

Pete Rose's Baseball Gambling Admission and Its Rhetorical Implications

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Abstract

When Pete Rose was banned from baseball in 1989 for gambling on baseball, he faced an immensely steep uphill battle for his reinstatement. For years following the banishment, Rose continued to deny that he ever once bet on baseball, saying that these were false allegations. Hoping that the powers that be would eventually believe him, Rose continued his denial until 2004, when he decided to come clean. In a tell-all book released that year, Rose admitted to betting on baseball and even on the team that he managed, the Cincinnati Reds. Rose felt that by telling the truth after lying all of those years that baseball and its fans would immediately forgive him and it would restart his entry back into baseball again. However, the rhetorical implications of Rose finally admitting to betting on baseball have been steep and have left many wondering whether the rhetoric was effective or not.

Introduction

When you step foot into the Baseball Hall of Fame, you see the biggest legends in the game of baseball, some with numbers that simply defy logic. However, try these numbers on for size: 4256 hits, 3562 games played and 14,053 at bats, all tops in their categories in Major League Baseball history. Add that to three World Series victories, three batting titles, one Most Valuable Player Award, two Gold Glove awards, the Rookie of the Year Award and 17 All-Star Game appearances at 5 different positions. These numbers not only defy logic, but they belong to a man that is not in the Hall of Fame nor may ever be. This is because one Peter Edward Rose, the owner of all of the aforementioned gaudy numbers, was banned for life from baseball in 1989 for betting on baseball while as a player/manager for his longtime team, the Cincinnati Reds. For the fans of "Charlie Hustle," this was nothing less than the proverbial punch in the gut. In 2004, after adamantly denying for 15 years that he did not bet on baseball, finally admitted that he did, in fact, bet on baseball, and on his own team that he was managing at the time, the Reds (albeit never to lose).

But why did Rose decide, after all of these years, to finally admit to betting on baseball (including on his own team) and apologize after years of denying completely that he bet at all? As Borneman (2005) states, apologies "are a form of performative redress that link the fate of the wrongdoer and the victim in a public event, which seeks to defeat the wrongdoer's claim to mastery over the victim" (p. 54). By using the reverse strategy of what he had already been doing for the 15 years leading up to his admittance/apologia, Rose appears to be attempting to win back the trust that he once had with his fans, former teammates/players and Major League Baseball himself by minimizing the claim of gambling on baseball. By completing these steps, I feel that Rose is trying to link himself back to the legend of the game and leader of young talent that he once was. The leadership aspect of this scandal probably looms largest of all. Rose was given the opportunity to teach and develop young men and mold them into successful Major League Baseball players. He chose to bet on them as he was leading them.

In the following paper, I will analyze Rose's admittance to gambling on baseball, the apologies that followed and discuss why he may have decided to use this strategy. I will discuss the texts that will be analyzed, followed by an explanation of the theory that will be used to analyze the text. I will move into my analysis of Rose's admittance/apologia and close out by discussing the implications on Rose's leadership. Looking at Rose's texts from Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation point of view, I would argue that he was not successful in winning over his audience. After 15 years of denial, most people already had their minds already made up about whether or not Rose bet on baseball, and on his own team and they believed that he had. People felt that Rose deserved to be in the Hall of Fame on his playing credentials alone and the gambling sullied his legacy. Admitting on betting on baseball now would seem to show a desperate man grasping for desperate measures, and trying to sell a book.

Description of the Text-Pete Rose's Confessions

Because Rose was and still is such a major public figure with baseball fans and non-baseball fans alike (not to mention one of the most popular players in history), his banning from baseball was major news around the world in 1989. And when he decided to come clean and admit to his wrongdoings in 2004, Rose made headlines once again. He came clean in his autobiography entitled *My Prison Without Bars*. What followed was nothing short of a media frenzy, completing several interviews, discussing his admittance and apologizing to anyone who would listen in hopes of getting reinstated back into baseball, and lead the way to a possible Hall of Fame induction. I will analyze several texts, most from the week in early 2004 that Rose decided to admit to the world that he bet on baseball.

