



**BY EVAN WEINER**

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**THE BUSINESS AND POLITICS OF SPORTS**

Suppose for a moment that New York Gubernatorial candidate Carl Paladino pitched for the Atlanta Braves or Ohio Congressional candidate Rich Lott owned the Cincinnati Reds. Imagine for a second that Alaska Senatorial candidate Joe Miller dumped water over the heads of two reporters while pitching for the Detroit Tigers. Replace the names John Rocker for Paladino, Marge Schott for Lott and Dennis McLain for Miller and ask yourself a question.

Are athletes held to a higher standard of conduct by society and American newspapers, radio and TV reporters and commentators than politicians?

The answer seems to be yes. Sports fans taunted Barry Bonds, Alex Rodriguez and other alleged steroid users in baseball but does anyone care about the various members of Congress who have been in trouble with the law?

The answer to that is a resounding no.

Politicians and elected officials have far more of an impact in life than Bonds, Alex Rodriguez, Roger Clemens, the other named baseball players in the Mitchell Report about drug usages in Major League Baseball and every other athlete who played a game. Politicians make laws,

athletes entertain yet athletes are held up as role models for the youth.

National Football League Commissioner Roger Goodell is the moral police these days. Goodell plans to have a chat with Brett Favre about the allegations that Favre texted some pictures of himself as nature intended to a New York Jets employee named Jenn Sterger when the quarterback played for the New Jersey-based team in 2008. Goodell is in uncharted territory here because there are no criminal or civil investigations of Favre and the only thing he might have done is something ridiculously stupid. But Favre also might have violated league policy--there are morals clauses in sports contracts.

Politicians don't have moral clauses. Maybe they should.

Goodell did deal with Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger in a stern matter earlier this year. Roethlisberger faced sexual assault allegations in Lake Tahoe in 2008 and in Milledgeville, Georgia, in 2010. But no charges were filed in the two incidents. Goodell did suspend Roethlisberger for six games under the NFL's personal conduct policy for the start of the 2010 season. The suspension was reduced to four games by Goodell as Roethlisberger was on good behavior.

Goodell has also suspended Michael Vick and Adam "Pacman" Jones because of criminal behavior. In Congress, possible criminal behavior might get you an ethics violation and have your name dragged down by radio talk show hosts and cable news TV hosts.

Sports might be the "third rail" of American society. A politician can say the vilest and worst things imaginable on radio or TV. A politician can go visit a mistress in Argentina and not tell anyone you are disappearing for a few days if you are the Governor of South Carolina and not lose your job as Mark Sanford could tell you. What Sanford did was breach his trust with South Carolina, not for having a mistress but for the failure to tell anyone that he was leaving and would be out of town. An elected official, particularly a governor has to be in constant contact with his administration. But if it happened in sports — like it did to National Hockey League President John Ziegler in 1988, you will soon lose your job. Ziegler was let go after being in London, England in May 1988 for some reason when the officials working the Mother's Day playoff game at the Meadowlands struck because the recently suspended Jim Schoenfeld (who was caught on tape and WABC TV gladly handed over the tape) calling Don Koharski a "fat pig" and telling him to "have another donut."

Then there was the Don Imus-Rutgers incident in 2007.

Don Imus apparently was not much of a student when it came to sports history. Almost 20 years ago to the day that Imus and his producer, Bernard McGuirk, referred to the Rutgers Women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos," another high-profile gentleman found himself in hot water for remarks made on broadcast TV.

On April 6, 1987, the general manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers, Al Campanis, appeared on ABC's "Nightline" to discuss the 40th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking Major League Baseball's color barrier. When asked whether there was "still that much prejudice in baseball today," Campanis responded, "I don't believe it's prejudice. I truly believe that [blacks] may not have some of the necessities to be, let's say, a field manager or perhaps a general manager." Campanis was out of a job by April 8. And like Campanis, a few words marked the beginning of the end for Imus.

Imus joined Campanis, football commentator Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder, Cincinnati Reds owner Marge Schott, golf analyst Ben Wright, MLB pitcher John Rocker, and basketball's Tim Hardaway and Micheal Ray Richardson on the unemployment line. Some have been luckier. Sportscaster Billy Packer was largely spared the wrath of the sports industry although he spent some time apologizing for making disparaging remarks in 1996 about Allan Iverson and women's basketball. In June 2006, the manager of the Chicago White Sox, Ozzie Guillen, was fined by MLB for calling sportswriter Jay Mariotti a "fag," among other things. Guillen was ordered to undergo sensitivity training, and eventually apologized for using the word. Guillen is still the White Sox' skipper.

Imus was different. He wasn't a player in the sports industry but his talk radio show did venture into the sports arena on occasion. In the end, it was easier for the CBS and NBC/MSNBC networks to cut ties to a cash cow like Imus than defend him. But neither CBS nor MSNBC had a problem with Imus's constant put-downs, which have been documented for decades, until he entered the sports realm by insulting the Scarlet Knights. CBS also had to contend with its partner, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, of which Rutgers is a member. The Tiffany network would eventually have had to renegotiate its multibillion dollar deal with the NCAA (the TV deal ends two years from now), and the collegiate organization might have been none too pleased with the continued presence of Imus had CBS decided to keep on.

