

## Sliding for Home: The Rhetorical Resurgence of Pete Rose

All-time hits leader Pete Rose's strategy for breaking back into baseball flies in the face of accepted rhetorical theories—and it seems to be working. That success tells us as much about today's fragmented popular culture as it does about "Charlie Hustle's" determination to return to the game.

by Todd McDorman

*Jim Gray: Pete, now let me ask you. It seems as though there is an opening, the American public is very forgiving. Are you willing to show contrition, admit that you bet on baseball and make some sort of apology to that effect?*

*Pete Rose: Not at all, Jim. I'm not going to admit to something that didn't happen. I know you're getting tired of hearing me say that.*

Banished in 1989 for allegedly betting on baseball, Pete Rose, the sport's all-time hits leader, returned to the game for one spectacular evening on October 25, 1999 as baseball honored its "All-Century" team prior to Game Two of the World Series. Upon his introduction as the final outfielder on the team, Rose received a 55-second standing ovation from the Turner Field crowd in Atlanta—15 seconds longer than the next most appreciative response for hometown hero and all-time homerun king Hank Aaron. Immediately following the presentation, Rose conducted an on-field interview with NBC's investigative sports journalist Jim Gray. Known for his cutting and sometimes insensitive questions, Gray repeatedly pressed Rose to admit that he had gambled on baseball, a charge he has always denied.

In the media frenzy that followed, Pete Rose became a national topic as people criticized Jim Gray, defended Rose, and seriously questioned why Rose remains banned from baseball. Presented with this re-defined rhetorical situation, Rose was able to renew his self-defense concerning his alleged improprieties. The seeming early success of that renewal has major implications for the study of sports apologia—implications that may tell us as much about how

the passage of time alters public memory and how the fragmentation of American culture could change the strategies used to defend one's reputation in the public forum.

### **Defending Your Life**

From Pete Rose's banishment for gambling to Darryl Strawberry's repeated drug problems to John Rocker's apology for his hate-filled diatribe to Bobby Knight's removal as the basketball coach at Indiana University, sporting celebrities have increasingly find themselves having to defend their reputations in public forums.

First elaborated from a rhetorical perspective by B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, *apologia* is a common form of taking one's case to the people when reputation and more are in jeopardy. Studies of *apologia* have ranged from analyses of political speeches, such as Nixon's "Checkers" address, to corporate apologies issued by the likes of Tylenol and Sears, to the image restoration discourse of pop culture figures such as Hugh Grant. Ware and Linkugel developed four modes of defense that remain central to analyses of *apologia*. Denial, Rose's bat of choice, and bolstering, in which the speaker attempts to reinforce the public's positive opinions of him, are the two reformatory modes. Differentiation (explaining the legitimacy of one's actions) and transcendence (admitting the act but signaling one has risen above the mistake) are the transformative modes .

A study of sports *apologia* by Noreen Wales Kruse in 1981 found that, for sports celebrities, contrition and transcendence is the most frequently effective form of rhetorical self-defense. Say you are sorry, prove your repentance, and you get a second chance, the study suggests.

Rose's strategy of denial flies in the face of that long-respected study, and his tactics fell flat when he employed them in 1989.

### **Fall from Grace**

Pete Rose epitomized the American Dream. From humble beginnings, the undersized and modestly talented Cincinnati native became a baseball icon. Sarcastically derided "Charlie Hustle" as a rookie by baseball greats Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford, Rose came to embody the label, turning it into high praise. After twenty-three seasons Rose held numerous baseball records, including being the all-time leader with 4,256 hits, 3,562 games played, and 14,053 times at-bat).

In 1984, two years before he retired from playing, he also became the manager of the Cincinnati Reds, a position he would hold until his banishment from baseball.

In February 1989, Major League Baseball. MLB hired attorney John Dowd as a special investigator, and he issued a 225-page report with seven volumes of evidence and testimony claiming, among other allegations, that Rose bet at least \$10,000 on 52 different Reds' games in 1987.

The outlook for Rose was bleak. Perhaps Thomas Boswell's biting critique of Rose—that he was a symbol and victim of the greed of the 1980s—is an accurate portrayal.

