

Learning from Birdman
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

I teach a sport in society course in a university, and this has brought me close to the culture of sport, its values, its ways. Examining the workings of the sports realm has helped me acquire what could be termed an anthropological, or sociological, perspective on how the rest of American life goes about its business.

The topic for today, the sport world isn't big on moral inventorying, self-condemnation, guilt, groveling, and apologizing. Invariably when athletes do something that is called into question they refer to whatever it is as a "mistake." They don't say "I did something wrong," or "I did something bad," or "I'm bad." They say, "I made a mistake," as if it is akin to adding up the numbers in their checkbook wrong. They take the morality out of it. To illustrate, there's a prominent major league pitcher who will remain nameless, who in his younger days stole twenty-three computers and was dismissed from the university he was attending at the time. He says now that it was a mistake to have done that. Not wrong, a mistake. Whatever it is—drunk driving, drug use, robbing a convenience store, you name it—to athletes, and of course I'm generalizing here, it's a mistake.

And what do the inhabitants of the sport culture do after they have made a mistake? They—another value, another way—*move on*. What happened in the past happened. That's over. You aren't going to change it. You don't dwell on it, you don't let it define you, you don't allow it to tie you up or affect or control your current actions. And so important, you don't let it take your mind off what most matters: today's game. You need to play today's game well and win it. So move on.

Which brings us to basketball player Chris "Birdman" Andersen. At this writing, Andersen, a member of the NBA's Miami Heat—incidentally, Andersen is one of nature's rarities, an American white playing in the NBA—has been suspended for an upcoming game in a championship playoff series between the Heat and the Indiana Pacers. It seems that Birdman—so called because of his arms-flapping, soaring style of play—suddenly and seemingly out of the blue knocked a Pacer player to the court with an elbow and then

shoved him when he got up and pushed a referee who tried to intervene.

What does the Birdman have to say for himself? Contrary to what you might think if you didn't know the sports world, he is not explaining anything, and he not getting into the right and wrong of what he did, and he's not bowing and scraping. It's today and Birdman is going to deal with today. "I can't regret anything," *The New York Times* reports him as saying. "I just got to deal with the way it is, and I'll be cheering my guys on [in the game from which he was suspended]."*

In announcing the suspension, the league said that Andersen "escalated the altercation" and "resisted efforts to bring the altercation to an end." It retroactively upgraded the foul that was called on Andersen at the time to a flagrant foul, penalty two. Surely that would bring an explanation and apology from the Birdman.

Nope. Birdman only deals with the current reality: "They made it clear that it was a flagrant two and it is what it is. I have to deal with the repercussions of it. And missing this game."

The reporters plead, "At least you could tell us what set you off."

Nope. "Man, it doesn't matter at this point."

"You're going to learn from what you did."

Nope. "I'm not going to change who I am and how I play."

Birdman refused to beat himself up or crawl: "I did a bad thing, and I want to apologize to my teammates and the fans and the Indiana Pacers" never came.

When Heat coach Erik Spoelstra was asked to discuss the incident, he declined to elaborate. "We have to accept it and move on," he said.

In the sport culture, whether to bring morality into play on some matter is a choice, not an imperative. I don't know anything about him, but I assume Chris Andersen cares deeply about whether he does right by his wife and children and parents. I'm sure he feels morally, ethically, obligated to look out for his teammates (the outburst that got him suspended may well have been a retaliation for a cheap shot against a teammate by the player he decked). But being moral, just, decent, whatever word to use, in those areas of his life doesn't mean he has to be that way with, say, a member of the opposing team.

Birdman keeps morality in its proper perspective. To him, it isn't the primary, or sole, standard for determining or assessing his conduct. Other things matter too, and more, like looking out for his own interests and the wellbeing of the people that matter to him and, very much, winning basketball games for his team.

So why am I getting into this about Chris Birdman Andersen? Because I think it has applicability for the circumstance of white people, the race to which I belong, and a race I care deeply about in the same way other people care deeply about their race.

Drawing a lesson from sports, whites could be very careful not to let anyone who doesn't mean well by them lay a morality preoccupation, or imperative, on them, one that goes something like this: "First and foremost, you whites have to do what is right and proper. And I'll be the one to show you where you have been bad. When I do that, you absolutely must focus all your attention on what I bring up; that's your topic of concern, all day, every day. You must feel compelled to expend inordinate amounts of time and energy documenting the failings in your character that led you do the awful things I point out; privately and publicly condemn yourself for your damnable actions; demonstrate guilt and remorse and humility; and sincerely apologize for all the hurt you have inflicted on innocent others. And when I tell you what you are duty bound to do to make up for all the wrong you've done--and I have a long list including around immigration, affirmative action, and what I call diversity--you must as a matter of principle do it. If doing it hurts your race, so be it; justice trumps self-interest (or at least it does for you), and don't you forget it."

Drawing from the sport culture, when confronted with something that comes out of that general pitch, let's say, "Look what you did to the Indians," Whites could, to coin a term, "birdman" it: "I can't regret anything. I've just got to deal with the way it is, and I'll be cheering white people [my team] on in the issues that confront them now [in today's "game"]. I'm sure as hell am not going castigate myself, or kiss your ring, I know that."

"Shame on you for saying that!" comes the reply. "What's the matter with you? You aren't an evil white supremacist, are you? Look, I can have you fired from you job for that impudence. Don't get the idea that because I'm talking morality here that that's all I'm talking about. I'm also talking power. I'll have your ass if you mess

with me. But back to what we're getting at here, you have to realize that it is wrong for you not to live among non-white people; wrong for you not to serve the interests of non-whites and sacrifice yourself in the process; wrong for you not to welcome millions upon millions of non-whites into your country, [etc., etc., etc., etc., etc., wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong].”

The birdman response: “I’m not going to change who I am or how I live. I look out for white people [my team] and I’m going to help us prosper [win a championship]. So how about if you stick it, OK? As for your white supremacist remark, I happen to think my race [my team] is the best. Who are you to tell me I can’t think that? And I’ll tell you what, go after my job, anything like that, and I’m coming after you with all I’ve got.” (A fierce sense of honor and integrity, and a fighting spirit, are also cherished values in the sport culture.)

Indeed, whites can draw a lesson from the sport world, which understands that preoccupation with morality and justice and fairness, as laudable as it seems on the face of it, along with self-flagellation and wallowing in guilt and putting great energy into atonement for ones’ presumed sins, cuts you down, rounds off your edges, and emasculates you (sport is a place for the strong and virile); it weakens and subordinates you and eventually sends you to the bottom of the standings in the game of life. And don’t for a minute think that those who relentlessly depict whites as bad, bad people aren’t on to that reality.

*”Heat’s Andersen Has No Regrets Over Altercation,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 2103.