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Rugby League: A Game in Crisis

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of crisis and reputation management strategies in Australian sporting clubs and finds that not only are individual clubs unaware of the potential impact of such crises on their organizations, but that they also have no training, contingency plans, or strategies to handle crises of any sort either at this or at the national league level. It uses the Australian Rugby League organization as a case study for examining these issues and concludes with several recommendations for improving crisis management and communications policies in Australian sporting organizations and for their stakeholders.

Many public and private organizations prefer to ignore the reality that "bad things" can happen, either through denial of their vulnerabilities or through myopia about their successes and strengths (Elliott, 2002). A crisis can be defined as any problem or disruption that triggers negative stakeholder reaction and extensive public scrutiny (Newman, 2003). Effective crisis management lies in continuous learning processes designed to equip managers with the capabilities, flexibility, and confidence to deal with sudden and unexpected problems or events (Robert & Lajtha, 2002). Good crisis leaders are those who can make fast decisions under pressure and who can keep the big picture consequences of actions and words in mind when making these decisions (Boin & Lagadec, 2000). In 2004, the Rugby league in Australia was both ill-prepared and ill-advised to effectively deal with a sex scandal involving a number of their players on an official club tour. In classic crisis escalation, what should have been a serious but easily dealt with problem became a major reputational and institutional crisis for the league, its sponsors, its players, and its fans.

Introduction

Many public and private organizations prefer to ignore the reality that "bad things" can happen, either through denial of their vulnerabilities or through myopia about their successes and strengths (Elliott, 2002).
Crisis by their very nature are unpredictable and varied, and when considering preparing a crisis management plan, firms should anticipate the worst thing that could happen and then make a plan to deal with it effectively (Newcomb, Scott, & Vanslyke Turk, 1993). Linked to a good crisis management plan should be a crisis communication plan which spells out the people, the actions, and the processes that will be used to communicate with the press, employees, and other stakeholders in the event of a crisis. Failure to communicate is one of the biggest mistakes made in a crisis situation.

In 2004, the Rugby league in Australia was both ill-prepared and ill-advised to effectively deal with a sex scandal involving a number of their players on an official club tour. In classic crisis escalation, what should have been a serious but easily dealt with problem became a major reputational and institutional crisis for the league, its sponsors, its players, and its fans.

This paper seeks to explore the issues inherent in crisis management and crisis communication as they apply to sporting organizations through a review of the relevant literature in this area. The extent of crisis management preparedness in Australian sporting organizations and the level of knowledge of the role and function of communications in crises management will be reviewed through an extensive examination and review of media commentary relating to this particular crisis. Over 160 different media releases from the popular press, sport commentaries, and news sites both in Australia and from overseas were reviewed in dating from February 22 (the date of the first alleged incident) to July 22, 2004. These commentaries were reviewed in relation to the literature and, from this, several recommendations for improving crisis management and communication's policies in Australian sporting organizations have been proposed.

**Literature**

A crisis can be defined as any problem or disruption that triggers negative stakeholder reaction and extensive public scrutiny (Newman, 2003). Effective crisis management lies in continuous learning processes designed to equip managers with the capabilities, flexibility, and confidence to deal with sudden and unexpected problems or events (Robert & Lajtha, 2002). Good crisis leaders are those who can make fast decisions under pressure, keep the big picture consequences of actions and words in mind when making these decisions (Boin & Lagadec, 2000), and understand and effectively use communication strategies to manage the crisis. Managers who do not do these things run the risk of escalating the crisis, coming under the scrutiny of the media, having the crisis seriously interfere with the normal operations of the organization, and jeopardizing the reputation of the organization (Fink, 1986).

The key role in any crisis management and crisis communication plan is to be prepared and to have the plan well rehearsed and well known to all key management staff (Shearlean & Lynne, 2002). Essentially the plan should have four main features: (1) to have clearly defined response strategies; (2) to have appropriate resources available and responsibilities assigned; (3) to maintain ongoing corrective action and reactions during the course of the crisis; and (4) to have an evaluation and follow-up stage (Sharon, 1999). We will examine each of these areas in brief.

**Clearly Defined Response Strategies**

It is generally noted that the quality of initial response by an organization to a crisis will largely determine how much damage a crisis eventually does to the reputation of the organization. A crisis needs to go public within the first three to six hours of the event (Newsome, Scott, & Vanslyke Turk, 1993) and the message that is sent needs to be well considered and prepared. In dealing with the media in a crisis, the way it is handled will largely determine not only how the organization is made to appear but it will also have an impact on that organization’s rapport with the media for years to come (Adams, 2000). Organizations have an inertia period of approximately two days where their response to the crisis and their reaction to the media interest in the crisis will largely determine the degree of long-term damage to the organization (see Figure 1).
Organizations with a well prepared plan generally have in place a “telephone tree” which details who calls whom during a crisis and who is the designated corporate spokesperson. Internal communications are also important during a crisis, with senior management needing to clearly communicate the facts of the crisis to staff, as well as the plan for addressing the crisis (Browne, 2003). It is important to have a single voice for the organization with a concise message, and that everyone in the organization knows what that message is and who will deliver it.

**Appropriate Resources and Responsibilities**

It is important during crises to realize that all staff involved in the organization will need additional support, information, and timely decisions. It is critical to a successful crisis management plan that the appropriate staff are given the time and information needed to adequately deal with the media, to make the necessary administrative decisions that might be required, and to possibly even counsel or support employees. Organisations that do not allocate sufficient resources to this task simply add more stress to the system (Browne, 2003).

