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Ben Roethlisberger's legacy recovery

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By Roy S. Johnson
Special to ESPN.com
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Let's hope [Plaxico Burrese](#) is watching. And taking notes.

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Tom Cammett/Diamond Images/Getty Images Ben Roethlisberger is in the spotlight in Pittsburgh again.

Because the path toward his return to the NFL -- ultimately, even his redemption -- has been drawn up and run like a well-executed pass route.

Sunday afternoon, Pittsburgh quarterback [Ben Roethlisberger](#), returning from a four-game suspension for breaking the NFL's public conduct policy, emerged from a darkened tunnel at Heinz Field during pregame introductions and was showered by rousing cheers.

He was also emerging from a year of ignominy, one in which he stood in danger of being remembered less for being a two-time Super Bowl winner and one of the best young quarterbacks in the NFL than for being a loutish brute, a poster boy for society's ills, spills and testosterone-fueled maladies and the arrogance that seems pervasive throughout pro sports.

Just like [Tiger Woods](#).

Just like [Michael Vick](#).

Just like [Donte' Stallworth](#).

And maybe, just like [Brett Favre](#).

I wasn't completely surprised by the reaction to Roethlisberger. And not simply because it was a home crowd buoyed by the 3-1 mark the Steelers earned without him. Nor do I at all diminish the sexual assault allegations twice made against him (though ultimately not charged), especially since I am the father of a teenaged girl.

Many fans and observers postulated that no matter what he did on the field for the remainder of his career Roethlisberger would always be remembered for his missteps, his failings. His legacy, it was said, would be characterized by what transpired in Lake Tahoe, Nev., and Milledgeville, Ga. Not what he ultimately accomplished as an athlete.

Just like Tiger Woods.

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And maybe, just like Brett Favre.

It has not been so -- at least for the first three athletes on that list. They've all regained at least a portion of their popularity (Vick may be more popular than ever), and they did it by following what I call the Athlete's 4-Step Legacy Revival Program. (Favre hasn't, of course, because the investigation into the allegations of his behavior toward former Jets employee Jenn Sterger is ongoing.)

Of course, the program has its limits and so do we. There are some crimes from which there should be no return such as murder, rape and any transgression against a child. (Unfortunately, the sports culture is still all too willing to forgive and forget many abuses of women.)

Short of those, it's starting to look as many -- even most -- sports fans are willing to forgive and cheer on, as long as the troubled athlete follows the Program. "Everything is repairable," says Mark Lepselter, president of Maxx Sports & Entertainment, whose clients include many former athletes turned broadcasters. ([Tiki Barber](#) being among them.) "If the guy is likeable, it's repairable, as long as the deed doesn't cross into moral turpitude -- and you don't have the 'holy s---' factor."

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Doug Benc/Getty Images Michael Vick was low-key as a backup last season but has electrified fans when he's been on the field this year.

My Program is simple. The first three steps are "contriteness" and "humility" (delivered with clear sincerity), then "acceptance" of any actions taken against them whether by courts or commissioners. In other words: Take the hit and pay the price.

Stallworth served 24 days behind bars after pleading guilty to DUI manslaughter in 2009. (He was sentenced to 30 days and 1,000 hours of community service.) Considering a life was lost in the accident, the sentence was widely deemed too light, but Stallworth quickly and honest accepted responsibility, which tempered cries for harsher treatment.

"From the beginning," says attorney David Cornwell, whose clients include Stallworth and Roethlisberger, "when he was still facing potential criminal, civil and NFL actions, Donte's mom said, 'Do the right thing. If the NFL needs information, give it to them.'"

NFL commissioner Roger Goodell suspended Stallworth for the entire 2009 season. He was signed by the [Baltimore Ravens](#) prior to this season and hopes to make what should be a relatively quiet debut next month after recovering from a broken foot suffered during the third game of the preseason.

No need to recount in full the prices paid for Vick (for his legal transgressions) or Woods (for his moral ones). Both not only lost millions of dollars, but Vick also lost his freedom (for nearly two years, for his involvement in dog fighting) and Woods his family.

