

CHICAGO BULLS
4
BRYAN SLOAN
1966-1978

CHICAGO BULLS
10
BOB LOVE
1976-1993

CHICAGO BULLS
23
MICHAEL JORDAN
1982-1993
1995-1998

CHICAGO BULLS
33
SCOTTIE PIPPEN
1987-1998
2001-2004

UNITED CENTER

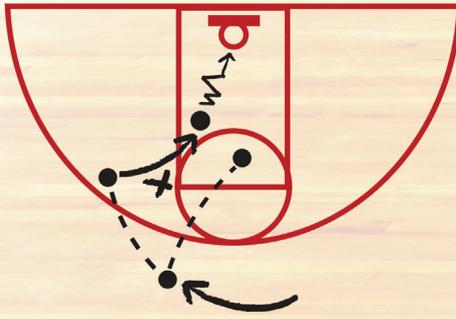




A NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF THE
**CHICAGO
BULLS**
DIGITAL MEDIA TEAM

The Chicago Bulls digital media team turns basketball games into content bonanzas, using the second-screen to make money, collect data and humanize players

By Hal Conick

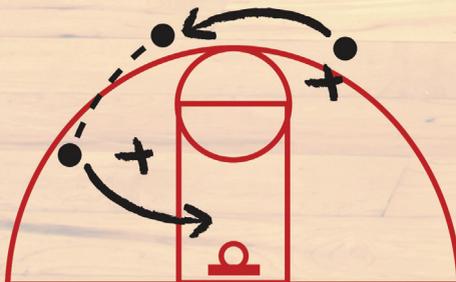


Samantha Brown squeezes past a force field of arms, cameras and microphones surrounding Fred Hoiberg, head coach of the Chicago Bulls, during his pregame press conference.

Brown—balancing two iPhones, a purple pen and an armful of papers—furiously types the coach’s words into one of her phones. Within moments, Hoiberg’s words float from his mouth to Brown, the Bulls’ social media coordinator, to the Bulls’ 4 million Twitter followers.

This moment is emblematic of sports media in the digital era. Three years ago, most information about a sports franchise or its players would trickle out through journalists, bloggers or TV and radio hosts, with franchise PR teams chiming in to clean up messes. Now, sports franchises have control over their brand, voice and the public’s perception of players.

In the case of the Bulls, this control means 20 people at each game create content, including a digital content team that snaps, tweets, posts and, in their words, humanizes the players. Many fans may think of NBA players as basketball automatons, machines created to score buckets, but Brown wants to show that they’re more than that: They’re human.



To humanize the players, Brown must first remember that she's human. As soon as Hoiberg's press conference ends, she hotfoots toward the media and staff's buffet. It's her last chance to eat for the next seven hours. In roughly two hours, a January game against the Los Angeles Lakers will tip off, but game day started hours ago for the digital media team. With 25 million followers across the Bulls' social media accounts, the digital team often works 16 hours—morning 'til night—returning for work at 10 a.m. the next day.

Brown zips through the back hallways of the United Center, past the locker rooms and toward the elevators that lead to the digital team's office in the arena's recent 190,000-square-foot addition. Brown slows her pace briefly to greet players and staff—the people on the court, on the road and behind the scenes whom she gets to know over 82 games. "They're each other's biggest supporters," Brown says of young Bulls players, 24 years old on average, who post congratulatory messages to one another after big games. To her benefit, the team's youth means players are also social media-savvy, some checking Instagram five minutes after a game ends, she says. Bulls players also tend to their own budding brands, posting photos of themselves that Brown sends them after games.

For Brown, working in sports marketing is a dream, but the dream certainly isn't restful. Brown remembers her first game nearly three years ago when she felt herself being pulled in a million different directions. "I had to Google how to spell 'the,'" she says. "I just kept looking like, this can't be right." The flow of her job—posting highlight videos, taking photos, greeting fans who message the team across multiple platforms—is now easier, more binary, but the rapid speed hasn't changed, nor has the need to react in the moment. Highlight dunks happen in a flash, so does breaking news. But with humanity and attention to detail, Brown believes the Bulls can win over fans.

