

Retiring Amidst Scandal – A New Playbook for Pro Athletes



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For anyone who has ever played or fallen in love with a sport, the professional athlete represents all that we aspire to. So when they fall from grace, *we all fall* – fans, brands and sponsors alike. What is an athlete to do when embroiled in a scandal? Is retirement the only option? Or, does it make an athlete look unnecessarily guilty or perhaps worse – like he or she is taking the easy way out?

Take the recent headlines about NFL legend [Peyton Manning](#), tennis super star [Maria Sharapova](#), and in admittedly smaller circles, cyclocross rider Femke Van den Driessche. While there is no question that Manning is at the end of his career; Sharapova and Van den Driessche are at their peak. Manning announced his retirement with pomp and circumstance (despite a cloud of suspicion) on the heels of the Bronco's Superbowl win, Sharapova admitted to failing a drug test and has stated she is not ready to retire, and Van den Driessche, who was set to appear before the UCI's disciplinary commission about the discovery of a motor in a spare bike at the Cyclocross World Championships, abandoned her defense the day before and said she was leaving the sport.

The scenarios are different but there is a playbook that all athletes should follow. When making the decision to continue competition or retire, the common denominator is that athletes

in crisis have to rehabilitate their image in order to survive.

Following are key steps in a [crisis communications](#) playbook for athletes:

1. **Get ahead of the game:** Athletes meticulously prepare for every game, every match, every performance. It's critical that they apply that same level of preparation to their communications plans. All professional athletes and the brands associated with them must have a plan in place to address potential scenarios and vulnerabilities so that when a crisis hits, the response is immediate.
2. **Understand the Ecosystem:** Athletes are part of a complicated ecosystem that includes fans, sponsors, other athletes, governing bodies, properties, the social sphere and of course, the media. An athlete must be able to address all of these audiences, with messages that will matter to them, when faced with a crisis.
3. **Honesty is the Best Policy:** The world of professional sports is about authentic human performance. For that reason, athletes need to take responsibility where warranted, be accountable for their actions—whatever those actions are—and be sincere in their communications.
4. **There is No Place to Hide:** Hiding creates an assumption of guilt, and an athlete who takes this route will quickly lose control of his or her own narrative. Having a crisis plan in place with a clear process that includes who to call, and when, will help shorten the response time; a must in a 24/7 news cycle. For example, athletes should immediately work with their communications and legal counsel to determine any potential legal liability, then be as transparent as possible about the situation, setting the tone for future communication.
5. **Timing is Everything:** An athlete at the end of a long

career embroiled in a crisis faces an entirely different set of challenges than an athlete at his or her peak. That timing must be examined carefully, with an eye toward what's next. And, there are cases where athletes will be forced to retire if they are banned from their sport. No matter what, image rehabilitation will be key to building—or maintaining—a legacy.

About the Author: Marya Pongrace is a Director at [Peppercomm](#) with deep experience in creating integrated communications campaigns to reach key audiences where they live, work and play. Ms. Pongrace, formerly the Director of Communications for a top World Tour professional cycling team, has deep experience in crisis communications and reputation management, having worked with professional athletes, sponsors and teams through major crises.