

AN EXAMINATION OF IMAGE REPAIR DISCOURSE IN
COLLEGE FOOTBALL CONTROVERSIES

BY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Communication

May 2016

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the generous support of my family, friends, and the faculty of Wake Forest University. I am forever grateful for your encouragement and suggestions.

I would like to express my sincerest thanks to and for my wife, Bernadette. You are an incredible partner, and I appreciate your unrelenting support throughout this process. I am also thankful for my son, Avi, who reminds me daily of the importance of laughing and loving in the midst of challenges. You may never know how much you inspire me to make the most of all circumstances. My parents, David and Emy White have never stopped believing in me or challenging me to pursue my dreams, and for that I am appreciative.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. John Llewellyn, for his unrivaled attention to detail, his patience, and his unselfish willingness to share his knowledge and experience during this pursuit. Your advice, generosity, and friendship have left a lasting impact that reaches beyond the scope of this project. I am also grateful for Dr. Todd McFall and Dr. Ron Von Burg, who have both contributed significantly to this project through discussion and a sincere desire to see me succeed in this endeavor. I greatly appreciate having the three of you serve on my committee; your mentorship and guidance have been invaluable in this process.

Above all, I thank God for incredible opportunities, a wonderful graduate school experience, and an inconceivable amount of love and support from those around me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	v
ABSTRACT	vi
CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT: THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF DIVISION I COLLEGE FOOTBALL IN AMERICA.....	1
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW	8
Image Repair	8
Application of Image Repair	14
CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY AND JUSTIFICATION.....	22
Methodology	22
Justification	27
CHAPTER FOUR – CONSIDERING THE IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS SURROUNDING THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND GIFTS FROM AGENTS TO PLAYERS	28
Introduction	28
Background	30
The Controversy	34
Image Repair Analysis	52
The Administration.....	52
Pete Carroll	60
Todd McNair	62
Reggie Bush and His Family	64
Discussion	67
CHAPTER FIVE – EXPLORING IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS IN OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY’S <i>TATTOOGATE</i>	69
Introduction	69
Background	71
The Controversy	73

Image Repair Analysis	86
The Administration.....	86
Jim Tressel.....	89
The Players	91
Discussion	92
CHAPTER SIX – IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS OVER A SERIES OF CONTROVERSIES: A LOOK AT THE MULTIPLE ACCUSATIONS CONCERNING JAMEIS WINSTON AND FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY.....	94
Introduction	94
Background	96
The Controversies	98
Image Repair Analysis	120
The Administration.....	120
Jimbo Fisher	127
Jameis Winston.....	130
Discussion	134
CHAPTER SEVEN – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	137
Limitations and Areas of Future Study	144
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	148
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	166

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Benoit's Image Repair Strategies. Source: Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 28 24

ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been widespread media coverage of controversies involving college football players at major universities. This thesis examines college football controversies at the University of Southern California, Ohio State University, and Florida State University through the lens of Benoit's Image Repair Theory. Investigating these three cases, this work considers how the responses of administrators, coaches, and players function rhetorically in efforts to maintain positive public perceptions in the face of attacks to organizational legitimacy. This thesis contributes to the body of image repair literature by examining how unique factors of Division I football programs influence image repair campaigns. This project identifies the significant role that fan loyalty plays in highly successful football programs moving beyond the controversial actions of players and coaches.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT: THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF DIVISION I COLLEGE FOOTBALL IN AMERICA

Major college football is no stranger to controversy. Multiple authors have highlighted the seemingly inherent and interminable love-hate relationship between our nation's greatest academic institutions and the sport/spectacle of football.¹ Almost in conjunction with its quick rise to most popular spectator sport, American football (in its infancy more like European rugby than the more familiar modern game) was met with intense opposition and criticism. Even before the turn of the twentieth century, football on college campuses was a topic of contention. In 1894, future United States president and then-Princeton professor Woodrow Wilson participated in a debate against Cornell professor Burt Wilder entitled, "Ought the Game of Foot Ball to Be Encouraged?"² It seems, as Ingrassia argues in *The Rise of Gridiron University*, that in its early stages, college professors and administrators "saw college [football] as a type of *middlebrow* culture, a popular activity intended to make *highbrow* intellectual culture legible, or palatable, to the public."³ He goes on to say that these "academics actually just institutionalized athletics as a university-sponsored *lowbrow* cultural ritual with its own

¹See Sperber, *Beer and Circus*; Watterson, *College Football*; Ingrassia, *The Rise of Gridiron University*; Branch, *The Cartel: Inside the Rise and Imminent Fall of the NCAA*.

² Watterson, *College Football*, 26.

³ Ingrassia, *The Rise of Gridiron University*, 4.

permanent place on college campuses.”⁴ It is the brokering of this tension between the academic world and the seemingly distant public that is tightly woven throughout the history of college football in America.

College professors were not the only ones debating the value of football on campuses in the late 1800s. The Wilson-Wilder debate of 1894 referenced the active and loud criticism of then-Harvard president Charles William Eliot toward the game. Eliot made sweeping changes to the academic structure at Harvard while president, leading the institution from 1875 to 1909. Alongside these changes, he freely offered his opinions on collegiate sports and football in particular. Originally calling for basic reforms in athlete eligibility, the length of football seasons, and game locations, Eliot eventually called out the sport of American football as a spectacle that had no place on college campuses.⁵ The enormous stadiums constructed in the 1920s and beyond as well as the staggering attendance numbers from even college’s earliest football games might lead us to believe that the fans and supporters of football won the debate, but it would be hard to argue that the debate is actually over. The tension I have highlighted thus far continues to be the cause of serious discussion over the place college football should hold (if any) in academic life.

Because of this tension, the controversies that have arisen over the past century since those early debates have brought increased scrutiny and intense criticism as well as passionate defense of the sport and its participants. The controversies surrounding the sport, its individual players, and its coaches have maintained certain consistencies over

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 46–48; Watterson, *College Football*, 27–29.

time, and the public nature of the sport and its history of strong media coverage regularly generate rhetorical situations which demand responses from embroiled players, coaches, and even the schools themselves. These responses, or rhetorical moves, are often very visible due to high levels of interest in the game and its participants.

One fairly early example of what now seems to be an all-too-common scenario in major college football came in the late 1940s and early 1950s at the College of William and Mary: Athletic director and football coach Rube McCray, along with basketball coach Barney Wilson, became entangled in an academic integrity scandal when it was discovered that the coaches were doctoring the high school transcripts of recruits in order to help them gain admission to the college. An internal investigation uncovered several additional honor code violations and unethical practices within the department and led to an agreement that both McCray and Wilson would resign following their respective sporting seasons.

In order to avoid further problems with grade manipulation, William and Mary president John Pomfret separated the athletic and physical education departments. Unfortunately for Pomfret and the two coaches, the change was publicly announced as a matter of formal policy, and the Board of Visitors for the university scheduled meetings to discuss the wrongdoings of the athletic department. McCray and Wilson both turned in revised letters of resignation that were immediately effective, and Pomfret became the inevitable scapegoat in a case he could not win. Soon after, he resigned and took another job. While William and Mary did not de-emphasize its football program, the school did find itself left out when the Atlantic Coast Conference was formed just three years later.⁶

⁶ Watterson, *College Football*, 219–224.

Over sixty years, several conference realignments, lucrative media deals, and generous coaching contracts later, this story has a startlingly familiar feel to it for even casual observers of major college football.

While controversy is not new to the sport, what has changed since the early days of big-time college football is the nature of media coverage and sponsorships. Live spectatorship has long-produced staggering numbers, from reports of 70,055 spectators at the Harvard vs. Yale football game of 1914 to over 70,000 people at the Ohio State vs. Michigan game in 1922 and 80,000 people at the University of California vs. Stanford University football game in 1923.⁷ However, TV viewership has exploded in recent years, with an all-time cable television record 33.4 million people reportedly watching the 2015 national championship game between Oregon and Ohio State on ESPN and 35.6 million people reportedly viewing the 2006 national championship game between Texas and Southern California on broadcast television network ABC.⁸ Keith Dunnivant summarized the impact of television on the game:

While providing a showcase for the sport, television has dramatically multiplied the number of people who care about it, significantly enlarged the role it plays in their lives, and harnessed the result of all that collective passion for the benefit of the networks and colleges. Television has also simultaneously raised the stakes, heightening the tension in the historic struggle between higher education and commerce.⁹

The increase in television coverage and viewership represents a significant shift in the popularity of the sport in the eyes of the American public.

⁷ Ingrassia, *The Rise of Gridiron University*, 144; *ibid.*, 155; *ibid.*, 150–151.

⁸ Chappell, “College Football Championship Sets A New Cable Ratings Record”; Perlberg, “The College Football Playoff Final Generated Huge Ratings For ESPN.”

⁹ Dunnivant, *The Fifty-Year Seduction*, XV–XVI.

Along with the increase in viewership, the money surrounding the sport has also gone up astronomically. Huge TV contracts and bowl game contracts have led to significant sponsorships and contracts for coaches. Notre Dame has an exclusive contract that allows the NBC television network to broadcast its games for \$15 million per year.¹⁰ Gaul estimates that former Notre Dame head football coach Charlie Weis will earn a staggering \$17 million just in severance pay.¹¹ In 2014-15, the top five college football conferences earned over \$1.2 billion in television revenue.¹² ESPN is spending about \$600 million per year just for the rights to broadcast the three annual College Football Playoff games (two semifinal games and one championship game).¹³ The highest-paid coach in college football, the University of Alabama's Nick Saban, earns almost \$7 million per year before bonuses and endorsements.¹⁴ There are lucrative deals and contracts at the top of the college football ranks.

It is undeniable that television coverage has changed the game. As the money surrounding the game has increased, so has the attention brought to the amateur status of student-athletes. Several authors have successfully addressed the notion of false amateurism and what some see as poor treatment of college athletes (football and basketball players at major universities in particular).¹⁵ The 2014 Ed O'Bannon case and

¹⁰ Gaul, *Billion-Dollar Ball*, 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹² Alsher, "5 College Conferences That Bring in Over \$250 Million."

¹³ Gaul, *Billion-Dollar Ball*, 20.

¹⁴ Berkowitz et al., "NCAA Salaries."

¹⁵ See Branch, *The Cartel: Inside the Rise and Imminent Fall of the NCAA*; Sack and Staurowsky, *College Athletes for Hire*; Smith, *Pay for Play*; Yaeger, *Undue Process*.

subsequent appeal, which ruled and upheld that the amateurism policy of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) violates certain federal antitrust laws,¹⁶ further highlight the unique environment surrounding the game and the setting for the controversies I will examine in this project.

In investigating controversies at the Division I level of college football, it is particularly interesting to look closely at the strategies which involved parties use in communicating with each other, the media, and the public. One popular lens for such an approach is Benoit's image repair theory, which purports to explain "a persuasive message or group of messages that respond[s] to attacks or suspicions that promote a negative attitude about the source of image repair."¹⁷ Given that controversies seem to be an inescapable part of today's increasingly popular and visible Division I college football landscape, I will examine the rhetorical strategies that coaches, players, and universities use for their own image repair efforts. How do the unique aspects of major college football affect the rhetorical strategies of coaches, players, and schools embroiled in controversies? How does the current climate affect how rhetoricians view the strategies of the involved parties? Does such a framework have explanatory power when it comes to the controversies we see in today's football world and how universities, players, and coaches respond to them? What generalizations can we make regarding these strategies?

In this thesis, I highlight relevant pieces of past research for this project. After pinpointing the rhetorical moment I study in this project, I explain my methodology for the research. Next, I present my reasoning for examining the cases I study and share my

¹⁶ McCann, "What the Appeals Court Ruling Means for O'Bannon's Ongoing NCAA Lawsuit."

¹⁷ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 10.

notions of how this project could contribute to the field. In each case study, I present the context and chronology of the focal controversy before analyzing the involved parties' image repair strategies and tactics. Finally, I look at broader takeaways for the study of image repair discourse in Division I college football controversies.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Image Repair

Image repair theory finds its roots firmly entrenched in accounts and apologia studies. Scott and Lyman defined accounts as “statement[s] made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior-whether that behavior is his own or that of others, and whether the proximate cause for the statement arises from the actor himself or from someone else.”¹⁸ Apologia is generally considered to be a personal defense, whether of one’s ideas or character, but this definition has changed over time. It is clear that both apologia and accounts research have relevance when considering situations that might call for a rhetor to make a statement explaining his/her actions or positions when challenged, but these can also apply in the analysis of an organization’s image repair discourse.

Apologia’s origin has been traced back as a key component and even a genre of rhetoric by those as far back as Socrates, Aristotle, Isocrates, and Plato, who all saw apologia as an inherent counterpart to accusation.¹⁹ Black addressed apologia as more of a strategy, writing that the goal in the face of antagonism would be “to produce discourse that can overcome an active opposition and, simultaneously, contribute to the

¹⁸ Scott and Lyman, “Accounts,” 46.

¹⁹ Ryan, “Kategoria and Apologia: On Their Rhetorical Criticism as a Speech Set,” 254.

attractiveness and credibility of the rhetor's ideas."²⁰ He recognized that while we may think of an "argumentative situation" as two people holding competing opinions, the rhetorical situation necessary for apologia as an argumentation strategy requires only that a rhetor consider the potential objections of an audience to his/her idea(s).²¹

Abelson considered how we may resolve dilemmas presented by our own inconsistent yet strong beliefs. He identified four possible resolution methods: denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence.²² Ware and Linkugel elaborated on these four concepts in their analysis of apologia as a contemporary genre of rhetoric.²³ They combined these four modes of resolution as various pairs to advance four postures – absolute, vindictive, explanative, and justificative, which they recognized as "subgenres" of apologia.²⁴ Benoit identified these postures as insufficient in their explanatory power of apologetic stances, though he did see value in the individual components of denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence as strategies.²⁵ He also recognized the importance of Burke's contributions on mortification and victimage in *The Rhetoric of Religion* as part of reducing guilt.²⁶

²⁰ Black, *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, 150.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 149–150.

²² Abelson, "Modes of Resolution of Belief Dilemmas," 344.

²³ Ware and Linkugel, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

²⁵ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 34.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33; Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion; Studies in Logology*.

In 1968, Rosenfield contributed significantly to the apologia literature by comparing two well-known public addresses of Richard Nixon and Harry Truman. He both identified and generalized similarities between the two speeches as four characteristics common to apologiae in mass media: First, mass-media apologiae tend to be part of acute instances of conflict. Second, such a form of apologia will not be limited to defensive remarks. Third, the middle portion of mass-media apologiae will contain a plethora of facts. Lastly, apologiae will be largely comprised of select arguments from earlier discourse rather than new assertions.²⁷

Scott and Lyman generated a classification system of accounts, focusing primarily on two categories: excuses and justifications.²⁸ Blumstein et al. identified “a critical need for more sophisticated taxonomies for arranging situations and interaction contexts.”²⁹ Furthermore, they wrote, “The classification scheme used by Scott and Lyman was helpful; but ultimately it was only partly adequate for mapping the universe of accounts observed in the real world.”³⁰ Schönbach took this insufficient level of adequacy into consideration when offering further explication and elaboration on Scott and Lyman’s model. He made modifications to the categories of excuses and justifications and added concessions and refusals as new categories.³¹ Benoit consulted the accounts literature in the development of his image repair theory, but he preferred not to get caught up in the

²⁷ Rosenfield, “A Case Study in Speech Criticism: The Nixon-Truman Analog.”

²⁸ Scott and Lyman, “Accounts.”

²⁹ Blumstein et al., “The Honoring of Accounts,” 565.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Schönbach, “A Category System for Account Phases.”

particulars of detailed taxonomies: “I choose to focus at higher levels of abstraction rather than on details of subcategories.”³²

Downey tended to agree with Black’s treatment of apologia as an argumentation strategy rather than a genre in contemporary study. She offered an overview of the changes in form and function of apologia from the classical period through the medieval, modern, and contemporary periods. In examining its transition, she argued, “Apologia no longer constitutes a genre but functions as a symbolic strategy.”³³

Ryan argued for apologia’s intrinsic tie to *kategoria* as part of a speech set. He argued that *kategoria*, or accusation, and apologia, or apology, are each better understood in light of the other as one unique pair. Continuing, he explained that examining *kategoria/apologia* sets would allow a critic to better understand the motives of both the accuser and the apologist in a given argumentative situation.³⁴

In examining corporate apologiae, Hearit concluded: “An *apologia* is not an apology (although it may contain one), but a defense that seeks to present a compelling, counter description of organizational actions.”³⁵ He examined how corporate apologiae function. Hearit wrote of social legitimacy theory and the unique motivations and strategies available to corporations as compared to individuals.³⁶ Hearit later identified

³² Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 43.

³³ Downey, “The Evolution of the Rhetorical Genre of Apologia,” 60.

³⁴ Ryan, “Kategoria and Apologia: On Their Rhetorical Criticism as a Speech Set.”

³⁵ Hearit, “Apologies and Public Relations Crises at Chrysler, Toshiba, and Volvo,” 115.

³⁶ Hearit, “‘Mistakes Were Made’: Organizations, Apologia, and Crises of Social Legitimacy.”

individual, corporate, and institutional apologia as three important and distinct areas of study.³⁷ He also addressed issues that arise due to liability management concerns, both ethically and legally, and how these factors influence the nature of apologetic responses.³⁸

Benoit drew from and built on prior accounts and apologia research when developing and refining his theory of image restoration, which he first presented in 1995.³⁹ Benoit also examined how image restoration worked in corporate crisis communication.⁴⁰ One key criticism of image restoration theory came from Burns and Bruner, who argue that image restoration theory should be more audience-centered rather than just message-oriented.⁴¹ In 2000, Benoit addressed this specific criticism, emphasizing that image repair theory is in fact audience-centered. Additionally, he explained that he had decided to change his language from image restoration theory to image repair theory in his work, reflecting the idea that sometimes an image cannot be fully restored but only repaired.⁴²

Benoit's theory offers a framework through which we can view the efforts of individuals or organizations to restore or at least repair their positive public perceptions. Image restoration theory focuses on message options and consists of five general strategies used to repair or restore image: *denial, evading responsibility, reducing*

³⁷ Hearit, *Crisis Management by Apology*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 207–210.

³⁹ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 1995.

⁴⁰ Benoit, "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication."

⁴¹ Burns and Bruner, "Revisiting the Theory of Image Restoration Strategies."

⁴² Benoit, "Another Visit to the Theory of Image Restoration Strategies."

offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Each of these strategies has a variety of tactics available to individuals or organizations to achieve their goals. *Denial* consists of *simple denial* and *shifting blame*. *Evading responsibility* includes *provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions*. Benoit identified *denial* and *evading responsibility* as ways to avoid or reduce responsibility for a crisis. He argued that *reducing offensiveness* and *corrective action* are both concerned with reducing the offensiveness of the act attributed to the organization or individual, whether that attribution was justified or not. *Reducing offensiveness* can mean using techniques of *bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, or compensation*, and *corrective action* involves taking steps to solve the issue or prevent another from occurring. Finally, *mortification* tries to restore one's image through an apology and a request for forgiveness from the public.⁴³

Another major criticism of the theory is that it is "heavy on description and retrospective sense-making through case studies, whereas it is short on predictive value and causal inferences."⁴⁴ This criticism, which came from Coombs and Schmidt, led Coombs to develop and refine situational crisis communication theory (SCCT).⁴⁵ Leaning heavily on attribution theory, SCCT attempts to be more predictive rather than merely descriptive in examining apologetic responses to crises. Benoit criticized this aspect of

⁴³ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 1995; Benoit, "Image Repair Discourse and Crisis Communication"; Benoit, "Another Visit to the Theory of Image Restoration Strategies"; Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015.

⁴⁴ Coombs and Schmidt, "An Empirical Analysis of Image Restoration," 163.

⁴⁵ Coombs, "Choosing The Right Words: The Development of Guidelines for the Selection of the 'Appropriate' Crisis-Response Strategies"; Coombs, "An Analytic Framework for Crisis Situations: Better Responses From a Better Understanding of the Situation."

SCCT, explaining that it focuses on identifying the appropriate communication strategies for image repair based on identifying only the type of crisis involved and ignores important factors that should be considered in response strategy selection. He wrote that SCCT does not adequately account for multiple and varied audiences, guilt vs. innocence, or the truth in a given situation. Additionally, Benoit highlighted that the empirical research that has been done on SCCT has not shown great support for the theory's explanatory power.⁴⁶

Application of Image Repair

Image repair theory has been applied to cases in a variety of areas. Benoit identified three discrete categories of image repair: *corporate*, *political*, and *sports/entertainment*. He also acknowledged two additional categories that in some instances may overlap the three discrete categories: *international*, and *third party*.⁴⁷ Benoit illustrated the reasoning for the three distinct categories in writing:

Corporations are more liable to attacks from competitors than entertainers are (although corporations are perhaps less susceptible to rival attacks than politicians). Corporations often have resources for designing and disseminating image repair messages and have options not available to entertainers: It may be possible to limit damage by firing one or more employees, but Hugh Grant cannot fire himself. Persuaders often face multiple goals; corporations are probably at greater risk from lawsuits than politicians or entertainers. Finally, corporations, like politicians, are more likely to make decisions that affect many people, compared with actors.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 36–40.

⁴⁷ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47–48. [parentheses in the original]

Benoit noted, “The image repair strategies are the same across domains, but nevertheless there are important contextual differences in image repair.”⁴⁹ These discrepancies seem to hold true in a review of past applications of image repair.

Corporate image repair has been extensively studied. For example, the responses of Arby’s, BP, USAir, AT&T, Bridgestone/Firestone, and Sears to various crises have all been critiqued through an image repair lens.⁵⁰ The beauty of such application lies in its ease; critics are able to examine strategies that companies employ during crisis communication situations and fit those tactics into the various components of Benoit’s typology. Then they make claims about the persuasiveness of the messages the companies chose and value judgments for the message types chosen. These analyses aid in creating a set of criticisms that we can compare and contrast as we examine new cases of corporate image repair discourse.

Political image repair has also been covered in past research. Benoit identified and contributed several of the first analyses of political responses to scandals and accusations.⁵¹ These initial studies include Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici’s criticism of Ronald Reagan’s communication concerning the Iran-Contra affair, Kennedy and Benoit’s analysis of Newt Gingrich’s communication concerning his book advance, as well as multiple authors’ consideration of Bill Clinton’s image repair strategies following

⁴⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁰ Compton, “Arby’s Image Repair Tactics as a Public Relations Strategy”; Harlow, Brantley, and Harlow, “BP Initial Image Repair Strategies after the Deepwater Horizon Spill”; Benoit and Czerwinski, “A Critical Analysis of USAir’s Image Repair Discourse.”; Blaney, Benoit, and Brazeal, “Blowout!: Firestone’s Image Restoration Campaign”; Benoit, “Sears’ Repair of Its Auto Service Image: Image Restoration Discourse in the Corporate Sector.”

⁵¹ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 63–65.

accusations of his relationship with Monica Lewinski.⁵² Other political image repair analysis has focused on the image repair strategies of such politicians as Hillary Clinton, George Allen, and Ernie Fletcher.⁵³ The work done in this field has demonstrated the frequent use of image repair strategies by politicians, often in the face of attacks from political opponents. The competitive nature of politics virtually ensures that new cases for analysis routinely become available.

Though corporate and political image repair cases have been analyzed more frequently than sports cases in the literature, there is still a growing body of sports image repair research to explore. In the first academic look at apologia in the context of team sport, Kruse recognized components of an ethic of team sport: devotion to the team above self; never giving up; and, playing by the rules to some degree, though winning is ultimately held in higher esteem than fair play.⁵⁴ She posited:

Because the tenets of the team sport ethic relate to winning, acts that violate the ethic are those modes of conduct that could negatively affect the outcome of a game or a series of contests, behaviors that pose symbolic threats to sport's ontology of competition. Thus, sport personalities must defend their moral worth as *sport figures* whenever their conduct might have harmful effects upon teams, games, or the world of sport and their actions seem to result from personal characteristics that make them unworthy to represent the fans in "testing the favors of the Fates."⁵⁵

⁵² Benoit, Gullifor, and Panici, "President Reagan's Defensive Discourse on the Iran-Contra Affair"; Kennedy and Benoit, "The Newt Gingrich Book Deal Controversy"; Blaney and Benoit, *The Clinton Scandals and the Politics of Image Restoration*; Kramer and Olson, "The Strategic Potential of Sequencing Apologia Stases."

⁵³ Oles-Acevedo, "Fixing the Hillary Factor: Examining the Trajectory of Hillary Clinton's Image Repair from Political Bumbler to Political Powerhouse."; Liu, "From Aspiring Presidential Candidate to Accidental Racist? An Analysis of Senator George Allen's Image Repair during His 2006 Reelection Campaign"; Sibal, "Examining Image Repair Strategies Across Time: A Governor's Response to Unconventional Behavior."

⁵⁴ Kruse, "Apologia in Team Sport," 273–274.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

Another key finding of her research is that although “the apologetic statements of sport personalities tend to be brief and general,”⁵⁶ “the apologetic responses of sport figures do not differ strategically from the character defenses offered by those in the sociopolitical world.”⁵⁷ This assertion supports Benoit’s claim, discussed earlier, that the image repair strategies available to rhetors are consistent across fields.⁵⁸

Nelson examined the rhetorical strategies employed by former tennis star Billie Jean King, her peers, and the media.⁵⁹ The image crisis in this case came when the long-married King admitted in 1981 that she had had an affair with her former secretary, Marilyn Barnett. Perhaps the most important finding of this study for the current endeavor was, “In offering an effective line of defense, the apologist and cohorts need not employ the same apologetic factors as each other. As long as they do not contradict each other, varying strategies can work together to the defendant’s advantage.”⁶⁰

Benoit and Hanczor examined the image repair efforts of U.S. figure skater Tonya Harding.⁶¹ She was accused of calling for her bodyguard to carry out an attack on rival Nancy Kerrigan in order to ensure Harding of a spot in the upcoming Olympics. Benoit and Hanczor identified bolstering, denial, and attacking one’s accuser as strategies that Harding used in a well-publicized television interview. One of the main problems for her

⁵⁶ Ibid., 281.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 280.

