Is There No Turning Back? Introducing Black Sheep Regret and Ancillary Effects of Post-Transgression Athlete Behavior

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Introduction
When athletes perform poorly on the field or engage in unscrupulous acts off-the-field (e.g., domestic violence), fans may be at a crossroads. While fans could support the athlete through these transgressions, they could also harshly disparage the athlete and dissociate the transgressor from the team. In society, however, cases of wayward athletes have not only been met with disassociation, but also with amnesty. For example, former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis was identified as an alleged murder suspect in 2000. Although Lewis was the subject of punitive criticism by the media and fans alike, he was able to redeem himself by performing at an elite level on the field, utilizing humanitarian work as an outlet for image enhancement, and finally, maintaining the persona of being the ideal professional as a teammate and family man (Busbee, 2013). Today, Lewis is celebrated by many and his purported transgressions appear distant. Thus, it appears that post-transgression actions can truly have an impact on how athletes are perceived as well as how their former transgressions can be pardoned. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to investigate how fans’ perception of a deviant athlete can be influenced by novel post-transgression behaviors.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses
Conventional perspectives propose that fans operate using in-group biases (Wann & Dolan, 1994), wherein they tend to support in-group athletes. However, group-relations research has provided evidence to counter this phenomenon (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). When group members stray away from norms (e.g., reflecting strong performance or certain traits), individuals may criticize such members. Extant literature in psychology has termed this as the black sheep effect (BSE), defined as the tendency to judge deviant in-group members more harshly than comparable out-group ones (Marques et al., 1988). Considering that external events can contribute to how fans evaluate players, novel information about athletes may be able to spur retractions of previous negative comments and behaviors. Thus, we propose a novel concept involving the confluence of the BSE and regret, termed black sheep regret (BSR), defined as the process in which fans repent over their prior derogation of an athlete, thereby revisiting former evaluations dependent on an athlete’s more recent activities. Therefore, the intention of this study is to demonstrate how regret by sports fans, stemming from positive (e.g., pro-social) post-transgression actions by athletes, can influence reevaluations as well as consumer choices of related products (e.g., player jerseys) following the presentation of performance (e.g., dreadful on-field play) and moral transgressions (e.g., domestic violence cases against the athlete).

The utility of BSR is rooted within existing literature on regret. Seminal work by Bell (1982) along with Loomes and Sugden (1982) conceived regret theory (RT), which postulates the occurrence of negative experiences following the presentation of novel information that could have led to more positive outcomes. While RT has been utilized in the context of consumer choices, its application is not far from the milieu of other behavioral decisions (Gilovich & Medvec, 1995). Given this perspective, regret may not only be a construct involved in merely purchase decision, but may also be applicable to evaluative judgments and other behavior implicated in group settings. Although previous literature has not attempted to examine the interplay between sports fans and regret, particularly in their evaluations of athletes from their favorite teams, we seek to extend this line of research through the proposition of a novel principle. We propose that BSR can compel fans to reevaluate their prior appraisals of athletes based upon the presentation of novel information. However, the key distinction of this construct is the operation of the BSE as an antecedent to BSR. Thus, we present the following hypotheses:
H1: Regret from positive post-transgression behavior (e.g., outstanding on-field performance or humanitarian off-the-field behavior) will lead to positive reevaluations.

H1a: This will also increase product choices and positive social media behavior.

H2: Regret related to negative post-transgression behavior (e.g., poor on-field performance or immoral off-the-field behavior) will spur harsh athlete reevaluations.

H2a: This will lower product choices and increase negative social media behavior.

Method
This study will be conducted online through Qualtrics Survey Software using a 2 (negative action: moral, performance) × 2 (post-transgression action: moral, performance) × 2 (nature of post-transgression action: positive, negative) between-subjects experimental design. To satisfy power conditions computed in G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), we will require 240 participants. We will recruit approximately 450 fans of the San Francisco Giants from a Western university (n ≈ 225) and from the general population (n ≈ 225) via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and Qualtrics Survey Panel. We will limit our sample to a more homogenous group for an effective experimental manipulation. This work will be supported by funds awarded from the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) Research Grant Program. Participants will be randomly presented fictitious news articles from a credible source describing either a moral- or performance-related negative action by an athlete. They will then complete a battery of measures involving evaluation of specific performance or moral traits, product choice, and social media behavior. Subsequently, participants will be randomly presented another article describing a novel behavior by the athlete (i.e., a positive or negative moral- or performance-related activity). They will then provide their perceived level of regret and reevaluate the dependent measures. For data analysis, a series of factorial ANOVAs will be performed to examine the effects of the initial negative action. Next, repeated-measures ANOVAs will be conducted to examine difference scores from the negative action and each of the post-transgression action conditions. Post-hoc tests using Games-Howell correction will then be used to compare the effects of high and low levels regret, dichotomized by a median split, among the conditions.

Expected Results and Discussion
We expect to find a significant effect of regret, wherein higher levels of regret from post-transgression actions involving positive performance or good moral behaviors will increase evaluations, product choices, and positive social media behaviors (H1; H1a). With respect to negative post-transgression behaviors, higher levels of regret will be negatively associated with the outcome measures (H2; H2a). This project provides the application of RT into a sports context, thereby testing how regret can drive fans to either support or further derogate an in-group athlete. The current study will also extend the BSE and regret by linking these two theoretical frameworks within sport management. As such, through the proposition of BSR, we intend to demonstrate how in-group derogation can be affected by post-transgression behaviors and thus, influence reevaluation and consumer decisions related to the athlete and team. The expected findings of this experiment may have numerous implications for sport managers, teams, and corporations within the applied sector of the field. For instance, practitioners may be able to leverage positive regret in fans and highlight such post-transgression actions, performance- or moral-related, to promote financial returns. Taken together, we hope our study can provide sound understanding of the BSE, RT, and BSR that will encourage multidisciplinary approaches in examining simply how fans perceive athletes from their favorite teams.