

Rebuilding a Professional Athlete's Reputation After a Scandal:

Refining Public Relations Techniques

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Literature Review	5
Methodology	7
Chapter 1: Identifying Scandals and Their Repercussions	8
Chapter 2: Image Repair Strategies of the Past	13
Extramarital Relations Case A: Tiger Woods	13
Extramarital Relations Case B: Kobe Bryant	16
Drug Scandal: Michael Phelps	19
Violence: Michael Vick	22
Discussion	25
Conclusion	28
Works Cited	30

Introduction

Professional athletes have evolved into more than just impeccable sportsmen; they are now sports celebrities as well as role models for people on an international level. Maintaining athletes' positive images and reputations is a major component of successful public relations practices in professional athletic organizations. This high social status comes with focused attention on these athletes' lives outside of their sport. However, even professional athletes err, and as previous cases have shown, scandals can ruin an athlete's reputation and relinquish them from their pedestal of fame.

There are many different types of scandals in the world of professional athletes including sports enhancing and recreational drug use, as well as extramarital scandals and those involving violence. Recently, Tiger Woods' and Kobe Bryant's actions have captured their audience with extramarital issues, but the famous Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps as well as the NFL player Michael Vick have both experienced their fair share of image damaging scandals.

Although all of these scandals may have been based on different events or actions, public relations is by far the most important part of if and how these athletes recovered their reputations successfully.

This paper will first identify what constitutes a scandal and its severity, then provide examples as well as the repercussions involved. The success of public relations practices used in aforementioned cases will then be evaluated, ultimately aiming to prove a more successful path to rebuild athletes' reputations after a scandal. The formula for success involves accepting responsibility and apologizing sincerely in a timely manner. The athlete should then pledge to avoid similar situations and keep their personal life

relatively mellow until the situation diffuses. They should not alienate the press; they should speak openly and honestly. And lastly, in order to eventually effectively rebuild their public image, they must prove their promises true through their actions over time.

Literature Review

Previously, most research involving professional athletes analyzes whether or not the public relations aspect of the scandal was effective. Joseph Walsh and Sheila M. McAllister-Spooner analyzed the image repair discourse after a photo was published of Michael Phelps allegedly smoking marijuana. The study concludes that when a client's actions are undeniable, they should respond quickly and honestly.¹ This idea has also been echoed in various other sources and seems to be the first and most important step in recovering an athlete's image. Many sources also pointed out that Tiger Woods was ineffective when it came to reacting in a timely, honest manner which ultimately hindered him in rebuilding his reputation.²

Other studies speculate how a scandal will play out based on similar cases in the past, compare sports scandals to one another, or to scandals in the business world.³

Much of the research points out that corporations and the images of the athletes that represent them are closely connected and similarly affected by scandals.⁴ A sports

¹ Walsh, Joseph, and Sheila M. McAllister-Spooner. *Public Relations Review. Analysis of the Image Repair Discourse in the Michael Phelps Controversy*. Elsevier, 3 Jan. 2011. Web.

² Woods, Tiger. "Tiger's Public Statement." Interview. TigerWoods.com: The Official Site of Tiger Woods. MLB.com, 19 Feb. 2010. Web. 08 May 2011. <<http://web.tigerwoods.com/news/article/201002198096934/news/>>.

³ Zavicar, Christina M., "Crisis Management in Athletic Public Relations" (2004). Senior Honors Theses. Paper 71. <http://commons.emich.edu/honors/71>

⁴ Sassenberg, Anne-Marie and Johnson Morgan, Melissa (2010) *Scandals, sports and sponsors: what impact do sport celebrity transgressions have on consumer's perceptions of the celebrity's brand image and the brand image of their sponsors?* In: 8th Annual Sport Marketing Association Conference, 26-29 Oct 2010, New Orleans, LA, US

Dalakas, V., & Levin, A, (2005), "The Balance Theory Domino: How Sponsorships May Elicit Negative Consumer Attitudes," *Advances in Consumer Research*, vol. 32, ed, Geeta Menon and Akshay R, Rao

industry statistical analysis revealed that the estimated size of the United State's sports industry was 414 billion dollars for 2010 and that the annual company spending for sports advertising was 27.3 billion dollars.⁵

The main thing that's missing from all of the research is a clear-cut path that athlete's should follow to repair their image in the most effective way possible. By combining information from past scandals as well as public relations specialists, this paper will define what actions an athlete should take when they're faced with a crisis.