⁵⁸ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 63.

⁵⁹ Nelson, “The Defense of Billie Jean King.”

⁶⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁶¹ Benoit and Hanczor, “The Tonya Harding Controversy.”

image repair effort was her lack of credibility with the audience. Benoit and Hanczor identified her initial response, which was shown to contain false information, as a major issue that she could not overcome with the American public. A really useful aspect of this study is an image repair analysis can be performed even when we do not actually know whether a party is guilty or innocent. Image repair analyses are concerned with motivations and strategies, but these are not necessarily dependent on finding the truth. However, this caveat does not mean that the truth is not important. Benoit argued, “Truth, insofar as human beings perceive it, must be considered in all persuasion, including image repair.”⁶² On the contrary, the truth may not always be available to rhetorical critics.

The Duke University lacrosse controversy has been studied by multiple authors. In 2006, three white members of the Duke men’s lacrosse team were accused of the rape of a North Carolina Central University black female student. Fortunato and Barnett each produced respective studies, one examining the framing of messages from Duke University and the other investigating the framing of national media covering the story.⁶³ Len-Ríos, in turn, looked at local news stories and the image repair strategies visible in the articles.⁶⁴ While she noted that the university used bolstering, corrective action, separation, attacking one’s accuser, denial, and mortification in its communication strategy, there were more important observations for my thesis. Len-Ríos pointed out that

⁶² Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 40.

⁶³ Fortunato, “Restoring a Reputation: The Duke University Lacrosse Scandal”; Barnett, “Framing Rape: An Examination of Public Relations Strategies in the Duke University Lacrosse Case.”

⁶⁴ Len-Ríos, “Image Repair Strategies, Local News Portrayals and Crisis Stage: A Case Study of Duke University’s Lacrosse Team Crisis.”

the complexities in the case in terms of the number of hot-button issues it encompassed left the university to determine how it would approach several issues at once in defending its students and its own reputation. Additionally, there is a significant challenge in choosing an appropriate approach for long-term vs. short-term image repair efforts as well as evaluating those strategies.⁶⁵ This case is beneficial for this project because it examines the efforts of a major college to repair its image in light of a controversy.

An examination of image repair discourse, not just at a major college, but in the primary money-making sports of football and basketball, was performed by Compton and Compton.⁶⁶ They looked at open letters to fans from coaches and athletic directors during losing seasons in football or basketball. They found that understanding the audience is crucial in determining which strategies to use, corrective action can be a useful tactic but must be followed through, attacking accusers may need to be dropped at times in favor of praising accusers, and that transcendence and defeasibility are common strategies in such open letters to fans.⁶⁷

There have also been studies that addressed football players and their image repair efforts. Brazeal examined the strategies Terrell Owens employed (bolstering, mortification, and attacking his accusers) following the fallout from his failed contract negotiation attempts with the Philadelphia Eagles.⁶⁸ Ultimately, she argued, Owens failed in his efforts to restore his image because of his perceived insincerity and unwillingness

⁶⁵ Ibid., 284.

⁶⁶ Compton and Compton, “College Sports, Losing Seasons, and Image Repair Through Open Letters to Fans.”

⁶⁷ Ibid., 354–356.

⁶⁸ Brazeal, “The Image Repair Strategies of Terrell Owens.”

to provide an actual apology by accepting any wrongdoing. Holdener and Kauffman analyzed the image repair efforts of Michael Vick, another NFL player, (mortification, corrective action) following his indictment on charges stemming from his involvement in an illegal dog fighting ring.⁶⁹ Both of these studies, like most of the sports image repair cases, focus on the celebrity/entertainer aspect of the sports personalities involved.⁷⁰

There are very few cases involving amateur athletes that have been analyzed using image repair theory as a basis for study. The intentional non-professionalization of student-athletes may affect how a collegiate athlete would approach his/her own image repair efforts. One study that kept the amateur status of college athletes in mind was Milford's examination of the NCAA's attempts in the 1990s to defend itself from criticism concerning its use of the term student-athlete.⁷¹ The case showed the importance of consistency in the image an organization promotes over time.

The case that most closely resembles those that will be studied as part of this thesis is Stein, Turman, and Barton's rhetorical analysis of Mike Leach, Adam James, and Texas Tech University following allegations that Leach had forced a concussed James to stand alone in a dark shed throughout a Texas Tech football practice as

⁶⁹ Holdener and Kauffman, "Getting out of the Doghouse: The Image Repair Strategies of Michael Vick."

⁷⁰ see Glantz, "The Floyd Landis Doping Scandal: Implications for Image Repair Discourse."; Walsh and McAllister-Spooner, "Analysis of the Image Repair Discourse in the Michael Phelps Controversy."; Brown, Dickhaus, and Long, "LeBron James and 'The Decision.'"

⁷¹ Milford, "Giving Them the Ol' Misdirection: The NCAA and the Student-Athlete."

punishment for being a weak competitor.⁷² The authors highlighted the importance of looking at allegations and subsequent responses as speech sets. In examining image repair strategies and their effectiveness, an analysis of each party, their motives, and their situational context can aid immensely in our understanding of the rhetorical moves that players make.

There is a clear gap in the literature when it comes to studies like that of Stein, Turman, and Barton. Very few authors have studied image repair discourse in the context of multi-party controversy communication at the Division I level of football. Major college football has such wide viewership and large financial and social impact that it calls for research as to how colleges, coaches, and players communicate surrounding major controversies picked up in the national news media.

⁷² Stein, Turman, and Barton, “In the Dark at Texas Tech: News Coverage Involving the Image Repair Discourse of Mike Leach and Adam James.”

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY AND JUSTIFICATION

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to examine rhetorical strategies of Division I football players, coaches, and universities in the midst of crisis situations that arise due to their direct or indirect involvement in controversies. Using Benoit's image repair theory typology, I will identify trends in the strategies that these groups employ in their efforts to repair their respective image(s). Based on past research in other fields, it will be essential to examine and identify the audience(s), the rhetor(s), and their corresponding motives to better understand the strategies they choose to employ.

I find Benoit's image repair theory to be the most appropriate lens for this project, as crisis response in major college football has not been explored extensively in past literature. It would be unwise to take a more prescriptive approach to these cases when there is not a substantial set of analyses from which to draw conclusions at this point. My goal is that in the application of this typology I find emerging patterns or a framework that fits Division I college football controversies that might be studied in future research.

To accomplish this task, I will present three case studies of well-publicized controversies and the image repair discourse surrounding each one. I intend to use Benoit's image repair typology to examine interview transcripts, press releases, and local and national news stories in which there are clear reputation defense strategies or where involved parties clearly address an audience in an attempt to repair their own image. Benoit's typology consists of the five general strategies *denial*, *evading responsibility*,

reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification discussed in the literature review. Table 1 indicates how the fourteen image repair tactics identified by Benoit correspond with these five general strategies. It also provides brief examples of discourse that would represent each of these tactics. This research is exploratory and will not account for every single local and national news story, so I will limit the sample to those artifacts that directly address involved parties' reputations surrounding the crisis created by the controversy at hand.

Table 1: Benoit's Image Repair Strategies

<i>General Strategy</i>	<i>Tactic</i>	<i>Example</i>
Denial	Simple denial	I did not embezzle money.
	Shift blame	Steve took your wallet, not me.
Evade responsibility	Provocation	I insulted you but only after you criticized me.
	Defeasibility	I was late because traffic delayed me.
	Accident	Our collision was an accident.
	Good Intentions	I didn't tell you because I hoped to fix the problem first.
Reduce offensiveness	Bolstering	Think of all the times I helped you.
	Minimization	I broke your vase, but it was not an expensive one.
	Differentiation	I borrowed your laptop without asking; I didn't steal it.
	Transcendence	Searching travelers at the airport is an inconvenience, but it protects against terrorism.
	Attack accuser	Joe says I embezzled money, but he is a chronic liar.
	Compensation	Because the waiter spilled a drink on your clothes, we'll give you dessert for free.
Corrective action		Because the waiter spilled a drink on your suit, we'll have it dry cleaned.
Mortification		I'm so sorry I offended you.
		I regret hurting your feelings and I apologize.

Source: Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 28.

For each case, I will use a template of questions in order to effectively compare and contrast the rhetorical strategies employed by the involved parties of each controversy. These questions will include:

What were the circumstances that led to the need for image repair efforts?

Who were the speakers and audiences for the image repair approaches?

What image repair strategies and tactics did each of the major parties employ?

How did these tactics and strategies work rhetorically?

How did each party's image repair tactics work with or against themselves?

How did their image repair efforts work with or against the image repair efforts of the other parties involved?

Answering these questions and delving into the rhetorical situations of each controversy will allow for a strategic comparison of the cases. Any emerging patterns will contribute to the budding literature focusing on image repair theory in college football. If there are circumstances unique to the sport that alter either image repair tactics or how audiences view the repair efforts of involved parties, it will be beneficial for future research to identify and highlight them.

In choosing case studies for this project, I was interested in finding three cases that are disparate enough to provide unique aspects to the overall project at college football programs similar enough to reveal any trends that may emerge from this study. I chose three cases that were very high-profile national news for a sustained period. While many of the players involved in the controversies were household names (at least regionally) at the time of the controversies, some were not as well-known nationally at the time. The three case studies I chose to use for this task involve the football programs at the University of Southern California (USC), Ohio State University (OSU), and Florida

State University (FSU). All three of these programs were at or near the top of the college football rankings at the time of their respective controversies.

My first case study will analyze the image repair efforts used in the USC case surrounding Reggie Bush's amateurism. USC, Pete Carroll, and Reggie Bush all became entangled in a long and drawn out NCAA investigation which ran from Bush's 2005 Heisman Trophy-winning season until 2010 when neither Carroll nor Bush were still at the university. My second case study will examine Ohio State's 2010 tattoo parlor scandal which shocked the college football world. Beloved head coach Jim Tressel was caught lying to his administration and to the NCAA in order to conceal improper benefits and violations within the football program. Several football players, some more well-known than others, had exchanged team gear and memorabilia for money and/or tattoos from a Columbus tattoo parlor. Additionally, there were allegations of loaner cars, special deals on goods and services around town, and cash payments for players from program supporters. My third case study will look at Florida State quarterback Jameis Winston and his repeated controversial off-field behavior which drew negative publicity to the team and the school. Florida State University and Head Coach Jimbo Fisher dealt with several allegations against star quarterback Jameis Winston between 2012 and 2014. He was accused of sexual assault, damaging property in a BB gun fight, and shoplifting on two separate occasions. Winston also made a lewd and offensive comment in the student union on FSU's campus. All three of these cases garnered enough attention to be sufficient for this project. I will discuss the outcomes of the investigations as well as analyze the details of the image repair strategies of the involved parties for each controversy in my case studies.

Justification

Looking at the intersection of image repair and college football controversies will contribute to the literature in both arenas. It can bring credence to the study of college football and help to examine image repair theory and how it applies across multiple genres. If an emerging pattern becomes evident through this study, it could prove valuable to public relations arms of colleges and universities that participate in Division I sports. It could also benefit players, coaches, administrators, and their advisors as they seek to display appropriate image repair discourse tactics during future controversies. It would also be valuable to the news media and public relations practitioners.

In terms of the importance of this project to academia, it is crucial to recognize that this is a nascent arena. I have only identified one study in the literature that examines image repair discourse from multiple parties in Division I college football.⁷³ In a field with very few analyses, emerging trends can aid future research in terms of its direction and scope. Past research points to a significant gap when it comes to applying image repair to college football, but it also points to a gap in image repair examinations of college sports generally. This project could contribute to the filling of this void and bring attention to this area for other researchers to join.

⁷³ See Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSIDERING THE IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS SURROUNDING THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AND GIFTS FROM AGENTS TO PLAYERS

Introduction

Nearing the end of the 2003 college football season, the University of Southern California Trojans football team saw its two most popular players, quarterback Matt Leinart and running back Reggie Bush, reach finalist status for the Heisman Trophy, the award given annually to the nation's best football player. Leinart won the award, while teammate Bush came in fifth overall in the voting.⁷⁴ While the Trojans did not reach the national title game, they did earn a share of the national championship by being voted the Associated Press's top team of the year.⁷⁵ While gaining a share of the national championship was an impressive feat, the Trojans were not satisfied.

The next year, the team vowed to definitively show it was the best team in all of college football, adopting the motto "Leave No Doubt" for the 2004 season.⁷⁶ That year, the team came through on its promise, winning all thirteen of its games including a 55-19 thrashing of Oklahoma in the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) National Championship.⁷⁷ Additionally, the star pair of Leinart and Bush managed to top their

⁷⁴ Yahoo! Sports Staff, "Heisman Trophy Voting Results since 1976."

⁷⁵ "FBS Championship History."

⁷⁶ Briggs, "Pete Carroll Returns to USC."

⁷⁷ "2015 USC Football Media Guide," 92.

prior collective performance in the Heisman voting, with Bush winning the award and Leinart placing third overall.⁷⁸ With back-to-back national championships and back-to-back Heisman winners, USC was poised to dominate the decade in college football, and dominate it did, reaching the next BCS National Championship game as well as four consecutive Rose Bowls.⁷⁹ The ongoing success of the powerhouse program was interrupted, however, in June 2010 when the NCAA ruled that things had gotten so out of hand at USC that the school had exhibited a “lack of institutional control” and that Bush and basketball star O. J. Mayo had both participated in NCAA contests for the Trojans while ineligible due to their acceptance of improper benefits.⁸⁰ This ruling and its severe accompanying sanctions have since become a measuring stick for the penalties handed out by the NCAA to other programs. The severity of the sanctions, the high profile nature of the program, and the length of the case itself contribute to making this controversy key to any study of modern college football controversies.

In this chapter, I describe the landscape of college football surrounding the timeline of the Reggie Bush amateurism case at USC. Next, I explain the important details of the case and the investigation. I also highlight the unique aspects that make this case unusual as a case study for image repair theory. Then, I examine the image repair efforts of Reggie Bush and his family, former head coach Pete Carroll, former assistant coach Todd McNair, and the university itself. In analyzing the image repair efforts of the involved parties, I look at how they functioned in light of the efforts of the other involved

⁷⁸ Yahoo! Sports Staff, “Heisman Trophy Voting Results since 1976.”

⁷⁹ “2015 USC Football Media Guide,” 92–93.

⁸⁰ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

parties. However, I only begin to formulate ideas of how image repair strategies in this case might fit a framework applicable to the sport as a whole. I will present broader claims in my discussion chapter following all three of my case studies, though I do suggest potential components of this framework here.

Background

A case study on USC and Reggie Bush would be incomplete without an overview of the program and how it fit into the larger context of college football at the time that Bush was being recruited by and playing for the Trojans. Leading up to 2003, Bush's freshman year at USC, college football had been trying to identify an appropriate method for crowning its yearly national champion. Because of fans' growing dissatisfaction with unresolved national championships, athletic conferences decided to implement the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) beginning in 1998 in an attempt to annually pit the two best teams against each other in a game that would determine each year's national champion.⁸¹ Before this innovation, Division I college football saw multiple years with more than one crowned titleholder, as no organization was considered the definitive authority on the matter.⁸² Fittingly, in the last year prior to the implementation of the BCS, Michigan and Nebraska split the title in controversial fashion with the Associated Press giving Michigan the championship and the Coaches Poll giving the honors to Nebraska.⁸³

While the BCS had its faults, it was recognized as a welcomed and much-needed change to the way the national championship was awarded each year. It used a

⁸¹ "Bowl Championship Series FAQ."

⁸² "FBS Championship History."

⁸³ Rothschild, "What Could Have Been."

combination of computer algorithms and human voters to rank teams and pair the top two teams in a national championship game. Still, because of ongoing controversies over the matchups, there were tweaks to the system in its early years in efforts to improve its outcomes.⁸⁴ The weight given to computers in the BCS ranking system changed over those first few seasons to minimize the impact that partisan voters might have on which teams reached the BCS championship game each year. Despite the tweaks and challenges to the ranking system, fans were excited about the potential of pairing the two best teams in the final game of the season each year. The increased attention of fans brought an average television rating of 16.72 – approximately one in six adults with a television watched – for championship games from the 1998 season through the 2002 season leading up to Reggie Bush’s first season at USC.⁸⁵ High viewership levels and large financial incentives for winning programs set the stage for big recruiting battles between schools and even bigger expectations for top recruits.

The University of Southern California Trojans football team has long been considered one of the best college football programs in the nation. The school claims 11 national championships, though three of those are shared with other programs and another was vacated due to NCAA sanctions in the ruling on the case described in this chapter.⁸⁶ Coach Pete Carroll was hired for the 2001 season to replace Paul Hackett, who struggled at USC, going just 19-18 in three seasons.⁸⁷ By the time Bush arrived for his

⁸⁴ Billingsley, “NCF - The History of the BCS.”

⁸⁵ Solomon, “Auburn-Florida State Draws Only 9th-Highest TV Rating in BCS Championship History.”

⁸⁶ “2015 USC Football Media Guide,” 115.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

freshman season, Carroll had the Trojans back on the right track with an overall record of 17-8 and two consecutive bowl appearances.⁸⁸ USC finished the 2002 season fifth overall in both major polls.⁸⁹ Going into Bush's freshman year, USC seemed poised for immediate gratification in terms of football success.

Considered a five-star recruit by Rivals, a national recruiting reporting service, Reggie Bush was ranked as the number one running back prospect in the nation coming out of high school in 2003.⁹⁰ Boasting impressive accolades, he was heavily recruited by USC and was expected to contribute on the field right away.⁹¹ USC fans were not disappointed; Bush easily lived up to the hype, setting numerous Trojan records and winning such national awards as the Doak Walker Award, which recognizes the nation's best running back; the Walter Camp Award, which honors the national player of the year; and several other player-of-the-year awards in his three-year career.⁹² Along with fellow Heisman Trophy winner Matt Leinart, Bush led his team to two perfect regular seasons, two national titles, another BCS championship game which they lost to the University of Texas, and an almost-perfect 37-2 overall record – prior to the NCAA vacating some of those wins – during his career.⁹³ His Heisman Trophy (eventually forfeited) was considered an appropriate accolade, with Bush racking up the second-most first place

⁸⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁸⁹ “2002 NCAA College Football Polls and Rankings for Week 17 - ESPN.”

⁹⁰ “Reggie Bush Rivals Profile.”

⁹¹ “Reggie Bush Bio.”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “2015 USC Football Media Guide,” 91–92.

votes of all time and winning in a “landslide” over Texas quarterback Vince Young and teammate Leinart.⁹⁴ In April of 2006, Bush was selected second overall in the NFL Draft by the New Orleans Saints.⁹⁵ His college legacy would eventually take a hit because of the NCAA ruling discussed in this chapter, but Bush is still widely considered to be one of the best college football players of all time.⁹⁶

The 2004 USC football team, led to the national championship by Leinart and Bush, really did “leave no doubt” about which team ruled the college football landscape. That is, there was no doubt about who the number one team in the nation was until allegations surfaced that Bush should have been ineligible due to his family receiving upwards of \$100,000 in financial benefits (later reports indicated Bush and his family received benefits worth closer to \$300,000)⁹⁷ from agents while he was still an amateur at USC.⁹⁸ In spite of the challenges to the legitimacy of the team’s wins while Bush played for the Trojans, the 2004 USC team is still considered, ethics aside, to be the best football team of the decade and of the BCS era.⁹⁹ The prestige of USC as a program and Bush as an athlete make this an important case in which to examine image repair efforts in the broader context of college football controversies and amateurism discussions.

⁹⁴ “USC’s Bush Wins Heisman by Monumental Margin.”

⁹⁵ “2006 NFL Draft Pick-by-Pick Selections.”

⁹⁶ See Fletcher, “Ranking The 50 Greatest College Football Players Of All Time”; “Greatest College Football Players by Jersey Number.”

⁹⁷ “Report: Bush Received \$280K in Benefits at USC.”

⁹⁸ Cole and Robinson, “Cash and Carry - Reggie Bush Investigation - Yahoo Sports.”

⁹⁹ See Thirey, “USC’s 2004 Team Selected by AP as the Best of the BCS Era”; “Forde: Best Teams of the Decade.”

The Controversy

With the importance of Reggie Bush to USC and of USC to college football in mind, I now turn my focus to the controversy surrounding the eligibility of Reggie Bush and the allegations of improper benefits given to him by agents. These allegations, initially reported by the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times* in April 2006,¹⁰⁰ were more comprehensively detailed in an investigation released by Yahoo! Sports just weeks before Bush's September 10, 2006 NFL debut with the New Orleans Saints.¹⁰¹ The timeline of events in the case is unusual for a college football controversy in that much of the controversy occurred toward the end of, and after, Bush's playing career and wound up spanning seasons led by five different head coaches. I base the following chronology chiefly on the reports of several news outlets: Yahoo! Sports, ESPN, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*.¹⁰²

In cases such as this one, it can be difficult to determine an exact chronology of events, but it appears that improprieties first began as far back as September of 2004, when LaMar Griffin, Bush's stepfather, and Lloyd Lake, a friend of the family, first spoke of creating a new sports agency together with Bush as their main client. A month later, the pair apparently met with Michael Michaels to propose a partnership among the

¹⁰⁰ Trotter and Schrotenboer, "Owner: Bush Parents Owe Rent"; Wharton and Klein, "Bush Involvement Alleged."

¹⁰¹ Cole and Robinson, "Cash and Carry - Reggie Bush Investigation - Yahoo Sports."

¹⁰² Klein, "Timeline of USC Troubles"; Klein and Hiserman, "The USC Case: What Happened When"; Gemmell, "A Timeline of USC Turmoil, Scandals and Coaching Upheaval"; Sharp, "USC's NCAA Sanctions Story"; "Timeline of Investigation at the University of Southern California"; "The Timeline - Reggie Bush Investigation."

three of them and the Sycuan Tribe, representatives of the Mission Indians of San Diego County. Yahoo! Sports reports that Michaels paid off \$28,000 in debt for Bush's family as part of the creation of New Era Sports & Entertainment in November 2004.¹⁰³ It seems that Bush's promise to eventually sign with the nascent agency was used as leverage to gain financial benefits from the backers of the company.

While these deals began to take shape off the field, Bush was still performing as a sophomore phenom on the field for the Trojans. He and quarterback Matt Leinart led the team to an undefeated season culminating in a lambasting of Oklahoma in the BCS National Championship on January 4, 2005.¹⁰⁴ The accolades poured in for Bush, who finished fifth in Heisman voting and earned several All-American, All-Conference, and Player of the Year honors that season.¹⁰⁵

During the off-season, it seems, the improper benefits began rolling in for Bush and his family. In March of 2005, Reggie Bush stayed in two hotels, racking up total charges of over \$2,000 that were put on Michael Michaels' credit card. More importantly, Michaels also bought a brand new house in Spring Valley, California, for \$757,500 which the Bush family promptly moved into and began living in rent-free.¹⁰⁶ Around the same time, New Era Sports gave Bush "almost \$13,000 to buy a pristine black-on-black 1996 Chevrolet Impala SS in Los Angeles."¹⁰⁷ That summer, Bush began an internship

¹⁰³ "The Timeline - Reggie Bush Investigation."

¹⁰⁴ Lopresti, "Southern California Powers Past Oklahoma for BCS Crown."

¹⁰⁵ "Reggie Bush Bio."

¹⁰⁶ Klein and Hiserman, "The USC Case: What Happened When."

¹⁰⁷ "The Timeline - Reggie Bush Investigation."

with another sports marketing agent, Mike Ormstein, which the NCAA would later question due to its availability only to USC athletes. Ormstein would later represent Bush as his marketing agent. The Bush family continued to live in Michaels' house rent-free on the promise that they would pay him back once Reggie turned pro. The cumulative dollar amount of benefits afforded the Bush family was already nearing \$100,000 in a sport that demands strict amateurism from its student-athletes.

In the fall of 2005, while USC was riding a long winning streak and vying for a spot in a second consecutive BSC title game, the relationships among Lloyd Lake, Michael Michaels, and Reggie Bush became increasingly visible to others in and around the USC program. Lake and Michaels were seen in the post-game locker room at a game, something Bush later admitted was "possible" he helped arrange.¹⁰⁸ In October, an additional potential partner was brought in to the agency with negotiating Bush's eventual NFL contract in mind; local sports agent David Caravantes agreed to join New Era Sports on the contingency that the agency sign Bush as its premier client. That same month, the three original partners – Lake, Michaels, and Griffin – approached the Sycuan Tribe about forming a larger partnership, but the Tribe decided against it. That decision left the three men to officially form New Era Sports & Entertainment on their own.

While the papers to create New Era were only officially filed in November 2005, LaMar Griffin showed off a brochure for the new sports agency as early as December 2, 2005. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* reported that the step-father of Bush showed one of its reporters the brochure inside of Michaels' home and "described New Era as 'a new

¹⁰⁸ "University of Southern California Public Infractions Report," 10.

company opening. They sent me a brochure. They're here in San Diego.’’¹⁰⁹ It is unclear whether or how Griffin thought that his ties to the agency, and in turn Bush’s ties to the agency, might remain secret. Either way, advertising the new sports agency while sitting with a reporter inside the family’s rent-free home was too conspicuous an act to expect others to ignore it.

