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When Moral Courage Fails: Pete Rose and the Boys Choir of Harlem
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> "In sports and in performance, the most meaningful awards go not to the hitting machine or the artistic genius, but to those who combine talent and character into a coherent whole. And part of character is moral courage."

What happens when moral courage fails? Consider two sorry tales from the past week.

The first concerns Pete Rose. Holding baseball's record for the most hits during his career -- 4,256 in 24 seasons with the Cincinnati Reds and the Philadelphia Phillies -- he should have been a shoo-in for election to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. But he was banned from baseball for life in August 1989 for gambling on sports.

Since then he has been lobbying for reinstatement and, he hoped, a spot in the Hall of Fame. Admitting he gambled, he insisted that he never bet on baseball. Last week his new autobiography, *My Prison Without Bars,* revealed that those public denials were lies. As manager of the Reds, he did indeed bet on baseball -- even on his own team, though he says he never bet on them to lose.

Where was the moral courage to say, early on, "I'm giving up gambling on sports?" Or to say, later, "I won't bet on my own team?" Or eventually to say, "I'm not going to lie?" It's a tale of serial opportunity and serial failure -- and possibly the end of his quest for baseball's most immortal honor.

The second tale concerns Walter J. Turnbull, founder and director of the Boys Choir of Harlem in New York City. A top-ranked institution that also operates a school, it performs in New York's best venues -- Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, Radio City Music Hall -- and travels globally with its repertoire of classical, popular, and gospel music.

Now Dr. Turnbull's board has asked him to resign for failing to report a multiyear sex-abuse scandal involving the school's chief counselor, Frank Jones, Jr., and a 14-year-old boy. City education officials took action to ban Mr. Jones from the school immediately on learning of the problem. Turnbull not only refused to honor the ban, but subsequently engaged Jones to chaperone eight choir trips, including a nine-day tour of Japan in 2001. Now the abused student has filed a $30 million lawsuit.

Where was the moral courage to say, on first hearing of the abuse, "This is serious, and I'll investigate fully and punish firmly?" Or to agree with city officials when it said Jones should go? Or at least to relieve Jones of his duties pending resolution of the accusations? Again, serial opportunity and serial failure -- and apparently the end of Turnbull's affiliation with the school he loves and the students he inspired.

Rose and Turnbull are real pros. No question about their talents: Each climbed to the top of his respective profession. As managers of new talent and as icons for their fans, they shaped young minds. There are lots of great hitters in major-league baseball, but only Rose holds the record. And there are lots of fine music teachers in inner-city America, but only Turnbull put together such a choir. These are the people for whom awards are made.

Yet in sports and in performance, the most meaningful awards go not to the hitting machine or the artistic genius, but to those who combine talent and character into a coherent whole. Part of character is moral courage. And moral courage involves foreseeing dangers and enduring difficult choices, all in the name of principle.

Did Rose see the danger? Not really. He admits that in 2002 he confessed to baseball commissioner Bud Selig that he had bet on baseball. When Selig asked why he broke such a sacrosanct rule of the game, Rose replied, "I didn't think I'd get caught." What never seemed to cross his mind was the highest principle of athletics: playing for the honor of the game rather than the advancement of the self.

Turnbull, by contrast, saw the danger clearly, responding when first told of the abuse, "This could hurt the choir." But again the highest principle -- doing what was best for the students, rather than covering up a hugely harmful situation -- was simply thrust aside. Entangled in loyalty, fearful of publicity, struggling financially, he couldn't bring himself to do what needed doing.

It's tough to resist the addiction of gambling. It's tough to sack a colleague. But however difficult, those actions start with the courage to admit it must be done. Each lacked that courage -- Rose to face down his own demons, Turnbull to face down the demons possessing a friend. So we may never know whether Rose, in order to win a bet on his own team, ever deliberately chose to lose the next day's game by putting in tomorrow's pitcher to save today's game. We may never know whether Turnbull provided the offending counselor -- now serving a two-year prison sentence -- further opportunities to abuse young boys.

Lesson: Moral courage is not just about doing things we never dared to do. It's also about saving the things we love. Without it, we risk what matters most.