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Perceptions of Professional Athlete Criminality

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PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ATHLETE CRIMINALITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Sports act as a social institution in the United States and athlete lives encompass much of network headlines. Resulting from the popularization of sports entertainment has been an enhanced insight into the lives of *professional athletes*. Namely, this coverage has become increasingly focused on deviant and criminal behavior committed by these individuals. Given the crucial role the media plays in perceptions of offenders, the question arises as to how professional athletes are perceived when their criminality is revealed in the media. A dearth of research exists with regard to understanding perceptions of professional athlete criminality. The limited body of literature suggests individuals who frequently watch, listen, or read about sports entertainment may perceive professional athlete criminality differently than those who are not consistent viewers of sports entertainment.

This dissertation expanded upon the sparse literature through utilizing household mail surveys with residents in Allentown, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia, PA. A survey was sent to randomly selected addresses within these cities and asked respondents to read and react to hypothetical vignettes involving professional athletes engaging in a variety of offenses (by assessing the seriousness, wrongness, and punitiveness of the act). Moreover, several scales were utilized to measure individual need and gratification for sports entertainment. Mixed modeling analysis was employed to determine how the vignette characteristics and respondent characteristics influenced perceptions of professional athlete criminality.

The results of this study indicated that perceptions of professional athlete criminality among this sample were quite simple. That is, individuals with higher levels of fandom and sport viewership had similar attitudes toward professional athlete criminality compared to non-fans. The strongest predictor of attitudes between professional athletes and non-athletes was the offense of gambling, which this sample rated more seriously, wrongly, and punitiveness when committed by a professional athlete. This indicated that while generally attitudes are the same toward athletes and non-athletes, offenses which may be perceived as attacking the integrity of the sport may be viewed more harshly for athletes. The implications of the findings are discussed, in addition to suggestions for future research and overall conclusions.