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“I DEFINITELY WANT TO THANK MY PSYCHIATRIST”:

DIGITAL MENTAL HEALTH DISCLOSURES IN PROFESSIONAL SPORTS

A Thesis in

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins with a brief history of the body, mind and sport relationship juxtaposed with a look at sports culture's problematic treatment of mental health. Toni Bruce's concept of "mediasport" emphasizes the influence sports have on society at large and helps articulate how changes to the sports lexicon can significantly impact broader cultural language. Chapter 1 reviews extant literature on the rhetorical concepts of *persona* and disclosure in order to use them as the focal points of the case studies in the following chapters. Liz Cambage has established herself one of the loudest professional athlete advocates for mental health. Chapter 2 features an analysis of Cambage's use of the digital media platform *The Players' Tribune* to disclose details about her experience dealing with mental health struggles in her personal life. Also included is a brief history of *The Players' Tribune* as a platform and consideration of what it means to be authentic and why that question is especially important in the context of mental health and digital media. Chapter 3 is focused on a YouTube vlog created by Christian "IWillDominate" Rivera, which documents his plight with panic disorder as a professional *League of Legends* competitor. Raymond Shuck's analysis of former MLB pitcher Pete Harnisch's 1997 confession of mental health struggles provides a frame of reference for mental health disclosures by athletes in traditional sports media in addition to demonstrating some of the similarities between traditional sports athletes and esports athletes. The thesis concludes with a look at former NBA player Metta Sandiford-Artest to reassert the importance of athletes continuing to be open about their mental health, documenting how this change has come about, what effects it has had on present-day discourse about mental health, and how future academic work can keep up with changes to come.

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INTRODUCTION

It's no accident that when individuals excel in public presentations they are often said to have "knocked it out of the park." Friends asserting that a certain peer's lateness for an evening out will be a "slam dunk" is par for the course, too. Sports have long transcended any status positioning them as tangential to or merely a segment of a culture; in the United States and around the globe, sports are woven into the fabric of society. Toni Bruce identifies this tapestry with a term of her own creation, "mediasport," for "any sport not experienced in the space where it happens, but represented through the media."¹ Referencing Stuart Hall, she explains that it is media's roles as cultural sense makers, as entities that tell people "what to think about rather than exactly what to think," that make the union of communication and sport so important.² Mediasport thereby inherits a lot of responsibility for the ideologies, attitudes, and values that reflect off of its production and into the world at large, which can lead to significant consequences. The fact that mediasport continues to be overwhelmingly male and that coverage by men, for men, and about men has long been the industry standard³ is indicative of mediasport's role in the perpetuation of a harmful hegemonic masculinity. Symptoms of this pervasive cultural standard are not hard to come by; anything from a derogatory comment towards a reporter on a team beat to a player feeling the need to play through an injury for the sake

¹ Toni Bruce. "Reflections on Communication and Sport: On Women and Femininities." *Communication & Sport* 1, no. 1–2 (March 1, 2013): 125–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479512472883>.

² Ibid, 126.; Stuart Hall. "The narrative construction of reality." *Southern Review*, no. 17 (1984): 3–17.

³ Ibid, 127.

of her team or a schoolyard attempt at insult with the phrase, “You play ball like a girl,” can be traced back to these hegemonic roots.

Caught up in these discriminatory practices are considerations of mental health. As focused as sports are on the body, there has been a documented and detrimental lack of concern for or attention paid to issues concerning the mind. Concussions and the language that has typically been used to describe them is helpful to the identification of why the mind has been treated as lesser. Those who’ve been diagnosed with broken limbs, muscle tears, and lacerations are typically clad with something that heightens the visibility of their injury to some extent, be it a bandage, a pair of crutches, or a sling. Concussions are “invisible”; the eyes can guess if symptoms like imbalance are apparent, but the root cause is still unseen.⁴ Noting both the physical “proof” and the resulting effects is especially important in the context of brain injuries because neither are visible to the naked eye. Such cases are of course able to be identified by medical professionals with adequate training and equipment, but it is up to the person with the brain-related injury to disclose that information to other people or else it would be nearly impossible for anyone else to know.

Concussions are also important for how prominent they’ve become in sports discourse. Pretty much every sport that poses even a tangential threat to an athlete’s physical well-being has worked its way into discussions about increasing concussion awareness and safety, but U.S. football has long been at the center of this discourse. In

⁴ “The Invisible Injury.” *Concussion Alliance*. <https://www.concussionalliance.org/the-invisible-injury#:~:text=For%20this%20reason%2C%20concussions%20are,adversely%20affect%20the%20recovery%20process>

2015, a study from Boston University and the Department of Veterans affairs diagnosed eighty-seven of ninety-one deceased former NFL players with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, a degenerative disease attributed to repeated impact to the brain.⁵ Another study emerged in 2017, this one conducted by *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. It was concerned with football players specifically, as opposed to the merely football-inclusive study from two years prior, but the results were similarly distressing. Of the 111 brains of former NFL players that were studied, 110 were found to have CTE.⁶ Later that year, the NFL implemented significant changes to the league's concussion protocol, which had to that point in time been extant only in name. As damning as the combination of the studies and the cases of players being visibly groggy after on-field collisions yet continuing to play was, it took a particularly egregious incident during which Houston Texans quarterback Tom Savage returned to the field after his hands had been twitching while he recovered from a hit for the league to finally take some action. The NFL's access to modern technology and methodology makes abiding by imprecise diagnoses and treatments of old, like "having one's bell rung" and "rubbing some dirt on it," malpractice at worst. In the context of the 20,000 former NFL players who have had to fight with the league in the courtroom for recompense for the lingering effects and later-emerging symptoms of their football

⁵ Jason M. Breslow. "New: 87 Deceased NFL Players Test Positive for Brain Disease." *PBS Frontline*, Sept. 18, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/new-87-deceased-nfl-players-test-positive-for-brain-disease/>

⁶ Joe Ward, Josh Williams, and Sam Manchester. "111 N.F.L. Brains. All But One Had C.T.E." *The New York Times*, July 25, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/07/25/sports/football/nfl-cte.html>

playing careers,⁷ the minimal action the NFL has taken to protect the brains of its athletes has become inseparable from the sport's legacy.

Football's failure to deal effectively with its concussion problem despite the amount of research, reporting, and real-life experience that has been conducted and shared sets paltry expectations for how the industry would treat other issues related to the mind. The way the sports community has handled mental health, in both its fledgling infrastructure currently in place to help athletes address mental health concerns and the language used to talk about them, is a testament to the lack of attention and, crucially, investment the sports community has given to the minds of its athletes. Conflation of an athlete's mental health struggles with a lack of toughness and, subsequently, a lesser athletic aptitude has persisted as standard operating procedure for fans and media professionals alike.

Two high-profile examples from 2020 help illustrate this point. Paul George, one of the NBA's biggest stars, spoke candidly in an August post-game press conference about his dealings with anxiety and depression while inside the NBA "bubble" that had allowed the season to continue in the midst of COVID-19.⁸ In response, former NBA star and current analyst Charles Barkley said, "Yeah, I'm not sure what that was about...I don't think guys making millions of dollars should be worried just because they're stuck

⁷ Ken Belson. "Black N.F.L. Players Want New Advocate in Concussion Settlement." *The New York Times*, March 17, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/sports/football/nfl-concussion-settlement-race-bias.html>

⁸ Ohm Youngmisuk. "Clippers' Paul George says he dealt with anxiety, depression inside NBA bubble." *ESPN*, Aug. 26, 2020. https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29743235/clippers-paul-george-says-dealt-anxiety-depression-bubble

in a place where they can go fishing, play golf and play basketball to make millions of dollars. That’s not a ‘dark place.’”⁹ Another former player and current podcaster, Raja Bell, put it even more bluntly: “Keep that shit to yourself, bro.”¹⁰ NFL quarterback Dak Prescott was upfront with struggles of his own, to which Fox Sports personality Skip Bayless said, “He’s the quarterback of America’s team. The sport that he plays is dog-eat-dog. It is no compassion, no quarter given on the football field. If you reveal publicly any little weakness, it can affect your team’s ability to believe in you in the toughest spot.”¹¹ In both instances, players with leading roles in both their sport and team contexts are chastised for the transparency of their disclosures. For a sports media complex driven by the United States’ largest media markets, it isn’t a surprise that the words and actions of players for the Los Angeles Clippers and Dallas Cowboys would attract comment. It is similarly predictable that Barkley, Bayless, and other industry professionals who’ve built their broadcasting careers by perpetuating problematic, generations-old sentiments to increasingly younger audiences would continue this practice when speaking about mental health.

Commentators making these claims contradict the history of sport. The mutually constitutive relationship between mind and body, like the one among sport, politics, and

⁹ Wil Leitner. “Charles Barkley Blast Paul George For Saying He’s in a ‘Dark Place.’” *Fox Sports Radio*, Aug. 26, 2020. <https://foxsportsradio.iheart.com/content/2020-08-26-charles-barkley-blasts-paul-george-for-saying-hes-in-a-dark-place/>

¹⁰ Mirjam Swanson. “Paul George, backed by Clippers teammates, reveals mental health struggles.” *The Orange County Register*, Aug. 26, 2020. <https://www.ocregister.com/2020/08/26/paul-george-backed-by-clippers-teammates-reveals-mental-health-struggles/>

¹¹ Matt Bonesteel. “Skip Bayless condemned for saying Dak Prescott’s admission of depression was a sign of weakness.” *The Washington Post*, Sep. 11, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/09/11/skip-bayless-dak-prescott-depression/>

rhetoric, dates back long before the years of ESPN and Fox Sports, and before batted balls and slam dunks. The ancient Greeks may not have been worried about setting their fantasy team lineups, but they were still immersed in a world of and by sports.

Debra Hawhee suggests that athletics¹² have served as metaphors for politics and life as far back as antiquity.¹³ While sports of millennia past lacked the television contract negotiations and advertising revenues that fund the multi-billion dollar enterprise in the present day, those ancient games share fundamental characteristics with contemporary competitive athletics. At the most rudimentary level, the relationship between mind and body was nourished by the same thing that fueled the connection between sports and rhetoric: an appreciation for the immediate relation between training practices and performance.¹⁴ Repetition in athletic training is reliant on repetition and imitation; the mind is constantly conjuring an ideal image that the body is attempting to match. Neither the invisible thought processes nor the visible performance can manifest without the presence of the other. Tangling the visible with the invisible continues beyond the body itself as spectators take in the physical display and then recount and discuss it with others whose eyes were not able to witness the same spectacle.¹⁵ Though their functions differ, mind and body operate as one both literally and figuratively.

¹² Hawhee uses “athletics” throughout her text. I use the term when citing her work, but otherwise replace it with “sports.” For me, athletics refers to the physical actions being done by athletes, while sports implies the competitive environment. Sports are contained within athletics, which is why I am comfortable applying Hawhee’s arguments to my own use of the word.

¹³ Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, 62.

¹⁵ Ibid, 13.

My choice of the word “spectacle” to describe sport is no accident, for even in ancient Greece sports transcended the particulars of a given competition to resonate with the culture at large. Hawhee employs the spectacular Athenian festivals of old as a backdrop for further linking of athletics and rhetoric.¹⁶ The Athenians were so enthralled by their sports and festivals that they built their sociopolitical calendar around them instead of the other way around. The modalities at play, the visual for the athletics and the textual for the rhetoric, are distinctive, but the moments when they converge and collaborate in the context of these events demonstrate a natural connection between the two. According to Hawhee, this passion for spectacle went hand in hand with the city’s profound love of honor.¹⁷ Conferring honor was a consistent part of the festivals and the discourse around them, and the actions of athletes and observers alike dictated this process. Isocrates argued that the exchange of honor occurred through both athletic and rhetorical displays that were similarly reliant on gathering and witnessing; the mere presence of one added another layer of consideration and motivation for the other.¹⁸ All of the above contribute to what Simon Goldhill deems a “culture of viewing.”¹⁹

I argue that the contemporary sports media landscape has perpetuated and exists because of a very similar culture of viewing, albeit one sustained by drastically different mediation. Hawhee describes the Greek notion of viewing as disruptive when compared with how Westerners today characterize the action. She argues that the eyes operated

¹⁶ Ibid, 163.

¹⁷ Ibid, 165.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Simon Goldhill, 1998. *The seductions of the gaze: Socrates and his Girlfriends*. In *Kosmos: Essays in order, conflict, and community in classical Athens*, ed. Paul Cartledge, Paul Millett, and Sitta von Reden. New York: Cambridge University Press: 105-24.

much like hands with the ability to “reach out and grasp -- and be grasped by -- something or someone else.”²⁰ Hawhee continues to say that “the fiery eyes were thought to extend outward, to meet the flames issuing forth from things ‘outside,’ and in the mingling of flames, in the joining of light, to comprise an altogether new body.”²¹

It is impossible for me to read this passage off of my IPS monitor, eyes red and weary from the constant light exposure that drives so much of my everyday experience, and not connect ancient Greek festivals, as represented by Hawhee, and digital media. Matters of audience extend the comparison even further. Eliciting louder commotion from their Athenian crowds communicated the degree to which athletes and speakers alike were being supported, and that same noise joined the watchers’ eyes in penetrating the bodies on display. However, there is a point crowd noise can reach where it drowns out the person or people at the center of attention and becomes the subject itself.²² Digital media like Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and other internet-based platforms thrive on a click economy that is built upon this kind of consistent community participation in the content being produced. Performers today are never given the chance to forget that they are operating in the presence of others, whether they are on the job in their mediated profession of choice or just perusing a given community like any other consumer.

Persistent performance and always-awaiting audiences have shifted from cultural byproduct to invaluable asset for professional athletes, the team owners who employ them, and the media outlets that cover them in the 21st century. As athletes that grew up with the internet as a part of their lives have commanded an increasing percentage of the

²⁰ Hawhee, 178.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 180.

active playing population, they've been able to use the platforms afforded by this technology in pursuit of ends that haven't been adequately met by their employers or communities. The lack of mental health care and support in sports has been addressed head-on by athletes from across a variety of sports all around the world. These folks have channeled the performing chops their careers are built on into online media creation that challenges assumptions about identity, what it means to be online, and how consequential giving a voice to an issue that has lacked one (and a presence to the same one which has also long been deemed invisible) can be if employed effectively. The entire plurality of voices now speaking through their digital means can't be accounted for in this thesis, so the chapters to come will focus on two individuals: WNBA star Liz Cambage and esports professional Christian Rivera. Through an analysis of Cambage's contribution to *The Players' Tribune* and Rivera's YouTube video, this thesis will interrogate what it means to construct *personae* in the contemporary sports media complex and how athlete disclosures about mental health can influence cultural practices beyond athletics.

In Chapter 1, I contextualize the work that has been done over the years about *persona* to make sense of the multifaceted identities of athletes on the internet and the ways they interact with their audiences. Additionally, I define what it means to disclose something from a rhetorical perspective. The performance of that disclosure and the corresponding participation from the audience is imperative for disclosure's juxtaposition with *persona* throughout the rest of the project. Chapter 2 will center around WNBA star Liz Cambage and her disclosure about her lengthy struggles with her mental health. I analyze the text of her contribution to the sports media website *The Players' Tribune* and spend time unpacking the historical precedent in the realm of sports journalism that led to

the site's creation in 2014. The launch of *The Players' Tribune* and its rise to prominence in the back half of the 2010s coincided with a spike in discourse about whether athletes should be sticking to sports or shutting up and dribbling rather than expanding their reach to other cultural issues, making the brief history of the platform also provided in the chapter a vital inclusion. Chapter 3 is concerned with online toxicity and gaming *personae* with retired esports athlete and current content creator Christian Rivera as the focal point. Rivera gave a detailed account of his history with panic attack disorder that includes his symptoms, what he did to cope, how it affected (and did not affect) his career as an athlete, and why he waited until after retiring to make these experiences public. With the aid of a past example of a professional athlete making his mental health struggles public, this analysis identifies how Rivera's video is representative of a new wave of disclosures in this era of easily accessible multimedia content creation.