One of the main texts that I will be analyzing is Rose's confession in the popular magazine *Sports Illustrated*. This confession coincided with the release of his tell-all book *My Prison Without Bars* in January of 2004. The confession in *Sports Illustrated* contains an excerpt from *My Prison Without Bars*. This is the point in Rose's life where he decided to come clean and admit to betting on baseball, and betting on his own team. The article and book were written by Rose himself, and were tell-alls in themselves. They are autobiographies of sorts and documented his beginnings in the world of gambling, moved into the controversy itself and came to a conclusion of Rose apologizing, admitting his faults and requesting everyone to move on. He documented his downward spiral in gambling, from the very beginning to the bitter end of his dismissal from the game of baseball.

He discussed how he first started gambling with a man he met while in Tampa (*Sports Illustrated*, 2004, p. 72). He discussed how eventually he had several bookies in several cities, as well as "runners" (p. 74) to go between himself and his bookies. He advised that his gambling would begin with football season, move into the NBA season and culminate with the college basketball March Madness. He stated that following March Madness, it was baseball season and Rose would be fully occupied with the "business at hand" (p. 74) of playing baseball. He laments about how once he reached the pinnacle of his baseball career (breaking Ty Cobb's hits record), he felt as if there was nothing left to chase and needed some more excitement (p. 74). This is when the gambling on baseball began. He also discusses how hard it is for him to apologize, stating he is "just not built that way" (p. 82).

In addition to the *Sports Illustrated* confession, I will also analyze some smaller texts that contain Rose's apologetic rhetoric, such as an interview he did with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I will also cite Rose from his book, as this is what prompted the admittance and the apologia that followed. As a baseball legend and a manager of young players for the Reds at the time of his banning, Rose felt he stained the game and led a bad example to the players that he managed. As he stated in the article, he "loved building raw talent into great players" (*Sports Illustrated*, p.72). In addition, in his interview with the *Inquirer*, he advised Jim Salisbury that he is a "baseball person, a teacher of the game, a motivator of the game, and those qualities don't make you a bating coach or a minor league instructor or a scout or something else. It makes you the guy in charge" (p. D1). This statement begins to link Rose's admittance and the apologia that followed to Rose's perceived leadership qualities and his attempt to be a leader once again. Rose himself cited the thrill he achieved from managing 34 different Cincinnati players through their first major league hit (p. 72) to being able to handle losing several thousand dollars in betting money due to March Madness because he got a "great deal of satisfaction from watching those young kids play" (p. 73). The implications on leadership may be the grandest of all implications when it comes to Rose's gambling situation. As Salisbury himself advised me, when you are in a position of leadership, "you should not be thinking with your wallet" (personal phone conversation, November 24, 2009).

Rhetorical Theory-Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation

A close examination was done to decide which rhetorical theory would best analyze Rose's statements. After reviewing several of these theories, I felt that Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation would most accurately analyze the chosen texts. As Bitzer states, "The presence of rhetorical discourse obviously indicates the presence of a rhetorical situation" (*The Rhetorical Situation*, p.59). Bitzer provides examples of The Declaration of Independence or Lincoln's Gettysburg Address as clear instances of rhetoric and indicates the presence of a situation (p. 59). Indeed, Rose's situation (betting on baseball, admitting to betting on baseball, apologizing for betting on baseball) required some tailored rhetoric on his part as a person in such a legendary status as him, not to mention someone who once held leadership status. Bitzer further argues that rhetoric is situational and that it is a mode of altering and constructing reality.

He posits that the source of the rhetorical activity is not the rhetor or intent, but the situation itself (p. 61). I feel these fit Rose's rhetoric as he is responding to his specific situation and is aiming for a positive response. Put very simply, the rhetoric comes into existence as a response to a specific situation. The situation itself must also exist as a necessary condition of rhetorical discourse. The key concepts of Bitzer's theory purvey that every rhetorical situation exists with three parts: an exigence, constraints, and a target audience. Bitzer states that the exigence "is an imperfection marked by urgency" (p. 62). In other words, this is the reason why the person, in this case, Pete Rose, wants to speak. The constraints exist as obstacles to the person's rhetoric and, according to Bitzer, can be anything from people and events to beliefs or attitudes (p. 63). Finally, the rhetorical situation most obviously contains an audience. When the rhetor is speaking, he or she always needs the audience in which they are targeting. There must be a set of people that the rhetor is attempting to address.

