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Managing the media: managing impressions and relationships when speaking to the sports media.

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1. Introduction: managing impressions and relationships in the media

At first glance, a chapter on speaking to the media may appear out of place in a handbook on elite sports performance. We typically associate elite sporting performance with what is happening on the pitch, in the pool or on the track rather than what goes on in the interview booth or press conference. It is also a widely-held belief that you cannot talk your way to a win and that actions speak louder than words, especially words spoken in the media. Additionally, for many elite performers, speaking to the media is an unwanted distraction that can take them away from their team mates during times of celebration, interrupt important recovery routines, be an invasive presence during preparation or take messages and meaning out of context, innocently or perhaps for strategic effect. So, why would elite performers, or an elite performance handbook for that matter, dedicate any time and space to it?

The simple answer is that speaking to the media is now an obligatory component of the elite sporting experience and it is a space where elite performers can achieve important goals relevant to a life in high-performance sport. Two of these goals are *the management of your impression* in public with fans, journalists and other interested over-hearers, and *the management of important professional relationships* that can be affected, for better or worse, by media performances. Both of these goals are important considerations for elite performers. Having a positive impression can, for example, increase your fan base and open up potential sponsorship opportunities. On the contrary, having a negative impression can attract scrutiny which may prove distracting or detract from your accomplishments. Potentially problematic media behaviour also has the potential to create tension for the close working relationships many elite performers need to work hard to foster.

Conceptualising media interview performances as a relationship management opportunity also opens the door for strategic action to be designed and taken, whereby a range of interpersonal goals like defending other's reputations, motivating one's team or particular players or even attempting to plant the seeds of doubt in the opposition's head can be performed by skilled interviewees in these public conversations.

In order to achieve these important goals in media performances, elite performers need to develop healthy attitudes to the media, awareness of what they can expect in media interactions and an array of strategies to help ensure they negotiate their media interview encounters in a professional manner. This does not mean elite performers need to like the media or the people behind the microphone or the keyboard. Rather it means understanding and respecting the role the media play in the elite sporting experience and developing strategies to manage everything they can throw at you so you can work towards managing your impression and your relationships when being interviewed. In some cases, elite performers may also wish to develop a greater awareness of the media's practices and processes so they can be harnessed and manipulated for strategic gain.

In this chapter, I elaborate on these two goals drawing on my experiences as a media educator for elite performers and my own research into media communication and language use in the sports media interviews. In Section 2, I consider how elite performers typically attempt to manage their impressions in the sports media and the importance of understanding your context when thinking about impression management strategies. In Section 3 I unpack some of the key interpersonal work elite performers do when speaking to the media in order to protect and have a positive effect on important professional relationships. In this section we also consider the notion of playing mind games in the media which is a different kind of interpersonal strategy some elite performers may wish to engage in. It is hoped that for elite performers reading this chapter, the discussion of these two key goals will help them reflect on how they can manage their impression and their relationships in their media interview performances.

2. Impression management in the sports media

Managing one's impression or coming across well in the eyes of others is a pervasive human concern in any social setting. We all want to come across well and we take steps every day to appeal positively to others. However, what this entails is an extremely complex question. Understanding how to generate a positive impression requires careful consideration of the context you are operating in and the social attitudes, norms and values that are shared by people involved in this context.

Researchers have identified some of the broad underlying values that elite sporting performers appear to orient to when speaking in the media (Caldwell, 2009; K. A. File, 2012, 2015, 2017; Rhys, 2016). File (2015), for example, found in an analysis of 160 post-match interviews with professional football and rugby athletes that athletes shared a concern with constructing themselves as modest and humble, as respectful of the opposition and officials, as emotionally balanced and as a team player. These values may reflect, in part, perceptions by elite performers of what the fans, the public or journalists reporting on sporting events typically consider socially appropriate for athletes speaking after matches have been completed. This study analysed post-match interviews from two different sports but also two different regions of the world suggesting that, at least in a team sporting context, these values reflect some of the more general concerns of elite performers when presenting themselves in the media. These values were most visible when elite athletes were faced with a question that potentially threatened their claim to being modest, humble, respectful, emotionally balanced or a team player. For example, interviewer questions that aimed to highlight the individual accomplishments of an interviewee during a match, that aimed to elicit an interviewee's reaction to a controversial refereeing decision, or that tried to capture of the emotional highs and lows of a sporting result were often met with a range of evasive or downgrading strategies as the player attempted to navigate any potential pitfalls to their impression.