GAME TIME

Three stories up from the court, Brown finds her digital colleagues sitting around a rectangular table in the Pippen Conference Room, named for six-time Bulls champion Scottie Pippen. The digital team, which employs twice as many members as it did two years ago, all wear matching fuzzy, gray Bulls sweaters. They discuss the long night ahead of them, including their

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#Bulls are are coming back fast, 62-57.

Portis: 14pts / 4reb / 1ast
Valentine: 10pts / 2ast / 1reb
Grant: 9pts / 5ast

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33 Retweets **152** Likes

👤 Bobby BP Portis

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roles during tonight's game, breaking it down by each teammate. Brown will run social media as usual, connecting with fans online and in person at the arena.

Dan Moriarty is the Bulls' digital director. He'll oversee operations, ensuring the night runs smoothly and filling in on content creation—or running around the arena to meet with special guests of the team—when needed.

Luka Dukich is the Bulls' senior digital content manager. Tonight he'll be responsible for

Each member of the digital team feels a kinship with the players. “They’re our guys,” Dukich says. “We’re seeing them grow in Bulls uniforms.”

posting highlights of the game to Facebook and Instagram, as well as working with a Chicago photographer who is doing an Instagram takeover of the Bulls’ feed during the game.

Matt Moreno, whose relaxed grin and leaned-back posture betray his experience, is the Bulls’ senior product manager. After nine years on the job, he’s the longest-tenured member of the digital team. Tonight, he’ll create graphics, video highlights and pull photos to be posted on social media.

Kamil Strycharz is the digital content coordinator and, at 22, the team’s youngest member. Just last year, he was an intern. Now, Moriarty says he’ll see Strycharz posting content in the wee hours of the morning, uncertain if he’s scheduling the content or simply doesn’t sleep. Tonight Strycharz will manage Twitter, “a full-time job in and of itself,” Dukich says.

Each member of the digital team feels a kinship with the players. “They’re our guys,” Dukich says. “We’re seeing them grow in Bulls uniforms.” Moriarty says humanization is their main goal this season. This team is still relatively unknown. “It makes the team more likeable to show their personality,” Moriarty says. “There’s a sense among fans that they’re actually seeing development and growth in front of them. That’s helped a lot of fans get on board.”

Before the season started, the digital team had trouble humanizing Bulls players. The roster features no all-stars, no players known by most casual NBA fans and few players who were on past Bulls rosters. Last year’s stars—Jimmy Butler, Rajon Rondo and Dwyane Wade—were all traded or released, yet Wade remains on the cover of a United Center marketing pamphlet still handed out in the stadium.

Adding to the digital team’s difficulty is the odd fact that many Bulls fans want the team to lose. In the NBA, the worst teams are given the best odds of drafting premier talent in the NBA Draft. Given the Bulls’ perceived lack of talent, a surge of Bulls fans clamored for the team to tank in order to secure a young star. Add to that the collective middle finger fans aimed at the Bulls’ front office in July 2017: A group of Bulls fans—angered at a series of trades—raised money to rent a billboard near the stadium that said “#FireGarPax,” referring to Bulls general manager Gar Forman and vice president of basketball operations John Paxson.

The Bulls started the season 3-20, pleasing

tank-happy fans. However, the scrappy young team won seven games in a row in December, making the digital team’s job easier. The Bulls’ refusal to quit endeared the team to many fans, who then took to social media to interact with the Bulls’ social media accounts. “People really embraced the team,” Dukich says of the Bulls players. Brown nods her head, agreeing: “It’s been a huge shift, and it’s noticeable.” The Bulls’ Twitter mentions and Snapchat inbox fill throughout the day—a notification seems to pop up on Brown’s work phone every few seconds. Many messages are still vitriolic, but most fans are friendly. As Moreno puts it: “Fans now get that we’re not Gar Forman at the computer.”