⁵ *Sports Industry Overview*. Statistics. Plunkett Research, Ltd., 2010. Web. <<http://www.plunkettresearch.com/sports%20recreation%20leisure%20market%20research/industry%20statistics>>.

Methodology

Public relations' attempts to revamp previous athletes' images after a scandal were reviewed in order to identify what practices were successful and which were not. To do so, several different case studies were condensed, compiled and compared ultimately leading to a prescription for better handling professional athletic scandals in the future. This was primarily a qualitative study and was not based on surveys, but on research of previous public relations methods and their effectiveness.

Four athletic scandals that were unrelated involving different subject matters were chosen to showcase a variety of public relations methods tested in several different situations. Each scandal occurred during the past ten years and was prominent in the United States media. Each of the athletes involved were at the top of their game and considered role models on and off the field.

Identifying Scandals and Their Repercussions

The first steps to evaluating the success of public relations practices and recoveries after an athletic scandal are identifying what the title “scandal” constitutes and defining its parameters. This will outline a more tangible map of athletes’ actions in the past, prior to scrutinizing the repercussions to attempt to identify a causal relationship.

As the popularity and branding of professional athletes grow, their private rights as an individual diminish. Ideally, fans should be able to separate athletes’ personal and professional actions, yet the line between the two is becoming increasingly blurred. Despite the convergence of fans’ personal and professional viewpoints, some fans claim they would forgive an athlete of his transgression as long as they continued to do what they are paid to do.⁶

In a previous study, a group of professional sports sponsors and sports media representatives were interviewed to identify the parameters of what constitutes a scandal. The study concluded that the word scandal is a timely label and that the levels of sport, gender differences, and performance influences have little to no effect on peoples’ perception of the severity of a scandal. The respondents were also asked to provide a definition of an athletic scandal and the researchers identified four consistent characteristics: an action that was either illegal or unethical, involved multiple parties

⁶ Summers, J. & Johnson Morgan, M. (2008). More than just the media: Considering the role of public relations in the creation of sporting celebrity and the management of fan expectations. *Public Relations Review*, 34, 176-182.

over a sustained period of time, and whose impact affected the integrity of the sport with which they are associated.⁷

Two key characteristics are easily overlooked. The involvement of multiple parties over a sustained period of time means that athletes with sporadic personal problems may not always be considered scandalous, although some cases may prove otherwise. The other important characteristic implies that a scandal impacts the integrity of the sport with which the athletes are associated. This is important because it defines individual athletic scandals as a direct link to a sport's image.

Former Yale President, A. Bartlett Giammati was the seventh commissioner of Major League Baseball. He was faced with a betting scandal involving some of the league players and responded, "What was allowed to become a circus, threatens to become the means by which the public believes the entire enterprise is a sideshow."⁸ This principle holds true in today's culture and makes the possible detrimental effect a single athlete's actions can have on an entire sport apparent.

Now that scandals have a more concrete definition, their repercussions should be reviewed as a warning to professional athletes. Four different scandals and their repercussions will be examined focusing on drugs, extramarital relations and violence.

The Tiger Woods case is prime for highlighting the negative effect extramarital scandals can have on an athlete's image. In 2009, Tiger Woods was allegedly involved with a series of extramarital relations that were brought to light when he crashed his car

⁷ Hughes, S. & Shank, M. (2005), Defining scandal in sports: Media and corporate sponsor perspectives. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 14, 207-216.

⁸ "USD's Academic Image No Match for Dark Stain Left by Athletic Scandal," *SignOnSanDiego.com*, The San Diego Union-Tribune, 15 Apr. 2011, Web. <http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2011/apr/15/usds-academic-image-no-match-dark-stain-left-athle/>

after a fight with his wife.⁹ His charismatic appeal was suddenly tainted and naturally, fans were confused as to whether or not their allegiance lied within Tiger Woods The Athlete or The Person.