Humour is also a strategy that elite performers can draw on in their media interviews to help manage their impressions. Possessing a good sense of humour is seen as a universally appreciated social attribute, and is one elite performers can utilise in order to come across positively. File (2017) found that football managers would employ humour attempts in post-match interviews, in some cases to negotiate questions about controversial refereeing decisions. An example reported on in this study was Garry Monk's (manager of Swansea at the time) 'I didn't know you were allowed two goalkeepers' response when he was asked about a missed handball decision that went against his side. Depending on how they are delivered, humour attempts like this, at a moment of great

frustration for a football manager, can give the impression of someone that is in control of their emotions while at the same time allowing you to register your displeasure at a refereeing decision. They are also quite indirect and can therefore help elite performers to avoid sanctions often associated with directly criticising referees (see File, 2017 for further discussion of this).

However, while humour delivered well can facilitate a positive impression, humour that fails can leave an elite performer picking up the pieces, defending themselves or even apologising. File and Schnurr (Under revision) found that athletes' and coaches' humour could fail and the repercussions of this could be damaging to one's impression. One example from this study that gained some recent attention was a humour attempt by Sam Thaiday, a professional rugby league player for Brisbane and Queensland. Thaiday, in a post-match interview, likened a recently completed match to losing one's virginity – 'not pretty but we got the job done' (see Hunt, 2016 for a report of this interview). This strategy was seen by some as an amusing and unique way to answer questions in an interview genre often criticised for its generic responses. However, others found the joke distasteful. This and the other examples presented in this study suggest that humour which can be deemed as sexist, racist, or that makes light of issues like domestic abuse may be edgy and can win you some fans, but it can also draw negative attention to your impression and activate a wider audience that is likely to condemn such humour attempts.

2.1 Bear in mind your context!

The above reflect some general values and strategies that elite performers appear to orient to when attempting to construct themselves in the media. However, the specific context an elite performer operates in will also require some careful consideration. Fans listening to your interviews may draw on a number of social and cultural ideas that have become associated with your sport or the way elite performers who play your sport typically behave. For example, how a boxer is expected to speak pre-match may be very different to an equestrian rider, rugby player, gymnast or tennis player due to the sociohistorical and cultural values that reside in the fabric of these different sports. As an elite performer you have a choice whether to draw on or resist these expectations and associations as you go about cultivating your impression.

In some cases, though, certain social values and ideas can have an overbearing influence on how your media interview strategies are interpreted by fans and therefore constrain your behaviour. File (2018) demonstrates this in a study that showed how managing a big club like Manchester United can create certain expectations about how the manager should speak. In this study, an analysis was carried out on the way David Moyes spoke in media interviews during his tenure as Manchester United. During his tenure, Moyes was the target of criticism by Manchester United fans not just because he lost a number of matches but also because his media interview performances did not appropriately capture the way a Manchester United manager should speak (Stone, 2014a, 2014b). This study compared the answering strategies Moyes employed with those used by his predecessors, Sir Alex Ferguson and Michael Phelan and found that Moyes spoke quite differently to his predecessors. Some of those differences included Moyes tendency to compliment fierce rivals (i.e. Manchester City and Liverpool), to mitigate strong criticism of his team and team performances in losing efforts, to reduce or avoid talk that highlighted the expectation surrounding the club, and to avoid over-promising with respect to the future and the response expected from the team. Many of these differences between the way Moyes and the way his predecessors spoke were highlighted by fans as problematic because they rubbed against the norms associated with being manager of a club with high expectations (Jackson, 2014; Stone, 2014a, 2014b).

Media strategies like being complimentary of the opposition, being less critical of your team and trying to avoid over-promising are used by football managers and managers of other sports teams across the world every day to generate the impression of a manager who is respectful and careful not to create too much pressure on his team. So why did they not work for David Moyes? In some contexts, like being the manager of a big club with high expectations (like Manchester United), these strategies could take on different hues of meaning. For example, compliments directed at a rival after a loss may be interpreted negatively as admiration of the opposition team which might upset fans that have a hegemonic position to uphold. Or, by being less critical of his own team's performance in a loss, the manager may be coming across as accepting of mistakes and bad performances which could raise questions about a manager's ability to be able to handle a club with high expectations. What this study highlights is the importance of understanding your context and that decisions about how you present yourself can be constrained by the context you are operating in. At a practical level, this may mean that some of the general media interview strategies elite performers typically draw on (like being overly respectful to the opposition or not promising too much) may not be appropriate to the specific context the elite performer finds themselves in.

