

Foul on the Play: Legal Discretion in Cases Brought Against Professional Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Is justice blind when the defendant is famous? This article studies how legal discretion operates in criminal cases brought against professional athletes, using a qualitative comparative design with cases purposively sampled against six criteria. The prosecutions of football players Henry Ruggs III and Rashee Rice and of Olympic wrestler Kyle Snyder are analyzed through a five-part framework covering the offense itself, the legal proceedings, access to resources, media framing, and institutional response. What emerges is a spectrum of legal elasticity. Severe harm limits how much leniency money can buy, but financial and social capital shape procedural outcomes in every case examined, and leagues and governing bodies run what amounts to a parallel disciplinary system with little transparency. The article closes with recommendations: publish and standardize institutional disciplinary guidelines, open the procedural record, invest in public media literacy, and bring race into future research designs.

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Introduction

Dura lex, sed lex—"The law is harsh, but it is the law." This Latin legal tenet encapsulates how the authorities and governing bodies responsible for enforcing and upholding the law have historically dealt with those who break it, as well as how it is applied today. In the case of petty theft, for example, the sentence a perpetrator receives may be light, whereas in a murder case, the judgment issued is much heavier. In both cases, though, the law is regarded as inflexible, absolute, and ideally impartially applied. But when this ideal is extracted from its theoretical context and applied to real-world settings, the notion of what constitutes an absolute law is confounded by a variety of factors. In fact, in recent decades, a large number of athletes have highlighted the fact that the scales of justice are not always equally balanced where fame, wealth, influence, and talent are concerned. These athletes live under a microscope, being viewed by the public as anything from entertainers to role models, to even hometown heroes. So, when they find themselves facing criminal charges—whether in the form of misdemeanors or felonies—the outcome of these cases often appears to run contrary to the idea of a perfect legal system where "the law is harsh, but it is the law."

These observations regarding the seemingly selective application and enforcement of legal principles and the arbitrary repercussions for their transgression invite questions rooted in fairness, legal equity, and social justice. This research article thus sets out to respond to the following questions: To what extent (if any) should an individual with notable societal contributions be granted legal leniency? In such cases, how are societal contributions measured and their value gauged? More importantly, how do these exceptions and anomalies undermine the U.S. justice system? These research questions will be explored in greater depth through three high-profile cases where athletes broke the law and received varying sentences. Each case is meant to serve as a window into the multiple confounding factors—legal, ethical, and moral—at play. Before examining these cases, however, this article describes the methodological process guiding their selection. Having detailed how each was chosen, it then sets out to provide background information on the topic at hand by exploring the social role that athletes currently inhabit, considering their obligations to fans, corporate sponsors, and their own personal interests. The article concludes with future directions as to how both the entertainment and legal domains may be re-envisioned in the interest of justice and equity for all.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative, comparative approach among various case studies to examine how the social value attached to fame, wealth, and status shape the application of legal principles in practice. A case-study-based approach is ideally suited to this line of inquiry because it offers a concrete context for examining how cultural norms, institutional constraints, and corporate interests all fundamentally affect legal outcomes. In other words, rather than engage with legal premises via abstract generalizations, the case studies presented here allow for a more in-depth, yet highly nuanced exploration, of both the virtues and failings of the U.S. justice system.

The discussion that follows centers around three pivotal case studies—that of Henry Ruggs III, Rashee Rice, and Kyle Snyder—all of which were chosen via purposive sampling. As Palinkas et al. (2016) define it, “purposive sampling” involves the “identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest” (p. 533). The cases featured here were selected for inclusion in the study’s dataset based on six criteria: (1) athlete status, (2) severity of the criminal charge, (3) media coverage, (4) discrepant legal outcome, (5) recency of the crime (i.e., it occurred in the last 10 years), and (6) location of the crime (i.e., it took place in the contiguous United States). For the first criteria, “athlete status” generally refers to those individuals who play sports professionally rather than recreationally. These include Olympic athletes, professional football players, and so on. With regard to the severity of the criminal charge, the cases were intentionally selected to represent a wide variety of charges, ranging from simple misdemeanors to more egregious felonies. Casting a wide conceptual net such as this was intentional in that it allows for a comparative analysis that accounts for various levels and degrees of harm. As for media coverage, for the case to be included here, it must have entered the public discourse through media reporting on the event. Differing legal outcomes was also a requisite for inclusion, as meeting this criterion allowed for further exploration of the even (or uneven) application of various laws. The time period specification was applied with the understanding that laws, policies, statutes, and mandates are continuously updated, and the legal landscape of 50 years ago would look drastically different from the one of today. Finally, because the law differs from one jurisdiction to the next—and in the U.S., even varies from state to state—it was important to demarcate cases that occurred in the U.S. from those that did not.