As the first quarter draws near, Dukich, Moreno and Strycharz flip open their laptops, crack their knuckles and prepare for the evening’s frenetic pace. Strycharz kicks back in his chair, mimicking Moreno, as Dukich pulls up software and social dashboards. Meanwhile, Brown waits courtside to film Snapchat videos of the starting five’s introductions, and Moriarty searches for ticket upgrades for special guests of the team. Win or lose, the digital team is in for a busy night.

FIRST QUARTER

Before the game starts, Dukich finds Facebook gold—or at least he thinks so. “Can we make a GIF of that?” he says, pointing toward the screen showing a pre-game ritual between Bulls big men Robin Lopez and Nikola Mirotić. “They touched each other’s noses.”

“I’ve seen them do that before,” Moreno says, eyes jutting from his laptop to the game.

“I got it, Matt Mo,” Dukich yelps, quickly cutting the celebration in a video editing program. The program is called WSC Sports, an artificial intelligence video platform that segments each basket into its own video, allowing the digital team to cut and post highlights within seconds. WSC even rates clips on a starred scale: Boring, mid-range jumpers get one star; earth-shattering dunks that send the announcer into a fit of hysterics get five stars. “It works on crowd and announcer noise,” Dukich says. Within moments of the pre-game ritual, Dukich cuts a video in WSC, turns it into a GIF and posts it to Facebook.

Three seasons ago, WSC wasn’t an option for the digital team. Fans would often post clips more quickly than the team, which sapped likes and engagement. Now, five-star highlight plays can be

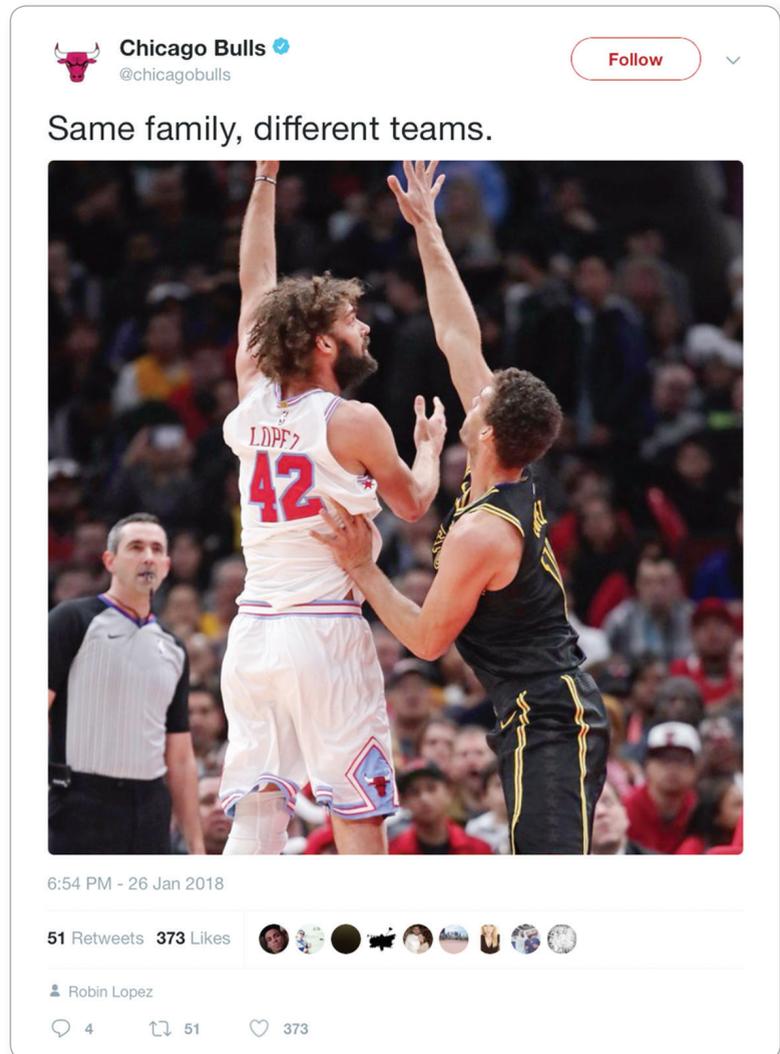
posted within 30 seconds.