Your context can also throw up very specific and unique challenges that require careful thought and consideration. For example, what is the best course of action for a player upon returning from a performance-enhancing substance ban? This is certainly a challenging context from an impression management perspective, one that should involve a range of strategic decisions from identifying a particular publication to share the story with through to working out what you want fans of the club to know about your return. Other specific cases I have been involved in include helping a player negotiate the fallout after signing for a rival club (and seemingly betraying fans of his current club), and helping coaches and players find the best way to deal with public scrutiny surrounding their appointment as manager or captain of a team, especially in cases where their appointment is seen to be a controversial one. Managing one's impression in relation to specific issues like these can require a detailed unpacking and understanding of the context, the clear identification of the underlying threats to one's impression and the design of the best course of action with which to go ahead.

In summary, while there do appear to be a number of general values the sporting public seem attached to with respect to professional athletes, particularly when speaking after a sports match or event, successful impression management requires attention to one's own context. In some contexts, the general strategies elite performers typically draw on may need reconsideration as they may indirectly create meanings that negatively affect your impression. For any elite performer that is experiencing increasing levels of media exposure, it is worth considering what values sum you up and/or are evident in your sporting context and getting help on how you can orient to them in typical sports media interview genres.

3. Relationship management in the media: protecting your working relationships

Elite performers also need to understand that media interview performances play a key role in the ongoing management and maintenance of professional working relationships in high performance sports teams and organisations. While the primary audience for sports interviews is the fans and sporting public, it would be naïve to think that media interview performances are not available for team mates, coaches, squad members or opposition athletes and managers to access at some point

in time. If you have said something that is or could be interpreted as particularly inflammatory or critical of an individual then some form of wider coverage is almost guaranteed as media sites are increasingly publishing stories based on controversial interview performances. This, therefore, means it is important for elite performers to have their key relationships (and the maintenance of them) in mind when approaching a media interview or press conference.

One of the biggest threats to professional relationships is being interviewed after a loss. In losing efforts, interviewers will often ask elite performers to evaluate things that have gone wrong and this can prime listeners for any criticism or blame an interviewee appears to be attributing to others for the loss. One of the biggest regrets or concerns for an elite performer is that they have said or will say something that is or can be understood as overt criticism or blame of someone in their team or circle which, in turn, causes a rift in that relationship. Being able to carefully negotiate your evaluative messages in a losing effort is a skill elite performers need to develop if they are to be successful at managing their professional relationships in the media.

Many of the elite performers I have worked with or interviewed as part of my research have alluded to the need to be delicate and careful when speaking to the media after a loss. Richie McCaw, World Cup winning captain of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team, was particularly conscious of the way he was coming across in the media in losses. In a research interview I conducted with him about his experiences when speaking to the media, he alluded to his underlying relational concerns and the strategies he tended to employ to manage relationships when speaking after a loss.

Research interview with Richie McCaw

01 March, 2012

Extract theme: relationship management, not 'having a crack' at your team or the referees

Richie McCaw

1. some days you just don't turn up but you're not going to say that are you + so==

Kieran File

2. ==why are you not going to say that even if it is the truth?
3. why would you not come out and say we just didn't turn up?

Richie McCaw

4. well that's having a crack at your boys isn't it you know
5. so you might do that behind closed doors
6. but that's not something to air out in public you know

Kieran File

7. but you do do that behind closed doors?

Richie McCaw

8. oh yeah definitely + definitely
9. you point out things with people and you're pretty frank about it you know
10. um but [in the media] it's not the time to air your dirty laundry and, especially as a captain, blame guys for not fronting you know

11. you say hey we're all at fault here we've got a few things we can get right and we've got to go and sort that out
12. that's why rugby players get accused of being pretty boring interviewees
13. but they don't want to be a front page headline
14. you know you make an outrageous comment about the ref is an idiot or you know that just gets you no where
15. because next week you've got the same ref or the week after you've got the same ref
16. you ain't gonna get anywhere
17. and that's why as a loser you've got to be gracious with it and just say oh we're going to fix it
18. and when you win you sort of say we're not going to get ahead of ourselves
19. and that's the general picture especially in a competition
20. so {laughs} I think you can see why probably boring is the right word