Once the cases were selected, the data for analysis was compiled. Data were derived from publicly available repositories. Court records, description of charges, and sentencing summaries therefore represented a large portion of the data. Other secondary sources, like

press releases from athletes' agents, affiliated institutions, and law enforcement agencies also comprised the bulk of the data for this study, as did media coverage on timeline of events, various updates, as well as suspensions and reinstatements.

Because no human subjects were involved and all data introduced here was publicly available, this study was not subject to institutional review board (IRB) approval.

Limitations

While such a methodological approach allows for the robust comparison of the legal, ethical, and moral considerations of each case, it is not without its own set of limitations. The first of these limitations is its small sample size. Three cases are hardly sufficient for definitive analysis, yet the hope is that it will offer preliminary insights that may be further explored in subsequent research endeavors. Additionally, because it focuses on high-profile cases only, several other equally insightful cases may have been overlooked in the selection process. Finally, media coverage tends to focus more on the individual accused rather than the other parties involved in both the defense and prosecution's respective legal teams, the judge, and any other agents involved in producing a particular legal outcome.

That said, these limitations may be overcome by specifying a narrower scope. The analysis presented here does not make generalized claims regarding the universality of certain legal outcomes, or the variables at play in different cases. Furthermore, to address deficits in the restrictive sample size, future research could expand this inquiry to not only include more cases, but also extend comparisons across jurisdictions, and rather than rely extensively on secondary sources, seek out primary sources in the form of commentary from legal experts and practitioners.

A Five-Part Analytical Framework

Having outlined the methodological approach guiding the analysis for this study, it becomes necessary to introduce the analytical framework similarly guiding it. This framework was constructed in such a way that it contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation on legal ethics. From a sociological perspective, this framework is rooted in the belief that the law itself is by no means neutral, nor is it neutrally executed; instead, its application is shaped by power structures, institutional interests, and individual interpretation. As Bourdieu (1987) reflected, the judicial domain is a site where social hierarchies of power are legitimized, and where legal subjects experience very different

legal outcomes. According to Bourdieu, the legal system is a nexus of political, economic, and symbolic elements.

This is why legal scholars like Susan Silbey (2005) make a distinction between “law-on-the-books” and “law-in-action. Silbey notes that legal outcomes are the product of everyday practices, individual preferences, and institutional norms more than they are a single code. As the American poet and philosopher Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. is famously quoted as saying, “The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience.” What both Silbey and Wendell Holmes allude to is the contingent and evolving nature of the law, and how it moreover changes with social circumstance.

Operating on a similar belief, the analytical framework for each of the cases investigated here is composed of five dimensions. The first of these dimensions pertains to the nature of the offense, including the statutory classification, the degree of harm resulting, the presence of mitigating factors or extenuating circumstances. Collectively, these considerations reflect a longstanding concern for proportionality (i.e., the punishment fits the crime) and moral gravity (Tonry, 2011).

The second dimension of this multi-pronged framework pertains to the legal proceeding. This includes considerations for bail amount, pretrial conditions, available evidence, plea bargains, and actual sentencing. Feeley (1979) argues that the “process is the punishment,” meaning that many of the harms resulting from a legal charge come before the process of conviction. For example, an individual’s reputation may be irrevocably damaged if they are deemed guilty in the court of public opinion, even if a court of criminal justice otherwise vindicates them.

