

Case Studies of Athletes Behaving Badly

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In April 2009 I wrote an article with colleagues Jeffrey Bond and Sandy Gordon that examined psychological reasons why athletes potentially develop problem behaviour. That paper was published in the April edition of *InPsych*. It indicated there were a number of significant factors that were linked to player dysfunction that included: personality makeup, the culture of the sport the athlete was involved with, and the effects of alcohol on the athlete's behaviour. In 2009, media attention has focused on several high profile sportsmen Matthew Johns (former NRL Star), Andrew Symonds (former Australian cricketer) and (Nathan Bock (AFL star), who committed "offences" that have brought them public humiliation and disgrace. The following aims to outline the circumstances of these cases, and to review them in the context of the original article.

Case 1: Matthew Johns

On 11th May 2009 ABC's "Four Corners" put to air a documentary entitled "Code of Silence". The program looked at an incident in 2002, where a 19-year-old New Zealand woman was subjected to group sex involving former rugby league star Matthew Johns, which reportedly led to significant trauma in that woman's life. Mr Johns admitted that he and some other Cronulla Sharks players had sex with the woman at a Christchurch hotel. At the time Police investigated the incident but no charges were laid. Following the Four Corners program Mr Johns was sacked from his involvement with Channel 9 "Footy show" and also from his coaching involvement with the "Melbourne Storm".

Case 2: Andrew Symonds

On 2nd June 2009 Andrew Symonds celebrated Australia's warm-up victory over New Zealand in an enthusiastic style, and reports indicated he was still drunk at breakfast the following day. He then went to watch the NSW v Queensland State of Origin rugby league match, which started at around 11.30am (English time) on Wednesday, and had more drinks. Symonds' drinking directly contradicted his playing agreement, and according to James Sutherland, chief executive of Cricket Australia: "The decision has been made after Andrew has in the last 48 hours broken a number of team rules to have him return to Australia. In isolation, those breaches are not significant, but in the context of commitments that Andrew has made to his teammates and Cricket Australia over the last six to 12 months, they are the final straw."

Case 3: Nathan Bock

On April 4 2009 Nathan Bock allegedly had an argument with his long-time girlfriend during a night on the town. He was subsequently facing charges of 'assault' and 'property damage' after being arrested by Police just after 2am at the General Havelock Hotel in Adelaide.

The Crows club champion spent two hours locked in the City Watchhouse cells before he was bailed to appear in the Adelaide Magistrates Court later this year.

Commentary

These cases serve to illustrate a number of key points that the original paper highlighted. First, the media have given each of the stories priority attention. Each case rated “front page” headlines in what might be seen as media hysteria. The media’s interest was because each incident involved high profile sportspersons, more than the behaviour being innately newsworthy on its own.

Secondly, all of the cases occurred in the context of alcohol abuse and all involved the individuals showing poor judgement when affected by alcohol.

The case involving cricketer Andrew Symonds was not so much around his drinking, but more about him failing to comply with the “team rules”. Of note these “rules” have changed significantly over the years and no longer can cricket tolerate alcohol abuse by its players in the public domain. This contrasts markedly with the images of cricket in the 1990s where former cricket stars David Boon and Merv Hughes became legends as much for their abuse of alcohol as their cricketing talent. Indeed, David Clarence Boon, was given more kudos by the media for his effort in drinking 52 beers on a Qantas flight between Sydney and London than any of his 5946 test runs. The tragedy for a player like Symonds was his inability to adapt to change, and recognize that what was “the norm” for cricketers when his career began, has by today’s standards become unacceptable. Symonds did not change, the sport’s culture did.

Thirdly, certain personality attributes that enhance a sporting person’s on field performance, may also place them at greater risk of dysfunctional behaviour away from the sport. The extroverted elements that give some players the drive for excitement and risk-taking on the field, are vitally important in the players sporting make-up. Outside the sporting arena, these same traits can create a dangerous mix, especially when combined with alcohol.

In the case of both Johns and Bock, their behaviours were likely to have been highly disinhibited and “risk taking”.

Fourthly, all cases illustrate the relevance of changes around “sport culture” and the expectations that sporting bodies have for their heroes.

This is clearly shown in relation to the greater proportion of female spectators, female journalists and female administrators involved with the various sporting codes. Greater female involvement and female recognition brings with it changes in human values that were previously ignored in many of the sports. Sporting administrators now recognize that to ignore the significant female audience would have been a disastrous social and financial mistake.

In 2002, when the Cronulla Sharks rugby team travelled to New Zealand for a preseason game, there was a view that comradely and team spirit would be bolstered by team bonding in the form of the players drinking together and engaging in group sex together.

In 2009 the emphasis is no longer on “team bonding” but rather on ensuring males show appropriate respect in their treatment of women, and that violence towards women is totally unacceptable. This was emphasised by the Australian Government’s Minister for Sport, Kate Ellis when she commented on the Johns’ case : "When you have half a football team and a teenage girl, I think that's offensive and inappropriate for our sporting role models."

To conclude, in 2009 every sporting organisation’s worst nightmare is to have a star player become headline News to a major scandal or criminal incident. To combat this threat, sporting cultures are changing and players are generally becoming more “professional” with “off field” accountability. In the future, successful sporting teams will recognize the importance of being proactive, rather than reactive, when dealing with issues around dysfunctional behaviour. With the help of psychologists, sporting clubs will be able to identify individuals most at risk, and provide them with the best resources to minimise risk. Player dysfunction, negative media attention, sponsorship withdrawal, and supporter loss are all phenomena that sporting clubs aim to prevent. Sporting organisations will benefit from appropriate psychological interventions to reduce potential dysfunction, improve education and emphasise the importance of a healthy and balanced life values.