

Two coaches in trouble, different media coverage

University of Illinois men's basketball coach Bruce Weber is under fire. The Illinois coach with a record of 209-96, two Big Ten titles and one trip to the NCAA national championship game, is under intense scrutiny from local and national media concerning the direction his program is headed.

Weber has a losing record in Big Ten play since the 2006 season, the year after former coach Bill Self's players departed. Fans have criticized him for years and with a new athletic director and a season rapidly spinning out of control, this likely is Weber's last season as Illinois men's basketball coach.

Journalists have flocked to this story. Weber is a likeable man and is honest to a fault. But faced with realities about his performance, media have shined the spotlight on Weber. The rumblings began at the end of last season, remained at a respectable level while the Illini were winning in the early part of the season and began to pick up steam as Illinois struggled during the Big Ten season. A day after Valentine's Day, when Illinois lost at home to Purdue and Weber's former assistant, Matt Painter, Weber laid it all on the line in a press [conference](#). ESPN picked up the story as did other national sports [media](#).

Shining the light on Weber is the media's job. They have a responsibility to report the dissatisfaction of a fan base, the drop in attendance and Weber's inability to get his team over the hump. Like the man or not, Weber is the coach of a Big Ten team. He is a coach of a team that has plenty of national exposure. He must be held accountable for his [performance](#).

One of Weber's protégé's is in an eerily similar situation. Chris Lowery was Weber's assistant coach when Weber coached at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. When Weber went to Illinois, Lowery followed him. A year later, Lowery returned to Southern Illinois as the head coach. He encountered early success with players recruited by Weber and took Southern to the NCAA Tournament's Sweet Sixteen during the 2006-2007 season. He was offered a seven-year contract worth \$750,000 per year. Since then, his teams have become progressively worse. Lowery's teams have struggled on the court, the program has suffered with player retention and the fans are unhappy with the direction of the program. They have shown that displeasure by not showing up at games. SIU Arena once was one of the most difficult places for an opposing team to play in the entire country. Today, it's a mausoleum.

And, for the most part, the media have been silent. Granted, Southern Illinois isn't placed under the same media spotlight as the University of Illinois. But even a flashlight sheds light into dark spaces. The main media source to cover Southern Illinois University, the Southern Illinoisan, has been amazingly quiet during the last two years while fans lament the decline in the program. The University has a major impact on the region and The Southern Illinoisan acts more like a cheerleader for Southern than a watchdog. Not just in the Sports pages but overall, the Southern Illinoisan's unbalanced coverage of the university's faculty strike last fall reinforces that observation.

Where has the Southern been during the last three years? Where have the stories been that recount the losses in player personnel, the stories that document the dropping attendance at SIU Arena, that capture the fan's unrest or that capture the futility of loss after loss? Even worse, those losses have financial implications. A \$750,000 salary, a drop in attendance and an upcoming drop in NCAA Tournament television revenue money from the Missouri Valley Conference placed the

athletic department in a tight spot. The university's remedy was to raise student fees.

Where was the story that explained how students had to pay for a poor basketball team? Where have the stories been that recount and explain the financial burden Lowery's contract has placed on the university, a situation that boils down to the fact SIU can't afford to fire Lowery, pay off his salary and hire a new coach. Where is the analysis of losing ticket sales compared to the bottom line cost of firing a coach?

You can't just blame the Southern Illinoisan. Local television (WSIL Channel 3) has also been lax in posing tough questions to Lowery or the administration about the coaching situation at Southern Illinois. And St. Louis media managed to make the trek to SIUC when the Salukis were playing winning basketball. Now that SIU has dropped out of relevance in basketball circles, they're forgotten.

The Daily Egyptian, Southern Illinois University's student newspaper, did a good job reporting on the faculty strike but has been inconsistent in its Lowery coverage. A Daily Egyptian reporter questioned Lowery about SIU President Glenn [Poshard's](#) criticism of him in January, while the working press remained silent. But overall, the students haven't asked the tough questions either.

It's a shame. There are good stories down here, stories that need to be told. The spotlight is shining bright at the University of Illinois. Can someone please bring a flashlight to the southern half of the state?