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Dennis Rodman

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Once upon a time he was the scourge of the NBA. He skipped practices and road trips; head-butted two players and then a referee; threw a bag of ice at his coach in San Antonio; used profanity in a live post-game interview; and kicked a television cameraman in the groin at a game in the Target Center. All of this earned him 24 games in suspensions, a suspension from one playoff series, and one indefinite suspension, \$67,000 in fines, and millions in lost wages.

Along the way this man covered his body with tattoos, changed the color of his hair with the same frequency as most of us change socks, wore eye shadow and nail polish, wrote a book which described his sex life in graphic detail, posed nude for the cover of the book, and appeared in drag in a wedding dress to promote the sale of his book, *Bad As I Wanna Be*. His ex-wife is writing a response, *Worse Than He Says He Is*.

After his most recent suspension Jesse Jackson allowed as to how the NBA should not try to take away this man's dignity. Inadvertently it was the funniest line ever uttered by the Rev. Jackson and it is being quoted everywhere. As we used to say in my neighborhood, you can't take away what he ain't got.

This is a summary of the past five years of Dennis Rodman's life in the NBA. Starting in Detroit and moving on to San Antonio, Rodman earned his nickname, "The Worm," which was a comment on both his personality and his basketball skills.

By the time Dennis left Detroit he was regarded as a major disruptive force on the Pistons. Perhaps a change of scenery would help. It did not. When Dennis threw the bag of ice at Bob Hill and was seen taking his shoes off on the bench while refusing to reenter a game, he was clearly beyond the pale.

And yet he was a talented player, and if anyone could "get to him" and somehow harness this immensely talented force, it was clear that Rodman could be a major asset for some NBA team. So there would always be teams willing to take a chance, coaches who believed they could tame the worm.

Along the way Dennis Rodman learned many things. He learned that his talent could keep him in the league, he learned that it was not who he was or what he did but how he was perceived that counted, and he learned the importance of marketing.

David Stern and the NBA have been praised mightily over the past few years for their marketing genius. Stern has led the NBA to fame and fortune by marketing the star players. Celebrity was the aim in every NBA city for the best players. As for their teams, fame would follow fame, and the merchandising windfall would be golden.

Rodman watched and understood. By the time he arrived in Chicago his celebrity-making-machine was humming along like a dynamo. Dennis was suddenly the best known personage in Chicago. There may be only one Michael, but clearly there is also only one Dennis. Last winter along the Kennedy Expressway heading in and out of downtown Chicago there was a huge billboard showing a Dennis Rodman bust. Every few days the color of the hair on this giant-sized Rodman head changed, and every day the traffic snarled as commuters slowed to see their hero and to take pictures of the doo.

At one book signing he appeared in feather boa and blond wig, and in short order large numbers of small boys began to emulate the costume, or at least the wig, at Bulls games and at book signings. He had become a role model.

Dennis Rodman was transformed from "The Worm" to one of the most marketable figures in the NBA behind Shaq and Michael. Product endorsements came rolling in, the TV talk shows were calling, the book hit the top of the best seller list, and Nike was paying Dennis \$1.5M for a three year endorsement contract. The baddest of the bad boys was suddenly in demand and getting rich. Self-promotion was paying big dividends.

Then came the groin kick shown over and over again on television. At first his teammates and coach tried to defend him, crowd reactions showed fans in the stands laughing as the cameraman writhed in pain.

The suspension, the nearly universal media condemnation, presidential comment, and the national outcry finally reversed those reactions. Rodman may be on the downhill slide. Nike has indicated that his endorsement contract will not be renewed. Other sponsors are wary of this kind of product identification.

But it may not be over. There is no substance here, only style, and style is fickle. Dennis could easily rise again, if only he can find just the right combination of outrageous and repenting behavior, with just the proper fashion statement.

Marketing is everything, and no one knows that better than David Stern, except perhaps Dennis Rodman.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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