



# Celebrities' sorry apologies have no redeeming value

Karen Brooks



ON FRIDAY, Lance Armstrong, seven-times Tour de France winner, survivor of testicular cancer and founder of Livestrong, the world's largest athlete-founded charity, will be broadcast speaking to Oprah Winfrey about his spectacular fall from grace.

The interview is Armstrong's first public response to the US Anti-Doping Agency's 1000-page report that resulted in him being stripped of all seven Tour de France titles and banned for life from the sport. After years of righteously refuting accusations, Armstrong (pictured) has done an about-face and agreed to a televised discussion where he will

give a frank but "limited confession" (for legal reasons).

Armstrong isn't the first sports star or celebrity to use the media in an attempt to restore a damaged reputation and he won't be the last.

But aren't we getting more than a little tired of this secular version of the Catholic confessional?

Jane Jordan-Meier, founder and chief executive officer of the Media Skills Academy in Fairfield, California, says "apologies have become an art form and most of us don't believe them any more".

*The Guardian* columnist Marina Hyde describes the broadcast "sorry" as "performative contrition". It functions as a set

piece, a script that disgraced athletes and stars act out while audiences suspend their disbelief in a desire to exonerate their former heroes.

Hyde believes this has become so commonplace we now have a "contrition industry".

Certainly, the public apology, the appearance of being sorry and humbled, has become a pathway to redemption (think of Bill Clinton).

And who better than Oprah, the queen of celebrity contrition, to facilitate this particular mea culpa?

When asked how he felt about the pending telecast, Armstrong told *The Associated Press*: "I'm



calm, I'm at ease and ready to speak candidly".

Funny how being caught can do that – loosen tongues and prompt expressions of remorse.

That Armstrong turns to Oprah to begin the process of public absolution plays like a well-orchestrated farce.

What might we expect? Tears are compulsory, as are lots of extreme close-ups and shuddering deep breaths.

Sincerity might be intended but the public are rightly becoming jaded about the context and purpose of these public confessions which aren't so much about redeeming a reputation as they are about protecting a brand and the financial empire that goes with it.

Professor David Rowe from the University of Western Sydney, the author of *Global Media Sport*, argues: "These public confessions never involve a spontaneous, unpremeditated urge for celebrities to unburden themselves.

"They're always a strategic attempt to recover, at least partially, their position. Without the public confession, the celebrity faces being constantly pursued for comment, and that means that the issue obscures everything else they want to communicate, achieve and recover."

The one thing we can be assured of is that another discredited athlete will materialise.

But can these disgraced sports stars really expect the public

confession to function as a legitimate form of absolution, opening a return to popular form?

Repentant Armstrong might be, but no amount of self-flagellation or carefully constructed words and emoting will erase years of false denial or persuade a cynical public this is little more than a calculated media stunt.

Perhaps Armstrong and his ilk should heed American sports writer Grantland Rice, who wrote: "For when the One Great Scorer comes/To write against your name/He marks – not that you won or lost/But how you played the Game."

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