

## Leveraging Scandal: How Sporting Controversies Pay Off

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2009 was a sporting year that's hard to forget – and not only because of what happened in sporting arenas globally. It started with the world's greatest swimmer, Michael Phelps, acknowledging his regrettable behaviour after being photographed smoking marijuana. It ended with the world's greatest golfer, Tiger Woods, admitting multiple infidelities. Between times, Australians held up their end in the sporting scandal stakes. A group sex fiasco broke in rugby league; Australian Football League (AFL) star Brendan Fevola was traded by Carlton to the Brisbane Lions after his drunken antics at the Brownlow Medal award night, and; burglary charges were pressed against the national rugby union team's flyhalf, Quade Cooper.



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2010 dawned no brighter. Scandals, fights and drunken, antisocial behaviour moved sports stars from the back to the front pages. But as tawdry as they often are, sports scandals are also becoming predictable – so predictable, according to University of New South Wales business lecturers [James Connor](#) and [Jason Mazanov](#), that the time has come for some shrewd sports bodies and sponsors to leverage them.

Scandals are no longer aberrant events, but a foreseeable and unavoidable outcome of sport today, argue Connor and Mazanov in their paper, *The Inevitability of Scandal: Lessons for Sponsors and Administrators*, published in the [International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship](#). Using the case study of the National Rugby League (NRL), which has endured a string of controversies over the past two years, but – curiously – has enjoyed improved crowd figures and television audiences at the same time, Connor and Mazanov suggest there's an opportunity to adopt marketing strategies to cash-in on the "bad boys" of sport. And with some sponsors seemingly reluctant to walk away, despite the ongoing shenanigans, one could argue there is already at least some acknowledgement that controversy is actually paying off.

### New Rules

The "bad boy" phenomenon in sport is not new. What has changed is the way it's reported by the media. Plenty of yesterday's biggest sports stars managed to avoid horror headlines during their playing days, despite off-field improprieties. In the 1950s, the behaviour of Australian cricketer and serial womaniser Keith Miller made latter-day cricketer Shane Warne – whose marital infidelities have been widely reported – "look like an altar boy". "And he used to do it in front of us," Miller's son Bob told a television interviewer recently. In the 1960s and '70s, Manchester United footballer George Best was an inveterate alcoholic and gambler. But gone are the days when journalists were complicit and ignored or even joined in with a sport star's bad behaviour. Instead the reporter is now encouraged to dig up the latest scandal to sell more newspapers or draw more readers to a website. "Coupled with this changed relationship is the shift in technology that allows for immediate reporting of behaviour by anyone equipped with a phone and internet," note Connor and Mazanov. "Thus, increased scrutiny, coupled with a need to report behaviour, has resulted in a significant increase in the exposure and discussion of scandal in sport."

Throw in the typically risk-taking age-group of 18- to 30-year-old sporting males who often have high disposable incomes and more time on their hands than average workers and, Connor says, it's no surprise that there's trouble. It's a touchy subject though, and the administrators of the major football codes in Australia are reluctant to discuss how they "plan" for such events, let alone if they would consider marketing opportunities off the back of scandals. Instead, they point to their abatement plans, which

include education, fines, suspensions and, in rare instances, contract cancellations. But, Connor says, these responses simply don't work. "Those strategies are pointless because they are designed to mollify the media, the government and those people who complain about the sport. They are not designed to actually fix the fundamental issues within sport, which predispose it to having scandal."

## Courting Controversy

The counter strategy to abatement is the suggestion that scandal can help to sell the sport in an increasingly packed leisure industry. "I don't think that you could say that an atrocity would encourage a mum to let her son play rugby league, but it might encourage someone to watch the game on TV," says prominent Australian rugby league journalist Steve Mascord. And if more people are watching the game, there's more people to see the products that get endorsed along with it.