“His final act of the decade was a quintessential 80s turn: the addict in denial,” Boswell writes. “Everybody in America seemed to know what was happening to Rose except Pete himself. Baseball wanted Rose to confess. Then the game could forgive him. It was that simple. Admit your problem. Get kicked out of the sport for a while. Get yourself fixed. Get reinstated”

While Boswell's advice is consistent with that of rhetorical critics, Rose refused to offer such an admission. Despite intense scrutiny, Rose “never cracked.” He, as one Cincinnati writer following the story wrote, “had the will of a steel door. It was amazing.” Amazing perhaps, but it was also a strategy that set in motion the chain of events that would place him—perhaps permanently—outside baseball's inner sanctum.

On August 24, 1989, just eight days before he would die of a heart attack, Baseball Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti closed the investigation by banning Pete Rose from baseball.

“By choosing not to come to a hearing before me, and by choosing not to proffer any testimony or evidence and information contained in the report of the special counsel to the commissioner, Mr. Rose has accepted baseball's ultimate sanction, lifetime ineligibility.”

Cloaking his comments in a defense of the integrity of the game, Giamatti vowed “to use, in short, every lawful and ethical means to defend and protect the game.” He ultimately sought closure while steering baseball into the future: “The matter of Mr. Rose is now closed. It will be debated and discussed. Let no one think it did not hurt baseball. That hurt will pass; however, as the great glory of the game asserts itself and a resilient institution goes forward. Let it also be clear that no individual is superior to the game.”

It was a powerful and effective statement. The success of Giamatti's rhetoric may in large measure explain the ineffectiveness of Rose's 1989 apologia.

Rose continued to stick to his story. In the press conference held at Riverfront Stadium, home of the Reds, on the day of Giamatti's statement, he again adamantly denied the charges. But with Giamatti's decision, Rose's days in baseball were over. His standing with the public had plummeted. A Harris poll, released ten days after Rose was banished, found that 84% of baseball fans felt Rose bet on baseball.

While presumably "cleaning up" his life over the next ten years, Rose's redemptive efforts largely went unnoticed. When he received attention it generally was for ventures of questionable taste such as his frequent special appearances at casinos or when he joined Mike Tyson and Gennifer Flowers in the promotion of a Wrestlemania event in Spring 1999.

During the week marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ban from baseball, Rose told ESPN's Gary Miller of his innocence and claimed that he had met the conditions set out for reinstatement, primarily "reconfiguring" his life. According to Rose, he no longer participates in any illegal gambling and he has disassociated himself from people of questionable character. And while Rose indicated he would "absolutely" agree with the ban if "they found I bet on baseball," he employed bolstering in an attempt to "set the record straight."

"It's amazing to me how many people who report on this story don't really know the facts, but they continue to report on it," he said.

But the denial apologia continued to be ineffective. Cincinnati sportswriter Tim Sullivan noted that Rose had been unable to generate any "real momentum toward reinstatement."

With each passing year, Pete Rose makes himself seem more irrelevant," Sullivan wrote. "He has not moved on with us but, rather, remains an unevolved prisoner of his past."

Rose's opportunity to escape that past was just around the corner.

## **A Second Chance**

On the eve of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rose's exile, MLB commissioner Bud Selig made the surprise announcement that Rose could participate in on-field festivities if he was elected to the All-Century team. The All-Century team celebration and Gray's subsequent interview created an exigence that provided Rose with an opportunity to re-articulate his apologia.

During the interview, each Rose denial and refusal to apologize was met with another effort to push the issue forward. In five consecutive questions Gray pushed for a confession. The persistence, along with the immediate lack of evidence and Rose's surprised reaction, put Rose

back on the front page. Cast as both hero and victim, a new rhetorical situation that maximized the persuasive appeal of Rose's message was born.

Legendary baseball writer Murray Chase said he thought it "was the best TV interview I've ever seen," but the majority of the immediate feedback was quite negative. NBC's New York television affiliate reported more than 600 complaints, while the Cincinnati affiliate received two hours of calls with some fans waiting thirty minutes on hold to voice their opinion.

After the game, widely respected Yankees manager Joe Torre complained that the tone of the interview was uncalled for and demonstrated that society has "lost sight of the word 'respect.' We deal too much in shock value."

Oft-scandal embroiled slugger Darryl Strawberry added: "we were pretty much all disgusted with Jim. Every player who ever plays cares about Pete Rose. It didn't sit too well in this clubhouse." Evidence of this displeasure surfaced before Game 3 of the World Series when Yankees players refused to answer Gray's questions on the field. The disagreement culminated with Gray's efforts to interview Chad Curtis after his game-winning homerun. Curtis stood with Gray during a forty-second commercial break only to say hello to his grandmother and announce "Because of what happened with Pete, we decided not to say anything." Curtis turned and walked away from a shocked Gray who shouted "Don't you want to talk about your home run?."