Rivera's inclusion in this project and the resulting union of sports and esports is not an uncontroversial turn. Esports competitions have a radically different relationship with the physical body than traditional sports. There is no physical contact between opponents or teammates in esports, but that does not preclude the body from being central to those events. Measurements like actions per minute and skills like rapid information processing celebrate the body different ways than the wrestling of ancient Greece, but appreciation is still extant. ESPN Sports Science is a retired television segment that used advanced tracking technology to highlight the most outrageous physical feats of the world's most celebrated athletes, spanning baseball, football, basketball, and more. On October 28, 2016, ESPN aired an episode of this segment

focused on a professional *League of Legends* player Eugene “Pobelter” Park.²³

Ultimately, even though sports and esports are categorically differentiated, they share many similarities and both fall beneath the umbrella of athleticism. Esports belongs to and can push forward many conversations about sports and athletics more generally, and this project concerned with disclosure and *persona* is one of them.

The *personae* created and maintained by professional athletes are uniquely suited for participation in and legitimization of digitally mediated discourses. This thesis explains to what ends *personae* and disclosures operate in the professional sports context and why understanding these terms, individually and as a pair, can help guide a culture so intertwined with sports towards improvement.

²³ ESPN. “What It Takes To Be A Top League Of Legends Player | Sport Science | ESPN Archives.” *YouTube*, July 6, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQxoz5baCTg>; There isn’t an in-depth breakdown of the game available in this video, but it provides an idea of what the game demands. More in-depth explanation of the game is provided in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 1: *PERSONA* AND DISCLOSURE

In this chapter, I define *persona* and disclosure from a rhetorical perspective in order to lay the groundwork for their use in Chapters 2 and 3. The act of disclosure demands a performance, and a performance demands the participation or presence of an audience. The juxtaposing of *persona* and disclosure throughout this project acknowledges that the performer-audience relationship is also inherent to sports. From antiquity through to the present, athletes have been performing for all who wish to observe. Logistical limitations before the advent of mass mediated technologies limited the number of eyeballs that could physically witness a particular event and therefore capped the number of people equipped with the knowledge to share what they had seen. In the ages of newspaper, radio, television, and now digital media, performances have become exponentially more accessible to those who want to be a part of that experience. Additionally, the act of performing itself has evolved. The ability for athletes themselves to create and share texts means that bodies that have been viewed in a purely sports context are now being presented in a new light. This chapter's examination of *persona* and disclosure builds the bridge from past to present that the case studies to follow will cross.

EXPLAINING *PERSONA*

Personae have been defined in their most literal form as masks typically worn in Greek and Roman theater. These masks allowed actors to embody characters the audience could identify as distinct from the actual individuals on stage.²⁴ Robert

²⁴ B.I. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel. "The Rhetorical Persona: Marcus Garvey as a Black Moses." *Communication Monographs* 49, no. 1 (March 1982).

Langbaum adds that a *persona* is “the mask that is required by the mythical pattern, the ritual, the plot -- the mask that is there before any person turns up to fill it,” emphasizing that even without a wearer, the *persona* is extant in and of itself.²⁵ The observation that there exists a role to be filled, or a character to be played, before a physical body takes on that representative function could easily be taken for granted in the context of a stage play. It is crucial to the construction of *persona* in the rhetorical context to recognize that actors have entered an existing space when they first begin their portrayal. Their preparation entails identifying what *persona* awaits them and channeling whatever is necessary to embody those findings in front of the audience.

Rhetorical critics have fashioned a variety of frameworks in which *persona* can be utilized and understood. In the past twenty years, many of the projects done on *persona* have built upon each other to create and distinguish various kinds rhetorical *personae*, and most share in their drawing from the work of Edwin Black.²⁶ From a numerical standpoint, then, it makes sense that Black identified and developed the First Persona and Second Persona.²⁷ Black identifies the First Persona as the author that a rhetorical discourse implies. This author is often an artificial creation rather than an actual person.²⁸ Philip Wander adds that the implied intent of the discourse also constitutes part of the

²⁵ Robert Langbaum. “The mysteries of identity: A theme in modern literature.” *The American Scholar*, 34, no. 4 (1965): 569-586, 576.

²⁶ Maegan Parker Brooks. “Oppositional Ethos: Fannie Lou Hamer and The Vernacular Persona.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2011): 511–48.; Ryan Kor. “The Commenting Persona: Reception Theory and the Digital Rhetorical Audience.” *Journal of Media Research* 11, no. 1 (2018): 55–70.

²⁷ Edwin Black. “The Second Persona.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (April 1970): 109–19.

²⁸ Black, 111.

First Persona.²⁹ Building on Wander's insights, B.I. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel argue that when the rhetor and her discourse tread into experiential and ideological turf the audience perceives as similar to these archetypes, the rhetor "stands in a symbolic relationship to those ideas or experiences."³⁰ In other words, the audience symbolically constructs a character and attributes it to the rhetor, who assumes her *persona* by embodying that character. Crucially, this construction is given a human shape that allows for the prescription of human judgment.³¹ This authorial identity and intent are derived in large part from the archetypal figures that have risen to prominence among the audience through history, literature, mythology or some other means.³² Extant feelings toward and experience with certain character attributes are vital to the staying power of *personae*. This is not to say that all *personae* are created equal, but rather to emphasize that without some sort of precedent, it could be more difficult for audiences to construct a character that can function as a resource for further recognition. If the discourse's audience does ascribe these archetypal qualities, the rhetor "will have inherent persuasive connotations deep within the cultural psyche of that audience."³³

Though the First Persona is ultimately constructed by the audience, the rhetor still wields an undeniable role in this construction process. In the words of Roger C. Aden, et. al., "every speaker generates a *persona* through their word choices and behaviors."³⁴ A

²⁹ Philip Wander. "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory." *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (December 1, 1984): 209.

³⁰ Ware and Linkugel, 50.

³¹ Wander, 209.

³² Ware and Linkugel, 50.

³³ Ware and Linkugel, 62.

³⁴ Roger C. Aden, Kelsey Crowley, Erin Phillips, and Gretchen Weger. "Doubling down: President Barack Obama's Doubled Persona after the Zimmerman Verdict." *Communication Studies* 67, no. 5 (2016): 605–22, 608.

rhetor's individual ethos can still be present, but it is distinct from her *persona* and its archetypal form. "When a speaker's rhetorical self becomes so closely associated with some set of human experiences or ideas that it becomes virtually impossible for an audience to think of one without the other, then that individual stands in a symbolic relationship to those ideas or experiences and may wear the mask of a rhetorical *persona*. Listeners, in such cases, impute to the speaker the ethos of their archetypal deliverer."³⁵ When these two are juxtaposed and the archetype is familiar to the audience, the ethos of the *persona* is far greater and suppresses that of the individual rhetor.³⁶

Black describes the Second Persona as the auditor, or audience, that the discourse implies. Characteristics and viewpoints demonstrated by the First Persona in a text are presented to the audience in question. When an audience member realizes that she is among those being invited to act by these factors, there is an accompanying assumption of moral importance.³⁷ The Second Persona is not required to be an actual human being, much like the First Persona, but the image projected by the discourse will still ultimately resemble a person or group of people. More central are the ideologies of this literal or imagined contingent, the viewing of which is enabled by the Second Persona.³⁸ Whether this implied audience is in agreement with, opposed to or feels neutral towards the discourse matters not as long as the appropriate reaction can be identified.³⁹ The existence of either the First or Second Persona independent of the other is uncommon, as

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ware and Linkugel, 51.

³⁷ Wander, 209.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Black, 111.

their development tends to occur simultaneously.⁴⁰ It's possible that the audience actually privy to the discourse is not representative of the Second Persona, just as it's possible for that present audience to recognize that whatever is being communicated was not crafted with them in mind.

Philip Wander's work does more than elaborate on the extent to which the First and Second Persona's operate. The key notion that the Second Persona commends, identifies, and constructs an audience is as important for those it includes as those it excludes. The excluded, or to use Wander's language, the negated and rejected, are by definition a group of their own. Wander identifies this group as the "silhouette of a Third Persona."⁴¹ Audiences not present or privy to the communication in question join with those who are deliberately ignored by the content of that communication in a collective state of alienation. Like the Second Persona, physical bodies aren't singled out as much as characteristics and world views, but the key difference for the Third Persona is that these same attributes are othered and marked as undesirable by the rhetor.⁴² Furthermore, treatment as such "refers not merely to groups of people with whom 'you' and 'I' are not to identify, who are to remain silent in public, who are not to become part of 'our' audience or even be allowed to respond to what 'we' say."⁴³ The negation of these manifests itself in social, political, and economic arrangements that can cause harm, and it is through these contextual lenses that the problematic morals at play become clear.⁴⁴ Negated groups could be subject to unchecked harm if the discourse that excludes them

⁴⁰ Aden et al., 611.

⁴¹ Wander, 209

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 216.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 210.

isn't understood to the fullest extent. Dana Cloud calls rhetoricians to action in her own work on *persona*, which fills in gaps left by Black and Wander. She argues that more attention must be paid to audiences not invoked or constructed by a rhetor "as symptomatic of communities and interests excluded in dominant rhetoric."⁴⁵ In large-scale, state contexts, not identifying these groups leaves them vulnerable to targeted harm that the exclusionary rhetoric could beget in a world rife with the denial of basic human rights on the grounds of law, tradition, or prejudice.⁴⁶ This task, and generally understanding and accounting for the Third Persona, "involves the unity of humanity and the wholeness of the human problem."⁴⁷

Chuck Morris extended the range of the *persona* conversation in the form of the Fourth Persona in 2002.⁴⁸ The Fourth Persona is much like the Second in its implying of a particular audience with a particular ideology. However, in the case of the Fourth Persona, there are two audiences being implied simultaneously. One is presumably catering to a majority or some hegemonic norms that dominate a given discourse. It is also a mirage cast to satiate this same audience and to distract it from the ideology of difference that is simultaneously being shared with a much more limited audience.⁴⁹ The Fourth Persona also shares the Third Persona's reliance on silence as a constituting force, since in both cases what is left unsaid is rich with meaning. Again, there is a key

⁴⁵ Cloud, Dana L. "The Null Persona: Race and the Rhetoric of Silence in the Uprising of '34." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1999): 177–209.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41939508>.

⁴⁶ Wander, 210.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 216.

⁴⁸ Morris, Charles E. "Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002): 228–44.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630209384372>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 230.

difference between these two *personae*. The Third's silence is one of exclusion, pushing those who are unable to properly interpret the text further away. By contrast, the Fourth entails a collusive exchange that "calls abettors into being" with carefully constructed silence.⁵⁰ The hidden ideology could still, in a given rhetor's mind, lead to harm if it were to be public knowledge, so keeping it mostly a secret is deemed an imperative. The audience that catches the "textual wink"⁵¹ knows of the lurking danger as well and colludes with the rhetor to maintain the front that is passing for the dupes.

Morris uses sexual marginalization as the prime example for his development of the Fourth Persona. The development of a sort of double-consciousness by LGBTQIA+ people to resist oppressive cultural norms is the embodiment of this rhetorical practice. A "double life" can manifest publicly when the markers of difference are largely indiscernible and as secrecy and disclosure, both rhetorical forms, are evinced in these performances.⁵² Classifying this behavior as performance falls in line with the notion that secrecy, with its focus on concealing, coding, camouflaging, and the like, is a "necessarily rhetorical phenomenon."⁵³

Morris argues that no act of passing can be enacted without the Fourth Persona,⁵⁴ even when winking at the secret audience is not an intention. "Social passing" is a phenomenon identified by Peter J. Rabinowitz in which nobody can interpret the secret being kept,⁵⁵ but Morris argues that "the closet always functions rhetorically to disclose,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 229.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 230.

⁵⁵ Rabinowitz, Peter J. "Betraying the Sender': The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts." *Narrative* 2, no. 3 (1994): 201–13. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20079639>.

in some fashion, the very secrets we would at all cost keep to ourselves."⁵⁶ As a result, as was the case for J. Edgar Hoover in Morris' analysis, the Fourth Persona looms over those who attempt to maintain an adequate degree of social passing but who have already given themselves away, whether they know it or not.⁵⁷ The Fourth Persona is capable of affording "a means of community in the teeth of intensified homophobia,"⁵⁸ but in Hoover's case, that potentiality is more menacing than comforting.⁵⁹

Dana Cloud's Null Persona doesn't fall in line with the numerical count being conducted with other *personae* (if it did, she'd have beaten Morris to the fourth spot), but the name is nonetheless indicative of the silencing that is so key to the concept. If the First Persona is developed through a rhetor's choice of words and behaviors that characterize her discourse, then the Null Persona is the result of self-silencing.⁶⁰ The Null Persona functions to direct attention towards "extradiscursive power relations involving economic exploitation and physical coercion,"⁶¹ and the oppression in question is disclosed by these conditions and the silence about them.⁶² Here again, as with the Third and Fourth *personae*, the rhetoric of silence manifests itself as "a discursive pattern in which speakers gesture incompletely toward what cannot be uttered in the context of oppression."⁶³ By definition, these non-explicit gestures can only amount to a silhouette of the unutterable⁶⁴ and not the complete articulation. In addition to pushing the

⁵⁶ Morris, 231.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 26.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 231.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 241.

⁶⁰ Cloud, 200.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Wander, 216.

⁶³ Cloud, 178.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

audience towards the conditions that can't be spoken aloud, self-censored messages reveal a fear of retaliation against the rhetor if they were to disclose too much too directly.⁶⁵ Cloud cites Wander's Third Persona again when noting that the objectification of groups that are unable to actually speak for themselves as they would wish becomes apparent through the said and the unsaid, the disclosure and the silence.⁶⁶

The digitally mediated disclosures that this thesis revolves around raise questions about audience, intent, and identity that *persona* is uniquely capable of addressing. Liz Cambage and Christian Rivera address their fans and audiences directly after spending years connecting with them from a distance. These actions don't overwrite the *personae* they've embodied in their careers, but they add new layers to those identities that demand consideration. The next section will help strengthen the link between Cambage and Rivera by defining disclosure, differentiating it from confession, and contextualizing secrecy.

DISCLOSURE, CONFESSION, AND SECRECY

Choices to withhold or to share information, to keep it private or make it public, are communicative transactions laden with power. As a direct result, understanding secrecy and disclosure as rhetorical forms is pertinent. Black argues that the archetypal role of translator, one who is deemed uniquely capable of receiving and then passing information on to others, inherits a degree of power that builds through a constant accumulation of prestige, authority, and persuasive prowess.⁶⁷ One's accumulation of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Wander, 210.

⁶⁷ Black, Edwin. "Secrecy and Disclosure as Rhetorical Forms." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, no. 2 (May 1988): 134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638809383833>.

such political power would be less likely in an egalitarian society that has less use for hierarchy and less appreciation for a single translator's contributions.⁶⁸ However, the cases in which a person is accumulating information from a variety of exclusive sources and is then looked to by others as the voice they'll hear that information from, like politicians or some status akin to elected office, are few and far between. I argue that every individual is to some extent their own translator. After all, if someone has an experience that they've kept to themselves, they are "uniquely capable" of passing that information onto others in one way or another. The universality of that status caps the power that one person has over another, but within individual contexts, there is still a net power gained.