Meanwhile, Bush was still being wooed by eventual marketing agent Ormstein. Travel and accommodations for Bush’s family to attend an away football game were paid for by one of Ormstein’s employees, Jamie Fritz. Ormstein also allegedly borrowed funds prior to the Heisman Trophy presentation to give Bush and his family what is believed to be one in a series of weekly cash payments of over \$1,500. Beyond that, Ormstein was overheard by Bob DeMartino, the sports memorabilia dealer from whom Ormstein allegedly borrowed the money, discussing the provision of funds to help Bush repair his car after a wreck. Additionally, Ormstein paid to outfit Bush’s brother and stepfather with suits for the Heisman presentation, to give Bush’s mom a makeover for the same ceremony, and to secure a limousine for the family’s use during the trophy presentation weekend. By the time the NCAA got around to its investigation of the case, it felt that the evidence that Ormstein had provided money and improper benefits to Bush and his family was clearly strong enough to constitute major violations against the program.¹¹⁰

On December 10, 2005, after helping lead his team to an undefeated regular season record and a matchup with Texas in the BCS title game, Reggie Bush won the

¹⁰⁹ Schrottenboer and Trotter, “Parents of Bush Face Questions about Home.”

¹¹⁰ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

Heisman Trophy by a wide margin; the voting was not even close.¹¹¹ At this point, there were no real concerns at USC about potential violations occurring behind the scenes. There was only excitement for the potential of a second undefeated season and back-to-back BCS titles in Los Angeles. With multiple suitors and cash payments coming in, Reggie Bush's situation was becoming more complex than it seemed from the outside. Soon after the Heisman Trophy presentation, Bush's arrangements for agents pursuing him as a potential client through cash and gifts began to unravel. Yahoo! Sports reports that toward the end of December: "The relationship between New Era representatives and Bush's family fractures. Bush and his family allegedly stop returning phone calls from Michaels and Lake. However, one source says Bush attempted to repair the relationship by telling Lake and Caravantes in a phone conversation that the deal with New Era Sports was still on."¹¹² At the same time, Ormstein was requesting a half-million dollar advance from sports memorabilia dealer DeMartino on a proposed memorabilia deal for Bush. Eventually, all of the agency dealings would catch up with Bush and his family.

The first week of January 2006, USC lost 41-38 to Texas in the Rose Bowl game, that year's national championship. ESPN touted it as "the ultimate revenge for Young, the bitterly disappointed runner-up to Bush for the Heisman Trophy."¹¹³ Just a week later, Bush decided to forego his senior season by declaring for the NFL draft. It is hard to know exactly what happened in the fallout between Bush's family and New Era Sports & Entertainment, but in perhaps the definitive foreclosing of any possibility for reparations,

¹¹¹ "USC's Bush Wins Heisman by Monumental Margin."

¹¹² "The Timeline - Reggie Bush Investigation."

¹¹³ "Horns of Plenty: VY, Texas Deny USC Three-Peat Bid."

Bush hired “Ornstein to be his marketing representative and agent Joel Segal to negotiate his playing contract” in the middle of January 2006.¹¹⁴ At the end of January and beginning of February – in parole hearings for Lloyd Lake – a lawyer spoke on the record mentioning the possibility of a settlement between Lake and Reggie Bush. This comment turned out to be just the start of lawsuit threats and settlement discussions for Bush and the partners of New Era.

In early February, things began to turn ugly in the dispute between Reggie Bush and Michael Michaels. Bush, his mother, and lawyer David Cornwell attempted to settle with Michael Michaels in a meeting with Michaels and his lawyer, Brian Watkins. According to Yahoo! Sports, Michaels tried to speak directly to Bush at the meeting rather than through their respective attorneys. When this action occurred, Cornwell had Bush and his mother leave the room so that Cornwell could speak on Bush’s behalf. During the continued conversation, Cornwell allegedly offered Michaels \$100,000 in settlement funds, but Michaels and Watkins declined the offer and explained that they planned to move forward with a lawsuit against Bush for money owed as well as for potential earnings lost in the fallout with New Era Sports & Entertainment.¹¹⁵

In a letter from Watkins to Cornwell dated February 13, 2006, Watkins stated that Michaels wished to maintain a relationship with Bush and to continue in future business deals with him. To that end, Michaels requested a settlement amount of \$3.2 million. Watkins claimed, “This amount does include 3 million in lost capital but does not include over \$100,000.00 in cash disbursements to your clients. We would also be amendable

¹¹⁴ “The Timeline - Reggie Bush Investigation.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

[sic] to entering into a confidentiality agreement at your request.”¹¹⁶ Watkins later offered to settle for \$500,000 rather than take the case to civil court for the full \$3.2 million.¹¹⁷ In a separate statement, Watkins explained, “In point of fact, LaMar and Denise Griffin, Reggie Bush's parents, with Reggie Bush's knowledge, defrauded our clients out of large sums of money by holding out the carrot of Bush's future football career in order to entice our clients to invest in their sports and entertainment company.”¹¹⁸ Watkins also asked in his letter to Cornwell whether he and Bush intended to involve USC in the matter since there could be major implications and negative consequences for them as a result of the case.

On April 3, there was still no settlement agreement between Michaels and Bush. That day, Watkins helped New Era Sports & Entertainment send LaMar and Denise Griffin an eviction notice for the house they had been living in rent-free for one year. The family owed \$54,000 in unpaid rent to Michaels at the time. When the family moved out of the house on April 21, they are accused of having removed several thousand dollars’ worth of furniture that Michaels had provided.

By the time the family moved out of Michaels’ home, the story had gained significant traction. USC asked the Pac-10 – the conference of which they were a member institution – to look into the story and gain additional understanding of the living situation of Bush’s family and its connection with New Era Sports & Entertainment. Additionally, the NCAA decided to investigate the story itself. Beyond that, with the

¹¹⁶ Robinson, “Attorney’s Letter Says Bush Family Got \$100,000.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

NFL Draft coming up, NFL teams had strong interest in the implications as well as potential consequences of the story. The first pick in the draft belonged to the Houston Texans, and Bush had long been projected to be taken in that first spot. However, the general manager of the Texans, Charley Casserly, tried repeatedly to discuss the matter with Bush to no avail. Initially, “Texans owner Bob McNair was quoted in the *Houston Chronicle* as saying: “If that’s all there is, if it’s still a minor thing, then I doubt it would have any effect on what we do.”¹¹⁹ However, even when pressed, Bush would not share details of his parents’ living or financial situations, telling Casserly only that “it will be taken care of in a couple days.”¹²⁰ Bush attorney Cornwell tried to ease speculation, assuring, “Bush’s parents will ‘cooperate fully’ with any inquiry from the Pac-10 or NCAA.”¹²¹

While some questioned whether the references in Watkins’ letter to Cornwell – references to USC and its interest in the story – might amount to extortion, Watkins vehemently denied such accusations. He pointed to the letter’s inclusion of comments expressing an interest in continuing to work together as evidence that he and Michaels harbored no ill will toward Bush or his family.¹²² Still, on the day of the 2006 NFL Draft, Cornwell provided the letter to NFL Security and the NFL Players Association indicating that Bush was the victim of blackmail. According to ESPN, the NFLPA and NFL

¹¹⁹ “Bush Attorney: Reggie Had No Knowledge of House Deal.”

¹²⁰ “The Timeline - Reggie Bush Investigation.”

¹²¹ “Bush Attorney: Reggie Had No Knowledge of House Deal.”

¹²² Robinson, “Attorney’s Letter Says Bush Family Got \$100,000.”

Security both supported Cornwell's assertion that Bush was being extorted.¹²³

Furthermore, Bush denied in a league-wide memo any and all knowledge of a financial relationship between LaMar Griffin and New Era Sports & Entertainment. Unfortunately for Bush, his vagueness and the triviality he ascribed to questions concerning his family's living situation might have cost him the number one spot in the draft. The Houston Texans passed on Bush; fortunately for him, he only fell one spot as he was picked second overall by the New Orleans Saints.

While examinations of the benefits Bush's family had received continued, USC also had another improper benefits case to handle. The NCAA determined that wide receiver Dwayne Jarrett would need to pay \$5,322 – the amount of rent he should have paid for his “free” apartment – to the charity of his choice in order to be reinstated after being declared ineligible in June 2006. Jarrett would go on to meet the NCAA request and be reinstated prior the start of the 2006 football season.¹²⁴ However, it is natural to conclude that additional cases involving unpaid rent and extra benefits arising during the official NCAA investigation into the Bush case could not have been favorable for Bush or the University of Southern California.

In September of 2006, the Yahoo! Sports investigation's findings were published detailing the financial arrangements largely outlined above.¹²⁵ The report implicated Bush and his family, Ormstein, Fitz, Lake, and Michaels in its uncovering of cash payments and disputes that appeared very damning in the face of potential NCAA sanctions against

¹²³ “NFLPA.”

¹²⁴ “Timeline of Investigation at the University of Southern California.”

¹²⁵ Cole and Robinson, “Cash and Carry - Reggie Bush Investigation - Yahoo Sports”; “Timeline of Investigation at the University of Southern California.”

the USC Trojans. When asked about the allegations, Bush stated simply, “I don’t want to talk about it.”¹²⁶ OrNSTein adamantly denied any wrongdoing on the part of himself, his employee, or Bush; he said that any payments for travel or lodging put on Fitz’s card would have been loans that Bush’s family would have paid back with cash. However, when “asked whether he was aware that such loans could constitute an NCAA violation, OrNSTein replied: ‘I have no idea.’”¹²⁷

Buried within the Yahoo! Sports report from September was a very important and bold claim:

Also, McNair allegedly knew of Bush's involvement with the New Era venture before last season's national championship game against Texas, according to two sources. And at one point during the 2005 season, sources say Bush thought that Carroll knew about his parents' living arrangement and feared he was going to conduct his own investigation. Bush called Michaels, instructing that if Carroll called regarding the house to "tell him that you're a longtime family friend." Carroll never called Michaels.¹²⁸

The NCAA does not take violations on the part of its members’ student-athletes lightly. Even more so, it frowns upon member institutions looking the other way or even being complicit in any wrongdoing. The allegations against Todd McNair, Bush’s position coach, and implications that his head coach may have also know about the infractions would eventually become crucial aspects of the case.

After all of the discussions and threats of lawsuits, Reggie Bush settled out of court with Michael Michaels and new lawyer Jordan Cohen in April 2007. According to Yahoo! Sports, the settlement “was for between \$200,000 and \$300,000” and “includes a

¹²⁶ Cole and Robinson, “Cash and Carry - Reggie Bush Investigation - Yahoo Sports.”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

confidentiality clause which will keep Michaels from talking with the NCAA.”¹²⁹ Though Cornwell had clearly stated that LaMar and Denise Griffin would cooperate with any NCAA investigation into their living and financial situations, this April report indicated otherwise. Rachel Newman Baker, Director of Agent, Gambling, and Amateurism Activities for the NCAA, wrote concerning the settlement:

The NCAA is aware that Mr. Michaels has agreed to a settlement with the Bush family. We continue our efforts to obtain cooperation from those involved with the case, including Reggie Bush and his family. Hopefully, the settlement agreement will encourage individuals who previously refused to cooperate due to concerns about potential litigation to now come forward with information that may assist with our on-going investigation.¹³⁰

Though the NCAA also stated that it had been trying to contact Bush concerning the case through multiple channels, Bush claimed during a USC practice he was visiting: “They haven’t tried to contact me. If they did I wouldn’t answer the phone.”¹³¹ There was no indication at the time that USC was in any way unwelcoming to Bush. Head Coach Pete Carroll said, “It’s great to see any of our guys show up. It was great to see Reggie.”¹³²

Since the settlement, the NCAA investigators were having a very challenging time getting involved parties to speak to them during their investigation. Bush and his family were not cooperating, and Michaels had chosen to remain silent as part of a confidentiality agreement included in the settlement with Bush. USC was allowing the NCAA and Pac-10 to conduct their own investigations without providing them much help. On October 30, 2007, the lack of cooperation that was keeping USC and Reggie

¹²⁹ Cole and Robinson, “Settlement Reached with Bush Family.”

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Klein, “Bush Is Warmly Greeted.”

¹³² Ibid.

Bush safe from the NCAA took a major hit. Lloyd Lake – still disgruntled from having provided funds to Bush and then not gaining him as a client – filed a civil suit worth close to \$300,000 against Bush. Yahoo! Sports columnist Dan Wetzel explained, “Due to the NCAA’s lack of subpoena power, historically its biggest cases have come from civil or criminal lawsuits where its investigators can use evidence gathered from depositions and other parts of the judicial process.”¹³³ Official records from court could be used to show that Bush should have been ineligible during parts of the 2004 season and all of the 2005 season. If the NCAA could show that violations did occur and that USC should have known about and prevented them, the findings would be detrimental to the program.

In November, Lake met with NCAA investigators and cooperated fully with them. As part of that meeting, he shared documentation that showed that Bush had, in fact, received improper benefits dating back to the 2004 football season.¹³⁴ This disclosure, not the filing of the civil suit, became the turning point in the NCAA case against Bush and USC. Lake’s testimony also indicated that USC running backs coach Todd McNair knew about the violations and about Bush’s involvement with the partners of New Era Sports & Entertainment.¹³⁵ Other information that further signaled involvement on McNair’s part was reported by Wetzel:

USC assistant Todd McNair knew of Bush's relationship with both Michaels and Lake. Moreover he spent a night out in San Diego with Bush, Michaels and Lake and knew Bush was staying the night in a \$500-a-night suite at the city's Manchester Hyatt. Yahoo! Sports obtained a receipt for the stay that was paid for

¹³³ Wetzel, “Trojan Trouble.”

¹³⁴ Klein, “Timeline of USC Troubles”; “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

¹³⁵ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

by Michaels' credit card. USC refused to allow Yahoo! Sports to interview McNair.¹³⁶

Lake's testimony, questioned due to his criminal past, was ultimately accepted by the NCAA. Investigators accepted Lake's testimony, despite his questionable background, because the alternative was to accept the word of Todd McNair, who NCAA investigators felt "provided false and misleading information to the enforcement staff."¹³⁷

It is crucial to note that the NCAA investigation was extended because another benefits case at USC came to light in 2008. A credible source came forward with information suggesting that USC basketball player O. J. Mayo had been given cash and gifts since he had been in high school and was being recruited by the Trojans. By June of 2009, the NCAA had decided to combine the Mayo and Bush cases as part of a larger investigation of the Southern Cal athletic department, and head basketball coach Tim Floyd had resigned.¹³⁸

In July 2009, things got worse for USC; allegations arose suggesting that USC had violated NCAA rules when Pete Carroll hired Pete Rodriguez, a former NFL coach, to serve as a consultant for the team. It seems that Rodriguez was evaluating players and offering suggestions for instruction, tasks reserved for the limited and highly regulated number of coaches allowed for each staff by the NCAA. When questioned, Carroll said the hire was "something that we have gone through all the proper channels a long time

¹³⁶ Wetzell, "Trojan Trouble."

¹³⁷ "USC Final Public Report," 2.

¹³⁸ "Timeline of Investigation at the University of Southern California."

ago to make sure that we were doing the right thing and all that. We've documented it.”¹³⁹ In the midst of a three-year investigation into the living situation of a Bush’s family, USC continued to add fuel to the fire, as the school remained uncooperative in the NCAA’s view and added violations seemingly each year.

Keeping with the theme of adding new violations to its case, USC announced in December of 2009 that it was conducting its own investigation into the improper use of a vehicle by one of its football players, Joe McKnight. As part of the investigation’s conclusions, USC chose to hold the running back out of its bowl game that season.¹⁴⁰ It seemed that the program could not catch a break in the investigation, though the school also appeared to keep hurting itself by undercutting its argument that it had a firm grasp on the athletic programs and NCAA compliance efforts.

Perhaps because he knew sanctions were coming, Pete Carroll decided to leave USC for the NFL in January 2010. He told reporters, “If you know anything about me, you know I can't pass up this challenge.”¹⁴¹ It might have been with great prescience that Carroll said: “I do not expect to ever be able to top what we just did. I think it's just been a beautiful time together. It hurts to separate right now... but it can't keep on going, because I can't pass up this opportunity.”¹⁴² No, it could not in fact “keep on going” at USC. The successful partnership of Carroll and his players had to end not only because of the NFL opportunity, but also because Carroll had the opportunity to get out of the

¹³⁹ Klein and Pringle, “Pete Carroll Denies Violating NCAA Rules.”

¹⁴⁰ “Timeline of Investigation at the University of Southern California.”

¹⁴¹ “Seahawks Announce Hiring of USC’s Carroll.”

¹⁴² Ibid.

college game before the sanctions were handed down to USC. As an NFL coach, there was not much the NCAA would be able to do to penalize Carroll.

In February of 2010, the NCAA finally held three days of infractions hearings in Arizona concerning USC's athletic teams. There, "a USC contingent that include[d] President Steven Sample, athletic director Mike Garrett, school compliance officials, former football coach Pete Carroll and running backs coach Todd McNair and his attorney appear[ed] before the NCAA's Committee on Infractions."¹⁴³ The NCAA, though, would not reveal its ruling for months to come.

On April 21, 2010, it was reported that Reggie Bush and Lloyd Lake finally came to an agreement concerning the civil suit Lake had filed against Bush.¹⁴⁴ Before Bush, Lake, or Michaels were to speak in court-ordered depositions, Bush attorney David Cornwell was able to open talks with Lake and his lawyer Brian Watkins. The out of court settlement between the parties prevented the NCAA from using the depositions as planned in its investigation of Bush and USC. In May, soon after the Bush-Lake settlement, sports radio host Dan Patrick asked Pete Carroll whether sanctions were coming for USC. Carroll said, "I'd be surprised if there are. The way everything was presented, I'd be surprised. But we'll see."¹⁴⁵

Finally, after years of investigation, the NCAA handed down "one of the harshest football penalties handed down by the NCAA since SMU'S football program was given

¹⁴³ Klein and Hiserman, "The USC Case: What Happened When."

¹⁴⁴ Robinson and Cole, "Settlement Reached in Bush Civil Case."

¹⁴⁵ Smith, "Pete Carroll Says He Would Be 'Surprised' If There Are Stiff Penalties for USC."

the death penalty for the 1987 season.”¹⁴⁶ On June 10, 2010, the NCAA released its findings and handed down significant penalties to USC. The school was cited with not only “failure to monitor,” but also the more severe “lack of institutional control.”¹⁴⁷ As part of the sanctions, the Trojans were given “a two-year postseason ban, the loss of ten scholarships for the next three seasons and the school was ordered to vacate wins from Dec. 2004 through the 2005 season. This amount[ed] to thirteen victories, including the Orange Bowl victory over Oklahoma in the national championship game for the 2004-05 season.”¹⁴⁸ The ruling relied heavily upon the notion that Todd McNair knew or should have known about the misconduct and dealings between Bush and the various agents involved in the case.¹⁴⁹ The school was also put on probation for four years (limiting access to its program by anyone outside of its staff and student-athletes and requiring frequent reporting to the NCAA on its compliance efforts), and the NCAA accepted the self-imposed punishments the school had already placed on its men’s basketball and women’s tennis programs.¹⁵⁰ USC also had to disassociate itself from Bush and Mayo.¹⁵¹

In the years since the case, USC has been through several administrative and football coaching changes. Ultimately, the Trojans were forced to vacate their BCS title, and the school has had to work to field competitive teams despite losing several

¹⁴⁶ Smith, “NCAA Hammers Southern Cal’s Football Program with Two-Year Postseason Ban.”

¹⁴⁷ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report,” 45.

¹⁴⁸ “Timeline of Investigation at the University of Southern California.”

¹⁴⁹ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

¹⁵⁰ Klein and Hiserman, “The USC Case: What Happened When.”

¹⁵¹ Zinser, “N.C.A.A. Hands Down Harsh Penalties to U.S.C.”

scholarships for multiple years. Because of the general silence from the involved parties and their unwillingness to cooperate with the NCAA investigation, I have chosen to address the fallout and repercussions from the case for each party separately in the proceeding pages. I provide appropriate additional information in the following pages that explains the relevant next steps of the various parties. I address legal responses, published comments, and other image repair strategies for the USC administration, Reggie Bush and his family, Pete Carroll, and Todd McNair.

In order to better grasp how the image repair tactics in the case worked, it is important to understand that public perception concerning amateurism and whether Division I athletes should be compensated beyond traditional scholarships at the time of the ruling was not necessarily what it is today. When the ruling was handed down in 2010, “the NCAA determined that McNair had engaged in unethical conduct and sanctioned him with a ‘show cause’ order, preventing him from contact with recruits for one year while working for USC or any other NCAA-member institution. The order makes a coach essentially unemployable.”¹⁵² McNair has not worked as a full-time college football coach since his contract at USC expired following the punishment being handed down.

Because he had not been able to find a job since USC chose not to renew his contract following the NCAA punishment, McNair filed a lawsuit against the NCAA in 2011 for defamation of character. In February 2015, the California Court of Appeals

¹⁵² Klein, “Court to Hear Arguments on NCAA Motion Regarding Action on Todd McNair.”

denied the request of the NCAA to seal the records from that lawsuit.¹⁵³ A CBS Sports article from March 2015 provided strong support for the notion that McNair was discredited on principle as a means to the desired end of punishing USC simply based on negative feelings toward the school from the NCAA.¹⁵⁴ After an NCAA appeal, in December of 2010, a California appellate court ruled that “the infractions committee report was unfairly worded to make it seem like McNair was aware of NCAA violations committed by Bush” and that the defamation suit would move forward.¹⁵⁵

What is really interesting is how negative the public perception of the NCAA has become since Reggie Bush was playing at USC. After the NCAA reduced the penalties at Penn State in the Jerry Sandusky case, many people questioned what they deemed to be an unfair enforcement of the NCAA’s sanctions in the USC case. SB Nation contributor Kevin Trahan explained that it appears that “the NCAA's enforcement structure hinges on how willing you are to let it do what it wants.”¹⁵⁶ He went on to speculate, “Penn State was treated better than USC because the Trojans – and most notably, former athletic director Mike Garrett – didn’t give in to the NCAA's demands.”¹⁵⁷ Trahan summarized the position that many now hold concerning the NCAA: “The organization levies punishments and takes them away based not on the

¹⁵³ Budrovich, “California Court of Appeals Denies NCAA Case To Close McNair Documents.”

¹⁵⁴ Dodd, “NCAA Overstepped in USC Case, Unsealed Documents Seem to Show.”

¹⁵⁵ “Court Says NCAA Disregarded Truth in Bush Case.”

¹⁵⁶ Trahan, “NCAA’s Penn State Choices Show It Cares about Power, Not Being Right.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

offense, but on how well the school respects the organization's authority. That's not a healthy enforcement system, and it's why nobody will walk away from either the Penn State punishment or subsequent retraction feeling all that good about the system.”¹⁵⁸ The increasing disapproval and skepticism regarding the NCAA’s investigation and sanctioning processes over the course of the Reggie Bush controversy make this case essential to any study of image repair in the context of college football. Changing public opinion of the NCAA also serves to make the image repair strategies used in the USC case more effective, which I show in the coming pages.

Image Repair Analysis

The Administration

There were several indications that the University of Southern California had little concern that it would be sanctioned by the NCAA beyond the self-imposed penalties it gave its men’s basketball and women’s tennis teams in an act of *corrective action*. Leading up to the official investigation, the school’s administration really did not address the case. The NCAA did wind up accepting the self-imposed punishments of the school on the two athletic teams, but it handed down severe punishments for the Bush benefits violations and for “lack of institutional control.”¹⁵⁹ The inaction of the school’s administration when it comes to football indicates that USC may have felt it would not be punished for the events that transpired between Bush and various agents, or perhaps USC just believed that any self-sanctions it might choose could be worse than the punishments the NCAA decided upon.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

When the initial story concerning improper benefits for Bush and his family broke in April of 2006, then-athletic director Mike Garrett commented: “Rather than jumping to conclusions, we need to determine the facts before commenting on this report. We have asked the Pac-10 to look into this.”¹⁶⁰ Additionally, the school’s legal counsel released a statement on the case: “USC cannot comment on any matter that is the subject of an ongoing NCAA and Pac-10 investigation. USC continues to cooperate fully with the investigation.”¹⁶¹ At this point, there was only speculation about the university’s potential involvement and/or possible sanctions for the team for Bush’s alleged actions. There was no need for the school to adopt any image repair strategies outside of the preemptive *corrective action* it had already taken, because there had not yet been an attack on its image or organizational legitimacy.

Another indicator that USC was not worried about possible penalties was found in the reception of Reggie Bush on campus. USC played in the 2007 Rose Bowl during Bush’s first season in the NFL. While the official NCAA investigation was under way, USC apparently encouraged Bush “to stay away from the 2007 Rose Bowl game” because of an NCAA request based on how his presence at the game might be perceived.¹⁶² However, Bush was welcomed at a spring practice following the Rose Bowl, which suggests again that USC was not overly concerned with potential sanctions stemming from the investigation.

¹⁶⁰ “Bush Attorney: Reggie Had No Knowledge of House Deal.”

¹⁶¹ Cole and Robinson, “Cash and Carry - Reggie Bush Investigation - Yahoo Sports.”

¹⁶² Klein, “Bush Is Warmly Greeted.”

One of the biggest signals that USC had little concern about being sanctioned came in the form of its hiring decision when Carroll left for the Seattle Seahawks. In the midst of USC's own investigation into the Joe McKnight improper benefits case, then-athletic director Mike Garrett announced that he had hired Lane Kiffin as head coach of the Trojans.¹⁶³ Kiffin "made more headlines off the field for committing numerous N.C.A.A. violations" than winning games at Tennessee during his only year there as head coach, and his program was being investigated for recruiting violations.¹⁶⁴ The hire was widely greeted with confusion, because USC was hiring an unconventional and largely unproven head coach in Kiffin.¹⁶⁵ Though there is speculation that Carroll left when he did because he knew about the impending NCAA ruling, it appears that USC did not expect to receive harsh sanctions since it hired someone who had already raised the ire of the NCAA during another very high profile investigation.