Every media outlet soon engulfed Woods' story. He was once considered, "the single most impactful endorser in the history of sports marketing"¹⁰ and he was so successful at branding that his persona developed direct relations to the stock market. The market value of Tiger Woods' sponsors fell substantively after the scandal broke, relative to the market values of firms without such endorsement deals.¹¹ Woods' corporate sponsors reacted to the scandal differently from one another. Gatorade, AT&T, and Gillette eventually distanced themselves while Nike and EA Sports remained supportive.¹²

The intensity and emotion of sports consumers, which corporations and sponsors thrive on, also seems to directly affect the fans' views of athletes as well. An online research community based in Canada asked their Facebook group members if Tiger Woods' scandal affected their opinion of him. There was a 33 percent majority that answered with "No, I don't care" and the votes for "No, not overly" and "Yes, I'm very

⁹ Storm, Ramus K., and Ulrik Wagner. "The Anatomy of Sports Scandal: Outset, Development and Effect." Diss. University of Southern Denmark, 2011. 3 Oct. 2010. Web. <https://heinz.sdu.dk:8443/ws/files/44321502/Anatomy_Sport_Scandal_playthegame_submitted.pdf>.

¹⁰ Rich Thomaselli, Dream Endorser, ADVERTISING AGE, Sept. 25, 2006.

¹¹ Knittel, Christopher R., and Victor Stango. *Celebrity Endorsements, Firm Value and Reputation Risk: Evidence from the Tiger Woods Scandal*. UC Davis, 28 Oct. 2010. Web. <<http://faculty.gsm.ucdavis.edu/~vstango/tiger007.pdf>>.

¹² Sassenberg, Anne-Marie and Johnson Morgan, Melissa (2010) *Scandals, sports and sponsors: what impact do sport celebrity transgressions have on consumer's perceptions of the celebrity's brand image and the brand image of their sponsors?* In: 8th Annual Sport Marketing Association Conference, 26-29 Oct 2010, New Orleans, LA, US

disappointed,” were equal.¹³ This shows that like Woods’ sponsors, his fans had mixed opinions about his reputation and the importance of it.

Kobe Bryant’s case parallels that of Tiger Woods. He was accused of extramarital relations and rape while he was playing for the Los Angeles Lakers. His wife stood by his side when he made a public statement admitting infidelity but saying it was consensual, not rape.

Similarly, Michael Phelps witnessed negative reactions from his sponsors when a British tabloid published a photograph of him allegedly smoking marijuana from a glass bong. Susanne Norwitz, a spokeswoman for Phelps’ sponsor Kellogg, stated that, “Michael’s most recent behavior is not consistent with the image of Kellogg,” when the corporation chose to drop their endorsement. Another one of his endorsers, USA Swimming, publicly reprimanded Phelps for his actions by temporarily removing their financial support and suspending him from competing for three months.¹⁴

Another professional athlete, Michael Vick, was the center of one of the most prominent violence-related scandals. The Atlanta Falcon’s quarterback was heavily involved in illegal dogfights, which resulted in suspension from the NFL, a 23-month prison sentence and the loss of nearly \$130 million from his contract with Atlanta (the richest contract in NFL history at the time). He also lost all of his endorsement deals with Reebok, Donruss Card Company, Upper Deck and AirTran Airways. However, Nike, his biggest endorser, remained supportive of Vick throughout the crisis. Court papers

¹³ Reid, Angus. "Quickpoll Results: The Tiger Woods Scandal | Facebook." Facebook. 16 Dec. 2009. Web. 09 May 2011. <http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=209596535377>.

¹⁴ Macur, Juliet. "Phelps Disciplined Over Marijuana Pipe Incident." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 05 Feb. 2009. Web. 18 May 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/06/sports/othersports/06phelps.html?scp=34>>.

provided crude details about his involvement in the execution of underperforming dogs, prompting public backlash from his fan base as well as animal rights groups.¹⁵

A scandal, as defined by Webster's online dictionary is, "a circumstance or action that offends propriety or established moral conceptions or disgraces those associated with it." The aforementioned examples highlight the severity of the effect a scandal can have on an athlete's public and corporate relationships.

¹⁵ Moore, Candace. "An Analysis to Determine Framing of the Michael Vick Dogfighting Controversy." Thesis. Ball State University, 2009. July 2009. Web. <http://cardinalscholar.bsu.edu/663/1/Cmoore_2009-3_BODY.pdf>.

Image Repair Strategies of the Past

Extramarital Relations Case A: Tiger Woods

After identifying the circumstances that contribute to a scandal, the quality and success rate of athletes' previous image repair strategies can now be assessed. Pointing out the flaws and successful techniques of crisis management and image repair strategies will aid in providing a better understanding of how athletes should manage their image in future scandals.

