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John Rocker and the Media Monster

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ABSTRACT

It is no secret that sports media coverage has reached epic proportions within our society. This article provides an intriguing, in-depth case study featuring a well-known controversy between a sports reporter and a professional athlete named John Rocker. Transcending sport, this controversial article was published in December 1999 by a Sports Illustrated reporter named Jeff Pearlman who used several of the player's indiscriminate quotes around which the article entitled "At Full Blast" was centered. The interviews granted for this study will illustrate how a solitary magazine article spawned a media blitz that was disproportionate to the importance of John Rocker's actual comments, and will call into question the ethics of how those comments were framed by the journalist for maximum effect. Because of the academic nature of this project, this is the only interview medium through which both John Rocker and Jeff Pearlman have agreed to go "on record." This article will purpose to examine the role and power of sports journalists and the ethical responsibility they have in discerning what is to be reported to the public, and what should remain on the playing field or in the locker room.

Introduction

Professional baseball has often been referred to as the American national pastime, an enduring symbol of freedom, of sport, and of life itself. A by-product of summertime, baseball is identified with the familiar and relaxing surroundings of the big league ballpark in which modern-day heroes compete to their utmost in the quest to win the game. If, to you, this is the ideal of Major League Baseball, then certainly the antithesis of this was experienced by the Atlanta Braves franchise in 1999. This organizational faux pas eclipsed even the team's staggering run of success, with playoff appearances in an unprecedented ten of the last eleven seasons. Unfortunately, relief pitcher John Rocker

gained infinitely more fame away from the baseball diamond than he could ever possibly hope to gain on any field or in any game.

What actually happened that was so catastrophic for him and the Atlanta Braves organization? John Rocker talked.

Perhaps Rocker simply stated our biggest fears as a society. Did we think we had coasted toward the new millennium having shed our collective prejudicial skin? There was John Rocker...six feet, four inches, and 220 pounds worth of wild-eyed Georgia boy, assuming the stereotype of a white, Southern male. If his persona had been created by a political strategist for a smear campaign, we would be looking at the next political star in Washington. He said exactly what no one is supposed to say, what no one is even supposed to think – and yet he said it as if he were saying hello or answering the phone, as if it were an obvious viewpoint.

In fact, Rocker not only talked, but he did so to a sports reporter—a breed which is no longer characterized by the kind-hearted family man who tirelessly relays the intricacies of the great game of baseball, but rather by the artful opportunist who chases headlines in the lucrative business machine called sport. Jeff Pearlman accomplished what could arguably be the goal of every sports reporter, and that is to write a piece which somehow transcends the game, and perhaps even sport itself. This article will illustrate how in writing such a piece, Pearlman effectually issued in an unfortunate new standard of negativism and tabloid sensationalism to the realm of sport. In retrospect, if the ramifications of the Sports Illustrated article could have merely been limited to these parties, it would have been an immediately manageable situation. Instead, as a result of Pearlman's ethically questionable decision to print the article, the resultant effect did in fact transcend the field of play and extended at large into American culture and society.

Background of the Controversy

During the off-season in December 1999, a reporter from Sports Illustrated named Jeff Pearlman composed a story on the outlandish left-handed Braves pitcher. Pearlman's composition, much to the chagrin of the Braves and Major League Baseball, actually consisted primarily of Rocker's indiscriminate direct quotes. In fact, his comments were not only startlingly direct, but more germane to this discussion, pointed sharply at New Yorkers, ethnic groups, and homosexuals. His comments cut a broad stroke across the multi-cultured population of New York City, which also happens to be the media capital of the world. Fueled by the rivalry between the New York Mets and his team, along with the target of Mets fans in general, Rocker commented on New York City itself: "The biggest thing I don't like about New York are the foreigners ... Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people and everything up there. How the hell did they get in this country?" (Pearlman, 1999, p. 62). Rocker's onslaught continued when he said he would retire before playing for a New York team. "It's the most hectic, nerve-racking city. Imagine having to take the [number] 7 train to the ballpark, looking like you're [riding through] Beirut next to some kid with purple hair next to some queer with AIDS right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It's

depressing” (p. 62). Not content with berating the fans and residents of his baseball rival city, John Rocker's insults extended even to his own team. As an over-weight African-American teammate was mentioned during the reporter’s visit with Rocker in Atlanta, Pearlman quoted Rocker as referring to the player as a “fat monkey” (p. 63). He also added that the Braves clubhouse was too stoic and businesslike, saying, “... but I don't think having the atmosphere of a doctor's office helps” (p. 64).

Why did these comments strike such a chord, and why did anyone care about an off-hand social comment made by an athlete? Some of the appeal may be explained by our acute fascination with star players, especially those who exhibit a personality. Like him or not, John Rocker was a guy who certainly had an opinion and wasn't afraid to express it. During the previous season, he had enjoyed much success, having nearly accumulated more saves as a relief pitcher than any other player in his team's history. Apparently, the success provided the necessary audacity for Rocker essentially to alienate himself from every facet and group in Major League Baseball, including his teammates and the entire Atlanta Braves organization.

Reaction from the Media

A media tirade ensued, with several offended special-interest groups voicing their objection to Rocker’s comments, creating a public relations crisis for the Atlanta Braves and for Major League Baseball. The initial reaction was one of disappointment for the Atlanta Braves, according to director of public relations for the organization, Jim Shultz, who said in an interview, "We were concerned about John Rocker and the public reaction both to him and to the Braves, and we as an organization do not condone those thoughts or the thoughts he expressed” (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Richard Levin, senior vice president of public relations for Major League Baseball, said the league office felt the article would cause trouble from the start, "The Commissioner knew from day one that it was going to require his attention ... it was a firestorm throughout the whole period” (Richard Levin, personal interview, March 12, 2003).