The third component of this framework is resource access. “Resource access” largely refers to the quality of the legal representation the accused is afforded, and how such representation grants them bargaining power in terms of how the trial unfolds and according to what timeline. Consider, for instance, the quality of legal representation for an attorney with a six-figure legal retainer fee when compared to a public defender who is arguably just as skilled but is likely overextended with a heavy caseload. Stuntz (2011) critiques the American criminal justice system along these lines, arguing that a lack of material and financial resources constrains a defendant’s ability to maneuver within the legal system. To illustrate, he states that, often, prosecutors are more willing to negotiate or reduce charges if they know that a defendant has the financial means to “put up a fight.” High-profile athletes are one demographic that would possess such financial capital, suggesting differential treatment even prior to trial commencement.

The fourth dimension, media framing, is informed by Entman's (1993) theory of framing, which argues that the way a case is portrayed in the media, for example, defines the problem for concern, its root causes and implications, the moral aspects embedded within it, and recommendations for ameliorating these transgressions. Gamson's (1994) research on celebrity scandal and media coverage extends Entman's insights to address how such media framing creates a narrative about who is the "bad guy" and who is the "good guy," who is redeemable versus unredeemable, and who is to blame and who remains inculpable. For a recent example of the effects of media framing on legal outcomes, one can refer to the *Depp v. Heard* defamation case, where due to the involvement of social media commentators and news circuits, a clear verdict of guilt was issued to Heard even prior to official sentencing (Anderson, 2022; Bogen, 2022; Pennington, 2022).

Finally, the last part of this framework is institutional response outside of the courtroom. This includes sports leagues, corporate sponsors, and any other governing body. These responses are, in many instances, treated as additional regulatory systems, ones with the capacity to mitigate or exacerbate formal legal consequences. In the context of elite sports, specifically, such institutions must balance concerns with public accountability and their economic interests.

In sum, professional athletes hold an anomalous position in society. Unlike ordinary civilians, they receive extensive public attention, and as such, are treated as responsible for their personal brand, as well as that of their league and individual sponsors. The integrity of these brands, however, can be jeopardized with a single false move, let alone a felony charge. Given such high pressures, and questions of how privilege, wealth, and influence enter, through each of the cases presented here, this article aims to answer yet another pivotal question, "Is justice truly blind?"

Henry Ruggs III: The Limits of Fame

The first case to be explored here is that of Henry Ruggs III. This case can serve as a crucial starting point for fully grasping how the justice system responds to a professional athlete committing a crime at the highest degree of severity, while also emphasizing the limits and the overall influence of wealth, fame, and public opinion when shaping the outcome of legal matters. Ruggs's case was uniquely serious from the very start, not only because he was a rising star in the NFL on the Las Vegas Raiders, but because the facts of the case appeared so clear cut, which did not leave much room for interpretation or alternate accounts.

On November 2, 2021, Ruggs, then 22 years old, was driving a 2022 Corvette Stingray registered under his name, at 156 mph with a blood alcohol level of 0.16—more than twice

the legal limit in the state of Nevada. He rear-ended Tinta Turnor, aged 23, in her RAV4, resulting in her and her dog's death as her vehicle was engulfed in flames upon impact. Medical examiners were unable to determine if the cause of death was from the impact, burns, or smoke inhalation. According to forensic investigators, though, the high-speed crash was so forceful that the RAV4 was pushed nearly 500 feet after the initial impact (Merrill et al., 2023; Olivieri, 2022). Going just off of the facts as they are presented at face value, the extremely high speed at which he was driving, his intoxication while driving, and the deaths directly resulting from his negligence should, in theory, result in a grave enough sentence that the benefits of fame and popularity would have no bearing on the sentence itself. A case of this magnitude drew the attention of not just the public, but legal experts across the country, who speculated that this case would serve as an example—a cautionary tale—where the perpetrator would feel the full force of the justice system (Merrill et al., 2023).

