

WHAT OPPORTUNITIES DO MICHAEL VICK, DAVID ROBINSON, AND TED LEONSIS HAVE IN COMMON?

I really don't understand it. Famous athletes have such golden opportunities to score big off the playing field. Yet, most just sidestep opportunities lying right at their feet to use their money for the common good...to teach by example that there's far more to the game of life than riches and fame.

Footballer Michael Vick, baseballer Alex Rodriguez, and golfer Tiger Woods have been highlighted in broadcasts lately, having come back to their games after losing "hero" status by harming their families, friends, teams, fans, and sports. Perhaps the greatest cost of their prior actions was movingly stated by Frank Deford, when he asked if young fans today had anyone to [look up to](#).

These fallen superstars can't undo their words and deeds any more than the rest of us can. But while we wish them success, their messages to the young and their televised acts of contrition for off-the-field behavior could be made a lot more meaningful if they simply offered to devote themselves and their money to a good cause, especially those who have so much more than anyone needs to live really, really well.

Of course, the ideal place to start down this path is before a fall. And the likeliest candidates to use large chunks of their money to do good may be those big leaguers who have always been good sports both on and off the field.

It may appear unfair to put so much weight on sports icons. Only a few rich people from all occupations give away significant chunks of their money. But there are exceptions besides the 40 American billionaires who just pledged to donate at least half their wealth to worthy causes. NBA legend David Robinson (San Antonio Spurs) is partnering with Living Cities to try to make celebrity-branded philanthropy more effective. And Kevin Johnson (Phoenix Suns), Jalen Rose (Detroit Pistons), and tennis star Andre Agassi have signed on to some worthwhile ventures, often with schools, though it's hard to determine their individual contributions on the [IRS forms charities file](#).

A friend of mine, now a foundation executive but once part of a major sports franchise, tells me that while some lesser-known athletes are charity minded, players have no incentive to take up strategic philanthropy. She could name numerous examples of one-offs, but not of athletes or athletes' foundations that try to leverage their investments for a good cause over the long haul—say, to make a community, neighborhood, or group of children better off.

Those beneath superstar status, in fairness, have such short careers that they might not be thinking of philanthropy before they decide what to do next. Still, among the super successful, there are too few footsteps to follow.

Team owners could set the pace and precedent. I'm inspired by people like Ted Leonsis, a principal owner of the Washington Capitals and now the Washington Wizards. In *The Business of Happiness*, he lays out "giving back" and "higher calling" as two tenets for happiness. What could Leonsis and his own fallen superstar Gilbert Arenas – who, in a recent Washington Post [article](#), talked about regaining the "trust and love" of the fans - do together to reinvigorate his off-court career? Why couldn't owners more generally channel some of their entrepreneurial spirit into well-designed options for players to start giving back?

Let's start with contract negotiations. Why not offer and push a new optional clause, that, like bank deposits, automatically sends some significant portion of bonuses or salary to charities of the player's choice? Not a hidden clause, but one of the two or three major agreements.

Some sports franchises do have foundations, and many have community relations departments. But without knocking holiday baskets, galas, sports camps, and so on, there's little attachment to sustained good works.

A lot of celebrity philanthropy runs through agents. Couldn't a couple of them become known as agents who help their clients accomplish major charitable feats? And can't league offices do a bit more to move philanthropic efforts from symbol to substance?

Thinking boldly, why not exclude money earmarked in advance for charity from salary caps? Players would get more for themselves and their charities combined, charities would benefit, owners would have an honorable way around a salary cap, and the team would get kudos for community involvement. Pollyanna-ish? Suppose one team owner, agent, and player decided to test this out. Would the players association and other team owners, even if opposed, want to take a public stand against more money for charity?

Of course, all this is more complicated than I'm letting on. Many athletes get taken to the cleaners by their advisers, agents, and sometimes their own bad spending habits. Tennis star Bjorn Borg and boxer Mike Tyson had to declare bankruptcy, though planning for charity might have helped them manage other parts of their private portfolios better as well.

Legal and charitable tax issues come into play too, such as the 50 percent limit on charitable contribution deductions for individuals and the 10 percent limit for corporations. But these pose only a minor obstacle since they simply limit the amount of government subsidy, not the amount that individuals can give to charity.

The vehicles for giving are many. Athletes can give now, yet still take their time sorting through long-term charitable goals. Leaders of community foundations like Terri Lee Freeman of the Community Foundation for the National Capital Region and John Porter of ACT for Alexandria (Virginia) can show them nifty ways to give money to charity today to be reallocated later when their vision for their gifts firms up.

And this proposition is win/win. Players and owners both boost their own marketability and reputation through community involvement. What sports writers wouldn't chase stories involving generous sums and lasting impact? Meanwhile, I personally know many of the country's top charitable tax lawyers, some of whom would be glad to help out pro bono if it would increase giving and involvement in the community. (Hey! Hobnobbing with athletes-turned-donors provides a lot of in-kind benefits, including goodwill for the law firm!)

Why not give it a shot?

The Government We Deserve is a periodic column on public policy by Eugene Steuerle, an Institute fellow and the Richard B. Fisher Chair at the nonpartisan Urban Institute. Steuerle is also a former deputy assistant secretary of the Treasury. The opinions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its sponsors.

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