“WSC might be the real MVP of the NBA,” Moreno says.

The Pippen Conference Room is filled with screens—two on the wall and two near each team member. In many ways, this multiscreen viewing experience mirrors the way fans watch games, as Google estimates that 77% of TV viewers fiddle with a second screen. STATS, a sports data and technology company, says this fan fiddling is not a threat to first-screen sports viewing but an opportunity for complementary content and campaigns. The Bulls’ digital team takes advantage of the opportunity to pioneer sports on the second screen, morphing from fruitless play-by-play posts—content dated as soon as it’s posted—to a multiplatform content machine. The team customizes content to each channel, Moriarty says: Twitter is active and responsive, Facebook shows “best of” highlights and score updates, Snapchat gives fans a behind-the-scenes perspective of a game, Instagram features in-game action shots by professional photographers and the Bulls’ website hosts videos, scores, fan games and documentaries.

The Bulls’ digital team receives almost no budget, but with sponsorship comes funding. Revenue generated from sponsored content has doubled over the past three seasons, Moriarty says. Sponsors realize that Bulls fans are online, responsive and interactive—even with ads—which has led to sponsorship deals with BMO Harris Bank, TransUnion, Papa John’s and Polish fintech company Cinkciarz. The team superimposes brand logos on posts throughout games, creating graphics from key stats or the game’s score. Some posts hinge on the Bulls being ahead or close in score—especially during make-or-break moments in the second half—but others go live no matter the context of the game. Brands pay for these sponsorships in bulk, Dukich says, and the digital media team finds creative ways to post them. Whether the Bulls win or lose, sponsors will get in front of 25 million followers.

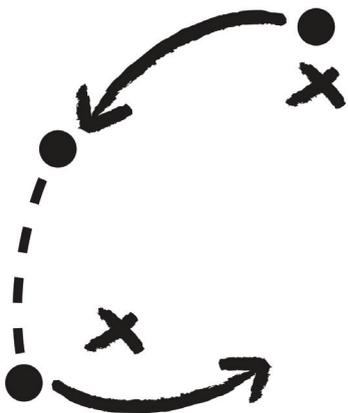
The Bulls have also devised a way to transform social media money pits—like Twitter and Snapchat—into cash cows. On Twitter, the team uses Twitter Amplify, Moriarty says, which generates money by affixing seven-second ads to videos. On Snapchat, Dukich says the team has thrived on unconventional sponsored content. For example, the Bulls produced a viral hit with a



“Beauty and the Beast”-inspired musical, written with Chicago’s Second City and sponsored by BMO Harris Bank. The musical featured Bulls center Robin Lopez playing a villain à la Gaston and unashamedly belting out a tune with his deep voice while chasing the Bulls’ mascot across the arena. Dukich could barely sleep the night before the Snapchat musical went live. “Why are they letting us do this?” Dukich asked himself. But fans loved it.

“We were seeing people stay and watch the entire video rather than dropping off after three snaps,” Dukich says. Within hours, the musical Snapchat story went viral, receiving coverage from USA Today and ESPN’s “SportsCenter.”





BMO's logo was clearly displayed for millions of unique viewers.

"The piece of content everyone was talking about is sponsored," Dukich says. Most other teams think of sponsored content as a necessary evil, but the Bulls have found that sponsored content, when created with humor and personality, is enjoyable for fans and profitable for the team.

Sponsored content helped the Bulls win the Best in Sports Social Media award at the Sports Business Awards, beating out the WWE, NBC Sports, the Dallas Cowboys and Major League Soccer. Moriarty, stunned by the victory, says judges told him the team won because it monetized content across platforms.

