

Athletes in confessional mode

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Athletes in confessional mode
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What is it about the media, and by implication, the public, that we seem to require a public confessional from our fallen heroes and icons? As I watched some of the Mark McGwire interview with Bob Costas I wondered if it had started with McGwire looking at the floor and saying, "Forgive me Bobby, for I have sinned." I trust it did not, even though it might have added to the ambiance.

As the parade of juicers made its way across Baseball Diamonds and onto our TV sets confessing their sins, I was struck by the need there seems to be for public humiliation of offenders. It is reminiscent of the stocks used in the colonial world for public penance. I suppose we should be thankful we do not require the offenders to carry the brand J burnt into their foreheads.

Not only does this public humiliation seem to be a necessary part of the ritual, but the first reaction to it seems to nearly always be ridicule of the supplicant. Jason Giambi's inarticulate admission to having done something, which he could not seem to name, was followed by media ridicule. Then after a decent interval, and one that is shorter when the guilty perform heroic acts that win games, the press and public cheer the redeemed hero, sometimes louder than ever before.

The confession of A-Rod was most typical of the pattern. A-Rod confessed to having juiced and hedged the confession with suggestions that it was only for a short time, and that some mysterious cousin was the catalyst in the transgressions. He tried to look sincere and repentant but he simply looked awkward and gave the impression he was a bald faced liar. The howling after A-Rod's confession, the jokes about the cousin that swept the internet and baseball web sites, along with the simple refusal to believe anything he said was quite striking.

This all took place before the season began. Then A-Rod started delivering the home runs including one in his first appearance at bat in the regular season, followed by a long drought at the plate, and then by one of his best seasons and absolutely his best post-season ever. A-Rod was a hero once again. The missing cousin was a distant memory. A-Rod became the darling of Yankee fans who now approved of the women he dated and hailed him as

the man who brought a World Series win to the Bronx for the first time in nearly a decade.

Andy Pettitte was another of those who sought redemption through confession, and he was able to do so while getting cover from the public interest in Roger Clemens. Pettite too took the humiliation medicine, looked intensely contrite, and because he was such a lovable guy and not Roger Clemens, he was quickly forgiven. He too would be cheered as he delivered for the Yankees. As we have learned over the years, winning trumps all. This is why there was so much feel good about the Yankee trinity of juicers.

Mark McGwire is no longer an active player so he will not get that same opportunity to sweep away all malice through heroic acts. Although given the reception that McGwire got in St. Louis yesterday, it would seem he needs to do nothing else, at least in Cardinal Country.

As for Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, and Sammy Sosa, three who have not confessed to their sins and publicly sought forgiveness, they never will be forgiven. The public requires more than they can give and so their names will remain in infamy.

Whether Tiger Woods will be required to undergo a similar ritual cleansing is not yet known. The passage of time will certainly ease the public disdain, just as it has done with former President Clinton, and a parade of philanderers who have marched across the political and show business landscapes. Once time has reduced the intensity of the reaction and Tiger Woods returns to the golf course, and more importantly when he begins to win tournaments and make those pressure putts and circus shots from the rough, the roster of affairs will pale in importance.

Maybe Tiger will not have to publicly seek forgiveness. His humiliation certainly has taken place without a confessional moment. The ridicule heaped upon him just on the internet alone has been massive and stinging.

It would probably be advisable for Tiger Woods to appear on some well controlled TV event that is made to look nearly spontaneous. There he could mea culpa twice around the dance floor, let those eyes well up a bit as he speaks of the terrible price he is paying for his sins, and then in the grand finale, speak of how he has turned his life around and how he realizes

the magnitude of his transgressions and how sorry he is that he disappointed the American public.

Such a public moment could be followed by a multitude of cynical sportscasters telling us how insincere Tiger's sincerity really is, and how Tiger would not answer all those questions they had for him, and how his handlers are seeking to manipulate the public.

A few weeks later having turned in some stellar golf, Tiger Woods would be cheered, his concentration could once again produce wonder, and his presence at the pancake house would be all but forgotten.

Only a few hard-hearted moralists and hypocritical media types could possibly refuse to dispense absolution.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you dont have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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