Similarly it is also important to have considered the personalities, training, and skills of staff in the preparation of a crisis management and communication plan. One of the key aspects of successfully dealing with a crisis involves successful dealings with media—and there are many people in senior positions in organizations that may not be well equipped to complete this task. Many senior staff have a strong urge to stay out of the news, fearing the criticism and possibly tough questions that are likely to be asked of them, particularly in a crisis (Hodaway & Seidel, 2003). Therefore, allocation of media responsibilities in crisis plans should take account of the training and ability of staff and where appropriate additional training and practice prior to a crisis is advisable.

**Maintain Ongoing Corrective Action and Reactions During the Course of the Crisis**

When communicating in a crisis situation, the spokesperson needs to have all the relevant information, and he or she also needs to be able to verify the accuracy of that information. It is important that this individual not speculate, make up information, nor discuss potentially sensitive legal or personal details of the situation (Shearlean & Lynne, 2003). Being open and responsive to the media is also important, as this will help to minimize comments that suggest the organization is trying to hide something or that they are evasive in some way. Keeping the media updated with new information, constantly reinforcing what the organization is doing to address the crisis, understanding that no matter what that there will be criticism of the actions and decisions being made, and understanding the audience for your message will all help (Browne, 2003). Organizations in crisis need to adopt a positive “high ground” in attitude to their responses to criticism. There will be many situations where the media and others will try and bait you into being defensive or apologetic. Staying calm, explaining the situation, and what action the organization is taking is the hallmark of a successful crisis leader (Browne, 2003).

**Evaluate and Follow-up**

Once the crisis has passed it is then necessary to review the performance of the organization and to assess the damage (if any) to the corporate reputation. In the aftermath, you must ensure that any communications reflect the concern and action being taken. It is important to emphasize that the organization has attempted to be fair and transparent in its actions and reactions to the crisis, and to also communicate the steps being taken to ensure that the possibility of a similar crisis occurring is minimized. This might
include such things as training, changes to policies and procedures, changes to structures or physical facilities, and so on (Shearlean & Lynne, 2003). Monitoring all media that refers to the crisis to verify accuracy of new information and to correct misinformation as it occurs is also an important part of the evaluation phase.

Finally, the post-crisis stage can also bring with it recurring problems associated with the amnesia syndrome—that is, the belief that as soon as the event is over, everything returns to the way it was before (Boin & Lagadec, 2000). When any crisis hits, there should be a number of fundamental questions asked about how and why the crisis occurred and what needs to be done in the future to prevent its recurrence.

A crisis then follows a reasonably predictable path as illustrated in Figure 1, where following a period of inertia in which the organization is given a period of grace and the media and public wait to see what will happen, the organization can react in one of two ways: positively, where they follow the theoretical advice and recommendations mentioned above; or negatively, where the organization does not deal with the media appropriately, nor do they have a well managed plan of response. The negative response will ultimately lead to an antagonistic media coverage, long-term brand damage, and possibly fatal public response and opinion.

\[\text{Figure 1. The crisis pathway}\]

In summary then, crises by their very nature are unpredictable and difficult to define. One person’s critical incident could be another’s crisis. Crisis that involve reputation are the most difficult to contain and require careful and well planned communications strategies. The key to the successful management of any crisis appears to be common throughout the literature: be prepared, be rehearsed, invest in media training, tell the truth, have one central and focused voice and message for the organization, make information widely available and be responsive to media, and, finally, learn the lessons from past crises to help avoid similar problems in the future.

**The Crisis Cycle**

When we examine crises in organizations, it becomes very evident that there is predictability to the cycle or progression of the crises process. Figure 2 shows this cycle. The solid line in Figure 2 represents the organization’s progress and public opinion while the dotted line represents media interest in the crisis and in the organization. It can be seen that when a crisis hits an organization, there will be almost instantaneous negative public opinion and alarm (depending on the nature of the crisis). There will be immediate media attention and a desire to know what has happened and what the organization intends to do about the situation. Following the immediate crisis, the organization then enters an inertia period, as previously
mentioned (Figure 1), where both the media and public wait to see what will happen. This is the critical point that will determine whether the organization's progress then follows path A or path B. In path A, the organization cooperates with the media, outlines an appropriate and responsible course of action, and is seen to be taking the "right" action in response to the crisis. In this case, public opinion will gradually return to a more normal level and media attention also begins to quickly wane.

![Figure 2. The crisis cycle](image)

When an organization does not handle the crisis well and fails to implement appropriate crisis communications, being both responsive to and receptive to the media, then path B is likely to eventuate. In this path, the negative public opinion will once again begin to escalate and associated media interest will grow. What generally happens in this scenario is that the media will begin to suspect there is more to the story than is being released, and they will be tempted to investigate on their own. This generally results in new information about either the organization, its employees, or the victims of the crisis (if applicable) coming to the public, thus causing new crises for the offending organization, and also causing further damage to public opinion. If this path continues, then the public image fall-out and damage to the brand can leak into the industry in general and other brands within the same product category can be affected.

Thus an organization planning for crises needs to be aware that, if left unchecked, a crisis can escalate dramatically and can drawn in issues, people, and organizations that were not implicated by the original problem. When this happens it is far more difficult for an organization to regain public opinion and brand equity. The tail end of the path line B in Figure 2 reflects this loss of ground in terms of public opinion and also the increased length of time before media interest wanes.

Sporting organizations, like many other organizations that deal with celebrities, have the potential to be exposed to many different types of crises, just by virtue of the celebrity status of their athletes (Chilton, 2002). The adulation and high profile status of many sports people can result in some of them acting "above" the law and failing to appreciate the rules of the "real" world that still apply in their fantasy existence. High profile athletes are often paid large sums of money, given access to other famous people and places, treated like royalty in relation to their wants and desires, and this can all create a situation where their behavior can lead to conflicts with the law and with their sponsors or their organizations.

