

Image Reparation Strategies in Sports: Media Analysis of Kobe Bryant and Barry Bonds

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Abstract

The professional sports world is plagued with scandal. Two such scandals with important implications were sexual assault charges brought against NBA star Kobe Bryant and the charges brought against BALCO Laboratories in a process that implicated MLB star Barry Bonds. By examining media coverage of these two athletes surrounding the scandals, one can discern what image reparation strategies work in the athlete's favor and which work against the athlete. This gives public relations professionals in the sport industry guidelines to follow in establishing and maintaining an athlete's positive image throughout a scandal.

I. Introduction

Fans expect a lot from sporting celebrities, and though they constantly want to know more about them, fans are quick to judge any problems or imperfect qualities (Summers and Johnson Morgan, 2008). However, fans seem to forgive some athletes faster than they forgive others, if they forgive at all, when indiscretions occur. Why do we forgive some athletes and not others? From what types of scandals is it easier for an athlete to recover? What mitigating circumstances must exist for an athlete to be forgiven? How should athletes respond when involved in a negative situation?

A review of literature demonstrates that little research has been published in the realm of image repair strategies of Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National Football League (NFL) players. This paper serves to inform sports public relations professionals of appropriate strategies to use in the image repair and restoration process following a scandal.

II. Literature Review

Few studies have analyzed image repair strategies utilized by athletes after a scandal, and even fewer have done so in the last ten years. Benoit and Hanczor (1994) examined Tonya Harding's strategy to deny charges that she was involved in Nancy Kerrigan's attack. Nelson (1984) discussed the image reparation of

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Billie Jean King after her affair with a former secretary was exposed. These studies provide some foundation, but much has changed in recent years in terms of athlete scrutiny by the media and the public.

In addition, players in the three major American sports leagues – the NFL, NBA, and MLB – have been excluded from most studies. However, there are a few that provide a foundation for further study of the topic.

Brazeal (2008) explored the statements made by Terrell Owens after he was deactivated from the Philadelphia Eagles team for being belligerent and publicly insulting toward his team and coaching staff. This study concluded that the way Owens and his agent handled the situation was the reason he was not forgiven. Owens is a player whose on- and off-field transgressions are constantly overlooked because of his talent. However, in this situation, Owens took that too far. He and his agent employed many commonly successful image repair strategies but never admitted fault or cited corrective action to eliminate the problem in the future. Brazeal attributed the image repair strategy's failure to Owens' inability to acknowledge these two things. This study suggests that winning and talent are so important to sports fans that they are likely to forgive if the player makes an honest and sincere apology, admitting fault and citing corrective action.

In a study on a successful image restoration strategy, Jerome (2008) explored the approach of NASCAR driver Tony Stewart through apologia. The study found that apologia seems to be an appropriate and effective method to employ in incidents and scandals related to sport celebrities, although it did not provide conclusive evidence. However, Jerome cited a confounding variable: the athlete's success. Although not a player in the NFL, NBA, or MLB, it can be argued that NASCAR, as a commercially driven sport continuously growing in popularity, receives a level of scrutiny similar to those leagues. Thus, this study can be used as a foundation for analysis of image repair strategies in this category.

These studies, in addition to being few in number, also only examine the statements made by the players themselves and surrogate speakers. They do not attempt to explore the media's role in the effect the strategy has, nor do they explore many image reparation techniques other than apologia. However, they do provide two important conclusions that apply to this study. First, they demonstrate that a sincere apology from the athlete can go a long way. Second, they imply that success in their respective sport may have influence over whether or not the public will forgive an athlete.

Carstairs (2003) discusses four doping scandals in sports history, one of which was MLB player Mark McGwire's use of androstenedione. The study cites several reasons McGwire's use of this substance was forgiven. First, the substance was not banned in MLB and was available over the counter, meaning that it enhanced performance but was legal and safe. Second, doping in team sports does not receive as much publicity or scrutiny because individuals on a team do not make that big of a difference compared to athletes in individual sports. Third, national pride was not at stake because it was strictly a domestic matter. Fourth, this incident occurred at a unique time: MLB had just come off a player's strike, and fans were disillusioned by it. The home-run record race between McGwire and Sammy Sosa was infusing enthusiasm into the sport again, and no doping scandal was going to interfere with that. This study shows that a combination of factors may often be present that will result in little need for an elaborate reparation strategy.

