

The truth about lies: Coaches and athletes consider deception just part of the game

by Brent Schrotenboer

On Dec. 14, 2005, Chuck Long answered the phone at his home in Norman, Okla.

A reporter was calling that night from San Diego and asked if Long had received any contact related to the vacant head football coach's position at San Diego State.

"No," Long said. He repeated his answer twice more for clarity.

Less than three days later, he was introduced as the Aztecs' new coach.

In other words, he told a fib - just like almost everybody else does to some degree.

But not even politicians seem to lie as blatantly and publicly as sports celebrities these days, probably because politicians know they'll be ripped for it by their enemies if caught.

By contrast, public lying in sports often is part of the game and the culture. The sports world, as we know it, might not even be able to function without it. Consider:

- Coaches might lose one of their top strategies.
- Teams looking for new coaches might never get their "top candidate."
- College recruiters and prospects might lose their edge.
- Most of all, many of sports' biggest egos - Roger Clemens, Barry Bonds - might have to drift back to earth.

"They're held up as role models, sort of ironically," said Robert Feldman, a professor of psychology at the

University of Massachusetts. "In many ways that gives them a sense of invulnerability: that they're not going to be found out in ways that other people are going to be found out."

In sports, there also are plenty of incentives to lie, especially to the media, which is a perfectly legal activity, if not moral. As many prominent athletes have learned recently, only lying to Congress or law enforcement can get you in real trouble.

A Pinocchio's guide to the sporting world:

COACHING CANDIDATES

After his hiring, Long told the reporter he wasn't forthright earlier that week because he thought it was a "crank call." Long said he reached that conclusion because the reporter only identified himself by his first name and affiliation but didn't mention his last name. (Long hadn't asked for it.)

That's a more creative explanation for a fib than Nick Saban's. In late 2006, the Miami Dolphins coach repeatedly denied he was headed for a job at Alabama. Saban said, "I'm not going to be the Alabama coach." Within days, he became the Alabama coach. He later denied it was a lie and said he regretted that he was "pinned into the corner" by the media.

Also in 2006, Boston College football coach Tom O'Brien issued a statement that said, "I'm not a candidate for any job." A day later, it was learned he was on his way to become the new coach at North Carolina State. Likewise, University of Miami football coach Butch Davis said in 2001 he had "no interest at all" in coaching the Cleveland Browns. Within days, he was the Browns' new coach.

Why they lie: When coaches are interviewing for another job, they don't want to be perceived as disloyal to their current team. So they want to keep it secret unless they get the job.

The interviewing team also might tell candidates to keep quiet because it can be publicly embarrassing if they become publicly known and later turn them down. So when a reporter calls the candidate to find out what's going on, what can a candidate say?

Saban said he learned to make it a rule "to never comment on something like that again."

CAUGHT CHEATING

Since 2003, each of the following sports figures has been or is being investigated for possible perjury: baseball players Bonds, Clemens and Miguel Tejada, basketball player Chris Webber, track star Marion Jones, track coach Trevor Graham and cyclist Tammy Thomas.

All were caught cheating or suspected of cheating and then suspected of lying about it as part of an official investigation. Webber pleaded to a lesser charge. Jones admitted it and was sentenced to six months in prison.

As Jones learned, lying to law enforcement risks jail time. If they just told the truth, no jail time. Just a loss of face in public. And to many sports stars, that may be worse.

Why they lie: Because they think they're really special.

"The Greek notion of hubris comes to mind," said Scott Tinley, an instructor in San Diego State's sports business management program and a former Ironman world champion. "And when an athlete or politician or captain of industry is caught, initial denial is simply the result of their disbelief that they could possibly have to answer to someone other than their own distorted ego."

Also, sports have many rules, often more than your average job, especially in the NCAA. It's tempting to bend them or break them when the goal is to beat the competition, especially when their jobs are the line. But when you get caught, how do you get out of it?

