

Zaun silent since Mitchell Report

PR Strategy; Unlike Clemens, Blue Jays catcher has kept quiet

Jeremy Sandler, National Post Published: Tuesday, February 05, 2008



Mike Casesse, Reuters

Usually one of the most media-friendly Blue Jays, Gregg Zaun has refrained from interviews in recent weeks.

Gregg Zaun is likely as well known to Toronto Blue Jays fans as any of his star teammates.

Where former Cy Young winner Roy Halladay is generally reserved and Gold Glove centre-fielder Vernon Wells shuns the spotlight, the 36-year-old catcher has been accessible and accommodating in his four seasons with the Blue Jays.

Zaun understands the game and can explain its nuances, which has made him a favoured interview subject and given him an opportunity to work as a baseball analyst during the past two post-seasons.

It is odd then that since being named in the Mitchell Report as a steroid user last December, Zaun's only communication has been a two-sentence statement sent out by the team via e-mail.

"I am stunned by the allegations set forth in Senator Mitchell's report," he said. "I emphatically deny these allegations but am not prepared to comment further at this time."

The day before the report was released, Zaun railed against it in an extensive interview with the National Post. He has changed his phone number since then.

Zaun's sudden media shyness is just one more piece of the fallout from the Mitchell Report, which is still making headlines as a United States congressional committee prepares for a public hearing next week.

Since Mitchell named more than 90 players in connection with performance-enhancing substances in December, the reaction from those players has been varied.

Roger Clemens, the most prominent player named in the report, immediately went on the offensive.

Andy Pettitte, Clemens' friend, former teammate and occasional training partner, spent 2 1/2 hours with lawyers from the congressional committee yesterday. He has already admitted to the allegations levied against him by Mitchell Report informant Brian McNamee.

Clemens, however, posted a video denial on YouTube, went on 60 Minutes and held a news conference to label his accusers liars.

"He's employing what we in the crisis business call a 'run to the light' strategy," said Gene Grabowski, a senior vice president of Levick Strategic Communications in Washington, D.C. "He's basically saying 'I'm innocent, I want to talk to the congressional committee, I want to go on 60 Minutes. He's acting as though he is innocent.

"Contrast that with Andy Pettitte. He acknowledged that he did something wrong, he apologized for it. Now, he hasn't made amends, but he probably will be doing something that represents making amends."

Grabowski heads his firm's crisis management practice with a client list that includes detainees at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, some Middle Eastern countries and companies caught selling hazardous toys made in China. He advises people to admit mistakes, apologize and try to make amends.

"If you do those three things if you've done something wrong, the public in general will forgive you, but the key is to do it early," he said. "Because it's always the cover-up that gets you in trouble."

Joanna Piros, a senior consultant at Vancouver's Counterpoint Communications, offered a similar take.

"The advice that we give our clients is fess up, stand up and say, 'You know what? I did it. Here's why I did it and I'm sorry.'"

Blue Jays president Paul Godfrey said he has not spoken with Zaun since December when the catcher personally delivered the same denial he issued to the media.

"I think Gregg knows, we've indicated to him and to all other players that the doors of the organization are always open," said Godfrey. "We don't turn our back on any issues involving the players under contract to us."

Godfrey said the club is not advising Zaun, adding players often "deal directly with the Players Association and/or their agents."

The players named in the Mitchell Report will have no choice but to deal with media scrutiny as spring training opens in Florida and Arizona within the next two weeks.

"I don't think Andy Pettitte is going to be hounded by too many reporters at spring training because it's old news, he's already told you what he's done," Grabowski said. "What more is there to say?"

Zaun was fingered by former New York Mets clubhouse attendant Kirk Radmoski in the Mitchell Report, which included a copy of a \$500 cheque sent from Zaun to Radmoski, and a former Montreal Expos bullpen catcher told investigators that he personally supplied Zaun with steroids.

With some hard evidence and multiple accusers, both Grabowski and Piros said Zaun is being ill-served by a head-in-the-sand strategy.

"A pro forma denial on paper is just that," said Piros. "I don't think [people] would be particularly convinced by that. You're more likely to give somebody some slack if they're willing to stand up in front of you and answer some questions."

At some point, Grabowski said, every public figure in a public scandal has to answer questions.

"If you're innocent, by all means, tell your story," he said. "But no comment is not a strategy that is acceptable in either case."