The image repair strategies and public relations utilized in the focused subjects of extramarital, drug, and violence scandals will be scrutinized to exemplify athletes' previous errors or personal triumphs.

Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods are involved in two of the most prominent extramarital scandals, partially because they occurred within the last decade and are therefore fresh within people's minds. Starting with Tiger Woods, a detailed image repair strategy analysis will be conducted once his scandalous actions are identified. A simplified version of his scandal is this: First, *The National Enquirer* published a story about Tiger being involved with a New York nightclub manager. Then, Tiger crashed his car down the street from his own house after a fight with his wife. The next day he announced that he would not be playing in his charity golf tournament, or any of the remaining tournaments in the tour. After this, a San Diego cocktail waitress, revealed to *US Weekly* that she had been involved with Woods. This led a total of seven women to claim they had been involved with Woods at one time or another.

Woods' reputation was under attack immediately after *The National Enquirer* initially accused him of extramarital relations. His previous image as a poised, generous,

honest man who cared about his family made these allegations so scandalous. Woods' first reaction to the situation was to withdraw himself from the public's eye and announce that he wouldn't be playing his own golf tournament or any of the other remaining tournaments in 2009. Soon, the allegations about the cocktail waitress received more media coverage, causing Woods to reach out to the public and apologize for his transgressions. He did not mention what he was apologizing for specifically although he posted a 317-word statement on his website saying, "Personal sins should not require press releases and problems within a family shouldn't have to mean public confessions."¹⁶

In an effort to remain personable yet apologetic, he also stated, "I have not been true to my values and the behavior my family deserves. I am not without faults and I am far short of perfect. I am dealing with my behavior and personal failings behind closed doors with my family."¹⁷ Fortunately for Woods, many of his sponsors were larger corporations like Gatorade, that have experienced the ups and downs of athletes' actions in the past, and many expressed their initial support.

About a year after the car crash that damaged his image, Woods began to attempt to rebuild his reputation. He started using his Twitter account as a way of personally connecting with his fans and after just one post, "What's up everyone, finally decided to try out Twitter," his followers jumped from 90,000 to 130,000 and continued to increase

¹⁶ Dorman, Larry, and Stuart Elliott. "Woods Apologizes and Gets Support." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 2 Dec. 2009. Web. 25 May 2011.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/03/sports/golf/03woods.html?pagewanted=1>>.

¹⁷ Dorman, Larry.

by the hour.¹⁸ By approaching his audience in an informal manner, Woods was able to reestablish some of his personable characteristics.

But was it appropriate for the media to bring so much attention to a celebrity's personal life? In an article published in *The International Journal of Sport and Society*, that explores the evolution of Tiger Woods' reaction to the scandal, Cathy Jenkins takes the media's side.

“His ability to attract and keep sponsors, and to attract high guest appearance fees, has also been enhanced by the previously clean-cut reputation which he had carefully protected and promoted. It can therefore be argued that the media were justified in covering Woods's private life, as it revealed more about the man behind the image which enabled him to attract so many fans and sponsorship dollars.”¹⁹

Woods' initial actions were to conceal the situation and plead for privacy, which he soon learned fueled more interest in his story.

His next attempt to preserve his image happened a few months later, when he decided to admit his transgressions not through a media conference, but to a select group of colleagues and friends. Questions were not allowed and only certain journalists were allowed to watch the session through a video link online. However, a closed apology to a small number of people didn't accomplish much. The public's opinion of Tiger was still tarnished because he had pled for privacy and avoided accusations for so long.

¹⁸ Cianflone, Robert. "Tiger Woods Reaches Out to Public with Essay, Interview." *USAToday*. Gannett Co Inc, 19 Nov. 2010. Web. 25 May 2011. <http://www.usatoday.com/sports/golf/pga/2010-11-17-tiger-woods-rebuilding_N.htm>.

¹⁹ Jenkins, Cathy. "A Faustian Contract? When a Sport Star's Media Goes Bad." *The International Journal of Sport and Society* 1.3 (2010): 231-34. *Sport and Society*. Common Ground. Web. <http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/10072/34068/1/64220_1.pdf>.

