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1

IT'S HARD *to* SAY I'M SORRY

SIN, CONFESSION, AND THE JOCK APOLOGY

I say, furthermore, that “a sin,” to speak more particularly, consists in doing, saying, thinking, or imagining anything which is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God.

J. C. RYLE

Holiness



My son watches a lot of sports because I watch a lot of sports. He's five, and he's giggled at beer commercials (he likes the Coors Silver Bullet train) and not (thankfully) asked me to define “erectile dysfunction” when forced to sit through commercials that portray old men either singing about Viagra in a deserted roadside bar or, inexplicably, two people sitting outside in different bathtubs, watching a sunset. He's also watched an unhealthy amount of jock press conferences. He knows the phrase “it is what it is.” And as such, he's sat through an inordinate amount of jock apologies.

These are, for the uninitiated, apologies by people (athletes) who don't really apologize. They're apologies that were written by twenty-one-year-old interns in the PR department. They usually say things like, “I'm sorry if anyone was hurt by what I said.” Translation: You're

too sensitive. Or, “We just need to put this behind us and move on.” Translation: I’d like to move on as soon as possible, if only you could let me forget that I took money from a booster, used steroids, ran over an old lady with my car, or shoved a fan who trashed my mom.

In sports, as in postmodern society, the idea that there is sin (and therefore true repentance) is ludicrous. Athletes apologize because they have to. They apologize because they’ve been caught. Luis Castillo, who is by all accounts a great guy, got caught for taking steroids to heal an injury before the NFL combine, where scouts and executives check out athletes before the NFL draft. He apologized afterward, essentially for getting caught, sending a letter to each and every NFL club, “apologizing” for his “mistake.” He was still drafted in the first round and is a millionaire today. In sports, repentance means being acquitted or having the charges dropped.

Below are a couple of years’ worth of real jock apologies I compiled in the early 2000s from a variety of college and pro sports. What they all have in common is a complete inability to actually apologize for what they’ve done wrong. Afterward, you’ll find a Jock Apology Generator in which you pull sentences from each of the three scenarios to craft your own, PR-friendly, athlete apology.¹ You can learn a lot about how *not* to take responsibility by reading these varied ways of “Please excuse me from the consequences and let me get on with my life” apologies.

***The Kellen Winslow Method, Part One:
Expressing Regret (but Not Repentance)***

Team: University of Miami

Position: tight end

The Incident: A postgame rant

The Apology: “After speaking with the press, I immediately regretted my comments and felt embarrassed for my family, my team, the University of Miami, our fans, alumni, and myself.”

How It Works: It's critical to express embarrassment on behalf of your team, company, wife, kids, aunt, uncle, dry cleaner. Tears are helpful as well, but not required.

***The Kellen Winslow Method, Part Two:
The Learning Experience***

The Apology: “What I have learned from this experience is to take my triumphs and failures in stride. My outburst should in no shape or form be a reflection on this institution or the Miami football program.”

How It Works: Try to express the fact that every irresponsible and damaging thing you've ever done is simply a learning experience, like homework. And most importantly, you'll need to absolve your employer (in this case, Miami football) of any responsibility for your embarrassing actions.

***The Jeremy Shockey Method:
The Blanket Pseudoapology***

Team: New York Giants

Position: tight end

The Incident: A homosexual slur

The Apology: “I guess I do regret saying it. I didn't think anyone was going to make a big deal out of it. I'm not prejudiced against anybody's beliefs or what they do in their off time. I do regret saying something like that. Whatever I did to offend people, I apologize.”

How It Works: The blanket pseudoapology gets you off the public hook without actually making a pride-killing apology. Also, the blanket “whatever I did to offend anybody” statement clears you of any further responsibility.

***The Mike Price Method:
Expressing Admiration Apology***

Team: University of Alabama (sort of) **Position:** head coach (just through one spring football practice)

The Incident: Being intoxicated and visiting an exotic dancer

The Apology: “Over the past several days, I have been saddened by the rumors that have been swirling about my conduct. I have had numerous truthful and honest discussions with the president and our athletic director, Mal Moore—our fine athletic director, Mal Moore, who has dedicated many, many years of service to this university and I was proud to have been picked by him.”

How It Works: The key here is to gratuitously compliment the people who hold your job in their hands. Also, it is important to shift the blame to everyone else by expressing “sadness” over the rumors that you helped create.

***The Rasheed Wallace/Damon Stoudamire Method:
The Coach Apology***

Team: Portland Trail Blazers **Position:** forward, guard, respectively

The Incident: Arrested for possession of marijuana

The Apology: “They’re deeply sorry for what happened, as we all are.”

How It Works: Why apologize yourself when you can get your coach (in this case, Maurice Cheeks), who likely makes a pittance compared to you, to do it for you?