Virtually every person in the country, whether they wished to or not, heard about the controversy swirling around this baseball player, provided they had exposure to any national media outlets. Rocker himself not so subtly indicated the intensity of the media’s pursuit of him in the months following the Sports Illustrated article, when, in declining a television reporter’s request for an interview, he offered, “I’m going to take a dump now if you want to get a sound bite” (Rocker to unidentified television reporter, quoted in Price, 2000, p. 41). Such comments only served to perpetuate the stereotype of Rocker as the archetypal Southern redneck. Yet, it should be noted that because of the academic nature of this project, rather than for journalistic or monetary gain, this is the only interview medium through which John Rocker and Jeff Pearlman have both agreed to go on record subsequent to this episode between the two men.

This scenario is a case study of how an innocuous interview becomes a media sensation. Essentially, the off-the-cuff comments of a 24-year-old who can throw a baseball 100 miles-per-hour were used as a worldwide springboard for social

commentary, exposing our society's over-fascination with the lives and particularly the utterances of sports stars. The evidence will illustrate how a solitary magazine article spawned a media blitz disproportionate to the importance of John Rocker's comments, and will call into question the ethics of how those comments were framed by the journalist for maximum effect. This article relies upon interviews with all the central figures in examining the media coverage of this incident.

Larger Issues of Social Consideration

Although Rocker's comments were clearly unethical, this article will argue that the reader must be wiser than to simply accept these outlandish remarks at face value. Instead of assuming these are merely the rants of an arrogant, irresponsible, and immature young athlete, one must question the tactics and the discernment employed by the reporter in this *two-way* form of communication. This article will show that the full blame cannot be cast upon the young professional athlete who suddenly realizes that everyone *cares* about what he says; rather, the blame for such a controversy, in part, must be shifted to American society for nurturing and accepting a larger-than-life view of professional athletes. More specifically, the blame is to be shared by those to whom the athletes speak, and by those who perhaps provide and/or create our collective cognizance, affinity, or disdain for these stars with the power of the pen.

This article will purpose to examine the role and power of sports journalists and the ethical responsibility they have in discerning what *is* to be reported to the public, and what should remain on the playing field or in the locker room. For instance, why should the public really concern themselves with the seemingly thoughtless remarks of a young baseball pitcher? If there were no media monster within sports, we surely would not concern ourselves with such a person in the first place. The larger, overriding issue of this article will be the identification of the unrealistically elevated status of sports stars, as well as the over-emphasis placed on sport in general.

Coinciding with these larger issues of significance are the secondary sources that will be called upon in this article to support the primary evidence regarding the John Rocker interview and its ramifications for several parties. These secondary sources are all categorized in the arena of sports in society. Furthermore, this article will use this specific scenario, along with literature on player-press relations, to illustrate how Jeff Pearlman is representative of the ethics of sports media in fostering society's unhealthy fascination with the statements of professional athletes.

The image of the journalist – like others in the public eye such as doctors and police officers – has varied widely through different periods of time and amongst different sectors of the population. Many people seem to hold contradictory views about journalists. Some are applauded when they uncover wrongdoing, fighting bureaucracy and tackling powerful figures on behalf of the common person, even putting themselves at risk of physical harm or harassment by the authorities. Others are derided and condemned when they appear to have grossly invaded people's privacy or to have been rude, aggressive, or devious in their pursuit of a story.

The question of trust is crucial here. If the public doesn't believe what they read, see, and hear from the journalistic media, then the whole basis of journalism would seem to be undermined. For journalists, credibility is everything. Yet an international survey showed that journalists had the lowest trust rating not only in the USA, but also throughout Europe. Of the different sectors, magazines journalism was the least trusted – only 28 percent of readers said they believed or partially believed news reported in magazines (Crook, 1998).

A Case Study – A Question of Intention and Contention

The whole notion of journalists being impartial and objective, even if they genuinely wish to be so, is highly contentious. "Clearly, more is going on here than horse racing, baseball, tennis, or football. Fundamental human issues are at stake: honesty and deception, loyalty and betrayal, fairness and partiality, equity and privilege, integrity and dissolution. At bottom, these stories deal with standards of conduct and consequences of transgression. Some cases offer clear boundaries; more mark gray areas within which attitudes and behaviors become problematic" (Polumbaum and Wieting, 1999, p. 73). After gathering results from extensive interviews with both a sports reporter and baseball player in this scenario, this article reveals that clear boundaries did not exist in any conceivable aspect. Although some journalists may carry out their duties with a highly developed personal ethic, "journalism as a whole, unlike law or medicine, has no licensing procedure, no disciplinary panels, no agreed-upon code of behavior" (Henry and Kamlani, 1993, p. 54). Since journalism is a field unencumbered by rules of conduct, this study will examine the ethics, or the lack thereof, exhibited by sports journalists. The integral component in this question of "blame" regarding the controversy is the *intention* of the reporter Jeff Pearlman, and therefore, this is the primary gray area to be investigated herein.