Yet, even in circumstances as ugly as the ones Ruggs found himself in, his case was proof that his popularity and financial resources would influence proceedings in a way that was far different from what an ordinary citizen would likely experience. After sustaining multiple leg and arm injuries from the crash, he was transported to a nearby hospital and was later charged with a felony DUI and vehicular manslaughter (Merrill et al., 2023). An average defendant might have anticipated trial in custody due to the severity of the crime, but Ruggs was allowed to post a \$150,000 bail shortly after his release from medical care. That said, following his release, he was nonetheless placed under very strict monitoring conditions, including periodic alcohol testing, was banned from driving, and was confined to his home with electronic surveillance systems in round-the-clock operation (Merrill et al., 2023). Even with all these restrictions, the fact that he was able to pretty much secure immediate pretrial freedom is an indicator of the obvious advantages that wealth and fame can convey. Consider the bail set, for instance. Bail tends to be an instrument of social stratification, separating those who can purchase their freedom from those who cannot (Arnold et al., 2014). Had Ruggs been a working-class citizen, sans the fortune and fame, he very likely would have had to spend the pretrial period behind bars. But because of his NFL salary and endorsement income, he was able to resume his life outside a jail cell while awaiting trial.

Ruggs's legal proceedings following his arrest further exemplify how high-profile defendants can use their personal resources as leverage by securing defense teams that strategically shape the trajectory of their cases. After his initial court appearance, many hearings were scheduled to determine whether the trial would proceed, but the defense repeatedly delayed administering charges. While such delays are fairly common in felony cases, the

frequency with which they occurred and their prolonged length incited public debate on whether his legal team was attempting to manipulate the timeline of the case to its strategic advantage (Merrill et al., 2023). For example, on December 16, 2021, another hearing for the case was scheduled to be held, but yet again, “procedural matters” pushed the case back to the following year.

Though Ruggs’ defense team may have been sufficiently handling the legal ramifications of his actions, he nonetheless felt the consequences of them in his professional role. Just hours after the crash was confirmed and such information was released to major news stations, the Las Vegas Raiders immediately dismissed him from the team, not just because they felt legally obligated to, but because of concerns for a public relations crisis. The NFL, however, chose not to take any disciplinary action against Ruggs; because he was no longer on any active roster, league policies no longer applied to him (Breech, 2021).

In July 2022, Ruggs’s defense team attempted to suppress his blood alcohol test results, arguing that the officers on the scene had no right to take a blood draw, but all this became a crucial evidentiary issue that was eventually denied by Judge Susan Johnson (Olivieri, 2022). Judge Johnson stated that this appeal was denied because of the extreme speed at which the car was being driven, Ruggs’s own behavior at the scene of the crime, and the eyewitness testimony speaking to the catastrophic collision—all of which were just cause to obtain his blood alcohol concentration levels. This ruling strengthened the prosecution’s case, as it effectively laid the groundwork for a mounting case against Ruggs. Speed data pulled from the Corvette’s internal diagnostic system confirmed that the vehicle’s speed reached 156 mph, and began to brake only moments before the fatal impact, with its speed only decreasing to 127 mph at the time of collision (Olivieri, 2022).

With compelling evidence against Ruggs piling up and a jury trial likely to result in several decades of prison time, Ruggs’s legal team started to pivot towards a plea agreement. During the time period between May 2 and May 10, 2023, a major shift occurred in the defense’s goals. On May 2, Ruggs chose to waive his preliminary hearing and agreed to plead guilty to one DUI felony count resulting in death, and one count of misdemeanor vehicular manslaughter (CBS Interactive, 2023; Merrill et al., 2023). The prosecution designed a plea deal with a sentencing range of 3-10 years in prison. While this is no small punishment, legal analysts noted that had this case gone to trial, Ruggs could have faced multiple decades behind bars. During his formal plea hearing on May 10, he admitted to driving drunk at 156 mph, taking full responsibility for the crash.

On August 9, 2023, Ruggs appeared in front of the court for his sentencing and received a sentence within the agreed-upon range, which he would serve in Nevada state prison,

becoming eligible for parole in three years (CBS Interactive, 2023). While those observing the case noted that the sentence was very lenient when compared to the severity of the crime committed, others pointed out that the state of Nevada caps certain DUI sentences and that many plea deals are offered in fatal DUI cases to spare families from the trauma of a trial. While there may be some truth to such an appraisal of the situation, it is undeniable that Ruggs was able to so easily attain a plea that resulted in an acceptably low sentence, in large part due to the quality of his legal representation.

