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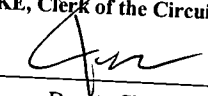
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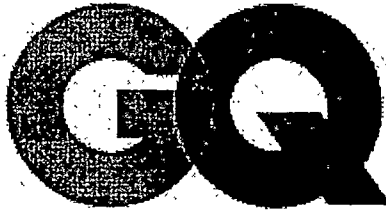
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**KEN BURKE, Clerk of the Circuit Court**

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Deputy Clerk

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Sports

## The Worldwide Leader in Dong Shots

With his leering coverage of Brett Favre's penis (allegedly!), Rex Ryan's foot fetish, and the surprising sex life of ESPN, A. J. Daulerio has turned Deadspin.com into the raunchiest, funniest, and most controversial sports site on the Web. But at what cost to his soul? And hell, to sports journalism itself?

BY GABRIEL SHERMAN | PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER YANG

February 2011



A.J. Daulerio was surprised that \$12,000 could fit into a single envelope. "I thought I'd need a hockey bag," he recalls, sort of kidding. It was early October, and Daulerio, the editor of the sports Web site Deadspin, had requisitioned the brick of 120 crisp hundreds to pay an anonymous source. In return, the source would hand over the voice mails from Brett Favre and photos he'd allegedly snapped of his penis and sent to Jenn Sterger, a Jets sideline reporter, during his one season with the team.

Now it's the first week of November, and Daulerio is telling me how he landed his most controversial scoop as we fly over a quilt of farmland on the way from New York to Indiana. In a few hours, he's expected in Indianapolis to participate in a panel discussion titled "Where's the Line? Sports Media in the Digital Age." More than any other sports journalist in years, Daulerio has been redefining where that line is, and then crashing over it. His tactics—reporting rumors, paying for news, and making Deadspin's money on stories that are really about sex, not sports—are questionable. His success is not. When he became editor of the site in July 2008, it had 700,000 readers per month. Today it has 2.3 million.

Going public with the Favre photos was originally Sterger's idea, Daulerio tells me. He was chatting with the former *Maxim* model one day early last year about contributing to Deadspin, "and she said something like, 'Do you want dong shots? Because I get them all the time.' I was like, 'Yeah, sure.' And she was like, 'Well, I'll get you dong shots. It's

unbelievable, the stuff I get. You won't believe who is the *worst* at it.' And then she went into the Brett Favre story." (Through a spokesperson, Sterger declined to comment.)

At the time, she was in talks with Versus, the sports network, to co-host a new talk show, and Daulerio says she got skittish that the scandal would torpedo her budding TV career. Six months passed, during which Daulerio says he confirmed the Favre story with multiple sources. He also heard that Sterger had forwarded the photos and voice mails, in which Favre flirts aggressively with her, to a number of friends. So in early August, with Sterger still declining to cooperate, he posted an item ("Brett Favre Once Sent Me Cock Shots: Not a Love Story"), hoping it would entice someone to send him the files. "I was throwing up the bat signal," he says.

It worked. About two weeks later, he says, he was contacted by a man who claimed to have the goods. Daulerio told his boss, Gawker Media founder-overlord Nick Denton, that he desperately wanted the scoop and was willing to pay for it. "I said, 'I'd mortgage the site for this. This is like Monica Lewinsky's dress for Drudge,'" "

Daulerio recalls.

Denton agreed to fly the source to New York, and on the afternoon of October 7, Daulerio met him at his hotel. He didn't bring the twelve grand. "What if I get whacked on the head?" he says. "It's always a possibility."

He looked at the photos and listened to the voice mails. Once Daulerio was satisfied that the voice was Favre's and the penis was, well, a penis, he and the source hopped in a cab and headed downtown to Gawker's SoHo offices. Daulerio ran upstairs, got the envelope, and brought it down to the street, where the source was waiting. After counting the money, the source handed Daulerio a paper-clip-sized USB drive with the files.

Before posting the photos and voice mails, Daulerio argued with Gawker's lawyer and chief operating officer, Gaby Darbyshire, over legal exposure. "She's like, 'You're willing to go to jail for this? It's just a dong shot,'" Daulerio recalls. "And I'm like, 'It's fucking *Brett Favre's* cock shot.' So yeah. If Brett Favre sued or [the pictures] were subpoenaed—I don't think they'd send me to jail for that, but given the choice, sure." In the end, Daulerio agreed to sign documents assuming responsibility for protecting the source's identity.

Immediately after posting, Daulerio says he sent the URL to "an intermediary" who confirmed—Daulerio won't say how—that it was, in fact, Favre's member in the pictures. No one has sued him (yet), and Deadspin had its first mainstream-media moment.