In this case, we examine the sex scandal that preoccupied the Australian Rugby League code in early 2004, and how both the club and the league handled the crisis. In the analysis, information relating to other sex scandals in sport will be considered, and, in particular, the crisis management and communication plans of the league and the club will be critiqued with suggestions for future "best practice" offered.
Method

This paper follows a particular crisis involving a National Rugby League team, the Canterbury Bulldogs, in Australia, during the 2004 season. The National Rugby League (NRL) has 15 teams in the competition, with the Bulldogs being one of the oldest. The club was established in 1935, and during that time has won 7 premiership titles. In the 2003 season, the club was leading the competition when it became known that they had violated salary cap regulations, and, as a consequence, they were stripped of competition points, causing them to miss out on the finals series and possibly the premiership itself.

The case follows events from 21 February 2004, when news broke that players from the club were accused of gang raping a woman following a preseason game. Through an analysis of media reports and news stories, we trace the club’s crisis management procedures and compare them to the theoretical models proposed in the literature. A number of interviews were then conducted with CEOs of various football clubs (the CEO of the Bulldogs declined an interview) about the general management practice in the league in relation to crisis management before concluding with recommendations for this club and other sporting clubs on how to best handle crises.

Results

A timeline of news stories is provided chronicling the escalation of public sentiment in relation to this crisis, and the crisis cycle is used to assist the analysis. Extracts and comments from these news reports show how poor handling and poor communications processes exacerbated the crises and caused it to spread to the league in general and then to other football codes.

Day 1. The Crisis Occurs 21 February

The story breaks in major national newspapers and on other electronic media that an alleged rape has occurred after a preseason game with six players from a national rugby league team—The Bulldogs. In addition, press reports suggest that a number of players had been on a drinking binge at three venues and had also been fighting with locals.

Days 6 – 11. Inertia Stage

During this stage, nine new news stories appear in major daily, weekend, and national papers. The first reaches the public announcing an inquiry into the matter by the NRL league. The league chairman is quoted as saying, “We are conducting our own investigation into what happened at *** last weekend. We in no way intend to interfere with what the police are doing. It is clear that there are some matters outside the central allegation and outside the police investigation that are of concern to the NRL.” He is also noted as being concerned with the image of the game on the eve of the season kickoff and the need to obtain an independent view of the events.

The woman who made the rape allegations will have her evidence videotaped as she re-enacts the events on the night of the alleged attack. She alleges that players forced her into group sex and threw her into the swimming pool at the resort where the club was staying. The club’s players have given their version of events, which are noted to have done more damage than good, as they admitted to group sex and drinking during the weekend. Bulldogs spokespeople are angered that comments have been made to the media by players when they had been specifically told not to talk to “outsiders.”

Other news stories provide comments by reporters that the Bulldogs involved had “been on the defensive,” with all stating that any sex that was had was consensual. Players had been advised not to talk to the media, but many ignored that demand, admitting to wild parties and group sex during this preseason weekend. Even more damaging were comments from players that this was just a typical night for the
players—one quote in particular went, “Some players just love a bun (woman who engages in group sex). Gang banging is nothing new for our club or most other clubs in the league.” Further players were noted to have described the woman as a “scrag.”

The NRL chairman was quick to voice disgust at the “gang banging” comment. The chairman of the Bulldogs was also quoted as not condoning those actions. Further on in this article, it also noted that a similar incident occurred with this club in the same preseason situation 12 months earlier and no charges were brought. There were also comments from other players in the league that it was the fault of the sport and the fans that this sort of thing happened. Players are paid large sums of money, they are idolized and live a fantastic lifestyle and could sometimes make behavior decisions that were outside the bounds of “normal” behavior. They couldn’t help themselves.

The NRL spokesperson suggested that the league has been attempting to control and minimize the likelihood of these incidents by holding seminars lecturing players on avoiding dangerous situations (which includes young women eager to flirt with players) and by employing security guards to accompany teams. The chief of the league expressed a desire to see the gossip and media discussion about the incident stopped and “hoped that sufficient measures were in place to put an end to the sex scandals.” An education and welfare committee would be looking to investigate the protocols for clubs for away games, and he called on clubs and players to focus on their responsibilities as role models in football and the community.

In spite of this discussion regarding whether the players in question did or did not rape the woman, there were also comments appearing in the press from sport commentators calling for some concrete reaction from the league and the club in relation to these players more so from the perspective that they had clearly breached the club’s code of conduct, with up to 11 clauses and sub clauses noted that these players had potentially breached. Why hadn’t the club disciplined these players in light of these conduct breaches, regardless of the actions of individuals in relation to the alleged rape? Players were noted to have clearly broken the rules and should face heavy fines and suspensions.

Other news commentators began to voice the concern that a couple of the club’s sponsors may be getting “itchy” feet at this stage. It was particularly noted that charities were reconsidering their association with the Bulldogs club after allegations that group sex was a common practice. One charity source was quoted as saying, “They were paralyzed by the scandal and felt that this was just the tip of the iceberg in sport generally.” The incident overshadowed the season launch of the league and the marketing department for the NRL seriously considered pulling a commercial, specifically targeted at women, due to the current climate, however logically impossible this was at such a late stage of the campaign. Most of the new season ads were aimed at 18– to 25-year-olds, families, and women, because it is known that women comprise 40 percent of their market. There are now questions about the long-term impact of this case on that sector of the market.

**Days 12 – 15. Negative opinion and media antagonism begins to surface**

Twenty more stories appear in this period from major national and international papers. A number of online news services and sport information services have also picked up the story and are making comments. Talks of crisis meetings at the Bulldogs club and police interviews with the players at the centre of the scandal begin to circulate. The club chairman makes the suggestion that this type of behavior is not to be tolerated and, if found guilty, players will face heavy fines, suspensions, or possibly dismissal, but no action will be taken at this stage. In carefully addressing the club’s lack of action, he quotes legal advice and reinforces that the club does not condone violence, threats, victimization, intimidation, or the humiliation of women. Further investigations are also opened into allegations that a woman making the same complaints 12 months earlier had been discouraged from taking her case further. There are comments about the possible loss of sponsors and fans and possible loss of government funding for the NRL depending on the outcome of the investigations. To make matters worse, on the same day, players who are to be interviewed by the police are photographed attending the meeting in thongs, t-shirts, caps, and sun visors—no
club uniform was worn by any player. Comments about the club's checkered 2003 season with salary cap breaches and large fines are raised again in most media commentaries.