The aftermath of this case further complicates discussions of punishment and retribution. Unlike many other defendants in similar cases, Ruggs continued to remain in the public eye. In April 2025, Ruggs's teammate, Josh Jacobs, revealed to the public that he was training in prison to entertain the idea of a possible football comeback in the near future—a dream that could only be realized with the assistance of immense fame. Later, in June of that same year, Ruggs spoke at a Hope for Prisoners event in Las Vegas, where he issued a public apology to the Tintor family while also discussing his own rehabilitation process (Guardian News and Media, 2025; Press, 2025). Appearances like Ruggs's are very rare for incarcerated individuals, but media outlets become accessible with sufficient personal notoriety. His first eligible parole date is August 5, 2025, and it has already been widely reported across various media platforms.

When viewed through this study's five-part analytical framework, the Ruggs case represents a case falling in the upper bounds of legal severity, so much so that even celebrity status loses its protective effect. The nature of the offense (i.e., extreme intoxication, high speeds, and loss of human life) narrowed the different narratives available to the defense, and intensified the public demand for justice. There may therefore be a threshold at which fame fails to protect against accountability and moral outrage—a threshold that serves as a legal, moral, and ethical line not to be crossed.

Ruggs's case also illustrates the impact of resource access upon procedural decision-making. Ruggs's ability to post bail and secure pretrial release, negotiate for extended delays, challenge evidence, and eventually obtain a plea deal underscore that while status and fame may not sufficiently protect against negative legal outcomes, financial capital can.

The media's role in framing this case is also noteworthy in terms of how it affects the punishment delivered. Early on in the case, the media aligned with the prosecution's narrative that this was not a candidate for redemption, and thus limited Ruggs's ability to secure a commensurate sentence in the short-term. Following sentencing, however, the narrative arc shifted through the media's coverage of his rehabilitation and hopes for a

renewed career. Therefore, while fame may not aid in the pretrial period, it appears to have made a difference in the punishments issued by the “court of public opinion.”

In its severity and general complexity, the Ruggs case thus serves as a baseline for the proceeding analyses. To continue engaging with the question of whether justice is truly blind, the discussion now turns to the case of another offense committed by a pro-footballer, but with very different results.

Rashee Rice: In the Grey Zone

When compared to Ruggs’s case, Rashee Rice’s experience falls into a moral and legal grey zone. A wide receiver for the Kansas City Chiefs, Rice’s offense also involves a high-speed car crash, similar to Ruggs, but even though he injured several people in the collision, it did not result in death. Therefore, Rice’s case can serve to illustrate how the legal system ideally responds to the harm that resulted from the crime. It also shows how prosecutors, judges, and juries take into account that this is a young person, still early in his career—considerations that led to more flexible legal interpretations of his guilt than was seen in Ruggs’s case. It is such elasticity of the law and its corresponding punishment that allows for a more in-depth exploration of the relationship among fame, societal value, and the uneven distribution of accountability.

On March 30, 2024, Rashee Rice and fellow NFL player Teddy Knox were driving at speeds in excess of 119 mph in a Lamborghini Urus and 116 mph in a Corvette, respectively. Rice lost control of his vehicle, setting off a chain reaction that involved four other vehicles, not including Knox. Even though no casualties resulted, multiple individuals involved were injured, including two children. Immediately after the crash, as recorded via dash-cam footage, Rice and Knox both got out of their cars and fled the scene on foot (Parks & Friedman, 2024). This act alone escalated the perceived seriousness of the crime in the eyes of the court in that it could be treated as an aggravating factor that effectively eliminated any chance of a deferred adjudication. As a result, the Dallas Police Department charged Rice with aggravated assault, collision involving serious bodily injury, and six counts of collision involving injury (Dearmore, 2025), all of which meant Rice could be looking at years of jail time.

A pivotal turning point, however, came on July 17, 2025, when Rice pleaded guilty to the two third-degree felony counts of causing bodily injury and a collision involving serious bodily injury (DeLatte, 2025; Falcon & Owens, 2025). Despite this guilty plea, he did not receive what would be considered a “typical” sentence. Instead, Rice was entered into a deferred adjudication plea agreement, which resulted in 5 years of probation, 30 days in jail,

\$115,000 in restitution, and a \$1,000,000 civil settlement (Dearmore, 2025; Falcon & Owens, 2025).

