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Excuse me while I devise a defense

These days, 'I had a bad day' isn't good enough for an athlete to explain his failures

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Blame day baseball for decades of Cubs' futility, former infielder Todd Walker suggested on his way to—he's really in trouble now—sunny San Diego.

Later came word that Cubs pitcher Mark Prior, who hasn't exactly made hitters sweat this season, might pin part of his problems on excessive perspiration that makes it hard to grip a curveball. Prior also recently pointed his sweaty finger at the dastardly winds and dimensions of Wrigley Field for helping the Arizona Diamondbacks take him deep three times.

That complaint came two weeks before Sox starter Jon Garland, after his only loss in his last 10 decisions, used high humidity as part of his postgame explanation why the Yankees hit three home runs out of temperature-touchy U.S. Cellular Field. Two days earlier, Sox teammate Mark Buehrle wondered what role Questec, the electronic evaluator of umpires, had played in his midseason struggles.

In a summer full of excuses, here and all over the sports world, it would be hard to pick the flimsiest.

Will we hear more of the same type of whining this weekend at the PGA Championships at the longer-than-ever Medinah Country Club?

Beyond Chicago, the competition for most implausible explanation expands once you include sprinter Justin Gatlin's conspiratorial masseuse who he says rubbed his legs with a testosterone cream and Tour de France cyclist Floyd Landis' claim that too much Jack Daniel's made him test positive for the same substance.

Don't expect the whoppers to go away, either.

By the end of this week, chances are good that at least a handful of golfers at Medinah will link either

the 7,561 yards of the course or the pin placements to their high scores. Before the end of the NFL preseason, if the Bears look like anything but a Super Bowl contender, the potential reasons offered could range from injuries to overexposure to the curse of Sid Luckman.

Whether they're an effort either to explain away unexpected failure or gain an edge at whatever cost, the number of farfetched alibis by today's athletes has increased at nearly the same rate as their salaries.

"When in doubt, go into denial—that's the way it is now," said Dr. Steven Ungerleider, author of four books and a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee Sport Psychology Registry. "You're hearing more excuses than ever because we live in a culture of denial, greed, money and a quest for success. It all leads to a lack of accountability and personal responsibility."

The method to such madness could be athletes hearing from coaches or sports psychologists the need for them to believe in their ability, even if the words used to rationalize their shortcomings fail the smell test outside the locker room.

"What athletes are doing when they do that is reassuring themselves and trying to maintain control, so you hear things like, 'It's the ballpark, it's not me,'" said Peter P. Roby, the director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University and a former college basketball coach. "From a psychological standpoint, it's a coping mechanism."

Indeed, when the excuses come from an athlete such as Prior, who was once unflappable, or a player such as Buehrle, in an uncharacteristic slump, it can reveal the troubles as more mental than physical.

"It's a sign that their confidence and mental toughness is shot to the point they cannot overcome external factors," said Mitch Abrams, a sports psychologist and president of Learned Excellence for Athletes. "I agree that you see [excuses] more than you used to, but I don't agree that it happens more than it used to."

Noted sports sociologist Jay Coakley from the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs attributes the trend toward excuse-making to the widening gulf between fans and millionaire athletes and the proliferation of media covering their every move. A generation ago, the public and media cut athletes more slack because, Coakley believes, "they were more like us."

"Now if we hear a pitcher [like Prior or Garland] say, 'It was windy out there,' it's immediately discounted as a multimillion-dollar pampered athlete who doesn't know what real work is," Coakley said. "We have no context in which to put their comments."

Instead of providing that context, Coakley sees the 24-hour, seven-days-a-week sports media creating an atmosphere that paints every answer black or white because shades of gray—while perhaps more insightful—can be less inciting. In that environment, players conclude that honesty might not always be the best policy because of the criticism that often follows.

"In the past, people were more willing to accept someone having a bad day, [but] today we live under the powerful illusion that we can control everything we do," Coakley said. "That has led people not to accept an answer like, 'I just had a bad day.' Players don't have all the answers to the 'Why?' questions. So sometimes they try to pull something out of their hat spontaneously and we're left to say, 'He said what?'"

Unlike many fans, Coakley allows for the possibility that while "the wind" might sound like an awfully feeble excuse for a pitcher, it might be the most accurate explanation.

"It sounds like sour grapes, but these athletes think in terms of centimeters and millimeters and see things we don't see," Coakley said. "It could be an excuse, it could be something said to get off his back or he could be right."

The most outlandish alibis, a majority of them coming from athletes caught doping, have made the public more skeptical than ever.

Cyclist Tyler Hamilton, for example, claimed in 2004 after he got caught transfusing someone else's blood that the blood belonged to his twin who died in utero. German track star Dieter Baumann contended in 1999 that someone had injected his toothpaste with the steroid nandrolene after he twice tested positive and received a two-year ban. After winning the 1998 Australian Open, tennis player Petr Korda blamed a positive steroid test on eating too much veal, even though one tennis organization found Korda would have to have eaten 40 calves a day for 20 years to reach that level.

Such a hackneyed history of high-profile excuses makes explanations such as Landis', in particular, harder to stomach for scholars who study sports.

"Landis' claim is still in the review process," Ungerleider said. "But most of us who operate in this world expect for a positive test not to be so, there has to be a magical story."

Rarely do they come with a happy ending.

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