Both saw their reputations -- and perhaps their careers -- stained such that many thought they were beyond repair.

And yet Vick, a former All-Pro quarterback, after sitting quietly as a backup in Philadelphia last season, became a starter this season and was playing the best football of his career before a rib cartilage injury in Week 4. Sure there were smatterings of protests at his games, but he was also overwhelmingly embraced by fans, especially after leading the Eagles to wins over Detroit and Jacksonville. In fact, the letters "M.V.P." had begun to replace "D.O.G." in many of the stories about him.

Woods still hears the occasional jeer, but fans who saw his momentous -- though self-induced -- fall from grace and a costly divorce are now almost trying to *will* him out of his swing funk.

That may not have been so had Woods not done that very painful public apology ("I am a sex addict") and admitted his guilt. "And after he wins a couple of majors," says Lepselter, "it'll be like last Thanksgiving never happened."

Roethlisberger's revival may have begun during the preseason -- long after the allegations had been dismissed and his suspension levied -- when the quarterback, who had long had a hostile relationship with the media, ambled toward a gathering of reporters covering the Steelers and began what Cornwell calls "a conversation." "It was not an interview," the attorney said. "It was a discussion, and acknowledgement that 'Big Ben' (the arrogant, frat-boy persona Cornwell admits Roethlisberger cultivated throughout his career) may have been off-putting to them, how he was responsible for their reaction to him and an invitation to see if there could be a difference going forward."

"What Ben went through was similar to what happens to a significant majority of the men in the NFL as they transition from life before the NFL to life in the NFL," Cornwell continued, "especially those who attain some star status. There's an expectation of what an NFL player is supposed to be like, look like, drive and wear. Far more players than we're aware of confront that and struggle to find out where they fit."

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G Fiume/Getty Images Donte' Stallworth hasn't played this season because of an injury,

but he could soon be returning kicks for the Ravens.

And not only the NFL. Just this week Woods admitted that the last year's turmoil allowed him to discover the personal flaws that led to his fall. Speaking during a conference call Monday prior to his Chevron World Challenge, Woods said: "I learned a lot about myself, and I learned how things went wrong, why they went wrong, and had to take a pretty deep and introspective look at myself. And there wasn't a lot of things I like about it. But I had to do it, and I did it, and grateful that I did."

Cornwell says Roethlisberger began similarly looking at Big Ben. "Not how Big Ben impacted others, but whether it was a mask that really fit," he says. "He embraced his roots with his dad, his faith, and ultimately concluded Big Ben was not who he was nor wanted to be. He also didn't get hung up on how people were going to react to him anymore. He invested in value of authenticity and was willing to let chips fall where they may."

Indeed that "authenticity" seems to be the thread that each of the redeemed has embraced. (Are you listening, Plaxico? Brett?)

Let us see who you really are, and not whom you want us to see.

Then we'll decide.

Authenticity is vital to every "step" of the program but the fourth and final one may be the most critical.

Perform.

"You have to continue to have a platform," says Lepselter. "Tiger has a platform and though he has not won any majors it allows fans to see him struggle, see him human and see him try to 'get it back.' Ben has a platform, so does Vick. Having it is important in making fans forget your transgression. If you don't have it, that can be a major factor."

Of course, the Legacy Revival will remain a work in progress -- perhaps for their entire lives. See: [Kobe Bryant](#), [Josh Hamilton](#) and [Dany Heatley](#). And no matter how "successful" it may seem at any time, it remains tenuous. One more off-field misdeed can end it all, dooming their legacy forever.

Even should they not falter, we may never look at them the same. Nor should we. Because maybe what we weren't seeing what was real, anyway. Athletes, like the rest of us, are never as "good" as we make them out to be when they are at the top of the mountain. Nor are they likely as "bad" as we deem them to be at their lowest.

Acknowledging that reality is a step we should all take.

Roy S. Johnson, a veteran sports journalist and media consultant, is the editor-in-chief of [Men's Fitness](#). His blog is [Ballers, Gamers and Scoundrels](#).

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