The genre of information sharing that I am most concerned with is disclosure. Disclosure is construed by Black as an act that is in direct conflict with secrecy, the latter being the conscious withholding of information from a broader audience and the former being the sharing.⁶⁹ He also states that "disclosure as a mediate device, as a short-range instrument, has a character different from disclosure used to achieve ultimate, conclusive aims. And this same difference between intermediate and ultimate purposes may apply, in reverse, to secrets; that is, keeping a secret for a short-range purpose may have a character different from keeping a secret permanently."⁷⁰ The first part of that statement differentiates two types of disclosure: one that is done for short-term ends and the other as a step towards more elaborate ones. The self-cited motives of the rhetorical translators focused on later in this thesis reflect these differences: Christian Rivera voices in his

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 133.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 138.

YouTube video his desire to finally get his experiences with panic attack disorder off his chest, and Liz Cambage hopes her disclosure about her depression will encourage other future disclosures. These motives are different, but they are linked by the act of disclosing.

The focus on disclosures invites the work of Dave Tell, who studies confessions in his book, *Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics in Twentieth-Century America*.⁷¹ There is some overlap between disclosure and confession, but preciseness is paramount for Tell, who posits that “we live in a culture defined by confessional anxiety: an anxiety born of an uncertainty about which texts should count as confessions, and compounded by the conviction that such classifications matter a great deal.”⁷² Such treatment and care is warranted given confession’s history as an act and descriptive term. Suzanne Diamond says that there is an unexamined prejudice against the term "confession," with the assumption being that people who are said to have confessed must have disclosed some sort of inappropriate or ill-received experience from their past.⁷³ The resulting cultural shame from confession references a history of religious morality associated with the act of revealing sins and secrets.⁷⁴ The negative connotation that accompanies the confession label invites a reading of wrongdoing that in many contexts would be unfair or harmful. Athletes relaying personal experiences with mental health struggles is one of these

⁷¹ Dave Tell. *Confessional Crises and Cultural Politics in Twentieth-Century America*. State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2015.

⁷² Ibid, 1.

⁷³ Suzanne Diamond. “Scripted Subjectivity: The Politics of Personal Disclosure.” In *Compelling Confessions: The Politics of Personal Disclosure*, edited by Suzanne Diamond, 16. New Jersey, UNITED STATES: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 14.

contexts, since negative reactions to their disclosures are exactly what the athletes of today are attempting to leave behind. Confessions are a kind of disclosure, but not all disclosures are confessions that inherit these qualities and assumptions.

The confessions Tell works with in his book are chosen because they appeared to be confessions when the reality was that little if anything was actually being admitted.⁷⁵ Further, he was just as concerned with the “political brouhahas” that emerged from these texts as he was with the contents of the texts themselves.⁷⁶ An example of this is NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins arguing that *Look* magazine’s story about the murder of Emmitt Till was a confession “despite the fact that the story was written in the third person, that it contained no apology, no remorse, no admission of sinfulness,” in an effort to prompt a retrial of the court case.⁷⁷ Tell is concerned with the ways texts are reclassified as confessions to take advantage of the power that authenticity (or inauthenticity) can have in political culture.⁷⁸ I am not concerned in this thesis with how texts are reclassified because the point of the disclosures chosen is their very existence; without the translations from Cambage and Rivera about their personal experiences, there is no text. The power of authenticity that Tell cites, though, can be of use to disclosures more broadly. Audiences can't actually determine the authenticity of an actor or a rhetor's text, but their perception of a level or lack of truth from these performances is meaningful. Tell says that the power of any confession resides in its claim to authenticity.⁷⁹ Diamond argues that attempts to define confessions as separate from

⁷⁵ Tell, 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 5.

general disclosures contribute to the bias against the term and limit their rhetorical potential.⁸⁰ The bounds of the confession genre are very loosely drawn by Tell, who advocates for the inclusion of anything that has been referred to as a confession as such.⁸¹ With as wide a net as this treatment entails, the biases the term inherits are pointedly relevant. If a confession needs to be authentic to be deemed a confession in the first place, the construction of that authenticity is all the more important to the rhetor/confessor's objective. For these reasons, confessions merely serve as a reference point for the disclosures discussed in this thesis rather than the operational term on which my analyses are based.

Where disclosure falls on the political spectrum is also a matter of concern for Black, who derives the fulcrum of his argument from the 1947 *Craig v. Harney* case in the United States Supreme Court.⁸² The issue in question was the power of a lower court to manipulate the proceedings that occur within it, and the Court declared that "a trial is a public event," and that "what transpires in the court room [sic] is public property."⁸³ Black takes this conclusion a step further, inferring that if what a court cannot keep secret is public property, a secret kept is private property.⁸⁴ The proprietary relationship among mystery, secrecy, and property is evident in idioms like "don't give me away," or "don't give away the ending," communicating the value of merely holding onto information; secret-keeping is, from an economic standpoint, a preservation of capital.⁸⁵ Conversely,

⁸⁰ Diamond, 12.

⁸¹ Tell, 7.

⁸² Black. The act of politicization here is relevant, but it is worth noting that Black published this piece in 1988 in a different political climate than 2021's.

⁸³ *Craig v. Harney*, 331 U.S. 367, 374 (1947).

⁸⁴ Black, 141.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

revealing that information would expend that same capital.⁸⁶ With the political spectrum in mind, Black argues that the left is characterized in part by a general aggrandizement of disclosure and a wish to keep capital, possession, and power equal and uniform,⁸⁷ all of which tracks with Diamond's previously stated progressive label. The right, on the other hand, favors the privatization of secrets and capital accumulation alike, as well as hierarchy, privacy in general, and private property.⁸⁸

According to Diamond, disclosure has the potential to burden both rhetor and audience with discomfort whether it is being done or received.⁸⁹ Black argues that "reprehension of secrecy and hypocrisy" is due to an abhorrence of any potential rift between appearance and reality, which would stand in sharp contrast to the virtuous standard that sincerity and authenticity are often held to.⁹⁰ Similarly, there exists a notion that too much information could be a bad thing and that knowledge is dangerous.⁹¹ Saying that something is better left unsaid, that a disclosure would be ill-advised, is this discomfort and reprehension in practice. Power dynamics between the censor and the potential discloser come into play when limiting the threat to profits could be prioritized over the betterment of a people. A sense of playfulness in the practice of secrecy is allowed even by those who generally oppose it. The elaborate decorum of high French society during the 18th century and the intricate costuming that concealed wearers is an example of how cultural import could be assigned to the masking of one's true self.⁹²

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Black, 144.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 149.

⁸⁹ Diamond, 10.

⁹⁰ Black, 146.

⁹¹ Ibid, 148.

⁹² Ibid, 146.

More masking and corresponding unintentional self-disclosure in stage performance extends from centuries past into the present. Lee Strasberg says that an actor's incorporation of personal feelings into those belonging to their character risks self-disclosure.⁹³ Black's related claim that "one does not go to the theater to see people be themselves,"⁹⁴ isn't the same as his previously cited claim that some people are generally opposed to disclosure as a communicative form. Instead, he is observing that the audience typically wants to see the most authentic version of the character being portrayed on stage. Any self-disclosure risks a rupture of the immersive experience at hand. Everyone at the theater has in most cases literally bought into the suspension of disbelief about the "realness" of what is being watched. In the event something actually real bubbles to the surface via an actor, like a response to a heckler at a live event or a cell phone ringing from their pocket, it stands out in contrast to the social contract that has been signed. Some shows may have fun with such events and integrate them into their play to make them feel as if they had happened by mistake, but even those instances acknowledge that the audience's expectations are being disrupted. Whether this insight holds up in contemporary entertainment, where actors themselves become or at the very least overshadow their characters on-screen is worthy of consideration.⁹⁵ In these cases, though, the blurred line itself eliminates the potential for a rupture because these actors and their characters are one in the same in the eyes of the audience.

⁹³ Lee Strasberg. "The Actor and Himself." In *Actors on Acting*, edited by Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, 2nd ed., 626–27. New York: New York Crown Publishers, 1970.

⁹⁴ Black, 147.

⁹⁵ Derek Lawrence. "Dwayne Johnson: Are All of His Characters the Same Person? | EW.Com." *EW*, July 12, 2018. <https://ew.com/movies/the-rock-cinematic-universe-dwayne-johnson-characters/?slide=5958091#5958091>.

Digital and social media have helped increase the sheer volume of performances and disclosures, allowing for remote viewing experiences that exponentially increase the potential reach of any given production. Generations with a lifetime of access to these resources continue to come of age in the smartphone and cable-cutting media landscape of the present. Comedian, actor, and director Bo Burnham, whose career began on YouTube as a teenager, said this about his insecurity about building a show about performance, and more broadly, American culture's response to new media during his 2016 Netflix special *Make Happy*:

But I worried that making a show about performing would be too meta. It wouldn't be relatable to people that aren't performers. But what I found is that I don't think anyone isn't...I was born in 1990 and I was sort of raised in America when it was a cult of self-expression. And I was just taught, you know, express myself and have things to say and everyone will care about them. And I think everyone was taught that, and most of us found out no one gives a shit what we think...Social media is just the market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform. So the market said, "Here, perform everything, to each other, all the time, for no reason." It's prison, it's horrific. It is performer and audience melded together. What do we want more than to lie in our bed at the end of the day and just watch our life as a satisfied audience member?⁹⁶

The personal experience Burnham cites is explicitly rooted in the United States, and he observes that the forces of the free market are inextricably linked to digital media and most potently, that the democratic intent of the internet has exponentially increased

⁹⁶ *Make Happy*, directed by Bo Burnham and Christopher Storer (2016; Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2016), Netflix.

the number of “performers” out and about in the country. He also identifies the link between performer and audience that is inherent with this type of technology. Spending swaths of time crafting messages whether embarrassingly meaningless or adamantly meaningful and then spending even more time checking on how they have been received is a practice that has become as ubiquitous as the platforms themselves. It illuminates the conundrum Diamond makes note of: do we master narratives of who we are or do the narratives master us?⁹⁷

In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler’s argues that “no analysis of disclosure can claim to be comprehensive if it ignores the confessional text’s rhetorical designs upon its reader, the circumstances of its reception, in other words.”⁹⁸ Attention paid to how a rhetor is affected while affecting, or in Burnham’s terms, how performer and audience are melded, is imperative. Even though Burnham gears his points stateside, the technologies and cultural forces that inspired them have had an international impact, a quality they share with Australian basketball superstar Liz Cambage.

⁹⁷ Diamond, 19.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. Fordham University Press, 2003, 25.

CHAPTER 2: A CASE OF CAMBAGIAN PERSONA

On March 19, 2021, WNBA star Layshia Clarendon tweeted the following in response to the criticism of the NCAA by women preparing to play in the tournament set to conclude their season: “I love this generation of college basketball players because the fearlessness they have to speak up about injustices is something I didn’t have in college. The ‘grateful & happy to be here’ women’s athlete is a thing of the past. I’m celebrating that fact today! Proud of y’all!”⁹⁹ The controversy in question revolved around a clear resource discrepancy between the “bubbles” within which the men’s and women’s NCAA tournaments were taking place due to nationwide COVID-19 restrictions. The teams of women competing were faced with food options, fitness space, and NCAA merchandise that was severely lacking both in terms of quality and quantity.¹⁰⁰ Clarendon spoke to the swift publicizing of these issues by participating players. The fearlessness she highlights is a refreshing sight for sports fans critical of the many issues that have plagued and been caused by the NCAA over the years, especially is it relates to the women’s sports.

Celebrating the exploits of the current college-aged generation in calling out the ways in which the organization they operate within exploits them is a worthy activity; so is acknowledging the previous generation’s speaking to these and other issues as

⁹⁹ Clarendon, Layshia. Tweet. @Layshiac (blog), March 19, 2021. <https://twitter.com/Layshiac/status/1372941796997664770>.

¹⁰⁰ Jennings, Chantel. “Stanford Sports Performance Coach Ali Kerschner Posted This to Instagram Earlier Today, Comparing the Men’s and Women’s Facilities in Their Respective Bubbles. Women’s Teams Get Six Sets of Dumbbells, Yoga Mats and a Single Stationary Bike until the Sweet 16... Htps://T.Co/HOgdJfHXhh.” Tweet. @ChantelJennings (blog), March 18, 2021. <https://twitter.com/ChantelJennings/status/1372617898187952130>.

professionals in recent years. Clarendon has emerged as one of the many WNBA players leading the way in advocacy for social change not just in their teams or local communities, but on the national level. One of the most recent and high-profile instances of these practices and their effects is the early advocacy for Raphael Warnock to oust incumbent Georgia Senator and Atlanta Dream co-owner Kelly Loeffler in the 2020 election cycle, which was an inflection point in the campaign that proved to be successful.¹⁰¹ No professional league can compete with the WNBA's collective dismissal of claims that they as athletes should stick to sports. The league has continued to combat these far-reaching societal issues while simultaneously dealing with sport-specific inequality, like that faced by the women participating in the 2021 NCAA Tournament. This includes, but is not limited, to less promotion and broadcasting of games and a minimal provision of wellness and improvement resources. Sports are not unique when it comes to workplace inequality, and it is precisely that commonality that highlights the intimate connection sports has with culture at large. Whether sport is a reflection of society, vice versa, or most likely, somewhere in between, the parallels make the ignorance of any folks who clamor for athletes to "stick to sports" obvious. There is no sport without politics.

Liz Cambage is another example of one of the league's best players leading a particular charge. Since the very start of her WNBA career in 2011, Cambage has been transparent about her struggles with maintaining her mental health. Though not alone in

¹⁰¹ Gregory, Sean. "How Atlanta Dream, WNBA Helped Warnock Defeat Loeffler | Time." *Time Magazine*, January 7, 2021. <https://time.com/5927075/atlanta-dream-warnock-loeffler/>. In March of 2021, Loeffler's shares of the Atlanta Dream were sold to a group that included recently retired WNBA and former Dream player Renee Montgomery.

the sports world with the courage to share her story as frequently or in as much detail as she does, her choice of platform and her prominence as a celebrity athlete make a close analysis of her work worth the effort. This chapter will focus primarily on Cambage's 2019 contribution to sports media site *The Players' Tribune*, which focuses on content created by and with athletes both professional and amateur from the United States and around the world. In the written piece, Cambage acknowledges that her mental health struggles are something she's, "been honest about, both privately and publicly, as much as [she] can. So much so that [she] thinks [she's] developed this kind of...*persona*"¹⁰² around it." This *persona* creation throughout her career emphasizes her desire to normalize mental health discourse and improve support, institutional, personal, and otherwise, for folks who need it. Analysis of how Cambage continues this *persona* construction within her account will help to inform how athletes more broadly can continue to use digital media platforms to initiate change. Tracing the work of an athlete like Cambage, who has years of experience speaking to significant social and personal issues and a consciously developed *persona* to aid her in doing so, can provide a template for what I call the Cambagian Persona that less practiced athletes can emulate as they make efforts of their own.

WHO IS LIZ CAMBAGE?