In 2003, former Baylor basketball coach Dave Bliss instructed his players and assistant coaches to lie. He wanted them to say a murdered player had been dealing drugs to pay for his tuition to conceal the truth: Bliss was paying for the tuition - a violation of NCAA rules.

Earlier this month, the NCAA said Long Beach State basketball coaches provided false information to officials investigating possible violations. The NCAA said one assistant coach asked players to lie, too.

COLLEGE RECRUITING

About 10 years ago, recruiting analyst Bobby Burton was talking to a football prospect who said Michigan was recruiting him as "the next Charles Woodson," who had just won the Heisman Trophy.

But it turns out Michigan was telling a lot of recruits the same thing, because another recruit told Burton the same story. Then another and another. Likewise, coaches often have told several recruits at the same position that "You're our No. 1 choice" at that position. In 2006, a former Louisville football player accused head coach Bobby Petrino of breaking a promise to give him a scholarship after the player paid his own way for a semester. The player sued. Somebody was lying. It went to trial, but the jury believed Petrino.

This year, Daniel Smith, a high school football player in Idaho, sued the University of Hawaii for promising him a scholarship and then revoking it.

Why they lie: In a high-stakes game, it's about hedging bets and making promises to lure recruits. Coaches can't always deliver because of roster limitations.

"A coach may really like one player at one position but has a 50-50 chance of landing the best one, so he's got to keep the other warmed up on the stove," Burton said.

On the flip side, prospects lie, too. They often commit to play at schools but then renege because they get a better offer. Or they just like attention.

Kevin Hart, a Nevada high school football player, announced at a packed news conference last month that he was signing with Cal. One problem: Cal never recruited him. Hart had made it all up.

SANDBAGGERS

Overly hype your opponent and downplay your team's ability. Football coach Lou Holtz was artful in this realm almost every week.

Before a game at Stanford in 1991, the Notre Dame coach griped about his team, the 8 p.m. start, and even not winning a coin toss yet that season.

"We have a lot of problems," Holtz said. Stanford wasn't ranked, but four other teams on his schedule were. Despite this, he said, "I don't think anybody on our schedule is going to provide us with as many problems as Stanford."

Then Notre Dame won 42-26.

Seemingly every coach does it. It's considered gamesmanship. Nevertheless, such public pregame evaluations often are not what the coaches really believe, which makes it, well, a bunch of pretending and white lies.

Why they do it: "They're doing it to reduce expectations and pressure, and to look good when they perform better than their prediction," said Bryan Gibson, a social psychologist at Central Michigan University.

Lying about injuries is considered similar gamesmanship and another prolific practice. In 2005, a columnist for The Florida Times-Union came up with a nickname for Florida football coach Urban Meyer: "Urban Liar."

Meyer indicated before a game that an injured wide receiver would play. Then when that player didn't play, Meyer said he knew all along that player wouldn't.

Before the AFC Championship Game this year, San Diego Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers denied to media his anterior cruciate ligament was torn, even though it was. The Chargers also reported that Rivers had a sprained medial collateral ligament, an injury less severe than the injury he actually had.

The idea is to mislead the opponent so it will be caught by surprise or won't target injured players.

BACKGROUND

In 1998, Toronto Blue Jays manager Tim Johnson impressed his players with war stories of his days in Vietnam. One problem: He never served there.

In 2002, U.S. Olympic Committee President Sandra Baldwin resigned after it was discovered she never received a doctorate from Arizona State, as she had claimed.

In 2005, Arizona businessman Reggie Fowler was trying to buy the Minnesota Vikings when it was discovered he claimed on his resume to have played in the NFL, the Canadian Football League and Little League World Series - none of it true. Fowler only had tried out for the NFL and CFL. By "World Series," he said he meant an all-star game in Arizona.

Why they lie: Doesn't everybody want to impress people and have a cool sports job? All it takes is a few credentials you might not have.

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