When asked about such fundamental ethical issues as loyalty and deception, Pearlman stated, "I didn't go into this story thinking I'm going to write a piece that'll cause a lot of controversy—I had no idea that he felt that way about everything" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 11, 2003). By the same token, Rucker indicated that he had no idea that his comments would be used in such a manner, saying, "Obviously that's what he's going to say because like I say, having to get ready to come down there and sandbag you and try to be your buddy, and buddy up to you, and then any kind of passing comment you say, he's going to write his entire article based on that and try to make you look like a real ass—he seems okay until you know his intentions" (Rucker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

The entire news industry, for better or for worse, exists to earn money. "Because of the profit orientation of their employers, journalists often find themselves in situations calling for ethical judgment" (Borchers, 2005, p. 86). According to Pearlman, the major point of contention, in retrospect, about this article and the subsequent media frenzy is that the article which became infamously negative was in actuality intended to be an earlier published, positive piece on the Braves hurler. During yet another playoff run for the perennial winning Atlanta team, Pearlman was asked by his editors to do a piece on

the successful and colorful relief "closer" for the Braves. It was the National League Championship Series in 1999 in which John Roker talked enough trash with the opposing New York Mets to draw not only verbal lashings, but also the retaliatory physical abuse of being struck by coins and even batteries thrown by New York fans. The Braves narrowly escaped the series, propelling them to the World Series, only to stay in the same city to face the defending champion Yankees. This fan upheaval perhaps had much to do with the Braves being blanked in four games in the World Series. Of course, this positive story on Roker was to have been published during the Yankee series. "So I wrote this very positive story about John Roker," remarks Pearlman, "but the Braves got swept in the World Series so quickly by the Yankees, we never had time to run it" (Jeff Pearlman, March 13, 2003). This comment may seem innocent enough, but it actually indicates a willingness to change a positive story that was already written.

Having commented on a touching anecdote with which he ended this article regarding Roker's loss of a beloved dog as a child, and even interviewing Roker's father on the condition that it would be a positive portrayal of his son, Pearlman seems to feel little remorse at having chosen to drastically alter the original article without ever informing Roker or his father of these intentions. "I think now Roker's family and Roker have considered me to be a liar ... they'll never believe me, but the original story I wrote about him was almost 100 percent positive" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Pearlman's contention is that his story changed after the subsequent interview with Roker. Having already written the "positive" version, Pearlman was then faced with the ethical decision of changing the article into one which he knew had the potential to become somewhat inflammatory. This is an example of how the media saw an opportunity to exercise its power, and chose to detonate an ethical bomb in the form of this article, one whose explosion reverberated throughout the nation.

Journalistically speaking, the reporter, according to Pearlman, was asked by his editors to "freshen up" the story during the off-season. It was apparently not the editors of Sports Illustrated who suggested a better story might evolve on the player's home turf of Atlanta; rather, Pearlman said, "So I called his agents and they said why don't you go down there and hang out with him in Georgia?" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Thus, in November 1999, both men concur that Pearlman spent around eight hours with Roker in the midst of a normal day for the baseball player in Atlanta, leading to the article published the following month entitled "At Full Blast" (Pearlman, 1999, pp.60, 62-64).

Public Relations Perspectives

Interestingly, this important behind-the-scenes information was news to Richard Levin of Major League Baseball's Public Relations department. Before his 18-year position with the league office, Levin was a sports reporter himself, offering that such a request from an editor to freshen up a story is quite common. "To me it's really a moot point. It doesn't really matter whether or not he had written a story earlier and went back to freshen up the piece—that happens a lot in magazines, so if Jeff says that happened I wouldn't doubt that" (Richard Levin, personal interview, March 12, 2003). On the other

hand, Jim Shultz of the Atlanta Braves agreed more with the reporter on the significance of this issue, and was interested to hear the rationale. Being involved directly with Braves PR at the time, Shultz confirms that Pearlman was indeed at work on a Rocker story during the playoffs. "You know, that's part of the irony of the whole thing, had it run in October, it would have been more 'John Rocker the great relief pitcher' with a little bit of his personality in there ... but since they killed the publication of it originally, you know, Jeff comes back for a second session with John, and John goes off on this tangent" (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

Perhaps to be expected, and as Pearlman suggested, Rocker has an altogether different perspective on this matter. Approximately ten to twelve seconds into conveying Pearlman's explanation of the positive early story, Rocker said, "I really find that very, very hard to believe" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003). Immediately Rocker referred to a more recent Sports Illustrated article in which Pearlman featured David Wells, the league leader in wins at that point in the season. Rocker said, "He was just having a phenomenal year and he was leading the league in two or three pitching categories, and you know, all Pearlman could do the entire article is just rip the guy one analogy after another, you know, telling about how fat he was and how much he drank and how much he went out and partied" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

The article to which Rocker pointed in inferring that the reporter's negative writing style cannot be limited to an isolated case was published in a July 2000 edition of Sports Illustrated and was entitled "Heavy Duty" (Pearlman, 2000, p. 42). Pearlman, in the introduction of his opus, writes, "Wells is a fat guy who is content being fat, and if he is in search of anything, it is a beer: Coors Light in a bottle, please. Everything about Wells is fat" (p. 42). Similar to the reaction of Rocker as to what was written and published by Pearlman was the surprise of the subject, David Wells, who was a pitcher for the Toronto Blue Jays at the time. Subsequent to the Pearlman article, in a Philadelphia Daily News story, Wells was asked about his reaction to the Sports Illustrated piece: "All it talks about is me being fat and what I did when I was in New York, basically. Read it. It's stupid. The guy screwed John Rocker, and all of a sudden I'm victim No. 2" (Wells, quoted in Blum, 2000, p. 84). However, following the Rocker article, this landed him another feature piece in Sports Illustrated.