As noted earlier, USC had multiple NCAA violations during the time between the end of Bush's playing career and when the NCAA ruled on his case. The NCAA generally found USC to be cooperative throughout this time, but USC must have somehow left a bad impression for the school when the NCAA was determining whether and how it should be penalized. In the public infractions report, the NCAA gave the program harsh penalties for failing to monitor its athletes and its compliance processes appropriately.¹⁶⁶ Once the rulings were announced, USC switched gears. Because it was

¹⁶³ Evans, "U.S.C. Hires Kiffin to Replace Carroll."

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ See "Kiffin Leaves Tennessee after 1 Year for USC."

¹⁶⁶ "University of Southern California Public Infractions Report."

found at fault, USC needed to address the attacks it perceived from the NCAA. To do so, it primarily used the strategies of *denial*, *reducing offensiveness*, and *corrective action*. The school used these strategies simultaneously, but I will address them individually to call out the key aspects of the administration's communication that fell into each strategy.

In terms of *denial*, Benoit identifies the tactics of *simple denial* and *shifting blame* as possibilities.¹⁶⁷ USC employed both when it announced that it would appeal the NCAA infractions report. Todd Dickey, senior vice president for administration, wrote, "We sharply disagree with many of the findings in the NCAA Committee on Infractions Report," and asked, "There is a systemic problem facing college athletes today: unscrupulous sports agents and sports marketers. The question is how do we identify them and keep them away from our student-athletes?"¹⁶⁸ USC denied that it had done anything wrong in respect to certain allegations, and Dickey tried to shift the attention to the agents and marketers he painted as predators. In its appeal, USC admitted that Bush had committed violations by receiving improper benefits as a student-athlete, but the administration denied any knowledge of those benefits within the program and tried to shift blame completely to Bush and the agents involved in the case.¹⁶⁹ When the NCAA did not budge on its penalties in reviewing the appeal, USC stopped focusing on *denial* for the most part.

Another image repair strategy that USC's administration employed was *reducing offensiveness*. The university did this through *attacking the accuser* and *minimization*.

¹⁶⁷ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 22–23.

¹⁶⁸ "USC to Appeal NCAA Ruling."

¹⁶⁹ "Appeal of the University of Southern California."

The school tried to minimize the severity of the violations when it claimed, “When the COI’s findings against the assistant football coach are stripped away, the remaining findings against USC are not remotely sufficient to justify the severity of the penalties levied against USC’s football program.”¹⁷⁰ The Trojans also minimized their violations by citing many precedents and casting their own violations in light of those of other schools that received lesser punishments.¹⁷¹ This tactic did not impress the NCAA officials, who did not change their stance on the penalties applied. However, USC administrators brought attention to apparent discrepancies in the penalties that schools received and challenged the investigation and appeals processes themselves by showing inconsistencies in the NCAA’s enforcement of its rules.

Further minimization efforts are highlighted in continued words from Dickey on the NCAA ruling:

We feel the penalties imposed are too severe for the violations identified in the report. We will accept those sanctions we believe to be consistent with penalties imposed upon other NCAA member institutions found guilty of similar rules infractions. We are hopeful that the NCAA Infractions Appeals Committee will agree with our position on appeal, and reduce the penalties.¹⁷²

The school has maintained that its violations were significantly less substantial than the sanctions indicated.

As far as *attacking the accuser* goes, USC administrators attempted to attack two accusers: the NCAA and the marketing agent whose testimony the NCAA relied upon so heavily. Their attack on the NCAA was in line with their minimization efforts; they

¹⁷⁰ “USC Supplement to Appeal.”

¹⁷¹ “Appeal of the University of Southern California.”

¹⁷² “USC to Appeal NCAA Ruling.”

focused mainly on the inequity they felt was evident in the NCAA's enforcement of its rules. However, their attacks differed from their minimizing tactics in that they found specific faults to criticize. First, the administration accused the NCAA of "abuse of discretion."¹⁷³ They also claimed the NCAA unjustly created a new level of monitoring for elite athletes and applied it retroactively to USC.¹⁷⁴ Additionally, USC criticized the NCAA for botching part of its investigation – the crucial aspect of the investigation that the committee used to show that Todd McNair knew of the violations and failed to report them; the NCAA made significant errors (such as asking about the wrong calendar year and mixing up who called whom) in its questioning of both McNair and the agent surrounding a phone call that tied the two together.¹⁷⁵ In terms of criticizing the agent in the case, the USC administration pointed to his criminal background and discrepancies in his story that led the NCAA to throw out some of his claims. They attacked him by including such accusations as: "These 'unresolved discrepancies' actually included strong evidence that agency partner A lied about the events of the March 2005 weekend in San Diego in an effort to directly implicate USC and the assistant football coach," and "In addition, the Committee ignored the fact that agency partner A falsely accused the assistant football coach of taking \$50,000 from another sports agent."¹⁷⁶

The school's efforts to deny its violations and to reduce their offensiveness did not convince the NCAA to lessen the severity of its penalties. However, USC's denial

¹⁷³ "Appeal of the University of Southern California," 3.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 22–28.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

and offensiveness reduction strategies were effective in shifting negative attention from both fans and the media away from the school and toward the NCAA. The NCAA was chiefly seen by USC, the media, and football fans as overstepping its bounds in the case, something that continues to haunt it to this day as it seeks to maintain control over college athletics.¹⁷⁷ The arguments for minimization of the offenses in the case seem more effective today than they would have at the time because of the changes in how the sports-viewing public sees amateurism since the case began. When the allegations came out against Bush and his family, the country was truly shocked, with some writers equating what Bush did to felony bribery.¹⁷⁸ Today, the tide has turned – much of the general public now believes that Division I football players deserve to be compensated financially for their play, and lawsuits are strengthening that perspective.¹⁷⁹ The more we move in this direction, the more the public sympathizes with the University of Southern California rather than the NCAA.

Finally, the administration also very visibly utilized *corrective action* to repair the program's image. While the school initially self-sanctioned in men's basketball and women's tennis, it was the sweeping changes in the athletic department that were most noticeable. On June 20, 2010, USC president-elect Max Nikias returned the Heisman Trophy won by Bush, announced that then-athletic director Mike Garrett would be

¹⁷⁷ Lopez, "Five Years Later"; Trahan, "NCAA's Penn State Choices Show It Cares about Power, Not Being Right"; Dodd, "NCAA Overstepped in USC Case, Unsealed Documents Seem to Show."

¹⁷⁸ Williamson, "Five Reasons Why Reggie Bush's Heisman Was Rightfully Vacated."

¹⁷⁹ McCann, "What the Appeals Court Ruling Means for O'Bannon's Ongoing NCAA Lawsuit."

replaced by Pat Haden, and added personnel to the university's compliance office to ensure that things would be handled above board from then on.¹⁸⁰ The school had also disassociated itself from Bush, chosen not to renew McNair's contract, and saw Carroll and Floyd leave the university, so Nikias' staff changes left none of the same personnel implicated in the case remaining at USC. While these changes did not alter the penalties they received, they did show that Nikias was going to be very intentional about creating the appropriate culture around USC's athletic teams.

Looking back at the case and the university's response, it seems that the school was essentially effective in its image repair efforts. While the NCAA upheld the stiffest penalties since the death penalty imposed on SMU in the Bush case, the NCAA's reputation arguably suffered more than USC's did. After all of the penalties had been imposed and USC football had served its time, the 2015 Trojans were ranked in the top ten in both major preseason polls.¹⁸¹ Rivals also ranks USC as having the eighth best overall recruiting class for 2016.¹⁸² On the other hand, the NCAA is under increased scrutiny due to several high-profile cases and perceived inequalities in the enforcement of its rules. Haden has promised that while USC may have survived these issues, it will not let down its guard: "This is not the last issue we'll face. But we're going to have a culture of compliance. We're going to think about it in the morning, think about it before we go

¹⁸⁰ Witz, "U.S.C. President-Elect Acts Swiftly in Wake of Sanctions."

¹⁸¹ "2015 NCAA College Football Polls and Rankings for Week 1 - ESPN."

¹⁸² "Rivals 2016 Team Recruiting Rankings."

to bed. We're going to have issues, but we'll fess up and be better than the way before."¹⁸³

Pete Carroll

Pete Carroll was possibly the least affected person in the case in terms of punitive damage or challenges to his reputation. As mentioned in the case history, the NCAA cannot punish NFL coaches unless they go back to the college game. Still, Carroll was hardly criticized during the investigation anyway. He was well-liked in Los Angeles, and he maintains that reputation today.¹⁸⁴ However, there were some image repair strategies he used during the case that are worth mentioning.

Carroll seemed to allow the NCAA to investigate without interference, preferring to stay out of the situation as much as possible. The NCAA never claimed that Carroll had knowledge of the benefits given to Bush or his family. When asked about it early in the case, Carroll told reporters, "I don't know the details of it, so I have no comment about it."¹⁸⁵ When the NCAA questioned the hiring of a consultant for the team, Carroll used *denial* in discussing a potential violation. He explained, "The hire was something that we have gone through all the proper channels a long time ago to make sure that we were doing the right thing and all that. We've documented it."¹⁸⁶ There was a hint of *bolstering* involved as well when he said, "We tried to do everything exactly the right

¹⁸³ Witz, "U.S.C. President-Elect Acts Swiftly in Wake of Sanctions."

¹⁸⁴ Kaufman, "USC Fans Still Embrace Their Old Coach, Pete Carroll."

¹⁸⁵ Wharton and Klein, "Bush Involvement Alleged."

¹⁸⁶ Klein and Pringle, "Pete Carroll Denies Violating NCAA Rules."

way.”¹⁸⁷ Though Carroll denied the offensiveness of the act, the hire was still an NCAA violation.

When he left for Seattle, Carroll indicated that the investigation at USC was not part of his decision.¹⁸⁸ However, as explained earlier, it is hard not to speculate that Carroll knew about the coming sanctions and jumped ship at just the right moment to avoid having to deal with the punishments at USC. He said he would be surprised if USC received heavy sanctions but that everyone would need to wait and see what the NCAA ruled.¹⁸⁹ After the ruling, Carroll expressed dismay and shock, maintaining, “There’s nothing there.”¹⁹⁰ He continued with his *denial* strategy, “We couldn’t do anything about it -- because we didn’t know.”¹⁹¹ In the same article, he also *shifted blame* by expounding:

This issue in particular is not like any of the other cases that’s come along. It is about one person in a community where a kid came from who decided to take advantage of his potential good fortune. And he found a way in to make that happen – outside of any of the university issues and setting and all that. They didn’t want anyone else to know. And we didn’t know.¹⁹²

Carroll was successful in his image repair because the attacks were not on his image *per se*. The NCAA did not go after him, and fans did not generally blame him aside from the speculation surrounding the circumstances of his departure.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ “Seahawks Announce Hiring of USC’s Carroll.”

¹⁸⁹ Smith, “Pete Carroll Says He Would Be ‘Surprised’ If There Are Stiff Penalties for USC.”

¹⁹⁰ “Carroll.”

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

Todd McNair

If the NCAA messed up its case against USC in terms of sanctions and their fair application, it hurt itself even more in its reports concerning McNair. The NCAA's findings depended on proving a connection between McNair and agents providing illicit benefits to Bush and his family. Without that link, they could not show that USC knew about the infractions and would not be able to penalize the school. The public infractions report against USC showed exactly the link between McNair and an agent that the NCAA needed.¹⁹³ The school, in its initial appeal, poked several holes in the investigation and the story that supposedly showed this crucial link.¹⁹⁴ The NCAA completely tarnished the reputation and legacy of McNair, considered at the time to be one of the best recruiters in college football.¹⁹⁵ Like the university, McNair filed his own appeal since the NCAA had singled him out and given him a "show cause" ruling which prevented him from being able to recruit. That ruling ultimately led to USC not renewing his contract.

In his appeal to the NCAA, just like in USC's, McNair used *denial* and *attacked his accuser to reduce the offensiveness* of his alleged violations. McNair accused "the NCAA Committee of Infractions of using false statements and the mischaracterizing of the facts to support a finding of 'unethical conduct' against" him.¹⁹⁶ Unfortunately for McNair, the NCAA disagreed with the points in his appeal and ruled against him. McNair's lawyer, Scott Tompsett, continued the attack on the NCAA: "... the Infractions

¹⁹³ "University of Southern California Public Infractions Report."

¹⁹⁴ "Appeal of the University of Southern California," 22–28.

¹⁹⁵ Stites, "USC's Reggie Bush Scandal Is Now the NCAA's Problem."

¹⁹⁶ Smith, "USC Football."

Committee mischaracterized and manipulated key testimony. The Infractions Committee based Mr. McNair's unethical conduct finding on demonstrably false statements. The Infractions Committee based its decision on inconsistent and contradictory findings.”¹⁹⁷

After an unsuccessful appeal, McNair decided to file a defamation suit against the NCAA in June of 2011.¹⁹⁸ McNair and Tompsett claimed that the NCAA “arbitrarily and capriciously decided to ruin plaintiff Todd McNair's career to further their own agenda.”¹⁹⁹ McNair has been successful thus far in the legal proceedings against the NCAA. Unsealed documents from March 2015 appear to show what USC officials had alleged during the appeal process: the NCAA infractions committee had an agenda of taking down USC and needed a pawn, which became McNair.²⁰⁰ The release of these documents was an effective way to strengthen public opinion of McNair and hurt the reputation of the NCAA.

On December 7, 2015, an appellate court determined that McNair’s suit should proceed in the legal system. California’s Second District Court of Appeal ruled:

This evidence clearly indicates that the ensuing (NCAA infractions committee) report was worded in disregard of the truth to enable the (NCAA committee) to arrive at a predetermined conclusion that USC employee McNair was aware of the NCAA violations. To summarize, McNair established a probability that he could show actual malice by clear and convincing evidence based on the (committee's) doubts about McNair's knowledge, along with its reckless disregard

¹⁹⁷ Lev, “NCAA Denies Appeal of Ex-USC Assistant McNair.”

¹⁹⁸ Lev, “Todd McNair Sues NCAA for ‘Ruining His Career.’”

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Dodd, “NCAA Overstepped in USC Case, Unsealed Documents Seem to Show.”

for the truth about his knowledge, and by allowing itself to be influenced by nonmembers to reach a needed conclusion.²⁰¹

This ruling did not completely repair McNair's image, as there are multiple audiences with different perspectives in play. From an NCAA perspective, McNair has not adequately demonstrated that he had no knowledge of Bush's infractions, though the court felt that McNair's ignorance of the improper benefits was established well enough to warrant the case reaching trial. McNair's reputation within the coaching community, what he might care about most, will not seem healed until he is employed again as a full-time position coach at the collegiate level. Even if he does obtain another coaching position, it will be difficult to determine whether his reputation has returned to pre-controversy levels. As far as the general public goes, McNair has support far and wide in his fight against the NCAA, who college football fans seem to dislike increasingly each day.

Reggie Bush and His Family

Reggie Bush was the primary focus of the case, as it was his athletic ability on which the adults in his life were trying to capitalize. His parents, LaMar and Denise Griffin, lived rent-free in a lavish home for an entire year based on the notion that Bush would sign with the home's owner once Bush declared for the NFL draft. LaMar Griffin, as described above, attempted to create a sports agency with two partners – one the homeowner – to capitalize financially on his stepson's success on the field. Though he was legally an adult, one could make a strong case for Bush being the real victim of his stepfather's and the agents' greed. Yet, his reputation took a huge hit during the NCAA

²⁰¹ Schrottenboer, "Court Slams NCAA in Reggie Bush USC Violations Case." [parentheses in the original]

case against him and USC, so I examine his image repair strategies here. I include his family's response here as well.

Bush's primary image repair strategy has been *denial* as well as *reducing offensiveness* by *minimizing* the situation. When the story initially broke concerning Bush's family's living situation, Bush told reporters, "We have nothing to hide. When all is said and done... everyone will see we have done absolutely nothing wrong."²⁰²

Landlord Michael Michaels, however, explained that Bush's parents "didn't pay for the first few months but promised to pay when the Heisman Trophy-winner started earning millions of dollars after turning pro."²⁰³ ESPN reported that Bush said, "I'm confident and I know what the truth is. I know for a fact that everything is fine and this is all blown out of proportion and there's more to the story than is being told right now."²⁰⁴

Bush's family refused to even speak about the rent when the story came out. LaMar Griffin told the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, "I have a lawyer to talk about that. I'm not even going to put my mouth on it."²⁰⁵ *Silence* is not an image repair strategy that Benoit puts forth in his theory. However, the threat was not so much to the Griffins as it was to Bush and USC, so LaMar Griffin may have felt that he did not need to answer to anyone concerning the rent payments or other improper benefits. Yahoo! Sports reported

²⁰² "Bush Attorney: Reggie Had No Knowledge of House Deal."

²⁰³ "Bush's Parents Didn't Pay Rent, House Owner Says."

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Schrottenboer and Trotter, "Parents of Bush Face Questions about Home."

that an NCAA spokesperson said, "Now that certain individuals have spoken publicly, we hope they will now speak with the NCAA."²⁰⁶

As time passed, there was conflicting information between what was said by the NCAA and by Bush. In an article on the 2007 settlement with Michaels, Cole and Robinson reported that the NCAA had “made two requests to interview Bush via his attorney and followed up with a written request.”²⁰⁷ Interestingly, Bush claimed, “They (the NCAA) haven't tried to contact me. If they did I wouldn't answer the phone.”²⁰⁸ Bush, of course, was already playing for the New Orleans Saints at that time. In 2010, when Bush settled with Lake, there were even fewer public comments. Bush and his family largely remained silent during the investigation except for *denying* or *minimizing* any wrongdoing.

Reggie Bush did exhibit *corrective action* in returning his Heisman Trophy to the Heisman Trophy Trust in 2012. He also reportedly showed remorse, or *mortification*, in a phone call to Athletic Director Pat Haden during which he apologized for the problems he caused for the school.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Bush received a multi-million dollar contract to play professional football well before the ruling in his amateurism case was handed down. As much as his reputation might have been damaged before the NCAA, the NCAA's opinion of Bush did not seem to matter enough to him to even attempt to correct it. Certainly the fans' opinions matter because they can affect his paycheck, at least

²⁰⁶ Cole and Robinson, “Cash and Carry - Reggie Bush Investigation - Yahoo Sports.”

²⁰⁷ Cole and Robinson, “Settlement Reached with Bush Family.”

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Moura, “Former USC RB Bush Returned His '05 Heisman.”

indirectly. It seems, though, that fans care more about on-field performance than past issues. Beyond that, the increasingly negative perception of the NCAA as well as the shift in public attitudes toward a willingness to pay players has cast Bush in a better light as time has passed. Today, he is written about as one of the all-time college football greats, though he has not yet been able to escape the asterisks and the reminders of a tarnished legacy.²¹⁰

Discussion

The Reggie Bush-USC case is a complex matter. If nothing else, it is a good example of why there have not been many image repair applications in college football. This case, in which several parties face image repair situations for multiple audiences, represents a serious breakdown in the stranglehold of the NCAA over its member institutions. Though the case began as an investigation into alleged improper benefits, the party who may have suffered the most is likely the NCAA itself.

It seems that there are some significant problems in major college sports, football specifically, that make image repair studies challenging. First, a star player like Reggie Bush can take off for the NFL long before sanctions come down. While he was pressured to return his Heisman Trophy, his entire team and the school were stripped of championships and wins. While the NCAA argued that the school should have known about the violations, it does provide a unique situation where the school may have to save face while an athlete does not. The same can be said for a coach who can leave for the NFL – out of the reach of the NCAA’s jurisdiction.

²¹⁰ See Hinton, “The Ghost of Reggie Bush”; Fletcher, “Ranking The 50 Greatest College Football Players Of All Time”; “Forde: Best Teams of the Decade”; Thirey, “USC’s 2004 Team Selected by AP as the Best of the BCS Era.”

A school cannot entirely escape the image repair situations that its employees or student-athletes bring about. In the case of USC, sweeping changes were made as a sign that the administration recognized that violations had occurred, whether they agreed with the NCAA's rulings or not. If there is a scapegoat to be found here, we could identify either McNair or Garrett. McNair, who is still battling the NCAA in his own image repair effort, has gained great support as the NCAA loses fans. Garrett has had stints as athletic director for smaller schools since he was fired at USC, but nothing quite as prestigious as the Southern Cal job. One key difference among the parties in this case is that only the administration representing the school itself truly has to protect and maintain a specific image. The other parties are all able to move on, but the institution endures and must stay and face the music.

CHAPTER FIVE
EXPLORING IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS IN
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY'S *TATTOOGATE*

Introduction

In January of 2010, Jim Tressel and the Ohio State University Buckeyes were very near the top of the college football world. Coming off a January 1st Rose Bowl win over the Oregon Ducks, the Buckeyes finished the 2009 football season ranked fifth overall in both the Coaches Poll and the Associated Press Top 25.²¹¹ Tressel's 2002 Buckeyes were the consensus national champions and in the 2006 and 2007 seasons the Buckeyes reached consecutive BCS National Championship Games.²¹² In a sport where sustained success happens only for a select few schools, Ohio State was the proverbial cream of the crop. Beyond that, Jim Tressel was widely regarded as an exemplary leader and Christian role model. His Tyndale House book, *The Winner's Manual: For the Game of Life*, debuted at number three on the *New York Times*' Best Sellers List in 2008.²¹³ The popularity of the team and its head coach made for a spectacular fall from the college football pedestal in 2010 and 2011 when the NCAA investigated the school and handed down punishments for the program, Tressel, and several players.

As explained in earlier chapters, this was certainly not the first time controversy struck a college football team. From William and Mary forcing out two coaches and the

²¹¹ "2009 College Football Rankings - Postseason."

²¹² "Jim Tressel Coaching Record."

²¹³ "Best Sellers - The New York Times."

college president due to academic dishonesty in the 1940s and 1950s to the NCAA imposing the death penalty on Southern Methodist University's football program in February of 1987,²¹⁴ football coaches, players, and teams have often been tangled up in sticky webs of indignity. Still, the focal elements of this chapter, *tattoogate*, occurred at a crucial point in time. The NCAA had just recently passed down extremely harsh punishments on the University of Southern California, sending a message about the seriousness with which it viewed infractions by its member organizations. Additionally, the Ohio State case was one of the first under new NCAA president Mark Emmert. The unique environment and timing of *tattoogate* make it a most appropriate case study for this project on image repair in Division I college football.

In this chapter, I first discuss the college football climate as a whole as well as specifically at Ohio State University preceding the *tattoogate* scandal of 2010. I then provide a detailed overview of the events surrounding *tattoogate* and the rhetorical moves of the involved parties. Next, I analyze the image repair efforts of the University (its administration), Coach Jim Tressel, and the players, using Benoit's typology as discussed in the methods section. While I discuss how the tactics and strategies of the involved parties functioned both with and against each other, I do not make broader claims of how these strategies fit a larger pattern of image repair efforts across the sport. I reserve such conclusions for the discussion chapter following the completion of the three case studies in this project. Still, the findings of this case study do allow for some predictions that I offer at the conclusion of the current chapter.

²¹⁴ Watterson, *College Football*, 219–224; *ibid.*, 369.

Background

In order to analyze the image repair tactics in the *tattoogate* controversy, we must first understand the general landscape of college football at the time leading up to the scandal. As mentioned in the first chapter, college football was continuing its rise in popularity and viewership throughout the mid-2000s. The 35.6 million people who viewed the 2006 national championship game attest to just how large the sport had become for the American public.²¹⁵ Coaching contracts were still rising, and the financial stakes for colleges were as well. However, the sport was not without its troubles. The ever-present dialectic between *student* and *athlete* in the term *student-athlete* was being debated regularly. In June 2010, the NCAA ruled on the Reggie Bush case at USC, handing down the most severe penalties for a major college football program since the death penalty at SMU.²¹⁶ New NCAA president Mark Emmert, in the face of challenges across multiple sports, needed to set a precedent that showed that the organization under his leadership would not take infractions from member institutions lightly. Additionally, Emmert and the NCAA knew that the Penn State-Jerry Sandusky scandal was being investigated beginning in 2009 by the Pennsylvania attorney general and would need to be addressed by the NCAA.²¹⁷ Emmert needed to show that he and the NCAA were not afraid to tackle serious issues amongst its member institutions appropriately yet toughly.

²¹⁵ Chappell, “College Football Championship Sets A New Cable Ratings Record.”

²¹⁶ “University of Southern California Public Infractions Report.”

²¹⁷ Chambers, “Penn State Sanctions: Timeline of the Sandusky Scandal That Brought NCAA Penalties.”

Football at Ohio State during this time period was prolific. Ohio State produced first-round draft picks every year from 2006 through 2009.²¹⁸ Coach Jim Tressel was the all-around lovable hero coaching in a sweater-vest and restoring the winning tradition that Ohio State University football fans craved. He replaced John Cooper, a coach who just could not get the job done, going only 3-8 in bowl games and an unacceptable 2-10-1 against rival Michigan.²¹⁹ Ohio State alum Joe Oestreich summed up the fan base's hard feelings concerning the prior coach's tenure nicely: "When John Cooper was losing every year to Michigan, the whole state was in a funk."²²⁰ Adding to Tressel's endearing nature was the fact that he was the only head coach in Division I college football teaching a class in the fall semester during football season.²²¹ Of course, the national championship he brought to Columbus along with a 9-1 (later made 8-1 by NCAA penalty) record against the Michigan Wolverines and appearances in two BCS National Championship Games made it practically impossible for Ohio State fans not to love him. He was the fresh and friendly face of a program built on a winning tradition and now rolling in success.

With its resurgence under Coach Tressel, Ohio State brought loftier and loftier expectations for each football season. Quarterback Terrelle Pryor was expected to be the best player in the Big Ten in twenty years. He wanted to "leave a legacy" and "to be one

²¹⁸ Russo, "Production Down at Ohio State Football Factory."