"Yo, is this score for real?" Moreno says, looking up at the game from his computer. The digital team doesn't get to focus much on the flow of the game, but they notice the team's scoring slumps as much as they notice its scoring runs. It's the end of the first quarter and the Bulls' offense looks torpid, its defense tortured. The team is down 17-30; it's a slow night for social media highlights.

Although the Bulls are down, the team in the Pippen Conference Room creates content at an intense pace. Dukich scrolls down to the Lopez-Mirotić post. "Now I'm glad I grabbed that pre-game," he says. Facebook tells him the GIF is performing 90% better than other posts.

SECOND QUARTER

Brown is on a mission, zooming through the winding backstage hallways of the United Center. She's searching for a 200-level seating section where a couple from New Zealand said they'd be sitting. Early that morning, one of them, AJ Sullivan, tweeted at the Bulls that he and his wife, Emma Sullivan, would be flying into Chicago specifically to see the game for Emma's 40th birthday. Moriarty found two 100-level seat upgrades and a bag of Bulls gear and gave it to Brown to surprise the couple.

"I don't usually venture out," Brown says, rushing into the concourse behind the 200-level seating, briefly lost in the arena's twists and turns. "Hopefully these people are here."

Brown finds the Sullivans watching the game, big smiles plastered across their faces. She shimmies to their seats, leans in close to Emma and hands her the bag and envelope. Emma's eyes widen, her hands shake. Tears stream down her cheeks as she reaches up to cover her mouth. "Can I give you a hug?" Emma asks, arms extending toward Brown. "Happy birthday," Brown says, bending down and embracing her.

"Oh my god, she's crying," Brown says as the couple gleefully stride down the stairs to their new 100-level seats. "I'm going to start crying." On the way down, Sullivan tells Brown that she's been a fan of the Bulls for 25 years, even naming her first son Jordan after Bulls legend Michael Jordan. Seeing the team live has been her life's dream. "I've waited 25 years for this," Sullivan says, fanning her face to dry her tears.

Brown snaps a picture for Twitter of the Sullivans showing off their new Bulls bags over their Bulls jerseys. As the Sullivans scamper to

their seats, Brown shakes her head in disbelief. “This is my favorite part of the job,” she says, breathing deeply to hold back tears. “I have goosebumps.”

Goosebump moments don’t happen every game, but the digital team communicates with its fans through social platforms 24 hours a day—including the 70% of followers from outside of the U.S. The team’s popularity spurted in the 1980s during Michael Jordan’s ascent to stardom and reached its zenith during Jordan’s dominant years in the 1990s, which included six championships. Jordan’s shadow has stretched through time, captivating a devoted generation of Bulls fans, which has translated to billions of dollars and millions of social followers for the team. This year, Forbes named the Bulls the fourth-most valuable NBA franchise with a net worth of \$2.6 billion. The Bulls also have 18.5 million Facebook followers, the second-highest among U.S. sports franchises, behind only the Lakers, per Fan Page List.

The digital team tries to carry this momentum forward by being humanized on social, Brown says—posting in a person’s voice rather than that of a brand and reaching out to fans in real life, beyond the social networks. During road games, she’ll find fans in Bulls gear and give them a free hat or T-shirt. “They celebrate like they won a million bucks,” she says. On one occasion, the Bulls were tagged on Reddit and Twitter by posters who alerted the team to a young fan named Rocco who was battling cancer and hoping for a cheer-up message from his favorite player, Bulls guard Kris Dunn. The Bulls sent Rocco a care package of Bulls gear and posted a video from Dunn on Twitter: “We’re thinking about you,” Dunn says in the short clip. In response, the Bulls received a picture of Rocco lying back in a hospital bed, decked out in Bulls gear and sunglasses, flashing a big smile. “This team means the world to people,” Brown says.