In 2010, women from around the globe gathered in the Czech Republic to represent their home nations in the 16th FIBA (Fédération Internationale de Basketball) Women's Basketball World Cup. The two-week tournament featured sixteen teams from six continents, but a United States squad laden with talent from their (and the world's)

¹⁰² Emphasis in original.

premier professional league, the WNBA, separated themselves from the pack. Team USA racked up a perfect 12-0 record with an average victory margin of thirty-five points *en route* to their record-improving eighth gold medal at the event.¹⁰³ Only Australia, the team that had foiled the USA's attempt at a three-peat in this event in 2006,¹⁰⁴ came close, losing in the group stage by a competitive score of 83-75.¹⁰⁵ While 2003 WNBA MVP and reigning All-WNBA selection Lauren Jackson was expected to be the Australians' best shot at an upset victory against the likes of Diana Taurasi and Tina Charles, the game was actually kept within reach thanks to an eighteen-point performance from a teenager who had previously been, in the world of women's basketball, a relative unknown. By the end of the decade that this tournament helped usher in, Liz Cambage had emerged as anything but.

Cambage was selected by the Tulsa Shock¹⁰⁶ with second overall pick in the 2011 WNBA Draft after emerging as a marquee prospect in the months between it and the 2010 World Cup.¹⁰⁷ After a debut season that included being named to the All-Star and

¹⁰³ 2010 FIBA World Championship for Women.

https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/event/p/sid/4730/_/2014_FIBA_World_Championship_for_Women/history.html

¹⁰⁴ 2006 FIBA World Championship for Women

https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/event/p/cid/WMW/sid/3508/_/2006_World_Championship_for_Women/index.html

¹⁰⁵ USA vs. Australia, 2010

https://archive.fiba.com/pages/eng/fa/game/p/gid/9/grid/E/rid/7212/sid/4730/_/2010_FIBA_World_Championship_for_Women/statistic.html

¹⁰⁶ Basketball Australia. "Cambage Chosen Second in WNBA Draft by Tulsa Shock | Basketball Australia." Basketball Australia, April 12, 2011.

<https://australia.basketball/blog/2011/04/12/cambage-chosen-second-in-wnba-draft-by-tulsa-shock/>.

¹⁰⁷ Mechelle Voepel. "Tina Charles, U.S. Women Top Australia in FIBA World Championship." ESPN.com, September 29, 2010.

https://www.espn.com/olympics/columns/story?columnist=voepel_mechelle&id=5631584.; DishNSwish. "WNBA Draft 2011 Prospect Capsule: Elizabeth Cambage – 'She's

All-Rookie first teams,¹⁰⁸ she prioritized preparation for and participation in the 2012 Summer Olympic Games with Team Australia, resulting in her sitting out the entirety of her sophomore season in the United States.¹⁰⁹ Cambage announced in early 2013 that she wouldn't be returning stateside for another year before ultimately suiting up for most of the Shock's schedule,¹¹⁰ but the ankle injury that marked the end of her 2013 season in Tulsa also marked her last WNBA appearance until 2018.¹¹¹ She returned to the league with the Dallas Wings after spending the previous four years rehabbing from a ruptured Achilles, playing for the Australian national women's basketball team (nicknamed and henceforth referred to as the Opals) and in other professional leagues around the world, such as China's WCBA.¹¹² In Dallas, she was once again named an All-Star and finished

Definitely One Of The Most Exciting Prospects in Australian Women's Basketball.” Swish Appeal, April 10, 2011. <https://www.swishappeal.com/2011/4/10/2098961/wnba-draft-2011-prospect-capsule-elizabeth-cambage-a-work-in-progress>.

¹⁰⁸ Basketball Australia. “Liz Cambage Selected to WNBA All-Rookie First Team | Basketball Australia.” *Basketball Australia*, September 21, 2011. <https://australia.basketball/blog/2011/09/21/liz-cambage-selected-to-wnba-all-rookie-first-team/>.

¹⁰⁹ Liz Cambage Will Not Return to Tulsa Shock For the Remainder of the 2012 Season https://www.wnba.com/archive/wnba/news/cambage_shock_082812.html

¹¹⁰ Jessica Lantz. “Liz Cambage out in Tulsa - an Examination.” *Swish Appeal*, April 10, 2013. <https://www.swishappeal.com/2013/4/10/4208072/liz-cambage-out-tulsa-shock-china-womens-basketball>.; Jessica Lantz. “Cambage Returning to Tulsa for 2013 WNBA Season.” *Swish Appeal*, May 16, 2013. <https://www.swishappeal.com/2013/5/16/4338240/wnba-tulsa-shock-liz-cambage-return>.; *The Sydney Morning Herald*. “Ankle Injury Ends Cambage's WNBA Season,” September 5, 2013. <https://www.smh.com.au/sport/basketball/ankle-injury-ends-cambages-wnba-season-20130905-2t7aw.html>.

¹¹¹ Mike Brown. “Tulsa Shock Confirms 6-Foot-8 Cambage Won't Return for 2014 Season.” *Tulsa World*, April 23, 2014. https://tulsa-world.com/sportsextra/shock/tulsa-shock-confirms-6-foot-8-cambage-wont-return-for-2014-season/article_d92f0a10-cb18-11e3-8660-001a4bcf6878.html.

¹¹² Xinhua. “Cambage Relishes Time in China, Aims to Win WCBA Title with Shanxi - Xinhua | English.News.Cn.” *XinhuaNet*, November 28, 2019. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/28/c_138589791.htm.; Associated Press. “Liz Cambage out of Worlds with Ruptured Achilles.” *USA TODAY*, September 20,

second in WNBA MVP voting after a stellar season that included a 53-point performance that remains the highest single-game total for a player in league history.¹¹³ That season would be her only one as a member of the Wings; she requested a trade in January 2019 and was dealt to the Las Vegas Aces, where she would earn her third All-Star nod in her fourth WNBA season.¹¹⁴ Cambage re-signed with the Aces in 2020, but received a medical exemption in the wake of COVID-19 that allowed her to sit out the entire season while receiving full pay.¹¹⁵

Her elite-level production on the court during her second stint in the United States has cemented her as a foundational player in the modern WNBA, but her personality has

2014. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/wnba/2014/09/20/liz-cambage-out-of-worlds-with-ruptured-achilles/15986279/>.

¹¹³ WNBA.com - Official Site of the WNBA. "Seattle's Breanna Stewart Named 2018 Most Valuable Player." Accessed December 27, 2020. [/news/seattles-breanna-stewart-named-2018-most-valuable-player/](https://www.wnba.com/news/seattles-breanna-stewart-named-2018-most-valuable-player/); WNBA.com. "Top Single-Game Scoring Performers in WNBA History - WNBA.Com - Official Site of the WNBA." WNBA.com. July 17, 2018. <https://www.wnba.com/photos/top-single-game-scoring-performers-in-wnba-history/>; "New York vs. Dallas - Box Score - July 17, 2018. ESPN. Accessed December 27, 2020. <https://www.espn.com/wnba/boxscore?gameId=401018913>.

¹¹⁴ Joseph Zucker. "Liz Cambage Requests Trade from Dallas Wings." Bleacher Report, January 22, 2019. <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2817093-liz-cambage-reportedly-requests-trade-from-dallas-wings>; Albert Lee. "Liz Cambage Is Headed to Vegas!" *Swish Appeal*, May 16, 2019.

<https://www.swishappeal.com/wnba/2019/5/16/18627962/wnba-trade-las-vegas-aces-dallas-wings-liz-cambage-moriah-jefferson-isabelle-harrison>. Benyam Kidane.

"Australia's Liz Cambage Selected as Starter for the 2019 WNBA All-Star Game, Elena Delle Donne, A'ja Wilson Named Captains." *Sporting News*, July 11, 2019.

<https://www.sportingnews.com/au/nba/news/las-vegas-aces-liz-cambage-named-starter-wnba-all-star-2019-game-elena-delle-donne-aja-wilson-named-captains/10btekjuk7ezh1usc4zu36qnsf>.

¹¹⁵ WNBA.com. "Las Vegas Aces Re-Sign Three-Time All-Star Center Liz Cambage - WNBA.Com - Official Site of the WNBA," April 22, 2020.

<https://www.wnba.com/news/las-vegas-aces-re-sign-three-time-all-star-center-liz-cambage/>; Mechelle Voepel. "Las Vegas Aces Center Liz Cambage Receives Medical Exemption for 2020 Season, Will Receive Her Full Salary." *ESPN.com*. Accessed December 27, 2020. https://www.espn.com/wnba/story/_/id/29519944/las-vegas-aces-center-liz-cambage-28-receives-medical-exemption-2020-season-receive-full-salary.

made her into one of the league's brightest stars. Celebrating with teammates at All-Star Weekend,¹¹⁶ sharing trash talk with the masses,¹¹⁷ and being namedropped by Drake¹¹⁸ are just a few examples of her ability to take advantage of the spotlight her play has given her. The joys of her public life are far from the only things she has illuminated for fans in recent years, though. Her willingness to disclose her struggles with mental health spans many years.¹¹⁹ As her celebrity has grown, Cambage has continued to be one of the most talented and productive players in the sport while maintaining this commitment to reflecting publicly on her wellbeing.¹²⁰ On August 11, 2019, Cambage's most detailed account of her mental health history went live on the new media website, *The Players' Tribune*. In this disclosure, Cambage highlights two games, one on August 3, 2019, versus the Dallas Wings and another on August 5, 2019, two days later versus the Washington Mystics. These contests predate the publishing of this article by only eight and six days respectively. After these games, the official box score entries for Cambage read "DNP-Rest," meaning she did not play due to a scheduled period of rest as opposed

¹¹⁶ Matt Ellentuck. "Liz Cambage Is Having the Best Damn Time at the 2018 WNBA All-Star Game." *SBNation.com*, July 28, 2018.

<https://www.sbnation.com/wnba/2018/7/28/17625444/wnba-all-star-game-liz-cambage>.

¹¹⁷ Matt Ellentuck. "Hopefully Liz Cambage Never Stops Trash Talking." *SBNation.com*, September 24, 2019. <https://www.sbnation.com/wnba/2019/9/24/20879420/liz-cambage-mystics-wnba-playoffs-beef>.

¹¹⁸ Complex AU. AU, Complex. "Did Drake Shout Out Liz Cambage on 'Astroworld'?" *Complex*, August 3, 2018. <https://www.complex.com/music/2018/08/drake-shoutout-liz-cambage-travis-scott-astroworld-sicko-mode>.

¹¹⁹ Jackie Epstein. "Opals Basketball Star Liz Cambage Talks about Depression Battle | Herald Sun." *Herald Sun*, July 18, 2016. <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/sport/olympics-2016/opals-basketball-star-liz-cambage-talks-about-depression-battle/news-story/f0c34c5b2fca292ab451846ab258c9df>.

¹²⁰ Mirin Fader. "Unapologetically Liz." *Bleacher Report*, August 17, 2018.

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2791044-unapologetically-liz>; Lindsay Gibbs. "The WNBA Needs Liz Cambage, but She May Not Need It." *The Ringer*, August 20, 2018. <https://www.theringer.com/2018/8/20/17757632/liz-cambage-wnba>.

to a specific ailment. The title of this disclosure, “DNP-Mental Health,” is what Cambage says would have accurately reflected her status for those contests.

The Las Vegas Aces hosted the Connecticut Sun for another game on August 11, 2019, and walked away with a win on the back of a strong performance from Cambage. The box score captured her game-high twenty-one points and accompanying twelve rebounds¹²¹ for posterity. Hours before gametime, her latest and most detailed account of her ongoing battles with mental health problem went live on *The Players’ Tribune*, making the day a fitting one to emphasize Cambage’s ability to demonstrate her influence on and off the court.¹²²

IDENTIFYING *THE PLAYER’S TRIBUNE*

The Players’ Tribune (henceforth referred to as *TBT*) was launched in October 2014 by former MLB star Derek Jeter as a platform for athletes to express themselves with the freedom allowed by social networks but with the creative resources of a more traditional media outlet. Written accounts constitute most of the site’s output, but it has also grown to include podcasts and videos. Ghostwriters and producers aid in the production process, but all of the bylines belong to the athletes whose stories are being told. As of February 2021, a few scrolls down on the website’s homepage brings users to a selection of contributions beneath the section header “Mental Health Awareness.” From both here and within the “More” tab in the header of the page, users can access a growing library of fifty-four articles, videos, and multimedia conversations from athletes that

¹²¹ Basketball-Reference.com. “Connecticut Sun at Las Vegas Aces, August 11, 2019.” Accessed December 27, 2020. <https://www.basketball-reference.com/wnba/boxscores/201908110LVA.html>.

¹²² Liz Cambage. “DNP-Mental Health.” *The Players’ Tribune*, August 11, 2019. <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/liz-cambage-mental-health>.

focus on mental health. Included alongside contributions from current and retired players from a multitude of sports is Cambage's contribution from the summer of 2019. Her post is titled "DNP-Mental Health." Two words and the common abbreviation of "did not play" don't reveal much by themselves, but the juxtaposition of sports jargon and mental health is a fitting setup for the content that follows. The next section of this chapter will analyze Cambage's disclosure through the previously established lenses of disclosure and *persona*.

The question of authenticity and its place in discussion of confession and disclosure is an important one, and it has also been posed directly to the *The Players' Tribune*. When a 2015 New York Times feature about the freshly-launched site included a quotation from Editorial Director Gary Hoening explaining that most of the sites posts were not written directly by the bylined athlete,¹²³ the authenticity claims the site promoted as its foundation were seemingly in limbo.¹²⁴ That authenticity has been cited as a key proponent of the platform's success,¹²⁵ so its integrity is presumably vital to its continuation.

¹²³ Richard Sandomir. "Athletes Finding Their Voice in Derek Jeter's Digital Venture." *The New York Times*, March 28, 2015, sec. Sports. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/sports/athletes-finding-their-voice-in-derek-jeters-digital-venture.html>.

¹²⁴ Nicole Schuman. "The Players Tribune Allows Athletes to Take PR Into Their Own Hands." *PRNEWS*, May 22, 2019. <https://www.prnewsonline.com/the-players-tribune-allows-athletes-to-take-pr-into-their-own-hands/>.

¹²⁵ John J. Edwards III. "Derek Jeter's Players' Tribune Agrees on Sale to Minute Media." *Bloomberg.com*, November 21, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-21/derek-jeter-s-players-tribune-agrees-on-sale-to-minute-media>.; "The Players' Tribune: Why Authenticity Matters in Media | NEA | New Enterprise Associates." *NEA.com*. Accessed February 3, 2021. <https://www.nea.com/blog/the-players-tribune-why-authenticity-matters-in-media>.

A major part of *TBT*'s appeal to contributors is its ability to offer both the space and resources for athletes to speak their minds without worry that important details of their accounts will be lost in or misconstrued by the editorial process. Historically, and to this day, the same promises cannot be made for a typical print sports column. After all, the bylines belong to the likes of Frank Deford and Mina Kimes, not the athletes that they wrote about. For most of the twentieth century, reporters traveling, sharing meals, and spending time with teams and players was a familiar phenomenon. An influx of money into professional sport by the start of the 1990s resulted in less intimate access to players for media. Self-preservatory tendencies emerged among athletes under the presumption that the less that was shared, the better the chances that their reputations wouldn't falter, and the more money they would be able to make.¹²⁶ The correlation may not have proven to be scientifically sound, but the logic prevailed. Among the most glaring exceptions to this "rule" is MLB's Alex Rodriguez, who netted one of the most lucrative professional sports contracts of all time¹²⁷ in the face of an often bizarre relationship to the media.¹²⁸ One of Rodriguez' most famous teammates and recent National Baseball Hall of Fame inductee, Derek Jeter, did build a reputation for being inscrutable to the media. In retirement from the ballfield, he founded *TPT* with the idea that without having to worry

¹²⁶ Amos Barshad. "What Happens When Athletes Do the Sportswriting?" *The New York Times*, February 21, 2018, sec. Magazine.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/21/magazine/what-happens-when-athletes-do-the-sportswriting.html>.

