

Fans break heroes' fall

End the double standards for sport greats

PROFESSIONAL sport is a world where the transition from hero to villain can be brutal and immediate.

The tiniest of margins — missing a kick to touch at the end of a Test match — can transform first-choice to fourth-choice.

It is an accepted part of sport, this carousel that builds up and then breaks down careers and dreams. The fine print in the quest for glory, stardom and wealth is the acceptance that it can all be taken away in an instant, given the fickle nature of coaches and the “wisdom” (or stupidity) of crowds who drive perceptions.

The fishbowl of sport amplifies failures as much as it does success, and we accept the former because we so badly want the latter.

What is less clear is how off-field discretions should be managed in sport, and hypocrisy abounds. From South Africa to America, sport grapples with issues of crime and punishment on a far more severe scale than dropping a player for poor performances.

Oscar Pistorius is the one we cannot seem to escape. He orbited in the company of Beckham, Bolt and Djokovic in the sporting solar system. Sponsors were lining up to give him money. It all vanished in the time it took to fire four shots into a door to “neutralise” a target he neither considered nor identified in the early hours of February 14 2013.

Last week, he argued that a mitigating factor in his sentencing for culpable homicide should be that he has been harshly punished by the loss of sponsorships and damage to his reputation, that he had somehow become the victim in the aftermath of his negligence.

DOCTOR KNOW

ROSS TUCKER

The fall should be proportional to the rise

Less severe is the case of Ched Evans, a Welsh footballer who played for Sheffield United until his 2012 conviction for rape.

Having served half his five-year sentence, he was released last week into a storm of debate over whether clubs should now look to sign him.

This includes opinion from within the sport advising clubs to “listen to the fans” before they consider adding him to their books.

This is to delegate matters of principle to a crowd of people whose passions and vested interests often make them far from ideal arbiters of accepted social behaviour. Luis Suarez, for instance, thrives in football because of fan “democracy”.

So too, Floyd Mayweather banks billions thanks to fans (and media) who pay to watch him assault a willing opponent in a boxing ring, but who willingly look away when he assaults unwilling opponents in the form of five women, including his wife.

Ray Rice, the Baltimore Ravens running back, was captured on film knocking his fiancée out cold, but it took public pressure before his contract was ended, leading to a firestorm of accusation, blame and avoided accountability.

The point is, we get into real trouble when we view moral and ethical matters through the fishbowl of sport. The cases of Pistorius and Evans share the conflation of sport with “real life”, creating a convoluted ethical and moral debate.

The judicial system exists to protect society and to rehabilitate offenders after punishment, but would a teacher or banker with ruined career prospects receive compassion in sentencing and career redemption after violent crimes? Perhaps. But in matters of sport, there's a loss of perspective that obscures thinking.

Do sports teams have a responsibility beyond what happens in their stadiums? Some argue that once the judicial system has run its course, sport should not impose a second punishment on the athlete, implicitly arguing that losing out in sport is the equivalent of serving time in jail. Others say that sport should reject violent criminals even after their first punishment, and that sport can set a moral example.

My opinion is that as long as athletes and teams want to leverage success into lucrative rewards and glamorous lifestyles, they cannot also want to ignore the flip side. If athletes launch themselves into the stratosphere by playing on their hero status, they cannot plead for compassion when their own actions turn them into villains. For the legal system, this should be irrelevant. For sport, having heroes and role models precludes you from tolerating real-life villains.

The fall should be proportional to the rise, not mitigated by it.

Mystery bug sinks swimmers

MORE than 20 swimmers, including former Olympic champion Liu Zige, were struck down by diarrhoea and fever while competing at the Chinese national championships this week.

Organisers of the five-day championships in Huangshan are still unsure what caused the outbreak. — Reuters

West Indies turn tail on India

THE West Indies tour of India, abandoned because of a pay row, was described yesterday as “very disappointing”, by BCCI secretary Sanjay Patel.

The islanders went home with the fifth ODI, a T20 match and three Tests still to play. Asked if a tit-for-tat boycott of a West Indies tour could happen, Patel said: “Everything will be considered.” — © The Daily Telegraph

McCullum joins anti-Cairns group

BLACK Caps cricket captain Brendon McCullum, said on Saturday he would testify against former teammate Chris Cairns in a perjury trial in London next year.

Cairns was charged with perjury after winning £90 000 in damages in 2012 after suing IPL founder Lalit Modi for match-fixing allegations. — © The Daily Telegraph

Beijing Marathon masked by smog

THOUSANDS of runners battled thick smog at the Beijing Marathon yesterday, with some athletes donning masks as air pollution soared to 16 times the maximum recommended level.

Organisers refused to postpone the race despite the soupy white haze over the Chinese capital. — AFP

Rossi calls back the past in Oz

VALENTINO Rossi rolled back the years to win his sixth Australian Grand Prix yesterday after world champion Spaniard Marc Marquez crashed on lap 18. Seven-time world champion Rossi won a ding-dong battle with teammate Jorge Lorenzo for his first win in Australia since 2005. — Reuters

'Williams brothers' jibe causes storm

WORLD women's No 1 Serena Williams yesterday lashed out at Russian federation chief Shamil Tarpishev for calling her and sister Venus the “Williams brothers”.

“His comments were very insensitive, I thought extremely sexist and racist,” she said.

World No 2, Russia's Maria Sharapova, also hit out at his “very inappropriate” comments. — AFP