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The Soap Opera Saga of Pete Rose: He's Hustling Again

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Wednesday, January 7, 2004

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Rose's latest strategy comes with the release of a new autobiography, *My Prison Without Bars*, timed for release to give Rose the best chance for a shot at reinstatement to the game and election to the Hall of Fame. It will also put some big money in his bank account.

The tragic story of Pete Rose remains one of the greatest blights on America's most legendary sport. His 1989 settlement with baseball commissioner Bartlett Giamatti precluded a full hearing and an open investigation. For the last fourteen years, Pete Rose has steadfastly denied ever betting on baseball—even though he spent time in a federal prison for tax evasion linked to his gambling habit.

Pete Rose's guilt or innocence of baseball's cardinal sin has been hotly debated ever since, though only the most die hard and blinded fans could truly have believed that Rose was innocent. When allegations of Rose's gambling were submitted to the baseball commissioner, a process was automatically put into motion that would either absolve Rose or lead to a lifetime ban. From the very beginning, Pete Rose tried to play the investigation the way he had played the game—cutting all corners and breaking a rule any time he could get away with it. Special Counsel John Dowd, the attorney who investigated the case, produced evidence that Rose had placed hundreds of bets on baseball games, including bets on the Cincinnati Reds made while Rose was the team's manager.

The rule—known throughout the game as "Rule 21"—is abundantly clear, and it is posted on the door of every major league clubhouse: "Any player, umpire, or club or league official or employee, who shall bet any sum whatsoever upon any baseball game in connection with which the bettor has a duty to perform shall be declared permanently ineligible."

By the time the special counsel's investigation was over, it was clear that Rose was either guilty of the accusations, or was at least unwilling to submit to a formal hearing which would determine his guilt or innocence. Either way, Pete Rose had insulted and compromised the sport that had made him famous, rich, and powerful.

Giamatti, a former president of Yale University, was a world-class scholar as well as a life-long lover of baseball. Speaking of baseball players in general, Giamatti once observed: "You can't get to the top of your profession without having lived a life where a lot of people are taking care of you. It's an adulated, isolated life, and you're vulnerable. These people who have developed their physical gifts haven't necessarily developed the rest of their lives."

This was particularly true in the case of Pete Rose, whose life was obviously spinning out of control as the commissioner prepared to make his decision. Giamatti told Rose that he would have to completely "reconfigure" his life. It is now clear that Pete Rose decided merely to reconfigure the truth.

In his 1989 autobiography, *Pete Rose: My Story*, Rose steadfastly denied that he ever bet on baseball. His new book

tells a very different story. The first book was, Rose now admits, filled with lies. What about this book?

In a lengthy excerpt published in *Sports Illustrated*, Rose makes his guilt clear. A compulsive gambler, Rose claims that he was able to put his gambling habit on hold for the baseball season each year, until one year the temptation overcame him. "Finally the temptation got too strong, and during the 1987 season I began betting regularly on the sport I knew best—baseball. This wasn't a no-account playoff bet on a couple of teams I had nothing to do with. I was betting on baseball while I was managing a major league ball club in the regular season. But in all honestly I no longer recognized the difference between one sport and another. I just looked at the games and thought, I'll take a dime on the Lakers, a dime on the Sixers, a dime on the Buckeyes—and a dime on the Reds.... I didn't even consider the consequences."

This stunning admission—packaged in the form of a book that promises to make Rose millions of dollars—is strategically timed for the hope that Rose will be reinstated to the game and elected to baseball's Hall of Fame. Given the rules of the Hall of Fame balloting process, Rose must be reinstated before December 2005 in order to be placed on the ballot used by baseball writers. After that, Rose's hope for election to the Hall of Fame would rest with baseball veterans—some of whom have pledged never to return to the Hall of Fame if Rose is elected. His best shot—if not his only shot—expires in a matter of months.

When Bart Giamatti announced the banishment of Pete Rose from baseball, he characterized the event as a tragedy for the sport. "The banishment for life of Pete Rose from baseball is the sad end of a sorry episode. One of the game's greatest players has engaged in a variety of acts which have stained the game, and he must now live with the consequences of those acts." Giamatti went on to declare the ultimate sanction: "By choosing not to come to a hearing before me and by choosing not to proffer any testimony or evidence contrary to the evidence and information contained in the report of the Special Counsel to the Commissioner, Mr. Rose has accepted baseball's ultimate sanction, lifetime ineligibility."

Baseball's concern with gambling is directly traceable to the fact that the sport was nearly destroyed in the 1919 Black Sox scandal which included a fixed World Series. As George F. Will noted, baseball and gambling were closely intertwined in the early twentieth century. The 1919 scandal was just the worst of what had come to light and brought baseball into disrepute. As Will argues, "Baseball's nightmare is a player or manager in hock to the mob." Pete Rose seemed to be in hock to just about everybody.

