

Padres CEO Tom Garfinkel Goes the Extra Mile After 'Rain Man' Comment

Written by Maury Brown
Monday, 22 April 2013 21:36



We have all made mistakes. We have all said something we wish we hadn't. Very few of us have done so and upset millions. Such was the case with San Diego Padres CEO Tom Garfinkel. Speaking to approx. 50 season-ticket holders the day after Dodgers starting pitcher Zack Greinke hit Padres left-fielder Carlos Quentin with a pitch, resulting in a mound charging, bench-clearing brawl that left Greinke with broken left collarbone. Garfinkel, admittedly still emotional after the brawl, [let out a gaffe](#) .

"He threw at him on purpose, OK?" Garfinkel told the season-ticket holders. "That's what happened. They can say 3-and-2 count, 2-1 game, no one does that. Zack Greinke is a different kind of guy. Anyone seen 'Rain Man'? He's a very smart guy."

It's here that the story veers into social awareness. It's here that I broke a cardinal rule as a member of the media and became part of the story.

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Fans can see athletes, execs, and media as automatons. That we're all ego with no heart. That we live to serve the machine and that because it's our business, you check your emotions at the door. We have family, lives and feelings. Remember that as both Garfinkel and I learned a lot about it.

As an autism awareness advocate and parent of a child on the spectrum, Garfinkel's comments struck a nerve. Being a caregiver to one with autism is hard enough. Having an exec make the comment, and having the season-ticket holders laugh was rubbing salt in the wound. "Rain Man," of course, was an autistic savant. April is International Autism Awareness month. And the day before the brawl [was Autism Awareness day at PETCO Park](#) . It added up, and the seething turned into a boil.

As I have done on occasion when I'm going to write a scathing column, I reach out to the VP of Media Relations at MLB. "Be prepared, I'm going to rip this guy a new one," was the message. I called Garfinkel out on Twitter, demanded an apology for all of us in the autism community, and in a sign I had completely lost all professionalism and objectivity, called him an "asshat".

I had seen Garfinkel's comments as just another exec that was out of touch. I immediately erred on the side of someone that was in a position of power and would use that to avoid accountability.

I was wrong.

For the rest of the day, I got message after message from Garfinkel apologizing. As we went back and forth he talked of his kids and how our story had hit him, not as an exec that made a gaffe in front of the press, but as a father.

I was still leery. Conditioned by those looking to do damage control and spin, I wanted to believe it all true, but still wasn't 100%. I told him I appreciated the personal messages, but this was about others and I was wanting to hear that a public apology was coming.

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"I will," Garfinkel wrote. "I'm struggling with the words. They will be my words not a PR persons." He then added, "You don't know me and have no reason to think I am anything but an 'asshat.' But I feel terrible and I am truly very sorry."

I tried to explain life with a special needs child. As I have done far too many times, I went through trying to describe something that is very hard for one that hasn't experienced it. My wife had spent the morning trying at the optometrist's to get my son to go along with an eye exam. He was having nothing of it. Redirection, coaxing, bribing with treats, all were in vain. As I explained to Garfinkel, "He has no idea what's occurring. There's no way to communicate that this is something to help him. In his mind, someone is shining a bright light in his face and without knowing what the reasons are for it, is wanting it to stop. It's drove my wife to tears. The comments about 'Rain Man' added to the situation."

As the dialog continued, so did the words of apology.

"Your emotion sparked up the dad in me and personalized just how insensitive my comments were. I feel terrible about it."

It went beyond me. Garfinkel called the media. He went on XX1090 with Darren Smith. He apologized publicly through the media outlets. And, he wrote those personal words he had been struggling with [via Twitter](#) :

"Hearing from parents who have children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and being a parent myself, I have learned a lot today. I am deeply sorry for my insensitive remarks. Separately, I'd like to also personally apologize to anyone affected by Social Anxiety Disorder."

It's here when one has certainly done more than enough to apologize for a wrong. It was clear from our communication, the reaching out to the media, and his messages on Twitter that he was remorseful.

But, he went further.

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"Call me," he messaged, and gave me his number.

It was later in the evening by this time, and when we did connect on the phone, I told Tom that it had to have been a rough day. "It was one of the toughest. But your story really hit me," he said. I was certainly not blameless in all of this, and said how sorry for how I conducted myself, especially for the gratuitous "asshat" statement. He said I had nothing to apologize for even though I clearly did and regret it to this day.

Over the course of about 20 minutes, we spoke, not as baseball executive and media member, but as two people that had learned a lot over the day about something larger than sports; it was about family and the human condition. I was not prepared for the call in its complete honesty. I can only say this... his was as emotional and as heartfelt an apology as one could get.

"I don't know what I was thinking."

I said, "Well, us special needs folks are a bit hypersensitive, sorry about that. I don't think you were malicious."

"I don't know why I did it. It was a bad day.... I just want to apologize to you and your wife," was Garfinkel's reply.

As I said at the beginning, we have all made mistakes. The difference for this man was he did it and it splashed across newspapers coast-to-coast. We seem to now be in a society where it's always someone else's fault. Few, especially in a position of power, feel the need to be accountable. Tom Garfinkel took that head on and I personally gained an incredible amount of respect for him.

I should never be part of the story, but I broke that rule. I needed to be a fool and play that role of championing personal accountability. I found out that, at least for this man, he never needed the prodding.

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