

Perspective: The Michael Phelps story of marijuana use is not only a personal tragedy for him but it is a lesson for other Americans, especially for young people. Today most Americans view marijuana use as a serious health risk, reject marijuana use strongly and know that its use is illegal. As a result of his thoughtless behavior Michael Phelps may lose the public respect that he worked so hard for so long to earn. He also may lose millions of dollars of endorsements. As a result of smoking marijuana he has become a different kind of role model by showing how much young people have to lose as a result of using marijuana. His DWI arrest at 19 indicates that this was not a single incident and that substance use may not be benign in his life.

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After Failure of Judgment, Phelps Shouldn't Get a Pass



By Michael Wilbon
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If you want to read that it's okay to take bong hits because you're 23 and the best swimmer in history, cast your eyes elsewhere, because that's not going to be the position taken here.

Michael Phelps, of his own free will, decided to trade on his image to the tune of \$100 million or so, an image that surely doesn't include drunk driving and getting high. This isn't fine print; it's in big block letters: DON'T SCREW UP! This is what Phelps agreed to, implicitly, when he signed on with AT&T, Visa, Hilton Hotels, Kellogg's, Rosetta Stone, Speedo and Nestle, among others: to conduct himself without scandal . . . all the time.

It doesn't matter that "everybody else is doing it," because my bet is that everybody else smoking pot at that student party at the University of South Carolina doesn't have endorsement deals worth \$100 million. They haven't courted the concept of being a role model and selling cellphones and cereal to mothers and grandmothers and little children. I'm annoyed over reading my friend Sally Jenkins's column justifying that Phelps "periodically needs to bust out of the confines of the pool and of his too-coy image," because he already busted out in 2004, when he was caught drinking and driving.

Phelps promised after that much more serious transgression that he wouldn't be guilty of such irresponsibility and inappropriate behavior again. Now, after stupidly taking a bong hit essentially in public, Phelps has issued a similar mea culpa, saying: "Despite the success I have had in the pool, I acted in a youthful and inappropriate way, not in a manner that people have come to expect of me. . . . I promise my fans and the public -- it will not happen again."

So how many times does Phelps get to act irresponsibly before Sally and a whole lot of other folk hold his feet to the fire a bit?

Three times? Five? Sally suggests in her column yesterday that people are holding Phelps to superhuman ideals if they don't accept his apology.

No, we're not. You want to get blatantly practical about this? If Michael Phelps wants to get high, then he should do it in the privacy of his own home, far away from cellphone cameras. At the very least, these incidents represent serious lapses in judgment.

I've never seen so many excuses for doing something so stupid, considering the stakes:

- Athletes have extreme training methods, extreme goals and therefore extreme rewards. As an example, Sally wrote that she "once watched Andre Agassi drink an entire bottle of Chianti -- at lunch." (Did he do it during Prohibition? If not, it wasn't illegal.)
- Phelps is driven by a case of boyhood ADHD.
- Everybody does it, so it must be okay. (No Sally, all of us haven't done it, and didn't do it in college, either.)

Stop it. People who stand to gain so much from their talent and image had better know by the age of 23 that a standard of behavior is expected of them that isn't expected of other people their age. Of course, it's a double standard, but Phelps is making \$100 million for having to live through it every day.

Even people who don't have a squeaky-clean image have consequences to pay for certain acts. My dear friend Charles Barkley, as you might have noticed, has disappeared (I hope temporarily) from TNT after being arrested for drunk driving. I love Barkley. He's helped my career and bank account by making me editor of his last two books. I'd do almost anything for him. But he doesn't get a pass for drinking and driving.

There should be zero tolerance for that, and Phelps doesn't get a pass for that, nor for his bong hit. The latter, in and of itself, certainly isn't heinous. But it is stupid, given what's at stake. And everybody excusing it, Sally, doesn't help Phelps get the message that he'd better be careful and vigilant. Being granted a pass at every turn usually breeds a sense of being bulletproof, as we saw in the much more serious case of Michael Vick, who actually squandered \$100 million or more. And Phelps isn't cast in the role of bad boy or tough guy. His marketing representatives have set him up to be the guy who walks the straight-and-narrow.

I have no idea if News of the World is a legit news organization or not, but the British tabloid also reported that Phelps's handlers offered all kinds of perks to the outlet if it didn't publish the photo of Phelps taking a bong hit. I wonder if Phelps's camp, in addition to all the sharpies, includes anybody with enough guts (and job security) to sit him down and get in his face, which is what most 23-year-olds need. Is there anybody in that camp who's going to tell Phelps that he's one more strike from ruining all the years of hard work? Are any of the embarrassed sponsors on Phelps's roster going to tell him, "Michael, this isn't the image we signed on for"?

Sally asks in the lead of her column if anybody is really surprised that Phelps dived headfirst into the bong water? I realize her tongue was firmly planted in cheek, but yes, I'm surprised. The kid I've observed is aware enough to know that he's different than other 23-year-olds, that he's more gifted, that the rewards and experiences have been greater for him than the average college kid, that his wealth and riches have to be protected, first and foremost, by exercising common sense. To do that, Phelps is going to have to keep his wits about him, and the best way to do that, whether anybody's watching or not, is to keep his face out of the bong water.