It is also important to note the definition of a scandal. In-depth interviews of sports sponsors and sports media representatives revealed behavior deemed scandalous is primarily characterized as illegal or unethical. Sponsors thought that legality was the biggest issue in defining a scandal, while media personalities felt the actions were scandalous primarily because they challenged the integrity of the game (Hughes & Shank, 2005).

There is a need for more examination of recent incidents in the most scrutinized and valued sport leagues in America. This study uses media analysis to discern image reparation tactics as presented to the public and to gauge public perception of two athletes involved in scandal, Kobe Bryant and Barry Bonds. Therefore, this study aims to determine appropriate and successful responses to scandals and transgressions in sport.

III. Case Studies

Case Study 1: Kobe Bryant

In 2003, NBA star Kobe Bryant was charged with sexual assault. The criminal charges were dropped because the alleged victim refused to testify, and a civil suit was settled out of court. Without a conviction, neither side was ever proven. However, Bryant's transgression no longer seems exceptionally significant to the public.

Before the incident, Bryant was often characterized as a good citizen, husband, and father with a squeaky clean image (Cooper, Tuchman, Buckley, and Hinojosa, 2003; Buckley, Toobin, Choi, 2003; Gibson, Napolitano, Acuna, La Jeunesse, Nauert, and Estrich, 2003). He was also described as polite, courteous, gracious, and philanthropic (Grace, 2003). According to Fox News correspondent William La Jeunesse, Bryant and his publicists had always promoted the star as different from other NBA players, someone with a clean lifestyle. This is also seen in his endorsements, as he was the third most sought-after sports figure for endorsements after Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods; he had deals with Sprite, Spaulding, McDonald's, and Nike totaling \$10 million to \$12 million per year (Gibson et al., 2003).

When the incident was first revealed, Bryant spoke to the *Los Angeles Times*, saying he would not do something like this. It is ambiguous whether or not he meant he would not have an affair or would not rape anyone. However, when the district attorney filed charges and cited DNA proof that Bryant had sex with the alleged victim, Bryant immediately set up a press conference declaring he was guilty of adultery, but not of rape (Cooper et al., 2003). It was clear that Bryant did not want to tarnish his image and his family if charges were not going to be filed, but when the D.A. made it clear that they would be, Bryant felt it was necessary for his defense to admit that he engaged in sex with this woman.

Bryant's statement included many important elements. First, his wife sat by his side, showing her support. Second, he apologized and repented for committing adultery. Third, he publicly apologized to his wife. Fourth, he vehemently denied committing a crime. In addition to all of these, he chose a female defense attorney to represent him, which limited his image as a sexual predator (Grace, 2003). All of these elements combined to give a fairly convincing, heartfelt statement to the press that said Bryant was sorry for not being perfect but that he did not commit a crime.

After the initial arrest, Los Angeles Lakers general manager Mitch Kupchak said the allegations against Bryant were out of character and that Bryant was one of the finest young men the team has known (Cooper et al., 2003). Bryant's wife also issued a statement when charges were filed, saying that her husband made a mistake but did not commit a crime and that she intended to stand by him as he fought the charges (Gibson, Napolitano, Acuna, La Jeunesse, Nauert, and Estrich, 2003). These statements lent credibility to Bryant's case by illustrating his strong relationship with his wife and past precedent of good conduct.

Throughout the process, Bryant cooperated with authorities, showing he was a good citizen and had nothing to hide (Grace, 2003). The timing of his defense strategy also worked to his benefit. As soon as the district attorney announced that charges would be filed, Bryant and his wife both issued statements (Whitfield & Tuchman, 2003). This was important because it didn't seem as if they were devising a story or plan. The truth does not take long to formulate compared to a cover-up, and the rapid release of statements helped to solidify the idea that what Bryant was saying was the truth.

