

Finding your Passion: The Gina Mizell Story

The clock reads 5 seconds and your team is a field goal away from heading to the BCS National Championship game. The ball is set and all of a sudden a yellow flag flies into the left hand side of your television screen. “Offside!” you scream as the referee turns on his microphone to confirm your penalty call. And, just like this, Gina Mizell’s career was born.

Mizell began her journalism career sitting around her television set watching football¹ games with her family around the age of 11. Little did she know that calling plays and writing about sports would eventually lead to her meal ticket, but she did know it was something she was passionate about. Mizell said: “I would sit around and watch games, make a comment about what was happening and then five seconds later the person calling the game or analyst would say the same thing. [My] family members would laugh and say, “You should do THAT,” and just point to the TV. I did not really know THAT meant journalism until high school.”

In high school, Mizell experienced her first journalism class and found that news writing came fairly easy to her. She knew from the start she always wanted to be a sports writer, even though her very first published piece for her high school newspaper was over a fashion show. Her senior year she became the sports editor for her high school newspaper and only applied to schools that had excellent journalism programs.

After receiving a pretty hefty scholarship from one of the Top-5 ranked journalism schools in the nation, Mizell settled in at Arizona State University. She received exceptional training in and outside of the classroom. She learned all aspects of broadcasting and joined the student newspaper, The State Press, as a freshman.

¹ Football throughout this article is referring to American football

She worked her way up and eventually became the sports editor for the newspaper. Mizell said: “I interned at TV and radio stations and saw a ton of the behind-the-scenes stuff. I was a stringer for The Arizona Republic and covered a ton of high school games on deadline, which is honestly one of the most difficult things to do in this field. That all gave me great experience and a versatile skill set as I prepared to enter the workforce.”

After college, Mizell landed her first career position as an intern with MLB.com. She covered the San Diego Padres and experienced first-hand what it was like being a beat writer. Mizell said: “That was an amazing experience because I truly got to see what it is like to work a beat on a day-to-day basis and what it takes to come up with fresh ideas and to bring interesting content to readers every day throughout a long season.” She attended all 90 home games that season and was mentored by full-time beat writer Corey Brock.

She then landed her first full-time position as a sports reporter for The Beaumont Enterprise. She mainly covered football for the only FCS college around, Lamar University, and high school football. It was in this job where she learned the foundation of what every sports journalist needs in order to be successful in the business. Mizell said: “I worked with a fantastic sports editor, Jon Styf, who was very hands-on and really pushed me to become a better reporter and storyteller. He told me to get my hands on anything Gary Smith had written and learn from that. That was something I really needed at that time and made me appreciate what a craft sports writing actually is.”

After making a connection with an Oklahoma sportswriter, Jenni Carlson, at a convention for the Association for Women in Sports Media (AWSM), Mizell caught her big break. In July 2011, two sports writing positions covering the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University opened up at The Oklahoman newspaper

in Oklahoma City and Carlson sought out Mizell asking if she was interested. Mizell immediately sent in her resume and before she knew it, she was moving to Oklahoma to cover the Oklahoma State University Cowboy football team.

Mizell currently remains The Oklahoman's OSU sports journalist and beat writer and covers every home and away game for the Cowboys. In addition to just writing, Mizell is featured and co-hosts in several video interviews and has a blog that follows just about every OSU move. She is very active on Twitter as well, with 6,599 followers. Mizell has made a name for herself in the Big 12 college football world, proving that her hard work and consistency has paid off.

Her writing is innovative and creates an illustration in the reader's mind. Covering football can sometimes become repetitive and bland, but Mizell writes with a twist and always leaves the reader intrigued. Her work is relevant to any OSU sports fan because she reports the facts and writes in a way where you can tell she has a genuine investment in producing quality articles. She eats, breathes and sleeps OSU football and it shows in her incredible work. If there is breaking news that occurs at 3 a.m., Mizell has already tweeted it by 3:02 a.m. and has a story out by 3:30 a.m.

When it comes to the Oklahoma State versus University of Oklahoma rivalry, Mizell has no hard feelings. She works in close quarters with Berry Tramel, who covers OU football as part of his job, but what many do not know is that he also splits his time covering some OSU football and Oklahoma City Thunder basketball. She also works in near quarters with Jenni Carlson, the journalist that helped jumpstart her career. These three journalists all may cover different sports and teams, but they also work together quite often to produce quality pieces for their paper's website and print.

Mizell's work has come a long way and has revolutionized into something impressive that will only continue to grow. When comparing her work from 2009 to work she produced just three days ago, you can tell a seasoned writer has emerged. Not only did she go from covering small-town high school football to a hugely successful Big 12 football team, but she also grew into her own writing and developed a voice in a competitive journalism world. She has made huge strides and keeps the reader engaged from the very first word all the way to the last.

Throughout her career, Mizell has faced many challenges and she will continue to face new ones, since we now live in a rapidly advancing technological world. Her first struggle is, of course, the decline in newspapers. She has had to learn how to write not only for print, but also for the web. Mizell said: "The decisions about how we try to monetize content on the web and get more print subscribers and such are made by [people] way above me on the food chain, so I just keep working to produce the best work that I can on every platform that I can. The fact that those types of things are out of your control can be a bit unsettling."

Another challenge Mizell faces is how to manage her professional and personal life. Being a journalist is a full-time job and, even when you are sleeping, you are expected to be on call. Since football started at the end of July, Mizell has only had a total of three days off. Mizell said: "That has been the biggest challenge for me personally--finding a balance between work and personal life. Because right now, I do not have one. At all. I obviously care deeply about my job and want to go full out with that because it is the whole reason I moved to Oklahoma in the first place. I honestly don't know how anybody with a spouse or children do this job the way it needs to be done in 2013."

More specifically, Mizell's job becomes especially challenging when the coaches have the power to dictate who and when players and other coaches can speak

with the media. Herein lies the problem: if you cannot speak to anyone, how are you supposed to find your story? College football journalists now have to become especially creative when it comes to getting story ideas. Mizell said: “We have still found ways to stretch outside the box and tell some cool stories, but the way you get insight and build trust with sources is by being around. I am not able to be around as much as I used to be, and it honestly has made me question how much longer I want to cover college football.”

Mizell just wants to strive to be the very best journalist she can be. She does not feed into all of the ‘competitiveness’ or ‘rivalry’ that is thought to surround reporting college football. In a society where true journalism is often overshadowed by fan-based blogs, Mizell stays focused on the real side of journalism, one candid article at a time.