¹²⁷ S.I. Wire. "Yanks Will End up Paying A-Rod \$317 Million by Contract's End." *Sports Illustrated*. Accessed February 2, 2021. <https://www.si.com/mlb/2016/08/11/new-york-yankees-alex-rodriquez-contract>.

¹²⁸ Kat O'Brien. "A-Rod Kisses Self in Mirror in Magazine." *Newsday*. Accessed February 3, 2021. <https://www.newsday.com/sports/baseball/yankees/a-rod-kisses-self-in-mirror-in-magazine-1.1210794>.

about words or sentiments potentially getting “twisted and turned,” players would prove to be more willing to share than he ever did and that many people used to what they had heard through media coverage over the years would expect from athletes.¹²⁹ These and other expectations that sports fans and society more broadly have established for athletes, especially in the United States, are important to examine further. That investigation will take place later in this thesis, but it is worth noting here that *TBT*'s launch and rise to prominence in the back half of the 2010s coincided with a spike in discourse about whether athletes should be sticking to sports or shutting up and dribbling rather than expanding their reach to other cultural issues.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, blogs like *Deadspin* and ESPN.com's *Page 2* ushered in a new era of sports reporting. As a sort of counter reaction to players not sharing as much in either quality or quantity, these sources managed to establish the credibility (if not always the clout) of more traditional media sources without the access that had typified the industry in generations past. The sharing of opinion and independent analysis eventually resulted in a degree of “traditional” access, but that part of the business became an accessory to the core business rather than the core business itself. As the century progressed, new ways to get at least some access to athletes emerged alongside social media, most notably Twitter. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram allowed athletes to tell their stories and connect with mass audiences without needing to be featured in a local or national outlet, setting the stage for what Cabbage and her peers are now able to do relatively easily.

¹²⁹ Marisa Guthrie and Scott Feinberg. “Derek Jeter, The Aspiring Media Mogul (Who Dislikes Media), Reveals Next Big Swing.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 29, 2015. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/derek-jeter-aspiring-media-mogul-811572>.

CAMBAGE'S *PERSONA* CONSTRUCTION

Many of the details in Cambage's account are revelatory, but she was not a stranger to discussing her mental health before *TBT*. In the second full paragraph of her disclosure, Cambage acknowledges that her mental health struggles are something she's, "been honest about, both privately and publicly, as much as [she] can. So much so that [she] thinks [she's] developed this kind of...*persona*¹³⁰ around it." Her language here does little to assuage the concerns of those critical of *TBT*, since conflating honesty with the creation of a *persona* would ignore the inherent tension between those two terms. Is authenticity lost in this creative practice? Or is authenticity only possible through it? The following analysis of Cambage's disclosure will be guided by two major elements tracked through the text instead of merely parsing the prose line by line. However, the first of these elements is on display at the very top of Cambage's post: "Have you all in the States ever heard of a rip?"¹³¹

Cambage's direction of her content to a specific audience is the first major element. Writing to a specific audience doesn't always entail the acknowledgment of an actual person, like when someone scribbles "Dear Diary" onto a page that, if they have anything to say about it, will likely never be seen by the eyes of anyone else. However, Cambage's addressing of "you all" indicates that she has a readership in mind that stretches beyond a one-to-one or one-to-self scale. She is conscious of the fact that the nature of her account means that many people will have the chance to engage, and she embraces that almost as if she were at a podium speaking to an arena full of fans.

¹³⁰ Emphasis in original

¹³¹ According to Cambage, "rip" is short for riptide, indicating that the abbreviated form is likely a slang term in her home community in Australia.

In addition to speaking for herself to this plurality of others, Cambage also includes herself in a “we” throughout the text. This “we” is never defined, but it does imply that it at least includes all of those in this hypothetical arena that she is speaking to, the folks “in the States,” the United States, that are mentioned in the opening line. It is part of the internet’s nature for its content to be available around the world barring any censorship by governmental powers that be, but Cambage is addressing this demographic in particular. Why? Part of the reason is likely that *TBT*, a U.S.-based publication with content formed around athletes from U.S.-based sports leagues, would be expected to have an audience made up of U.S.-based consumers. Cambage’s Australian heritage is a more complex factor that is simultaneously of more consequence.

Her subtle shift in address from “you all” to “we” throughout the text is in part an indication that there is at least one subsection of an intended audience at play. As a household name in her home country¹³² and a player with a growing collection of international accolades, Cambage has generated interest in her career and life beyond the coastal borders of the United States. Most of her Australian audience likely does know what a “rip” is, and she likely singles out the United States with the question for the general *TPT* audience reasons listed above. That shift is also a microcosm of the sports world’s gravitation towards the United States. Athletes from all over the world have for many years come stateside for their professional careers, but what can be lost in that transaction is that their lives are moving, too. Not all become citizens, or even spend more than a couple of years on the nation’s soil, but the vast reach and influence of

¹³² Chris De Silva. “Sad Reality in Basketball Star’s Aussie Upbringing,” *WWOS*. March 9, 2019. <https://wwos.nine.com.au/basketball/liz-cambage-on-growing-up-black-in-australia-and-women-in-sport/d1b93f4f-e3a8-478e-9a87-5f72eaceaa95>.

mediasport content helps provide ample opportunity to connect with a community beyond the one that is built within a given team's locker room or home city, especially in the twenty-first century.

Cabbage's use of "you all" and "we" may be jarring in the broader context of sports journalism, which typically relegates the first-person perspectives of the athletes in question to direct quotes. On *TBT*, though, questions of and direct references to the audience are more rule than exception. Direct mention of a group isn't always present, but many of the site's posts do partake in this practice. For instance, the two most recent stories on the site's "Basketball Articles" tab (as of February 1, 2021) do this identifying work in the headlines alone: "Thank You, Indy" by WNBA All-Star Erica Wheeler, who wrote about leaving the Indiana Fever after four years,¹³³ and "Who Are We Going to Be?" by NBA head coach Stan Van Gundy, who reflected on the on January 6, 2021 riots at the Capitol in Washington, D.C.¹³⁴ That Cabbage's "we" appears to boast an international scale aligns with the global urgency of the mental health conversation she contributes to with her text, a text laden with personal disclosure that will be discussed next.

Cabbage's personal disclosure is the second theme of her text. Disclosure of some sort is to be expected on the basis of the first-person perspective alone, but the intensely personal details that she shares throughout the piece are guiding forces for the

¹³³ Erica Wheeler. "Thank You, Indy." *The Players' Tribune*. Accessed February 2, 2021. <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/posts/thank-you-indiana-fever-wnba-basketball-erica-wheeler>.

¹³⁴ Stan Van Gundy. "Who Are We Going to Be?" *The Players' Tribune*. Accessed February 2, 2021. <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/posts/stan-van-gundy-nba-basketball-racial-injustice>.

points she hopes to drive home. Some of these manifest in brief mentions that lack further explanation but which still resonate in their own ways. Cambage cites teenage drinking-induced blackouts, an initial attempt at sobriety at eighteen, a lonely and tear-filled rookie season, and a 2016 suicide watch as the sorts of experiences that “we” must learn to grapple with in order to properly move the conversation about athletes and mental health forward.

Cambage expresses skepticism that people who claim to be ready to talk more about mental health are actually willing to adequately do so. She almost taunts her audience while expressing this, resembling a coach trying to motivate her team to take their game a step further: “I know that, on the surface, people are ‘ready’ to talk about mental health. But are they *really*?” Assuming that the “we” Cambage has used remains representative of international society, she is speaking in these sentences to the collective while potentially talking about them at the same time. This confrontation challenges all who encounter it to assess their own willingness to put words into action. Can “we” open up about those experiences and engage with them in a generative way? Rather than isolating those who may not be ready to do so just yet, she takes the first step herself, saying that “if it helps, I’ll start.”

Cambage does her starting with three small sections describing ways in which basketball and depression have intersected throughout her life, noting that each is not typically talked about. The first is that her mental health was a factor in her decision about where to play the 2019 season (which was ongoing at the time of publication) and throughout the early parts of her career. Cambage briefly details having a panic attack on a plane flying her back to Tulsa in 2012 after competing for Australia in the Olympics.

Disappointment in the bronze medal finish and memories of the anxiety from her first WNBA season combined to make that return a harrowing one for the twenty-year-old. The presence of coach Fred Williams in Dallas made a return to the league after four seasons possible, but his firing prompted Cambage to look towards the West Coast or once again return to Australia.

The next section, just a paragraph long, features Cambage's clarity about her use of medication to help her deal with her depression and anxiety. What she takes is not included, but that is less important in the grand scheme of things than the information she does choose to provide. She identifies as "one of the many millions of people in the world right now on medication to help treat depression and anxiety," adding that she's been taking such meds for years. An account like this has the potential to help alleviate any lingering sense of pharmacophobia that may limit the level of care an audience member recommends for someone else or is willing to take on themselves. The benefits that she goes on to note, like control over self-doubt, steadiness of mood that may otherwise tilt towards an extreme, easier sleep, and an overall sense of healthiness and freedom, all serve to further deconstruct a legitimate barrier in the way of people confronting their mental health.

Cambage provides even more specific detail about her experience using medication soon after. She says that for a stretch at the end of July during the All-Star break, a time when most of the league descends on one location for exhibition competition and no official team games, she was off of her medication (though it is unclear exactly when she stopped taking it). The "why" of this decision is explained: "I wake up groggy in the mornings. I move a little slower. I don't dream — which is a big

deal for me. Dreaming is my way to be in touch with myself. It's my connection to God. And when I go too long without it, I miss it." The constant contest between the stability and dulling effects of the medication is a reasonable one to debate, given that Cambage is forced to sacrifice an important part of her identity for that stability. But the negative repercussions from this decision are borne out in her first couple of games back with the Aces. She had an anxiety attack outside of the team's locker room after a game and needed to call her agent for help getting back to the hotel and to take her medication. The dulling sensation that she called out earlier is one that she tries to avoid whenever possible, but her note that it is "better to live in a fog than get carried away by the tide," indicates a peace made with what is best for her at this moment in time. The "we" that she used to prepare her audience for this message gives way to the "I" of her own personal experience. Never in these descriptions does she conflate her own personal experiences and needs with others who are dealing with anxiety and depression. This specificity may not provide solutions for those in search of them or reflections that others can relate to. It does, however, give the text an air of authenticity that other more general resources lack, a trustworthiness that enables audiences to accept what they are hearing as reliable, if not always agreeable.

In direct contrast to the brevity of the previous point, Cambage's third and final section detailing her intersection of basketball and depression leads into the rest of her account. "My mental health has negatively impacted my ability to do my job," is simultaneously the subheading of this section and a focal point of the entire piece. Her mental health is not some sideshow that she can afford to put off until she has the time and energy to confront it. It is woven into the fabric of her everyday life, even on the

basketball court; the box scores that she says should have listed as “DNP-Mental Health” are the ultimate example of this. As she is concluding the piece, one of her last notes is that “we” probably won’t be in a place anytime soon where the official box score would actually include this sort of DNP. This is a direct indictment of a worldwide sporting culture that has long stigmatized mental health and generally deprioritized the well-being of the athletes who sustain the industry. Cambage’s disclosure is one of many that is attempting to change that culture for the better.

CONCLUSION

Liz Cambage’s story had been told previously in feature format by the likes of Mirin Fader and Lindsay Gibbs, as cited above. Even that small amount of coverage is an exception to a problematic mediasport rule that has underserved the perspectives and stories of women. Furthermore, “mediasport valorizes elite, able-bodied, heterosexual, and professional sportsmen,” while excluding, marginalizing, or trivializing anyone who fails to fit into that shallow definition.¹³⁵ Mediasport has enough cultural cache to rival just about any non-Orlando based media entity in the world, and the importance of athletes like Liz Cambage challenging and changing the norms with their potent *personae* that have upheld it cannot be overstated. Cambage’s instinct that her “starting” by sharing her own experiences could potentially convince others to do the same indicates a desire to initiate a domino effect of disclosures from other athletes and, more broadly, non-athletes who could then extend the activity through their own networks. That kind of transactional economy is exactly what Cambage seems to be after. The practice that Cambage is perpetuating is the same that past athletes engaged in for her, and as even more athletes

¹³⁵ Bruce, 127.

contribute to *The Players' Tribune* and disclose personal details to the public, discourse about mental health both within and beyond the sports world could change for the better. Christian Rivera claims that his disclosure, the primary subject of analysis in Chapter 3, is without any motive other than wanting to get the information off his chest. Whether he likes it or not, he, too, is contributing to this rapidly evolving sports media movement.

CHAPTER 3: ANONYMITY, TOXICITY, AND THE UTILITY OF SHARING

Esports' gradual emergence into the mainstream over the course of the last few decades can be attributed to the simultaneous expansion of internet use. Connecting with each other from around the world has changed the way billions of internet users live their lives. Digitality has done away with the time-space boundaries that for most of history had prevented instantaneous communication.¹³⁶ Part of the appeal of the internet was that users could interact with others they'd never met in person, and another was that such communication could take place anonymously. It didn't take long for the negative potential of this supposedly democratic medium to rear its ugly head. Segments of sites like Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan have developed reputations as places of congregation for deliberately hateful people, but toxic actors proliferate in all sorts of communities, especially sports fandom.¹³⁷ A scroll through the comments on social media posts from the sports industry's largest media entities, like ESPN and Bleacher Report, or the league's themselves, like the NFL and NBA, will often reveal at least a handful of discriminatory and offensive content. The toxicity increases exponentially if the content is created by or about women. *Sports Illustrated's* Julie DiCaro wrote about vitriolic comments left on her blog posts in 2006 and their similarity to the response to her work covering the 2015 rape investigation of Patrick Kane, a player for the NHL's Chicago

¹³⁶ Nicholas Negroponte. *Being Digital*. Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995.

¹³⁷ Amanda Phillips. *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2020.

Blackhawks.¹³⁸ “Twitter has largely replaced blog comments when it comes to sports discussions,” DiCaro says. “But for women, not much has changed.”¹³⁹ Women, communities of color, LGBTQIA+ folk, and other oppressed populations have been forced to operate in the reality that the discriminatory treatment they receive online may be just as bad or worse as what they have faced in person.

The toxic behavior that is wont to persist in most internet spaces has affected esports as well, but there are particularities that set the industry apart. For the sports newsletter *Power Plays*, Benjamin Mock traces the lineage of video game culture from communal arcades to home-based consoles to internet-based play.¹⁴⁰ Mock argues that the conversation about violence in video games that took off in the aftermath of the 1999 school shooting in Columbine, CO, embedded an “us versus them” mentality in the gaming community that led to diehard fans cloistering around the idea that they must preserve the purity of gaming from the encroaching mainstream.¹⁴¹ Women bore the brunt of this gatekeeping, with accusations of liking games only to be more relatable and a stereotypical expectation that they would date other members of the community just a couple of the ways they were discriminated against.¹⁴² The Gamergate controversy of 2014, which revolved around game developer Zoë Quinn being falsely accused of sleeping with a journalist for positive reviews of her new game and subsequently targeted

¹³⁸ Julie DiCaro. “Threats. Vitriol. Hate. Ugly truth about women in sports and social media.” *Sports Illustrated*, Sep. 27, 2015. <https://www.si.com/the-cauldron/2015/09/27/twitter-threats-vile-remarks-women-sports-journalists>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin Hock. “The toxic culture of esports is keeping women on the sidelines.” *Power Plays*, Sep. 14, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

by coordinated harassment, is likely the highest profile instance of this toxicity. It extended beyond Quinn, with men from Reddit and 4Chan forums expanding their attacks to any woman in gaming under the guise of fighting for the same purity that has served as their excuse since the start of the millennium.¹⁴³ Whether esports likes it or not, they have inherited, are built upon, and continue to perpetuate these and other harms from gamer culture.

