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Commentary

Michael Phelps Regrets

Karl Greenberg, Feb 03, 2009 05:00 AM

I was walking home from dropping my kid off at school on Monday, and I couldn't make 20 blocks without noticing that even the local paper's lead story was about Michael Phelps and his performance with a bong. The headline: "Wet and Wild."

What does this mean for the national economy, the fate of the national stimulus package or bailed-out Bank of America's \$10 million Super Bowl party? Nothing. But the fact that Phelps was photographed attached to his own stimulus package means a lot for Michael Phelps' personal economy.

Yahoo's lead story from the AP: "The International Olympic Committee expressed confidence Monday that Michael Phelps will learn from his 'inappropriate behavior' and continue to serve as a role model after a British newspaper published a photo of him inhaling from a marijuana pipe."

It is important to note that Phelps apologized for "regrettable" behavior, but here's the key point: the IOC *thought* he was apologizing for his own regrettable behavior (then again, they also consider him a role model, the logic of which escapes me entirely, unless he's a role model for eugenics.)

Up for grabs is whether Phelps apologized for: a) his own behavior; b) the behavior of the pipe, which was so clogged with resin that he never actually inhaled; or c) the behavior of the photographer who, in taking his picture, evinced the fact that all of us are now de facto members of the global security apparatus bent on destroying what is left of our privacy.

But let's talk marketing: Will this affect Phelps' corporate endorsement deals worth millions from the likes of Mazda, Speedo, Guitar Hero (admittedly a one-off) and health-food company McDonald's? Robert Passikoff, founder and president of New York-based firm Brand Keys, asserts that, like a rocket that must achieve escape velocity in one explosive burst, an athlete made famous with a singular achievement has only so much time and equity with which to transcend the gold medals around his or her neck and become something more stellar (and valuable as a brand spokesperson).

"It is hard to shoe-horn him in someplace as a spokesperson, because he has a particularly narrow talent," he says. "He can't migrate to the values in too many categories. But the problem for him is that the categories in which he has some sort of image fit are likely to do with things like exercise and health, and sucking on a bong doesn't help."

Passikoff also points out that spokespeople are relatively easy to come by, particularly if they have greater exposure. "The weight of the medals is more than the weight of his personality. Guys like that need to be particularly careful because their own resonating value is of limited wavelength. A guy with great setup shot in the NBA can go out in Philly and shoot guns and people forgive him. Given that there are so many people out there willing to provide name likeness and values to pick up a new income stream, you have to protect what you got."