The NRL considers removing all images of the club in question from the $3.5 million advertising campaign, but is unable to do this completely. Wherever possible, club representation is removed—particularly in the ads targeted at families. Experts agree that these ads will not address the fundamental image problem now facing the league. It is only the behavior of players that can now go some of the way to undoing the damage done. In the short term, the club and the league prepare for loss of sponsorship. Comments are also noted by the NRL chief about the lack of action taken by the league against these players and his call for calm and understanding until the end of the police investigations.

In the short time thereafter, more comments are made concerning the police interviews and the new information that the Bulldogs club held "truth" meetings before meeting with the police, where players aired their version of events in front of each other to give them all the opportunity to hear what everyone else had to say. Questions are raised about the quality of the personal player interviews following this meeting. The "group" story clearly paints the woman in question as the lustful initiator of multiple sexual encounters—all consensual. Criticism is also leveled at the police, who failed to interview the players individually immediately after the assault was reported. Players have been instructed not to talk to outsiders about the case. The report from the NRL investigator into general player misconduct finds no evidence that players misbehaved against female patrons on the evening of the alleged rape.

Calls begin to appear that it is the responsibility of the clubs to educate young players that ignoring community standards degrades them and the sport that they play. Team bonding sessions are not good forums and these rites of initiation are not acceptable in modern society. Why were the players out drinking anyway, and where were the club's managers? The media comments further that perhaps the coach's arrogance and the club's tolerance of this behavior have somehow contributed to the problems and culture of the club. On the club's website, for example, under the headings of Born, Height, Weight, Test Matches, and Personal notes, all the coach could summon was "unknown."

New allegations come to light at this stage with a woman claiming sexual assault in early February by two players from another NRL club. Police investigate this one as well. It is also found that the chief executive of that club knew of the allegations and decided not to inform the national league. More media comments appear concerning a heated exchange between this person and the chairman of the NRL.

The chief of the NRL is noted as looking "drained, even hollowed out." However, articles appear in which he seems to be trying to calm down talks of a crisis in the league, and in which he begins to talk of the future and of making the game even better after these events have subsided. However, other commentators note the reviews being made by a number of sponsors of the club in question and the league in general with millions of dollars at stake. Professional sponsorship companies also worry, with some citing this scandal as a negative for everyone involved in sports sponsorships because these allegations highlight the uncontrollable nature of sport—and this is a factor that sponsors will now consider carefully. Reports of similar sex allegations from sports around the world are also now being reviewed, with comparisons to Kobe Bryant and members of a number of Premier League Soccer clubs. Some also suggest that the female market segment may also shrink with these types of allegations becoming more common.

One report also notes that the NRL has employed a female university journalism lecturer to counter the perceived culture of misogyny in the game. One player refuses to give DNA samples, citing it a violation of his civil liberties and against his religion. As this player does not drink and insists he was in bed at the time of the alleged assault, the club supports his stance.

Comments appear in general media from NRL players and other clubs that the players are the real victims in this scandal. The story being pushed is that the players are mostly good, God-fearing blokes who unfortunately sometimes fall prey to women out to make trouble for them. Most commentators of course have scathing sarcasm in response to this view. However, we now also see news stories about the families of the other players in the club that were not implicated in the alleged rape and how they were tucked up in bed at the time. The stories discuss the discomfort and anger they feel at their men being smeared with this scandal. Other players in the league also comment on how this is affecting them, and how people are making nasty comments to them because they are NRL players.
Another player—the captain of the national rugby league team—at a media lunch to launch the new season, makes a distasteful joke (in front of TV cameras and the press) about the sex scandal. He apologizes to all through the national media, citing a lack of judgment and expressing genuine remorse, and is spared further punishment.

The prime minister is quoted as expressing his sorrow for the fans of the rugby league after their sport has been “gutted” by the recent sex scandal. He stresses that if a crime has been committed then people should pay the full penalty, but people should be presumed innocent until proven guilty. The bulk of people who support this sport are decent people who care about their sport, their families, and their country, and this is a positive that we should focus on.

Other articles comment on the difficult times for the club, the edginess of sponsors, and the return of the board of directors of the Bulldogs club at the AGM.

Days 16 – 20. New crisis point reached and continued negative public opinion and media interest and attention

Media attention continues to be high, with 16 new stories appearing in major daily and national papers. The media has started to dig for more information about the club’s history and player transgressions. The Bulldogs club loses two of its major sponsors, resulting in a loss of revenue of about $650,000. Both organizations cite overwhelming pressure from their customers and fear of an impact on their brand image through continued association with the club. The club expresses their sadness at the decision but offers no other comments.

From the media come comments that most people thought that the issues raised by the sex scandal in February would subside after a week (the usual span of sports scandal) and yet after two weeks there appears to still be plenty of interest and plenty of news. Apart from the inept handling by the club of the incident and inappropriate comments made to the media by players, it appears that new allegations of sexual assault by two players from another club have kept up the media’s interest. Added to this is the national television news story on “60 Minutes” in which the woman who alleged sexual assault from the same club 12 months ago is interviewed and her story aired. Commentary is also quick to include the fact that Australian sports people are not alone in the world when it comes to sex scandals; however, it seems that the media is always interested in them and all the sordid details.

