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ROGER'S WORLD: LET THERE BE DOUBT

By Richard E. Nicolazzo

As bizarre as it may sound, Roger Clemens and his legal team may have devised a good strategy in reputation management – they just got off to a late start.

Clemens' battle with Brian McNamee, his accusatory former trainer, has played out a bit like the one-on-one showdowns that routinely occurred when the Rocket was facing a tough batter on the mound.

McNamee told federal and baseball investigators that he injected Clemens with performance-enhancing drugs from 1998 through 2001. His statements ended up in the now infamous Mitchell Report released in December.

Almost instantly, Clemens reputation, which he points out is the result of 25 years of hard work, went "poof." In today's media-crazed communications environment, that's apparently all it takes.

The episode illustrates an important strategy when it comes to reputation management: if you have the slightest inkling that someone is about to attack you, make some early moves to counter the impact before it hits the press.

In this case, Clemens told a 60 Minutes audience that he was unaware that McNamee was going to testify against him. He also admitted he declined to meet with Mitchell report investigators "as did a lot of other players."

Bad move. As Roger must know from his career on the diamond, playing "catch up" has always been difficult at best.

While they may not have known the specifics, Clemens and his lawyers -- and for that matter every sports fan in America -- knew the report was going to be publicly released.

In my view, to help mitigate the impact, Clemens should have volunteered to speak with the investigators and deny steroid use. He could also have brought McNamee's motives into question before the report became public.

In this way, Clemens could have set the tone from the outset -- right in the contents of the report. He may have gained more control of the outcome.

Despite angry statements of denial, a video news release, the interview with Mike



Wallace on 60 Minutes, a defamation lawsuit against his accuser, an agreement to testify before Congress, and a taped phone conversation with McNamee, Clemens is being roasted in the court of public opinion.

"He-Said-She-Said" Defense

The water-cooler talk says Clemens is guilty, but in reality, will anyone ever be able to prove it in a court of law?

Clemens has seemingly taken a page from the executive playbook in which a lover often boasts about a lurid affair with the CEO. The CEO retorts that there are no witnesses and the "he-said-she-said" defense works.

While appearing way out of the ordinary, Clemens' super-aggressive communications strategy could actually put doubt in the minds of some fans and even casual observers about his innocence or guilt.

At this juncture, no witnesses have come forward to corroborate that McNamee injected Clemens with performance-enhancing drugs.

Also, to date, no one has come forward to admit they provided Clemens with steroids or needles.

No major league player has validated McNamee's claims against Clemens. Nor has Major League baseball.

To be sure, this could change in a "New York minute." If so, Roger Clemens has a major credibility and reputation problem.

On the other hand, one has to consider that Clemens is not currently the subject of any criminal investigation. Unlike Barry Bonds, who allegedly lied under oath, Clemens has not been called testify before a federal grand jury.

Clemens' lawyers are likely aware that the statute of limitations has expired on illegal actions that may have occurred more than seven years ago.

Some observers think Clemens will trip himself up when he testifies before Congress on January 16 because he'll be under oath.

But realistically, what can happen? He's already stated publicly what he plans to tell Congress. McNamee, who is also expected to testify, will likely repeat what he told baseball investigators.

The net result of all this will bring us right back where we started: Clemens' word and credibility against McNamee's.

For sure, Clemens' arrogance and even childish behavior has made him and his career another "victim" of the baseball steroid controversy.

However, unless some new facts come to light, there will always be some lingering doubt about the truth.

In the world of Roger Clemens, that may be the all-time-great legacy he so desperately wants to defend.

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