As the second quarter ends, Brown glides up to the United Center’s video control room, an eerily silent room of screens where a director’s voice dominates the tense atmosphere. Brown is still beaming and red-faced from her meeting with the Sullivans. On the court the Bulls battled back, now within four points of the Lakers, but Brown is more concerned that the team’s message to Emma appears on the scoreboard. Just then,

the message flashes across the scoreboard’s screen: “All the way from New Zealand, happy birthday Emma!”

“That’s awesome,” Brown says, smiling as she takes a rare pause. “I hope she sees it.”

THIRD QUARTER

A baby-faced duo sit, headphones over ears, in a dark room lit by two computer screens and a live projection of the Bulls game on the wall. Chris Ramirez and Dan Charous, members of the BullsTV team, are slowing down a clip of Bulls forward Denzel Valentine shooting a three-point shot in the second quarter. The video is edited to look rustic and cinematic, a crescendo of music rising in the background. Within moments, the clip is sent to the digital team to be posted online.

The creation of the high-quality video is a fast, multiperson effort: Two BullsTV cameramen move through the stadium, filming the game from angles that TV cameras can’t capture. Within moments of a big play, a runner brings a video memory card containing the play to the editing room, where Ramirez and Charous edit the clip for Instagram (edited to fit portrait mode), Facebook (edited for its 16x9 aspect ratio widescreen video player) or YouTube and the Bulls website (shot in 4K). Within moments, cinematic fretwork is carved into the Bulls’ social networks.

The BullsTV team is another cog in the Bulls’ content machine. In addition to in-game video, BullsTV produces a pregame show for Bulls.com, films commercials and produces a documentary series called “Run With Us.” The series is similarly cinematic, like the Valentine highlight, but gives viewers an up-close look at players at practice, in the weight room and during their downtime. Fans can see when friendships are formed and milestones are reached—such as guard Zach LaVine’s return to practice after his ACL surgery. “Media can’t get that stuff,” Moriarty says.

The Bulls also have a cadre of artists working to make the team more visually appealing. For example, Chicago photographer Elise Swopes took over the Bulls Instagram feed for tonight’s Bulls-Lakers game, snapping photos at court level, then sending them to the digital team. Swopes is one of approximately a dozen artists who works with the Bulls digital team. Another Chicago-based artist, Chuck Anderson (aka NoPattern), has taken over the Bulls’ Instagram in the past, but for tonight’s game, he’s designed

“Our stance is: They’re going to be on their phones during the game anyway, so we might as well be the thing they’re looking at.”



a flashy-logoed Bulls hat to be given away at the game.

“We’ve been able to tap into the Chicago creative community and get them to work with us,” Dukich says. “The Bulls brand name is so strong that the first Instagram takeovers were unpaid because the artists just wanted to do it.”

The Bulls’ pull extends to technology, Moriarty says. The team has received discounts on CRM systems, content management systems and more than 30 other pieces of technology. A software company’s case studies look better with the team’s logo and brand name splashed across them, Moriarty says. The technological boon has led to better data on fans. For example, the Bulls’ Fanbeat challenge, a second-screen trivia game, draws approximately 1,500 players during each game, Moriarty says. There are 20 questions a night, running concurrently with the Bulls game, featuring unknowable questions like “Will the Bulls lead at any point in the fourth quarter?” Fans who answer correctly can win tickets, merchandise or, for those who answer all 20 questions correctly, \$1 million (which has yet to be won). Through this platform, the Bulls get data from clearly engaged fans—e-mail addresses, zip codes, lead scoring for ticket sales—previously shielded by television. Nielsen boxes can’t deliver this kind of information, Moriarty says of the

game’s more than 7,000 unique registered players. “Our stance is: They’re going to be on their phones during the game anyway, so we might as well be the thing they’re looking at.”

