Written by Stacey Hough, Guest Columnist
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The Manti Te’o situation, with its many twists and turns, has revealed much even as the story remains somewhat shrouded in mystery. As a sports talk show host, I find that sometimes whether something is newsworthy or not, becomes a part of the conversation. The story, which broke on Jan. 16 (by Deadspin.com), regarding the Notre Dame linebacker, and Heisman trophy runner-up Te’o and the news that the girlfriend that he mourned the loss of before the nation, didn’t even exist, was definitely newsworthy.

The information began to come furiously, first that Manti had found out about the alleged hoax, and then that possibly he could have played a part in the facade. Mostly, there’s been the claims by Te’o that he had been hoodwinked, bamboozled, etc. Notre Dame as an institution has backed Te’o. Public opinion has seemed to swing from the disbelief that someone could claim a deep love and relationship with someone they never saw (Te’o’s version is that he never met the girlfriend, but talked at great length via telephone, due to her being a student at Stanford), to the opinion that kids will be kids, and Te’o was a victim of a scam that got out of hand. My observation has been more on the mainstream media’s handling of the Notre Dame lovestory, both when it was thought to be legitimate, and now that we know it is a fabrication.

It is worth noting that the Heisman season of Te’o was a great season on the field. He played well in big games, including the game shortly after his grandmother and his "girlfriend" both passed within 18 hours of each other. The outstanding play of Te’o, amidst this devastating personal loss, added to the respect and admiration showered upon the senior linebacker. The media told and retold the story. Te’o spoke of conversations with his dying ‘girlfriend’ in which she told him to play the game and not come to her funeral. Though they had never met, he wasn’t going to meet her as she lay dying, or attend the funeral. Whether you believe Manti knew she didn’t exist at that point or not, I would submit that it gained him fans, and according to at least a couple of voters, also gained him Heisman votes. Apparently nobody in the media did due diligence to verify a death, or that a funeral took place. Part of the story had been that this girlfriend was a volleyball player at Stanford. Seems that would have been easy to check. The media bought the story and swallowed it whole. The benefit of the doubt was extended to Manti Te’o, which seems rare in this day of a (usually) very cynical media.

Now I hear some of the same pundits whom have criticized and berated athletes, pro and amateur alike, taking on the tone of "please move along, nothing to see here", and "he’s just a kid". I agree with the young man being allowed to make mistakes, but what about the grown folks who looked the other way as this fantastic tale was being told? A caller on my radio show mentioned earlier in the season how tired he was of Notre Dame being crammed down our throats. He opined that nothing gets overblown like when something good happens at Notre Dame. I would add to that, apparently nothing gets muted more than when something embarrassing or controversial happens at Notre Dame, also.

There definitely are more facts to emerge in the strange case of Manti Te’o and the girlfriend who wasn’t. As I write this, Te’o has sat down with Katie Couric to do an interview that will be aired on Thurs. Jan. 24th. He will have his parents by his side, and I understand that Couric has the same publicist as does Te’o. It should be very comfortable for him. What won’t be comfortable, is the upcoming conversations Te’o will have with 32 NFL teams, each of whom have their own private investigators. Those teams will ask their investigators to do the work that the media folks didn’t do, and that is fact check everything that has come out of Te’o’s mouth. It is understandable that before someone throws tens of millions of dollars at a person, they find out if they’re either as gullible as Gomer Pyle with pads on, or if they are a pathological liar. The real issue with young Mr. Te’o may lie somewhere in between. The findings by the NFL teams may be the only hope of the truth of this matter ever surfacing. A very bizarre story of love, major college football, social media, and mystery. Interesting that some seem done with it in a week. There are some players, locally and nationally, that are probably wondering where these short attention spans were when they played, and made mistakes. Manti Te’o is a very young man, and a very good football player. I hope his NFL career is so loud that it drowns out this strange chapter of his life. It’s better to be drowned out that way than by journalists saying "sssshhhhh".

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