"I did like nine television shows in two days," Daulerio recalls. "The *Today* show called me on a Sunday at two thirty. It was brunch time with my girlfriend and a friend, and I was half in the bag. A couple of hours and two bong hits later, I'm doing an interview on the porch. Everyone is jamming Adderall to clean the place as quickly as possible. I was trying to find pants." The story has generated 5 million page views to date—and plenty of debate about the TMZ-ization of sports journalism. "It isn't a question of whether or not he should have done the story. It's a story," says Frank Deford, who's been writing for *Sports Illustrated* since 1962. "But aren't there better stories to do? Do we really want to know about Brett Favre trying to get laid? Wouldn't you rather spend your time delving into the evils of college athletics, or drugs and sports?"

Even Will Leitch, the founding editor of Deadspin and one of Daulerio's closest friends, has gotten a little queasy. At first, Leitch talked with Daulerio constantly about the site, hashing out ideas and offering advice. But in July 2009, when Daulerio posted a link to the Erin Andrews stalker video, Leitch thought he went too far. They remain close but no longer talk about Deadspin. Leitch, now a writer for *New York* magazine, told me he wouldn't have published the Favre photos: "I never wanted people to feel like they needed to take a shower."

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When Deadspin launched in 2005, it followed the original Gawker template: snark-laced riffs on other people's reporting, driven by the editor's voice. Leitch published a dozen carefully crafted posts per day, almost all of them commentary. But by March 2008, when Leitch poached Daulerio from *Philadelphia* magazine, Denton's focus had shifted. To build traffic, he insisted that his editors post far more often—up to forty times daily—and he expected them to break news, not just react to it.

This new model played to Daulerio's strengths. A dogged reporter who works the phones all day, he's also willing to go to some dark and seedy places. Daulerio's Deadspin still runs plenty of posts with highlight clips and headlines like "Michael Vick Does Dallas," but he also pioneered entire subgenres of coverage that are tagged on the site as *#mediameltdowns* and *#cellphonecockpictures*. Some posts don't even pretend to be sports-related. In December, Deadspin published an essay called "Fuck You, Charlie Brown," by contributing editor Drew Magary. An excerpt: "Charlie Brown is depressed. Lucy is a bossy cunt. Linus is a head case.... Whenever Snoopy talks, he sounds like a cat being raped. No one smiles."

Somehow, though, posts like this coexist with legitimate investigative journalism. Last August, Daulerio obtained secret financial documents from Major League Baseball franchises that revealed how owners employ creative accounting to juice profits. In December, he posted documents that exposed the dire financial condition of the NBA's New Orleans Hornets. And days after the Favre story broke, the NFL launched an investigation that led to a \$50,000 fine (a wrist-slap, true, but still plenty humiliating) for the future Hall of Famer.

Daulerio gets about 200 e-mails a day, a steady stream of tips about athletes, sports executives, and media personalities getting drunk, getting laid, and getting stupid. Nothing much surprises him, but the e-mail he received at 7:39 a.m. on May 16, 2010, made his eyes bulge. It was a fan letter from Buzz Bissinger, the famously

pugnacious Pulitzer-winning reporter who wrote *Friday Night Lights*. The previous afternoon, Daulerio had posted a short item praising Bissinger's unhinged Twitter feed. He never imagined that Bissinger might respond, let alone volunteer to write for a site he once publicly excoriated. During a 2008 appearance on *Costas Now*, Bob Costas's HBO show, Bissinger shredded Leitch for Deadspin's tone and journalistic standards. ("You're like Jimmy Olsen on Percocet," Bissinger barked.) Now, shockingly, he was volunteering to work for Daulerio: "Hey, I'm beginning to like writing like a blogger.... You should have me write regularly. Can't beat 'em join 'em. Deadspin has more power in its toe nail shavings than every newspaper combined."

Bissinger's about-face says a lot about how radically the sports-media landscape has shifted in the past few years. It says even more about Daulerio. "I have to say, I like what he's doing," Bissinger told me in a mid-November phone call. "He's breaking stories.... In terms of the Costas thing, I now twitter all the time and people go, 'You're just like Deadspin.' My response is, 'Well, yeah, I am. The world changes.'"

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"Reporting is the thing I was always good at," Daulerio tells me over beers when we meet after the Indianapolis panel at Scotty's Brewhouse, a sports bar just a few blocks from the Colts' home at Lucas Oil Stadium. Daulerio's ulterior motive for coming to Indy is to schmooze a source. For weeks now, he's been trying to get sports columnist and former ESPN commentator Jay Mariotti, who was arrested in August for allegedly beating up his girlfriend (and ultimately pleaded no contest to misdemeanor assault charges), to write a Deadspin piece about the experience. Since then Daulerio has been e-mailing with Mariotti's friend Bob Kravitz, a columnist with the *Indianapolis Star*, to try to get in contact with Mariotti. Daulerio is hoping Kravitz shows up tonight so he can keep working him.