Not surprisingly then, Rocker seemingly takes solace in the similar treatment of David Wells by the very same reporter. Therefore, Rocker certainly dismisses the notion of any sincere effort by Pearlman to create a positive story on him at any point in time. In fact, he flatly states of Pearlman after citing the Wells example: "He's got no agenda except to rip players and defame players in the eyes of their fans and that kind of thing" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

Providing an insightful view of sports, journalism, and society from a reporter's perspective, Leonard Koppett says that beyond merely acting as liaisons, sports reporters are actually more like a surrogate to the fan of a particular game. Especially when considering the power of the sports reporter, in examining the impact and significance of the preceding statements of two athletes, obviously questions of journalistic ethics are

evoked. The media horror which Rocker and Wells have faced firsthand as a result of Pearlman's Sports Illustrated magazine articles, according to Koppett, do not have as much to do with the types of impressions fans draw about the sports world, at least not in a primary way. However, he makes the point that books and magazines "do have an enormous effect in another way, too. They solidify, reinforce, and perpetuate the impressions first produced by daily journalists. The stories that get retold, the cumulative nostalgia, the reputations that become frozen forever.." (Koppett, 1994, p. 127). This is precisely the way Rocker seemingly feels of the relentless media hounding for months, even years, following this article. Rocker must have felt that he had become the personification of a society frustrated with its own inadequacies. America also likes to build its heroes a high pedestal – it makes it that much more exciting when they fall.

Even Pearlman realizes this by saying, "Here's a guy who just became a beating boy for the press you know, for society, for Saturday Night Live, for late-night TV. And I definitely think he was treated unfairly, he was made a martyr. I mean I don't even know what the ultimate lesson is, I just think we sometimes tend to jump on someone when they're down, everyone beats on him, no one shows sympathy for the guy, and it's really not fair—I feel bad for freaking Rocker. He would never believe that, and if you tell him he'll say, 'whatever,' like I was an asshole, but I feel bad for him. I don't think he should've been suspended by baseball, I don't think he should've been fined by baseball" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Still, when asked if Pearlman felt any responsibility for this media backlash and "frozen" image of Rocker, intriguingly, he replied, "Zero. I didn't treat him poorly. I mean I've never been a fan of 'blame the messenger,' you know. I still think I wrote a fair profile of the guy" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

Media Blame Game – What Is Fair

These two statements are completely incongruent, and typify the blame game expertly played by the media. Although he had no assurance of the far-reaching impact his article would eventually have, Pearlman was most certainly aware of the journalistic windfall value of a negative piece laced with racial and cultural slurs as opposed to a mundane piece on a quirky relief pitcher. Yet he felt no responsibility for the media backlash Rocker received, and he wrote the article that started it all. Thus Pearlman, who with these comments was attempting to be either innocent or stupid, is actually neither.

Lee Wilkins (as cited in Kitty, 1998), a professor at the University of Missouri specializing in media ethics, remarks that "fairness is a messy term in terms of ethics and it's a term I don't use very much because 'fair' in and of itself--it just can't hang out there—it's fair to whom? And the minute you say 'fair to whom' you've given a whole lot more information and at that point you can say 'I can be fair to this source in this story and not be fair to anybody else'" (p. 59).

"Fair" to some may be interpreted as hype to others. Supporting the claim of this article, Koppett says that in the magazine business, "Hype becomes far more important than credibility" (Koppett, 1994, p. 128). Logically, because magazines are more

expensive and sold less frequently, they must call attention to themselves in various ways. Working the opposite of the true journalistic approach, which begins with the story and then attaches a headline to it, the daily editor encourages the reporter to go and find out what happened so the story can be printed. Koppett stresses the important, fundamental difference in that the magazine editor says, "We know what happened, now go out and get me some good stuff about it" (p. 128). Though the intention of the reporter in this article really cannot be proven, Koppett's examples are reminiscent of Pearlman's editors asking him to freshen up the story, and during the off-season, the news was certainly at a halt for Major League Baseball. This is apparently, in part, is what led John Rucker to assert earlier that he was "buddied up to," or "sandbagged" by the reporter in his visit with him in Atlanta.

Further to our point, this ethical dilemma leads to a little more than misgivings about Pearlman's periodical. In fact, when Rucker was asked the same question of the degree to which he feels Pearlman is responsible for the incredible media aftermath, he does not blame Pearlman as the initiator. However, Rucker did cite blame against his editors and Sports Illustrated in general. Rucker complained, "It used to be a legit sports magazine, but now it's almost like the sports-gossip magazine, and with a little bit of trash that me and Chipper [Jones] were talking to the Mets that year, I guarantee you the editors and staff of SI saw a little crack there. They saw a young, fiery, arrogant kid and they're like—hey, why don't you go down there?" (John Rucker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

In contrast to the thoughts and words of Rucker, a player for whom he once represented in the arena of public relations, Jim Schultz comments on Sports Illustrated, and in doing so, demonstrates a politically correct PR spin. In fact, Schultz, without even being asked about the magazine, began spinning thusly, saying, "Today's Sports Illustrated is a very aboveboard and honest publication, obviously. You know, we're owned by the same people, the parent company is the same for both SI and the Atlanta Braves, and you know they're not going to sabotage, I don't think, without due process anyway, one of their employees" (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Of course, Pearlman's account would concur with Braves representative and fellow parent company compatriot Schultz regarding the question of the integrity of his employer, Sports Illustrated. Defending himself, Pearlman matter of factly stated, "He said everything he said. I'm not in the business of writing—I don't work for ESPN you know—I don't do powder-puff bullshit. I was assigned to write a fair profile on him" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

The Ethics of Sports Journalism

In considering ethical issues of sports journalism, this Pearlman article on Rucker brings to light issues regarding relations between players and the press. In his discussion of sports journalism, Tom Witosky states, "It is my firm belief that no sports reporter should place himself or herself in the position of having to explain why he or she did not write a potentially embarrassing story about an athlete if the news was judged to be relevant, important, and legitimate" (Witosky, 1999, p. 41). While the account of these

remarks does not seem relevant or important to the performance of a baseball pitcher, Pearlman maintains he did not misrepresent the athlete, and thus published a fair profile.