²¹⁹ "John Cooper Coaching Record."

²²⁰ Reid, "Buckeyes Fans State Their Case."

²²¹ Karp, "This Professor Looks Familiar... --- Ohio State Football Coach Jim Tressel Has an Unusual Side Job on Campus -- Teaching a Class."

of the best players that ever lived.”²²² His career did not start off as well as he and the coaching staff had hoped, but there were moments in which Pryor shined. Following his MVP effort in the January 2010 Rose Bowl win over Oregon, there were hopes of a national championship for Ohio State in the 2010 football season. The team was returning a majority of its starters and was ranked second in both of the preseason polls.²²³ Losing only one regular season game in 2010, the Buckeyes were nevertheless out of the national championship hunt, but they were selected to play in a BCS game: the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans. Pryor’s ego may have gotten the better of him when he noted in referring to other quarterbacks nominated for awards ahead of him: “I’ll put it like this: You put me in any of their offenses – any of them – and I’d dominate.”²²⁴ These words came at around the same time that Ohio State first learned of allegations that Pryor and some of his teammates had been violating NCAA rules for months, selling and trading memorabilia to a local tattoo parlor owner being investigated for drug trafficking.

The Controversy

The following timeline of events is based on the reporting of the NCAA, ESPN, and the *Columbus Dispatch*.²²⁵ From 2008 to 2010, eight Ohio State football players were receiving preferential treatment, an NCAA violation, from the owner of a local tattoo

²²² Greenstein, “Ohio State Football Preview: The Buckeyes Believe They Can Win the National Championship behind Quarterback Terrelle Pryor.”

²²³ “2010 College Football Rankings - Preseason.”

²²⁴ Hernandez, “College Football: Ohio State’s Pryor Takes Swipe at Other College QBs.”

²²⁵ “Chronology of Ohio State Scandal”; Bennett, “Timeline of Ohio State’s NCAA Case”; “Tressel Resignation.”

parlor.²²⁶ Though the NCAA does not generally include names in its reports, it is widely known that the tattoo parlor was Fine Line Ink run by Edward Rife. Some players received discounts on tattoos, while others received cash or tattoos in exchange for memorabilia. Additionally, one player received a discount on a vehicle and a loan for car repairs.²²⁷ While these benefits were given to players over a three-year span, that fact was kept from the administration and the coaching staff for much of that time.

On April 2, 2010 at 2:32 p.m., Columbus lawyer and former OSU walk-on Christopher T. Cicero sent the first of a series of e-mails to Jim Tressel calling his attention to the fact that Ohio State players had been selling memorabilia to Rife. In that initial e-mail, Cicero also told Tressel that Rife was being investigated on federal drug trafficking charges. Tressel chose to withhold all of this information from his superiors, but did forward the e-mail to Terrelle Pryor's mentor. Just four hours after the first e-mail was sent, Tressel replied to Cicero, "Thanks. I will get on it ASAP."²²⁸

Two weeks later, Cicero again e-mailed Tressel, this time providing relevant highlights from a conversation he had held with Rife. According to Cicero, Rife had been offered "nine Big Ten championship rings, fifteen pairs of cleats, four or five jerseys, and one national championship ring" by players in exchange for cash or tattoos.²²⁹ At the end of this e-mail, Cicero stressed to Tressel to keep the information confidential. Though Tressel had an obligation by contract to inform both the Ohio State administration and the

²²⁶ "The Ohio State University Public Infractions Report."

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ "Chronology of Ohio State Scandal."

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

NCAA of the possible infractions, he still did not. Within a couple of hours, Tressel wrote back to Cicero: “I hear you!! It is unbelievable!! Thanks for your help....keep me posted as to what I need to do if anything. I will keep pounding these kids hoping they grow up.”²³⁰ Cicero then wrote back the same afternoon reiterating to Tressel that there were serious federal drug charges coming soon for Rife and that Tressel should make sure that all of his players ceased contact with him immediately to avoid their numbers being traced when Rife would eventually be arrested. Cicero’s final e-mail contact with Tressel was in early June of 2010.

On September 13, 2010, all Ohio State athletic department employees signed their annual compliance forms indicating that each employee had reported any knowledge of possible NCAA infractions to their school. Tressel’s signing of this form later proved to be a serious obstacle for his case before the NCAA, as he had knowingly withheld information about the improper benefits allegations that Cicero had informed him of earlier in the year.

It was not until December 7, 2010, that the U.S. attorney’s office informed Ohio State administrators that memorabilia that seemed to belong to several players had been discovered during a raid of Rife’s business as part of the federal drug trafficking investigation Cicero had referenced in communication with Tressel. That means that the entire Ohio State administration – save Jim Tressel – knew nothing of the looming concerns over its football players’ eligibility for a full eight months after Cicero tipped off the head coach, which encompassed the entire 2010 regular season. Ohio State administrators informed the athletic department of the allegations on December 8, and

²³⁰ Ibid.

Tressel claimed the following day that this was the first time he had heard about the possible infractions of some of his players.²³¹

One week later, on December 16, Ohio State officials interviewed Terrelle Pryor, Daniel Herron, DeVier Posey, Mike Adams, Solomon Thomas, and Jordan Whiting concerning their involvement with Rife and possible misconduct. The very next day, Ohio State contacted both the Big Ten and the NCAA to inform them of an impending self-report of violations. That report was sent to the NCAA on December 19, 2010, and declared the six interviewed players ineligible until any reinstatement by the NCAA. After conducting its own interviews with the six players by phone, the NCAA told Ohio State on December 22 that all but Whiting would have to serve five-game suspensions for their actions. Whiting would need to sit out for one game, and all six of them would have to pay restitution for the improper benefits they received. In an unusual move, the NCAA allowed the players to play in the Sugar Bowl against Arkansas in January 2011.

Representing the University, Athletic Director Gene Smith lamented:

We were not as explicit with our student-athlete education as we should have been in the 2007-08 and 2008-09 academic years regarding the sale of apparel, awards and gifts issued by the athletics department. We began to significantly improve our education in November of 2009 to address these issues. After going through this experience, we will further enhance our education for all our student-athletes as we move forward.²³²

Smith also tried to point out the players' good intentions: "The decisions that they made, they made to help their families. ... So these young men went into their decision with the

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² "NCAA Requires Loss of Contests for Six Ohio State Football Student-Athletes."

right intent.”²³³ At this point, neither the University nor the NCAA had any idea that Tressel had prior knowledge of the rules infractions.

The fact that Tressel had not been forthcoming with the administration, the NCAA, or the public made his words on December 23, 2010, even more damning and revolting: “I think we all have a little sensor within us, ‘Well, I’m not sure if I should be doing this.’ And then sometimes it gets overridden by what you think your necessity is.”²³⁴ He went on to place at least some of the responsibility for educating the players on himself and the coaching staff:

I think ultimately we as coaches feel as if the buck stops here – that we’re the ones that need to make things even more crystal clear than when a compliance officer might spend time with our team or an outside speaker or whatever it happens to be. The bottom line is that we feel as if that’s our responsibility, so obviously we don’t feel good about the fact that we fell short.²³⁵

Still, looking back at the entire controversy while recognizing Tressel’s foreknowledge of the infractions, his words on December 23 placing this minimal amount of blame on himself and even dissipating it across the entire coaching staff must not sit well with the public, the school administration, the NCAA, his staff, or his players. In late December, the five players with the longer of the suspensions publicly apologized to the fans and their families for their actions.²³⁶

On January 4, 2011, Ohio State played Arkansas in the Allstate Sugar Bowl. Ohio State, led by game MVP Terrelle Pryor, beat Arkansas by a score of 31-26, a win that

²³³ “Tressel Resignation.”

²³⁴ Robinson and Wetzel, “Tressel Knew of Gear Scheme Last April.”

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ Lesmerises, “Five Buckeyes Offer Their Apologies to OSU Fans for NCAA Violations.”

would later be vacated by the NCAA. The six Buckeye players who were scheduled to serve suspensions at the beginning of the 2011 season were allowed to participate in the bowl game. Several of those players had integral roles in the win. Posey led the team in receptions, and Herron scored a touchdown for the Buckeyes.²³⁷ Pryor, the star quarterback for the Buckeyes, never sat out a single game for Ohio State because he declared for the NFL Draft instead of returning for his senior year.²³⁸

On January 13, the legal team for Ohio State was searching through e-mails for another case and stumbled across Tressel's e-mail exchanges with Cicero from the prior spring. As part of the investigation, the school searched the rest of the athletic department's e-mail accounts but found nothing to suggest that anyone other than Tressel had prior knowledge of the infractions. On January 16, school officials asked Tressel about the e-mails with Cicero, and he confessed that he had in fact received e-mails from Cicero alerting him to the improper benefits. This admission was the first indication Tressel gave that he might have withheld any information from the school or the NCAA concerning the case. Tressel would later claim that he told members of the compliance office and possibly other employees in December of the tips he had received from Cicero, but school officials adamantly denied these claims.²³⁹

On February 8, Tressel admitted for the first time that he had committed his own NCAA infraction. When asked whether he understood that it was likely that players had

²³⁷ "2011 Game Recap / Allstate Sugar Bowl."

²³⁸ McDonald, "Oakland Raiders Take Terrelle Pryor in NFL Supplemental Draft."

²³⁹ "Tressel Alerted OSU Officials To Tattoo Scandal Tip As Early As December."

committed violations, he agreed that he did. When asked specifically by an attorney for the NCAA whether he had chosen, despite his knowledge of probable infractions, not to share any of that information with the NCAA, Ohio State's compliance office, or anyone else in Ohio State athletics, Tressel admitted that he had chosen not to disclose this information. This answer was particularly concerning given that he had forwarded the initial e-mail to Pryor's mentor and after that action had signed compliance forms indicating that he had not withheld any information about rules infractions from the NCAA or the school.

On February 19, 2011, booster Robert DiGeronimo paid several Ohio State players \$200 at a charity event.²⁴⁰ The fact that this infraction took place during the NCAA investigation of improper benefits at Ohio State hurt the Buckeyes significantly more than it might have otherwise. DiGeronimo had given almost \$75,000 to the University earmarked for athletics over a span of several years.²⁴¹

Yahoo! Sports broke the news on March 7, 2011, that Tressel had known about the infractions in April of 2010 but had not disclosed any of that information to his superiors.²⁴² Ohio State quickly responded by holding a press conference the next day and announcing that the school had suspended Tressel for two games and fined him \$250,000 for his NCAA violation in not disclosing the information he had concerning the improper benefits players had received. Tressel's suspension would later be increased to five games to match the suspensions of the five players. Athletic Director Gene Smith backed

²⁴⁰ Bennett, "Timeline of Ohio State's NCAA Case."

²⁴¹ "The Ohio State University Public Infractions Report," 11.

²⁴² Robinson and Wetzel, "Tressel Knew of Gear Scheme Last April."

Tressel completely at the press conference, and, when asked about whether he had considered firing Tressel, school president E. Gordon Gee famously remarked, “No, are you kidding? Let me just be very clear: I’m just hopeful the coach doesn’t dismiss me.”²⁴³ Gee’s remarks read like a joke but convey real data about power relationships. Tressel was forced to apologize as part of his reprimand, but in his speech he stated, “Admittedly, I probably did not give quite as much thought to the potential NCAA part of things as I read it. My focus was on the well-being of the young people.”²⁴⁴ He also reiterated to the audience that he had been asked for strict confidentiality, but the e-mail records showed that he had not been asked for confidentiality until the second e-mail from Cicero two weeks after the first correspondence in which Tressel learned of his players’ involvement with Rife. Additionally, the belated confidentiality request did not relieve Tressel of his contractual duties to inform the Ohio State administration of the infractions.

On the same day as the press conference, Ohio State appealed to the NCAA for earlier reinstatement of its penalized athletes. The school cited NCAA precedents in hopes that there would be a reduction of sentences for the five players given five-game suspensions. The school also advocated on behalf of its players by identifying corrective actions being taken by the University and the players; the players had already begun and were continuing to perform community service and outreach.²⁴⁵

The apology Tressel offered at the press conference did not satisfy Smith. After the conference, the athletic director apparently told Tressel he needed to apologize more

²⁴³ “Chronology of Ohio State Scandal.”

²⁴⁴ Marshall, “Ohio State Football Coach Jim Tressel Suspended 2 Games, Fined \$250,000 in Aftermath of Yahoo Report.”

²⁴⁵ “Ohio State Reinstatement Appeal.”

explicitly. On March 14, Tressel did just that: “I sincerely apologize for what we’ve been through. I apologize for the fact I wasn’t able to find the ones to partner with to handle our difficult and complex situation.”²⁴⁶ This second apology must still not have been satisfactory for Ohio State administrators, as Tressel’s suspension was increased to the first five games of the 2011 season on March 17, 2011. Perhaps the administration recognized that Tressel was “apologizing” but not claiming any responsibility for his part in the infractions.

On March 30, Ohio State University announced Luke Fickell as interim head coach for the first five games of the 2011 football season. That same day, when asked if he had considered resigning, Tressel said, “I’ve never had that thought. That wouldn’t be something that would jump in my mind unless there came that point in time where I said, ‘You know what? The best thing for these kids is if I do,’ and I don’t feel that way.”²⁴⁷ As spring practices began at the school, it was expected that Fickell would coach the first five games in the fall and then yield to Tressel for the remaining contests.

In April, the NCAA sent its notice of allegations to Ohio State. The notice restated the infractions the NCAA had determined each of the players to have committed, but it also stated that Jim Tressel had “failed to report” information about potential violations to the administration and, in the process, allowed some of his players to compete in NCAA contests while ineligible for participation.²⁴⁸ The report asked Ohio

²⁴⁶ “Tressel Resignation.”

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ “Amended Notice of Allegations.”

State to submit pertinent details of the case in order for the NCAA to render a judgment for the school.

While the case was ongoing, President Gee asked Tressel to resign as football coach. On May 30, 2011, Jim Tressel's resignation was announced by the University. Tressel explained, "After meeting with university officials, we agreed that it is in the best interest of Ohio State that I resign as head football coach. The appreciation that Ellen and I have for the Buckeye Nation is immeasurable."²⁴⁹ Gee and Smith chose to focus on the ideals and mission of the school rather than on Tressel's accomplishments or his mistakes. They spoke of the resignation being part of the process of moving forward in the University's ambition and tradition of excellence both on and off the field. Both claimed that they held the University in higher regard than any of its individual employees. Fickell was named as the interim coach for the entire 2011 season as part of the press conference.

On June 7, Pryor announced that he would leave Ohio State, foregoing his senior year. Through his lawyer, Pryor released the following statement: "In the best interest of my teammates, I have made the decision to forgo my senior year of football at The Ohio State University."²⁵⁰ Soon after, Pryor would be taken in the NFL's supplemental draft by the Oakland Raiders. However, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell was not too keen on the idea of Pryor skipping out on his NCAA suspension. As part of the conditions for his

²⁴⁹ "Text of Ohio State Statement on Tressel Resignation."

²⁵⁰ "Lawyer: Terrelle Pryor Not Returning to Ohio State."

eligibility for the supplemental draft, Pryor had to agree to sit out the first five games of the 2011 NFL season.²⁵¹

On July 7, 2011, Ohio State officially responded to the NCAA's allegations.²⁵² In its report, officials expressed shock and disappointment in former head coach Jim Tressel's behavior and lack of institutional reporting in the case. The administrators distanced themselves from him by highlighting the severity of the case and calling attention to their punishment for Tressel as well as their acceptance of his subsequent resignation. Additionally, they self-imposed several major punishments ranging from the enforcement of the original suspensions of involved players to the vacating of all of the school's wins from the 2010-11 season. Ohio State University hoped that by punishing itself, it could earn favor with the committee and therefore receive a lesser penalty than what the NCAA might have otherwise given. Tressel's response to the NCAA allegations also admitted that he had made mistakes. However, it focused largely on his good intentions in not sharing the information he had received from Cicero. Tressel's response explained:

At the time he received the emails Coach Tressel had several concerns that led to his error in judgment. In his interview he prioritized those concerns as his focus on the safety of student-athletes, the gravity of the federal criminal investigation, and the request for confidentiality made by the individual who provided the information. At the time, those concerns trumped any thought he had relating to possible NCAA rules violations. However, Coach Tressel stated in his interview, and acknowledges now, that he should not have allowed those concerns to override his duty to report possible NCAA violations.²⁵³

²⁵¹ McDonald, "Oakland Raiders Take Terrelle Pryor in NFL Supplemental Draft."

²⁵² "Ohio State Response to Allegations."

²⁵³ "Jim Tressel Response to Allegations."

The report made the argument that Tressel was an honest man that had made a poor judgment due to having to balance several serious concerns at once. Moreover, it asserted that he had been punished enough by losing his job as head coach at Ohio State.

In late July, the NCAA said that Ohio State would not face the “failure to monitor” charge, one of the most serious charges the NCAA considers. The NCAA stated, “Considering the institution's rules education and monitoring efforts, the enforcement staff did not believe a failure to monitor charge was appropriate in this case.”²⁵⁴ This change was a huge relief for both Buckeyes fans and officials. The NCAA did not uncover any additional infractions during its investigation.

On August 12, 2011, Ohio State officials went before the NCAA for its infractions hearing. There, Smith told the committee that not only would Ohio State impose the punishments it offered in the response to the NCAA’s allegations, it would also return the \$339,000 it had received from its participation in the 2010 Sugar Bowl. This was a stronger push by Smith to have the NCAA look upon Ohio State with leniency.

On September 1, Ohio State found itself with more problems; the school suspended two of its players for accepting cash from DiGeronimo, the booster who had paid players at the charity event in February of 2011. On September 20, the school made it very clear that they were officially cutting ties with DiGeronimo. More investigative efforts uncovered extra pay for football players who held summer jobs at DiGeronimo’s company. Additional suspensions were handed down by the school to several players including Posey, who received an extra five games tacked on to his existing suspension.

²⁵⁴ Bennett, “Ohio State Doesn’t Face Worst Sanctions.”

On November 3, 2011, the NCAA sent a new notice of allegations to Ohio State. This time, the illegal benefits from DiGeronimo significantly increased the severity of the case in the committee's eyes. Ohio State stripped itself of five scholarships over three years while it awaited the ruling. The NCAA let the school know that it was again facing the failure to monitor charges they had escaped earlier in the year. While the school waited for a ruling, Urban Meyer was hired to take over the football program. Neither Meyer nor Smith anticipated more serious punishments than those the school had already agreed to dole out. Smith noted that a bowl ban would be unprecedented for the nature of the crime.²⁵⁵

On December 20, 2011, Ohio State received the NCAA decision on *tattoogate*. Ohio State was, in fact, cited for failure to monitor as feared following the NCAA's warning in November. The NCAA upheld the punishments that Ohio State had already self-imposed, but it also took away additional scholarships from the program and banned the Buckeyes from participation in a bowl game for the 2012 season. Regarding former head coach Jim Tressel, the committee found that because he had at least four clear opportunities to mention the infractions to the NCAA or the school but did not, he had "engaged in unethical conduct."²⁵⁶ As punishment for this unethical behavior, the NCAA imposed a five-year show-cause order for Tressel, which all but assured that he would not work in college football for at least five years and perhaps ever again.

²⁵⁵ Bennett, "Timeline of Ohio State's NCAA Case."

²⁵⁶ "Ohio State Cited for Failure to Monitor."

Image Repair Analysis

The Administration

For most of the timeline of this case, the University was not perceived to have been at direct fault for the controversy. Because of this aspect of the controversy, the school's administration was able to focus not only on its own reputation but also on protecting its players and coach embroiled in the scandal. This strategy seemed to be in Ohio State's best interest because solidifying the reputations of its constituents presumably makes a school stronger and more consistent in its branding. While needing to perform its own image repair strategies at times, Ohio State was also able to engage in third party image repair.

The first rhetorical move by the school came when it declared the involved players ineligible almost immediately after being notified of the memorabilia found in December of 2010. With this action, Ohio State was showing that it respected the rules set in place by the NCAA, the governing body of the sport. The school was protecting itself, but it was also able to back its players in the process. After interviewing the players in the case, Smith thanked the players "because they were honest" and "forthright" with the investigators.²⁵⁷ As soon as the NCAA ruled that the players would be reinstated only following their serving suspensions and paying restitution, Smith stood up for the players: "The decisions that they made, they made to help their families. ... So these young men went into their decision with the right intent."²⁵⁸ Smith focused on *good intentions* to help the players *evade responsibility* for their actions.

²⁵⁷ "Tressel Resignation."

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

Smith's addressing of the deficiencies in student-athlete education concerning improper benefits actually served as both third party image repair and image repair for the school. On the one hand, his comments were *shifting blame* from the athletes back on to the college. However, this was an intelligent strategy given the available information at the time, because Smith was also able to offer a simple *corrective action* that was already taking place: reform in its compliance education.

When the NCAA sanctions against Ohio State players were upheld in March of 2011, Smith stated, "The players are sorry for the disappointment they have caused, will learn from their mistakes, and will strive to earn the confidence and support of everyone associated with the university through their future conduct."²⁵⁹ Smith was performing *mortification* for the players. This was an unusual rhetorical move; *mortification* is usually performed for oneself. In the appeal for reinstatement, Ohio State highlighted the *corrective actions* its athletes were taking.²⁶⁰ The athletic director, representing the University, supported the Ohio State players throughout the case. Of course, the penalized athletes were following Athletic Director Smith's corrective action plan rather than one they created themselves.

While the scattered tactics in the third party image repair efforts of the school might not have been as effective as picking one or two on which to focus, the primary concern for the school was not the image of its players. The image of its players is only important insofar as it maintains the image the University wishes to portray. When viewed in this light, the disparate attempts at keeping star players eligible makes better

²⁵⁹ "Ohio State Player Sanctions Upheld."

²⁶⁰ "Ohio State Reinstatement Appeal."

sense. What should be more consistent, then, is the school's strategy for maintaining its own image. Here, we find repeated and steady efforts to *bolster* reputation, express *mortification*, and provide evidence of *corrective action*, all discussed below.

Ohio State University swiftly reported violations to the NCAA throughout the case as it became aware of them. It made appeals as it saw fit, but the school also recognized that in its best long-term interest, there was a point where Tressel was so deeply in the wrong that he had to be forced out. At that point, the University expressed shock and dismay at his efforts to conceal NCAA infractions, distancing itself from Tressel in order to ensure that the school's reputation would remain strong.²⁶¹ The school also distanced itself from DiGeronimo and Pryor in order to maintain an image of tolerating only behavior that conformed to the highest standard.

Mortification was a key component of Ohio State's image repair strategy. Tressel was forced to apologize a second time publicly because the first account was unsatisfactory. Smith was also remorseful for not having a better educational system in place concerning compliance and athletes.²⁶² Furthermore, it is likely that the five players who publicly apologized for their actions in the case were strongly encouraged to do so by the athletic department.

In order to show true remorse, Ohio State chose to focus on *corrective action*. Distancing itself from Tressel, DiGeronimo, and Pryor served as *corrective action* for the school alongside its many self-imposed penalties. The school was not only quick to comply with the NCAA at each step along the way, it also offered its own punishments

²⁶¹ "Ohio State Response to Allegations."

²⁶² "NCAA Requires Loss of Contests for Six Ohio State Football Student-Athletes."

throughout the case. Gene Smith even stood at the hearing and told the NCAA that Ohio State would give back its earnings from the Sugar Bowl on top of the other *corrective actions* it was already taking. Ohio State was right to use *corrective action* and *mortification* together.

The Ohio State administration also chose to *bolster* its reputation several times. Throughout the case, both Gee and Smith chose to focus on themes of moving forward, upholding tradition, and winning on and off the field. Even once the final ruling was handed down, Smith stated: “We are surprised and disappointed with the NCAA's decision. However, we have decided not to appeal the decision because we need to move forward as an institution.”²⁶³ Perhaps the biggest criticism of Ohio State’s handling of its image repair in this case was Gee’s comment concerning whether he had considered firing Tressel.²⁶⁴ This quote undermined the authority of the administration as well as their focus on moving onward and upward. On the contrary, it spoke the truth about the relative power of the administration and the athletic department, specifically the head coach. Still, the image repair efforts of the administration worked much better than their third-party image repair efforts for the players, largely due to the consistency and simplicity of the message.

Jim Tressel

From an analysis point of view, Tressel’s image repair efforts did not stand a chance from the beginning. This case is interesting, though, in that it highlights how one can be perhaps so popular that the threats to one’s image do not function as we might

²⁶³ “NCAA Bans Ohio State from Postseason Play.”

²⁶⁴ “Chronology of Ohio State Scandal.”

expect. While he attempted to apologize, it was too little, too late. Considering that he had at least four opportunities to come forward with his knowledge of the infractions prior to the official NCAA investigation, it was difficult to recognize any true remorse.

The importance of audience to image repair here is readily apparent, though. For the audience of the NCAA and the administration at Ohio State University, Tressel's tactics were simply insufficient. He attempted to *minimize* the seriousness of the infractions, and he stated that he did not think it was necessary to speak up since he knew the government would do its job. This *transcendence* attempt did not resonate with fans, the NCAA, or school administrators, because Tressel knew that he was required to report the information Cicero gave him; choosing not to report the violations was not a way to stay out of the government's way. The contradictions, the lack of acceptance of responsibility, and the apparent lack of true remorse led to his forced resignation.

