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Blame It On Mr. Heisman?

Ken Briggs | Jan. 18, 2013 NCR Today

Little lies have a way of creeping into our lives on Sandberg's "little cat's feet" and breaking loose as raging tigers whose tails everyone grab for the antic, profitable ride.

Take the latest Notre Dame dust-up over Manti Te'o and his phony girlfriend.

From the first snap of the season, Te'o and Notre Dame's public relations machine had visions of his capturing a Heisman trophy. Schools chasing that publicity coup have a way of pumping up candidate resumes with attention-getting tales of heroic or saintly virtues. They sometimes lapse into fibs for the sake of selling a good story. By design or coincidence, Te'o emerged as the front-runner right out of the gate; his grandma and lover had died on the same day and, in the odd display of tribute that goes for manliness these days, Te'o had gone right out and played Michigan State the next day, in part because his imaginary lover had urged him to as she was expiring.

It doesn't matter who knew what about the lie. The story sparked its own justifications -- it was just too good. Whether the participants lied openly or whether it took the form of denial. Lies are splendid chameleons.

The lie is viral. Someone invents the girlfriend, she dies on the eve of a big game, and the media, seeking its own piece of the pie, buys the story and runs with it. PR surely saw the advantages and either wished a darker secret weren't true or covered it up. In any event, it went, well, "viral," and Te'o was in the front rank of Heisman candidates at season's end and missed it by a tiger's whisker.

America is arguably the most competitive society the world has ever seen, and getting ahead encourages falsifying one's credentials. Public relations, though practiced with integrity by some, is often a powerful generator of deception, evasion and downright mendacity in desperate attempts to sell the brand. Colleges have become notably untrustworthy sources of information about themselves, so eager are they to elbow their way into higher rankings. But PR is only the most visible myth-making industry. The media join by being complicit, preferring spin to hard reporting, and the public chimes in, too, when portions of it grasp partisan lies when it suits their preconceptions. And the rash of resume frauds testifies to the pressures to bend the truth in an effort to get an edge.

It isn't a slap at public relations, per se, to suggest that the main business of America is marketing success even as the tools for evading the truth have escalated. Illusion and misdirection permeate advertising and politics.

Creating false selves and facades is as old as human nature. Cain dissembled after killing Abel. That reflects a simpler time. Now we have the equipment to play that game on a level that overwhelms Hitler's merciless capacity to lie. It becomes even slicker and dangerous in the hands of global media. Appearances, as they say, can be deceiving. Lying against the backdrop of a carefully cultivated image of righteousness and a multi-billion dollar endowment may make it harder to detect the flaw, but once uncovered it looks like the same old grubby drive to beat the competition.

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