A month later, Woods hosted a series of one-on-one interviews with reporters that lasted for no longer than five minutes. He still stressed the fact that some of the story would remain private, like what started the fight on Thanksgiving night and if he had sought any sort of treatment. Finally, on April 5th, 2010, Woods held a press conference and used simplistic image repair strategies: suffering, praising others, corrective action, and apology.²⁰ After evading the truth for so long, he publicly announced his infidelities and apologized to his fans, family and sponsors.

Although the media is continuing to cover his now failed marriage, fans have reaffirmed their support of him as an athlete because he accepted full responsibility for his actions. As suggested in the conclusion Jenkins' analysis of Woods' media image she states, "It appears that as Woods continues working to repair his image and rebuild his golfing career, the 'nice guy' role model may be replaced with that of a man who learns from his mistakes."¹⁵

Extramarital Relations Case B: Kobe Bryant

Kobe Bryant has certainly become a household name for any sports enthusiast, but for many different reasons. They may love him because he's one of Los Angeles Lakers' star players, they might loathe him because they side with his rival LeBron James fan, or they may view him as an inspirational role model. Whatever the case may be, Kobe Bryant is a certainly a basketball legend to be reckoned with both on and off the court.

²⁰ *Responding to a Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communications*. Ed. Dan P. Miller and Robert L. Heath. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004. 100. Print.

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. Like Tiger, Kobe was also a highly sought after athlete. In fact, he was the third most sought after sportsman for endorsements in the early 2000's, falling short to Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods.

He started playing in the NBA in 1996 and was a self-proclaimed homebody – someone who ignored the party lifestyle of his teammates thus making him an ideal role model for children. He was considered respectful, hardworking, and a family man, all of which contributed to his value in the endorsement industry.

Lately, Bryant's name has been strewn across all media outlets because of his participation in the NBA playoffs. In 2010 he was the face of the Lakers' in a series of NBA playoff commercials that featured his rivalry with LeBron James. Lately, Bryant's media coverage has been overwhelmingly positive, but his reputation was being questioned not too long ago.

A 19-year-old woman from a small town in Colorado accused Bryant of rape in the summer of 2003. Bryant admitted to adultery with the accuser, but denied the rape charges. The rape case was dropped when the woman refused to testify in court, but she followed by filing a civil suit. The civil suit was settled outside of the court for an undisclosed amount. In a media analysis of Kobe Bryant's actions, Jennifer Kennedy wrote this in *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*:

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. 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.

Kennedy also notes that he reacted to the scandal in a timely manner. As soon as charges were pressed Kobe and his wife both made a public statement. He hosted a press conference to reassure the public that he had nothing to hide, and although he made a mistake he was wrongly accused of rape. After the press conference, Kobe remained relatively quiet which seems to have been effective in his case.²¹

During his impending court ruling, however, Kobe was involved in an altercation with his teammate Shaquille O'Neil, which eventually led to Shaq leaving the Lakers team all together. Although most of the media attention at the time was focused on the rivalry between two of the best players and teammates in the league, Kobe's discretions weren't out of the public's mind. Fortunate for him though, like Tiger Woods, many of his fans remained supportive of Kobe or decided to impend judgment until the trial was completed. However, in 2005, Bryant's jersey sales dropped to the 90th rank in the league, much lower than prior to his scandal, indicating that not all of his fans were able to overlook his personal ethics and affairs.²²

²¹ Kennedy, Jennifer. "Image Reparation Strategies in Sports: Media Analysis of Kobe Bryant and Barry Bonds." *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 1.1 (2010): 95-99. Web. <<http://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/academics/communications/research/09KennedyEJSpring10.pdf>>.

²² Simon, S. (2005, January 8). Analysis: Sales of Kobe Bryant's basketball jersey plummeting since his legal troubles. Weekend Edition Saturday (NPR).

In his defense, many of the upset basketball fans' anger could have stemmed from the fact that they weren't necessarily Lakers fans, but they were upset that one of the better players in the league would tarnish the sport's reputation. They also could have used it to further fuel their grudge against the Kobe and his team.

Overall, although his reputation isn't quite the same as it was when he first entered the league, but it seems as if Kobe is continually making improvements on his public image. And with a NBA championship is under his belt, much of the public has began to overlook Kobe as a man with personal and ethical issues and refocus their attention on his athleticism.