However, for the fan base, Tressel could really do no wrong. Though he lied to the administration and to the NCAA, he was also responsible for the wins the fan base craved. The fact that he stood up on December 23 to address the public but chose to shame his own players and take just a small amount of responsibility in the matter should have bothered the public. He should have never *shifted blame* as he did.²⁶⁵ However, he fed and reflected a culture of greed for college football glory, and that culture continued to grow. Tressel's infractions were not egregious enough to alienate alumni and fans who supported his winning coaching strategies. This aspect of the case supports Kruse's

²⁶⁵ Robinson and Wetzel, "Tressel Knew of Gear Scheme Last April."

notion that though ethics are important in sports, winning is more important to fans than following every rule.²⁶⁶

However, Tressel lost his job for lying to the NCAA and to the administration. His *mortification* strategy was an extremely poor tactic because of how little he could be trusted to be sincere. He was effectively banned from college football for five years, so one cannot say that his image repair efforts worked. In truth, he swiftly overcame this issue, moving from a consulting position with the Indianapolis Colts to a position at Akron University and now serves as the president of Youngstown State University. The irony is glaring here; Tressel was not considered honest enough to continue serving as head football coach at Ohio State, but he is now in charge of another academic institution (an Ohio university, no less). This case points to the importance fans place on winning in college football over following rules set forth by its governing body.

The Players

As discussed earlier, the school provided some third-party image repair efforts for the players involved in the scandal. However, these efforts were largely ineffective due to inconsistencies in strategies and the reputations of the players being less important to the University than its own image. The players themselves also performed image repair strategies, though.

The five players who had the five-game suspensions all publicly apologized together in December of 2010. They all focused on strategies of *mortification* and *corrective action*. It is telling that reporters felt that the only non-starter in the group should be the one quoted. Solomon Thomas said, “This has really made us all really look

²⁶⁶ Kruse, “Apologia in Team Sport,” 273–274.

at things very differently. We're very remorseful to everyone around us. We realize we made a mistake. We're asking you, Buckeye nation, alumni, community, to let us show you that we do love this university."²⁶⁷ He also emphasized that the players would give back to their community and would make a difference.

The problem with the players' apologies was that they had no credibility. Not long after these public apologies, there was more trouble with payments from DiGeronimo. Additionally, the fact that Pryor declared for the supplemental draft after playing in the Sugar Bowl and avoided serving his collegiate suspension did not leave a good taste in the mouths of the public. One cannot expect the strategy of *mortification* to work when true remorse is not demonstrated. In fact, an online poll from an Ohio website showed that the majority of the public did not believe the apologies of the players were sincere at all.²⁶⁸

Discussion

The image repair efforts of each party all worked differently in this case study. The players and Tressel utilized *mortification* strategies, but the group had lost credibility and shown a lack of remorse, so Tressel lost his job and all of the players had to sit out games (Pryor sat out of NFL competition). Still, Tressel managed to escape the situation with great fan support, while the players could not. As discussed in the previous case study, Pete Carroll skipped town just before the NCAA penalized USC, and he still has great fan support today. Coaches have a benefit in that they are able to leave while the

²⁶⁷ Lesmerises, "Five Buckeyes Offer Their Apologies to OSU Fans for NCAA Violations."

²⁶⁸ Yarborough, "Terrelle Pryor and Teammates Apologize for Misdeeds That Drew NCAA Sanctions; Do You Buy It? Poll | Cleveland.com."

universities remain, forced to clean up the mess the coaches left and rebuild their reputations.

It seems that there might be a hierarchy of sins within the sport that dictates that, regardless of one's image repair efforts, it is impossible to escape unscathed after committing certain acts. In this case, lying to one's superiors and to the NCAA seems at the upper end of that hierarchy. Selling memorabilia in a sport that seems to be moving toward a pay-for-play model might not rank as high on that list, but not showing genuine remorse in the face of disciplinary action that affects a team's chances of winning might.

Finally, as the administration, looking out for the school's image and values is incredibly important. I find that Tressel, DiGeronimo, and Pryor all served as release valves for the pressure Ohio State felt from the NCAA and fans to show that it would play by the rules as it tried to meet near-perfect measures of success. Tressel, as a head coach, was hired to win but forced to resign when he got caught doing what he felt gave his team the best chance of winning on the field (concealing the information about star players receiving improper benefits). The university distanced itself from DiGeronimo as demonstration that it held its institutional values above the financial benefits it was receiving from an athletics booster. Pryor left the university in part to escape his suspension, yet the school cut off contact with him to show that while it wanted football success, it valued some higher ethic of sportsmanship in winning. In truth, administrations are threatened not by the immoral acts themselves but by the public finding out that the university allowed those acts.

CHAPTER SIX

IMAGE REPAIR EFFORTS OVER A SERIES OF CONTROVERSIES: A LOOK AT THE MULTIPLE ACCUSATIONS CONCERNING JAMEIS WINSTON AND FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

Introduction

In Division I college football, there are several factors that contribute to the success of a team. While there are certainly perennial powerhouses and so-called dynasties, winning the national championship can require the right combination of players and coaches, a favorable schedule, a few big plays at key moments, and maybe even a little luck. The Florida State University Seminoles have achieved much success in college football historically, but in the 2012 through 2014 football seasons, the stars aligned for the Seminoles. The team went 39-3 in that stretch, winning one BCS National Championship and reaching the inaugural College Football Playoff.²⁶⁹ Much of that success can be attributed to its 2013 and 2014 starting quarterback Jameis Winston, who was also responsible for negative attention from the media and the public.

In the 2013 season, coming off a top ten finish in both the Associated Press Top 25 and the Coaches Poll,²⁷⁰ the Seminoles ran the college football table. Leading his team to a perfect 14-0 record and a national championship, Jameis Winston was recognized as the consensus ACC Player of the Year, Offensive Player of the Year, Rookie of the Year,

²⁶⁹ “2015 FSU Football Media Guide.”

²⁷⁰ “2012 NCAA College Football Polls and Rankings for Week 16 - ESPN.”

and Offensive Rookie of the Year.²⁷¹ Winston also became the youngest winner ever of the Heisman Trophy at the end of the 2013 regular season.²⁷² While he was impressing fans with his play on the field, his off-field actions were the subject of intense scrutiny throughout the 2013 and 2014 seasons.

Unlike the USC or OSU cases, the controversies surrounding Winston did not cost Florida State any wins or trophies. However, the allegations about Winston's actions in many ways were more severe than the allegations against Reggie Bush or the players at Ohio State. By the time he was being considered as a potential first overall draft pick, Winston was being thoroughly vetted by NFL teams.²⁷³ While he did not cause his team to vacate any wins, Winston did present rhetorical situations that demanded image repair responses from him, his head football coach, and the Florida State administration. I am including this case as part of this larger project in order to examine how the rhetorical strategies of the involved parties functioned in a high profile case that did not involve a large-scale NCAA investigation or team sanctions but still presented serious allegations against the star of a championship team.

In this chapter, I first give a brief overview of the context in which Jameis Winston and the 2013 and 2014 Florida State Seminoles functioned and what their place was in college football history. I then describe – and put into a chronology – the off-field behavior of which Jameis Winston was accused. In writing about these allegations, I address how Winston's fame in a small community focused intently on Florida State

²⁷¹ “Jameis Winston Biography.”

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ Johnston, “Making Sure.”

Athletics may have influenced police, school, and media handling of the claims against him. Next, I investigate the image repair strategies of Winston, Florida State, and head coach Jimbo Fisher. As I explore their image repair efforts individually, I also consider how these strategies function rhetorically with and against each other. Lastly, I contemplate what these strategies and their results might tell us about college football controversies as a whole.

Background

In 2012, when Jameis Winston enrolled at Florida State, the BCS system was already being phased out. Though it was created to settle discrepancies in who was considered each year's Division I football champion, the champion crowned by the BCS was not unanimously accepted every year. Fans and media alike debated whether Division I football should implement a playoff system in order to allow more teams to compete for the title than just the two that the BCS system selected.²⁷⁴ By the 2014 season – Winston's last at Florida State – the College Football Playoff had already been implemented, which allowed a selection committee to pit four teams against each other in national semifinal and championship games.²⁷⁵

Prior to Winston's arrival in Tallahassee, the Seminoles went through its first football head coaching change in thirty-four years, replacing Bobby Bowden with Jimbo Fisher following the 2009 season.²⁷⁶ Fisher was expected to revitalize the program

²⁷⁴ See Wetzel, "The Wetzel Plan"; "Pros, Cons of a College Football Playoff."

²⁷⁵ Fazekas, "How the College Football Playoff Began."

²⁷⁶ Smith, "Bowden Makes Retirement from Florida State Official."

quickly through defensive staff changes and recruiting.²⁷⁷ In 2010, as several major programs were under intense scrutiny and investigation from the NCAA, Florida State had to vacate twelve wins from the 2006 and 2007 seasons due to an “academic fraud scandal” in which several FSU student-athletes were caught cheating in an online music course.²⁷⁸ Fisher was tasked with leading his program beyond the controversy and back into the limelight as championship contenders. Fisher did revive the powerhouse program, leading the team to a combined 58-11 record, a BCS National Championship, four straight bowl victories, and three ACC championships in his first five seasons as head coach.²⁷⁹

At the beginning of the 2013 season, the University of Alabama Crimson Tide was considered to be the best team in all of college football, having won three of the previous four BCS National Championships.²⁸⁰ In an SEC-dominated field, though, Florida State stood out as a potential dark horse contender for that year’s crown. In the pre-season, the Seminoles named promising freshman Jameis Winston their starting quarterback. Winston had redshirted the year prior behind star quarterback EJ Manuel but had been considered the top quarterback recruit in the country as well as one of the nation’s best baseball players coming out of high school. In fact, Winston had chosen

²⁷⁷ Schlabach, “Fisher Lays Groundwork for New Era in FSU Football.”

²⁷⁸ “Florida St. Vacates 12 Football Wins for Cheating.”

²⁷⁹ “2015 FSU Football Media Guide,” 229.

²⁸⁰ “FBS Championship History.”

Florida State over Alabama as well as powerhouses Louisiana State, Ohio State, and the University of Oregon.²⁸¹

Jameis Winston instantly produced what were considered outstanding numbers on the football field. His efforts helped his team to two undefeated regular seasons and a combined 27-1 record.²⁸² However, his off-field actions garnered almost as much attention as his athletic feats, and the negative attention from media and fans presented challenges for himself as well as Florida State University as they tried to manage the negative publicity and shift attention to the team and its accomplishments. While Winston was only suspended for one game during his career, and no Florida State football victories during his tenure have been vacated to date, Winston's controversial actions and words present several image repair opportunities to study. The strong football reputation of the school and the star power of Heisman-winner Jameis Winston give this case a feel similar to the USC and OSU cases. Conversely, the lack of any official NCAA investigation, the presence of criminal allegations, and the relatively minimal consequences for Winston and Florida State University athletics in this case contribute to a discussion on preferential treatment and the value of appropriate image repair strategy choices for star athletes.

The Controversies

Jameis Winston was a major contributor on the field as part of the Seminoles football team. It is also noteworthy that he was also a valued outfielder, relief pitcher, and designated hitter for the Florida State baseball team that earned top ten rankings

²⁸¹ "Jameis Winston Biography."

²⁸² Ibid.

nationally in 2013 and 2014.²⁸³ Florida State University and the Seminole fans had a vested interest in Winston remaining eligible and representing the school in competition. Having a star on the team – whether baseball or football – excites fans who hope the team will win games and championships. Though he had his first run-ins with the law as a true freshman, allegations against Winston were not widely publicized until after he had already become successful and famous as a Florida State athlete during his redshirt freshman (academic sophomore) season. The accusations against him became national news as Winston’s name reached a broad audience.

The first publicized allegation against Jameis Winston was by far the most serious; on November 13, 2013, TMZ reported that Winston was “being investigated for felony sexual assault.”²⁸⁴ Several media outlets had been requesting information concerning the case in the days leading up to the TMZ story. In response to those requests, the Tallahassee Police Department stated, “The Tallahassee Police Department has received several requests from local and national media for a case TPD received on December 7th, 2012, of an alleged sexual battery. The case was assigned to the Special Victims Unit. TPD is continuing its investigation and has consulted with the state attorney as to the direction of the case.”²⁸⁵ According to a redacted police report provided to TMZ, the alleged sexual assault occurred in an apartment in the early morning hours of December 7, 2012.²⁸⁶ TMZ reported that though there were discrepancies between

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ “Florida State QB Jameis Winston Investigated for Sexual Assault.”

²⁸⁵ “Source: FSU’s Winston Not Talking to Police.”

²⁸⁶ “Incident Report.”

Winston and the description of the unknown suspect in the report – Winston is listed at 6’4” but the perpetrator was estimated to be between 5’9” and 5’11” – police had confirmed that Winston was the suspect in the case.²⁸⁷ Just one hour after the TMZ story was released, Florida State University responded with a statement:

We are aware of a matter that was investigated by the Tallahassee Police Department almost a year ago. Because the investigation has not been closed by the TPD, we cannot comment further at this time. We look forward to a speedy resolution of the issue. There is no change to Jameis Winston’s status.²⁸⁸

At the time of the statement, Winston was “widely considered the current frontrunner to win the Heisman Trophy” and already projected to be the number one draft pick in 2015.²⁸⁹

When asked about the accusations, Winston’s lawyer, Tim Jansen, said, “The case was basically closed and we’re not sure why it’s opened up.”²⁹⁰ A police spokesman, however, commented, “The case is open and active and the victim is working with the State Attorney’s Office.”²⁹¹ It is unclear why the case was reopened,²⁹² but Florida State was 9-0 with a number two overall ranking going into its tenth game of the season when the TMZ story broke. It was uncertain at the time whether or not the ongoing

²⁸⁷ “Florida State QB Jameis Winston Investigated for Sexual Assault.”

²⁸⁸ Rubin, “Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Is at Center of Sexual Battery Investigation: Report.”

²⁸⁹ Rossman and Burlew, “Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Investigated for Sexual Battery.”

²⁹⁰ Rubin, “Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Is at Center of Sexual Battery Investigation: Report.”

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*; Wolken, “State Doesn’t Expect Jameis Winston to Speak with Investigators.”

investigation might jeopardize the Seminoles' perfect season; a felony charge would result in Winston's automatic suspension from the football team.²⁹³

On November 15, 2013, William "Willie" Meggs, a state attorney associated with the case, told reporters that he was unsure why the case had stalled initially, but it was likely that the woman who initially filed the police report had either declined to cooperate with police or that the police had determined there was not enough information to warrant prosecution.²⁹⁴ After repeated media requests for information concerning the case, it was forwarded to Meggs' office. Though he said that he expected Winston not to talk to state investigators in order to avoid incriminating himself, Meggs said he remained confident about his office's ability to handle the case properly: "It's not as easy as it would be if we were fresh on it, obviously, but it's not impossible. I think we're going to be able to reconstruct the events of that night."²⁹⁵

Five days later, on November 20, the alleged victim and her family released a statement through their attorney, Patricia Carroll, to the *Tampa Bay Times* concerning the investigation. As the *Times* reported, the family made several claims in the statement regarding how the case had been handled including that a detective had told Carroll "that her client's life 'will be made miserable' if she pursued a sexual assault case against Florida State quarterback Jameis Winston."²⁹⁶ Continuing, they wrote, "When the attorney contacted Detective (Scott) Angulo immediately after Winston was identified,

²⁹³ Wolken, "State Doesn't Expect Jameis Winston to Speak with Investigators."

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ Baker and Mitchell, "Statement."

Detective Angulo told the attorney that Tallahassee was a big football town and the victim needs to think long and hard before proceeding against him because she will be raked over the coals and her life will be made miserable.”²⁹⁷

The family specified that they had not intended for the case to go public and that the alleged victim was “devastated” to learn just recently that Winston’s lawyer had been notified of the case in February 2013, because that gave Winston plenty of time to prepare his defense.²⁹⁸ Very early in the case, the family claimed, “Angulo refused to collect Winston's DNA or interview his roommate, a possible witness, because doing so would alert Winston and could force the case to go public.”²⁹⁹ It is understandable that the family would have been confused and disappointed, then, to hear that Tim Jansen, Winston’s attorney, had been notified just a month after Winston was named the suspect. The family expressed dismay with the police department and asked a series of questions concerning what they believed were mishandlings in the case. During a phone interview concerning the case and statement, Meggs, the state attorney, expressed disbelief that the police department had shared any of the investigation materials with Winston’s lawyer or the media, and he called for a self-examination of its procedures at the conclusion of the case.³⁰⁰

On the same day that the alleged victim and her family released their statement, the results of a voluntary DNA test linked Winston to his accuser. ESPN reported – in an

²⁹⁷ “Statement from Woman Accusing FSU Star Jameis Winston of Sex Assault.”

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ Baker and Mitchell, “Statement.”

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

article originally published November 20 but updated December 5 – that Winston and his attorney fully expected the announced results of the test, as Winston claimed to have had a consensual sexual encounter with the woman. Jansen stated, “We are not surprised with the results of the DNA. We voluntarily submitted to a DNA. The only thing we are surprised by is it was leaked out by law enforcement. The question the people should ask is, why is it being leaked? For what purpose?”³⁰¹ The handling of the information by law enforcement was a major theme in the case. While questions surrounded the management of the investigation, then-Tallahassee interim police chief Tom Coe said that the case had been closed because “the accuser stopped cooperating with” police in February 2013.³⁰² He also claimed that many factually incorrect statements had been made concerning the case, though he did not identify which, saying only, “There will be a time when we can comment on those issues.”³⁰³ Coe indicated that the Tallahassee police wanted to “move [the case] forward as quickly as we can in coordination with the state attorney and bring closure to it.”³⁰⁴

As the football season continued, there was a balancing act in the media between covering the Seminoles, 10-0 at the time, and the Winston sexual assault case. With just two regular season games remaining, Florida State had its eyes set on the ACC and national championships. However, it could not keep the media from reporting on the case. On November 22, 2013, Winston’s accuser and her attorney released another

³⁰¹ Schlabach, “Test Links Winston’s DNA to Accuser.”

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

statement which said, “To be clear, the victim did not consent. This was a rape.”³⁰⁵ She also claimed that Winston was lying about having multiple witnesses, saying that if he had them, he would have produced them for investigators back in February 2013. Throughout this time, Florida State would not allow media questions for Winston or Fisher concerning the allegations. The only relevant comment from either Winston or Fisher came from Fisher speaking highly of Winston’s character: “I think the world of the young man. Always have.”³⁰⁶

On November 23, one day after the alleged victim reiterated that she had been raped by Winston rather than having consensual sex with him, the Seminoles beat Idaho at home in their final regular season game of 2013. Mary Ellen Klas of the *Miami Herald* reported on the widespread support that Florida State football fans showed Winston during his last home game of 2013, stating that fans young and old proclaimed Winston’s innocence and attacked his accuser’s character.³⁰⁷ In the same article, Klas mentioned that many fans had concern that even the allegations alone against Winston would harm his reputation. She quoted a fellow writer: “‘Unless it is announced — and soon — that the accusation of sexual assault is a case of totally mistaken identity, Winston will suffer the weight of scandal,’ wrote Gerald Ensley, a *Tallahassee Democrat* columnist and Heisman voter. ‘And it will end his Heisman chances even if he leads FSU to the national championship.’”³⁰⁸ The story strongly suggested that Florida State fans were much more

³⁰⁵ “Jameis Winston Accuser -- Let Me Be Clear ... I WAS RAPED.”

³⁰⁶ Rossman and Burlew, “Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Investigated for Sexual Battery.”

³⁰⁷ Klas, “Seminoles Fans Rally behind Accused Quarterback.”

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

concerned with keeping a perfect football record and winning a national championship than bringing justice in a sexual assault case. This attitude appears to be an unfortunate consequence of having a star player accused of such a heinous act as rape.

On November 27, 2013, the Tallahassee Police Department released their own timeline of the events in the sexual assault case. While the police stated that they released the timeline in an effort to demonstrate that they had followed proper protocols and acted with professionalism, Winston attorney Jansen said:

We are deeply troubled that the Tallahassee Police Department is putting on their webpage a timeline of the events in this case, which is an ongoing investigation, which contains some information which violates my client's rights to a fair resolution of his case, including the tainting of a potential jury pool. There is no reason whatsoever for that timeline to be on a public web page at this time.³⁰⁹

The information contained in the released timeline did not reveal pertinent new information except that both the accuser and the accused had refused to be interviewed by the police department in January 2013. *USA Today* reported that Chief Assistant State Attorney Georgia Cappleman said the state did not expect to decide whether to charge Winston until at least December 9, 2013.³¹⁰

Still perfect when the timeline was released by the police department, the Seminoles already knew they would play in the ACC Championship Game on December 7. Additionally, Heisman voting would end on December 9, so it would benefit Winston to be cleared of all possible charges in the case sooner rather than later. Still, when his lawyer met with State Attorney Meggs, a request presented by Winston and Jansen to speed up the investigation made them both appear callous. Jansen explained to Meggs

³⁰⁹ Burlew and Portman, "Police Release Jameis Winston Timeline, Prompting More Questions."

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

that “delaying a decision on charges would hurt ‘Mr. Winston's reputation, his chance for awards and possibly affect Florida State University's ability to play for a national championship.’”³¹¹ If Jansen’s assertion was correct, Winston was in a bit of a predicament; if he was truly innocent and would not be charged, it would be beneficial to have the case end sooner so he could play without distractions in the remaining games, but having Jansen try to move up the timeline for purely football-related reasons made Winston look like he was cold and unsympathetic toward his accuser and made court officials look like pawns of FSU football. His feeling unsympathetic toward her would be reasonable if she had falsely accused him of rape, though.

In the midst of the sexual assault investigation and the final stretch of the 2013 football season, ESPN reported two additional incidents involving Winston.³¹² In November 2012, Winston and roommate and teammate Chris Casher were implicated in a BB gun fight that resulted in significant damage to their apartment complex. When questioned, the roommates told police that they had not participated in the shootings themselves but were involved in ongoing “battles” with teammates involving BB guns, paintball guns, and even eggs. ESPN reported, “Police records show the apartment manager, Dave Sudekum, initially wanted to evict Winston and three other tenants but decided to not press charges after an FSU athletic department official promised that the players would pay for the damage.”³¹³ The other incident that ESPN reported concerning Winston involved his stealing soda from a Burger King fountain drink dispenser in July

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² “Police: Winston Questioned in BB Gun Battle.”

³¹³ *Ibid.*

2013. In that incident, ESPN reported that “the restaurant declined to prosecute.”³¹⁴ Because these occurrences had happened well before November 2013, it appears that reporters were digging for information in Winston’s past to report as he continued his stellar on-field performance for the Seminoles and awaited a decision in the investigation.

The media attention regarding the allegations and past incidents were not—too—harmful distractions for Winston and his teammates; they beat the University of Florida 37-7 in their final regular season game to finish undefeated heading into the ACC Championship Game against Duke University.³¹⁵ Florida State and Seminoles fans, however, had plenty to be anxious about in the week leading up to the Duke game. On December 4, 2013, Willie Meggs announced that the sexual assault investigation was over and that the results of the examination would be announced at a press conference the following day. Sportswriter Dan Wetzel wrote that local attorneys speculated that Winston would be cleared of any wrongdoing based on their past experience with Meggs; Meggs did not typically call press conferences to then announce arrests and charges.³¹⁶ If Winston were to be charged, he would be immediately suspended from the football team and face up to fifteen years in prison.

On December 5, 2013, two days before the ACC Championship Game, State Attorney Willie Meggs announced that Jameis Winston would not be charged with any crime in the sexual assault investigation over which Meggs presided. The manner in which Meggs conducted himself at the press conference was widely criticized, as he

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Berkes, “Florida State vs. Florida Final Score.”

³¹⁶ Wetzel, “State Attorney.”

laughed throughout the media interaction.³¹⁷ Reporter Christine Brennan used stern words to describe the press conference she witnessed: “There was laughter. There were jokes. There were smiles. The news conference in which Florida state attorney Willie Meggs announced that Jameis Winston was not going to be charged with sexual battery was an extremely light-hearted affair. Everyone seemed so incredibly happy to be talking about an alleged sexual assault.”³¹⁸ While Meggs later stated seriously that delays caused by the Tallahassee Police Department did make the investigation more difficult, Brennan further criticized the mood of the press conference, writing that if it:

had been delivered with seriousness and sincerity, it not only would have been beneficial to those of us watching, it also would have helped build a much more compelling case for Winston. It is much easier to trust the authorities when they seem to be taking their work seriously than when they act as they did in that news conference.³¹⁹

Florida State went on to win the 2013 ACC Championship and BCS National Championship, and Winston walked away with numerous conference and national honors in the first 14-0 season in Florida State football history.³²⁰ Following the final game of the season, Florida State asked Winston to discuss the case, but he refused to talk.³²¹ Exonerated of all charges, Heisman-winner Winston was poised to attempt a repeat of

³¹⁷ See Boren, “Laughter at Jameis Winston Press Conference Struck Wrong Note (video)”; Brennan, “Laughter about Winston Sex Assault Case Disturbing.”

³¹⁸ Brennan, “Laughter about Winston Sex Assault Case Disturbing.”

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ “Jameis Winston Biography.”

³²¹ Bogdanich, “Errors in Inquiry on Rape Allegations Against FSU’s Jameis Winston.”

2013's perfect season without the distractions from the sexual assault case. However, the reports did not stop when the investigation concluded.

In April 2014, the *New York Times* presented a thorough exposé highlighting discrepancies in the case and errors in how the police handled it.³²² The story rehashed several complaints from attorneys on both sides indicating that the Tallahassee Police Department had made numerous errors in investigating the rape accusations against Winston. Beyond confirming that mistakes were made, the *Times* reported that another young woman had sought counseling following a sexual encounter with Winston. Chief Assistant State Attorney Georgia Cappleman commented that while she could not say that a crime had occurred in this second situation, it might indicate a more systemic problem with Winston than the dropped case suggested.³²³ The article also made public ties between Florida State boosters and Detective Scott Angulo, who had done private security work for the boosters. This working relationship presented a serious conflict of interest in the investigation.