The outcome of this case is significant for a few reasons, the first of which is the deferred adjudication. This means that all of Rice's felony charges could be cleared upon his completion of probation, leaving him with a completely clean criminal record. Secondly, even though the judge did express concern over Rice's fleeing the scene and his failure to help the victims of the crash he caused, the court still accepted this deal. The flexibility demonstrated by the judge overseeing this case prompts us to think about the primary factors behind such leniency. Deferred adjudication is extremely rare in cases that involve multiple injuries, accidents resulting from willful recklessness in the form of speeding, and reports of the perpetrator fleeing the scene after an otherwise gruesome crash. Following the standard logic of the law, such actions should theoretically trigger much stricter punitive measures because they demonstrated complete disregard for human life—the fundamental value underpinning many of the mechanisms of the U.S. justice system. Yet even with this logic applied, Rice's promising future and high earnings worked together to give him a sentence that was very light compared to the legal precedent thus established. The fact that the legal system viewed Rice as someone whose current lifestyle warrants preservation without being marred by a criminal record—even after his reckless acts put many people's lives at risk—suggests that the higher the athlete's prestige and future promise, the more flexible the ruling.

A similar response was witnessed among the general public and the various institutions overseeing Rice's professional activities. Following the end of the criminal case, the NFL was ready to impose a strict suspension according to its own policies, with the expected timeframe for this suspension set at 5 to 7 weeks (Falcon & Owens, 2025). Beginning in August 2025, though, Rice had already made attempts to restore both his career and public image while waiting for the NFL to make a final decision. The ease with which he integrated himself back into his old professional role points to how organizational and institutional response mirrored the leniency issued in the courts when it came to their own punitive decision-making.

When compared to the Ruggs case, which sits at the upper limits of the zone of legal elasticity, the Rice case falls somewhere in the middle; it neither constitutes fatal harm or minor misconduct. The nature of the offense (i.e., high-speed racing, serious bodily injury, and fleeing the scene of a crime) would typically garner a judicial response designed to assign culpability and moreover deter similar behavior in the future. However, the absence of fatalities serves as a mitigating variable. Because the current legal system is propped up

by certain social and cultural values, like the sanctity of human life, and because Rice's case did not necessarily threaten that value, his narrative was framed as one of rehabilitation rather than condemnation.

Yet, similar to Ruggs's case, Rice's financial resources, and the elite legal representation they afford, allowed him to maneuver within the legal system, even prior to the start of a trial. Once more, a plea agreement became a possibility—a possibility not often extended to the average citizen. It is possible, however, that the defense was aware of Rice's resources in this regard, and so pursued an avenue that would presumably result in less contestation.

Finally, media framing and institutional response mirrored the official judicial position. Coverage of the case presented Rice's actions as recklessness rather than a true moral deficit, signaling to the NFL that he should be disciplined, but not in a way that imposed career-ending sanctions.

Kyle Snyder: Just a Lapse in Judgment?

Having now presented a case at the far upper limit of legal elasticity and one in the middle, for the purposes of comparative analysis, it is helpful to consider a case on the other side of the spectrum—a case that would, in theory, be afforded many interpretative freedoms. One such case is that of Kyle Snyder, an Olympic wrestler convicted of soliciting prostitution.

On May 9, 2025, Snyder, a highly decorated U.S. Olympic champion wrestler, and a member of one of the most prestigious U.S. teams of his generation, responded to an undercover escort ad that was posted by the Columbus Police's PACT unit. He arrived at a Quality Inn location, offering to pay for a sexual encounter, and was later arrested inside the hotel room. The police evidence compiled included \$160 of documented cash, body camera footage of the encounter, and confirmation that Snyder explicitly requested oral sex from the sting officer. Snyder was one of sixteen people caught in this sting operation (AP News, 2025; Caplan, 2025).

Initially, Snyder's charge came in the form of a misdemeanor (i.e., prostitution solicitation) under Ohio law (Guardian News and Media, 2025). Many media outlets reported on this arrest as soon as it hit the news circuit, although the tone in which the information was conveyed was surprisingly reserved. Rather than paint Snyder as an immoral wrongdoer, the media reports published at the time focused on the sting operation itself and the misdemeanor classification of the offense; they moreover emphasized Snyder's clean criminal record prior to the incident.

