



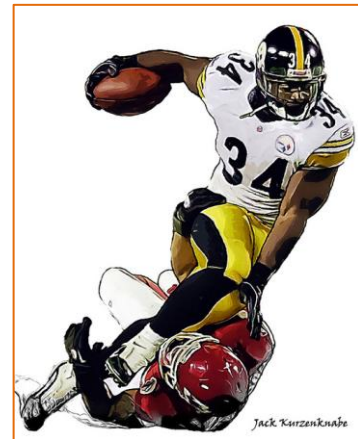
Defending Freedom of Tweets?

The Ethics of Athletes and Controversial Tweets

Danee Pye, Ph.D., & Scott R. Stroud, Ph.D.

www.mediaethicsinitiative.org

With the widespread use of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, the line between private speech and public speech has become increasingly blurred. Although most people are free to speak their minds online, public figures face unique challenges. Even if the First Amendment protects most Facebook posts and tweets, some feel that as public figures athletes have a responsibility to think before they speak—online. For example, Rashard Mendenhall, a running back for the Pittsburgh Steelers, came under attack for tweeting his thoughts about Americans celebrating the assassination of Osama Bin Laden.



Jack Kurzenknabe / Public Domain

After some Americans greeted news of the killing of Bin Laden with cheers, Mendenhall tweeted: “What kind of person celebrates death?” and “It’s amazing how people can HATE a man they have never even heard speak. We’ve only heard one side.” Public response was immediate. Mendenhall’s tweets resulted in a spike from 13,621 to 36,914 in his Twitter “followers” and a backlash from people who found his statement inappropriate or offensive. Many called for a “full and complete apology,” and the athletic company Champion dropped him as an endorser, stating that he would not be able to “appropriately represent Champion.” Champion further explained Mendenhall’s statements reflected values inconsistent with those of the brand, and “Champion is a strong supporter of the government’s efforts to fight terrorism and is very appreciative of the dedication and commitment of the U.S. Armed Forces.” Because of his relationship to the Steelers, the team’s president, Art Rooney, also issued a response, stating, “I have not spoken with Rashard so it is hard to explain or even comprehend what he meant with his recent Twitter comments. The entire Steelers’ organization is very proud of the job our military personnel have done and we can only hope this leads to our troops coming home soon.”

To his critics the athlete explained, “This controversial statement was something I said in response to the amount of joy I saw in the event of a murder. I don’t believe that this is an issue of politics or American pride; but one of religion, morality, and human ethics.” Nevertheless, he did issue an apology in a later tweet, stating “I apologize for the timing as such a sensitive matter, but it was not meant to do harm.” He also wrote, “I apologize to





anyone I unintentionally harmed with anything that I said, or any hurtful interpretation that was made and put to my name.” Although Mendenhall argues that he was just trying to provoke conversation and “encourage anyone reading it to think,” ESPN.com reporter James Walker describes him as “the latest example of a player needing to use restraint before posting his thoughts on Twitter.”

Discussion Questions:

1. What exactly, if anything, did Mendenhall do wrong?
2. What values are in conflict here? Why might we want to defend Mendenhall’s right to tweet?
3. Do sports figures have special obligations to the public concerning how they speak or talk about certain issues? Why? Would you apply these same standards to a prominent politician?
4. If Mendenhall was an unemployed or unsigned football player, would your view of his obligations while speaking change? How? What if he was unendorsed (by companies such as Champion) and not affiliated with any team at the time of the tweets?
5. Should sports journalists cover Mendenhall’s tweets and the subsequent controversy? Why or why not?

Further Information:

Gerry Dulac, “Champion drops Steelers Mendenhall as Endorser.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, May 7, 2011. Available at: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11127/1144883-66.stm>

James Walker, “Players need to be more careful on Twitter.” Available at: http://espn.go.com/blog/afcnorth/post/_id/27327/players-need-to-be-more-careful-on-twitter

Mike Florio, “Mendenhall deletes his ‘truther’ tweet.” Available at: <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2011/05/03/mendenhall-deletes-his-truther-tweet/>

This case remains the intellectual property of the Media Ethics Initiative. It can be used in unmodified PDF form without permission for classroom or educational uses only.

