

IN A SORRY STATE

In keeping with how our sports stars have become so adept at issuing apologies, the author would like to beg your indulgence in advance for anything that inadvertently annoys you in this article. Really, he didn't mean it

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Even in a sport that has always challenged the concept of mannerly conduct, it would be hard to top the outburst by Serena Williams at the US Open in September. It was really quite something, comparable in the annals of unseemly displays with vintage John McEnroe, who behaved towards line judges as if he had caught them in the act of breaking into his car. But for sheer volume, lewd content and unabashed theatrics, McEnroe had nothing on the ordinarily civil Serena, who became unhinged when she was called for a foot fault during her semi-final match against Kim Clijsters. As the offending line judge sat there with what can only be described as a stunned expression, Williams said – and I quote: 'I swear to God I'll take this ball and shove it down your fucking throat! Do you hear me? I swear ...'

It went on, but you get the picture: Not nice.

As you can probably imagine, there was quite a stir in the wake of this impromptu upbraiding. Williams was penalised a point, which gave Clijsters the match. It resulted in a \$10 000 fine for unsportsmanlike conduct. And it was potentially damaging to her image, which would have been a problem when it came to those corporate endorsements athletes oh-so-cherish. It seemed as if the immediate thing to do was to, well, offer up a public apology, but the still steamed-up Williams was having none of it. Cooler heads later prevailed upon her, which led to the issuance of what became Apology No 1. In it she conceded that she 'handled the situation poorly', but left out the two words that would seem ▶





to be essential to any expression of personal regret: 'I'm' and 'sorry'. When it became clear to her (or her handlers) that her initial try was inadequate – a figurative foot fault, if you will – Williams tossed Apology No 2 up in the air and batted at the press. In this one she said she was 'sincerely sorry' for the way she had conducted herself. That seemed to get her off the hook with her fans, who cheered wildly when she and her sister, Venus, came out a day later and won in doubles play.

Is it just me or has the act of the apology among athletes become a sport in and of itself? It certainly seems that way during our daily excursion through the American sports pages, where you cannot seem to go a paragraph without tripping over an apology by some transgressing player, coach, owner or – gasp! – sports writer. Of course, the year now drawing to a close has seen a fair share of apologetic pleas outside the realm of sports, including one from Congressman Joe Wilson (for shouting 'You lie' during a speech by President Barack Obama) and TV funnyman David Letterman (for having sex with a female member of his staff). But if you were handing out awards for public displays of contrition, you could not come up with a better group of nominees than an NFL quarterback who operated an illegal dog fighting ring and a running back who used a gay slur to criticise his coach and shoo away some prying reporters.

Oh yes – we also had dear Serena, whose apology was accepted, and who a week later shot a commercial for Tampax. Some found the irony too perfect for words.

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We Americans like to think of ourselves as a forgiving people. Someone screws up, we'll give them a second chance or in some cases even a third and fourth. But we've got to be sure they're worthy of it, that they understand that the behaviours they engaged in were untoward. In some cases, they'll have to do some jail time or pay a steep fine. But generally, they'll be able to wipe the slate clean with a carefully-worded but sincere apology. Of course, the operative word here is 'sincere', which is one of those things that is hard to define but easier to recognise. In a way it is not unlike the 1964 opinion by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who observed of pornography: 'I know it when I see it.' Well, the same goes for the sincerity content of an apology: You know it when you hear it.

But not everyone 'sees' with the same eyes or 'hears' with the same ears, which is why there is no consensus on whether or not NFL quarterback Michael Vick is actually sorry for having had a hand in slaughtering canines in his savage dog fighting operation. When last we addressed his undoing in this space in April ('Vick – As in Sick'), the disgraced former Atlanta quarterback was serving out his sentence in a federal penitentiary. It was speculated here that Vick would indeed play again, but that he would have to fashion a convincing public apology. Well, it turned out that Vick was signed as a backup by the Philadelphia Eagles, whose owner spoke passionately of his belief in giving second chances. Curiously, Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie was far less flexible in the case of a game-day employee who had been fired for criticising the team on Facebook for letting a popular player go. But that should give you some insight into the apologies: Not one size fits all.

Seeing Vick undergo what has become a continued public spanking has been an interesting spectacle. From the day he was introduced to the press by the Eagles back in August, he has issued more apologies than the Philadelphia Parking Authority has handed out citations. But somehow his apologies have seemed scripted, the work of a savvy communications staff, and not the product of deep self-analysis. Publicly, he seemed occasionally disengaged, as if there is some loose wiring between what he is saying and what he is thinking (if he is thinking).