At the time of the incident, the Columbus Police Department released him immediately, only issuing a subpoena that instructed him to appear in court on May 19. The short timeframe between the incident and the court date helped to hasten the trial. At his scheduled court appearance, Snyder pleaded guilty to the reduced charge of disorderly conduct, a nonviolent misdemeanor (AP News, 2025; Martin, 2025). The penalty he received was likewise minimal: a \$250 fine, court fees, and mandatory participation in a “John School” diversion program designed to educate new offenders on the legal and social consequences of solicitation misdemeanors (Martin, 2025; Zacardi, 2025). He received no jail time, no probation, and no long-term consequences, legally speaking, and as if on cue, on May 21, just two days after his court appearance, SafeSport lifted his suspension, rendering him eligible for participation in international competition again. Less than two weeks after his arrest, he was cleared to continue training with the U.S. World Wrestling Team (AP News, 2025).

When the five-part analytical framework is applied to Snyder’s case, it becomes clear that this case resides in the lower limits of legal severity and the upper limits of interpretative flexibility. Because the offense posed no direct threat to the public’s safety and resulted in no victim harmed, it did not threaten the sanctity of human life the way that Ruggs’s and Rice’s cases did. It, therefore, did not warrant a legal consequence that reflected a threat to such an esteemed value. The offense was framed as a lapse in judgment rather than a fundamental breach of social trust—both in legal understandings and the general cultural discourse.

As for resource availability and its impact on procedural matters, Snyder’s case illustrates how speed affects resolution. The quick turnaround from the time of arrest to court appearances effectively limited the punitive damages brought to Snyder. This is in stark contrast to cases where defendants await sentencing in pretrial detention centers, where they face prolonged uncertainty or other collateral damages (e.g., loss of income) that serve as a form of parallel punishment. Snyder’s experience was, on the contrary, briefly endured and temporally and symbolically contained.

Media framing of the event also played an integral role in shaping the outcome Snyder experienced. Coverage of Snyder’s arrest remained strictly factual; it refrained from providing a moral commentary on Snyder’s actions and even went so far as to emphasize Snyder’s previous achievements rather than the offense itself. Institutions adopted a narrative frame commensurate with the one established by the media. The suspension issued by SafeSport was brief, and USA Wrestling’s reinstatement of Snyder happened on an equally accelerated timeline. In Snyder’s case, therefore, it was not just his financial

resources that helped to produce a favorable outcome; it was the influence of his social capital. His pristine public image prior to the event carried such weight that the offense itself was interpreted as simply anomalous behavior.

Discussion

When considered side by side, the cases of Henry Ruggs III, Rashee Rice, and Kyle Snyder exemplify how the legal standards to which professional athletes are held vary along a spectrum of severity. Rather than illustrate a uniform application of the U.S. legal code, these cases—differing in terms of resulting harm, offense classification, and both the material and immaterial resources of the perpetrator—reveal how socially contingent punishment truly is. In all three cases, the legal outcomes incurred were affected by an interplay of multiple variables, from the severity of the resulting harm to the athlete's perceived societal value, to media framing, to institutional interest. What this suggests is that justice is something that can be negotiated as opposed to universally imposed.

Sitting at the upper limits of this spectrum, the Ruggs case illustrates that celebrity status has finite boundaries—boundaries that are imposed by the fatal nature of the offense, which were as morally defining. Even still, the influence of financial and social capital is evidence in the procedural unfolding of the case, as with Ruggs's pretrial release and plea deal negotiations. This case is thus compatible with the view advanced by contemporary socio-legal scholarship, which notes that while extreme harm mitigates leniency, it does not fully eliminate the influence of resource access when it comes to shaping the legal process as a whole.

The Rice case, however, resides somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. The nonfatal harm that resulted from the incident gave rise to a more elastic response—that is despite the presence of multiple aggravating factors, such as several injuries, fleeing from the scene of the crime, and so on. Rice's case illustrated how when the fundamental value of the sanctity of human life is able to remain intact, and the perpetrator retains their future societal and institutional value, they are narratively framed as redeemable, which in turn, prompts further interpretative discretion in both legal and social spaces.

