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Sports Sinners Need Forgiveness, too

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Sports sinners need forgiveness, too

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*These times are so uncertain,
there's a yearning undefined
— people filled with rage
I've been trying to get down
To the heart of the matter
But my will gets weak
and my thoughts start to scatter
So I think it's about forgiveness
Forgiveness
Even if you don't love me anymore.*

From "The Heart of the Matter" (1989), written by Mike Campbell, Don Henley and J.D. Souther

I was driving down the road the other day and put in a cassette. Wouldn't you know it, this great Don Henley tune came on and Henley sang the lyrics shown above.

Made me think. A bunch of us in the sports world could stand to practice a little forgiveness.

Why? Well, I had just finished teaching one of Oregon's graduate sports marketing classes at Nike and had visited briefly with Phil Knight. Knight is in the middle of an unfortunate situation with his alma mater (U of O) that, frankly, in my opinion is Oregon's fault. I'm sure I don't know all the particulars but the bottom line is Oregon made some decisions that greatly hurt its most famous son. Knight responded by implying he would withhold any future charitable donations to Oregon.

That's unfortunate for Oregon, especially as the Ducks push to enter the top 15 in football and top 20 in men's and women's basketball. But let's be honest: Every person who gives freely of his or her gifts is entitled to make certain fundamental decisions.

I'm told Oregon has apologized (but perhaps only privately). I'm hoping Knight will eventually see fit to forgive.

Interestingly, my Christian faith suggests I should practice forgiveness as a general activity. I think most world religions work this way.

That's a good thing because in the sports world, we seem to have many situations begging for forgiveness.

Latrell Sprewell got his hands around a coach's neck a couple of years back and choked him. Bobby Knight got his hands in a lot of people's faces and came close to getting fired. Soccer great Eric Cantona went into the stands one night to put his foot in a taunting fan's mouth. Skater Tonya Harding got her hands around a hubcap and just about took her boyfriend's head off.

Still, it appears to me that if Sprewell had led New York to the NBA Finals, he'd be way past forgiven, he could run for mayor of New York City. Knight got a suspension and a fine but then landed a top recruit. If Indiana can get past the first round of the NCAAs next March, he'll be Professor of the Year. Harding had to go clean cemeteries for a couple days but got back in the news. There's probably a sitcom or a Broadway show in that concept. Is that forgiveness or just good business?

Now, a lot of you out there may be starting to write my forgiveness thing off as too liberal.

Damn tree-hugging fools out in Oregon. Hell, they can't even pump their own gas.

Well, where do we draw the line on crime and punishment in the sports world?

You want fines and suspensions, or are those too light for you? You want to start banning folks from playing the games? Fine, fine. How long? You want 'em gone for life? Skating did that to Harding. Great, let's get it on.

But who among you wants to play judge?

Right now the NFL has got a world of hurt going on with Ray Lewis and Rae Carruth. Even though the murder charges against Lewis were dismissed, will sportswriters forgive him? Will the fans? If O.J. Simpson had been an active athlete, would the commissioner have been pressured into making a statement?

Conversely, if Carruth is found guilty, will we scream for a greater bloodletting because he was a "hero"?

When I sit here and think about it, I know many of the "crimes" we work ourselves up about are pretty small. And some of them are huge. I'm not for a moment excusing any of them. Not the murders, rapes, drug convictions, felony assaults, intimidations or illegal gambling. We know how to do excuses. I'm just wondering how we want to practice forgiveness and how we bring about relevant change.

You wanna know why?

All of us in the sports business world have contributed to the situation. We've made people rich. We've made them famous. We've put athletes on the front page. We've lionized strikeouts and birdies. Touchdowns and power play goals.

We've created broadcasting and merchandising contracts that support exclusive ad buys and monster sponsorships. We've built luxury boxes and authorized VIP treatment. We've gripped and grinned with the stars and rode with them in the limousine to the game.

It's the sports business world we wanted and we made it.

We built these "heroes" and paid our gardeners with the profits.

Seems all of us have been enjoying a pretty good sports economy and selling our magazines and shouting into our microphones. We've made quota for 10 straight quarters and thrust our fists in the air about the corporate ROI.

So tomorrow when you look down on Pete Rose and John Rocker, Bob Knight and Tonya Harding, ask yourself what role you played in the heart of the matter.

I'm guessing it's time to think about forgiveness. Even if we don't love some of them anymore.

And here's the last word. If we won't forgive these "heroes," are we at least willing to change the way we do business? I doubt it, but I could be wrong.

Court is always in session. You be the judge.

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