

## The moral compass suddenly goes south

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The starlet, the cardinal, the baseball slugger and the mayor make an unlikely quartet, except possibly in a summer when scandals have rocked everything from entertainment and religion to sports and politics and produced a virtual morality play on a public stage.

Lindsay Lohan's moment in the spotlight may have been the most poignant. On the night she was arrested for driving drunk and with a suspended license and carrying cocaine, the 21-year-old actress was quoted by companions in the SUV as boasting:

"I can't get in trouble. I'm a celebrity."

But to some, it resonates as more of a mantra in a time when seemingly anything goes.

There's an apparently steroid-bulked-up Barry Bonds setting home-run records. There's President George W. Bush commuting the prison sentence of his vice president's chief of staff, who lied and stonewalled through a criminal investigation.

There's a blood-doping scandal plaguing the Tour de France. There's Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony's attempts to quash a clerical sexual abuse scandal that ultimately cost \$660 million to settle.

Then there's the dogfighting and dog-killing charges against NFL superstar Michael Vick, not to mention Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's admitted extramarital affair that destroyed his 20-year marriage and could threaten his once-promising political career.

"There is no consequence. They do it because they can," said criminal defense attorney Alex Jacinto. "If there is no real threat from society to enforce the law and they see people getting away with what they do, then what's to stop anyone else?"

"Where's the moral compass for society?"

Three days after Lohan's meltdown, party-gal Nicole Richie was sentenced to four days in jail for her second drunk-driving conviction in four years.

That came less than a month after Richie's "The Simple Life" reality-TV co-star Paris Hilton served a drama-filled 23 days in county jail for her own alcohol-related reckless-driving conviction.

But the severity of the sentences has left some wondering whether the stars got preferential treatment. And convicted vice presidential chief of staff Lewis "Scooter" Libby got off with just a \$250,000 fine.

Mahony is still a cardinal, attempting to salvage his legacy as a prince of the church. Villaraigosa is still the mayor, working to relaunch his political star. Hilton has a new album, movie and book in the works, and Bonds will soon be the all-time home run king.

If Vick's high-powered lawyer got former NBA star Jayson Williams out of a murder charge, is it a stretch to believe he can't get the Atlanta Falcons' quarterback off for inhumanity to dogs?

"If (he does) get away with it, it does send a terrible message," said John P. Crossley Jr., director of the University of Southern California School of Religion and an expert on religion and social ethics. "There are some built-in checks and balances against some (immoral and unethical) behavior, like Nike taking the action it has (to suspend Vick's endorsement deal).

"The kind of thing (Vick) is alleged to have done, including dog-killing, is on the same plane as Pete Rose gambling on baseball. And on some things, there is no forgiveness (from society), or Pete (Rose) would be in the (baseball) Hall of Fame."

To some degree, America has always had an "outlaw" culture, dating back to the Wild West, with society indulging and even reveling in the exploits of its bad boys and wicked femmes, especially the charismatic ones who could stay ahead of the posse.

Is the latest string of high-profile blunders a glimpse of a new evolving morality and a generation of self-entitlement that feels it's not bound by the old rules?

Or is it that instant news access is simply highlighting what have always been a litany of human foibles?

"There have always been culture wars, but are we in so-called moral decline?" Crossley asked rhetorically. "I would say no. It's not different than at any time in history.

"I would say the thing that is new is what's gone on with Barry Bonds and steroids and the Tour de France and blood doping and transfusions is this idea of winning at any cost - that it's more important to win or to break Hank Aaron's record or win the Tour de France than to play fair."

Winning at any cost, of course, isn't limited to professional sports. Consider consumers who used Napster to download free music and Enron lying about its corporate performance.

In one way or another, Americans "cheat" every day: using the car-pool lane when driving solo, fudging tax returns and college exams, plagiarizing term papers off the Internet, padding a resume, lying about their age or even using cosmetic surgery to disguise the aging process.

"As Charles Dickens noted 150 years ago, Americans are always ready to forgive rogues - as long as they're rich," notes David Callahan,

author of "The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans Are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead."

"Thanks to the trends of the past quarter-century, this national trait has become ever more pronounced. If you mix the values of the Me Generation with the notion that 'greed is good,' you get lots of cheating."

Often that cheating is criminal.

Last fall, the backup punter at the University of Northern Colorado was charged with stabbing the first-string player in his kicking leg in order to become the Bears' starter.

It's an extreme example of how far young athletes - and sometimes their parents - will go in pursuing dreams of college scholarships and professional contracts.

"There's a lot of this that goes around where parents are trying to use their children as retirement funds, thinking they'll get some multimillion-dollar contract down the way," said Tony Czarnecki, owner of the All American Sport Shoppe baseball store in Canoga Park.

"If they think (their son) might be a decent athlete, you'll often see that in elementary school, they'll pull him back a year in school so that he'll be a year older than the other kids in his grade. When he reaches high school, he'll be older and bigger with a body that's more mature."

Four years ago - before even steroids broke on to the national landscape as an evil in baseball - the hottest supplement among athletes at community colleges in Southern California was 1-Test, an anabolic steroid hawked by athletes and some supplement stores.

"It was implied that if you wanted to get playing time, you had to get with the program and get bigger," said an athlete who played on a team and requested anonymity because he now plays at a four-year college.

The stakes are even bigger in show business, and the rules have obviously changed.

"If Paris Hilton can be shown having sex on the Internet and still get lucrative handbag, clothing and perfume lines, not to mention a TV reality series, it shows that there really isn't any price to pay for your indiscretions," says Hollywood comedian and writer Jerome Cleary.

"Anything you do that is scathing or where you're cheating only makes you famous today if it is somehow acknowledged. You can glorify even your apology."

Some say all the publicity also may be fostering a misperception that an unprecedented moral crisis is at hand.

"One thing that strikes me is that in our present information age, we know a lot more about private lives of famous people than we have in the past," said James Kellenberger, an ethics and morality professor at California State University, Northridge.

"Sometimes when there is an increased incidence (in unethical or immoral behavior), it's not because there is more of it but because there's better observation of it.

"If a lot of what we're seeing now is the product of increased media attention, then the change in the times may not be as great as one might think at first."

But some say Cardinal Mahony's attempts to cover up abuse in the Roman Catholic Church may say more about the moral and ethical morass of the day than any young starlet's drunken driving.

"The cardinal's involvement underscores that today there is no moral authority in the sky, no moral absolutes," says Jacinto, a lifelong Catholic who works with lay groups in Los Angeles.

"The priests' (sexual abuse) scandal not only raises the issue of deconstruction, it is also the latest and most tragic battle in what has become an ongoing cultural civil war in our society.

"What's at stake is not society as we know it, but its soul."

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