***The Pete Rose Method:
The Nonapology***

Team: Cincinnati Reds

Position: second baseman

The Incident: Accused of betting on Reds baseball games; later banned from Major League Baseball “for conduct detrimental to baseball”

The Apology: “No, no, Jim, not at all. I’m not going to admit to something that didn’t happen. I know you get tired of hearing me say that, but I appreciate the ovation. I appreciate the American fans voting me on that all-century team. I’m just a small part of a big deal tonight.”

How It Works: Rose uses a technique that we like to call “not apologizing at all.” And then he takes special care to turn the conversation back around to the love we all feel for him. This method might keep you out of baseball, but it will land you plenty of opportunities to sit at card shows in cities like Bettendorf, Iowa, where you can sign your autograph.

***The Chris McAlister Method:
The Ongoing Apology***

Team: Baltimore Ravens

Position: cornerback

The Incident: Violating team rules during a road game

The Apology: “I’ve already apologized and am still apologizing to a lot of my teammates for what happened last weekend. [Coach] Billick hit it this weekend, he hit it [yesterday] with the media, and my teammates have talked about it. It’s something that we’re moving forward, going past.”

How It Works: When in doubt, keep apologizing. And talk about how important it is to “move forward” and “put this behind you.”

***The Allen Iverson Method:
The Legalese/Promotional Apology***

Team: Philadelphia 76ers **Position:** guard

The Incident: Homophobic slurs in rap album

The Apology: “If individuals of the gay community and women of the world are offended by any of the material in my upcoming album, let the record show that I wish to extend a profound apology.”

How It Works: While apologizing, take special care to mention your upcoming album, book, or movie. Make the media work for you. And remember, going on record now saves a lot of heartache later.

***The “It Is What It Is”
Jock Apology Generator***

How It Works: “. . . and you’ll find a nice buffet available in the press room at no charge.” Best to add tears to this apology.

Instructions: Using one phrase from each group listed below, craft your own professional athlete apology for personal use.

Group 1:

- I would like to apologize first and foremost to my fans.
- I would like to apologize to my teammates and absolve my team of any responsibility.
- I would like to apologize to alumni of this fine institution of higher learning.
- I would like to apologize to my family.

Group 2:

- The drugs were not mine, but I still take full responsibility for my actions.
- It was not my intention to physically assault _____.
- I truly do not know how the roughly \$15,000 of stereo equipment got into my vehicle.

Group 3:

- The most important thing now is to put this issue behind us.
- We need to move forward as a team, starting right now.
- It's now time to focus on winning.

Here's an example of the jock apology generator in action: "I would like to apologize first and foremost to my fans. The drugs were not mine, but I still take full responsibility for my actions. The most important thing now is to put this issue behind us."



Believe me when I write that I don't expect athletes to be perfect. I am far from perfect myself, and thank God that there weren't people following me with cameras and notebooks in my early twenties, looking to record my every thought, action, and idea for posterity. God's grace is big and sufficient. But that said, athletes, especially Christian athletes, should try to model true, biblical repentance when put in a public apology situation because it's a way to honor God and grow in sanctification.

J. C. Ryle writes that a mark of "growth in grace" is increased humility. So where is the athlete who has the courage to say, with Job, "I am vile" or with Peter, "I am a sinful man, O Lord"? Where is the athlete willing to ask the forgiveness of God, in front of a nation of fans and press?

In 2008 Tiger Woods, largely recognized as the greatest golfer and endorser of Buick products to have ever walked the earth, was on his way to doing the undoable: winning every golf tournament he entered in a given year. Woods is also almost universally accepted, in that Michael Jordanian way, as an all-around swell guy—a friend of Madison Avenue and sports fans alike. Parents hold him up as an example of hard work, and as a golfer who isn't a professional just because he

grew up a child of privilege like most golfers do. Woods, it is understood, is also wildly competitive, single-minded, and driven as are most successful pro athletes.

TIGER, TIGER, BURNING BRIGHT

Woods's pursuit of a perfect season ended on March 24 in Miami, when he finished two shots back of Geoff Ogilvy, but it was on the final hole of the tournament that Woods unleashed a stream of invectives at a photographer who dared to snap his shutter during the golfer's backswing. He went so far as to threaten to break the neck of the next photographer who dared to do the same thing.

Now, far be it from me to preach restraint in the heat of battle, as I am perhaps the sorest loser to have walked the face of the earth. I've thought, and said, things I've regretted in the heat of battle and thank God for the fact that those things have never made it to print. I have wanted to find opponents in the parking lot after games—and not to share the four spiritual laws with them, if you know what I mean.

But after the round, rather than apologize or take responsibility for his actions, Woods offered the following: "Each time it's happened, well, three out of four times, I made bogey," he said of midswing camera clicks. "You have no idea what's been said on the golf course all the time, in any sport really. It was the heat of the moment."