Finally, at the other end of the spectrum, Snyder's case demonstrates how when minimal harm intersects with extensive social capital, the ensuing legal accountability can be both brief and socially dismissed. In Snyder's case, the informal punishment (i.e., suspensions from play and professional organizations) mirrored the formal punishment assessed by the courts. Snyder's case likewise highlights the protective effects of social capital, but this

time, in the form of a previously pristine public image, which mitigated the damage brought by the charges laid against him.

Collectively speaking, these three cases underscore the fact that the U.S. justice system's treatment of professional athletes who break the law is less grounded in universalities and more influenced by questions of the harm committed, the fundamental values jeopardized, and prospects for redemption. Media framing plays an integral role in this process by constructing a narrative wherein the perpetrators are portrayed as irredeemable or as a candidate for rehabilitation. This narrative subsequently gets picked up by the involved institutions, which employ this story of events to determine the kinds of disciplinary decisions they will make.

Taken together, these cases suggest that the entailments of accountability are not universally experienced, especially when one takes into account the influences of status, wealth, and perceived social value. In this way, these cases continue to raise questions about proportionality, fairness, and equal justice in the eyes of the law.

Implications for Further Research and Future Directions

This study's findings point to a need to rethink how judiciary and legal discretion operates at the intersections of media, sport, and the criminal justice system. One step that may be taken towards realizing a more just and equitable justice system includes promoting greater transparency and standardization when it comes to decision-making. This means that during the early procedural stages of bail setting, plea deal negotiations, and deferred adjudication deliberations, the general public would need to be privy to such behind-the-scenes deliberations. Admittedly, the current legal system has discretion inbuilt into it. Otherwise, consideration for mitigating factors and extenuating circumstances would cease to exist. Yet, with the establishment of clear guidelines for when leniency or exceptions are permissible, and when they are not, reform could be made in a way that reduces inequality.

Another reform that may be made towards this end involves targeting sports leagues and related governing bodies, which currently serve as a parallel system of accountability, but one with very little transparency or coordination with legal entities. The organizations referenced in this case study analysis—the NFL, USA Wrestling, and the Olympic committees—are just a few of the many governing institutions that should aim to specify clearer avenues for pursuing disciplinary action when athletes incur criminal charges. That way, the

institutional sanctions applied are on par with the criminal charges filed. Developing standardized timelines for reinstatement and independent review panels to check personal biases would both help to preempt claims that reputational or economic interests outweigh ethical commitments.

Additionally, given how the analysis presented here illustrates the influences of the media on legal outcomes, it points to a call for greater media literacy. Due to concerns for freedom of expression and the right to free speech, the media cannot be regulated in the same way that the legal system can. That said, with greater media literacy, the public would be better able to interrogate the veracity of the commentary surrounding these high-profile cases. That way, analysis from news organizations, pundits, social media influencers, and so on would not play such a role in crafting influential narratives of guilt or innocence long before formal adjudication and would, by extension, not influence their outcomes.

Finally, future research should extend the current analysis by supplementing the discussion with reflections on how race and racialized perceptions shape legal elasticity. While such an analysis was beyond the scope of the present article, it remains crucial to examining issues of equality within the present U.S. criminal justice system. It is worth noting that of the three cases presented here, Kyle Snyder was the only White defendant, raising questions about how race enters into the equation. There is ample literature arguing that race impacts discretionary flexibility at every stage of the legal process, from arrest to bail, to plea bargaining, to sentencing (Arnold et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2005; Stevenson, 2018). Building upon the present study in this way would therefore add to the scholarly conversation on this matter by considering how race intersects with fame, media coverage, and notoriety.

In the abstract, the law may be harsh, but it is the law. In reality, though, as this article has proven, the universality implied by such a declaration is far from how it is realized in practice. As the cases introduced here demonstrate, when fame, future promise or value, and public perception are factored in, the law becomes unevenly distributed, remaining harsher for some and not others. This research therefore suggests that far from being blind, the justice system sees clearly who stands before it.

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