Another key concept in Bitzer's theory that can apply to Rose's rhetorical situation is the fact that rhetoric is always persuasive. It serves as a possible beacon for change. No one wanted to persuade his constituents more than Rose and finding that key rhetoric was an important part of Rose's admittances and subsequent apologies that followed. Garret and Xiao revisited Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation and attempted to posit that that audience plays a much bigger role than the initial rhetorical situation suggests. They felt as if the rhetorical situation can contain a much more interactive role than what Bitzer had initially hypothesized. However, given the nature of Rose's rhetoric and the outlets in which he used to admit to betting on baseball and then apologizing for it, Bitzer's initial theories still hold the most water when discussing this particular situation. Rose's situation does not call for very much interaction, just the audience's reactions and the need for change as it relates to Rose's acceptance back into the game of baseball. And because Rose felt as if he apologized so much that he feared he might come off as phony (Hutchinson, p. 62), he has the quintessential rhetorical situation as he had to frame his apologies just right for the audience's approval. There is no need for any kind of audience interaction in this rhetoric, except for where it means the most: Commissioner Bud Selig, who would be in charge of Rose's possible reinstatement.

Literature Review

When discussing why Rose chose to apologize 15 years later in order to save face, it is imperative to look at the notion of apologia itself and how prominent figures choose to use it. Apologia is a form of transformative strategy that actively seeks to alter an audience's meaning and/or affect for the elements involved in the situation (McCleary, 1983, p. 12). Rose's apologia seemed, on the surface, to be very similar to President George W. Bush's apologia when apologizing for the Abu Ghraib scandal. Bush used a method called simulated atonement in which he erected a façade of accepting responsibility and expressing eagerness for redemption, but also escaping any long-term accountability at home (Shepherd, 2009, p. 462).

There is also the thought camp that what Rose conveyed in his gambling admission was what can be called confession-as-apology (McGreevey, 2008, p. 3). This is when someone confesses to their wrongdoing and does so in a way that the confession also takes the part as an apology. Governor James McGreevey of New Jersey, when admitting to his extramarital affair with a man in 2004, engaged in confession-as-apology, but did not necessarily apologize for the wrongdoing. This is similar to what Rose did in his confession, stating that he was sorry that it happened, but not saying he was sorry that he took part in gambling on his own teams.

Prior literature on Rose himself when it comes to the gambling situation mainly comes from before he admitted to doing it. Prior to the admittance, most of the literature was based on pure speculation. In "Fields of Broken Dreams", George Higgins (1990) felt that Rose was not telling the whole truth when he said he didn't gamble on baseball. He felt, simply, that Rose didn't bet on baseball until his losses from gambling on football and other sports became so staggering, he could no longer cover those losses (p. 210). Most of the literature on Rose and the gambling situation seems to have come post-admission, hence the current analysis.

Rhetorical Analysis

Key Concepts

When Rose came forward in 2004 to admit to the world that he bet on baseball and (even worse) on the very team he was managing, it came as a shock to baseball and non-baseball fans alike. Why now as opposed to 15 years ago? However, when Rose began talking (in the form of a book and a magazine article as well as several interviews) it became abundantly clear that Rose felt he had a motivation to admit to betting on baseball now.

As we alluded to in the prior section, every rhetorical situation requires an exigency or a motivation or urgency to speak. In Rose's case, he had nowhere to go but up. He had dug himself such a hole that it appeared he might never come out. In order to lobby for possible reinstatement back into the game of baseball, he needed to earn the trust of everyone important to the game: the fans, his former teammates and, most importantly, Major League Baseball and Commissioner Bud Selig. For the 15 years leading up to his admission, most people had already made up their minds that Rose bet on baseball, even if he never said so himself. He was already guilty in the court of public opinion and no one was going to move on and even discuss a possible reinstatement until he came clean. As Rose stated in *Sports Illustrated*, he needed plenty of time to "show a redirected, reconfigured or rehabilitated life (as quoted by former commissioner Bart Giamatti)" (p. 78). Rose couldn't imagine life anymore without baseball, so it was time to speak first with Commissioner Bud Selig, and admit to betting on baseball, as well as his own team.

Rose blatantly lied to everyone involved in this case when the truth just may have set him free, even though his statements following his admission didn't let on as such. As he stated in *My Prison Without Bars*, "I should have had the opportunity to get help, but baseball had no fancy rehab for gamblers like they do for drug addicts. If I had admitted my guilt, it would have been the same as putting my head on a chopping block. Lifetime ban. Death penalty" (2004, quote retrieved from www.cbc.ca). This statement would lead most to believe that while Rose is admitting his guilt now, he is just trying to reason why he did not admit to betting on baseball to begin with. So another large part of his motivation to admit and apologize now is to try and reason why he didn't admit to betting on baseball when he was questioned in the first place. There are others who believe his motivation to admit guilt now as opposed to any other time was that Rose needed money and selling his book was tops on his agenda. Salisbury, who did the interview for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and was one of the select few who had the opportunity to interview Rose as the book was coming out, was one who felt that Rose's main motivation to admit guilt now was to sell books. Salisbury stated that while Rose was very relaxed in the interview, he also seemed very scripted in his delivery (personal phone conversation, November 24, 2009).