The *Times* article also questioned the university's response and motives in the case. Bogdanich, the author of the report, painted an image of the Florida State administration as uncaring, willfully ignorant, and noncompliant with federal rules regarding sexual assault cases on college campuses. Winston's accuser even filed "a complaint with the civil rights office of the federal Department of Education, and the agency recently agreed to examine whether Florida State properly responds to sexual

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

violence complaints.”³²⁴ One of the most condemning aspects of the article came in quoting former prosecutor Adam Ruiz, who had handled a sexual assault case involving another Seminole football player a decade prior. Ruiz stated that then-head coach Bobby Bowden had personally tried to persuade Ruiz that there had been no crime, and the player ended up being acquitted in the case. Referencing that earlier case, Ruiz said, “I learned quickly what football meant in the South. Clearly, it meant a lot. And with respect to this case I learned that keeping players on the field was a priority.”³²⁵ The reputation of the school was challenged through the negative portrayal it received in the report.

For its part, the school swiftly responded to Bogdanich’s accusations; the university released an official statement – published on *Tomahawk Nation*, a Florida State news website – on the same day that the *New York Times* article was published.³²⁶ In the statement, Florida State officials claimed that they had provided several answers to questions from the *Times* over several weeks and had also provided a general statement regarding the Winston case, but that Bogdanich chose not to publish significant portions of their written statements.³²⁷ The school used the statement as an opportunity to publicly state that Florida State takes every sexual assault report very seriously and does not tolerate such acts, that the school offers extensive support for survivors of sexual assault in its larger campus community, and that the university does appropriately investigate

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Elliott, “Florida State’s Official Response to New York Times Story.”

³²⁷ Ibid.

and accurately report the sexual assault claims that occur on campus. Florida State was conducting its own investigation into the case, but in response to allegations that the school did not report or investigate the Winston claim appropriately or soon enough, the school wrote, “In the case examined by The Times involving Jameis Winston, no university official outside the Victim Advocate Program received a report from any complainant naming Winston prior to when the allegations were made public in November 2013.”³²⁸ With a pending Title IX investigation looming, it was important for Florida State officials to defend themselves but not implicate themselves in any way.

Jameis Winston, cleared of any wrongdoing by the legal system in Florida, did not stay out of trouble for long. On April 29, 2014, Winston was issued an adult civil citation for stealing \$32.72 worth of crab legs and crawfish from a Publix grocery store.³²⁹ Winston was reportedly cooperative with authorities when questioned. He claimed that he realized once he made it home that he had left the store without paying for his merchandise but had not gone back to the store before the police arrived to question him.³³⁰ Florida State said that Winston would be suspended from the baseball team until he had paid for the merchandise and completed the community service law enforcement assigned him as part of his citation. Both the baseball coach and football coach at Florida State issued brief statements supporting the university’s decision.

Either Jameis Winston’s attorney or Winston himself, again in the spotlight, felt it necessary to release a statement concerning the citation. Winston called it “a terrible

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Elliott, “Jameis Winston Cited for Shoplifting Crab Legs at Publix.”

³³⁰ Ibid.

mistake for which I'm taking full responsibility. In a moment of youthful ignorance, I walked out of the store without paying for one of my items.”³³¹ He also stated, “I must realize that my mistakes are magnified and can bring great embarrassment to all those who support me every day. I make no excuses for my actions and will learn and grow from this unfortunate situation.”³³² Winston again referred to his youth when asking that people view him as the young man that he was at the time and confirmed that he planned to complete his community service.³³³ Winston’s statement independent of the crime suggested that perhaps he was maturing, but the notion that he was learning from his mistakes was contradicted by the idea that he would shoplift in the first place – though Winston would later try to redefine the situation and his motive in the incident.

While it is unclear why the story surfaced when it did, *USA Today* reported on July 30, 2014, that hours prior to the November 2012 BB gun fight discussed earlier, Winston and roommate Chris Casher were stopped and handcuffed at gunpoint by campus police.³³⁴ As it turned out, Winston and Casher were shooting at squirrels with a pellet gun on a bike trail across the street from Florida State’s campus. The pellet gun had been mistaken for a real firearm and was reported to police. When questioned about the incident in 2014, Winston stated, “I’m not talking about that.”³³⁵ Winston continued to receive an unusual amount of negative publicity for a star athlete. The author of the

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Axon, “Jameis Winston Stopped by Police at Gunpoint in 2012 Incident.”

³³⁵ Ibid.

article, Rachel Axon, did report Winston's words at July's ACC media days concerning his need to live up to a higher standard due to his fame: "I know I have to be able to live up to that hype everywhere I go. I have a certain standard I have to hold myself up to, and if I even go an inch below that standard it's going to be chaos."³³⁶ Again, Winston acknowledged to members of the press that he understood that his behavior would be scrutinized at a closer level than the behavior of those not in the spotlight.

Jameis Winston took just two months to fall much further than that metaphorical "inch below" the standard set for his behavior. On September 16, 2014, Twitter erupted with tweets from Florida State University students claiming that Jameis Winston was standing on a table in the student union repeatedly shouting, "Fuck her right in the pussy," imitating a vulgar yet popular internet meme.³³⁷ His public display of vulgarity would have been hard to top had he been making a concerted effort to contradict his own references to his newfound maturity. The next day, the university issued a joint statement from interim school president Garnett S. Stokes and athletic director Stan Wilcox. The statement read:

As the university's most visible ambassadors, student-athletes at Florida State are expected to uphold at all times high standards of integrity and behavior that reflect well upon themselves, their families, coaches, teammates, the department of athletics and Florida State University. Student-athletes are expected to act in a way that reflects dignity and respect for others.³³⁸

The statement continued, "As a result of his comments yesterday, which were offensive and vulgar, Jameis Winston will undergo internal discipline and will be withheld from

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Kalaf, "Jameis Winston Yells 'Fuck Her Right In The Pussy,' Killing Meme."

³³⁸ Shanker, "FSU to Bench Winston for Half after Obscenity."

competition for the first half of the Clemson game.”³³⁹ Jimbo Fisher expressed disappointment with Winston’s behavior, saying, “It was not a good decision. You can’t make certain statements that are derogatory or inflammatory to any person, race or gender. You have to understand that. You have to be very intelligent about what you say, [because] it matters.”³⁴⁰

Because his actions certainly contradicted his earlier comments to the media about becoming more mature and making better decisions, Winston needed to issue an apology for his words. In a press conference, he took ownership of his actions, asking for forgiveness and calling his choice to shout the profanity “a selfish act.”³⁴¹ While young men often have lapses in judgment, this one was particularly offensive since the young man accused of sexual assault not two years prior to this incident chose to shout such a vulgar comment on the school’s campus.

Florida State University received criticism for being too lenient on Winston in suspending him for just one half, as writers saw the suspension as a sentence not only for the profanity Winston shouted on campus but for the series of poor choices he had made since joining the student body.³⁴² Facing pressure after a national outcry, Florida State announced late the night before the high-profile Clemson game that Winston would be suspended for the entire game rather than just the first half as initially announced.³⁴³

³³⁹ Tracy, “Jameis Winston Suspended for First Half of Florida State-Clemson Game.”

³⁴⁰ Shanker, “FSU to Bench Winston for Half after Obscenity.”

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² See Chase, “Jameis Winston’s Punishment Is Better than Nothing ... Barely.”

³⁴³ Staples, “Florida State Suspends Jameis Winston for Entire Clemson Game.”

Given the slow pace of the sexual assault investigation, it was somewhat surprising that Florida State made the decision to penalize Winston for such an important game on their schedule rather than waiting until the next week when they faced a less-feared opponent, North Carolina State.

It was not until December 2014, two years after the initial interaction between Winston and his accuser, that Florida State University conducted a two-day student conduct hearing to consider the allegations against Winston and whether he had violated the campus code of conduct. At that point, Winston had led the Seminoles to another perfect football regular season and a spot in the ACC Championship Game on December 6, 2014. On the second day of the hearing, Winston spoke on the record about the events of the night of December 6, 2012 for the first time, saying:

I did not rape or sexually assault [the accuser]. I did not create a hostile, intimidating or offensive environment in the short period of time that we were together. [The accuser] had the capacity to consent to having sex with me and she repeatedly did so by her conduct and her verbal expressions. I never used physical violence, threats, or other coercive means towards [the accuser]. Finally, I never endangered [the accuser's] health, safety, or well-being.³⁴⁴

Winston went on to graphically detail his account of the events of the night which included what he says was consensual sex. Winston also made a statement against his accuser and her lawyers:

Rape is a vicious crime. The only thing as vicious as rape is falsely accusing someone of rape. [The accuser] and her lawyers have falsely accused me, threatened to sue me, demanded \$7,000,000 from me, engaged in a destructive media campaign against me, and manipulated this process to the point that my rights have and will continue to be severely compromised. [The accuser's] and her lawyers' public campaign to vilify me guarantees that her false allegations will follow me for the rest of my life.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Schlabach, "Winston Denies Assault Allegations in Statement." [brackets in the original]

³⁴⁵ Ibid. [brackets in the original]

After his statement, he invoked his right not to answer any questions from the investigators, saying that he preferred to wait until his accuser could also be asked questions under penalty of perjury in a civil court. Winston and his lawyers clearly felt the need to prepare and provide a statement before ensuring that Winston could not incriminate himself by responding to any questions that he was not obligated to answer. David Cornwell, adviser to Winston and his family, asserted, “The entire point of the hearing was to establish a record that could be used in a potential civil lawsuit.”³⁴⁶

Former Florida Supreme Court Justice Major Harding, who presided over the Winston code of conduct hearing, announced his findings on December 21, 2014. Harding wrote to Winston: “I cannot find with any confidence that the events as set forth by (Winston and the woman) or a particular combination thereof is more probable than not as required to find you responsible for a violation of the Code. Therein lies the determinative factor of my decision.”³⁴⁷ Lawyers for the accuser indicated their unhappiness with the decision and voiced a natural concern given the circumstances: “There are certainly glaring bases for appeal, but at some point we have to recognize that Florida State is never going to hold Jameis Winston responsible.”³⁴⁸ The university, however, was confident in its handling of the case. School president John Thrasher explained, “The university selected Justice Major Harding, a highly qualified and respected jurist, to remove any doubt about the integrity of this process and the result. He

³⁴⁶ “Jameis Winston Denies Rape in Graphic Account of Sex with Accuser.”

³⁴⁷ Baker, “FSU Clears Quarterback Jameis Winston of Code of Conduct Violations.” [parentheses in the original]

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

conducted a thorough Student Conduct Code hearing and reviewed more than 1,000 pages of evidence generated by three other investigations, and we would like to thank him sincerely for his service.”³⁴⁹ Winston, as a result of the ruling, was allowed to play in the College Football Playoff semifinal game in which Florida State was routed 59-20 by the University of Oregon.³⁵⁰

On January 7, 2015, Jameis Winston declared for the NFL Draft, and Erica Kinsman – Winston’s accuser – filed a Title IX complaint against Florida State University just hours later.³⁵¹ As Winston and attorney Tim Jansen predicted, Kinsman filed a civil lawsuit against Winston shortly before the NFL Draft in April 2015. The lawsuit alleged “four counts [on the part of Winston]: sexual battery, assault, false imprisonment and intentional infliction of emotional distress.”³⁵² Despite the timing of the civil suit and the other incidents in which Winston was involved, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers did significant reconnaissance and chose to select Winston first overall in the 2015 NFL Draft.³⁵³ As part of the questioning Winston went through in the pre-draft process, he explained that the crab leg incident at Publix had been a complete misunderstanding. Winston claimed that an employee at the store gave Winston the crab legs and indicated that he did not need to pay for them before another employee notified

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Bianchi, “America Gets Its Wish — a Humiliating FSU Loss.”

³⁵¹ McCann, “A Look into Erica Kinsman’s Lawsuit against Jameis Winston.”

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Johnston, “Making Sure.”

security of Winston's walking out without paying.³⁵⁴ Coach Jimbo Fisher and Florida State both said that they had no prior knowledge of anyone at Publix giving players anything for free, and Publix announced that an internal investigation suggested that no employee gave Winston the crab legs.³⁵⁵ If Winston stole the crab legs, the university was not liable in any way. However, if it could be shown that Winston was given improper benefits due to his celebrity status, the university could still face NCAA sanctions. Essentially, then, in order to avoid possible penalties, the university and Fisher had to make the argument that Winston was lying about the incident when he said that he was given free merchandise. Ultimately, the Buccaneers' leadership was confident enough that Winston would overcome the incidents in his past and become a mature face of their franchise that they were willing to spend the top pick in the draft to acquire him.

On May 1, 2015, Winston filed to have the civil lawsuit moved to federal court, presumably "because federal court is a forum often thought to be more friendly to defendants and one in which media coverage is strictly limited."³⁵⁶ On May 8, Winston filed a countersuit against Kinsman alleging "defamation, defamation per se and tortious interference with prospective business advantage."³⁵⁷ The countersuit may actually be a sign of strong confidence from Winston and his legal team, as attorney and *Sports Illustrated* contributor Michael McCann explained that defamation countersuits at the

³⁵⁴ "Winston: Crab Legs given to Me, Not Stolen."

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ Nohe, "Jameis Winston Countersues His Accuser, Erica Kinsman."

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

federal level, especially for celebrities, are hard to win.³⁵⁸ The suit is currently expected to be heard in federal court in April 2017, with both Kinsman and Winston indicating that a settlement prior to the hearing is not expected.³⁵⁹

While Kinsman's Title IX lawsuit against Florida State was scheduled for trial in July 2016,³⁶⁰ the university settled with her for \$950,000 and an agreement that the university would commit "to five years of sexual assault awareness programs and to the publishing of annual reports on those programs."³⁶¹ However, Florida State was careful to note that the settlement was in order to move on and avoid spending in excess of the settlement amount to move ahead with the trial. With national scrutiny over its handling of sexual assault cases, it was a positive public relations move for Florida State to pay the settlement to make the case go away and to commit to additional sexual assault education and reporting measures.

While this chapter includes several concurrent storylines, the central theme of the events concerned Florida State administrators trying to decide how and whether to discipline Jameis Winston for his off-field behavior and how to manage public reaction to his offenses as Winston continued to lead the team to two undefeated regular seasons, two ACC championships, and a national championship. This case study offers an opportunity to examine image repair strategies over time and across multiple challenges to Winston's reputation. The other two case studies in this project focused mainly on one

³⁵⁸ McCann, "A Look into Erica Kinsman's Lawsuit against Jameis Winston."

³⁵⁹ Sonnone, "Trial Date Set for Jameis Winston Lawsuit."

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Tracy, "Florida State Settles Suit Over Jameis Winston Rape Inquiry."

type of NCAA violation each, while this case contributes to the overall project by offering an example of criminal allegations as well as multiple disparate civil accusations.

Image Repair Analysis

The Administration

The off-field behavior of Jameis Winston presented several challenges to Florida State administrators as they sought to maintain a positive school image while allowing Winston to play. As explained in earlier chapters, the financial benefits of winning college football games are a strong incentive for schools to field good teams. With Winston leading the Seminoles, Florida State won two ACC titles and a national championship, bringing money and prestige to the program in the midst of a revival. It makes sense that Florida State wanted Winston to play and remain eligible as long as he was benefitting the program.

Throughout Winston's tenure, Florida State administrators made relatively few image repair efforts in comparison to the number of incidents in which Winston was involved. Two factors in their limited speech were the sensitive nature of some of the accusations and the school's policy not to comment on ongoing legal or police cases. For example, when news broke of the investigation into the alleged sexual assault, administrators simply stated that they were "aware" of the situation but could not "comment further."³⁶²

³⁶² Rubin, "Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Is at Center of Sexual Battery Investigation: Report."

While Florida State could not comment directly on the sexual assault investigation, its reluctance to penalize Winston for his off-field behavior suggests that his value to the program meant more to the school than the risk he posed of damaging their institutional reputation. Winston was so valuable to Florida State that the school decided to pay approximately \$60,000 for his loss of value insurance – a form of insurance that pays out if a player is injured prior to negotiating a professional contract in order to compensate the player for his accompanying loss of earnings – prior to the 2014 season.³⁶³ It appears that Florida State was willing to jeopardize its own reputation at a later date for the immediate rewards of winning. There is strong evidence that suggests that Florida State officials knew about Winston being named a suspect in the alleged sexual assault of Erica Kinsman as early as January 23, 2013, less than two weeks after Winston was identified as the alleged aggressor during a telephone call from Kinsman to a police detective; a police department email indicates that someone from athletics contacted the department to request information about the case.³⁶⁴ Yet, the university publically claimed in April 2014 that it did not learn of Winston’s alleged involvement until the *TMZ* story was released in November 2013.³⁶⁵ This discrepancy will tend to be overlooked by fans of the program, but persons outside the FSU community will see the school as deceptive and untruthful.

³⁶³ Elliott, “Florida State Plans to Pay for Jameis Winston’s Loss of Value Insurance.”

³⁶⁴ Bogdanich, “Errors in Inquiry on Rape Allegations Against FSU’s Jameis Winston.”

³⁶⁵ Elliott, “Florida State’s Official Response to New York Times Story.”

There are a few primary audiences to consider when looking at the image repair efforts of Florida State. First, there are the media and those interested in either the sexual assault case or college football. Additionally, the administration has an audience of the NCAA and those conducting the federal Title IX investigation of the school. The audience that proved most important to Florida State in this case study was its fans, though. Florida State revealed its true priorities when officials protected Winston despite all of his off-field problems and risked future sanctions to keep him on the field increasing their football brand's value. The administration asked Fisher and Winston not to discuss the alleged sexual assault during the 2014 season.³⁶⁶ This decision makes the most sense if Florida State was trying to keep Winston eligible and fans happy. The price to be paid for this strategy is a deferred reputational hit.

Another piece of the case that was not necessarily the fault of Florida State's administration but still cast it in a poor light was the handling of the case by the Tallahassee Police Department. Not only were there several publicized errors in the investigation, reporters illuminated the fact that Detective Angulo had done private work for Florida State boosters in the past.³⁶⁷ With the prior instance of former head coach Bobby Bowden's efforts to convince a prosecutor that there had been no crime in an earlier sexual assault case involving a Seminole football player,³⁶⁸ it is easy to perceive

³⁶⁶ Rossman and Burlew, "Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Investigated for Sexual Battery."

³⁶⁷ Bogdanich, "Errors in Inquiry on Rape Allegations Against FSU's Jameis Winston."

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

the “botched” investigation as a concerted effort between the school and local law enforcement to protect its star football player at all costs.

When Florida State University administrators were challenged by Walt Bogdanich’s critical exposé, they responded swiftly. Bogdanich criticized the school for not acting soon enough in the case, for not complying with federal regulations, and for not caring about sexual assault survivors. The response the school provided contained three main image repair tactics: *bolstering*, *defeasibility*, and *transcendence*. The administration *bolstered* by elaborating on all of the programs and support it offers for survivors of sexual assault, touting the benefits of its Victim Advocate Program. The university also chose to use *defeasibility*. They stated, “Many students who contact the Victim Advocate Program make it clear they are only seeking counseling and academic accommodations. They either decline or want to delay the decision to go forward with university or criminal proceedings... To rush victims or disregard their wishes not to proceed would be re-traumatizing and hinder their recovery.”³⁶⁹ Lastly, the school used a *transcendence* tactic when discussing the privacy of survivors. The university explained, “The Victim Advocate Program operates under a statute unique to Florida that gives all rape crisis counselors a confidentiality privilege. Advocates cannot breach this confidentiality – even to talk to police – without a waiver from the client.”³⁷⁰ The school’s *transcendence* tactic was employed in an effort to show that the privacy of survivors was more important than the prosecution of aggressors. *Defeasibility* and *transcendence* were self-serving tactics for the school as it tried to *reduce the*

³⁶⁹ Elliott, “Florida State’s Official Response to New York Times Story.”

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

offensiveness of and *evade responsibility* for its perceived lack of survivor support. The strategies FSU employed were not enough to overcome the perception that the school had lied about how early it learned of Winston's alleged involvement in the sexual assault case or that they would protect Winston at all costs to keep winning and earning money.

Florida State did suspend Winston from the baseball team briefly after he was cited for shoplifting, but he never sat out of a football game until the Clemson game in 2014. When Florida State finally determined to penalize Winston in football, the school was widely seen as doing far too little to punish him. Chris Chase, for example, wrote an entire article on USA Today's *For The Win* sports website criticizing the minimal punishment and called it "laughable."³⁷¹ Under increased pressure, of course, the university lengthened the suspension to the entire Clemson game. The joint statement concerning the suspension explicated, "Based upon the results of our continuing investigation of Tuesday's incident involving Jameis Winston, we have decided to not play him for the entire game against Clemson on Saturday night."³⁷² The school claimed agency when it was public revulsion that made it act; while increasing the suspension did show that Florida State was more serious about sending a message to Winston concerning his behavior, this *corrective action* only came after pressure from media and football observers. Florida State appeared reluctant to penalize Winston in a more serious manner that might also affect its revenue streams from football or, heaven forbid, lead to a loss.

The timing of Florida State's code of conduct hearing for Jameis Winston reflected poorly on the school for multiple reasons. The investigation took place well

³⁷¹ Chase, "Jameis Winston's Punishment Is Better than Nothing ... Barely."

³⁷² Staples, "Florida State Suspends Jameis Winston for Entire Clemson Game."

after the school discovered the accusations against Winston. Additionally, they waited until after the 2014 football regular season had been completed before starting the hearing. After a perfect regular season and a spot in the ACC Championship Game had been secured, Florida State heard both sides of the case. By the time a ruling was made, Florida State had beaten Duke and was scheduled to play against the University of Oregon in the inaugural College Football Playoff semifinal. When it was announced that Winston had been cleared in the investigation, reporter Robert Silverman published a common sentiment of observers of the case: “No, they’re definitely not going to [hold Jameis Winston accountable], not with a the semifinal playoff game on New Year’s Day against Oregon – possibly the last time that Winston will don garnet and gold – just around the corner.”³⁷³ Florida State had significant incentive in clearing Winston in the case, which naturally generates speculation that the school could have hired a partisan arbitrator or worked outside of the confines of the official hearing to convince the judge of Winston’s innocence.

The university’s response to Winston’s pre-NFL Draft, post–post season playoff game claims concerning the crab legs at Publix showed that the school’s interests rest in profit rather than in its celebrity players themselves. When Winston shared that an employee gave him the crab legs, the university gained the NCAA as an interested audience. Choosing to distance itself from Winston and any possible improper benefits sanctions, the school stated, “The details disclosed by Winston in that interview were not previously known to the University. As is the case with all matters of this type, we will work in partnership with the NCAA to determine whether a violation occurred.”

³⁷³ Silverman, “Jameis Winston Cleared of Rape Like Every Other College Sports Star.”

Distancing itself from Winston was a *corrective action* taken by the administration as they *denied* prior knowledge of Winston's claims. They had no issues throwing Winston under the bus once he could not help them more on the field than he could hurt them off the field.

Finally, the last major image repair effort by the administration came when the school settled out of court with Erica Kinsman. Florida State made sure to explain that the settlement was in no way an admission of guilt in the Title IX case, but it was financially beneficial to settle rather than spend millions in fighting the charges in court.³⁷⁴ However, an article from *New York Daily News* highlighted what Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a former law professor and CEO of the non-profit Champion Women, considers the more sinister side of the settlement. Hogshead-Makar explained, ““The economic boost that (schools) get by being in the national championship and having a Heisman Trophy winner outweigh any harm to the victim, even if they have to pay an enormous settlement. Schools would say, ‘It's worth it because we're getting so much more by having a successful football program.’”³⁷⁵ The inclusion in the settlement agreement of sexual assault education and reporting of those educational efforts served as an attempt to satisfy not only the alleged victim but also the Title IX investigators. It is challenging to balance multiple image repair goals, but Florida State attempted to make a settlement without admitting any guilt in the case while preserving its financial windfall from football. In so doing, they may have hurt their image for some of the general public, but the school was counting on their loyal fans sticking by them.

³⁷⁴ Tracy, “Florida State Settles Suit Over Jameis Winston Rape Inquiry.”

³⁷⁵ Red, “FSU Had Incentive to Settle with Jameis Winston Accuser.”
[parentheses in the original]

Throughout the case, Florida State had multiple audiences to consider. The threats to its image required different responses for each audience, but the types of responses that would have been accepted by those various audiences would have conflicted at times. The choice it seems that Florida State's administration made was to satisfy its loyal fans first, the Title IX investigators and the NCAA second, and the media and other observers last if at all. Gambling on keeping Winston eligible rather than being harsher on him appears to have paid off tremendously in the short term on the field and financially with the success of the football program. However, the reputation Florida State has earned for putting its celebrity athletes ahead of its student body – particularly sexual assault survivors – may cause significant problems for the school as soon as the next couple years when a ruling is made in the federal Title IX investigation of the program. In terms of effectiveness, I argue that the school was largely unsuccessful in its image repair efforts with most audiences. However, it seems that the brand loyalty of Florida State fans is strong enough for the school to overcome its poor choices in defending itself, at least in the local and alumni communities.

Jimbo Fisher

In terms of image repair, Head Coach Jimbo Fisher was the least active of the coaches in the three cases of this thesis. Fisher's reputation was never truly challenged directly enough to warrant much use of image repair efforts. When his prior knowledge of alleged improper benefits infractions – a Publix employee giving free food to players – was suggested, he used the tactic of *simple denial*. When criticized for allowing Winston to dress out before the Clemson game, Fisher elected to use *corrective action* and *minimization*. More often, he used third party image repair strategies as he worked to

maintain the university's positive image while keeping his star player eligible to compete for the Seminoles. Fisher found himself trying to support both his quarterback and his institution during Winston's time on campus.