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Sceptics have assessed his expressions of sorrow over what he did with a jaundiced eye, saying: 'Sure he's sorry. He is sorry he got caught.' The inference here is that Vick would say or do anything to get back in the league, that he has been essentially coerced by circumstances to apologise. And according to Nicholas Tavuchis, the author of *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*, 'a coerced apology is not worth a damn'.

Nor has Vick been worth a damn as a quarterback this year. In the sparse action he has had this year he has been spotty. But as the NFL season winds down, it appears that he has cleansed himself sufficiently; he has not killed any dogs while he has been in Philadelphia. And while yours truly and others remain uncertain – and that includes the animal lovers, who would like to see him consigned to an overcrowded kennel – he has received big ovations whenever he has spoken at schools. Moreover, fans are once again shelling out currency for replicas of his jersey, which is an indicator that suggests that he has achieved the chief aim ►

of any apology, however hollow it has seemed to some: To gain closure and move on.

While Tavuchis told me a few years ago that ‘you cannot force someone to apologise’, even Vick understood that without an apology he would have ended up bagging groceries at a Piggly Wiggly. Less cognisant of that was the legendary baseball star Pete Rose, who was banished from the sport when it was found that he had illegally wagered on games while serving as the manager of the Cincinnati Reds. For years Rose denied it, even when NBC reporter Jim Gray implored him to apologise in an interview during the 1999 World Series. Gray told Rose, not incorrectly: ‘The American public is very forgiving. Are you willing to show contrition, admit that you bet on baseball and make some sort of apology to that effect?’ While a few years later Rose would do exactly that, he was far from accommodating that evening to Gray, who he accused of ‘bombarding me’ with questions. Interestingly, it was Gray who then became the focus of attack – by viewers, who flooded the NBC switchboard with criticism of Gray; by players, who boycotted Gray in support of Pete; and even by some of his fellow journalists, who said that Gray ‘overdid it’.

So what did Gray do?

The only thing he could do. He apologised.

Poor Pete: If an apology is a bar of soap, which some use to scrub the stain from their reputations, Rose slipped on it and slid even further from his reinstatement to baseball (and a possible place in the Hall of Fame, which had been denied him due to his misdeeds). In so far as NFL running back Larry Johnson is concerned ... well, he should have used the soap to wash his mouth out. Upset with Kansas City head coach Todd Haley, Johnson used a gay slur on his Twitter account and used the same with reporters who were covering the story. Although Johnson apologised, and in doing so said he was ‘disgusted’ with himself, he was suspended and later released. For anyone keeping score at home, it was the second apology Johnson had issued in a year. The first one occurred after an altercation in a nightclub, during which he was accused of throwing a drink on one woman and pushing another.

Google ‘Larry Johnson’ and you’ll get the whole sordid story, complete with what he said and running commentary by his erstwhile fans. Nothing can be said or written today without it drawing widespread attention, which is part of the reason we’ve been seeing an upswing in apologies. Say one wrong word in

Cleveland, and within hours it will be fodder for conversation in sushi boats bobbing in the Sea of Japan. Mark Whicker, a sports columnist for the *Orange County Register* in California, found out just how quickly word can spread when he penned a piece this year on a woman who had been held captive since age 11 by a deranged lunatic. In the column he spoke of the many memorable sporting moments the woman had missed. OK ... dumb idea, poorly executed. But you would have been astounded by the

volume of irate reaction that it generated, including a blog from one critic who called it ‘the single worst piece of sports journalism ever committed to the page’.

Ouch!

Whicker tapped out an apology.

It was enough for some. It could never have been enough for others.

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Sometimes you cannot predict what will annoy people. A long time ago, I wrote a piece I referred to a few months ago about an old alcoholic who roamed around America telling people he was the former baseball pitcher Frank Lary. From what he told me, he did it to cadge drinks from his fellow bar patrons and, interestingly, to assure himself better medical attention when his lungs gave out and he found himself sitting in an emergency room. And I wrote it as he explained to me: by telling people he was a down-on-his-luck celebrity – even a dimly remembered one – he would get better attention from the staff than if he told them he was a bum off the street. I have to say it made sense.

Occasionally, I get a few flaming arrows shot into the fort from readers who take exception to what I write. Usually, they come in a day or so later, sometimes

a week. But I have to say I had not expected to hear from a nurse at a New York hospital on the Lary story. Clearly irritated with me, she accused me of perpetuating ‘as fact that famous people are treated better than ordinary people in hospital’. She said ‘I SWEAR THAT IS NOT TRUE’. It went on – and on – even though the old con artist is long dead and the story I did on him was written nine years ago. And in case you are wondering if I apologised ... I did. I wrote it down on a piece of paper, put it in a bottle and threw it overboard. Depending on the tides, she should get it by 2030. ■

Kram is a celebrated sports writer with *The Philadelphia Daily News* and the contributor of *Business Day Sport Monthly’s American Read*.



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