Graham Knight (as cited in Kitty, 1998), a professor of sociology who specializes in mass media, popular culture, and contemporary social theory at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, notes, "A good journalist tries to be fair." Knight continues by saying, "In practice, this means doing the sorts of things we associate with objectivity--trying to set aside one's own preferences and prejudices, getting the different points of view of the participants in an event or issue, trying to be balanced in how you represent those views, and so on. What this always seems to skirt around, however, is that usually reporters et al. are dealing with a world that is itself profoundly unfair--a world where opportunities and resources such as wealth, power, and access to the media are unevenly distributed" (p. 58).

Pearlman does cite one specific example in the Rucker piece in which he felt he crossed the line regarding negativity. At one point in the article Pearlman wrote how Rucker was going to speak to a group of children, and asked him if he liked speaking to kids in that setting. Rucker responded that he really did not. Pearlman says, "Looking back, that was stupid of me to use. It was like kicking puppies. You know, like you have enough issues in this story without a stupid little thing like he doesn't like talking to kids—anyway I thought I was too hard on him right there" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

Many commentators on sports journalism point to the obvious ever-increasing differences in salaries and background that contribute to the division between professional athletes and the press. The sheer volume of sports coverage across the various media platforms lends itself to a bird's eye view of every detail of a player's life both on and off the field. Jay Coakley said, "Responsible journalists, including writers and announcers, have become sensitive to the fact that they should not jeopardize people's reputations simply for the sake of entertainment" (Coakley, 2001, p. 380). If Pearlman's article were to be judged according to this comment, neither he nor his magazine would qualify as ethically responsible journalists.

On the contrary, for a man who acknowledges that his life has not and will not be the same because of this article, it would be safe to assume that John Rucker would not place Pearlman in the category of a responsible journalist who considers the reputation of the athlete on whom he is reporting. Upon sharing Pearlman's confession with Rucker that the reporter admitted he has crossed the line in a specific instance, Rucker grimly replied, "He went too far—he did tell you over the phone he went too far, but how's he going to tell the 200 million people who read the article? He must be thinking I'm a shithead" (John Rucker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

Writing from the perspective of a sports journalist, Leonard Koppett admonishes reporters to pay more attention to select carefully what to publish or not to use, rather than digging out hidden facts. "And that's where we find the ethical obligation that is valid in more areas of life than just journalism: keep a sense of proportion" (Koppett, p.

163). Richard Levin of Major League Baseball, referring to his former days as a sports reporter (when, as he pointed out, ours was less of a tabloid society), addressed the legitimate question of whether Pearlman should have used all of the indiscriminate remarks gathered from his visit with Rocker in Atlanta by stating, “The point I think that is key is how the reporter treated the quotes and the question is whether the reporter—I don't think he had an obligation to do it—but whether he, from a moral point of view or an ethical point of view, that he should have gone back and said, ‘you know, listen, this is what I hear that you said. Is this what you really mean? Is this what you really want to say?’” (Richard Levin, personal interview, March 12, 2003).

In a subsequent interview, Pearlman responded to this suggestion of Levin's specifically. In speaking of Rocker he said, "He's a grown man and I'm a journalist. I don't feel like I have to say to him, oh, are you sure you want that used? You know, he's putting it out there. Those are his words and those are his thoughts and I don't feel any need to protect that kind of thing...there's some people who agreed with Rocker and there are other people who just think I shouldn't have used the quotes ... I mean, there were no quotes that I put in that ended up, like, not making it in ... there was never a doubt about publishing it. Never" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Clearly stating the point of this article, despite the perceived dilemma about the content of the article, there was never a doubt that Sports Illustrated would publish it, and more importantly, that they would sell magazines. It would have been detrimental, in terms of business, to allow Rocker to retract or re-state his comments. Both the writer and the magazine clearly knew they had a juggernaut story.

"Is it raining out?" former sports reporter Leonard Koppett once asked of a third-base coach who had just come in from the street. The coach replied, "Yes, but don't quote me" (Koppett, p. 110). A sports reporter encounters many players along the way who are, at best, wary of the significance of the journalist's inherent power. Offering his insider opinion on how crucial the media is to the average player, Rocker says, "In a lot of places, the players look at cases like mine, and I think that the players are so afraid to blow off the media because they don't want to get on the media's bad side. They want the media as an ally and will do anything and everything they can and kiss as many asses as they can, you know, within the media circles to see that that never happens. Because, I mean, the old quote, ‘the pen is more powerful than the sword’ could never be more true" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

With conviction, Rocker said he felt completely led by the reporter in this situation. The comments of Pearlman confirm his awareness that there was an opportunity at hand—his subject was making statements that just might prove to be volatile. And in the media business, volatile most often means lucrative. Pearlman perceived that Rocker, "Probably thought a lot of things he said were just things he was saying that I wouldn't use, you know ... I honestly think with all my heart that he felt we were two white guys driving around that he could say this stuff, and I'd be just like, oh whatever, you know. I don't think if I were a black reporter, or even maybe a female reporter, but definitely not black or Hispanic, that he would have said those things" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Matching Pearlman every step of the way in this

controversial interview scenario, Rocker said, "I was 24 years old—I was dumb, and I fell for it ... it was definitely a snow job for sure" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003). He continues by pointing out the significance of his previous comments regarding his use of sarcasm in saying, "There was several times, yeah, I made several sarcastic comments and he's over there laughing, and he thinks it's funny ... but he's definitely making some of his own little comments, that, if sarcasm and the snicker on his face were taken out of it and put in print, there'd be definitely some people staring a strong eye at him as well" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