After his press conference, Bryant pretty much stayed quiet. According to sports agent Drew Rosenhaus, this was the right move. Rosenhaus believed that Bryant did the right thing in admitting he made a mistake in committing adultery and defending himself vehemently against the charges but also recommended that Bryant maintain a low profile to limit the media coverage of the situation (Buckley, Toobin, Choi, 2003). Bryant did this, and in general, the media coverage garnered by Bryant's actions covered his talent on the basketball court, not anything he said or did regarding the trial. The exception to this, which will be discussed later, was the coverage of mistakes and controversies encountered throughout the trial process. However, these were not under Bryant's control.

When the criminal charges were dropped, Bryant issued a letter of apology to his accuser. It stated that while he believed the encounter was consensual, he realized after the course of the trial that she did not feel the same way (Adams, 2004). Overall, this statement did not seem to harm to the athlete's image. Many believe that this apology was part of a deal the woman's attorneys were planning to settle the civil suit (Knott, "Victim", 2004). Others even think it helped him to come across as the good guy, apologizing and offering her some sort of consolation (Inskeep, 2004). However, something agreed upon is that he did not admit to sexually assaulting the woman (Adams, 2004). Maintaining a consistent position throughout the court proceedings proved successful for Bryant, as he was never caught in a lie after his initial press conference, eliminating some doubt whether he was telling the truth.

There were a few outside factors that also negatively influenced the credibility of Bryant's accuser, which in turn increased Bryant's credibility. Many pieces of evidence that would damage the accuser's credibility were highly publicized. Even when pieces of evidence were ruled inadmissible in court, the public heard about them. This called Bryant's accuser's credibility into question and therefore limited extra damage done to Bryant's image. This, along with the prosecution dropping the case against Bryant, made fans question the charges against Bryant, causing less damage to his image. Also, Bryant's accuser filed a civil suit before the criminal trial was over, which still remained when she told prosecutors she could not testify in the criminal trial. This would call her motives into question, giving the appearance that the woman was after money more than anything else. If these were her motives, the incident may or may not have actually occurred. With this, the popular inclination would be to believe that the woman made everything up, which would mean that the only damage to Bryant's reputation would be due to his adultery, not because he sexually assaulted someone.

When the allegations were initially revealed, media personnel around the country were shocked. Bryant was always available to the press after games to answer questions, always being forthcoming and helpful. Jim Gray, an ESPN correspondent, said he had never seen Bryant have a bad moment in public or in private, and many media representatives thought these allegations were completely out of character (Grace, 2003).

There was a media frenzy surrounding Bryant's case. Web sites dedicated to the case filled the Internet, and it was a popular topic for talk radio and talk TV (Henninger, 2003, p. A8). International newspapers updated readers around the world on the trial against Bryant. There were more stories written about Bryant's situation than anything else in the NBA (Sandoval, 2004).

There were many reasons for this extensive coverage, but three were much more prevalent than the rest. First, Kobe Bryant is a heavily followed sport celebrity with international reach (Smith, 2009; Paul, 2009). Second, the case involved many controversial issues, including the defendant's right to privacy and the admittance of the defendant's psychiatric and sexual history. There were also many missteps by the court throughout the trial that garnered a great deal of media attention because they threatened the likelihood of a fair trial. Bryant's lawyers also challenged and found loopholes in rape shield laws, inspiring debate and political reform around the country (Kenworthy, 2005; Johnson, 2004). Third, Bryant's sexual assault accusation had not yet been settled in civil court when a rift between Bryant and teammate Shaquille O'Neal sent O'Neal to another team, caused coach Phil Jackson to retire, and caused a great divide among the organization as well as the fans (Knott, "Lakers Soap Opera", 2004). This brawl garnered a great deal of media attention in its own right, but most did not end without the mention of Bryant's impending legal battle. Because of this, the case was also often mentioned in any summary of recent Lakers' history in media coverage (Leon Moore, 2005).