The club then releases a copy of a letter of support from the manager of the hotel where the alleged rape took place. In his letter the manager commends the behavior of the players and also notes that players were not drunk and disorderly, that there were no fights, and that he was unaware of any other incidents in relation to player behavior.

A third sponsor leaves the club stating, “With the adverse publicity we don’t want anything to do with the club.” This sponsorship was worth $100,000 to the club. Police are still calling for information to assist in their investigation, stating that a seventh player was seen walking away from the area where the attack took place and that they would like to talk to this player.

The chairman of the club doubts that this player exists; however, if this is the case, then that player should come forward and give evidence. He also insists that he is “laying down the law,” vowing that any player who is found guilty of the assault will not have a future in the club. He cautions that the players should be considered innocent unless proven guilty. The club’s website has been flooded with comments from both fans calling in their support and from others calling for more action by the club.

Others in the league call for the NRL to get tough on players’ off-field behavior to limit the number of possible incidents like this one. There is a call for the club to punish the players, even if cleared of the assault charges, for breaching the club’s code of conduct and for bringing the game into disrepute.

A school in the heart of the Bulldogs’ club territory requests that another competitor club conduct a junior development coaching clinic planned for the school after concerns about the sex scandal intensify among parents and school authorities, who ultimately deem the club’s culture inappropriate for children. The principal of the school cites overwhelming parent support for distancing the children from these players.
while the investigation is underway. In the same report, another minor sponsor has also left the club while another sponsor requests more control in the contract to allow them to exit if the police investigations result in criminal charges against players.

Another article cites the cancellation of a rugby league linked schools extravaganza which is to be held in Sydney in April. Up to 1,000 school children were to be involved, but Department of Education officials have abandoned the idea following the sex scandals in the NRL. External sports commentators are now suggesting that poor player conduct has been a time-bomb waiting to explode for years and that this is all too common in many sports. For too long players have been getting away with blue murder, and clubs have turned a blind eye because of the players' ability on the field. In many cases, the behavior tolerated in the clubs would be revolting to normal people. The NRL announces a program of education courses relating to community standards, racism, vilification, sexual discrimination, and harassment for officials, coaches, and players. While this is seen as a good idea, many question why it is necessary at all. Why don't these players know what decent behavior is?

**Days 21 - 26. Continued negative media attention and general public support begins to wane**

Twenty-four new stories appear during this period, with media interest still high. More allegations of sexual assault appear in relation to other clubs and the scandal begins to spread to other codes and other teams in the league. The NRL chief comments that the sex scandal has damaged the game and has focused the media spotlight on the off-field behavior of players. One of the lessons learned is that the media cannot be blamed for the problem and that clubs need to work more proactively with the media when problems occur. At this time, there are still no results from the police investigation.

The second NRL club to face sexual assault allegations is also confident that the club will recover; however, their chief executive officer announces his decision to stand down. He insists that this is a decision he has been contemplating for some time and has nothing to do with the sex scandal.

More sexual assault claims are laid against footballers from a different code (Australian Rules Football - AFL). Two women claim assault of a serious nature which are denied by the players. A review of the NRL sex scandal case (which is still under police investigation three weeks after the event) is also given. Talk begins to circulate about a national television broadcast in which a woman will be interviewed about an alleged gang rape by AFL players a few years ago. The woman did not go to the police at the time. The producer of the program says that the purpose of the show is to determine whether there is an endemic problem within the football codes regarding attitudes toward women.

The mother of an 18-year-old intellectually disabled girl claims her daughter was gang raped by four rugby league players the previous month. This information is aired on another national television show and police investigate the claim. Meanwhile, the state crisis centre manager states that a number of women claiming they had been sexually assaulted by footballers had called the centre following recent allegations involving NRL players.

Stories appear in relation to the claims about AFL players. The police are investigating and the club has condemned the action if proven to be true. The club in question has a history of off-field misbehavior by players, and this is a culture that the current president and coach are trying to change. The AFL says it is approaching SBS to get more information about claims aired last night on their national broadcast. The Chief of the AFL expresses his disappointment with the allegations and a strong desire to work with the police to resolve the issue. He also criticizes SBS for its reluctance to hand over information in relation to claims made on their program. He urges other women who feel they may have experienced abuse at the hands of the AFL to come forward to the AFL as their first port of call.

Two of the club's main sponsors review their involvement with the club and ask for a detailed briefing about the club's position and the players' involvement.

The coordinator of the Melbourne rape crisis unit comments that it is not unusual for women to complain they had been raped by professional footballers and other sportsmen. There is a culture within sport
that allows sexual violence against women, and the sports are complicit in letting that culture continue. 
AFL has now fallen into the cesspit occupied for the past month by rugby league, and, even if it emerges, the mud will remain caked over it. From an external commentator’s perspective, most worry that the club did not express any concern for the women involved. Their statements stick clearly to the letter of the law and show concern only for the image of the club and the reputations of the players. They do not seem to have any compassion for the alleged victims and obviously see this as an admission of guilt.

The woman who claimed she was sexually assaulted by a group of NRL players has identified the players from club photos. A taxi driver who took the woman and an unnamed player to the hotel on the night in question is also re-interviewed by police. It is also announced that the woman was argumentative outside a nightclub before leaving to go to the player’s hotel. Players waiting for taxis are seen to reject her advances and it is stated that the woman had had consensual sex with a player in the nightclub earlier in the evening.

The club’s football manager is sacked today by the board because he allowed players to publicly present themselves at police interviews wearing thongs and T-shirts. He is also stated to have failed to ensure that the club’s code of conduct was observed at all times during the team’s ill-fated trip in the preseason. On two occasions, players presented themselves at the police station dressed casually despite a management directive to wear more appropriate attire. They were also two hours late for their appointments. The players involved would also be fined by the club. Police announce they are still investigating claims of a gang rape against an 18-year-old intellectually disabled girl by rugby league players. These players are not affiliated with any national club. The mother complains that these men “competed” as they raped her daughter, and this takes the actions of football players to a new low.

