

Ryan Lochte's Next Stop – A Reputation-Reclamation Tour?



By Ray Hennessey, Chief Innovation Officer, [JConnelly](#)

If [Ryan Lochte](#) regains his reputation, he has the Real Housewives to thank.

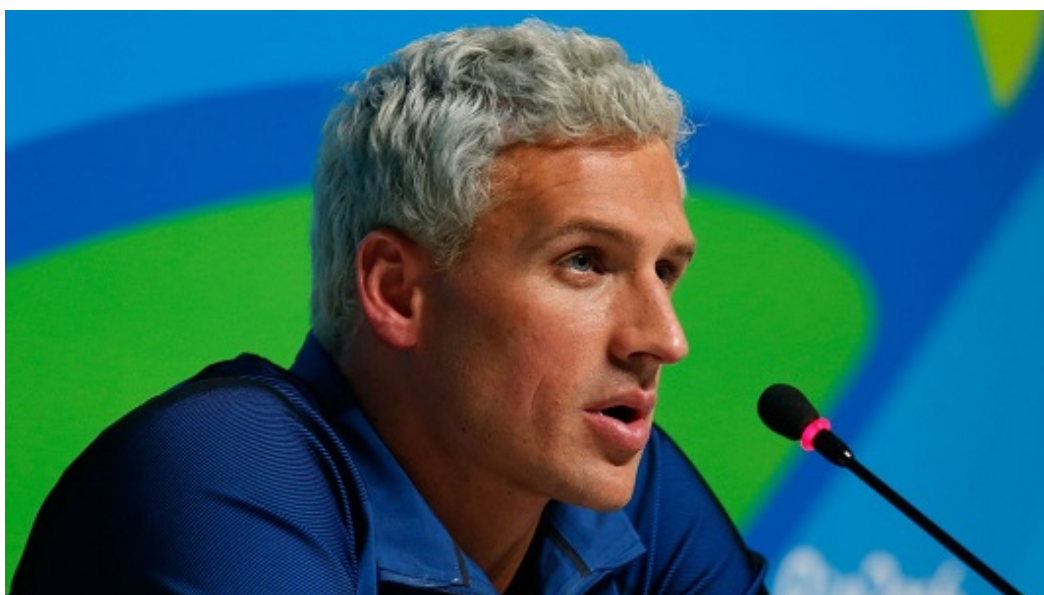
Time was that filing a false police report about being robbed at gunpoint to cover up your boorish behavior in the foreign country hosting the Olympics was a career-killer. Indeed, Ryan Lochte has already lost several sponsorships as a result of the controversy, as brands like Speedo and Ralph Lauren have wisely distanced themselves from the swimmer's bad behavior. Lochte bungled the [crisis response](#), with inconsistencies and half-hearted apologies. He is not a sympathetic figure.

That's the opportunity.

Truth is, Ryan Lochte was never a sympathetic figure. Despite tremendous talent, he was always in the shadow of his home-country rival Michael Phelps, who just happens to be the most decorated Olympian in history. That turned Lochte into swimming's version of the Washington Generals, consistently losing to the Harlem Globetrotters as the crowds roared with delight.

Rather than brood over being born at the wrong time, Lochte acted out – and to great success. With his bleached hair and Playboy-model girlfriend, he assumed the role of swimming's

bad boy. He exuded an attitude problem. He couldn't compete with Phelps in the pool, nor could he win over the public's love, so he became the convenient villain, a J.R. Ewing that fans loved because he was so tough to love. The public appreciates a villain, even roots for one from time to time, and Lochte made being bad look good.



(Photo Source: Twitter)

That's precisely why, rather than a drawn-out reputation-reclamation tour, he might just want to double down on his bad-boy image. In reality, there wasn't much shock and horror at the news that Lochte may have just caused an international incident by lying about police robbing him. There was almost a grudging acceptance that when you put a guy like Ryan Lochte in the streets of Rio in the darkest hours before dawn, something bad is going to happen. After all, it wasn't like this was Aly Raisman or anything.

Lochte, despite all the furor, has the chance to be the handsomest ugly American in history. The American public would appreciate that. Just look at the popularity of reality television. From the Real Housewives to the Kardashians to The Bachelor, television audiences crave – nay, demand – their villains. Even the granddaddy of reality, Survivor, rewards

characters not because of their physical ability to overcome obstacles, but their mental capacity to undercut their fellow man. The worse the behavior, the greater the love. It's why Tanya Harding is on television today in TruTV's "World's Dumbest..." series, while fellow Olympic figure skater Nancy Kerrigan, whose career Harding infamously sabotaged in a vicious beating at the 1994 Winter Games, has drifted into relative obscurity.

That's what makes a conversation about Lochte's reputation response unique: He is not trying to regain a choir-boy image. He never had one to begin with. Rather, he needs to only convince the world that his bad behavior doesn't rise to the level of a criminal act. Lochte's whole public persona radiates mischief and devilment. His only real brand risk is if he's viewed as a violent criminal. Even the criticism that he's a liar isn't a career-killer. Just look at the presidential campaign trail.

But what about all those lucrative sponsorships? They were going away anyway. Take a look at the history of Wheaties boxes and you'll find a steady stream of athletes who captured their moment then faded to black. Lochte's career in the pool was over anyway. It was only a matter of time before sponsors looked for the next big thing. Lochte was going to need a second act, one that wouldn't be characterized by time in Phelps' shadow.

That's why I wouldn't be surprised if his phone isn't buzzing with offers to embrace the role he seems to embody so well. He is a reality television dream casting: handsome, fit, and famous, with just the right amount of wrong. In short, he is already a character. He can parlay that into a very lucrative personal brand, with speaking opportunities, a book, and branded product lines in areas like spirits. There's money in that approach, and a great deal of continued notoriety. Lochte would be wise to dive right in.

About the Author: Ray Hennessey is Chief Innovation Officer at JConnelly, an integrated communications firm in New York. An accomplished journalist and business leader, Ray develops new approaches to communication, content, reputation and storytelling for JConnelly and its clients. With more than 25 years of media and management experience, Ray has spent his career at the convergence of traditional and emerging media. Most recently, he served as Editorial Director for Entrepreneur, where he helped launch the Entrepreneur360 and Top Company Culture franchises, as well as the Entrepreneur Network video channel. Previously, Ray helped launch the FOX Business Network, where he served as founding Business News Director. Earlier in his career, he was editor at SmartMoney.com and Dow Jones, a daily on-air contributor at CNBC and the IPO columnist at The Wall Street Journal.