By the end of the third quarter, the Phippen Conference Room sounds like a sports bar in Chicago—minus the slurring—as the digital team members holler for the Bulls’ comeback. “We’re winning this one,” Moriarty says to Moreno, Dukich and Strycharz, joyfully hitting the table as the Bulls go up 75-72. “He’s on fire,” Strycharz says, putting an arm up as Mirotić splashes home his fourth three-pointer of the game. The digital media team scrambles for a long night. “Get the ‘Bulls Win’ graphics ready,” Dukich says.

FOURTH QUARTER

Real-time Bulls highlights flash across the Phippen Conference Room’s big screens.

“That’s money!” Dukich yelps as Bulls forward Lauri Markkanen hits another three-pointer. “Should we do a highlight of all of his threes or just that one?”

But highlights quickly dim into lowlights. The Bulls on-court product falls apart. In life, heartbreak takes many different forms; for sports fans, it tends to manifest as a frustrated yell followed by a resigned sigh.



“Uuugh,” Dukich grunts before crossing his arms, whistling and turning his attention back to creating content. Just like NBA players, the digital media team must have thick skin and short memories.

Still, it’s disappointing to lose—even from a content standpoint. There’s a big difference between wins and losses for the digital team. A win means more likes, more views and more engagement with fans. It also means more content, such as a quiz the team would create for the Chicago Tribune as part of a media partnership. “But we’re not going to make a quiz titled ‘Last Night’s Loss to the Lakers,’” Dukich says with a sigh.

During a nail-biter, the digital team stays in the office long past midnight to produce a stream of content—the best possible outcome is a buzzer-beating victory, Moriarty says, because the night will be rich with clicks and content. On those hectic nights, he doesn’t feel a five-person team is big enough to keep up. After losses, Moriarty says the digital team feels like it has twice as many people as it needs. “Here, we fell apart for the last two minutes, and I haven’t put anything up on Facebook or Instagram,” Dukich says, gesturing toward the big screens.

During insurmountable blowouts, Moriarty will send half his team home early. “It’s a lot less

content,” Dukich says. The team learned that fans don’t want their social feeds jammed with content after losses. After one lopsided loss last season, the digital team posted a highlight dunk and fans reacted terribly, Dukich says. “People know when you’re fake,” he says, now resigned to an early night. “It takes one shitty piece of content for someone to unfollow. Then, they’re gone forever.”

Contracts with sponsors stay the same when the team loses, he says, even if certain pieces of content can’t be posted. The content will have to come another time. “Sometimes it’s kind of nice to get home at a normal time,” Dukich says, shrugging.

POSTGAME

Brown elbows through another media scrum, this time in the Bulls’ diminuendo locker room. Players are clearly disappointed to lose. Their shoulders slumped, their eyes sullen, their voices muted—save for one player who sings in the shower. Brown, however, can’t afford to be glum; her camera needs to be right there, in the players’ faces, to broadcast interviews on Facebook Live, so fans can get to know them as humans.

Bulls guard Ryan Arcidiacono clears a path for Brown as she camps directly in front of Mirotić, giving Facebook fans a tight shot of the Montenegrin’s bearded face (in less than two weeks, Mirotić will have been traded to the New Orleans Pelicans). Brown deftly steps around pairs of \$300 sneakers and full-to-the-brim buckets of ice water to broadcast Bulls guard Zach LaVine, still sweaty and sad-eyed. Bulls center Cristiano Felício places his giant hand on Brown’s shoulder when she’s finished broadcasting—“Oh! I thought that was you,” she says, craning her neck to meet the eyes of the 6’9” Brazilian—and the two share a brief laugh before she moves past the media, out of the locker room and into an elevator. It’s time to finish the evening in the Pippen Conference Room.

In the elevator, Brown slumps against the wall, exhausted. A Bulls cheerleader asks if she wants to go out for drinks. “No, I need sleep,” Brown says. She’s off the next game, but then flies with the team for a West Coast road trip—Portland, Los Angeles and Sacramento, all within six days. Each day, the process will start anew, 2,000 miles from home. But that’s OK with Brown; she has work to do. “We’re trying to tell the story of these guys growing,” she says, hiding a yawn. **m**

