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MLB

The Astros' Bet on an Accused Abuser Backfires

A locker room outburst by Houston assistant general manager Brandon Taubman reignited the team's controversial decision to employ reliever Roberto Osuna



Houston Astros relief pitcher Roberto Osuna delivers a pitch during the ALCS. PHOTO: THOMAS SHEA/REUTERS

By Jared Diamond

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HOUSTON—The Houston Astros traded for Roberto Osuna 15 months ago with little regard for the moral implications of such a deal. They added a pitcher charged with assaulting the mother of his child, an accusation Major League Baseball found credible enough to suspend Osuna for 75 games under the sport's domestic violence policy.

No other team wanted Osuna, but the Astros saw a distressed asset. So they acquired him over the objections of some members of the front office and intense backlash from a portion of their fan base. He cost almost nothing, and he increased their chances of winning a championship.

That calculation imploded on the eve of the World Series following an ugly incident involving an Astros executive's profane defense of Osuna, directed at female reporters, after the team won the American League Championship Series.

On Monday, Sports Illustrated ran an article that said assistant general manager Brandon Taubman taunted the group of women as the Astros partied in the clubhouse after their pennant-clinching victory on Saturday. The story asserted that Taubman turned toward the reporters, including one wearing a purple domestic-violence awareness bracelet, and repeatedly shouted in an “offensive and frightening” manner, “Thank God we got Osuna! I’m so f—ing glad we got Osuna!” One of the journalists targeted had often posted phone numbers to domestic-violence hotlines on social media when Osuna came in to pitch for the Astros in 2018, National Public Radio reported on Tuesday.

The Astros on Monday further inflamed the controversy. After initially declining to comment for the article, the team rebutted Sports Illustrated’s account and attacked the author’s credibility in a statement calling the piece “misleading and completely irresponsible” and saying, “We are extremely disappointed in Sports Illustrated’s attempt to fabricate a story where one does not exist.”

Instead, they said, Taubman “was supporting the player during a difficult time.” (Osuna had blown the save in the ninth inning in the game, before second baseman José Altuve hit a walk-off home run.)

Taubman’s outburst reignited the Astros’ already controversial and much-maligned decision to employ Osuna, embarrassing the organization hours before its premier event. Rather than celebrating the beginning of an exciting matchup between the Astros and Washington Nationals, the conversation Tuesday revolved around the Astros’ seeming indifference to the continued criticisms of Osuna’s presence on their roster.

MLB said Tuesday that it would open an investigation into the Taubman situation, adding that, “Everyone in baseball must use care to not engage in any behavior—whether intentional or not—that could be construed as minimizing the egregiousness of an act of domestic violence.” But the league’s comments and plans to interview those involved did little to quell the firestorm, one the Astros largely brought on themselves.

Sports Illustrated said on Tuesday that it “unequivocally stands behind” its story and its writer, Stephanie Apstein. The Baseball Writers’ Association of America demanded an apology from the Astros, Taubman, owner Jim Crane and Houston’s top two public relations officials, Anita Sehgal and Gene Dias.

Crane said that the Astros “fully support MLB and baseball’s stances and values regarding domestic violence” and emphasized the team’s fundraising efforts for groups supporting that cause. Taubman on Tuesday apologized for using “inappropriate language” and his “unprofessional and inappropriate comments.”



Brandon Taubman, right, during a news conference to introduce pitcher Gerrit Cole in 2018. PHOTO: MICHAEL CIAGLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

“My overexuberance in support of a player has been misinterpreted as a demonstration of a regressive attitude about an important social issue,” Taubman said.

Nobody on the Astros retracted its denial of the Sports Illustrated story on Tuesday. General manager Jeff Luhnow didn’t address the media before Game 1 of the World Series. Manager A.J. Hinch did, serving as the highest-ranking person in the organization to address the issue in person

“No one, it doesn’t matter if it’s a player, a coach, a manager, any of you members of the media, should ever feel like when you come into our clubhouse that you’re going to be uncomfortable or disrespected,” Hinch said. “We all need to be better across the board, in the industry.”

When the Astros completed the trade for Osuna in July 2018, Luhnow cited the team’s “zero-tolerance policy related to abuse of any kind.” He said he spoke directly with Osuna and several of his former teammates and friends before signing off on the deal. He reconciled acquiring Osuna with the Astros’ “zero-tolerance policy” by saying, “I believe that you can have a zero-tolerance policy and also have an opportunity to give people second chances when they have made mistakes in the past in other organizations.”

Officials withdrew the assault charge against Osuna in September 2018 after the alleged victim declined to testify. None of the Astros’ statements this week about Taubman mentioned the zero-tolerance policy.

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