Bryant was eligible for free agency while the criminal proceedings were happening, and many different teams around the league were pursuing him, despite the possibility that he would be found guilty and jailed (Wilbon, 2004). It seems from this that Bryant's talent on the court was such that transgressions off the court could be forgiven, or at least this one. Teams seemed to think that Bryant was worth the risk. They trusted him personally, athletically, or both.

Media coverage reported that many people, although disillusioned by the accusation against Bryant and his admitted adultery, planned to wait until the case was completely resolved before drawing any conclusions (Cooper et al., 2003; Grace, 2003). Media coverage also reported many accounts of people saying that Bryant's press conference was genuine and compelling, including an account describing Bryant as showing a full range of emotions, including anger, frustration, and remorse (Abrams & Scarborough, 2003). This would indicate that many people believed that Bryant was genuine in his remorse, which is important in the process of forgiveness. However, Bryant's jersey sales dropped to number 90 in 2005, much lower than his normal top spot, indicating that fans were not willing to accept all of his legal problems right away (Simon, 2005).

Simplified, Bryant's image repair strategy was to stay out of the headlines on personal issues and in the headlines for what he did on the court. With O'Neal gone from Los Angeles, Bryant quieted down. He was not involved in any major personal incidents. Once again, he demonstrated to America that he is a good person and an upstanding citizen, in addition to being a fantastic basketball player. This is why he has made a fairly strong comeback.

When charges were first filed, Nike stripped a shoe of Bryant's name. They did not publicly associate themselves with the athlete, but tested the waters of public opinion through back channels and underground methods. Two years after charges were filed, Nike decided to fully and publicly stand behind Bryant by launching a new shoe bearing his name (Kang, 2005).

Since the incident, Bryant has seemed to significantly recover from the demolition of his public stature. Nike and Coca-Cola have resumed Bryant's endorsement deals (Smith, 2009). In addition, Bryant was featured in commercials for TNT as well as a public service announcement for the Make-A-Wish Foundation (Kang, 2005). Bryant appeared on the cover of the "NBA '07" video game and in a commercial for the "Guitar Hero World Tour" video game alongside other beloved American athletes (Price, 2009). His jersey is also the highest selling in the NBA (Miller, 2009).

Bryant's international reputation seems fully intact, at least in China. When Bryant traveled to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing with the United States basketball team, he was extremely well received. In China, he has appeared in commercials and a reality show as well as on billboards and websites. His jersey sales there are also higher than those of Yao Ming. Much of this has to do with his basketball talent. However, this high reputation is also due to his philanthropic involvement in the country: He is establishing the Kobe Bryant China Fund to raise money for education and health programs as well as stimulate philanthropy within the country. The fund also serves to encourage cultural education in schools in both the United States and China (Paul, 2009). It is important to notice three factors driving Bryant's popularity in China: his on-court talent, his philanthropic actions, and his appreciation of the country's culture. The first two are factors that may influence any athlete's popularity in the United States.

However, Bryant has not made a full recovery in the realm of American public opinion. His feuds with teammate Shaquille O'Neal and coach Phil Jackson worked against him in this realm, making him one of the least liked players in the NBA (Kang, 2005). He has since made up ground with both men. However, he is still often viewed as an "arrogant, coddled, selfish, disconnected, joyless, ungrateful phony who also very publicly committed adultery" (Miller, 2009, para 7). It is important to note, however, that some of this stems from Bryant being a great athlete who plays for one team and not for the 29 others.

Despite Bryant's lack of a full image recovery in the public sector, he seems to be on the right track. He often spends time with less fortunate children, which shows that he uses his fame, influence, and money in a positive manner, something that seems to be well-received by the public (Miller, 2009). He also continues to excel on the court. With another NBA Championship recently under his belt, it is likely that fans will forgive and forget in order to resume worshipping an NBA legend who often seems to defy the rules of team identification.

Case Study 2: Barry Bonds

Hughes and Shank (2005) found that the most prominent of recent scandals was the steroid abuse scandal involving BALCO Laboratories, generally because of the "chronic cheating and large-scale cover-up" (p. 212). One of the athletes most broadly associated with this scandal is MLB's Barry Bonds.