Esports and broader video game culture are much more intertwined with online interaction than traditional sports. When folks aren't competing or watching the occasional high level professional esports competitions or amateur events, which are usually LAN-based,¹⁴⁴ fans and players alike usually find themselves engaging with the same game on the same servers. Fans of traditional sports leagues like the WNBA or NWSL are of course free to go from watching a game to playing the sports themselves, but their experience is isolated to their locale that most likely lacks a professionally regulated contest. The parameters of most games are coded in and unavoidable; no matter a player's skill level, every time they boot up the game and join a match, they will see the same map, the same structures, and have the potential not only to mimic the results of professional players they may watch, but also to do so against those very same players. Because the casual gaming that provides the backbone of esports has become increasingly reliant on internet connectivity over time, community interaction is becoming increasingly unavoidable.

¹⁴³ Marty Moss-Coane. "Radio Times: What is GamerGate?" *WHYY*. Oct. 28, 2014. <https://whyy.org/episodes/what-is-gamergate-2/>

¹⁴⁴ Short for local area network, which is a group of computers that are connected together over a single network.

Blogs, social media, and online video games have a mutual reliance on the use of screennames within their services. These screennames allow users to remain anonymous while simultaneously allowing for expression of identity, at least to some degree. In the earliest years of graphical gaming, a three-letter identifier for an arcade machine scoreboard was as elaborate as one could get. The phenomenon of trying over and over again to topple the high scores of those mysterious initials translates into the present day, where names that include entire phrases can leave a memorable impression. When Christian Rivera first began playing *League of Legends*, a computer game released in 2009 that has since become and remains one of the world's most popular video games, only those he told directly would have been able to know that he was the person responsible for both the gameplay and the in-game text messages from the screenname IWillDominate. The limited identifiable information that players can see means that the only way someone using a screenname can be recognized beyond the confines of the game is when their profile reaches a scale of mass recognition. Professional players or content creators are usually the ones who reach that point in a *League of Legends* and broader esports context, and Rivera has slotted into both of those categories since 2010. His status shifting from an essentially anonymous player to that of an esports professional to, post-retirement, an active content creator dramatically shifted how players and fans react upon seeing his screenname. There are of course still many *League of Legends* players who may not be engaged with the professional aspect of the game and have no knowledge of Rivera, but even a partial unveiling is significant. Social media like Twitter allows accounts to be identified with both a screenname that is used for tagging and a name strictly for identification, but many users, especially those who are not influencers,

prefer the inherent shroud of obscurity. Rivera's choice of screenname isn't inherently harmful, and *League of Legends* is coded to prevent any potentially harmful or abusive names from being chosen, but the edge that comes with the chosen phrase, I will dominate, does reflect in part a desire for indisputable victory. Wanting to display confidence and intimidate other players even a tiny bit may be why names like this proliferate throughout the gaming space. For Rivera, who goes by his screenname more often than his legal name while operating in the public eye, the in-game moniker has evolved from being just an account identifier to existing as a *persona* that is being constantly performed.

The purpose of this chapter is to put online esports communities, traditional sports, and *persona* into conversation with each other through Rivera's 2016 YouTube video in which he describes his experiences managing his panic disorder as a professional esports athlete. Juxtaposition of his disclosure with that of Cambage from the previous chapter and from another traditional sports example, a press conference of former MLB pitcher Pete Harnisch, will highlight overall similarities, distinguish new media from old, and identify esports as a particularly rich resource for learning more about *persona*'s contemporary role in the ways people interact on a daily basis. A brief background on *League of Legends* and Rivera, including a recounting of his own history of toxic internet behavior, will be followed by an analysis of Rivera's video and Harnisch's conference.

RIVERA AND THE RIFT

On October 27, 2009, video game developer Riot Games moved their first creation, *League of Legends*, out of a beta period and into the open market. An entrant into the burgeoning genre of multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs), *League of*

Legends is a free-to-play online multiplayer game playable on personal computers only. A handful of game modes have been offered since its launch, but the base game pits two teams of five players against each other on a map called Summoner's Rift. Each player in the game chooses from a large cast of controllable characters rife with magical powers, fantastical beasts, and advanced technology, and controls that character for the duration of the match. The two teams attempt to synergize their efforts with the rest of their team to conquer their opponents in matches that typically last twenty-five to thirty-five minutes.

Within its first few years on the open market, *League of Legends* managed to transition from just another free-to-play game in a vast library of options to one of the most popular games in the world. Infrastructure for competitive play emerged almost immediately and teams formed to be a part of it. By the end of 2011, Riot Games had hosted their first League of Legends World Championship, which featured eight teams from three continents.¹⁴⁵ Existing tournaments continued to integrate this new game into their pre-existing festivities, but starting with that first World Championship, Riot Games slowly took the reins and began organizing their own tournaments and leagues. Their 2017 separation from Intel Extreme Masters, an industry standard for competitions in many games, was the final blow to third party involvement.¹⁴⁶ The Riot games events have, as a result, grown to be the most prominent in the game's community. Major leagues are spread across the world, with South Korea, China, Turkey, Brazil, Europe,

¹⁴⁵ Fandom. "Worlds Season 1." *Fandom.com*.

https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/Season_1_World_Championship

¹⁴⁶ Austen Goslin. "League of Legends will no longer feature at IEM tournaments." *RiftHerald.com*. May 23, 2017. <https://www.riftherald.com/2017/5/23/15682296/iem-lol-league-of-legends-riot>

and North America currently serving as the most prominent regions. Success has manifested itself with billions of dollars of revenue, tournaments hosted in the world's most famous arenas, spinoffs into different game genres, and a player base that even after a decade on the market continues to maintain its place near the top of the most popular games and grow its audience.

Rivera's career in esports kicked off in unison with *League of Legends*' emergence into the open market. According to Fandom.com,¹⁴⁷ he spent a combined six months between 2010 and 2011 as a member of the teams Haters Make Us Famous and compLexity Gaming before locking in with Dignitas for all of 2012. At the start of 2012, he signed with Team Curse, later rebranded as Team Liquid, where he would spend the rest of his career as a player before retiring in 2016. However, he stayed with the Team Liquid organization post-retirement as a streamer and content creator until 2020, when he joined Cloud9 to continue the same work.

On multiple occasions throughout his career, Rivera has been punished by Riot Games for his behavior while playing *League of Legends*. The first came on December 4, 2012, and was a permanent ban from the game and competitive play. This was the result of repeated verbal abuse of other players through *League of Legends*'s in-game chat feature, about which he had reportedly been warned and/or punished to a lesser extent eight times prior to that decision.¹⁴⁸ After being ineligible to play in 2013, Rivera's ban was lifted, and he resumed play in 2014. The second instance came in 2020, four years

¹⁴⁷ Fandom. "IWillDominate." *Fandom.com*. <https://lol.fandom.com/wiki/IWDominate>

¹⁴⁸ Dave Tach. "League of Legends player banned from Championship Series for 'persistent toxic behavior.'" *Polygon*, Dec. 4, 2012. <https://www.polygon.com/2012/12/4/3728920/league-of-legends-player-banned-from-championship-series-for>.

into his professional streaming career. He had been among those selected by Riot Games to participate in the League Partnership Program, which allowed content creators to simulcast professional *League of Legends* matches on their own personal streams and provide their own commentary. On July 23, 2020, Rivera told viewers of his stream on Twitch that Riot Games had removed him from the program.¹⁴⁹ Though Rivera said he hadn't been told exactly what had prompted the ban, Olivia Richman of Win.gg reported that he'd told a player that her poor game performance was due to her "doing her nails" while playing.¹⁵⁰ Rivera acknowledged this comment in a June 2020 tweet that was replying to another tweet that is no longer available, arguing that he didn't know the player the comment had been directed towards was a woman and that he didn't view the comment as misogynistic.¹⁵¹ Richman's assumption that Riot Games and the LPP probably identified a pattern of behavior of which this particular comment was a part would track with Rivera's previous suspension, which came about not because of one instance of problematic behavior, but because of many. Rivera's toxic history isn't tangential to the disclosure of his mental health history that this chapter revolves around. Rather, toxicity within the community is an integral part of this chapter's analysis, just as it is inextricable from online gaming at large.

¹⁴⁹ George Geddes. "IWillDominate has been removed from the League Partnership Program." *Dot Esports*, July 23, 2020. <https://dotesports.com/league-of-legends/news/iwilldominate-has-been-removed-from-the-league-partnership-program>.

¹⁵⁰ Olivia Richman. "IWillDominate to co-stream LCS after League Partner ban lifted." *Win.gg*, Feb. 5, 2021. <https://win.gg/news/7126/iwilldominate-to-co-stream-lcs-after-league-partner-ban-lifted>.

¹⁵¹ Christian Rivera. Tweet. <https://twitter.com/IWDominateLoL/status/1272721420884127745>

The years of Rivera's career between these two punishments includes the uploading of a twenty-five-minute video to his YouTube channel in which he discussed his history with panic attack disorder. This was the first video Rivera uploaded to his channel, which was also branded as IWillDominate and was created very soon after he retired from professional play. The debut video has garnered over 181,000 views in the five years since the date of its posting, which is just past the top end of what appears to be an average view range between 75,000 and 160,000. A vlog format stands in contrast to a library of content that consists mostly of recorded gameplay from Rivera's livestreams on Twitch.tv and the occasional analysis of professional games from around the world. Anyone who opts to comb through all the videos on the IWillDominate channel will have to scroll a long way to find the first vlog, titled "IWD's Vlog #1 - Getting Through Panic Disorder as an LCS Player," because Rivera uploads videos three to four times per week.

A bit of additional context about Rivera's professional playing career will help provide clarity to some of the content contained within the video. The League Championship Series (LCS) is North American *League of Legends*'s top professional competition. During the period Rivera speaks about most, the months between the 2013 and 2014 seasons, he was a member of Team Curse. Team Curse was one of eight teams participating in the LCS at the time. At season's end, top teams from the leagues scattered around the world gathered for the Season 3 World Championship in the United States in September and October of 2013. Qualifiers for the World Championship and non-qualifiers alike had from the end of this event through January of the new year to rest and prepare for the next season of play. Team practice during this time and during the season often manifested in the form of remote scrimmages against other organizations in

the league, and a day of work entailed hours at a time spent clustered with teammates and staff as the collective attempted to set themselves up for success in official matches. This clustering often continued outside of official practice and into the team's everyday life since it was common for the players within an organization to live and work together from the same shared space.

RIVERA'S MULTIMEDIA DISCLOSURE

Rivera structures and presents the video in a very essay-like fashion, previewing all the main points he's going to make in a way that would make any teacher proud. He doesn't waste any time getting right to the point. These are his first words: "It's Dom here, and I'm gonna be talking to you guys about something that no one outside of my close friends in LCS and writers and obviously people within my former teams really knows about me which is that I suffer from panic disorder."¹⁵² From this statement, he immediately transitions into defining exactly what panic disorder is: "Panic disorder is an anxiety disorder characterized by recurring panic attacks causing a series of intense episodes of extreme anxiety during these panic attacks. That leads you to what are panic attacks...Panic attacks are periods of intense fear or apprehension of sudden onset accompanied by at least four more bodily or cognitive symptoms."¹⁵³ The infrequency with which Rivera stops speaking throughout the video and the free-flowing rhythm of his speech seem to indicate that he is constantly referring to notes but not reading a pre-written account. However, he does clearly take the time to look off camera and read lengthy definitions of panic disorder and panic attacks. Recalling what he had previously

¹⁵² IWDominate. "IWD's Vlog #1 – Getting Through Panic Disorder as an LCS Player." YouTube, Feb. 1, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ik8UbNTc0ZA>

¹⁵³ Ibid.

learned and speaking to it in the manner that he speaks about everything else in this video wouldn't have actively discredited the information that he was providing, but the deliberate effort to not be vague or imprecise about panic disorder here makes connecting the dots to the experiences he goes on to talk about immediately after much easier.

Rivera then elaborates on what he retroactively realized was his first time experiencing a panic attack. He was just out with a couple of friends eating at a Brazilian steakhouse and needed to take some time to walk around outside. Since he had been drinking some alcohol, his assumption was that he had just reacted strangely to those drinks and would be able to sleep off whatever had been ailing him. The following day he had a more intense sensation that hurt his chest and inhibited his breathing, prompting him to ask team owner Steve Arhancet to drive him to the hospital. "Steve took me to the hospital, waited in the emergency room for like four to five hours. I still didn't get processed because, like, I wasn't in, like, the most acute stage...the people at the hospital didn't think, 'oh, this guy needs immediate help right now.'"¹⁵⁴ Fortunately, Rivera felt better and opted to just leave. Eventually, advice from his mom prompted a doctor's visit that did lead to an official panic disorder diagnosis, but the intervening weeks caused some panic of their own. "I just thought that, ok, I just need to stop, like, stop doing anything weird to my body. I'm not going to take energy supplements anymore, I'm not going to, like, drink or do anything...I'm just going to go completely neutral because that's what's affecting me, I'm having weird reactions to this stuff."¹⁵⁵ When respiratory tests came back clean and showed that he was physically sound, there was only more

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

confusion. The decision to finally ask his mom, whom he trusted, for help came only after wrestling with not wanting to worry her with a burden that he felt was his own. Rivera elaborates in even more detail on what exactly he was feeling and how he chose to cope. “I did all those tests and they all came back completely fine. They’re like, ‘there’s absolutely nothing wrong with your respiratory system, you are completely ok in terms of what’s physically happening with your system,’ and to me that was super shocking. How could that be if I feel this bad and I feel like I can’t breathe and I feel like I’m going to die? How can it be that there’s nothing wrong with my respiratory system?”¹⁵⁶ It is worth recognizing just how thorough he was in this disclosure, especially with regard to his fear. It is a double-faceted fear, too, with one part of it encompassing the fear he felt for himself and the other covering the fear he was assuming for his loved ones. This makes for a powerful emotional appeal. At no point does Rivera claim that his sharing of all this information is so others can use it to determine if they are potentially dealing with panic disorder, but that doesn’t exclude the possibility of that kind of use. Not all panic attacks are equal, which Rivera himself realizes when speaking to his mom, who had also experienced them at some point in her life. But the knowledge needed to recognize them or properly investigate their true nature could be an asset for viewers.