An admission by NBC sports Chairman Dick Ebersol that the interview "probably went too long" and MasterCard International's demand for an apology from Gray further validated the perception that Rose had been violated, giving him yet more credibility.

As Bob Raissman of the *New York Daily News* wrote: "Gray came off as a guy who was looking to enhance his own reputation as an interrogator . . . with[out] any sense of fairness or appreciation for the circumstances surrounding the interview. . . . It was just another case of a guy on TV . . . trying to become the moment and make himself bigger than the game."

Not only had a new rhetorical situation given Rose's apologia renewed relevance, but the validation provided by the thousands of protest calls and demands for an apology re-focused the issue from the guilt or innocence of Rose to a critique of Gray's tactics. Gray not only gave Rose's apology more relevance but he made many compassionate and open to Rose's message.

## Public Memory Lost

The vast support of Rose triggered by the Gray interview suggests that the public not only wants to remember Rose the ballplayer, but also may want to forget the possibility that Rose the gambler was guilty—or if he was guilty, to deem it a past event that lacks contemporary relevance.

Adding to the new effectiveness of Rose's apologia is the fact that most of his significant detractors have left the public. Fay Vincent, Giamatti's successor, remains opposed to Rose, but his voice is muted, having been forced out as MLB commissioner in the early 1990s.

John Dowd, the MLB investigator, was later fired by baseball. He has remained in the spotlight, seeking out occasions to criticize Rose, but MLB has been displeased by Dowd's outspokenness.

Early doubts about Dowd's report have attained an almost mythic status. Sam Dash, former chief counsel to the congressional Watergate committee, charged "If John Dowd turned in a report like that to me, I'd fire him."

Roger Kahn, longtime baseball author, concludes that while the Dowd report is "persuasive in spots . . . overall [it] is an unconvincing mix of allegation and distortion. I don't know if Rose bet baseball. I do know, however, he was railroaded out of the game."

Rose's frequent public statements have also challenged the validity of the report, leaving it hanging publicly in a negative light.

Finally, most of the individuals who provided information to Dowd subsequently spent time in jail due to a number of offenses. While none of this disproves their allegations against Rose, it obviously has affected the perceived credibility of their testimony.

So public support has swung dramatically toward Rose. A week before the All-Century ceremonies—even prior to the sympathy evoked by the Gray interview—an Associated Press poll found that people felt Rose should be in the Hall of Fame by a 2-1 margin. Nine months later, during Hall of Fame ceremonies that included the induction of three figures from Rose's Cincinnati teams, Rose spoke specifically of the changing public perception. Rose cunningly expressed his desire to speak directly to Selig: "I'd just like to sit down and look the guy in the eye and say, 'What do you think the fans want? Isn't baseball for the fans--or did I miss

something somewhere? Has my situation changed in the eyes of baseball fans? Is it snowballing my way? I think it is.”

### **A Fragmented Culture**

The Pete Rose incident clearly illustrates how the fragmentation of culture—with individuals gaining access to information, much of questionable verity, through television, print, radio, and the Internet—can improve the odds for a public figure’s self-defense. At the time of his suspension in 1989 the impact of the Internet was negligible while 24-hour sports networks and talk shows on cable television news networks were on the periphery. In ten years technological expansion has multiplied the mediums available for apology.

In the days and weeks following the Gray confrontation, Rose developed a comprehensive and effective public strategy. On almost a weekly basis, Rose capitalized on the media’s attention in a variety of forums ranging from public appearances to numerous interviews to a new series of national television ads for auto-body repair and repainting.

A more concerted effort to air his story and gain public support is seen in Rose’s use of the Internet, which has been a central feature of Rose’s revival. Todd Greanier, a writer for the online *Baseball Archive* summarizes the strategy: “Pete Rose has recently taken his plight to the Internet. If the response from the users of *The Baseball Archive* is any indication, he picked a great forum”.

Furthermore, private web sites organized to protest the Gray interview gave the impression that this is a national controversy. The two most prominent sites called for boycotts of NBC and their advertisers.

Comments by public figures left a fragmented commentary that melds into a defense of Rose. This is seen in the earlier support offered by the New York Yankees as well as a variety of others ranging from sportswriters to Hall of Fame players to even President Clinton.

