

Athletes: Far More Than Entertainment

Professional athletes hold a massive amount of influence provided by the platform sports fans witness them on. Far beyond the games broadcasted to the public, players have every opportunity to speak loudly with their actions on social media and other online avenues. That influence is elevated when an athlete reaches astounding levels of success. Take Joe Burrow for example, he is the current Cincinnati Bengals quarterback who signed a five-year contract extension in 2023, which made him the highest-paid NFL player on record. (Bengals, 2024) Burrow is also the recipient of the 2019 Heisman Trophy, where he won with the largest margin of victory in the history of the award. This statistic has yet to be broken. (Heisman, 2024) Burrow's athletic accomplishments are impressive, but, more importantly, public opinion shows that the most impressive thing he has done is help raise money for impoverished children and families. David Clark Scott, an editor for The Christian Science Monitor, includes a testimony from Athens resident, Will Drabold, in his article, "Why Joe Burrow's Heisman Trophy speech changed lives" that illustrates the impact it had among children living in southeastern Ohio. Drabold was motivated to set up a fundraising page on Facebook following Burrow's speech, and his wife is a teacher who had a student declare proudly that "[they] go to the food bank". Scott writes, "This isn't pride in hunger. Rather, it's a child's understanding that they aren't defined by poverty."(Scott, 2019) The origin of this rallying is traced back to a key impromptu moment during the acceptance speech. Pushing through rising emotions, Burrow recounts, "Coming from southeast Ohio, it's a very impoverished area and the poverty rate is almost two times the national average. There's so many people there who don't have a lot, and I am up here

for all those kids in Athens and Athens County who go home to not a lot of food on the table, hungry after school. You guys can be up here too.” (Hylights, 2019) The impact his words had is immediate as the audience applauds, however that moment’s effects did not end at the ceremony. Succeeding that evening, just as Drabold, many people began to act by calling the Burrow household to give thousands of dollars towards the food bank in Athens. Then, the building blocks for the Joe Burrow Foundation began to fall into place.

In 2022, the Joe Burrow Foundation was established as Burrow partnered with his parents, Robin, and Jimmy, to help provide resources for families “...who are working to overcome food insecurities and childhood mental health issues”. (Bengals, 2024) Donors from the states of Ohio and Louisiana support the nonprofit organization as a result of Burrow’s history in their local communities. Specifically, the fundraising campaign, “From the Bayou to Greater Cincinnati: Let’s Do Good” began friendly competition between Cincinnati Bengals and Louisiana State University fans to buy clothing from the Ohio-based company “Where I’m From Apparel”. (WCPO, 2022) The proceeds were donated to impoverished families by the foundation after Cincinnati bought out Baton Rouge 2,804 pieces of apparel to 1,801. Burrow had this to say after the results, ““While it’s fun to compete, and Cincinnati has earned bragging rights, the true winners are the children and families served through our foundation.”” (WCPO, 2022) The Joe Burrow Foundation raised more than \$65,000 through this kickstarting campaign, and has only continued to expand its impact.

Joe Burrow is just one example of an athlete who used his platform to inspire change. Here are a few other large names rallying for change: Serena Williams with The Yetunde Price Resource Center, LeBron James with The LeBron James Family Foundation, and Drew Brees with The Brees Dream Foundation. All of these organizations have one thing in common, and

that is contributing back to the communities they hail from. The people who are fans of these athletes can gain a sense of pride knowing that their home meant enough to them to fund and raise money for these programs that go on to make a lasting impact locally, and oftentimes nationally. Sports are broad in the sense that it draws people in because it requires a community to maintain. Without fans and families there would be no teams. Without coaches and sponsors there would be no players. Without players there would be no games. Finally, without games there would be no competition and loyalty. It is that unyielding loyalty beginning from the simple love of a game or player, that rolls over into a passion towards a place where one lives. Athletes are able to advocate for change on such a public platform when they make it to the professional level, and because of their experience many viewers find it relatable to their own lives. There are people, stories, and prevalent issues that mark local communities where home teams receive a majority of their support. Even though the Joe Burrow Foundation received money from fans residing in both Ohio and Louisiana, there is a reason Cincinnati gave more in donations toward the “Let’s Do Good” campaign. It all derives from community connections, and many athletes are aware that without their fans, talent and money will only get them so far. Creating something notwithstanding makes a social impact because a game victory or accepted award eventually fades with time.

Unfortunately, there are charities that do not reach an ethical standard, or are even an effective use of money. The reason for this is documented in an article written by Paula Lavigne, an ESPN investigative reporter. An “Outside the Lines” investigation of 115 charities founded by professional athletes was conducted in 2013. This issue is among the findings: “Many athlete charities fail the effectiveness test for a variety of reasons, ranging from the deceptive and unethical – if not illegal – to the simply neglectful and ignorant. Some athletes set up foundations

as tax-planning vehicles. Others dispute the nonprofit standards overall, saying as long as they spend at least some money on actual charity they should not be criticized.” (Lavigne, 2013) If criticism is deserved or not is a fair argument because athletes are pressured to do something selfless with their income. An array of online forums will pop up upon searching for professional athletes’ annual income debating whether said athletes are paid too much. It is unfortunate when well-meaning charities fall through due to negligence, but it is those of poor integrity that put a bad name on athlete foundations. More specifically, an example of what “Outside the Lines” “... found after conducting interviews and examining documents [is that] NBA forward Lamar Odom's charity that promised money for cancer research [had] not given a dime in grant money to any cancer entity in its eight-year history”. (Lavigne, 2013) Just how athletes’ rapid publicity can propel them to stardom, it can bring controversies out just as quickly.

As social media continues to dominate the 21st century, many athletes are heavily active on sites such as Instagram, and Twitter. Millions of fans follow personal and professional pages to stay updated on what their favorite athletes are up to. As athletes move to contribute to society outside of their respective fields, utilizing social media is an excellent way to keep their fanbase updated on passion projects or organizations they partner with. Of course, athletes may protect their private lives, but if an athlete has an open public image they should listen to their audience. Viewers are vocal when they are passionate about their community, and supporting local athletes is important to boost morale. Initiating charities or other nonprofit efforts should never be an isolated effort, or expected simply because one makes a lot of money. The foundations mentioned in this essay were built in a community, and in doing so there is accountability, unity, and growth. Sports corporations should not overlook the power of local communities when

partnering with their athletes' initiatives for social causes. One individual will never become successful enough to outgrow their roots.

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