More speculation circulates about the NRL gang rape scandal, with rumor and comment about what happened still under discussion. One article announces that this is the football sex scandal that won’t go away. Clubs in all codes are attempting to reinforce to players their expectations for behavior and treatment of women; however, one club president has announced that the problems facing the league are caused by predatory women who target footballers. Further, these footballers are often young and inexperienced without the emotional maturity to make decisions, and, when you add alcohol into the mix, then you are just asking for trouble.

A multi-million dollar sponsor of the AFL will quit the sport if the sex scandals continue. The club is currently playing a wait-and-see game, and sponsors are waiting for the results of the police investigations. The majority of the players are outstanding people and leaders in the community—we shouldn’t let the behavior of a small number tarnish the good work of all the others.

**Days 26 – 30. Action taken but the impact of the crisis spreads to other clubs and other football codes**

Media interest remains high, with 39 new stories appearing in this period. The AFL states that women are important to the league, with almost 50 percent of club memberships and attendances being made up of women. In May, there will be a summit about the role of women in the AFL, and there is mounting pressure for the league to appoint a female commissioner. While the AFL has generally had a relatively clean reputation and has done little to offend its family target audience, they still have skeletons in the closet. The AFL appears to have done a better job of educating players and the culture of group sex is not as common; however, under-the-counter payments and bribes are issues that can also impact the league’s reputation. Also of concern is the lack of interest or compassion for the women at the centre of all these allegations. A back-page story in one newspaper the day after the police announced their investigations pondered whether the two players would be available for the first game of the season on that weekend. Is this really all the fans care about?

The NRL is noted as having its greatest public relations disaster, and allegations from the club in question have only served to entrench the feelings and prejudices of many about the behavior of rugby league players in general. Another article comments on the culture of the NRL as repulsive, with players swaggering into
police stations in beach gear, the Australian captain so insensitive that he makes a tasteless joke, players make foul-mouthed statements wearing T-shirts designed to provoke and trivialize the incident. Supporters defend the code with unsophisticated and crude arguments that ignore facts and common decency. Players note that group sex is common; there are reports of clubs making payments to ensure that unseemly matters do not make the headlines. One club manager says he gets 50 phone calls a week complaining about footballer’s behavior. Players, their management, officials, and the media are all at fault because victory has always been put before virtue—hush everything up to keep the star on the field. These clubs think that they are above the law, and it is no wonder then that the players think the same thing. But perhaps this is the dawn of a new sporting culture—maybe the new generation will stop the drinking, gambling, and groupie mentality, and both players and clubs will not need special training in how to behave?

A former NRL club manager sacked for not enforcing club code of conduct will bring legal proceedings against his club this week. The players in question have all had suspended fines for their lack of dress standards.

The chief executives of both the AFL and the NRL meet this week for crisis talks about the sex scandals. They discuss strategies to assist in these situations. While the chiefs of each league have been praised for their open and accountable approach to the claims, some players in the NRL have been less than helpful both with the police and the media. There is some discussion about various AFL clubs paying large sums of money to women accusing players of rape so that they wouldn’t take their cases to the police or the media. Both leagues state that they are doing everything possible to educate players to their responsibilities; however, at the same time, most people know what is right and wrong and have their own values, and there is not much the football club can do about that. Some footballers are idolized, and hero worship has its own drawbacks for players.

The chief executive of the NRL club at the centre of the sex scandals resigns. The police investigation continues. The club and the league reluctantly accept the resignation, calling him an honorable man. The club needs a new era of accountability and nepotism, and reluctance to answer to community standards will not be tolerated. It appears that this is the price for attempting to discipline players and for sacking the club manager for their roles in the sex scandal that has been plaguing the club for six weeks. As the club’s CEO, he absolutely defended the players in relation to the scandal, but 10 days into the affair he became shocked by reports about his players’ behavior, including the consensual group sex that was supposedly a common part of their off-field behaviour. He breaks ranks and notes that this attitude is appalling to his family values and his faith and he couldn’t condone it.

One commentator notes the responsibility for the media to report sport as it is and to call on-field violence and off-field gang rapes crimes, rather than treating them as some form of macho sporting activity. This then may go some of the way to improving the image of modern professional sport and give our young people a more balanced view of right and wrong.

Rape scandals show no sign of abating with another eight cases of alleged gang rape reportedly set to become public within weeks. Two more AFL clubs are set to be put in the media spotlight and nine players from these clubs are accused of gang raping two women at a nightclub.

More news about the resignation of the NRL club’s CEO and his acceptance of responsibility for the incident which has cost his club over $600,000 in sponsorship as well as fines from the league. Other reports surface that the players are running this club and that they are responsible for the CEO’s resignation, as they were unhappy with his decisions regarding the sacking of the manager and penalties applied to players. Officials of the club are concerned by the financial impact of the disaster with lower attendances and less sponsor support.

A large number relate fresh claims of gang rape against AFL players. Comments are made that the first NRL incident has sent shock waves through all football clubs, with all scrambling to minimize the damage to their reputations.

One insider comments on the difficulty juggling egos and economics where the demands of old-guards football boards and new-style business are often in conflict. The resignation of three top football administrators in 10 days raises many questions. The NRL club at the centre of the storm adopts the old-guard approach, which is to kill the messenger and blame the media for the firestorm. The circle the wagons
approach takes no account of modern business practices or of modern crisis management theory. While many question the club’s decision not to name players involved nor discipline them for breaches of conduct, the result is that many executives are unable to satisfy the multitude of demands of pampered stars. The NRL club in question is now saying that its players engaged in immoral acts which were not illegal and that this may cost some of these players their careers.