While he was being told to remain silent concerning the sexual assault allegations, Fisher stood up for Jameis Winston's character during his weekly radio show.³⁷⁶ Telling listeners that he thought very highly of Winston, Fisher's comments served as a *bolstering* tactic on Winston's behalf. However, since he would not comment on the allegations directly, Fisher did not have to give his opinion concerning Winston's guilt or innocence in the case. Fisher also used third party image repair tactics when supporting the school's decision to suspend Winston from the baseball team for shoplifting. Referring to baseball coach Mike Martin's suspension of Winston, Fisher stated, "I fully support Coach Martin's decision and will also make sure that Jameis meets all obligations, which I know he will."³⁷⁷ This statement was supportive of both the university and Winston, as Fisher addressed the *corrective action* of the program in disciplining Winston but also supported his player by expressing confidence in his intentions of fulfilling the terms of his suspension.

Concerning the vulgar comment Winston repeatedly yelled on campus, Fisher distanced himself from the situation by reprimanding Winston: "You can't make certain statements that are derogatory or inflammatory to any person, race or gender. You have

³⁷⁶ Rossman and Burlew, "Florida State Quarterback Jameis Winston Investigated for Sexual Battery."

³⁷⁷ Elliott, "Jameis Winston Cited for Shoplifting Crab Legs at Publix."

to understand that.”³⁷⁸ Fisher also distanced himself from Winston’s comments when the quarterback claimed that the crab legs he allegedly stole from the grocery store were actually given to him. Fisher adamantly denied that he had known anything about what would have been a violation of NCAA rules. He stated, “I had no knowledge of it until I came in this morning. But FSU, we did make contact with Publix back then to make sure there was nothing going on.”³⁷⁹ By separating himself from Winston and his comments, Fisher was effectively *shifting blame*.

Following the one-game suspension and subsequent reinstatement of Jameis Winston, Fisher spoke to the media using the tactics of *corrective action* and *minimization*. After being criticized for allowing Winston to dress for warm-ups before the Clemson game, Fisher said, “He assumed he was going to dress for warm-ups and went out, and I never saw it. It got miscommunicated.”³⁸⁰ By calling it a “miscommunication,” Fisher was attempting to *reduce the offensiveness* of Winston’s act. Additionally, while actually putting the blame on himself and the equipment staff, Fisher was then able to explain that he took swift *corrective action* by sending Winston in to change clothes and return to the sideline in plainclothes to serve his suspension. Finally, Fisher defended Winston yet again while keeping distance from his actions: “And I say this: It’s not that I defend; I do not condone. I said that the other day, but Jameis is not a bad individual.”³⁸¹ Fisher managed to defend the character of his player while trying to

³⁷⁸ Tracy, “Jameis Winston Suspended for First Half of Florida State-Clemson Game.”

³⁷⁹ “Winston: Crab Legs given to Me, Not Stolen.”

³⁸⁰ Shanker, “FSU’s Fisher: Winston Suspension ‘Hit Home.’”

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

keep any blame from himself, though saying Winston was “not bad” was not exactly a ringing endorsement.

Fisher’s character was not challenged as directly as the reputations of the university or Winston were in this case study. Yet, he still had goals of garnering support for his program and winning games. Like the university administration, Fisher had incentives for helping Winston keep his eligibility. Given the circumstances of the case, Jimbo Fisher was successful in navigating the challenge of supporting both his player and his institution while leading the team to championships and major accolades.

Jameis Winston

Jameis Winston was the subject of intense scrutiny while he was enrolled at Florida State University. As the star quarterback, he seemed to get preferential treatment in many controversial situations for his celebrity status in the small town of Tallahassee. He responded to several very serious allegations during his playing career, and the main image repair strategies he used were *mortification*, *reducing offensiveness*, and *denial*. Winston’s overall image repair efforts were very ineffective because his credibility was deeply undercut by his repeated immoral behavior and perceptions that he was being protected by the university and local law enforcement during his sexual assault investigation.

Initially, when the sexual assault allegations surfaced against Winston, he chose not to speak about them, which is fairly typical of individuals who have hired legal representation. He did appear cold toward his accuser when his lawyer’s primary concern

seemed to be Winston's Heisman campaign.³⁸² The subsequent reports of Winston's soda fountain theft at Burger King and the BB gun fight between him and teammates served to portray him as at least incredibly immature to the American public. The combination of cold and immature was not flattering. Willie Meggs' laughter when announcing that Winston would not be charged also hurt his credibility. The negative view of Winston, however, differed greatly from the perception the Florida State fans held. Fans young and old vowed unwavering support to Winston even as Erica Kinsman reiterated that he had raped her.³⁸³ In fact, some Seminoles fans actually expressed concern that the case would affect his public reputation, suggesting that his reputation amongst Seminoles fans would be nearly impossible to harm.³⁸⁴

Though Winston was likely instructed to remain silent on the topic of the alleged sexual assault, it is obvious that his attorney felt the need for him to apologize for his involvement in the shoplifting incident at Publix. Because there was no credible deflection strategy available, Winston used *mortification* when he described his actions as "a terrible mistake for which I'm taking full responsibility" and vowed to "learn and grow from this unfortunate situation."³⁸⁵ He continued to talk of his personal growth and desire to behave more maturely at ACC media days when he spoke of holding himself to a higher standard. However, his credibility was hurt further when he shouted his infamous sexual obscenity on campus. Though he apologized and used *mortification* again to show

³⁸² Burlew and Portman, "Police Release Jameis Winston Timeline, Prompting More Questions."

³⁸³ Klas, "Seminoles Fans Rally behind Accused Quarterback."

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ Elliott, "Jameis Winston Cited for Shoplifting Crab Legs at Publix."

his regret for his words, it was hard to believe his sincerity; serial apology wears thin eventually. Chris Huston of HeismanPundit.com explained the challenge of Winston continuing to make bad decisions: “It continues to reinforce the notion that he’s a bad-character guy – something we were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt over after he wasn’t charged with rape.”³⁸⁶

Jameis Winston used the tactics of *differentiation* and *simple denial* when questioned about the crab legs incident prior to the 2015 NFL Draft. He went back on his earlier statements in which he apologized for taking the crab legs and crawfish. In his efforts to clarify what happened that day at Publix, Winston explained that he was actually given the seafood by an employee who had offered to provide Winston free product due to his celebrity status.³⁸⁷ Florida State, Jimbo Fisher, and Publix all disputed Winston’s claim that he had been given the seafood as an improper benefit without being challenged by the NCAA or the media. This shift from Winston receiving seemingly unconditional support to being thrown under the bus and called a liar indicated that his credibility had suffered amongst his greatest supporters and that those devotees, Florida State and Jimbo Fisher, held the football program in higher regard than Winston; Winston was appreciated insofar as he provided value to the football team and, by extension, the university and its coach.

Finally, Jameis Winston also *attacked his accuser* in his countersuit. Winston claims that Erica Kinsman and her lawyers “knowingly perpetuated a lie about him, slandered him in the press and damaged his reputation to the point where it has cost him

³⁸⁶ Tracy, “Jameis Winston Suspended for First Half of Florida State-Clemson Game.”

³⁸⁷ “Winston: Crab Legs given to Me, Not Stolen.”

substantially in terms of potential future earnings.”³⁸⁸ Unfortunately for him, his reputation has suffered not just because of the rape allegations but also due to his repeated off-field behavior that has contradicted his promises to mature and learn from his mistakes.

When Florida State lost in the College Football Playoff national semifinal game against Oregon, football fans across the country cheered the loss.³⁸⁹ After the game, Winston seemed determined to add to his controversial playing career. He said, “We were never stopped at all... If you want to be – if everybody in this room – just wants to be real with themselves, this game could have gone either way.... We beat ourselves. Just be real with yourself right now. We beat ourselves.”³⁹⁰ Winston’s words displayed a “bad sport” attitude that does not resonate well with the public. Former Florida State head football coach Bobby Bowden recently opined, “I think it’s a consensus among FSU fans and boosters that he was an embarrassment to the university. He won a lot of ball games, probably one of the best football players that ever attended Florida State, but he hurt himself off the field.”³⁹¹ Winston’s image repair efforts were very unsuccessful due to his complete loss of credibility with most fans and members of the media.

Jameis Winston was the least successful party in repairing his image during the controversies at Florida State. At the same time, he may have come out of the controversies the most unscathed of all of the involved parties. Winston earned a four-

³⁸⁸ Nohe, “Jameis Winston Countersues His Accuser, Erica Kinsman.”

³⁸⁹ Bianchi, “America Gets Its Wish — a Humiliating FSU Loss.”

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁹¹ Horowitz, “Iconic College Football Coach.”

year, \$25.35 million contract as the first overall pick in the 2015 NFL Draft.³⁹² While his civil lawsuit is still pending, any financial penalty he might incur will likely pale in comparison to the money he receives for playing professional football. Additionally, a civil ruling alone is unlikely to deter his fans at this point. The best aspect of Winston's future image repair possibilities was summarized by Bobby Bowden: "The good news is that he's young enough to get over that, ya know it, and he's gotta do that. He just can't make those junior high school decisions that he made while he was in college."³⁹³ On the other hand, it is possible that Tampa will be a replay of Tallahassee for Winston; local fans will love and support him while NFL fans outside of Tampa will deride him.

Discussion

As in the USC and Reggie Bush case, the Florida State controversies of 2012 to 2014 centered on a star athlete coming into his celebrity status. In this case, though, the allegations against Winston were several orders of magnitude worse than those against Bush. Bush was able to benefit from changing public opinion on amateurism and college football; Winston's alleged crimes are understood to be wrong across time and generations. However, this case does show the power of celebrity status for college football players and the extent to which schools are willing to deal with poor off-field performance for wins and reputation and the money that accompanies them.

This case was very different from an improper benefits case. Rape allegations are always serious. Because of the success the Seminoles were having on the field, though, the university seemed to be willing to look the other way to an extent. There were

³⁹² Elliott, "Jameis Winston Signs Contract with Tampa Bay Bucs."

³⁹³ Horowitz, "Iconic College Football Coach."

allegations and suspicions of the university working with local law enforcement to ensure Winston's continued eligibility. Had a professor or other employee been implicated in a sexual assault case, he/she would likely have been suspended, yet the university did everything it could not to penalize Jameis Winston. This contortion reveals just how valuable athletes are to their programs, or at least how valuable *star* athletes are to the top programs; Bloomsburg University kicked Joey Casselberry off its baseball team in 2015 for tweeting an offensive comment about female little league pitcher Mo'ne Davis.³⁹⁴ The tweet, in which Casselberry referred to the young woman as a "slut," was arguably far less offensive than Winston's "Fuck her right in the pussy" comment, yet Casselberry was removed from the team while Winston was suspended eventually for just one college football game. As a society, this discrepancy suggests that we value athletic ability, and the money it brings, far more than maturity, integrity, or justice.

It is telling that the university and Jimbo Fisher stood by Winston throughout his two seasons as the starting quarterback for their football team yet threw him under the bus once he had declared for the NFL Draft and ended his eligibility. Universities with major financial incentives for winning seem more willing to take on the risks associated with the off-field behavior of star athletes. While I argue that the university and Winston were both unsuccessful in their image repair efforts, I must ask whether this shortcoming matters to either party and how it might harm them. Florida State added a national title and two ACC Championships during Winston's career, and the school continues to reap financial and intangible benefits from its on-field success. Winston is making millions playing the game that also gave him the opportunity for a free education – which he has

³⁹⁴ Boren, "Offensive Tweet about Mo'ne Davis Gets College Baseball Player Kicked off Team."

not indicated that he will complete – at Florida State. Both parties face ongoing investigations or lawsuits stemming from Winston’s alleged actions and the handling of those accusations, but it remains to be seen whether these cases will hurt either the school or Jameis Winston. Chances are that the cases will not hurt either Winston or Florida State with any constituency that matters to either of them.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Controversies abound in Division I college football. These controversies demand image repair responses from players, coaches, and administrators as fans, media members, the NCAA, and the general public challenge the images and reputations of those groups. This thesis examined the image repair strategies and tactics employed in three controversies involving elite football programs: University of Southern California, Ohio State University, and Florida State University. Using Benoit's typology of image repair strategies and tactics,³⁹⁵ the efforts of each party to respond to criticism or attacks on their reputations were identified and analyzed. While the literature review in this project uncovered just one examination of image repair efforts in a Division I football controversy,³⁹⁶ this thesis contributes three such case studies to the literature. One key goal of the examination of image repair efforts in the three cases was a strategic comparison of the cases in order to identify themes and commonalities that might extend to other college football controversies. This chapter suggests how the three cases in this thesis contribute to image repair research in college football and indicate important areas of future study.

All three controversies focused on events involving star players – though not all implicated Ohio State players were “stars” – drawing criticism for their off-field behavior

³⁹⁵ Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, 2015, 28.

³⁹⁶ See Stein, Turman, and Barton, “In the Dark at Texas Tech: News Coverage Involving the Image Repair Discourse of Mike Leach and Adam James.”

in the midst of great success on the gridiron. In the Southern Cal case, the administration was left to clean up the mess left by Reggie Bush, Coach Pete Carroll, and members of the athletic department staff. In the Ohio State case, the administration also had to deal with immediate and lingering effects of a coach and football players violating NCAA rules. Finally, in the Florida State case, school officials sought to maintain a positive school image and continued football success despite the off-field behavior of its star quarterback. The administrations, coaches, and players used different image repair tactics within each case, but, across the cases, these groups employed similar image repair strategies at each university.

USC, OSU, and FSU officials all used *corrective action* to address attacks on their reputations. All three administrations publicly distanced themselves from the players who brought negative publicity to the schools. However, it must be emphasized that this distancing occurred only *after* the players were no longer eligible to compete for their respective schools. Until that moment, Florida State appeared to at least tolerate Winston's off-field behavior, and Ohio State allowed its players to compete for the team in the Sugar Bowl despite their approaching suspensions. Once Terrelle Pryor declared for the NFL Draft after the Sugar Bowl, Ohio State administrators had as little use for him as Florida State's did for Jameis Winston. Reggie Bush had already announced his decision to turn professional by the time investigations started in the USC case, but USC administrators publicly distanced themselves from Bush as part of the eventual NCAA sanctions.

The decision to overlook or seemingly forgive off-field behavior of star athletes – as long as they have something to give the schools and the fans – supports Kruse's

argument that, in sport, winning is still most important.³⁹⁷ Ultimately, these schools rely heavily upon the support of athletic boosters and fans, and keeping those supporters happy requires a successful on-field product with issues of morality left to be sorted out after the season, if at all.

This thesis argues that the efforts of the USC and OSU administrators were effective, but both programs still received hefty penalties from the NCAA. The general public's inclination to dislike the NCAA for its perceived overstepping stance on college athletics and its student-athletes benefitted both schools in terms of their public images. These two administrations used differing strategies, other than their shared use of *corrective action*, which suggests that multiple tactics can be used successfully in image repair efforts of schools facing NCAA sanctions for players. The emphasis school officials in both cases placed on distancing themselves from the individuals providing improper benefits to their student-athletes benefitted the images of the schools. It is interesting that both schools navigated their respective sanctions well and fielded successful teams soon after the implementation of their penalties even though Ohio State expressed *mortification* for the behavior of its players and Jim Tressel while Southern California *denied* its involvement. However, the simplicity of image repair campaigns, the turnover in athletic staffs, and the decisions to distance themselves from the perceived problem individuals in both cases greatly benefitted the two schools' public reputations.

Florida State administrators used some of the same image repair tactics that Ohio State and Southern Cal administrators employed, but this project concluded that Florida

³⁹⁷ Kruse, "Apologia in Team Sport," 273–274.

State's image repair efforts were largely unsuccessful for most audiences. The allegations in the FSU case did not involve violations of NCAA regulations, though, and it is very possible that cases involving legal troubles – especially as serious as sexual assault accusations – require vastly different responses than improper benefits cases. Florida State officials used *bolstering* and *corrective action*, but administrators appeared untruthful about when they first learned of Winston's alleged involvement in the sexual assault case. The media and most of the public felt that Florida State did too little in terms of punishing Winston. Additionally, his repeated off-field issues demanded a stern response that Florida State was never willing to give. USC and OSU had scapegoats in their cases: getting rid of Todd McNair and Jim Tressel and distancing themselves from agents and boosters. Florida State did not have a disposable scapegoat; perhaps Winston was the only individual at Florida State who could have filled this sacrificial role, but Florida State was unwilling to get rid of the championship chances Winston brought to the school. Had Winston been less successful on the field, Florida State officials would likely have not allowed him to remain on the roster. Still, the fans of the school unwaveringly supported the program, and Florida State continues to succeed in the sport.

The continued success of all three programs despite vastly different image repair campaigns and results indicates that alumni and football fan communities at top football programs generally pledge allegiance to the winning team and school above individuals that compete or coach for those programs. This notion is particularly important when studying college football controversies; even though a school must stay and face the music when a player or coach leaves NCAA sanctions or other messes to clean up, the

school also benefits from a fan base that is unapologetically loyal to the program as long as the winning can continue.

In terms of coaches' image repair efforts, these case studies showed a wide variety of image repair tactics from *denial* to *transcendence* to *mortification*, but varying degrees of attacks to coaches' reputations dictated these disparate responses. Pete Carroll and Jim Tressel both *shifted blame* to others, but Carroll was not personally attacked in the same way that Tressel was. Carroll was accused of illegally hiring an NFL coach in a consultant role that went beyond what was permitted by the NCAA, but Carroll *denied* knowing that the hire was illegal and *bolstered* his position by suggesting that he and the athletic department had always worked hard to ensure that they did things "the right way."³⁹⁸ Tressel was caught lying to the administration, and no amount of *transcendence* or *minimization* could make up for that perceived slight.

Todd McNair served as a scapegoat in the USC case; when the NCAA would not allow the school to appeal the part of its decision that concerned McNair's alleged knowledge of Bush's rules violation, administrators let McNair's contract expire, presumably to distance itself from McNair prior to the NCAA's USC appeals hearing. McNair was left to fight the NCAA on his own, and ongoing civil litigation may prove that his *denial* and *attacking of his accuser* [the NCAA] were beneficial image repair tactics. Jimbo Fisher, though criticized for minor issues surrounding Winston's off-field behavior and eventual suspension, was largely not challenged or accused of wrongdoing in the Florida State case. Though the stories of all three head coaches differed greatly in

³⁹⁸ Klein and Pringle, "Pete Carroll Denies Violating NCAA Rules."

the three cases, all are still held in extremely high regard by fans of the three programs. This public “verdict” suggests that the success of a team under the leadership of a head coach matters much more to a fan base than any perceived sins of those coaches.

The players were the critical component of the three cases in this thesis, as the negative media attention in each case stemmed from the actions – alleged or confirmed – of star players. None of the players presented successful image repair campaigns, though the student-athletes did try multiple tactics each. Reggie Bush *denied* and *minimized* before employing *mortification* and *corrective action*. His apology to USC athletic director Pat Haden and the return of his Heisman Trophy indicated Bush’s recognition of his own wrongdoing in the case. However, the sanctions were already in place and USC was required to distance itself from Bush. The media and college football fans considered Bush a criminal. As the perception of the NCAA has turned sour in the debate over compensation for college athletes, Bush’s image has benefitted in the eyes of the general public and the media, while USC and New Orleans Saints fans overlooked the offenses due to the value they placed on his on-field performance.

The Ohio State players in the *tattoogate* controversy also relied on *corrective action* and *mortification* in their case. The players were unsuccessful in their image repair attempt, because they never demonstrated true remorse. Terrelle Pryor skipped out on the team and his suspension when he declared for the NFL Draft despite having promised not to as part of his sanctions.³⁹⁹ The fact that the NFL made him serve his suspension with the Oakland Raiders indicated that the league recognized the insincerity of Pryor’s

³⁹⁹ “Lawyer: Terrelle Pryor Not Returning to Ohio State.”

apologies.⁴⁰⁰ While the other players did serve their suspensions, they were either not eligible to declare for the NFL Draft or were not projected to be drafted early. Media and fans alike saw that the players were insincere in their expressions of regret.

Jameis Winston was accused of the worst crimes in any of the controversies in this project. He used strategies of *denial*, *reducing offensiveness*, and *mortification* to repair his image. Winston is still fighting in court today for his reputation, which he believes was intentionally tarnished by his accuser.⁴⁰¹ Unfortunately for him, his repeated off-field behavior, including theft, property damage, and public vulgarity, left Winston apologizing often. His repetitive displays of remorse grew tiresome for the public and the media, and his image repair efforts suffered. However, Winston is still loved – seemingly unconditionally – in Tallahassee, though it remains to be seen what might change when his civil suit is heard next year.⁴⁰² The players in all three of the cases benefitted from the willingness of their respective schools’ fans to look beyond off-field offenses in favor of celebrating on-field victories.

The examination of these three case studies highlights a few important aspects of Division I college football that are unique to the study of image repair discourse. First, institutions tend to last through controversies, a trend which is both advantageous and disadvantageous; administrations must deal with the ramifications of athletes’ and coaches’ actions, but they have the luxury of enduring fan loyalty to fall back on as long

⁴⁰⁰ McDonald, “Oakland Raiders Take Terrelle Pryor in NFL Supplemental Draft.”

⁴⁰¹ Sonnone, “Trial Date Set for Jameis Winston Lawsuit.”

⁴⁰² Ibid.

as the school continues to compete at a high level. Second, there are certain sins that will lead to sanctions or firings for individual coaches and players, but fans are generally willing to overlook those offenses as long their teams win. Third, image repair campaigns in college football are inherently complex due to multiple audiences to be addressed as well as potentially conflicting goals among players, coaches, and administrators.

Efforts to maintain or repair the image of a major college football institution should be studied independently of celebrity/sport or corporate image repair. A school does not maintain organizational legitimacy in the same way that a large corporation does, nor do star college athletes or winning coaches find themselves subject to the same limitations as professional athletes or actors. Schools fielding successful programs are not dependent on customers who are willing to “change brands” regularly to save a few pennies or to feel good about a purchasing decision. These schools have dedicated alumni and fan bases that pledge their loyalty and their money as wins and trophies accumulate.

Limitations and Areas of Future Study

This research was chiefly exploratory and investigative. The choice of three controversies at major college football programs was made in order to search for patterns that might extend to other programs and controversies. However, there are several limitations as well as research outcomes that indicate opportunities for future research. A couple of these limitations were necessary aspects of the restriction of cases to major Division I football programs. For example, all three controversies occurred at highly visible and successful programs. The ability of schools to overcome the threats to their organizational legitimacy might be different depending on how prominent their sports

teams are. Even when administrators at schools with major programs do not pick adequate image repair strategies, the three case studies in this thesis suggest that those schools will overcome the controversies, outlasting coaches and players at these institutions – provided they do not receive the NCAA’s *death penalty*.

However, this luxury may not prove true at a school that does not have the same fan support for its athletic teams. Future studies could examine whether and how alumni or prospective students that care more about the educational mission of an institution might influence that school to approach image repair differently than USC, OSU, and FSU did in these cases. It is possible that these strategic choices may yield greatly different results when the football boosters and loyal fans are removed from consideration as an audience.

Another limitation that provides an opportunity for further study lies in the origin of the three controversies studied here. All of the cases in this thesis began with a star player’s alleged actions that were either illegal or prohibited by the NCAA. There are several controversies that do not begin this way; some are created by coaches,⁴⁰³ while others extend to administrators or additional internal or external parties.⁴⁰⁴ It would be beneficial to the image repair conversation to conduct several case studies in which threats to a school’s image were generated in a variety of ways. Additionally, case studies

⁴⁰³ See Watterson, *College Football*, 219–224; Stein, Turman, and Barton, “In the Dark at Texas Tech: News Coverage Involving the Image Repair Discourse of Mike Leach and Adam James.”

⁴⁰⁴ See Rodgers, “UNC Academic Scandal”; Wolff, “Broken Beyond Repair: An Open Letter to the President of Miami Urges Him to Dismantle His Vaunted Football Program to Salvage His School’s Reputation.”

involving lesser-known players might yield different strategies or results. Image repair strategies in college football controversies might work differently and to varying degrees of success based on how controversies started and how successful the involved players are.

A third limitation of this thesis concerns the racial dynamics at play in the controversies analyzed. Numerous authors have addressed racial inequalities and tensions in college football and the disproportionate numbers of African-American athletes (high) and coaches (low) compared to the general population.⁴⁰⁵ With few exceptions (USC Running Backs Coach Todd McNair and Athletic Director Mike Garrett), all three of the cases in this thesis involved black players and white coaches and administrators. Statistically speaking, this dynamic is representative of major college football. However, issues of race may influence image repair tactics. For example, the tendency of coaches and administrators to speak of “outsiders” taking advantage of their players – ironic considering the administrators are making substantial amounts of money for the players’ efforts, while players are being compensated with a scholarship and a small stipend – might not as easily extend to cases involving white players. Future research should include cases that include different racial distributions; one that might be considered is the controversy surrounding white Texas A&M player Johnny Manziel, whose head

⁴⁰⁵ See Brooks and Althouse, *Racism in College Athletics*; Grant, “African American College Football Players and the Dilemma of Exploitation, Racism and Education: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Sports Law”; Logan, Logan, Jr., and Harrison, Jr., “4 Years a Football Player: The Social Reproduction of Restricted Agency”; Melendez, “Black Football Players on a Predominantly White College Campus: Psychosocial and Emotional Realities of the Black College Athlete Experience”; “Black Teams, White Coaches: Racial Inequality in Coaching of College Sports”; Grant, “African American College Football Players and the Dilemma of Exploitation, Racism and Education: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Sports Law.”

coach, Kevin Sumlin, is black.⁴⁰⁶ Perhaps examples such as the Manziel case would contribute to the conversation by showing whether and how race might influence image repair tendencies in college football controversies.

⁴⁰⁶ See Gleeson, “Breakdown: All the Fame, Controversy of Johnny Manziel’s Offseason.”

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