and Maryland, and he expects even more teams than last year at regional tournaments this spring on the campuses of Rutgers, South Florida, UNLV, Michigan and Alabama. (Also, because Flenory knows seven-on-seven leaves out a significant -- and large -- portion of every football team, he plans to stage a line camp featuring team competition on the morning before each regional tournament begins.)

Also at the forefront is Express founder Brett Goetz, who will send his team to Flenory's tournaments but who has no intention of joining the association. Goetz, a financial planner who worked extensively with an Optimist Club youth league before he launched the Express, wants his team to remain independent. Goetz welcomed the NCAA into his tryout because he said he wants to operate "with transparency." Like the NCAA, he worries about the shady characters who always seem to know how to find elite players and then try to cash in on them.

How ubiquitous are such people? Isaac McDonald, a 6-6 sophomore receiver from Champagnat Catholic in Hialeah, Fla., estimated he receives about eight calls a week from people interested in helping his football career. Asked how they tracked down his cell phone number, McDonald was at a loss. "I don't know," he said.

One move by Goetz this past winter confirmed that elite travel football has moved to the next stage in its evolution. In past years, Goetz has scrounged for low-level sponsorships and plowed his own money into the Express. A few months ago, he made a deal with Under Armour. Unlike travel basketball coaches who receive stipends from apparel companies for outfitting their teams in clothing festooned with Swoosh or interlocking UA logos, Goetz won't be paid. But he won't have to dip into his own pocket anymore to provide uniforms for his team. Under Armour will handle all of that, beginning with the gear Express coaches wore this past weekend and the shirt given to each player who attended the tryout.

It's unclear how many similar teams around the country have struck such deals, but it's obvious why elite travel football would be attractive to apparel companies. Most of the players who played in last year's Badger Sport/New Level Athletics National 7-on-7 Tournament either signed with Division I schools or will sign with them as seniors. In last year's final, future Louisville signee Teddy Bridgewater threw passes to class of 2012 LSU commitment Avery Johnson for the Express against Oregon-bound De'Anthony "Black Mamba" Thomas, who played for a Los Angeles-based team called the 1925 All-Stars that was coached by former NFL stars Keyshawn Johnson and Brian Kelly. When possession changed, Stanford-bound defensive back Wayne Lyons covered USC-bound receiver Victor Blackwell.

The tournament, which was held at Alabama's football complex in Tuscaloosa, was crawling with reporters from Rivals.com and Scout.com, the two leading recruiting services. At the Express tryout this year, Rivals and Scout were joined by 247Sports, a new recruiting service launched late last year by the founders of Rivals.

As players left the registration table Saturday, they stood in front of a South Florida Express backdrop, where reporters from each service took their picture for use in their profiles on each website. Some, such as Miramar (Fla.) High cornerback Tracy Howard, were well known to the recruiting service reporters. (Howard might be the nation's top cornerback prospect in the class of 2012.) Others, such as Jones, hoped to get exposure.

While Goetz and Flenory don't always see eye-to-eye about the direction of elite seven-on-seven football, they do agree on one point: It gets players noticed by college coaches. "One of the things we've found with seven-on-seven, aside from it being like AAU-style travel basketball, is that it helps kids get recruited," Flenory said. "There are no 40 times. They play a lot more football."

Flenory believes the system of traditional camps -- which measure players' speed with 40-yard dashes and agility drills -- is outdated. A.J. Sebastiano, who played receiver for the Express last season, would agree. Sebastiano, from North Broward Prep in Coconut Grove, Fla., was virtually unknown in the recruiting world before he showed up at the Express tryout in January 2010 and destroyed defensive backs being recruited by BCS-conference schools.

Coaches who only looked at Sebastiano's 40-yard dash time (in the 4.6-second range) were turned off. But his performance in the tryout and in a Tampa tournament against the best players in Florida inspired a closer look. Sebastiano still had to produce in an 11-on-11 setting for his high school last fall, but that production wouldn't matter if no college coaches watched. After his stint with the Express, Sebastiano was on their radar. Last week, Sebastiano signed with Northern Illinois. Saturday, he proudly wore a Northern Illinois hat and encouraged younger players at the tryout not to be intimidated by the better-known players.

Zeke Pike, a star Class of 2012 quarterback from Edgewood, Ky., said it isn't only unknown players who reap the benefits of playing in the tournaments. Pike estimates he had about a dozen scholarship offers when he joined Flenory's Texas-based Goon Squad team at last year's national tournament. But in the days after Pike's breakout performance, schools higher on the food chain began to inquire about Pike's availability. Suddenly, LSU, Arkansas, Florida and Alabama wanted to know more about Pike, who now estimates he has more than 40 scholarship offers. "That's when my name started to get out there -- when I competed against the best athletes in the country," Pike said. "It helped get me on the map more than I already was with the big schools."

Pike will happily reprise his role as the Goon Squad's quarterback this year. The fact that players of his caliber flock to these tournaments ensures that they will continue to grow -- even if the NCAA has reservations about them. That's especially true if players know their involvement might help them receive an invitation to a prestigious all-star game.

On Sunday, John Schmid, the director of player management for the U.S. Army All-American Bowl, extended the first invitation for the 2012 game to Miramar's Howard. When Schmid approached Goetz about extending the invitation, Goetz worried higher-ups at Under Armour -- which partners with ESPN to stage a competing all-star game -- might be offended, but he decided to allow Schmid to extend the invitation because, Goetz said, his main mission is to help players get as much exposure as possible so they can earn college scholarships.

Not long after Schmid handed Howard an information packet about the all-star game, someone handed Howard a cell phone. On the line was a coach from the University of Miami, which offered Howard a scholarship when he was a sophomore.

Off to the side, Jones watched Howard and smiled. A year from now, that could be him. "This is the traveling seven-on-seven team that'll get your name out there," Jones said. "Whatever they've got to offer, that's what I want to know."

*For full story, click [here](#).*