Bonds and his trainer both had an ongoing relationship with BALCO Laboratories. A government task force designed to expose and charge those dealing steroids investigated many high-profile athletes, including Bonds. While many athletes confessed to knowingly using steroids provided by BALCO management, Bonds testified that he did not know that the substances he was using were steroids. However, in the time period in which Bonds was accused of using steroids, his statistics improved drastically. In Bonds' first 13 seasons in MLB, Bonds' batting line averaged .290, 32 home runs, and 93 RBI per season. In the six seasons after he started using steroids, those numbers increased to .328, 49, and 105 (Fainaru-Wada & Williams, 2006, p. 145). These numbers represent a drastic increase that most agree could not have been achieved naturally.

Bonds was never well liked by fans, the media, or his teammates. When in the minor leagues, spectators said he refused to run out ground balls or sign autographs (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 29). He was often involved in squabbles with the Pirates over money, beginning by taking them to salary arbitration in 1989 (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 29). This did not help his image because he appeared to just be after money and think he was worth more than others thought. These squabbles also inspired several on-field tirades with coaches and media in 1991 (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, pp. 30-31). In 1993, Bonds signed with the San Francisco Giants, where his reputation continued.

A *Sports Illustrated* column and a fight in a game against the Padres exposed the public to Bonds' poor relationship with Jeff Kent, another key Giants player (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 122). Major moments in Bonds' career also highlighted his teammates' negative feelings towards Bonds. When Bonds hit his 500th career home run, most of his team stayed in the dugout, refusing to celebrate with their teammate (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 112). When the player's teammates distaste for Bonds is that public, the fans

are likely to inherit the feeling.

Bonds became more media- and fan-friendly in 2000 because his advisors thought his rudeness would jeopardize his ability to financially capitalize on free agency when it became available after the 2001 season (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 78). However, after he secured a new contract, he returned to his old behavior (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 147). It is likely that fans saw through this sudden and temporary change in Bonds' behavior that directly correlated with contract negotiations. This would prove to fans that Bonds was motivated by money and his actions were a part of that greed, which would decrease his popularity.

It also did not help his reputation that Bonds made it well known that he thought he was being discriminated against because he is African-American. He discounted the talent of other players, attributing fans' obsessions with Mark McGwire and other white players rather than himself to a "black man in a white man's game" (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 111). Basically calling fans racist, Bonds may have alienated himself even more from the people from whom he wanted love and respect.

Bonds did not seem to think it was important for him to be popular. When the public was angry at Bonds, his game improved. Because of this, people close to Bonds thought he would actually make horrible remarks to "inspire outrage" so that his game would get better (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 30).

When the BALCO scandal was made public, Bonds categorically denied using steroids in public and in government interrogations. Even though the government offered immunity to those who cooperated with their investigation, Bonds did not do so. While he had his reputation to worry about, these proceedings were secret, and most athletes involved were confident that their confessions would never be revealed to the public (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 197).

However, by saying he did not use steroids, Bonds was adamantly denying something that was the most plausible explanation for his physical size and dominance. According to Fainaru-Wada et al. (2006, p. 75), 162 games limit the workout opportunities during a baseball season, and Bonds' trainer did not travel with the team, meaning he only supervised Bonds' workouts when they were home. With little opportunity to work out, especially with limited trainer supervision, it is unlikely Bonds would have been able to naturally build and maintain that amount of muscle on his body during the season. Bonds' appearance also changed dramatically. Many fans found it unsettling that he had changed so much and that he now resembled a WWE wrestler more than a baseball player (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 111).

Bonds' story was also over the top. For example, in his grand jury testimony, he said, "I didn't think the stuff worked" (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 202). In that same testimony, Bonds later said, "If it's a steroid, it's not working" (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 203). This does not seem believable because Bonds had the best seasons of his career while taking these substances. Such a statement makes it seem as if he is hiding something.

When BALCO was exposed, it was also implausible that Bonds was not involved and did not know he was using steroids. BALCO had run tests on Bonds' blood and urine samples that would only be used to test for steroids (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 115). Also, Bonds' name and photograph were used on a website promoting BALCO products alongside athletes who tested positive for steroids and those who eventually admitted using steroids (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 215). Overall, it was highly unlikely that Bonds was not using steroids, and his defense that he did not know he was using steroids also seemed unlikely when the public learned of other athletes who knowingly took steroids provided by BALCO.