He's in luck. Shortly after we sit down, Kravitz walks in with *Washington Post* sports columnist Mike Wise, who'd also sat on the panel. Daulerio blends right in, swapping stories with Wise and Kravitz like the traditional reporter he used to be. After growing up in Churchville, Pennsylvania, a blue-collar Philly suburb, and graduating from La Salle University in 1997, he bounced around small-town newspapers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. That's when he realized he had a natural talent for cultivating sources and getting people to tell him stuff they probably shouldn't. "When I was covering this one city council in Pennsylvania, I created relationships with each member," he says. "So when I left, all the members threw me a little party. It was at the VFW. They shut the doors, and it was a little *Bronx Tales*-ish: We drank all night. They gave me a police escort to get back on the turnpike so I wouldn't get pulled over."

The anecdote is vintage Daulerio: brash, boozy, self-mythologizing. "He's a throwback to an earlier era—when journalists had enough charisma to inspire movies," says Denton.

And like his tabloid forebears, Daulerio can be vindictive when he feels like he's been crossed. An hour into his first day as editor of Deadspin, he received an e-mail from Josh Krulewitz, a PR rep at ESPN. Krulewitz explained he was happy to answer ESPN-related questions and, quoting a line from *Airplane!*, closed with "'Good luck, we're all counting on you.'"

Daulerio fired off a reply based on a trove of anonymous tips he'd received over the years about extramarital and/or inappropriate sexual liaisons between ESPN employees. "I was like, okay. 'Is so-and-so banging so-and-so in the broom closet?'"

Krulewitz didn't know how to respond: "Um, you want me to comment right now?"

Despite the awkward introduction, Daulerio and Krulewitz developed an unlikely rapport. They e-mailed frequently, and Krulewitz was often quoted in Deadspin posts about ESPN.

On October 21, 2009, Daulerio blew the relationship to pieces. That morning, the *New York Post* reported that *ESPN Baseball Tonight* analyst Steve Phillips was embroiled in a sex scandal with a 22-year-old production assistant who went *Fatal Attraction* on him and sent his wife creepy letters. Daulerio was furious. Six weeks earlier, having caught wind of the scandal, he had called Krulewitz at his office in the company's Bristol, Connecticut, headquarters and asked if Phillips was about to be fired. Krulewitz said no.

Daulerio felt he'd been lied to. He called Krulewitz in a rage, then unleashed the sex rumors on Deadspin. Under the headline "ESPN: The Worldwide Leader in Sexual Depravity," Daulerio wrote, "Chances are, at this point, there's some truth to them. We'll just throw 'em out there and see how many 'no comments' or, you know, actual comments or 'you would be completely wrong' there are about these situations.... So, Bristolites, strap in—it's

gonna be a long day."

The posts weren't only about the network's on-air personalities. Daulerio went after executives, too. His logic: Since Phillips was suspended for having an interoffice affair, shouldn't the behind-the-scenes people be disciplined for similar infractions?

The blogosphere reacted with vitriol to Daulerio's tantrum. In a post titled "AJ Daulerio Is an Asshole," Brian Cook of the sports blog MGo summed it up best: "Daulerio's an embarrassment.... As someone who runs a sports blog for a living, his wanton flouting of common decency makes me look like an asshole by proxy, and I don't appreciate it."

Daulerio maintains that his reaction was justified because ESPN tried to play him. But he concedes that vengeance, not just news value, motivated him to post the gossip. "I was hurtful, and I can see the mean-spiritedness," he says.

Over drinks in Indianapolis, I ask Daulerio if he has ever received an e-mail about something he's written that has caused him to question his own tactics.

He grows quiet. "It was Dylan Salisbury, Sean Salisbury's kid," he said. In October 2009, Sean Salisbury, a journeyman quarterback who'd become an ESPN football analyst, sued Deadspin for libel after the site ran a slew of items mocking him for showing a cell-phone photo of his penis to a female co-worker at a bar. ("Wanna see a photo of my baby?" he had asked.) The incident cost Salisbury his ESPN job.

"That was the first time I realized it's not only the [people I'm writing about] who are human—I realize that and can compartmentalize that," Daulerio says. "But it's also their kids who are being affected."

"I never told my dad I contacted A.J.," Dylan, a sophomore at the University of Kansas, told me a few days later. "I told A.J. my dad's situation. My dad's dad had just died, and all this stuff was coming down on him. I asked A.J., 'Any chance you can take it easy? My dad told me it wasn't true, but I don't know who to believe. How would you tell your son if it's true?'" Remarkably, Daulerio asked Dylan to write a piece for Deadspin defending his dad. Dylan declined.