Ten minutes into the video, Rivera transitions from describing his panic attacks, their symptoms, and how he addressed them to speaking about the impact of his panic disorder on his career as a professional esports athlete. This section of the video remains extremely personal, but it is at this point that Rivera’s narrative expands to include those around him. Rivera brings up his ability to perform for his teammates on multiple

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

occasions, indicating that it was front of mind for him as he was learning to cope. When the panic attacks were first occurring, Team Curse often had to cancel their practice scrimmages, but they wouldn't tell teams exactly why this was happening. "We would just have to straight up cancel [scrimmages] or there was times where we would have to pause the scrim for like fifteen to twenty minutes and we'd be like, 'Oh, what's happening? Oh yeah, Dom's just, like, taking a shit' or something like that...But, it's like, I'm having a panic attack and I'm just walking around the house over and over again to try to like make myself feel normal."¹⁵⁷ Rivera does cite being transparent with and receiving support from his teammates, singling out the efforts of Joedat "Voyboy" Esfahani, the team's star player, as particularly helpful. "Between seasons there was a point where I just wanted to quit LCS and I actually have to thank my teammates, like Voy specifically, for just having my back," Rivera said. "There was a point where I walked away outside and I was practically in tears...I was so frustrated because I didn't know, like, how to control what's happening to my body and I just felt like I was fucking crazy." There was not total transparency, though, because Rivera notes that the team opted to not communicate in full what Rivera was dealing with to the two South Korean players on the team, Kim "Fenix" Jae-hun and Chae "Piglet" Gwang-jin. Both players had only recently moved to the United States from South Korea and were not fluent in English,¹⁵⁸ which likely contributed to the decision to leave them in the dark. "For Fenix

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ This language barrier has been common throughout the history of the LCS as coveted players from Europe and Asia were signed by North American teams. However, the infrastructure teams have been putting in place in recent years far surpasses what existed for Team Liquid while Rivera was a player (which is especially problematic when considering that Team Liquid has always been one of the most willing teams to dedicate resources wherever possible to improve; Joonkyu Seok and Sung Wook Baek. "Interview

and Piglet, we just kind of told them, ‘oh, Dom is just sick...he’s just sick right now, that’s why we have to wait for him.’”¹⁵⁹ It is not a very sensical decision given that there were folks in the organization capable of translating, so there was perhaps another reason that Rivera and his teammates were apprehensive. The sort of empathy from the colleagues and friends Rivera was most concerned about letting down cannot be overlooked, nor can the apprehension towards being totally honest with everyone on the team. Both the positive and negative outcomes matter here because all levels of sports have struggled to normalize mental health discourse for years.

Since most *League of Legends* professionals, especially early in the 2010s, were either in their late teens or early twenties, extant literature on mental health in teenage athletes is an invaluable resource despite the difference between the hardwood and LCD playing surfaces. Linda Flanagan cites longtime sports psychologist Marshall Mintz throughout her feature for *The Atlantic* titled “Why Are So Many Teen Athletes Struggling With Depression?”¹⁶⁰ in her attempt to answer that eponymous question. “The professional consensus is that the incidence of anxiety and depression among scholastic athletes has increased over the past ten to fifteen years,” says Mintz, who adds that reported levels of negative emotional states tend to be higher from student-athletes than from non-student-athletes. This decade-plus overlaps with the 21st-century trend of high school “sports professionalization,” a term used by professor of health and human

with Sophie Ahn, English tutor helping Korean players in NA LCS.” *InvenGlobal.com*. Jun. 9, 2017. <https://www.invenglobal.com/articles/2097/interview-with-sophie-ahn-english-tutor-helping-korean-players-in-na-lcs>

¹⁵⁹ Rivera.

¹⁶⁰ Linda Flanagan. “Why Are So Many Teen Athletes Struggling With Depression?” *The Atlantic*, April 17, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/teen-athletes-mental-illness/586720/>.

performance Timothy Neal to describe how the methods and intensity of collegiate athletics have trickled down into younger demographics. Ramped up practice schedules, increased participation, and parental pressure culminate in detrimental overtraining and exhaustion that wears out the body physically and is central to the development of pervasive mental-health problems. Mintz says that the biggest culprit of these effects is sleep deprivation, which goes on to contribute significantly to anxiety and depression.¹⁶¹

Rivera was 23 years old and half a decade removed from high school when his panic disorder emerged, but there are still connections to make between his professional experience and the amateur experience of high school athletes around the country. Rivera doesn't skate past the subtle changes in his appearance that fans in the *League of Legends* community had noticed, explaining that he “developed dark circles because I had an extreme deprivation of sleep because I was, like, not able to sleep, was having panic disorder every night, had panic attacks every night and I was sleeping less.”¹⁶² Rivera doesn't identify that previous exhaustion had contributed to the development of his panic disorder, but the same idea that “endless practice is the route to athletic mastery” perpetuated by parents¹⁶³ has been ingrained in his mind. “I used to be fine, and now I'm just, like, walking around the house like trying to, like, walking literally around the house for three hours a night trying to figure out like a way that I can get myself to sleep,” says Rivera. “I'm not going to be useful to the team. I'm not going to perform well if I'm just dealing with all this, like, bullshit. Instead of practicing the hours that I should be

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Rivera.

¹⁶³ TEDx Talks. *How We Can Change Youth Sports Culture* | Heather Bergeson | TEDxEdina, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrlPuRfoGdY>.

practicing, I'm spending that time literally doing nothing to try to make myself feel ok."¹⁶⁴

This desire to perform and support their team is the very same that is often exploited by collegiate athletic programs that are profiting from the uncompensated labor of their athletes, and Team Curse's monetary investment in Rivera as a player is inextricable from this experience. Rivera's boss and Team Curse owner Steve Arhancet, whose day-to-day dealings with the team were much more intimate than those of the traditionally distant owners in traditional sports, was very active in making sure Rivera received the care that he needed, going as far as being the person to drive his contracted player to the emergency room and sit with him for hours. Rivera considered Arhancet a friend at this time but didn't overlook the professional context of their relationship, recognizing that there was monetary as well as emotional investment at stake. "Steve was invested in me as a player. He thought I was the best player that we could have at that point up for my position and he wanted me to perform as well as possible, and also he was someone who I considered a friend, and he actually just cared about me as a person. He didn't want to see me just dealing with all this stuff everyday. So Steve ended up helping me through that and he tried to do whatever he could."¹⁶⁵ Arhancet participating in this way and being there for Rivera is meaningful beyond Rivera's individual case. The results of a study from Rachel Wahto et. al. suggests that once an athlete leaves home to go off to college (or, more generally, out of their family home), understanding

¹⁶⁴ Rivera.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

coaches and teammates may be able to encourage the person in question to get the help that they need, or perhaps even direct them towards that help.¹⁶⁶

The same study from Wahto et. al. identified that public stigma including “being seen as weak” and “teammates finding out about one’s use of counseling” contributed to athlete avoidance of seeking appropriate psychological services.¹⁶⁷ Relatedly, João Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia et. al. found that stigma, hypermasculinity, and low mental health literacy are all important barriers often put between elite athletes and the mental health treatment that they need.¹⁶⁸ Hypermasculinity, the very same force that has for decades been the source of so much harmful behavior in the video game community, is just as present in the sports world. The oft-stated beliefs that players need to “man up” and “rub some dirt on it” contribute to a culture that encourages the sacrificing of one’s body for the good of the team. There is a fine line between a full-fledged desire to give all you have for a chance to win and a fear that doing anything else would result in some sort of negative consequence. It is possible Rivera may not have disclosed his panic disorder to his South Korean teammates because he feared that they would respond by respecting him less. Again, it is unfair to assume that either Jae-hun or Gwang-jin would have reacted any differently than one of Rivera’s native English-speaking teammates, but the general discomfort that comes with the prospect of being transparent about mental

¹⁶⁶ Rachel S. Wahto, Joshua K. Swift, and Jason L. Whipple. “The Role of Stigma and Referral Source in Predicting College Student-Athletes’ Attitudes Toward Psychological Help-Seeking.” *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology* 10, no. 2 (June 2016): 85–98, 94.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁶⁸ João Mauricio Castaldelli-Maia, João Guilherme de Mello e Gallinaro, Rodrigo Scialfa Falcão, Vincent Gouttebauge, Mary E Hitchcock, Brian Hainline, Claudia L Reardon, and Todd Stull. “Mental Health Symptoms and Disorders in Elite Athletes: A Systematic Review on Cultural Influencers and Barriers to Athletes Seeking Treatment.” *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 53 (May 15, 2019): 707–21, 715.

health in any context, professional and sporting included, is not a phenomenon unique to Rivera.

At the end of his video, Rivera elaborates on his decision to withhold his disclosure from so many folks in his life. In fact, the entirety of the last few minutes is spent explaining why he was making this video now and not at some point in the past. Between his lack of communication with his own teammates and opting not to inform other teams he was competing against, it is clear that Rivera wanted to keep the circle of those in the know as tight as possible. In that context, his decision to wait until he had retired from professional play to publicize his experiences makes a lot of sense. Rivera cites a multitude of reasons for waiting, and he strings them together in quick succession. The first couple are that he assumed that such a disclosure would bring unnecessary additional stress to what was already a stressful job. “I thought it would bring me, like, unneeded stress. I thought that it would be something that would just be, like, kind of looked at negatively within the community.”¹⁶⁹ This feeling was tied closely to his thought that “people would just shit on [him] for it.”¹⁷⁰ The *League of Legends* community’s reputation for toxicity, in concert with the toxic masculinity of esports and sports internet use more generally unfortunately lend credence to this assumption.¹⁷¹ How

¹⁶⁹ Rivera.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Andreas Stavropoulos. “League’s toxicity falls on Riot and the community, and Hai believes the “problem needs to be fixed from both ends.” *Dot Esports*, June 18, 2020. Retrieved from <https://dotsports.com/league-of-legends/news/leagues-toxicity-falls-on-riot-and-the-community-and-hai-believes-the-problem-needs-to-be-fixed-from-both-ends>; Tim Rizzo. “Toxicity slashed by 30% in League of Legends, according to Riot.” *Inven Global*, Oct. 30, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.invenglobal.com/articles/12608/toxicity-slashed-by-30-in-league-of-legends-according-to-riot>;

the community perceived his play in games was also a significant factor here. Rivera didn't want people to "justify [his] play based off panic disorder all the time, even when it wasn't relevant."¹⁷² The desire to keep the discourse about his career as tethered to the gameplay itself as possible is easy to sympathize with, which makes his inability to do so with his "doing her nails" comment earlier even more unforgivable. With so much of the *League of Legends* community packed into the same social media circles on Reddit and Twitter, the prospect of seeing millions of anonymous fans bicker about the particulars of his mental health when only he really knew what he was feeling at a particular moment in time is nightmarish. Without precedent of other professional players making similar disclosures to refer to, Rivera couldn't assure himself that the ensuing discourse would be manageable for him.

Even though he waited, it is still notable that he decided to disclose at all, when he very well could have just embarked on his career as a content creator and continued with his IWillDominate *persona* without ever having acknowledged this aspect of his life. Ultimately, he did just want to have the information out in the open. "I just kind of wanted to get this out here, to talk about what happened to me, how it affected me as a player...I don't have anything to hide anymore, I'm not a pro player."¹⁷³ The implication here is in line with how Rivera chose to operate regarding his opponents and the esports community, that his panic disorder was something that should be hidden. There is a contradiction at play here because Rivera explicitly claims that he doesn't view his panic

Mobalytics. "How to Stop Being Toxic in League of Legends." *Mobalytics*, May 22, 2020. Retrieved from <https://mobalytics.gg/blog/how-to-stop-being-toxic-league-of-legends/>

¹⁷² Rivera.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

disorder as a weakness: “I never thought [panic disorder] made me a worse player or it hurt my career at all. I didn’t want, like, every time I make a bad play or some shit people be like, ‘oh, he has panic disorder.’”¹⁷⁴ From the community angle, he identifies a difference between dealing with those comments as a player and doing so as a streamer. The one-way channel of a professional sporting event was extant for him in the same way that it is for athletes in traditional sports, with very limited engagement with the millions of folks who tune in to watch. Perhaps there is comfort for Rivera in streaming and being able to field comments and respond to them in real time, not allowing any potential false or hurtful narratives to emerge unchecked. One narrative did take hold during Rivera’s career. The bags that emerged under his eyes because of his sleep deprivation and the frequent self-touching of his face were seized upon by the community, who took to a meme that Rivera was a hard drug addict. No explanation was ever offered during his playing career, and Rivera acknowledges that he doesn’t believe that anyone actually thought he was using these drugs, but it was an annoying thing to deal with.

Rivera not only chose to share, but he shared a lot. He could have pared everything down to the best of his ability into a 280-character Tweet or two, but he instead opted to speak candidly for 25 minutes straight in what appears to be a one take, minimally edited video. Making that decision is not a luxury that athletes of generations past could even imagine given both the constraints on the type of publicity that would be available to them and the nature of the content, which has historically been frowned upon in the hypermasculine space. Juxtaposing Rivera’s video with former MLB pitcher Pete Harnisch’s 1997 press conference, as analyzed by Raymond I. Shuck in 2019, in the

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

following section will offer insight into these differences in possibility in addition to highlighting some of the aspects that bring the two disparate communicative events together.

PETE HARNISCH, PRESS CONFERENCES, AND PRECEDENT

Pete Harnisch was playing in his tenth MLB season when, on April 25, 1997, he was placed on the injured list of his team, the New York Mets. That April, the Mets called a press conference during which Harnisch explained that he was on the IL due to depression.¹⁷⁵ Shuck argues that both the placement of Harnisch onto the IL by the Mets and Harnisch's disclosure of his depression can be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's "utterances."¹⁷⁶ By doing so, he argues that "Harnisch's admission both advanced discourse on mental health in sport and was constrained in its advancement of that discourse."¹⁷⁷ Shuck's argument contrasts with and complements my analysis of Rivera, but before exploring the particulars of that relationship, I will briefly compare and contrast the traditional sports press conference with the online vlog.

Schuck separates his chapter into three sections that guide the bulk of his analysis of Harnisch's conference: Harnisch's admission of his depression experience, Harnisch's reaction to the diagnosis, and Harnisch's additional statements of detail. Contained within

¹⁷⁵ Until 2019, the MLB term for roster spots occupied by players who were declared unable to play for a minimum length of time was the "disabled list." Since February 2019, "injured list" has been the new term used. Schuck's chapter uses the old term, but throughout this section, I replace it with the new one; Bob Nightengale. "MLB Changing name of 'disabled list' to 'injured list.'" *USA Today*, Feb. 7, 2019.

"<https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/2019/02/07/mlb-disabled-list-injured-list/2806018002/>

¹⁷⁶ Schuck, Raymond I. "'I'd Just like to Let Everybody Know': Pete Harnisch on the Disabled List and the Politics of Mental Health." In *Sport, Rhetoric, and Political Struggle*, 175–89. New York: Peter Lang, 2019, 176.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

each is discussion of aspects both positive and negative that can be pulled away from all that was said and unsaid during the conference. For the purposes of comparison with Rivera, I will only discuss the content within that first section, the disclosure itself. In addition to disclosing that he was dealing with depression, Harnisch described what symptoms he had experienced most, which included feeling withdrawn, struggling to communicate, increasing anxiety levels, loss of sleep and appetite, and a general sense of weakness.¹⁷⁸ “Harnisch’s statement of these symptoms advanced mental health discourse by making them public,” said Schuck.¹⁷⁹ He doesn’t provide nearly as much detail as Rivera does, but in the service of normalizing the various ways that depression and other mental health issues can affect people, any individual experience can prove to be the one that resonates for someone who’d previously thought they were alone.

Like Rivera’s, Harnisch’s description of his experiences with depression neglects to move beyond the individual. The contribution being made by providing that experience is substantial, but not referring at any point to the broader context of how baseball and professional sport more generally have responded to mental health concerns left much unexplored potential impact untapped. Other factors, some of which could have factored into Harnisch’s own personal experience, could have been implicated by “discussing how the culture of sports stigmatized admitting mental health conditions and/or how the sport of baseball produces solitary isolation.”¹⁸⁰ In 1997, these and other symptoms like them would have been hard pressed to find their way into criteria for injured lists, which were typically reserved for soft tissue injuries, muscle tears, and bone

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 182.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 183.

issues. As Liz Cambage noted in her own disclosure, the fact of progress does not erase the fact that such inclusion remains scarce. A direct result of most entries on an injured list being of the physical variety is that teams are incentivized to find ways to prevent or recover from those maladies, which is exactly what the Mets had done with another pitcher in their organization, Bill Pulsipher; “within the same organizational context and general timeframe as Harnisch, the Mets organization looked only at physical mechanics to treat [Pulsifer], who would later be diagnosed with general anxiety disorder and clinical depression.”¹⁸¹ Harnisch and Rivera speaking at length about what was troubling them to both their teams and the general public serves many functions; contributions to boosting the quality of care for the athletes who followed them is chief among them.