Why did he do it? This remains one of the great unanswered questions of the whole tragedy, and Rose's new book doesn't go very far in answering the question. According to Rose, he confessed his betting on baseball to current Commissioner Bud Selig in November of 2002. When Selig asked him why he had done this, Rose responded with the essence of simplicity: "I didn't think I'd get caught."

That is a very different response than Rose offered to Bart Giamatti and others in 1989. When asked at that time if he had ever bet on baseball, Rose responded "No, sir. I did not bet on baseball." He later repeated the denials under oath. In *My Prison Without Bars*, Rose offers a more extended explanation. "So before I go on, I know what you're thinking: Why didn't you tell the truth, Pete—admit that you had a problem? It's a fair question, one that I've asked myself many times over the past 14 years. I wish I had an easy answer, but I don't. If the commissioner had presented evidence or given any indication of his position, I might have handled things differently. I really didn't believe I had a problem." Rose went on to argue that he may have broken the letter of the law, but he did not violate its spirit. He may have bet on baseball—even his own team—but he claims never to have taken an unfair advantage or to have allowed his betting to influence his baseball decisions. Is this believable? Rose's rationalization comes down to what amounts to a moral hallucination: "So in my mind, I wasn't corrupt."

That statement probably comes about as close as possible to revealing the real Pete Rose. This is a man, after all, who was once caught trying to smuggle \$100,000 out of Japan in order to avoid federal income taxes—and then tried it again. In his newest book, Rose also admits getting his wife to smuggle contraband into the prison for him. This is a man who has raised lying, deceit, and dishonesty to the level of art. He may have earned the name "Charlie Hustle" for his energy on the baseball field, but the name also applies to his very flexible understanding of the truth—Pete Rose will say whatever seems to be in his best interest at the time.

Time will tell if Pete Rose is reinstated and if he is ever elected to the Hall of Fame. The most insightful and reflective baseball fans must understand that the election of Pete Rose would forever compromise the Hall of Fame and the sport

itself. Pete Rose cannot even bring himself to tell baseball fans, "I'm sorry," in any believable way. "I'm sure that I'm supposed to act all sorry or sad or guilty now that I've accepted that I've done something wrong," Rose states. "But you see, I'm just not built that way."

Should fans just forgive Pete Rose and move on? Forgiveness requires a true and full confession—and results in a genuine brokenness of spirit. To repent is to hate the sin, not merely to regret getting caught. Pete Rose's new version of the truth isn't even close to a confession of his sin. It is another exercise in self-promotion.

If Pete Rose really means to admit his guilt and help baseball recover from his gambling, lies, and deceit, he should release a statement something like this: "I broke the rules, ruined my reputation, lost my job, went to prison, compromised my integrity, and then lied about it all for fourteen years. I violated the trust of my team and my fans and brought baseball into disrepute. I lied to men of integrity and I lied under oath. I am humiliated and forever embarrassed for my misdeeds and my lies, and I ask all those who love baseball to forgive me. I do not belong in baseball's Hall of Fame. Keep my statistics in the record books if you will, but tell your children that Pete Rose chose to break the rules, and now pays the consequence. Charlie Hustle will no longer hustle the truth." That's not what you will find in *My Prison Without Bars*.

Former Commissioner Faye Vincent isn't buying Rose's story. "He's consistent: He's all about the money. He lied in 1989 because he thought it was in his best interest financially. He thought he'd be ruined if he told the truth. Now, he feels he needs to tell the truth because it's in his best interest financially." Hall of Fame pitcher Bob Feller said "Rose admitted that he bet on baseball, so that makes Bud Selig's job easy. He can move the case to the dead file. It's over. Rose knew the rules. Betting on games means a permanent ban."

Pete Rose's diehard fans will be fighting hard for his reinstatement and pushing him for election to the Hall of Fame. In their eyes, baseball glory is all about athletic accomplishment—not character. If that is so, then baseball should simply rescind "Rule 21," and just let the gambling resume.

Bart Giamatti got it right in 1989. "The matter of Mr. Rose is now closed. It will be debated and discussed. Let no one think that it did not hurt baseball. That hurt will pass, however, as the great glory of the game asserts itself and a resilient institution goes forward. Let it also be clear that no individual is superior to the game."

Bart Giamatti died of a massive heart attack just days after handing down this decision. At least he died having told the truth. No individual is superior to the game. No individual is above the law. Pete Rose doesn't belong in anyone's Hall of Fame.