Sean Salisbury dropped his lawsuit last year but still struggles with his Deadspin infamy. He told me that being a punch line was "devastating" and that the whole episode drove him to seek counseling. "I was embarrassed to show my face," he said. "Unless it's going to movies with my kids, I don't go out."

Perhaps Daulerio's darkest moment came last spring, when he posted a video of an obviously drunk college girl having sex in a bathroom stall at a sports bar in Bloomington, Indiana. At the time, he was thinking of it as part of a series on fans having sex in bathrooms. (In the fall of 2009, he'd posted a clip of a couple getting it on in a stall at the new Cowboys Stadium.) On May 11, a few days after the video went up, Daulerio received an e-mail from a woman imploring him to take it down. "I know the people in it and it is extremely [*sic*] hurtful. please, this is completely unfair," she wrote. In separate responses, both Daulerio and Darbyshire, the Gawker lawyer, refused to comply. "Best advice I can give you right now: do not make a big deal out of this because, as you can tell, the footage is blurry and you are not identified by name," Daulerio wrote, assuming the e-mailer was the girl herself.

For the rest of the afternoon, Daulerio and the woman traded five e-mails. Finally, before handing the matter off to Darbyshire, Daulerio wrote, "It's not getting taken down. I've said that. And it's not a very serious matter. It is a dumb mistake you (or whomever) made while drunk in college. Happens to the best of us."

The next day, though, he and Darbyshire decided that removing the video was "the best course of action," Darbyshire says. But by then it had migrated to other sites. And a couple of days after that, Daulerio received a panicked call from the girl's father. "He had this basic breakdown on the phone," Daulerio recalled. "The guy is like, 'You gotta understand, I've just been dealing with watching my daughter get fucked in a pile of piss for the past two days.'"

Daulerio now says he wishes he hadn't run the video. "It wasn't funny," he says. "It was possibly rape. I was trying to kind of put it in that same category [as the Dallas video]. I didn't really look at the thing close enough to realize there's maybe something a little more sinister going on here and a little more disturbing."

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On a cold, rain-soaked night in November, I meet Daulerio at Congee Village, a karaoke bar near Gawker's offices. Paul the bartender places fresh beers in front of us when we're only halfway through the ones we're working on. Five beers in, out come the shots. Daulerio tells me it's the eleventh straight night he's been out drinking.

He looks spent. The previous week he'd been in Los Angeles, helping out on a pilot for a show Norm MacDonald is pitching to Comedy Central, a kind of *Daily Show* for sports. Daulerio hated the glacial pace of TV writing. "That was miserable," he says.

He tells me he has no plans to leave Deadspin. He wants to continue to grow the site and has expanded beyond sports with a general-interest offshoot called Deadspin XY. Several weeks from now, in mid-December, he'll have another huge surge in traffic when Deadspin links to a series of foot-fetish videos starring a woman who looks exactly like Rex Ryan's wife, narrated by a man who sounds exactly like Rex. And yet, for all his success, Daulerio seems down. Last fall, he started seeing a shrink for the first time. In fact, he'd just come from an appointment. I ask what's been troubling him. "You're just kind of tethered to the machine," he says. "Socially, there's no separation whatsoever. It's like I needed somebody to kind of tell me just, okay, this is what you can do to not do that, to not be this person."

I ask if his persona on Deadspin is who he is in real life.

"I think it's very close," he says. "I think that's part of the problem, too." He tells me he's missing "just a normal daily existence. I think it's technology controlling [me], hands down."

Deadspin's remarkable growth is a direct result of Daulerio's willingness to push himself harder than is probably healthy and to run the kinds of stories that would cost most journalists more than a few hours of sleep. He's certainly not doing it for the money. The Favre scoop generated a traffic-based bonus of only \$4,990, which Daulerio split with his staff of four writers. All told, he makes about \$100,000 a year.

"He needs the next story like an addict needs their next fix," Denton says. Around the time Daulerio began therapy, Denton told him to take a week off. "He was showing signs of burnout."

"I worry about A.J. sometimes," Leitch says. "He goes at everything 100 percent all the time."

As we linger at the bar, nursing what feels like our twenty-seventh beers, I ask Daulerio how he'd feel to be on the receiving end of a Deadspin post about his own personal life. "I expect that the worst things that happened to me or somebody I know will come out," he says. "Then I'd kind of deal with it and take my lumps." But given everything he's seen and done, he wouldn't want his own kid, if he had one, anywhere near the Internet. "I would not have a daughter on Facebook—ever," he tells me. "It's just bad news."

#### TAGS

Sports, A.J. Daulerio, Deadspin