Because of the severity of the penalty (lifetime ban from baseball) and the immense popularity of the person (all-time hits leader, potential Hall of Famer), there were several constraints that Rose faced with his sudden admission of guilt. One such constraint that Rose had to deal with was changing the fans' already made up opinions that he bet on baseball and that he had a gambling problem. Salisbury echoed this sentiment during my interview with him when he stated that fans were "turned off" when Rose was banned for betting on baseball and on his own team (personal phone conversation, November 24, 2009).

He faced an uphill battle, and this uphill battle did not just end with the fans. Because for all of the wrongdoings in sport today (such as steroid abuse), none of those impose a lifetime punishment as stated in the Major League Baseball rulebook. It is even posted as such on the locker room door of every locker room; Major League Rule 21, as it is known, states "Any player, umpire, or club or league official or employee, who shall bet any sum whatsoever upon any baseball game in connection with which the bettor has a duty to perform shall be declared permanently ineligible" (Major League Rule 21, para. d). Rose lamented that if he done drugs or had a drinking problem, he would not have been banned and rehabilitation would have been paid for him. He stated that there was no rehab in place for gamblers, so he did not admit guilt. There is also the constraint of the large anti-gambling community, another group that Rose must pander his rhetoric towards.

The audience at hand is, very simply, everyone who is important to Rose's plight to not only get reinstated back into the game of baseball, but back into the good graces of everyone who can shape the public's opinion of Rose. These not only includes Major League Baseball and its fans, but also his colleagues outside of baseball and non-baseball fans who know the name Pete Rose because he is a legend, and now associate him with gambling. However, there is also another important demographic that Rose appears to be targeting with his admission and apologies: the millions of people in America who are anti-gambling. In many religious groups and with many people, gambling is looked at as sinful. Because it is something that causes addiction and loses people millions of dollars each year, many people continue to fight against gambling. Having a major celebrity like Rose get banned from baseball for his severe gambling habit put a big dent into the plight of many of these people. While Rose cannot take back his gambling, he can at least now admit his faults and speak about the evils that gambling can cause.

Effects

Using these key concepts to analyze why Rose decided to admit to betting on baseball and his own team, one might be able to come up with their own assumptions as to if he were successful in his statements or not. Based upon the texts and his statements in his admission, his rhetoric may have not entirely been effective. To the general consensus of Americans, minds were already made up whether or not they felt Rose bet on baseball or not from the moment he was banned from baseball in 1989. A majority of people had the gut feeling anyway that he bet on baseball, even though he adamantly denied doing so. To many, it would appear that the admission served a dual purpose: to attempt reinstatement back into baseball and to sell copies of his new book that was about to hit stores.

Indeed, both subjects were touched on in an article in the *Chicago Tribune*. Michael Hirsley stated that by admitting on betting on baseball, “Rose met one condition that Selig said was essential before he’d consider reinstatement” (p. C1, 2004). However, Hirsley also touched on the fact that the admission coincidentally came on the same weeks as Hall of Fame inductee announcements. “I would never, never in my life do anything to distract anybody from going to the Hall of Fame” (2004), stated Rose in the *Tribune* article.

Given the timeliness of the book’s release as well as the massive media crush that he created by holding interviews and printing his confession in *Sports Illustrated*, one would be inclined to believe the exact opposite of what Rose states he was doing. Rose acted as if he did not want the attention to be put on him by his gambling admission. But people who were smart enough to see right through the rhetoric could tell that selling the book was a major reason for him admitting on gambling now as opposed to 15 years prior. Five years later after the admission, Rose is still in the same place where he was in 2004. Therefore, the rhetoric was not a very effective mediator for change. Jim Salisbury of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* echoed these sentiments in the phone interview with him (November 24, 2009).