Pearlman subsequently spoke directly to this significant accusation that he was leading and playing along with the interviewee. Immediately he said, "Nope. Unquestionably not ... as a journalist you have an obligation almost not to argue ... I am there to listen, but I was unquestionably not laughing at any of his jokes that were in any way racially motivated, or whatever, you know, ethnically or sexually, I mean, believe me, it was a conscious decision on my part once he started talking that way not to react in any way, except to listen and to say, maybe to say, really? You feel that way? —or, you know, stuff like that" (Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

Possessing first-hand knowledge of most of the events surrounding this controversy, Atlanta Braves director of public relations Jim Schultz further proves this ethical case study by saying that Pearlman told him that he had a tape recorder, pen, and notebook. "John agreed to meet with him on a certain day ... so it wasn't like he sabotaged John. Jeff told me at some point later on that he didn't publish the strongest things that John said, and if that's the case, you know, well, I give Jeff a pat on the back or whatever, I mean it was bad enough, I thought, publishing what he did say, but you know, I don't have any doubt that John Rocker said those things" (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003). In fact, so profound was the impact of this article on sports media coverage that Schultz, more than two years removed from the situation, is instinctively distancing himself from Rocker.

Unflattering Publicity

In such a situation, sports consumers face their own dilemma. This section of the public invests their time, emotion, and resources into essentially helping to fund the apparent dysfunction of both professional athletes and the products of the press. Surely, the bad guys of sport cannot possibly deserve all the attention given them by society via the surrogate known as the media. Supporting one of the major assertions of this case study, Sporting News columnist Dave Kindred logically points out, "The only reason anyone knows what John Rocker said is because today's insatiable media monster must be fed, and in the absence of substance we hurl into its maw a daily, even hourly, ration of uncensored half-thoughts uttered by celebrities" (Kindred, 2000, p. 64).

According to John Rocker, the roles are reversed in this interview scenario with regard to one's desire for notoriety. He says of Pearlman, "The guy wants to stay on his little soapbox and make a little name for himself and this is the way to etch his little place in history and then meanwhile he wrecks an entire person's family—and it was just a

little blip on the screen for him. I guarantee he probably even rarely thinks about this article until somebody like you calls him up and wants to ask him a couple of questions about it—it affects my life every day” (John Rocker, March 11, 2003). The following statement by Indianapolis Star editor, Tim Franklin (as cited in Reina, 1995), was intended for athletes, but in the view of Rocker, these words could also be applied to Pearlman: "They want publicity, but when it's unflattering publicity, that's when hypocrisy sets in" (p. 12).

However, Pearlman flatly denies the notion that he knew it would be a controversial piece leading to fame, or rather at least in part, infamy. "Anyone I work with at SI, I think, will tell you I am not a journalist who goes around looking for attention. I mean, I don't like doing TV work. I don't really like being on the radio. After the Rocker aftermath, I had tons of calls to do radio stuff and TV, and I only did the ones that the PR staff, at the beginning, kind of shoved in my face and said, you have to do these—so I probably ended up doing about three interviews about Rocker. Ever” (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

Propagation of Negativity

If we are only aware of the Rocker debacle through the feeding frenzy of the aforementioned media monster, there must be a logical rationale behind its continuous coverage and controversial nature. The reason we still care about Rocker, which illuminates a pivotal point of this article, is that the media machine has been programmed to see to it that we do. Columnist Wayne Scanlan asserts that, "The scariest notion to reckon with is that the celebrated antics of Roberto Alomar, Albert Belle, and Dennis Rodman have become a financial necessity to major league sport and the media who present it and cover it” (Scanlan, 1997, p. D2). Aside from the notion of the economic success of negativity, Pearlman, a native of New York, offers the logical explanation for the controversy having to do with Rocker's involvement with, arguably, the media capital of the world. "He was a major New York City villain in the first place. You know he pitched really well against the Mets—he talked a lot of shit to them, so when his quotes came out, a lot of them were anti-New York and the New York tabloids jump on that stuff very quickly. I think if he was talking about the Milwaukee Brewers or Cincinnati Reds I don't think it would have generated nearly as much buzz...but he messed with New York and New Yorkers take this stuff very personally—in New York papers...on sports radio and everything” (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Integral to the assertion of this article, the SI article changed sports media coverage due in no small part to the fact that Rocker picked a fight with the city of New York, the very core of the media machine.

The rationale for such an ongoing controversy in terms of the media negativity and New York press involvement is logical, but still, Rocker was not exactly as renowned as a Cal Ripken or Barry Bonds of this time period. However, noting the national exposure of the Brave's flagship cable television station, WTBS, Jim Schultz stated, "But the fact is, he was a fairly prominent player, or at least a well-known player, on a major league baseball team that received an awful lot of media attention because of the way we had

played for several years” (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003). In his book, Controversies of the Sports World, Douglas Putnam explains why so many players, as Rucker alluded to, are wary of the press since “Any unintentional act or casual utterance of a star player, especially one that is in any way controversial, stands a good chance of making its way into print, television, radio, or cyberspace” (Putnam, 1999, p. 80).