Connor believes a number of sponsors – at least privately – would not have an issue with some of the scandals that erupt. "I think many sponsors are actually happy with that tacit approval [of a scandal, such as a binge drinking incident involving a player] because it fits with the image that some of them want," he says. "They can engage that 18- to 30-year-old group, which is difficult to get to." That theme is evident in the paper, which singles out Foster's Group's Carlton and United Breweries, a long-time sponsor of sports such as rugby league and cricket through its VB beer brand. The company's most recent series of ads, broadly themed 'The Regulars', features cameos from Australian sporting heroes – cricketer Michael Clarke, former rugby league great Wally Lewis and respected ex-Olympic swimmer Michael Klim. Connor asserts: "If we wanted to market a beer as 'rugged, manly and tough' then having sportsmen consuming it helps to maintain the message. This appears to be the re-branding strategy that Carlton and United Breweries is employing with their VB beer product."

For its part, CUB strongly refutes employing trying to cash in on sporting scandals. Sustainability manager Scott Delzoppo says the company is a major supporter of the drive towards a more responsible drinking culture. "Any suggestion that a brand benefits from a player's rebellious behaviour is way off mark. We have responsible consumption contractual requirements in place with sponsor parties and have even ended a relationship with a sponsored party as a result of anti-social behaviour (under confidentiality). Foster's sporting sponsorships now integrate responsible consumption messaging; we have and continue to develop campaigns with our sporting partners to improve crowd and general public behaviour, elite athlete behaviour and grassroots awareness."

However, Mazanov ponders whether troubles off the sporting field can be explicitly incorporated into a marketing plan. "Do you start planning in scandals to promote your product if there is a relationship between scandal and brand recognition?," he asks. "Should you manufacture scandal to promote a brand?" But he adds there are other ways to cash in that may be more palatable to the public. "You can look at it cynically and say 'how can a company make money out of it?'. Equally, for those trying to promote health messages, how powerful would it be to have the former Richmond and West Coast AFL star Ben Cousins, who has had a long battle with recreational drugs – as shown in the new television documentary *Such Is Life* – in an ad saying 'it wasn't worth it.'"

Geoff Lipshut, chief executive of Australia's Olympic Winter Institute, sees the logic in preparing and even marketing for a sports scandal. But he remains unconvinced it would work. "I can understand the big picture of why the alcohol companies might want to associate their products with younger athletes in the targeted age," he says. "This would lead to the resilience of the sponsorship relationship. The chance to benefit from scandals may be available, but the risk of activating these opportunities is high, and maybe the cost-benefit risk scenario would not always add up."

## Putting Tiger to the Test

An early example of what might be in store for sports marketing occurred in the wake of the Tiger Woods scandal, following the golfer's admission in late 2009 to a string of marital infidelities. Gillette, the shaving and personal care brand owned by Procter & Gamble, and Gatorade, the sports drink company, may have pulled the pin on sponsoring Woods, but giant sportswear company Nike stood firm. Then, a few months after the dust settled, Nike did exactly what Connor and Mazanov suggest in their paper: it embraced the disgrace. Using audio from an interview Woods' now late father, Earl, had given about his wife, Kultida, in 2004, Nike presented a somber and speechless Woods in close up as Earl delivers a

heartfelt message that concludes: "Did you learn anything?" While advertising experts initially lauded the concept, others were not so sure. "Crass", "creepy" and "tasteless" were common words used in blogger reactions. After surveying 500 viewers, the US-based television advertising analyst Ace Metrix determined that the ad had failed in both persuasion and watchability stakes. Interestingly though, the ad has also garnered more than 3.2 million hits on YouTube and, according to researcher Visible Measures Corporation, in excess of 160 derivatives (largely spoofs and parodies) and 15,000-plus comments for more than 7.1 million views. Compare that to Woods' apology press conference, which has drawn about 60,000 hits on YouTube.

But when it comes to shrewd leveraging and a glimpse into the future of how scandal can be effectively embraced, perhaps PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) offers the best example. The group managed to cash-in on the Woods imbroglio with a campaign that never actually was. The mere suggestion it was going to sell its pet-neutering message with a 'Too Much Sex Can Be A Bad Thing' billboard featuring a photo of Woods was enough to generate substantial publicity. The mock-up billboard went viral and news organisations across the US, including MSNBC, ABC, CNN and Fox, hotly debated PETA's tactics. With threats of legal action from Woods' lawyers, the billboards never saw the light of day. But as Connor and Mazanov conclude in their paper, all it takes is someone brave enough to take advantage.

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