Drug Scandal: Michael Phelps

Michael Phelps is one of the most well known names when it comes to competitive American swimming especially during the Olympics. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics Phelps surpassed the 1972 record of winning 7 gold medals set by Mark Spitz by winning 8. He was expected to earn around \$100 million in his lifetime through awards and endorsements because of his immense potential.²³ Some of his major sponsors included AT&T, Kellogg, Mazda, Subway and Visa.

Phelps' future was looking promising in 2008, even four years after he had been involved in a drunk driving car accident. After his car accident, prosecutors pressed charges, many of which were dropped after Phelps pleaded guilty for drunk driving. Although his blood alcohol level was at the legal limit in Maryland, he was still underage and failed to stop at a stop sign. Phelps was sentenced 18 months probation and was

²³ Crouse, Karen. "Phelps Apologizes for Marijuana Pipe Photograph." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 01 Feb. 2009. Web. 01 June 2011.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/02/sports/othersports/02phelps.html>>.

required to work with Mothers Against Drunk Driving as well as make speeches at various schools about the dangers of driving under the influence.

His main approach during this court case was to immediately accept the responsibility, admit his wrongdoings, and apologize profusely. In court Phelps said, “I recognize the seriousness of this mistake. I’ve learned from this mistake and will continue learning from this mistake for the rest of my life.”²⁴

Then, in 2008 when a British newspaper published a photo of Michael Phelps smoking marijuana from a glass bong, the process of reputation rebuilding started all over again. The British newspaper didn’t state that Phelps was specifically smoking marijuana, but pointed out that the pipe was often used for that purpose. While marijuana is not on the list of banned drugs outside of the sport of swimming, the stakes were higher this time around because the Associated Press named Phelps Male Athlete of the Year just after the 2008 Olympics. After dealing with the aftermath of being involved in drunk driving, Phelps realized the previous actions he had taken against a scandal were relatively successful. So, once again Phelps made the right move by apologizing the same day as the photo was published.

“I engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment,” Phelps said in his apology. “I’m 23 years old and despite the successes I’ve had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner people have come to expect from me. For this, I am sorry. I promise my fans and the public it will not happen again.”²⁵

²⁴ "Olympic Champ Sentenced For DUI." *CBS News US*. CBS News, 24 Dec. 2004. Web. 01 June 2011. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/08/national/main654380.shtml>>.

²⁵ Crouse, Karen. "Phelps Apologizes for Marijuana Pipe Photograph." *The New York Times*. The New

Although he doesn't say how he plans on preventing another situation like this, Phelps further proved how serious he was about abstaining from drugs to follow up his quick admission and apology. To do so, he agreed to be randomly tested for drugs more frequently than during his last season.

In an analysis of Phelps' image repair discourse, a study points out that his strong athletic reputation is what helped him keep his sponsors. Speedo was arguably one of the most closely associated brands with Phelps and released this statement after Phelps' apology: "Speedo would like to make it clear that it does not condone such behavior and we know that Michael truly regrets his actions. Michael Phelps is a valued member of the Speedo team and a great champion. We will do all that we can to support him and his family." Through their statement, Speedo makes it clear that his skills as a "great champion" outweigh his transgression in the long run.²⁶

In a later interview with a newspaper, Phelps apologized once again, this time referencing his drunk driving accident in 2004. By doing so he was able to stress the fact that he is an imperfect individual but is striving to become a better person.

Another one of the major aspects of Phelps' scandal was that it occurred at the peak of the Super Bowl hype, lending less attention to him from the media. Overall, it seems that Michael Phelps' image repair strategy was a success. "His statement was well received by his sponsors and organizations, and the media all but dismissed the

York Times, 01 Feb. 2009. Web. 01 June 2011.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/02/sports/othersports/02phelps.html>>.

²⁶ Walsh, Joseph, and Sheila M. McAllister-Spooner. *Public Relations Review. Analysis of the Image Repair Discourse in the Michael Phelps Controversy*. Elsevier, 3 Jan. 2011. Web.
<<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0363811111000026>>.

transgression as a “boys will be boys” scenario. Additionally, Phelps’ sponsors and governing organizations not only supported the swimmer, but also bolstered his image.”²²

Violence: Michael Vick

Michael Vick was known as the Atlanta Falcon’s quarterback up until his involvement in dog fighting, which was self-led. Not only was Vick involved, but he was at the center of the crime, using his leadership skills to draw people into participating in his “Bad Newz Kennels.” As legal documentation states, Vick was the instigator in the entire investigation and not only encouraged dogfighting, he encouraged the killing of dogs that were not performing well.