Government investigations and raids of BALCO gave way to a media frenzy. Everyone wanted to be the first to break the story, but information was difficult to get. This created a continuous media cycle in which a reporter would find a piece of information and break it. Then, that information would trickle down into all of the other interested media outlets (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006, p. 216). This constantly made the BALCO scandal a top news story, encouraging debate and speculation for months. It also made every piece of information important, rather than making media sort through to find the important details when all are released at once.

Game of Shadows: Barry Bonds, BALCO, and the Steroids Scandal that Rocked Professional Sports was published in 2006 by two *San Francisco Chronicle* reporters who compiled information; including court documents, affidavits, confidential memoranda, grand jury testimony, audiotapes, and interviews with over 200 sources; from an investigation spanning two years ("Bonds Exposed," 2006). The book had a wide reach, selling 124,000 hardcover copies, and excerpts of it appeared in many different media, including the *San*

Francisco Chronicle and *Sports Illustrated* (Rich, 2009).

Game of Shadows portrays Bonds as self-worshipping, narcissistic, rude, inconsiderate, promiscuous, and abusive (Fainaru-Wada et al., 2006). Above all, it pieces together elements to demonstrate that Bonds lied about many things, namely his steroid usage, but also significantly, his relationships with those around him. As a popular and commonly referenced book, this meant that Americans were exposed to all of this information and this portrayal of Bonds.

When Bonds hit his record-tying 755th home run, MLB commissioner Bud Selig did not applaud. For the same event, only 1.7 million households viewed the momentous occasion (Albiniak, 2007). While this was an occasion of enormous proportions for the sport considered America's pastime, America virtually ignored it. This shows that the public perception of Bonds was extremely low.

Bonds's struggle continues, as he was indicted on perjury and obstruction of justice charges (Williams & Van Derbeken, 2007). This is an ongoing scandal. However, we can learn a great deal from the course of events up until now, and Bonds' past precedent, along with Bryant's proof that past precedent can play a large role in image reparation, show that the course of events to follow will most likely not differ much from what has already occurred.

IV. Conclusion: Prescription for Action

From this information, four main guidelines for image reparation can be concluded. First, athletes must maintain a positive relationship with fans and media throughout their careers. When the public already has good will towards an athlete, a scandal may come as more of a shock, but the public will generally be more receptive of the athlete's position and apology or give the athlete a chance to prove him- or herself before jumping to conclusions. It may also help the athlete's image rebound more quickly. A positive relationship with the media and fans can help mitigate a serious scandal.

Second, the public will respond better to a quick, truthful, and heartfelt response to an accusation than a cover-up. Similar to the findings of Jerome (2008) and Brazeal (2008), Bryant's quick admission of adultery and proclamation of legal innocence was more believable than Bonds' denial of an obvious truth. If an athlete is innocent, he or she needs to come forward quickly and vehemently defend him- or herself. If an athlete is guilty and there is really no doubt in the public mind, it is better just to come out and say it than to try to deny it to those who do not believe the story. People don't like to be lied to. They seem to want the truth and a sincere apology.

Third, positive athletic performance of a sport celebrity should be emphasized after a scandal as long as the incident itself does not damage the integrity of the game. Bryant's on-court excellence post-scandal seemed to help the athlete recuperate his image. Brazeal (2008) and Jerome (2008) support this notion. Bonds' case is different because many people believe that his performance is directly linked to the scandal in question. However, when positive athletic performance is independent of personal incidents, this performance often forces fans, media, and companies to set aside their opinions of the athlete as a person and respect him or her as a player.

Fourth, keeping a low profile outside athletic performance is an important strategy. The less athletes say and do off the court or field, the less media attention they garner about the incident. Bonds would also be an exception to this because of the nature of the scandal. Another possible exception would be to secure media attention through philanthropic involvement, showing the athlete's good character.

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