This extract, from a very experienced and respected elite performer, reveals a concern with avoiding publically 'blaming his guys' (lines 4 and 10) as well as the avoidance of critical comments about the referee in a losing effort (lines 14 to 15). While the reason for the avoidance of blaming his players is left implicit, a reason is offered for avoiding blame of referees: that you need to have an ongoing relationship with them and critical comments may negatively affect this relationship. This is almost certainly the case in team circles as well, where public shaming, or causing a player to lose face with the sporting public, not only has the potential to affect your own relationship with the blamed or criticised individual, but may also affect that individual's standing with other members of the team or circle, especially if you are the leader of the group and your opinion carries weight with others (as alluded to in line 10). Neither of these outcomes is relationally a good one, as a mixture of unconfident, unhappy players and bad relationships could negatively impact team work and cohesion.

The notion that such comments can become a front page headline (in line 17) also shows that the media are particularly interested in professional working relationships or any apparent pressure on them. Overtly emotional remarks that hint at problems behind the scenes contribute to the drama that encapsulates interest in professional sport by the public and is therefore an interest media outlets are keen to probe. While avoiding criticism and critical feedback is not possible in professional sport (something also alluded to above, lines 8-9), as it performs an important function in the correction of on-field issues, the media does not appear to be the best forum to offer extensive or overt criticism, especially immediately after a match or event. This is why elite performers often look to avoid comments that could be perceived of as blameworthy and to modify or soften any critical commentary that they do offer in media interviews. Even in cases where a critical comment has been softened, the practices of the media, including the shortening, adjusting or repositioning of quotes to remove softeners and to fit particular narratives can also alter the effect of a comment. This can have the effect of heightening the illocutionary force of a critical comment which may in turn put even greater pressure on a relationship.

McCaw also alludes to the potential for such concerns to result in an unengaging or boring interview experience for fans. It is often the need to manage relationships in the media that drives the generic or 'boring' media interview performances, whereby elite performers draw on a range of safe

platitudes in an attempt to negotiate potential threats to their relationships. Skilled elite performers will always be looking for opportunities to engage audiences in the media (as this can help improve your public impression), however, they are also adept at identifying situations when more careful management of relationships is a priority which may mean authoring a less engaging media interview performance. Of course, elite performers then run the risk of being labelled boring or generic; however, the reason such strategies are frequently drawn on is because they serve important interpersonal goals for elite performers like the protection of relationships.

3.1 Other interpersonal goals: praising and playing mind games in the media

Beyond protecting your relationship with your team, skilled practitioners may also use their media opportunities to achieve other interpersonal goals. Praise and positive remarks given in media interviews are an example of this. Players and coaches are often required to positively evaluate their own performance or the performance of their team in media interviews. Ex-All Black captain Anton Oliver referred to this process as 'handing out the goodies' (research Interview, 04/06/2011). The act of praising can be conceptualised as a strategic one whereby high performers use it to positively impact another individual's feelings of self-worth or their standing in the public. Examples of this include a coach motivating an individual player through the media by praising them or members of the team throwing their support behind an embattled manager. These actions suggest the use of praise is an important tool an elite performer can employ to have an impact on the way others feel.

Another interpersonal goal experienced practitioners might attempt is to use the media to get under the skin of competitors. For the most part, elite performers are at pains to illustrate the amount of respect that they have for their opposition when speaking to the media. This is often driven by a desire to not provide any additional motivation to the opposition before a match. However, media opportunities can be strategically used to try to unsettle an opposition team or an individual – a practice that is often referred to as mind games. The goal of mind games is to innocently or directly raise doubts about the abilities of an individual before the match and/or to undermine the confidence of the intended target or the confidence in the intended target by team mates. The use of the media in this process helps to improve the likelihood that a message of this kind, that aims to unsettle, will get to its intended target.