However, an article in *The New York Times* claims that being caught in a dogfighting scandal wasn’t Vick’s biggest mistake, but it was mediocrity.²⁷ The article, found in a pro-football section of the Times, states, “He ventured way outside the pocket of social respectability at a time when his quarterback rating was plummeting. He had not turned the Atlanta Falcons into a Super Bowl contender.”²⁸ Clearly some of Vick’s audience and fans were not proud of his actions at this point in time, on or off the field.

Another *New York Times* article discusses the fans’ reactions after Vick was released from his 18-month term in prison and signed another contract with the NFL. “A lot of fans are angry that he’s being given this chance, because they either A.) feel Vick hasn’t proven his remorse or B.) just believe that what he did — underwriting a dog-

²⁷ Vecsey, George. "Michael Vicks Big Mistake, and It Wasnt Dogfighting." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 21 July 2009. Web. 02 June 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/22/sports/football/22vecsey.html>>.

²⁸ Vecsey, George.

fighting ring in Virginia — is unforgiveable.”²⁹ The success of to Michael Vick’s strategy in dealing with the scandal remained unclear at that point. The author of the article, however, had a strong opinion about Vick’s apologetic success. “Vick took responsibility for his behavior and expressed his shame for what he had done so effectively that I wondered if he had hired an apology coach.” So even after the initial uncovering of the scandal, and after Vick served time in jail, people’s opinions remained mixed.

One of the main reasons that the former Atlanta quarterback’s scandal was such a big deal was the fact that no other athlete had experienced something similar. He was convicted of a crime, lost millions of dollars and was dropped by his endorsers including Nike. “No active athlete has had this kind of public relations. Ever.”³⁰

Vick’s name, which was already tarnished in the realm of football, needed some serious image rebuilding once he reintegrated into society after prison. National Public Radio discussed the three main steps involved in reassembling a tarnished public image: show genuine remorse, avoid being overexposed and demonstrate that you’ve changed your ways.³¹ In the text of the article, NPR mentions that Vick’s legacy may not be football, but ending the sport of dogfighting through quality public relations. “The third and final step in the process on the road to celebrity recovery is to ‘wrap yourself in a

²⁹ Collins, Gail, and Ross Douthat. "Michael Vick's Apology." *Opinionator*. The New York Times, 19 Aug. 2009. Web. 03 June 2011. <<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/19/michael-vicks-apology/>>.

³⁰ Kruse, Michael. "Michael Vick's Redemption Will Be "Mother of All PR Battles"" *Tampabay.com*. St. Petersburg Times, 21 May 2009. Web. 04 June 2011. <<http://www.tampabay.com/news/nation/article1002849.ece>>.

³¹ Neuman, Scott. "Michael Vick Needs To Score PR Victory, Experts Say." *NPR : National Public Radio*. National Public Radio, 20 May 2009. Web. 04 June 2011. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104346013>>.

cause.” Vick pledged to help the Humane Society eradicate dog fighting and also planned on traveling to different schools, educating youth about the humane treatment of animals.

NPR also notes that after jail, Vick did not focus his image rebuilding entirely on the fact that he was remorseful about abusing animals, but also on the fact that he was improving his work ethic on the field. This made him seem like a well-rounded, reformed person as well as a quarterback with a fresh attitude. The former Atlanta Falcons quarterback went on to sign with the Philadelphia Eagles, proving that his reputation as a football player had not gone completely by the wayside.

Discussion

These examples have provided a good look at how severe a professional athletic scandal truly can be. Now, comparing and contrasting the public relations approaches of these four cases will identify the successful methods discussed as well what a future athlete should and shouldn't do in a time of crisis.

Woods, Bryant and Phelps all had a relatively clean lifestyle prior to their scandals, which led to important endorsements from various sponsors. Their initial reputation was clutch in their image repair because it helped the public view them as a human being who had made a mistake instead of one who continually was involved in scandals or breaking laws. Woods and Phelps also had such strong connections to their endorsers, many of them continued to stay supportive of the athletes during a time when their integrity was being questioned. Having large corporations on their side was a huge benefactor when it came to persuading public opinion.

