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## Deadspin's A.J. Daulerio playing a different game

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Deadspin's A.J. Daulerio is taking a crowbar to journalism's traditional rules. The Bucks County native has become hated.

By John Gonzalez, Inquirer Columnist

POSTED: February 14, 2011

A. J. Daulerio is either an iconoclast or a gutter dog with no code. Depends on your perspective.

If you don't dig Daulerio or what he does as the editor of Deadspin, that's fine. He understands. He gets it. He just doesn't care. That probably makes some of you mad - or madder. He gets that, too.

"I'm easy to loathe," Daulerio admitted. (Deadspin recently compiled its "top 10 bad guys in sports"; Daulerio was No. 1 on the list.) "A lot of what we do and what we've become notorious for are stories that break the conventional rules of journalism. . . . Most times, we're trying to tell the truth and not sugarcoat it. Sometimes, that's really unpleasant and unsavory."

Because of that, it seems everyone has a take on Daulerio and Deadspin these days. He's everywhere now, appearing in *New York* magazine; *GQ*; or showing up, as he put it, "half drunk" on the *Today* show thanks to a booze-heavy, preinterview brunch. On Tuesday night, HBO's *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel* will run a story about Deadspin. Predictably, it will feature a healthy dose of Daulerio.

Since taking over Deadspin in July 2008, Daulerio - who grew up in Churchville, went to La Salle University, and worked at Philadelphia magazine - has grown the website considerably. When he became editor, Deadspin averaged about 700,000 readers per month. It now gets well over 2 million.

"I'm not denying that he's good at what he does," said Mike Sielski, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who went to college with Daulerio. "But there are ethical debates and ramifications that follow what he does."

Will Leitch - Daulerio's predecessor, who left for a gig at *New York*

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magazine - wasn't comfortable running certain material. Daulerio has fewer reservations.

"I think I knew what I was best at, and some of the stuff Leitch sort of shielded away from, I embraced," Daulerio said.

His approach, which sometimes involves paying for seedy information and trampling on other long-established journalism tenets, has yielded big stories and bigger controversies. There was the post about former ESPN analyst Sean Salisbury and the "practical joke" he allegedly played on coworkers that involved pictures of his manhood. There was the link to a different blog that had the There was the recent story about an alleged dalliance between Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez and a 17-year-old girl. And, perhaps most infamously, there were the lewd and revealing cell-phone photos that Brett Favre allegedly sent to a former Jets employee, Jenn Sterger. Deadspin paid a source \$12,000 for those.

Deadspin's reporting on the Favre scandal led to an NFL investigation, after which Favre was fined \$50,000. Still, it's possible Daulerio took more heat over the photos than Favre. Readers and journalists questioned his methods and criticized Daulerio for burning Sterger - which, by his own admission, he did.

"I'm transparent in what I do, but it's stuff that people haven't, in the past, been proud of," Daulerio said. "I like to not hide behind things. I like to show how things get put together, and people don't like that.

"It's become so commonplace to criticize what we do and focus on the ethics, when the reality is, I work for Nick Denton [the founder of Deadspin's parent company, Gawker], who doesn't adhere to those rules. If I worked somewhere else, would I do that? Probably not. But people want me to adhere to the rules at their job instead of what I'm asked to do here."

He has a point. (Disclosure time: We're friends, though he sometimes refers to me in print as "The Mexican" despite knowing that I'm half Cuban.) I've had lots of conversations with other writers about Daulerio; they almost always harp on his ethics. The complaints can sometimes feel like lame schoolyard whining about the mean kid who won't play nice. Except that isn't it. That misses the point.

Daulerio and Deadspin don't follow traditional rules because they're engaged in a different game, something more aggressive and raw and unrepentant. I think that scares some journalists. When you distill the knee-jerk disapproval and evaporate the phony outrage, what's left is fear. In a way, Daulerio is the mainstream media's bogeyman, a daily and frightening reminder that the old ways are slowly fading - if they aren't already obsolete.

"What used to be a shout is now a whisper," said Daily News editor Larry Plett, who was Daulerio's boss at Philly mag. "A.J. is proving that to have an impact, you have to [have] a full-throated scream. . . . I can't stress enough how proud I am of him. He has [guts]. Too many journalists are afraid. If every journalist in America had his chutzpah, we wouldn't have gotten into the Iraq war."

That's a gross overstatement, but you get the idea. Even if Daulerio's critics are right about him being nothing but a glorified smut peddler - he's smarter and more talented than that, but let's pretend they're onto something - he is, at the least, unique in his ability to stomach the job.

"There are weird moments of ickiness on certain stories," he said. "It passes."

Contact columnist John Gonzalez at 215-854-2813 or [gonzalez@phillynews.com](mailto:gonzalez@phillynews.com).

Follow him on Twitter: @gonzophilly.

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