These numerous public fragments have coupled with Rose’s continuing statements on the issue to combine a tapestry that defends Rose while seeking his forgiveness. In the process they reinforce scholar sdjfsdalj Nelson's suggestion that an apologist's peers and the media are also important for the impact of an apology (1984).

Then, ofe the course of several months following the Gray controversy, Rose’s rhetoric moved from the reformative techniques of denial and bolstering to more transformative efforts at

differentiation and transcendence. Rose apologized and accepted blame for his “mistakes” without specifying exactly what those mistakes entail. He combines this “admission” with the embrace of the fans to argue that it transcends baseball’s allegations and punishment.

In another [Sportcut.com](#) interview from February 2000 Rose combines these elements in suggesting that his immense public reception at the All-Century introduction says “that America understands that I made some mistakes and the majority of people are willing to forgive me and let me go on with my life.” Ad

Thus, a more reflective and introspective Rose now accepts some blame for the situation. In concluding the [Sportcut.com](#) interview Rose offers “I’m the one that made the mistakes so I can’t get mad at anybody else because of the mistakes I made” (Estock 2000). The following month while visiting his son, Pete Rose Jr., at the Philadelphia Phillies spring camp Rose reiterated this acceptance of responsibility offering, “I created the problems I had, but it’s kind of sad you can’t go down to the cage to watch your son hit.”

He followed this admission with another appeal for his ban to be rescinded: “Everybody in the world will agree that regardless of what you think I did do or didn’t do, I’ve been in the penalty box long enough,” Rose said. It’s just the American way to give you a second opportunity.”

### **Out or Safe?**

While he has made significant progress in restoring his image in the court of public opinion, Rose has not yet persuaded the one judge he must convince: MLB Commissioner Bud Selig. Selig remains unmoved by the public support Rose has received and has indicated he has no intention of reinstating Rose. Before Game 3 of the 1999 World Series Selig said the public outcry “certainly can’t influence your decision.”

However, at the same time, in late January 2000 Rose’s attorneys secured a six-hour meeting with MLB’s top lawyer to dispute the findings of the *Dowd Report*. The meeting is beyond doubt a result of Rose’s return to the public spotlight. Still, Selig seemed unmoved by the meeting, saying the following month that there “is not a scintilla of give in” terms of the suspension

Since Rose’s denials have proven ineffective in persuading many within baseball, there has been a push for Rose to fully embrace a transformative strategy. Jim Caple agrees with such a strategy and writes that Rose “could get a chance” to be in the Hall of Fame “if he would just express a little remorse for breaking baseball’s cardinal rule—as well as some desire to address



his gambling problem.” Such an admission would demonstrate the type of regret Kruse argues is critical for re-admission into a sport community.

However, such a full-scale change in approach would also cost Rose his most endearing quality during the suspension: his consistency. The prolonged and consistent use of denial, as Benoit argues and the Rose case would seem to bear out, can, "if it can be sustained, . . . help to restore a tarnished image." To change his story this drastically, Rose would have to abandon denial altogether without an assurance of success. To reverse field (if he indeed is guilty) would force Rose to not only admit that he bet on baseball but also to admit his decade of denial was all a lie. Such a shift, particularly when Rose has regained a great deal of public support, could prove more damaging to Rose than continuing his present tract. The ban would not only be proven justified, but recast as a “liar” Rose would risk whatever degree of public trust he has recaptured.

Thus with the passage of time the wounds of Rose's transgressions are healed while Rose is faced with a painful paradox: the redemption he seeks in the baseball community may only come with the full admission that might destroy his redeemed public standing.

The rhetorical situation opened by the Gray interview has a limited life span. Although Rose regained the spotlight while amid the public's sports consciousness, there is a substantial risk that the spotlight will just as quickly dim. MLB may have the advantage of waiting out Rose and the public. Rose may win the battle for public opinion while losing the war with Commissioner Selig. The tension and drama may make columnist Tim Sullivan's appraisal prophetic: “Maybe Pete Rose works better in absentia, as a martyr to Bud Selig's misguided meanness. Maybe baseball's banished hit king is more attractive as a perpetual victim than as the prodigal son.”

Whether or not Rose wins re-admission to baseball, his rhetorical resurgence is worth our attention. Charlie Hustle may be re-shaping the way those who stumble in the public eye will defend their reputations for years to come.

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