So let this be a word of caution to fans and the media who dare to snap a shutter, clear their throat, or draw a breath when a professional golfer is in his backswing. Like Tiger, he may try to break your neck and may not be sorry about that either.

Tiger's rant and lack of remorse for his escapade is also an interesting perspective on sin and confession, and how it just doesn't seem to exist in sports. The fact of the matter is that the heat of the battle is precisely when our true character is revealed.

Woods could have said, "It was wrong for me to say what I said to the photographer. I really regret that and am embarrassed by it. I'll do my best to see that nothing like that ever happens again." Instead what he said, in effect, was, "What I said really wasn't that bad, as compared to the really nasty stuff that gets said behind the scenes," and "I could have gotten a bogey, which makes what I did completely justifiable."

If he'd really apologized, fans and the media would have been impressed by Woods's humility, the photographer would have had public closure to his mistake, and the kids watching at home (Are there kids watching golf at home? Do kids buy Buicks?) would have seen a real, live example of confession and repentance in action.

The case of Olympic uber-swimmer Michael Phelps is interesting as well. Months after shattering Olympic records and taking home a truckload of gold medals, Phelps was photographed inhaling from a marijuana pipe. Phelps, at the time, was already a pitchman for everything from cell phones to cereal. He was tailor-made for Madison Avenue in that he was young, white, humble, and on television a lot.

As is the case with many professional athletes, we made the same mistake that Madison Avenue made, in that we put our hope and trust in a young man who, as far as we could tell, had the ability to jump in the pool and swim faster than anybody on the planet. In that regard he was stellar. In essence, advertisers were saying, "Because Michael Phelps can jump in a pool and swim faster than other people, you should buy our product." This is a gamble advertisers make all the time. Unfortunately, lots of other people, kids included, made that emotional gamble as well.

His Olympic performances made us cheer, and they're no less worthy of our cheers now. Phelps did apologize for his actions, and his apology expressed true regret:

"I engaged in behavior which was regrettable and demonstrated bad judgment," Phelps said. "I'm twenty-three years old and despite

the successes I've had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner people have come to expect from me. For this, I am sorry. I promise my fans and the public it will not happen again."

His case suggests that perhaps as fans, parents, and writers, we should guard our hearts a little more closely when it comes to choosing heroes for our kids and our readers. Of course, the Phelps story is not yet over, and he may still be capable of great moral and athletic success as time passes.



We can hear crying from the basement, getting increasingly louder as Ian, the pastor's four-year-old son, makes his way up the stairs. As any parents of young children know, these meltdowns happen on a regular basis when your family spends time with another family. The conversation is put on hold, the fire is put out, and you try to resume talking where you left off.

Except this time, when Ian rounded the corner, it looked like he'd lost a fight with NHL enforcer Mike Ricci. His face was a bloody mess of red, and he was gushing from his little round four-year-old nose. Between gasping cries, he sputtered out the name of my son, Tristan, who I knew was responsible before Ian rounded the corner. To say that these kids "play rough" would be an understatement. That would be like saying that NHL tough guy Tie Domi played rough on the ice in the mid-1990s. When Tris and Ian play together, it's clash of the titans.

Tristan rounded the corner a moment later, looking sheepish. He knew that he was wrong, and that while he hadn't intended to bash his little friend in the nose, it happened. If he had been a professional athlete, his agent would have crafted a statement to this effect: "I regret that Ian's face collided with a ball that I threw. Sometimes basement play can get rough, and I have no control over that aspect of it. I give my

best to Ian and his family in hopes that we can all move past this and put this unfortunate incident behind us.”

Gladly, Tristan isn't a pro athlete. He's five and he still knows how to apologize. His heart isn't so hardened, and he's not so jaded by things like public relations and spin, that he can still manage to be genuinely contrite about things. I pray that this will be the case when he's twenty-five and apologizing to his spouse for something, or (God forbid) apologizing on national television for something he did as a high-profile athlete.

The cross and the gospel are, by nature, offensive. It's off-putting to suggest that sin exists in a world that tries so hard, like Woods and all of the jock apologizers, to justify it. As athletes, we want to thank God for our touchdowns, write “all things possible” in marker on our wrist tape or shoes, and kneel in the end zone after we score. But that's only half the story. We want to live like Jesus. Give talks. Maybe even start nonprofit foundations. But perhaps the most Christian thing we could do, from the stage, is acknowledge our own sin. And as fans, we need to realize our role models are human, sinners just like us, and extend the grace to forgive when they sin and act for their own self-interests. Perhaps the most Christian thing we can do is to pray for their ministry with other athletes and their walk with Christ.

NOTE

1. Adapted from Ted Kluck, “How to Apologize Like a Pro,” ESPN.com, Page 2, at <http://espn.go.com/page2/s/kluck/031112.html>. Reprinted with permission of ESPN.com, Page 2.