If the sex scandal was not enough, the NRL club now faces allegations of recreational drug use claiming that prominent players from the club tested positive for cocaine use last year and the club simply imposed a fine. The club is under no obligation to name the player involved and all clubs have different policies on how to handle this issue. The second NRL club to be named in the sex scandal has continued their investigation and have been said to have cooperated fully with police.

**Days 31 – 34. New crisis shocks the club and the league and public discontent and dissatisfaction spreads**

New crises hit the Bulldogs club and 10 new stories appear. Media interest begins to wane, with public opinion reaching a low point. Players from the NRL club alleged to have gang raped a woman in March now stand accused of testing positive to cocaine use.

More general comments are made about the ongoing police case and the allegations of drug abuse by certain players, plus a call from club officials and supporters for players and the club to get their act together. More comments about the disastrous publicity for both the NRL and the club in question, and about how the new drug abuse scandal is threatening the future of both the club and the league.

The news reports a violent brawl in the crowd supporting the NRL club at their game over the weekend. The NRL is threatening to ban all Bulldogs supporters and to fine the club for the violent behavior of their fans. Extra security will now be provided at all Bulldogs games and, if this happens again, the club will be taken from the league.

A few independent sports writers claim that as each day passes, more victims come forward and more poor off-field behavior is reported. Even if only half of these allegations are true, there is a serious problem in the code, and the question is asked, “Will this stop women supporting the code and allowing their daughters to support it as well?” The way we treat our young professional footballers has contributed to this attitude toward women and to the acceptance of this behavior. They are paid large sums of money, told they are elite athletes, and we treat them like national heroes. Over time they begin to believe that they exist in a world beyond the law and beyond normal social behavior. Players are also arrogant, believing that they will not get caught when they do engage in inappropriate behavior. The only way to address this is for the clubs themselves to get serious. Clubs need to take a good look at the culture which has created this monster and, if it is not addressed, then football will never be the same again.

More comments are made about the Bulldogs club and their fans disappointing behavior—comments that fans and others are getting sick of the NRL not taking any action against players in the sex scandal from earlier in the season. The Bulldogs have been penalized four competition points for their fans behavior.

**Days 35 – 51. Some positive action taken but more public discontent and comment about lack of general action and lack of interest in the larger issues**

Media interest continues to wane even though the Bulldogs appear to be taking some positive action at last. Only 12 stories appear during this phase. A new chief executive officer is appointed for the Bulldogs club, and he is committed to changing the club’s current culture, including one of secrecy with the media.

The families and wives of the Bulldogs players implicated in the sex scandal are interviewed. The shameful culture of the change room, where women are mere playthings and the sports star is both greedy
and lacking in moral responsibility, is discussed. The club, in addition to problems with its culture, has also failed the public relations test with contempt for community standards. The culture where players expect and usually get everything for free is well known and promoted. Group sex and sharing and keeping score of sexual conquests are considered to be a normal part of football activity—but do the sponsors and the fans really support this notion and how do parents feel about these men being role models for their children?

The national footy show, which highlights issues relating to NRL in a humorous way, finally addresses the Bulldogs issue and the larger issue of sex and violence in the code and the fact that this club has had a particularly bad history with crowd and fan violence. However, the issues of too much money, too much alcohol, and too much time are not tackled.

It is discovered that another NRL club used players to judge a bikini pageant at a local night club, and women's rights groups comment that this sends exactly the wrong message to the community and the club just isn't taking these issues seriously. The club insists that their involvement with the pageant was at the request of one of their sponsors, and that it was all strictly above board. The new CEO of the Bulldogs takes on the old culture and vows to clean up the club's image and players' off-field performance. There is more general discussion about the issues of the last month and the lack of a decision by police about the outcome of the investigation hanging over the heads of the Bulldogs club.

The NRL withdraws sexy merchandise after feminists warned that it was tacky and could further alienate female fans. Images on the website show women exposing their breasts, and they could be downloaded onto mobile phones. There are general negative comments about the NRL and the Bulldogs club and the decision by the NRL to withdraw the sexy merchandise. Some say the NRL and the club have failed to learn the lessons of the last couple of weeks.

The Bulldogs announce that any players charged over the sexual assault issue earlier in the season will be stood down immediately. There is also general discussion about the club's woes and problems with the board in terms of their inability to control player behavior. The Bulldogs sign a new sponsor to replace the two major sponsors who left following the sex scandal earlier in the season.

**Days 65 - 66. Police findings released, club again in trouble with the media, and fresh negative issues emerge**

Even though this represents the official end to the crisis, media interest is low with only nine stories appearing in major newspapers. No international papers break the news. The police findings are announced with no players charged over alleged gang rape earlier in the season. While the police investigation suggests that a sexual assault had taken place, there was not enough evidence to charge players. The Bulldogs club has responded to the announcement with a "us-against-the-world" tone suggesting that this was full vindication and players were even demanding front-page apologies. None of this shows that the club had recognized the larger problem with the league and their behavior. The NRL immediately fines the six players involved with breaches of conduct and for bringing the game into disrepute totaling $500,000. The NRL chief apologizes for upsetting the public with comments in relation to the police findings in the sex scandal. Writers state that the NRL doesn't "get it" and that their behavior is a classic example of the problems facing the league and football in general.

**Discussion**

Theoretical models suggest that when a crisis hits, there is a window of opportunity when the organization can, and should, react decisively and positively with the media—the inertia stage. This stage can last up to a couple of days, depending on the particular crisis and the availability of information. Following inertia, public opinion can either become supportive and positive, or it can turn negative and antagonistic. Organizations who are defensive and uncommunicative with the media often find this is the result.
open and responsive to the media helps to minimize comments that the organization is trying to hide something or that they are evasive in some way (Browne, 2003).

