

SAY IT AIN'T SO? THE NEED FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

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Tricksters, gamesters and drug users; words that might describe the characters in a newly released film actually describe some of the professional sports figures who have disgraced their respective games. Their actions, when discovered, have embroiled the sports world in headline-making scandals. Anyone who has watched television or read printed publications has no doubt seen many sport-related scandals. As a result, the average sports fan has been bombarded with news of sports scandals such as gambling, steroids, and dog fighting just to name a few. All of these incidents are disheartening to think about, but raise the questions, "How can sports organizations equip themselves to handle crises that arise?" and "How do scandals affect fan trust?"

In the words of the late Jim McKay of ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, it is the "Thrill of victory and the agony of defeat...the human drama of athletic competition" that draws fans to arenas and televisions alike. The appeal of professional sports is that the fans are witnessing true contests of skill where the outcome is not known until the final buzzer—or as Dan Cook said in April 1978 during the first National Basketball Association (NBA) playoff game between the Washington Bullets and the San Antonio Spurs, "The opera ain't over until the fat lady sings." Steve Bornstein (former head of ESPN) was asked to explain the explosion of ESPN and sports over the last 20 years. He explained, "You can't go to Blockbuster and rent tonight's game". Both Cook and Bornstein were alluding to the uncertainty factor associated with the outcome of sporting events. It is this spirit of true competition that makes the games real to the fans and creates the divide between pro sports and wrestling or "reality" TV.

Bob LaMonte, president and owner of Professional Sports Representation sums it up, "Sports are the only reality show in the world where every day you don't know the outcome. Once you start discussing cheating within the sport, it really cuts to the very fiber of what makes sports real." Echoing this sentiment, sportswriter John Feinstein intimated that the reason that people are so fascinated with sports is because the outcome is unknown. Further, when sports figures attempt to influence outcomes via points shaving, inside information given to gamblers and even improving performance through drug use, it cuts to core of competition. Where there is cheating, competition is compromised.

NBA Referee Scandal

In 2007 when news broke that an NBA referee had been accused of cheating the collective thinking of NBA fans wasn't "I can't believe it!" or "Is it possible?" it was "Which one was it?"

It seems that the consensus was that it was only a matter of time and perhaps wonderment regarding what took so long for it to come out. This was not the first time that there were allegations of referee misconduct in the NBA. In 2005, Jeff Van Gundy, coach of the Houston Rockets, alleged that Yao Ming was unfairly targeted during Game 5 of the playoffs. Additionally, it had been alleged that during the 2002 playoff Game 6 of the Western conference finals between the Sacramento Kings and Los Angeles Lakers that personal fouls against the Kings were either intentionally “missed” or “made-up” to give the Lakers additional free throws and the win.

David Stern, Commissioner of the NBA, faced a major challenge in how to react to the scandal caused by referee Tim Donaghy betting on games. Representative Bobby Rush, head of the subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, considered calling a hearing on the matter. He stated “Unfortunately, fairly or not, the NBA, more than any other professional sport, has been consistently dogged with allegations that league referees needlessly affect the outcomes of games by making bad calls.” Though it appeared that the scandal did not expand beyond Donaghy and his two alleged coconspirators, Stern’s job of getting to the bottom of Donaghy’s activities would be far more difficult and important than that of the federal prosecutor’s.

NBA Commissioner David Stern in his press conference stated that Tim Donaghy was a “rogue, isolated criminal” but can fans be confident of this opinion? He went on to say that “We would like to assure our fans that no amount of effort, time or personnel is being spared to assist in this investigation, to bring to justice an individual who has betrayed the most sacred trust in professional sports, and to take the necessary steps to protect against this ever happening again.” Stern, in spring of 2007, was quoted as saying, “I am not worried about games being fixed, and I am surprised you would ask such a question.” Stern went on to explain that the NBA had a system of checks that would prevent such an issue. The NBA has thrived in recent years and the scandal won’t cancel the next season or dissolve agreed upon TV revenues, but it is an ugly stain that will probably linger in fans’ minds. Regardless of whether Donaghy had been found guilty or innocent the reality is that fans may never again watch an NBA game the same way. After all, referees have the ability to affect the outcome of every game they officiate. The accusation in and of itself leaves a dark cloud over every game and official. Fans may say that the referee is “pulling a Donaghy” when calls are made against the team for which they are rooting, calling the referee’s integrity into question. In fact, when asked to comment about the NBA referee scandal several fans had the following to say:

- “Of Course. You cannot really believe that sports is real. There is way too much money involved? Ever wonder why a good player can have such bad days? It's fixed.....”
- “The NBA is fixed just like politics.”
- “Very sad. Watching certain NBA Games, you can tell referees are dictating the game...”
- “Let’s face it, though. Anybody watching the NBA knows that there has been some “fishy” officiating in the past decade (at least). What's sad about this story is that it really didn't come as a huge shock to me.”

Baseball Scandals

Betting

The NBA is not alone in the occurrence of scandals that expose the greed, unethical behavior and “anything to win” attitude of both on and off-the-field sports figures. Although some events are more recent than others, there are several examples that illustrate how the actions of a few serve to shake up their respective sports. For example, in 1989 the then manager and former player of the Cincinnati Reds, Pete Rose Jr., was rumored to be betting on the very sport while he managed and played. Although he denied the allegations commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti hired lawyer John Dowd to launch an investigation. Evidence was uncovered that Rose had bet on more than 50 Reds games in 1987. It wasn’t until 2004 that Rose admitted that he bet on baseball but maintained that he had not bet against the Reds.

