

The Entitled Athlete

By Richard J. Pound

www.poundenterprise.com

Professional athletes have long been revered for their on-field heroics, their off-the-field flamboyance, and the larger-than-life persona they project out to the fans that support their equally large salaries.

>From Derek Jeter to Terrell Owens, LeBron James to Adam "Pacman" Jones, and Lance Armstrong to John Daly, today's sports heroes hold great sway over impressionable, young student-athletes who follow their every move and word, trying to be just like them.

The professional athlete who has reached the pinnacle in his sport is often rewarded with much extravagance and riches.

These "entitled athletes" often lose sight of the hard work that got them to this level and the commitment and dedication needed to keep them there.

In many cases, they misinterpret their value to the team and sometimes place their own needs above those of the team.

NBA Hall of Famer Charles Barkley once said that he was "not a role model." I can agree with this to some extent, but I'm afraid Sir Charles misses the point.

It is the fan, not the athlete, who determines the athlete's "role model status."

Professional athletes don't have a choice in this, so I feel that athletes bear a share of the responsibility for their actions and statements and the impact both have on the kids who choose to emulate them.

I have been disenchanted with the recent antics of some professional athletes who clearly see themselves as bigger than the games they play.

Formerly revered and now reviled, Michael Vick and O.J. Simpson wrongly assumed that stardom would shield them from their criminal and anti-social behaviors.

John Daly just picked up another DWI arrest and was suspended by the PGA Tour for a second time. And New York Giants wide receiver Plaxico Burress shot himself in the leg in a misguided attempt to carry a pistol into a night club. Why Burress needed a loaded gun is beyond my comprehension, but his actions have not only hurt himself, they have placed his team at a severe disadvantage to repeat as Super Bowl champions.

As an athletic director and coach, my message to student-athletes is that like the professional athlete, their conduct is often emulated by the youngsters who look up to them. Their responsibilities should be held at a different standard from the normal student because they are privileged to be on a team and to have the opportunity to play for their school. Myron Rolle, a defensive back at Florida State University, found his balance as a true student-athlete by being an All-ACC player as well as receiving the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship.

Unlike Rolle, though, many student-athletes receive a mixed message from the individuals who purportedly have their best interests in mind. I call this oxymoronic message as the "Idolized Athlete Syndrome" (IAS).

IAS begins when the athlete is very young, long before the days of varsity competition, and continues well into college and professional ranks.

These boys and girls are not difficult to identify, and I am sure that you have seen these "budding superstars" in CYO games, Little League fields, and Pop Warner football games across the county.

In the early stages of IAS, the kids are often physically bigger than most kids and stand out as a dominating presence—hitting the baseball farther, scoring the most points in a basketball game, and running for 100+ yards and scoring the majority of TDs.

If you are not able to spot them initially, just wait for their over-zealous parents to yell across the playing surface in defense of their child. This is where the incubation of the "entitled athlete" begins. Our society has placed so much importance on the individual success of an athlete that we have lost sight of why our children began playing sports in the first place. According to Michael Pfahl, executive director of the National Youth Sports Coaches Association, "The number one reason why athletes quit playing their sport is that it stopped being fun."

Twenty million kids register each year for youth hockey, football, baseball, soccer, and other competitive sports.

The National Alliance for Sports reports that 70% of these kids quit playing these league sports by age 13. And they never play them again.

Like Mr. Pfahl, I feel that it's time we rethink how we present youth sports to our children.

The hard truth of the matter is that an exceedingly small percentage of kids who play youth sports move on to compete at the college and professional levels.

The numbers bear this out, according to the NCAA's report on Estimated Probability of Competing in Athletics Beyond the High School Interscholastic Level (www.ncaa.org):

Football

Percent High School to NCAA- 5.7%

Percent NCAA to Pro- 1.8%

Percent High School to Pro- .08%

Women's Basketball

Percent High School to NCAA- 3.3%

Percent NCAA to Pro- 1.0%

Percent High School to Pro- .02%

Baseball

Percent High School to NCAA- 6.1%

Percent NCAA to Pro- 9.4%

Percent High School to Pro- .07%

It is a fact of life that student-athletes often receive the benefit of the doubt or special treatment because of their special talents. However, these so-called "benefits" do not necessarily help the student-athlete.

For example, colleges and universities use "special admits" to remain competitive.

That is, if a player meets the NCAA's minimum academic standards, she could gain admission into a school that would not otherwise have accepted her application.

Unfortunately, some of the best known collegiate athletic programs have a disproportionate number of student-athletes having been accepted for their special talent over meeting the academic standards of the institution.

These "special admits" are mainly reserved for the talented athlete and include, but are not limited to, a less-challenging curriculum, lenient grading, special study hours and tutoring, independent projects, and preferential housing and course selection.

The reality is that many of these athletes will graduate from their institutions with a meaningless diploma and little prospects for a future outside of athletics.

Being an entitled athlete can also work as a double-edge sword for the athlete who falls out of favor or is unable to play at the level to which his peers have become accustomed.

Instead of becoming the entitled athlete, I encourage my student-athletes to emulate the individuals who give back to their communities and who work diligently to improve their skills and knowledge of the sports they love.

The old saying holds true that we meet the same people on the way down the ladder of success as we did on the way up.

How do you want to be remembered – as a person, first and an athlete, second? I refer regularly to a poem written by Rudyard Kipling when I'm working with my student-athletes; I feel this poem carries a significant importance in maintaining their balance.

Now this is the Law of the Jungle -- as old and as true as the sky;
And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die.

As the creeper that girdles the tree-trunk the Law runneth forward and back -
-

For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack.

"Control the process; don't let the process control you!"