As we can see by the press comments in the first few days of the Bulldogs crisis, their reaction to the problem, their lack of sensitivity to the alleged victim, and their aggressive stance with the media resulted in the negative path (path B in Figure 2) being taken, the consequence of which has been antagonistic press coverage, loss of brand image, and negative sponsor and public support. In addition, their response has also resulted in the league itself being drawn into the crisis and, in turn, suffering associated brand damage. Worse still in this case, the sport of football in general has also been implicated by the negative impact of the crisis and has also been tarnished with the negative brand image.

The literature also suggests that in order for a crisis management strategy to be successful, a clearly defined response strategy is required where everyone in the organization knows who is responsible for what and what actions need to be taken. In the case of the Bulldogs, there was no clearly defined strategy and, further, players and management did not appear to have a clear notion of who was to speak with the media and who wasn’t. This resulted in different stories being released to the media, an aggressive stance being taken in relation to media, and a perception that the club lacked sensitivity as to the seriousness of the issue.

The next most important element in a crisis plan is to have adequate resources available to manage the crisis and to allow the spokespeople for the organization to investigate the issue and report appropriately. In the case of the Bulldogs, it appears that limited resources were allocated as the club gave the media the impression that the crisis was really not a significant one and, further, that there was no additional information to be gained from continuing any investigation. Once again, the lack of sensitivity to the victims and the lack of appreciation of public opinion in relation to the crisis caused the club’s actions to be perceived in a very negative light.

As highlighted in the literature, organizations need to maintain ongoing corrective action and reactions during the course of the crisis. In the case of the Bulldogs, the public and the media became increasingly frustrated with the apparent lack of action taken by the club toward the players involved, regardless of their legal situation. People wanted to see some form of justice done; to see the players implicated suspended because of their contravention of the club’s code of conduct would have appeased many. The lack of action by the club and their constant reiteration that they could not prejudice the police investigation did little to sway public opinion. This approach also resulted in increased media interest, which in turn resulted in additional aggrieved women being found and brought into the media spotlight, as well as bringing other unrelated club issues, such as drug use, illegal salary payments, and management in-fighting, into the reporting. The end result was a picture of a club that was arrogant, unacceptable in their attitudes toward women, and lacking in moral and professional behavior. Further, the media investigations also resulted in the sex scandal issue being identified in other clubs and in other football codes, thus spreading the crisis and causing irreversible damage to the game.

Interviews with two CEOs of other NRL clubs at this time revealed that in the same circumstances they would have immediately suspended players pending the outcome of the investigation based on those players breaking club rules (being out past a curfew hour and drinking) and also to soothe public opinion and to be seen taking decisive action. One can only assume that if the Bulldogs club had been more open and helpful with both the police and the media that path A (Figure 2) would have been followed and the damage to the code and to other football clubs may have been averted.

Finally, crisis management plans all suggest a period of review and reflection with the aim of improving plans and tactics being the final step in a well coordinated plan. In the case of the Bulldogs, it appeared that even when the police verdict dropping charges against players was released, the club was still antagonistic and lacking in any form of apology or regret about the actions of the players involved.

Conclusions and Implications

This case is an example of a national sporting organization that has failed to adequately plan for the possibility of a crisis involving the off-field behavior of their players. Further, the history of the club in question
indicates that over the last two seasons they have had a number of crises that have not been well handled in terms of their media relations or in terms of an appropriate crisis management strategy. In 2003, the club was hit with a salary cap crisis and, in 2004, the sex scandal hit. The club in question did not appear to reflect and review its management operations or strategies to deal with crises as a result of either incident. Worse still for this club was the fact that their actions and poor handling of the incident caused the negative media coverage to spread to the league in general and to the code on a larger basis.

It would seem from this analysis that the off-field behavior of footballers has long been the subject of public concern and condemnation, and yet football clubs have largely chosen to ignore the problem in deference to the star billing of many of their players. Discussions with two CEOs from other clubs in the league suggested that the corporate culture within the Bulldogs was also largely to blame for the aggressive and unrelenting media interest in the story and for the unceasing questions in relation to the management and control of this particular club. In addition, the lack of appreciation of the long-term impact of this sort of crisis on the club and its fans and sponsors resulted in major brand image damage and deterioration of the brand image of the league in general.

This case highlights the need for sporting clubs of any level to recognize and plan for player-related crises. The increasing adoration and hero worship afforded national sports people and the culture of sex, drinking, and debauchery that prevails in many contact sports should highlight to clubs at all levels the need to be prepared and to have in place appropriate strategies to handle such crises. It would appear from this case study that media training and education for key management is also a significant factor in achieving a positive and successful outcome. In this case, the Bulldogs were suspicious, antagonistic, and unresponsive to media involvement, which only served to fuel their interest in the case and force a negative and unsympathetic viewpoint from the relevant media commentators.

Interviews with two other CEOs from NRL clubs also highlighted that crisis management plans were not common both within individual clubs and within the league in general and that perhaps it was time to take a more professional approach and to recognize the potential problems when dealing with elite athletes and to plan and rehearse appropriate strategies to cope with crises when they arise.

It is recommended that future researchers in this area investigate why clubs are resistant to putting in place appropriate crisis management plans and whether this is a problem more endemic in one sporting code over any other. It is highly likely that a sporting culture that has accepted immoral or anti-social player behavior in the past will be less able to see the benefits of adopting and practicing a crisis management plan. Future researchers should also consider the implications and demands of all relevant sport publics and stakeholders in their analysis, as it is likely that the conflicting demands of these groups may have a significant impact on the development of a crisis plan and the implementation of same.

This paper has limitations in that it is largely exploratory in nature and lacks empirical support for the propositions made. However, anecdotal evidence from media reviews and discussions with management involved in the football industry in Australia suggest that these findings are not isolated, but rather, more disturbingly, they are endemic of a sporting industry that has not fully accepted the transition to professional sports and the responsibilities to fans and sponsors that come with that move.

References