Schuck’s claim also brings to the fore the unique circumstances of baseball pitchers relative to other roles filled throughout professional sports. Pitchers are at the fulcrum of baseball action because their throwing of the ball towards the batter is what makes the game go, but they do so while standing in the middle of the field. They stand and throw for hours on their raised bit of land roughly equidistant from their closest teammates, but far enough away that the mound is in all but definition an island surrounded by a sea of green or brown. In a sporting culture that has historically left athletes struggling with their mental health to deal with it on their own and/or contend with discriminatory language and actions, the pitcher’s mound serves as an apt metaphor. More tangible baseball culture is used to contextualize Harnisch’s experience at a later point in the press conference. At around the time Harnisch’s symptoms became more

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 182.

serious, he had kicked his habit of using chewing tobacco.¹⁸² Chewing tobacco has long been and still is a prominent part of baseball culture.¹⁸³ There have been many public instances of players and coaches alike trying to kick the addictive substance in addition to filmic representations and frequent broadcasting of use during games, all of which have kept chewing tobacco tethered to the baseball conversation. It was prominent enough, at least, in 1997, that it warranted Harnisch informing the press definitively that doctors had told him that his quitting of the product may have factored into the development of depression but was not the root cause.¹⁸⁴ By clearly differentiating what he experienced from what other folks had been working through in the context of chewing tobacco, Harnisch pushed back against the simplification of mental health into recognizable and more digestible terms for the broader baseball audience. As much as the baseball and even larger sporting cultures at large would like to sort their mental health discourses into pre-existing boxes and leave them for whenever was most convenient, they cannot. Harnisch's specificity establishes that even as a professional baseball player, his depression is not just a baseball issue. His mental health and that of others is of consequence beyond the confines of the eighteen-foot-wide pitcher's mound in the center of a field and demands to transcend the bounds of a limited baseball cultural vernacular.

League of Legends has over a century of catching up to do if it wants to establish cultural norms as ingrained as those in baseball, but there are already simplifications being made about mental health that have emerged within the sport. The concerns Rivera

¹⁸² Ibid, 184.

¹⁸³ Steven Martano. "The Interwoven History of Baseball and Tobacco." *The Hardball Times*. Jan. 20, 2017. <https://tbt.fangraphs.com/the-interwoven-history-of-baseball-and-tobacco/>

¹⁸⁴ Schuck, 184.

raised about the game's community using his disclosure against him while he was still playing professionally speak to this dilemma. When a mistake made by a player in a game snowballs into more and more mistakes in *League of Legends*, the community often refers to that player as "tilted." The term is not to be taken literally in this context; the devices being used to power the game are not suddenly on an angle as pinball machines can sometimes be. Instead, tilt is construed as a mental state of frustration, disappointment, disbelief, and/or ambivalence. If an attempt at a play goes awry and another mistake is made immediately afterwards, it is often attributed to tilt. If a player abruptly decides to stop playing after a poor game, that gets assigned the same designation. It operates as a catch-all term that does not actually catch all that could be affecting a player's mental state. Rivera's documented toxicity history is therefore crucial context for his disclosure. It is impossible to tell for sure precisely how the community would have reacted to Rivera's panic disorder diagnosis if he had only shared that detail and nothing else but based on the assumptions that observers made in the past, jokingly or not, as they did with regard to the bags that had emerged under Rivera's eyes. It is much too easy to foresee many folks assuming that the game itself had caused the panic disorder to emerge. By elaborating as he did, Rivera ensured that would not be the case.

CONCLUSION

On January 24, 2020, Rivera posted to his channel the first episode of a new *League of Legends* podcast titled "The Crack Down." Dozens of episodes have been posted in the 16 months since, and the show has become a prominent part of Rivera's content rollout. The title is a direct reference to the drug use meme that folks in the *League of Legends* community had long associated with Rivera. In the summer half of

the 2014 season, Rivera said there were “a bunch of times where I had to leave the stage and people, like, memed that shit really hard. There were like, ‘oh, yeah, he’s leaving the stage? I guess he’s just gonna do some crack backstage and come back on the stage and play.’” Rivera cites feeling more annoyed than offended, and his previously stated claim that it is easier to deflect such memes as a streamer rather than a player imply that the crack use meme had continued into the early weeks of his turn towards creating content. The creation of this vlog about his panic disorder and the panic attacks that were enabling this meme to take off in the first place provides a bit of welcome closure. As the professional *League of Legends* player IWillDominate, Rivera felt uncomfortable pushing back against what the community was saying out of concern for what transparency about his mental health could mean for himself and his team. However, as the streamer and content creator IWillDominate, Rivera has with his disclosure alone added new depth to his online *persona* and that of other athletes in traditional sports and esports alike. Getting the truth out into the public functioned in part to shed a weight that had been pressing down on him, but it also provided an opportunity to turn what had previously been an annoyance into an avenue for profit. The relative privilege that allows a professional athlete to embrace and reframe a meme about them using hard drugs may be rare, but Rivera’s adaptive IWillDominate *persona* can inform identity creation and sustenance in all sorts of sporting communities and, more specifically, internet-based sporting communities. His transparency and transformation warrant further study, but the insights that have already emerged illuminate what similarities esports and traditional sports share in both communal and individual experiences and what complexities accompany online *persona* maintenance in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION: MAKING THE WORLD A METTA PLACE

“Well first off, I want to thank everybody in my hood. My wife, my family, my kids, everybody. I definitely want to thank my doctor, Dr. Santhi, my psychiatrist. She really helped me relax a lot. Thank you so much. It’s so difficult to play all this ball with so much commotion going on in the playoffs, and she helped me relax. Thank you so much. I knocked down that three, just like you told me. Thank you.”¹⁸⁵

Metta Sandiford-Artest offered that response to a question from reporter Doris Burke in the aftermath of the 2010 NBA Finals, which he and his Los Angeles Lakers teammates had just won. Burke asked a technical question about the basketball that had just been played, but as many athletes are wont to do in the moments after reaching the pinnacle of their profession, Sandiford-Artest (playing under the name Ron Artest at the time) spoke candidly about the folks that helped him reach that point. Starting with his family and friends is similarly standard protocol, but the bulk of his statement strayed from what is typically heard as confetti falls. He thanked his psychiatrist for helping him manage the emotional weight of playing through a high-pressure playoff context and also credited her with helping him land a crucial three-point shot with a minute remaining that all but sealed the series for Los Angeles. The spotlight on Artest had arguably never been brighter and he opted to use his minute of near-exclusive exposure to the cameras of ABC to sing the praises of a mental healthcare professional.

My use of arguably in the previous sentence isn’t a concession to opinion, but a direct reference to the other career-defining event in Sandiford-Artest’s career. In 2004,

¹⁸⁵ Ron Artest 2010 NBA Finals Post-Championship Interview (HD). YouTube, June 18, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMCeZK3OiKM>

Sandiford-Artest played a prominent role in an in-game altercation between his Indiana Pacers and the opposing (and hosting) Detroit Pistons that was immediately dubbed and has infamously been known since as Malice at the Palace. The two teams and many of the same players had in June of that same year faced off in a contentious six-game playoff series that Detroit ultimately won on the way to their NBA Championship. Indiana led this contest by 15 points with less than a minute remaining when tensions initially rose. Sandiford-Artest fouled Pistons center Ben Wallace with a shove to the back the while the latter was attempting a shot, leading to a type of scrum familiar to basketball players and fans alike: a bit of shoving, a lot of yelling, and a lot of each team holding their teammates back from escalating the matter in any serious way. As the commotion died down, Sandiford-Artest made his way to the scorer's table on the sideline and laid down on top of it to cool himself down. However, a fan a few rows up from the table then threw a beverage at the prone Sandiford-Artest, who then leapt up into the stands to go after that fan. The brawl was reignited, with many more players from both teams also jumping into the stands and other fans getting involved. The final 45.9 seconds of the game was called off, the NBA suspended nine players for a total of 146 games and \$11 million, and five players and five fans each faced assault charges. Sandiford-Artest received the most significant suspension (a total of 86 games, compared to 30 for his Pacers teammate Stephen Jackson) and lost the most salary (\$4.99 million, compared to \$1.7 million for Jackson). This punishment cemented Sandiford-Artest's role in what quickly became one of the most infamous moments in NBA history.

Sandiford-Artest's talent and intensity made him a first round pick out St. John's University in 1999, and both of those characteristics remained at the forefront of the

coverage of and discussion about his career. Stretches of aloofness and temper tantrums at teammates hindered his chances of becoming a full-fledged franchise player in the league, and these factors reached their pinnacle with the Malice at the Palace. Three years later, in 2008, Sandiford-Artest pleaded no contest to misdemeanor domestic violence after being arrested, a less well known but more troubling event from his life. In addition to court-mandated anger management, parenting, and marriage classes, he sought out a therapist. It was at this point he connected with Dr. Santhi Periasamy, the psychiatrist he thanked on national television. Five years, three teams, and one arrest after the Malice at the Palace, Sandiford-Artest once again found himself in the spotlight, this time celebrating and being celebrated in Lakers gold and purple on the Staples Center court. After such a strong performance in the game that had just concluded, announcer Mike Breen indirectly acknowledged Sandiford-Artest's past struggles and contextualized them with what had just occurred: "Boy, Ron Artest has made the most of his second chance. He's worked so hard, personally and professionally, to overcome his past and some issues as he referred to...He is not the perfect player, he is not the perfect person, but anybody who knows him well will swear by his loyalty and what a big heart he has." The broad strokes of Breen's statement serve to communicate to the viewing public whose primary association with Sandiford-Artest was that melee in Detroit that there was more to his story, though his doing so seems to forgive the domestic violence from his past in a way that may be a bit too sympathetic. Still, progress is on full display, and the sharp contrast of contexts is likely at least partially responsible for Sandiford-Artest's 2010 statement resonating with folks as it did.

The statement was met by a limited amount of media attention in the weeks and months that followed the 2010 NBA Finals. Neil Katz's report for *CBS News* wonders whether Sandiford-Artest's post-game moment with Burke was the point at which sports therapy would move firmly into the mainstream,¹⁸⁶ and Shelley Smith's ESPN report highlights the irony of a player with such a polarizing past advocating for such an underserved cause.¹⁸⁷ The lasting impact of the moment can be gleaned from accounts like that of former NBA center Roy Hibbert, who cited the statement as a pivotal moment in his own career.¹⁸⁸

Smith's reporting took her with Sandiford-Artest to Eastmont Intermediate School in Montebello, California, where the player was promoting federal legislation HR2531, the Mental Health in Schools Act, and to encourage the students to seek out help if they were experiencing trouble of their own. "If not me, who? Who has the credibility of having gone through it and the credibility to speak about it?" Sandiford-Artest asked himself as he prepared to address the student body. Those who hadn't caught the Malice at the Palace or the post-game speech live could, in 2010, watch both years later from the comfort of their homes thanks to YouTube, which had been founded in 2005. His advocacy for mental wellness in this moment marks a movement from making a singular statement to committing to a cause, one that lacked willing spokespeople with his level of

¹⁸⁶ Neil Katz. "Ron Artest Thanks Psychiatrist After Lakers Win; Is Sports Therapy Going Mainstream?" *CBS News*, June 18, 2010. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ron-artest-thanks-psychiatrist-after-lakers-win-is-sports-therapy-going-mainstream/>

¹⁸⁷ Shelley Smith. "Ron Artest: An Unlikely Advocate." *ESPN*, Oct. 18, 2010. Retrieved from <https://www.espn.com/los-angeles/nba/columns/story?id=5698248>

¹⁸⁸ Baxter Holmes. "Roy Hibbert vs. Roy Hibbert." *ESPN*, Aug. 6, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/13382086/roy-hibbert-looking-career-resurgence-los-angeles-lakers

recognition. It also represents a shift in the landscape of mental wellness advocacy from traditionally mediated events to those that can be built with and spread through digital multimedia platforms. The cultural transition into digital media had begun boosting the visibility of athletes' discussions of mental health, even if the scale of that change was not yet apparent.

Neither Liz Cambage nor Christian Rivera can claim to have ever had as significant a cultural moment as the two that bookend Sandiford-Artest's legacy, but both have contributed to a culture that has shifted towards the kinds of conversations that, in the first decade of the new millennium, were still few and far between. Since I began working towards this project in late 2020, examples of athletes disclosing their struggles with their mental health have continued to emerge. Very few of these folks have cited a specific account that inspired them to give one of their own, but Hibbert, as mentioned above, is one of them. "I felt that when he did that, it kind of opened the doors to make it somewhat ok," Hibbert said of Sandiford-Artest's post-game speech. "I think it was great that he did that."¹⁸⁹ Hibbert's disclosure wasn't as detailed as Rivera's or as narrativized as Cambage's, but his input is proof of process for Toni Bruce's argument that the productions of mediasport can change the direction of a conversation or, more substantially, a culture.

Discussion of the sports media complex merits consideration of the pursuit of capital. Capitalism is inextricable from all of the content Rivera has created, his disclosure video, podcast, and other YouTube videos alike. Though the disclosure differs drastically from the kind of content that Rivera typically creates and shares, it is a part of

¹⁸⁹ Holmes.

the media ecosystem that he makes a living from. As authentic and meaningful as the information he shared about his panic attack disorder is, it cannot escape from YouTube's requirement that most users sit through an ad that is likely irrelevant to what is about to be shown before getting to the content their clicking of the web address had promised. This reality doesn't reflect badly on Rivera, who was able to make multiple uses out of his platform with this video: communicating his experiences to his audience and creating content to maintain that audience. Still, the monetary involvement cannot be ignored even if Rivera wanted to ignore it. Even *The Players' Tribune*, an outlet with about as straight a line from creator to consumer as there can be, isn't impervious to the pull of sponsored posts.¹⁹⁰ Analyzing how the forces of capitalism have influenced and continue to influence the disclosures by athletes about matters as personal as mental health is an important next step for further study.

Cabbage and Rivera have both cited strong desires to share what actions they'd taken in response to their struggles with mental health. Rivera frames his disclosure as a more personal act to get the information off of his chest, but Cabbage is more explicit in her desire to help other folks who may be going through something similar in their own lives, athletic or otherwise. Athletes are using digital media to construct and present their identities and amplify their voices on their own terms in ways that previous generations simply could not. Their *personae* can extend beyond the domain of their respective competition and past a single conversation, like mental health, and into the culture at

¹⁹⁰ For example, a podcast called "Truss Levelz" is hosted on the site by two NFL players, Cameron Jordan and Mark Ingram II. It is sponsored by Pepsi.
<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/truss-levelz-trailer-podcast-nfl>

large. Professional athletes have been refusing to stick to sports for generations,¹⁹¹ but it is now easier than ever for them to do so, at least from a content production standpoint. Athletes' willingness and ability to use these technologies to speak out on issues important to them continues to grow and change the culture of which they are a part. Studying this influence through the lenses of *personae*, mediasport, and mental health disclosures is a crucial step towards understanding the potential of digitally mediated discourse.

¹⁹¹ Abraham Iqbal Khan. *Curt Flood in the Media: Baseball, Race, and the Demise of the Activist-Athlete*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

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