One elite performer that is often associated with mind games is the current England rugby team head coach, Eddie Jones. A recent example of this came in the lead up to 2018 Six Nations rugby match against Wales where, in a pre-match press conference, Eddie Jones questioned the ability of opposition first five, Rhys Patchell, to be able to handle the occasion (Jones & Williams, 2018). The quotes attributed to Eddie Jones from this pre-match press conference have been provided below:

1. *When Alun Wyn Jones and the guys go down for breakfast on Saturday, they'll be*
2. *looking at him [Rhys Patchell] thinking, 'can this kid handle the pressure?'*
3. *It's a big ask.*
4. *It's easy to play when the ball is on the front foot and going from side to side, but*
5. *when it gets a bit cut and thrust, nip and tuck, this will be a proper Test – then we*
6. *will see if Patchell has the bottle to handle it.*
7. *He hasn't played much Test rugby at all. He is going to have [Chris] Robshaw at*
8. *him, [Owen] Farrell at him, [Danny] Care at him - all guys that have played a lot of*
9. *Test rugby.*

A number of strategies are employed in this example that can be read as an attempt to undermine the confidence of and the confidence in the player in question. For example, he highlights the player's lack of experience (lines 7 to 9) and refers to him as a kid (line 2), both of which implicitly function to question this player's credentials and therefore chances of success on the big stage. He also raises the possibility that the player's own team and captain will be questioning his ability to perform and creates a story about what will be going through the Welsh captain's mind (at breakfast) before the event (lines 1 to 2). Such a strategy could also plant seeds of doubt across the team. He also cites specific actions and events that the targeted player is likely to experience during the game (lines 7 to 9) which, when they occur, may act as a primer or reminder for such comments (and associated doubts) to resurface in the player's mind during the match.

Of course there is no guarantee such comments will achieve their intended outcome. However, by using the media in this way, they are at least likely to reach the player or team targeted for the psychological barb. Experienced practitioners know that comments that are marked or untypical in media interviews (like the public questioning of an opposition player) make for an engaging news story, and the subsequent flurry of interest in such comments can make avoiding these comments difficult for the intended target. Journalists will often want to follow up such reports and stories by asking the targeted player, or other players in the team for their reaction to these comments. In this regard, the media, in their desire to elicit a reaction and give a story legs, inadvertently act as the messenger, delivering the comments to the player or team in question. And, even if it is publically rejected as ineffective by the intended target, the message, and the ideas inherent in it, have at least reached the target and therefore have the potential to impact the psychological preparation of that player or team.

In some sports and some media interview contexts, mind games are commonplace. The pre-match interviews and press conferences before boxing and mixed martial arts matches, for example, frequently involve public questioning and criticism of an opposition fighter, sometimes with the target of such mind games sitting in the room. In other sports, certain personalities or teams may become associated with such behaviour. The Australian cricket team have been an example of this is a sport that is culturally recognised for its values of respect and politeness (often referred to as 'gentlemanly' behaviour). While there is technically nothing wrong with playing mind games, some sections of the media, particularly those covering the opposition you are attempting to unsettle, can use these comments to portray you in a devious and/or malicious light which can leave you open to accusations of being a bad sport. Considering the extent to which any unwanted attention from the media will affect your team is an important factor in deciding when and how to use this particular technique.

5. Conclusion:

What this chapter has argued is that elite performers need to develop skills for negotiating their media interviews so they can both manage their impression with the public and manage any potential threats to their professional working relationships that can be (inadvertently) caused by media interview comments. Speaking and communicating is an interpersonal activity whereby people design messages in an attempt to make a connection with others and come across well and also make choices that aim to protect and maintain good relations with the people they are speaking with or to.

These principles are no different for people who, as part of their profession, need to speak to a wider audience through the media, although the specific values speakers need to orient and the strategies they need to employ can be specific to this context. With respect to managing one's impression, appearing modest, respectful, emotionally balanced and, if relevant, a team-oriented player are all general social values shared by athletes, the media and fans, and are therefore brought to bear on interview performances by those who are listening and interpreting an elite performer's performance in a media interview. At the same time, an elite performer's specific context may constrain their behaviour which can require a more careful consideration of the interview strategies employed in order to successfully negotiate a positive impression. When managing relationships, being particularly aware of and prepared for difficult interview situations, like speaking after a loss, is time well spent. Being careful to mitigate criticism that could be blown out of proportion by the media and threaten relationships is one consideration elite performers should engage with.

In conclusion, because of the potential value associated with a good impression and strong relationships for elite performers, developing skills for speaking to the media in ways that foster and protect your impression and your relationships is therefore a worthwhile endeavour and should be a component of any elite performance development programme.

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