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Trust and leadership: Where are our role models?

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Aug. 29, 2013 Young Voices

It's been a trying summer for baseball fans in Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Brewers are tag-teaming with the Chicago Cubs for last place in the National League Central [1], one of the most competitive divisions in baseball. They're not even scoring style points, ranked by uniform expert Paul Lukas in the bottom tier [2] among Major League Baseball teams.

The biggest blow came July 23, when MLB suspended [3] star left fielder and 2011 National League MVP Ryan Braun for the rest of the season (amounting to 65 games) without pay for performance-enhancing drugs. Braun declined to appeal the suspension, a change from February 2012, when a technicality won him an appeal of a possible 50-game suspension for using a banned substance during the Brewers' playoff run during his 2011 MVP season. The guy who took the urine sample didn't store the sample properly before shipping it off to be tested. Braun claimed his innocence and said he had nothing to hide (even while secretly telling other players [4] that the urine collector was anti-Semitic and a Cubs fan).

Braun's future is in disarray. On Aug. 23, he issued an apology [5], which his teammates are said to be embracing [6] as the first steps for him to come back as a contributor to the team in 2014. In a situation where there is no handbook for a player, this might be the best thing he can do, aside from coming back next year with 30 home runs and 100 RBIs while batting .300.

Braun is not alone in a vacuum where trust is shattered with the fans. Slugger and former home-run king Mark McGwire took the Fifth in 2005 when testifying before Congress about using steroids or performance-enhancing drugs, only to come back in 2010 and admit his steroid use before being named the batting coach for the St. Louis Cardinals. The list of players and former fan favorites goes on and on for suspected use of performance-enhancing drugs: Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds, Sammy Sosa, Rafael Palmeiro and Alex Rodriguez (who is currently appealing a 211-game ban by MLB).

We live in a society where it's difficult to find models of leadership where trust is at the center of the value system. Don't bother turning to politics, no matter which party you are fond of: There's too much dirt on any number of elected officials from both parties.

And sadly enough, it's difficult to turn to our church leadership when looking for models of trust. While using performance-enhancing drugs can't possibly be compared to the consequences of the clergy sex abuse crisis, there has been a level of cover-up that has caused a massive uproar of distrust among the faithful and the church leadership. The archdiocese of Milwaukee filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in January 2011 because of civil lawsuits related to the priest sex abuse crisis and cover-up within the archdiocese. The trial itself doesn't even seem trustworthy, as the judge didn't reveal that members of his family are buried in cemeteries [7] managed by the archdiocese through a $50 million fund he deemed off-limits for the case.

It seems Pope Francis is turning a page and doing what he can to instill some trust in the Catholic church. He set up a new commission [8] to oversee the Vatican bank in hopes that greater transparency might come.

But the pope has his critics too, including from the left for his involvement in Argentina's "Dirty War." It seems the better place to go to search for honesty, transparency and truth is the organization that finds its home in so many Christian churches around the country and the world: Alcoholics Anonymous [9]. It's hard to think of a rawer environment where people are struggling with their faults and shortcomings in an open space. AA has its roots in the Oxford Group, a religious organization with ties toward self-improvement through admitting wrongs, making amends, using prayer and meditation, and sharing with others.

Church leaders hope the secular world of sports can learn from the values of the religious traditions. But sometimes, we need to remind ourselves to look past the church leaders to find the true lessons.

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