Discussion

Being one of the biggest legends in the history of America’s game as well as a former manager, however Rose decided to spin his gambling on baseball had a major impact on the sport from a leadership standpoint. Looking at it from the legend point of view, in the United States, baseball may be the most influential sport on young children when one considers almost every child plays some form of Little League growing up. Seeing one of the sports biggest names in Rose be implicated for betting on the same sport he played and managed in created a huge black eye for the game as well showed a bad example for the millions of children who played the game. From the managerial point of view, he was the leader of young men in the pros, some just gathering their bearings in the big leagues. Having Rose bet on the very same team in which he led these young men can be looked at as extremely despicable. Salisbury agreed to this statement in my interview with him and seemed to allude to the fact that this may have been the worst part of Rose’s gambling problem (November 24, 2009).

Indeed, in just about everyone of Rose’s apology interviews, the leadership implications on his gambling always seem to come up. As he told *U.S. News and World Report*, “I’m a good teacher. I bring a very, very positive attitude to teaching. I’m a good coach, a good manager” (p. 52, 2004). These kinds of statements by Rose show that he seems to know that he did not set a good leadership example of betting on his sport and betting on his own team. He now needs to constantly explain himself and prove to the world that he can be viewed as a good and decent leader and be let back into the sport that he desperately loves. Rose may also need to show that he is more sincere in his apologies. While he did apologize often after his admission, they often did not seem sincere. He spoke of there maybe being some “real emotion” (*Sports Illustrated*, p. 82) inside of him somewhere and that it doesn’t surface very often. As he stated again in *Sports Illustrated*, “I’m sorry that it happened, and I’m sorry for all the people, fans and family it hurt. Let’s move on” (p. 82). This is not exactly Rose getting on his hands and knees to beg for forgiveness.

Conclusion

When Rose decided in 2004 to admit to betting on baseball and on his own team, it was both surprising and not surprising at the same time. For most, it was a foregone conclusion that Rose bet on baseball and his own team, even if he vehemently denied doing so. However, the timing of his admission (given it came the same week as Hall of Fame announcements) and the fact that it was done “coincidentally” around the same time his book was to be released was surprising to most people, as it showed the lengths that Rose would go to get himself reinstated into the game of baseball, and put the attention back on himself.

At the outset of this analysis, it was stated that Rose may have not been effective in his rhetoric of admitting to gambling on baseball and his own team after completely denying doing so. It would seem that this holds true, as Rose, to this day, has not been reinstated back into baseball and many feel that he is just as guilty as he was in 1989. Indeed, a lot of the rhetorical impact can fall back on Rose's purported leadership abilities. Even after admitting to betting on baseball, and his own team, for all of these years, the apology does not seem sincere and contrite to journalists such as Salisbury, who feel that Rose's apologies most likely are to sell his book. Some journalists even went further, stating that Rose does not seem to know just how larger than life his gambling on baseball games and his own team really was. Thomas Boswell of *The Washington Post* feels that even after the admission, Rose "still has not seen the truth-that his sins go far beyond gambling on baseball games and his contrition must go far deeper than any TV quote or book excerpt available so far" (p. D01, 2004). Even if Rose were to be reinstated back into baseball, how can he be trusted to lead a team of young men when he once had a proven addiction to betting on their own games?

Having a legend of the game such as Pete Rose be guilty of such a large transgression as gambling on his own sport and own team has been a major black eye for baseball. Compound that with the steroid debacle of the last few years and it would seem there are not many role models in the sport for children to look up to. If a paid leader of a major professional baseball team is capable of betting on the very players that he is coaching, there isn't much that a Little League coach or a father can tell his child who may be familiar with Rose's mistakes. Not only did Rose bet on his own players, but he also lied for several years about doing so. How can a father or Little League coach tell a young child to idolize a legend of the game such as Pete Rose when they would be idolizing an admitted gambler and proven liar?

As bad as the gambling aspect may be, another large implication coming from Rose's rhetoric is the lying. If Rose's rhetoric was effective, all was forgiven, and Rose was reinstated back into the game of baseball, it would show children that lying would be OK, as long as you are good at the sport you play. This is not to say that Rose should not be forgiven for finally admitting and apologizing as everyone should be able to forgive on their own terms. But when you beg forgiveness for your own selfish motives, that just adds to the negativity that already follows you. Rose should be in the Hall of Fame for his playing career. But now he is not, nor will most likely ever be because he gambled on his own sport and his own team and lied for years about doing just that. And had he admitted his wrongdoings when first accused of them, this poorly timed and ineffective rhetoric would not have been needed.

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