Certainly agreeing with this rationale of the plethora of media outlets in our contemporary culture, Rucker expounded by saying, “I mean, this society is built on nothing but sports radio and talk shows and Internet sites, or whatever, CNN ... baseball.com and all this stupid dot com stuff and every single one of them has a reporter with a microphone and a goddamn tape recorder in there trying to get his story which is going to be the exact same story that 97 other reporters have gotten ... as soon as the clubhouse opens they all bolt inside—they're all over each other and elbowing each other, jockeying for position, or whatever, trying to get the story before the next guy gets it” (John Rucker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

When asked if the baseball headquarters were surprised by the negative aftermath of the media onslaught following the Rucker article, Richard Levin of Major League Baseball stated, “Not really, you know, baseball...we always seemed to be in the eye of the storm—Pete Rose is another example. For some reason baseball stirs the passion of the people and when we have an issue like this, they become pretty excited about it—so, no, we weren't surprised by the amount of it or depth of it” (Richard Levin, personal interview, March 12, 2003). As Rucker points out, media prevalence in general notwithstanding, the competition among sports reporters is increasingly fierce and, along with these other factors, has definitely helped fuel this particular controversy, if not helping to actually foster the initial sparks even prior to Pearlman's article.

Clearly then, Rucker feels the press is responsible for creating and sustaining his bad reputation throughout this media firestorm, “They're hell-bent, no matter what you do. If you get labeled the bad guy, everything you do they'll spin it in a negative way ... but it couldn't be any more obvious when the media's making an effort, trying to sandbag somebody” (John Rucker, personal interview, March 11, 2003). Rucker's unabashed statements about the media paints what one may consider to be the most unflattering portrait of the press since Janet Malcolm declared every journalist a “confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse” (Malcolm, 1989, p. 38). In his look at the life of a sports reporter, journalist Bill Plaschke of the Los Angeles Times admits that athletes are in their most vulnerable state when dealing with the press. “We're everywhere; we surround them as they are preparing for games; we barely give them room to dress afterward; and were not looking to make friends, but front pages” (Plaschke, 2000, p. 44).

It is a fact that in all professional sports leagues, reporters – both male and female - are allowed in the locker rooms after games, a practice that seems at best unnatural, if not invasive. Minutes after the heat of battle, microphones are thrust into the faces of the star players without any consideration for the players themselves, their aches and pains, or whether they won or lost the game. Professional athletes are there for our consumption -

they entertain us on the field of play, and then regale us with their monotonous quotes, even if they're still dripping wet from the shower. In some sports like professional basketball, a player may be 19-years-old with only a high school education, yet may be interviewed by a highly skilled writer with a Masters Degree in Journalism. Even journalists admit that in this seemingly imbalanced system, players are almost literally fish in a barrel.

Providing rationale for this inherent power of the press, which can in the view of many, legitimately fashion a poor reputation seemingly overnight, George Sage, the author of Power and Ideology and American Sport says that "Definitions, values, and practices of the media are privileged and made to sound as if they are actually enlightened ways of thinking about the meaning of sport. They become the 'commonsense' constructions about sport that grow out of the production of media sport" (Sage, 1998, p. 177). Realizing this conveyance of such significant meaning through the media, Rucker frustratingly states, "It seems like my name has been picked out of the hat to be one of the bad guys and no matter what I do, I'm going to be one of the bad guys probably forever, because you know, they will sell more papers writing a negative article about John Rucker than they will writing a positive article and that is their goal—they're out to say, ok, what can I do, what can I put on this piece of paper that is going to sell the most articles?" (John Rucker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

In his book The Image, historian Daniel Boorstin (1962) wrote, "The disproportion between what an informed citizen needs to know and what he can know is even greater. The disproportion grows with the increase of the officials' power of concealment and contrivance. The news gatherers' need to select, invent, and plan correspondingly increases. Thus inevitably our whole system of public information produces more "packaged" news, more pseudoevents" (p.17).

In fact, so resounding were the ramifications of this article that its impact not only damaged the athlete, but the messenger as well. Further illustrating the findings of this article, Pearlman intimates the far-reaching power of the media by saying, "I don't think it helped my reputation. It makes you look like you're a troublemaker, looking for trouble, and there are certainly players who knew me as 'the Rucker guy' and stayed clear of me" (Jeff Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003). Perhaps logically, because of his position as director of public relations for the Braves, Jim Schultz perceives the press differently by stating, "Ninety-five percent of the media, especially a publication like Sports Illustrated—they are not out there to ... to uncover the worst dirt they can find and then go with it. I think for the most part, the media are very fair in their coverage of pro sports" (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

In an article by an associate writer for Sports Illustrated, the author refers to another sportswriter from Salt Lake City, George Ferguson, who tackles the questions of which party is most to blame, and how to improve player-press relations. In part, he points to the athletes for their "insensitivity and snottiness," but he also blames the writers for this increasing divide, "We are too often belligerent, unfeeling, repetitive and trite ... the problem is, I can't see the solution" (Ferguson, quoted in Telander, 1984, p. 3). "The

major conclusion is that conflict in player-press relations is likely to continue. Its intensity will vary with the players' understanding of the role of the press in professional sport, the knowledge and empathy of the sportswriters themselves, and the sophistication of the consumers of sport publications" (p. 3).

