

OPINION

Pete Rose unashamedly ushered in the realpolitik era of sports



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PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

UPDATED 1 HOUR AGO

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Pete Rose celebrates his 4,000th career hit with Montreal Expos teammates at Olympic Stadium in Montreal on April 13, 1984.

RON POLING/THE CANADIAN PRESS

On the day he was banned for life by Major League Baseball, Pete Rose held a farewell press conference. He repeatedly denied he'd bet on baseball (he had) and declared the decision a species of win (it wasn't).

A couple of days earlier, Rose had had a child. The ban included the right to appeal after one year.

“I’ve never looked forward to a birthday like I’m looking forward to my new daughter’s birthday, because two days after that I can apply for reinstatement,” Rose said.

When you watch that 35-year-old presser back now, you are struck by the barefaced cheek of it.

Rose managed to convince a lot of people he was being railroaded. Because what guilty person would compound the shame by continuing to lie? What would be the point?

The point was that there wasn’t a point. Rose continued to tell the same lies, with the same semi-convincing umbrage, for decades.

[Pete Rose, baseball’s banned hits leader, has died at age 83](#)

Eventually, people lost interest in the lie, so Rose wrote a book telling the truth. Then he went on a junket admitting it to whoever would give him a few minutes of air time. Even then, he wasn’t to blame.

“I bet on my team every night because that’s the confidence that I had in my players,” Rose told a reporter. He said the same thing many times in slightly different ways.

Rose wasn’t the first pro to tell a lie to get himself out of trouble, but he was the first to do it so boldly, for so long, with so little blowback.

I mean, who strings millions of people along for 15 years and then, having finally come clean, tries to then act like everything’s fine? A part of you had to admire the nerve.

Rose took himself off the board for the Hall of Fame, but that was it. Many of the same people who’d said he would never lie now said he had nothing to apologize for.

He continued to make good money off the game – as much as a million dollars a year for events and autographs. If you’ve spent time at Caesars Palace, you

may have seen Rose signing balls and cards at the gaudy sports memorabilia shop there. He never seemed to leave.

Eventually, broadcasters took a chance on him. It wasn't because of his ability to articulate the finer points of the game, but because he was so willing to play the black hat. Having no good name to impugn, Rose was free to pop off on any topic. He was fired after his involvement in a decades-old alleged sexual assault came to light.

Once any legendary sports figure dies, there is an urge to assess their meaning. What did they say about their time? Which is another way of asking, 'What did they say about me?'

Traditionally, this is a good thing. So and so reminds you of the good times when you were young. In some cases – Hank Aaron or Borje Salming – their lives represent a cultural step forward. Everybody lived in this reality when they arrived, and this or that player helped push everyone into a different one. That's the real measure of a great sporting life.

Rose was a fascinating representation of how that works both ways. Sports can push things ahead, but they can also drag them back.

Before him, iconic figures didn't lie. They made mistakes, but when confronted with the truth, they did the right thing. As far as the public was concerned, that was the law of the locker room.

It is difficult now to wrap our heads around the idea that pros were once seen as role models first, and athletes second. Better to be a good guy than a great player.

Babe Ruth wasn't lionized by average Americans because of all the home runs he hit. People knew him because he'd once promised a sick kid in a hospital bed that he'd hit one for him that day during a World Series game. They made whole movies about it.

Lou Gehrig faced down death. Ted Williams went to war. Joe DiMaggio would say hello to you in the street.

These men were more than statistics. They were moral exemplars.

By the eighties, that idea was coming apart at the seams, but it wasn't dead yet. Most pros still lived more like well-to-do doctors than international jet setters. The phrase 'at the end of the day, it's a business' was not in common parlance.

Depending on how you want to look at it, Rose either ruined that, or he did everyone the favour of revealing the truth.

Post-Rose, there were no rules on comportment. Of all the ballplayers who were caught juicing, not a single one 'fessed up completely at the first opportunity. In varying degrees of boldness, they all tried to squirm out of it.

Eventually, players stopped bothering with excuses altogether. Once caught – and it no longer matters for what – they lawyer up and let the team deal with it. Eventually, once the court case is over, or the lawsuits have been settled, a boiler plate apology is issued.

Every pro knows that their worth will be determined by one factor – how well they play. If you play well enough, eventually you become a good person again. It doesn't matter what you did. Moral quality follows utility, rather than the other way around.

Rose didn't make that happen because it's always been that way, but he hurried the process. He forced his colleagues to take a side, and most sided with him. Not because they agreed with anything he'd done, but because society has one rule and their tribe has a different one. That was another thing the sports-loving public didn't realize.

Rose pushed into the era that might be called the realpolitik of sports. We play games for pragmatic reasons – to make money, to distract the populace, to remind our enemies of our cultural heft – rather than moral considerations.

Nowadays, no one does the right thing just because. That would be foolish. They do the right thing if that's their best chance at getting away with it.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/sports/baseball/article-kelly-baseball-pete-rose/>

I'm not sure Cathal hits all the right notes here, but he can be forgiven as the sportswriter in a largely one-pony Sports Department. But he has the guts to say some things, and to tweak the MLSE noses who sustain the hollow pretensions of all the Toronto professional sports teams. (The Blue Jays in particular are a pathetic attempt at an intelligent way to build a baseball team. TJB