Steroid Use

Another scandal in Major League Baseball (MLB) involves the use of steroids. Because of the publicity surrounding the incidence of the use of performance enhancing drugs, baseball and steroids have become inextricably linked. Several high profile players have admitted to using steroids and/or performance enhancing drugs during their tenure. The 1996 Most Valuable Player (MVP), Ken Caminiti admitted that he was using steroids when he won the award. Alex Rodriguez (MVP, 2003) tested positive for performance-enhancing drug use that same year. In 2005, Jose Canseco, in his book “Juiced” estimated that as much as 80% of players used steroids. In January 2010, Mark McGwire revealed that his steroids use spanned more than a decade that included 1998, the year he set the single-season home-run record. In 2006 baseball commissioner Bud Selig appointed former Senator George J. Mitchell to investigate past steroid use by MLB players. The report named more than 80 current and former baseball players. As recently as April 2012, award winning pitcher, Roger Clemens was being tried for perjury due to allegation that he lied in an appearance before Congress in 2008 when he denied using steroids and human growth hormone. However, a key witness in the trial is Clemens’ former strength trainer, who says he injected the pitcher with performance-enhancing substances. A jury found Clemens not guilty. The use of steroids and performance enhancing drugs in baseball is now officially banned.

National Football League (NFL)/Michael Vick Dog Fighting Scandal

One issue that has the potential to develop into crises for professional sports teams is off-the-field player behavior. In July 2007, one of the highest-paid players in professional football, the quarterback Michael Vick of the NFL’s Atlanta Falcons, was indicted on federal charges of sponsoring a competitive dog fighting operation where dogs died in fights, were shot, hanged or in some instances electrocuted. The indictment alleged that at the time of his arrest Vick had been involved with dog fighting for approximately six years. Federal authorities seized 66 dogs and equipment commonly used in dog fighting from Vick’s Virginia home. After initially denying any involvement, Vick pleaded guilty to involvement in the dogfighting ring and served 23 months in prison.

Although this act was committed by one individual, the NFL had to address the scandal at an organizational level. Specifically, the allegations against Vick had to be reviewed under the

NFL's personal conduct policy. At the time, NFL spokesperson, Brian McCarthy stated, "We are disappointed that Michael Vick has put himself in a position where a federal grand jury has returned an indictment against him. We will continue to closely monitor developments in this case and to cooperate with law enforcement authorities."

Interestingly, although the NFL had nothing to do with the dog fighting operations the result was unfavorable publicity for the organization. The fallout of Michael Vick's actions included animal rights activists holding protests in New York outside NFL offices. In July 2007, NFL Commissioner, Roger Goodell ordered Vick to stay away from the Atlanta Falcons football training camp. Shortly after Vick pleaded guilty, Goodell suspended him from the NFL indefinitely without pay.

Organizational Crises

Although the examples above relate to actions taken by individuals, the effect was felt and had to be dealt with at an organizational level. For businesses there are primarily two types of crises: sudden and smoldering.

Some crises occur without warning. Sudden crises occur unexpectedly. The organization, in effect, has no control. Furthermore, in sudden crises the public perceives that the organization bears limited responsibility or is at no fault. Alternately, smoldering crises are like "accidents waiting to happen." They exist as an undercurrent as the proverbial "elephant in the room". In other words, everyone knows but no one says a word. These types of crises typically start out small but eventually become much bigger problems because of the negligence of the organization. As such, smoldering crises are perceived as the organization's fault (Hayes and Wooten, 2005).

In terms of managing organizational crises, crisis management is "a coordinated effort to handle the effects of unfavorable publicity ensuring fast and accurate communication in times of emergency" (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel, 2012). Furthermore, crisis management can also be thought of as the management of operations before, during and after the actual crisis (Caywood and Stocker, 1993). Once known, how crises are handled has the potential to chart the course and success of an organization for years to come.

The Importance of Trust

Trust is a part of any successful relationship. While trust may be given to a person, it may also be given to an organization (Kim and Trail, 2011). In this case, the relationship is between fans and various entities such as the respective sports organizations (i.e. players, coaches, front office) to which there is commitment and even game officials. Trust is vitally important in the relationship between fans and professional sports organizations and players. Sports fan put their trust in the aforementioned beings in the same way that they trust individuals. The importance of trust stems from the fact it implies that there is confidence that the people in question are reliable, have integrity both on and off the field. Moreover, trust implies that athletes would not do anything to compromise the outcome sporting of events or their performance. Furthermore, trust is important because fans that trust players (coaches, front office, and officials) are more likely to continue to

support athletes by way of ticket purchases and other paraphernalia. When trust is called into question it threatens to eat away at the core of a sports organization's business.

Regarding the NBA crisis, David Mayo of *The Grand Rapids Press* states, "No one that lives through this episode will ever look at an NBA game the same way as before the July revelation...games will never again will be witnessed "without a cry of 'Fix' from some offended fan." Perhaps the same can be said about professional sports competitions in general. The occurrence of incidents that attempt to influence and/or alter final outcomes may result in jaded, distrustful sports fans. Fans could be left wondering if the performance they've just witnessed is real or "enhanced". Crisis management can build back fan trust so the above quote will not become a reality.

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