Casting blame on the athletes and writers for this quandary seems pointless without questioning the role of the consumer, or the fan, in what is often a spectacle itself—more aptly, a distracting sideshow. "Today's sports world, not unlike the society from which it draws its main combatants, is filled with venom. And the leading vipers are poised on either side of a microphone. A bunker mentality—an us-against-them attitude pervades" (Barrett, 1994, p. 85). Focusing on the element that obviously forces the hand of the press, and in turn the players, Jim Schultz says, "The *public*, in general, places way too much emphasis on what these guys think. In an ideal world they'd say let's talk about what he did or did not do in last night's game and that's enough—but I'm afraid that's not reality" (Jim Schultz, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

The Big Picture

The senior sports columnist of Christian Science Monitor writes, "Many murders are not big news. Most drug users are not big news. And a guy on a loading dock can say exactly what John Rucker said and nobody pays any attention, despite it being just as offensive. But if these things involve athletes, they are apt to hit the top of the page. And we read every word" (Looney, 2000, p. 12). In order to place perspective on this particular media controversy in terms of the role of sports in society, each of the interviewees consulted for this article was asked to comment on the preceding quotation. Richard Levin said, "Baseball, for some reason, is part of the emotion, part of the fabric of the country and people feel very strong emotionally towards the game and towards the people that play it. Whether the players like it or not, they are role models, and there's no doubt that when a baseball player or any other kind of athlete is involved in something, it's much bigger news than the average guy on the street. And the baseball player and/or athlete should be aware of that" (Richard Levin, personal interview, March 12, 2003).

Initially qualifying that he is not a religious person, Pearlman empathetically responded to the quotation by referring to the verse in the Bible which he paraphrased as, "Let he who's free of sin cast the first stone ... I always thought it was funny how all these people were jumping on the anti-Rucker bandwagon. But how many of us haven't had some sort of racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic thought or done something that way you know ... we all have our prejudices" (Pearlman, personal interview, March 13, 2003).

This admission comes from the very writer who benefited from quoting Rucker's comments. And from a social standpoint, it raises the question of how indicative Rucker's comments were to a perceived societal prejudice. Perhaps this is why the Rucker situation reached such a furor. Perhaps it struck a nerve no one wants to admit they even have. If Pearlman's quote bears any resemblance to the truth, then Rucker's comments not only exposed himself - they might have exposed us all.

Rocker as well, in the end, does have a positive outlook on the controversy, and offers a thoughtful, final perspective to this scenario, "I throw a stupid baseball for a living. And you know, I get paid lots of money ... I mean, when it comes right down to it, I'm not making a hill of bean's worth of difference in anybody's life ... but in the great scheme of things, and in the way the world works, I mean, we could definitely get along without baseball. You know, it's not so imperative to everybody's life that—Oh! You must have it—it's you know, cheap entertainment, and for the things we get in return, I mean, it's just way out of whack when you've got, you know, people out there that are making serious, legitimate differences in people's lives every day" (John Rocker, personal interview, March 11, 2003).

Conclusion

To a large extent, sports journalists, and even the athletes at whom they point their collective pen, do have a common interest. This is to say that they both share jobs that produce an ever-expanding collection of entertaining cultural artifacts which are not crucially important to the life and breath of humankind. Instead, "We have to make Rocker evil, or mentally ill, or a symbol of some broader social problem, when he is simply a dumb redneck jock set up by Sports Illustrated," in the opinion of Andrew Sullivan. In his article in The New Republic, the author continues by qualifying, "And I mean that in the nicest possible way" (Sullivan, 2000, p. 46).

His obvious inappropriate remarks notwithstanding, was John Rocker in part a victim of the media monster which must continually be fed? Absolutely. It has been argued herein that this larger-than-life image of professional athletes is reflective of the media, and in turn, the media is reflective of the public. It is a perpetual cycle propagated by the media, yet fueled by consumer behavior and consumption. "The sooner the public stops behaving as though these guys are important, the sooner they will get over the notion themselves ... we take their words too seriously and their transgressions too lightly" (Quindlen, 2000, p. 68).

With regard to ethical journalism and publicity, Baker and Martinson (2001) explained that reporters should simply abide by the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Thus the final standard of this article must be that of a social responsibility, in that, this ethic "focuses on the need for professional media members to be sensitive to and concerned about the wider public interest or good" (p. 167).

The bottom line of the Sports Illustrated article for the publisher and the reporter was, and always must be, to create a story which will sell magazines. In order to achieve this capitalistic goal, Pearlman made an ethical decision to change the direction and intent of his original story after spending a few leisurely hours with Rocker, off the field and after the season was finished. This decision and the resultant article created a furor not only in Major League Baseball, but also ignited a heightened animosity toward John Rocker and athletes in general.

Therefore, though there are several issues involved, it becomes clear why the most crucial issue of this controversy is one of ethical consideration. Not only does the decision to publish this version of the Rucker story, and to include these offensive remarks, depict a lack of consideration for the player, his career, and his life, but also for the Atlanta Braves organization and for Major League Baseball. However, more importantly, Pearlman made the decision to publish the article despite the potential it had to negatively impact society and its existing skepticism of highly paid and sometimes arrogant professional athletes. It is the opinion of the author that Pearlman's article, which he re-wrote and entitled, "At Full Blast," was created with the full intent and expectation of garnering major attention.

Beyond this qualitative case study in which the main participants were primary sources, suggestions for future study include the exploration of whether sportswriters, rightfully or not, now have a license to cross over into broader journalistic territory, and to influence social commentary. This article has only briefly uncovered the ongoing strain of the player-press relationship. A social/psychological examination of this significant issue would be helpful and enlightening in terms of how these parties approach and consider one another, and if prima donna athletes have in fact become the "prey" of the modern day sportswriter. This is certainly a valid question considering that Jeff Pearlman has an upcoming book on the most controversial topic in sports – a book about Barry Bonds and the steroid issue in baseball.

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