Another thing that all four athletes had in common is that they all admitted their mistakes and accepted responsibility for their actions. Bryant and Phelps were the quickest to do so and apologized to the public on the same day as allegations arose, which was successful in showing that they had nothing to hide. Woods, however, did not act in a timely manner, which only drew more attention to his personal life because he left the public shrouded in mystery. Woods also released information in a slow manner, first by apologizing for nothing in particular, then by speaking with a closed group of journalists months later while continually withholding information, and lastly with a public apology nearly a year later. His plea for privacy only fueled the media's interest, showing that reacting publicly in a timely manner is important in the face of a crisis.

One of Woods' more successful public relations techniques was to informally reach out directly to the people through the social networking site, Twitter. Doing so showed that he was still a charismatic professional who was interested in interacting with his fan base to help rebuild his reputation.

Phelps and Vick both expressed shame in their actions and promised the public to improve themselves as individuals. Promises like that can easily be made and broken, but both athletes came up with a way to show their audience that they were serious. Phelps agreed to more random drug tests to prove his dedication and Vick pledged to work with the Humane Society to show his. Another positive move Vick made was that he demonstrated an improved work ethic when he returned to the football field, reassuring people who previously doubted his skills as a quarterback as well as his personal ethics.

Although it seems as if all four of these athletes walked away from their scandals with a positive reputation, their main mistakes must be evaluated prior to forming a prescription for more effective reputation rebuilding.

Phelps' main mistake was his timing. He had been involved in a drunk driving incident within the previous years and had already promised the public that he would learn from his mistake and become a better person. Then, as humans often do, he erred again. The photo of him with the glass pipe was also released right after Sports Illustrated named him Male Athlete of the Year.

Vick's biggest mistake was that he was the leader of Bad Newz Kennels and authorized the crimes committed in association with it, all at a time when his career was in decline. His crime was also focused around a sensitive subject: the mistreatment of animals. There's certainly a lot of football fans who love puppies so it's easy to see why

Vick had a hard time rebuilding his reputation after mistakenly offending a large majority of the public.

Woods' mistake was his ill timing. He immediately withdrew himself from the public, which only made matters worse and encouraged rumors. When he finally did take full responsibility for his actions and apologize to the public so much time had passed he lost many of his supporters.

And lastly, Kobe Bryant. In the midst of rape allegations and an extramarital scandal, Bryant was involved in altercations with O'Neil, which eventually caused O'Neil to leave the team all together. This however, refocused some of the public's attention to Bryant's lesser transgressions.

Conclusion:

Refining Public Relations Techniques For Use During Future Athletic Scandals

The past four cases have provided great insights into which public relations techniques were successful and which were not. The question now is, what is the most effective way of handling a scandal?

The prescription for action is simply a combination of the techniques used in each of the previous case studies. The most important factor is time. Time can persuade the public into thinking an athlete has nothing to hide but made a simple mistake, but it can also work against an athlete and ignite rumors and public distrust. So, the first step to take when an athlete is faced with a crisis is to react in a timely manner.

Next, the athlete needs to accept responsibility for their actions and show remorse for what they have done. They need to be honest and sincere and apologize to the public for their transgressions and pledge to never again be involved in similar circumstances.

After the initial apology, the athlete then needs to take some space from the media. It is important that they remain accessible, but they also need to give the public time to accept their apology and let them process everything. Then, the athlete needs to follow through with their previous pledge. Much like Michael Vick teaming up with the Humane Society to prove to the public that he is serious.

And lastly, one of the most important factors throughout every step of the process is that the athlete needs to be in constant contact with a public relations manager and have close ties to their endorsers, even prior to a scandal. Athletes must maintain a positive

relationship with fans and media throughout their career; the public will respond better to a quick, truthful and heartfelt response to an accusation than a cover-up.³²

Every scandal is different and must be handled on a case-to-case basis but there is a similar formula athletes can use to effectively diffuse their situation. React in a timely manner. Take responsibility for your actions. Be sincere, honest in your apology and show remorse. Pledge to change. Lie low socially and emphasize positive involvement in the community as well as on the playing field. Continue to show the public that you are striving to improve yourself, reassure them that will be the last time you're involved in that sort of situation. And lastly, prove it.

³² Kennedy, Jennifer. "Image Reparation Strategies in Sports: Media Analysis of Kobe Bryant and Barry Bonds." *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* 1.1 (2010): 95-99. Web. <<http://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/academics/communications/research/09KennedyEJSpring10.pdf>>.

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