What Imus and others failed to understand is that you can't enter the sports arena and run your mouth without repercussions. Both college and professional sports has come to serve as the country's moral compass when it comes to hateful and hurtful speech. Of course, it's somewhat surprising that sports leagues should be moral guides given how many National Football League players were arrested in 2006 alone.

But time after time, it's been proved: when it comes to sports, you better watch your mouth. In 1983, announcer Howard Cosell called Washington Redskins wide receiver Alvin Garrett a "little monkey" during a Monday Night Football game. Cosell said he really meant nothing harmful by the remark, but soon disappeared from Monday Night Football broadcasts. Although he wasn't fired — he quit — Cosell, who had been the key to the success of ABC's Monday Night Football in the 1970s, his remark sparked major criticism and effectively ended his days with the Monday Night franchise.

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Campanis never worked again in baseball despite the Seattle Mariners' front office wanting to bring him in as an advisor in 1988. The Mariners decided against hiring him after the Seattle chapter of the NAACP threatened to boycott the club's games.

Jimmy "the Greek" met his professional end at a Washington steakhouse when a TV reporter asked him why blacks seemed to be better athletes than whites. The CBS football analyst said that "[blacks were] bred to be the better athlete because, this goes all the way to the Civil War when ... the slave owner would breed his big woman so that he would have a big black kid." Snyder was dismissed from CBS's NFL pre-game show on January 16, 1988.

Schott got into all sorts of trouble with MLB in December 1992, when in an interview with the New York Times, she not only insisted that her use of the "N-word was a joke" but also described "the rise of Adolf Hitler as being initially good for Germany." Schott ran into more trouble in the next four years. During a May 1996 interview with ESPN, Schott again referred to Hitler and said, "everything you read, when he came in, he was good." Shortly after the interview, the acting commissioner of MLB, Bud Selig, and his owners ordered Schott to give up day-to-day operation of the Cincinnati Reds to avoid a long suspension. She sold the Reds in 1998, but her legacy remains tainted by her public comments.

Ben Wright lost his golf analyst job with CBS on January 9, 1996, months after he gave an

interview that included the following insights: "Let's face facts. Lesbians in the sport hurt women's golf. [Lesbianism] is not reticent. It's paraded. There's a defiance in them in the last decade. They're going to a butch game, and that furthers the bad image of the game." Wright initially denied he'd made the disparaging remarks, but came clean to Sports Illustrated. He has lived in sports exile ever since.

In 1999, Rucker, then a pitcher for the Atlanta Braves, opened up to Sports Illustrated writer Jeff Pearlman about his experiences in New York. His candid remarks included his thoughts about Asian women, and his teammate Randall Simon, whom he described as a "fat monkey." In 2000, Rucker was suspended by MLB, and by 2001 he was traded with his pitching in serious decline.

Also in 2007, Hardaway lost his job promoting the NBA and its All-Star game after telling a radio interviewer that he hates gays. Hardaway apologized but as far as NBA commissioner David Stern is concerned, the services of the former NBA star will no longer be needed. Richardson also lost his coaching job with the Continental Basketball Association's Albany Patroons after he allegedly told a local newspaper reporter, "I've got big-time lawyers. I've got big-time Jew lawyers," who would handle his suspension. During a Patroons playoff game, Richardson had screamed profanities and a gay slur at hecklers. He has apologized but fears another coaching job may be hard to come by.

Imus spent some time in exile and returned to radio and cable TV eventually. But first he had to go through some sort of kabuki dance which included a meeting with the Rutgers players who were targeted.

Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have bothered to reign in Paladino for threatening a reporter or sending out lewd e-mails to colleagues or for his slurs. The Republicans have not distanced themselves from Lott who turned up in a picture in Nazi clothing and it will be interesting to see what happens with Joe Miller in Alaska after his security team handcuffed a blogger for asking him questions at a public forum. The incident with Tony Hopfinger was caught on tape and Hopfinger was "freed" by local police.

Back in 1970, Major League Baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn suspended Detroit Tigers pitcher Denny McLain for dumping water over the heads of two Detroit sportswriters. So far Miller and New York Congressman Maurice Hinchey — who either shoved or put his hand against a reporter — have faced no repercussions.

There is overwhelming evidence that making derogatory or insensitive remarks in the sports world can cost you a career. Just ask Rush Limbaugh about his critique of Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb in 2003.

"I don't think he's been that good from the get-go," Limbaugh said during a Sunday night cablecast on ESPN. "I think what we've had here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well. There is a little hope invested in McNabb and he got a lot of credit for the performance of this team that he didn't deserve. The defense carried this team."

Limbaugh can be crude, caustic and over the top on his daily radio show but that's not sports talk. By the way two of Limbaugh's radio bosses at one time, former Texas Rangers and present Dallas Stars owner (along with at the moment Liverpool FC) Tom Hicks and former San Antonio Spurs and Former Minnesota Vikings owner Billy Joe "Red" McCombs had no problem with Limbaugh's mouth in radio but if Limbaugh was with the Stars, Rangers, Spurs or Vikings and was quoted with just of one of his daily diatribes, chances are he would have faced a suspension.

In sports you can play in the Super Bowl after being arrested, but you better choose your words carefully, as Imus and others have learned. In sports, at least, there is no truth to the old adage that sticks and stones can break bones but words don't do any harm.

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