

Study: Ballplayers use different tactics to repair images

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As steroid-use scandals have threatened the reputations of Major League Baseball's most prominent players during the past several years, those players have used a variety of strategies to repair their images, a new study finds.

Research by a Penn State College of Communications faculty member, published in the current issue of the Journal of Sports Media, found players such as Barry Bonds, Rafael Palmeiro and Jason Giambi denied drug-use allegations but reacted differently when faced with evidence to the contrary. The strategies did not alter the negative tone of newspaper coverage toward them.

"Although the players used a variety of tactics — such as trying to explain themselves or divert attention to their records — journalists were still very skeptical," said Michel Haigh, an assistant professor in the college who analyzed coverage between 2003 and 2006. "All players were presented as untrustworthy in newspaper accounts."

Barry Bonds, who frequently denied using steroids, blamed his trainer, Greg Anderson, and discussed his record-setting career after the leaked grand jury testimonies of Jason Giambi, Gary Sheffield and Kimberly Bell, his ex-girlfriend, stated he took steroids.

Giambi tried to bolster his image by discussing his accomplishments. He denied using steroids, but after his BALCO grand jury testimony appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle, he said he took the drugs to

grow bigger and faster but apologized to the media and fans.

Gary Sheffield was not quoted as frequently in the stories. When he was, his most common strategy was to evade responsibility by claiming his use of steroids was an accident. Sheffield said it was an accident, that he took the drugs "unknowingly" and would not do it again, but he never apologized.

Negative coverage persisted, no matter what the strategy, Haigh said. "Perhaps the best lesson here for athletes is it may be almost impossible to escape negative coverage — even if they apologize. And it may be impossible to repair their image."

The College of Communications at Penn State serves as home for the John Curley Center for Sports Journalism, which was created in 2003 and explores issues and trends in sports journalism through instruction, programming and research.

The center's undergraduate curricular emphasis includes courses in sports writing, sports broadcasting, sports information and sport and society. Along with classroom instruction, the Center's mission stresses the value of interaction, from on-campus guest lectures and on-site visits by students to real-life experience gained through internships. Sponsored programming includes lectures, panels and workshops on journalism and the role of sport in society.

Recent research has focused on a wide variety of topics, including misconceptions about Title IX among the media, the gender makeup of sports departments at newspapers and television stations, and the "mythology" behind the perceived behavior of student-athletes.

Provided by Penn State

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