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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2021 | GREENBAYPRESSGAZETTE.COM

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Weathering the storm

Aaron Rodgers' endorsement partnerships could survive his COVID controversy. Here's how.



Aaron Rodgers is the new brand ambassador for Swiss luxury watchmaker Zenith. The photo shoot was done at West De Pere High School. COURTESY OF ZENITH

Richard Ryman Green Bay Press-Gazette | USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

GREEN BAY – If the Green Bay Packers win the Super Bowl and Aaron Rodgers just stops talking about his views on medical science, he might escape his current self-created COVID-19 controversy relatively whole. • A public relations firestorm erupted when the Green Bay Packers quarterback tested positive for COVID-19 and it was revealed he was unvaccinated, although when asked the question in August, he equivocated, giving the impression to some that he was. After his diagnosis, he then made the situation worse by talking about “woke mobs,” “cancel culture” and NFL protocols he ignored because he didn’t agree with them. • One business partner, Prevea Health of Ashwaubenon, cut ties with Rodgers immediately after he said he had not been vaccinated and was using unproven or disproved practices such as taking Ivermectin, an anti-parasitic drug most often used in horses. Prevea has been an early and consistent promoter of vaccinations.

See **RODGERS**, Page 16A

“We do know this, if somebody’s done a lot of harm and a company just cut ties, their stock price goes up a notch. The sooner it’s done, the better. It’s kind of a damage-control device. In this particular case, I don’t think it’s a direct harm, so the wait-and-see approach is probably what they are doing on purpose.”

James Harris, assistant professor of business administration-marketing at St. Norbert College



Outdoors
Paul A. Smith
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WIS.

Positive forecast for gun deer hunting season

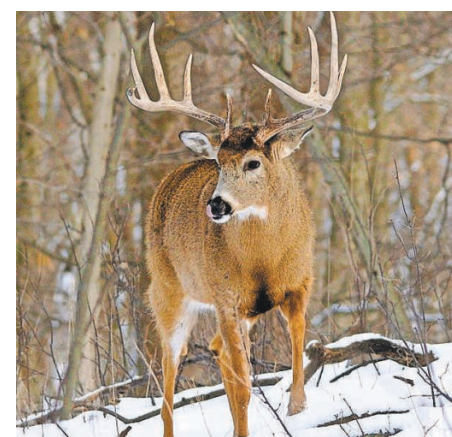
Ask people to name leading cultural events in the Badger State and they readily tick off the Wisconsin State Fair, Summerfest and Green Bay Packers games.

But when it comes to participation, the main act takes the stage in fall: Wisconsin’s deer hunting seasons.

In 2020, 876,000 people took part in deer hunting in the state, according to the Department of Natural Resources.

That compares to about 860,000 people in the seats during regular-season games at Lambeau Field, 840,000 attendees at State Fair in West Allis and 409,000 at the music festival in Milwaukee, said Eric Lobner, DNR director of wildlife.

See **DEER**, Page 15A



Aided by another mild winter, the white-tailed deer population has generally increased across Wisconsin and will provide good opportunities for hunters during the 2021 Wisconsin gun deer season. PROVIDED BY RANDY CRAWFORD

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USA TODAY

COP26: Nations strike climate deal with coal compromise. **4A**

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Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers takes photos with child cancer survivors at a 2019 fundraiser. Prevea dropped Rodgers as a spokesman this month after he contracted COVID-19 and acknowledged he had not been vaccinated against the coronavirus. USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

back in the playoffs, State Farm will believe this has blown over," he said.

None of his other endorsement partners has a direct tie to medical services or has Rodgers as an on-camera spokesman, so they can afford to wait out the controversy, which they appear to be doing.

"Those other brands, there's less of an issue there regarding the importance of trust in brand decision-making," Pokrywczynski said.

But given a choice, those brands prefer positive messages to surviving a public relations hullabaloo.

James Harris, assistant professor of business administration-marketing at St. Norbert College in De Pere, also said patience makes sense. While controversial, Rodgers' actions likely have not damaged their brands.

"We do know this, if somebody's done a lot of harm and a company just cut ties, their stock price goes up a notch. The sooner it's done, the better. It's kind of a damage-control device," he said. "In this particular case, I don't think it's a direct harm, so the wait-and-see approach is probably what they are doing on purpose."

If a company has taken a strong pro-vaccination stance, an association with Rodgers could be problematic, especially in its relationship with its own employees, said Phil Clampitt, professor of communications at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.

"Otherwise, their smart strategy would be to pull back and wait for this controversy to play out," he said.

There is good reason why companies might be reluctant to cut ties with Rodgers. In a study completed in early October, before Rodgers tested positive for COVID-19, The Action Network ranked Rodgers as the fourth most marketable player in the NFL, behind Tom Brady, Odell Beckham Jr. and Russell Wilson. Its formula looked at 20 factors across three core metrics: social media performance, audience performance and overall likability.

The Action Network's rankings have not been recalculated in the wake of the COVID controversy, but Rodgers may have a reservoir of goodwill, in a marketing sense, to draw on.

"As long as his teammates and coaches are supportive of him and he wins the Super Bowl, this all goes away," Clampitt said.

Also, Rodgers will have to avoid the temptation to reassert his case. Shutting up might be difficult for him, both because of his personality and because he'll certainly be asked about it the next time he faces reporters. But from a public relations standpoint, deflection would be the prudent course, Pokrywczynski said.

"There was a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel story that he acknowledged he was mistaken on a few claims. I think he should continue with that stance," he said. "I'm here to talk about the game. I've answered that question as far as I'm going to answer it."

To be clear, Rodgers offered a non-apology apology. He said he was sorry if people were offended by what he said, but he isn't changing his opinion on any of it.

See RODGERS, Page 17A

Rodgers

Continued from Page 1A

Rodgers won't resume being a spokesman for Prevea and likely won't become one for other health care organizations, but his other endorsements might survive. According to Rodgers' page on the Online Sports Database, he has endorsement deals with Adidas, State Farm, Sharpie, IZOD, Bose, Capital One, Bergstrom Automotive, Zenith Watches, TaylorMade Golf, QuickBooks, FedEx and Cash App.

Cash App said its deal was only for a couple of days on social media and ended before the COVID-19 issue came up. QuickBooks said its association with Rodgers was for a short campaign that ended in August.

Other companies contacted about Rodgers either declined to comment or did not respond, with the exception of State Farm, which said early on that it would stand behind Rodgers while simultaneously reducing the number of aired advertisements featuring him.

Although health care is not a part of the Rodgers appearances for State Farm, trust is an important part of what the insurance company is selling, said James Pokrywczynski, associate professor of strategic communications at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

"I think what their strategy is, they are going to bury his appearances deep in the vault and see how this thing plays out for a month or so. If he gets the team

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UN envoy sounds alarm on Lebanon

Impoverished nation fights economic woes

Sarah El Deeb
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BEIRUT – Lebanon is a failing state that has also failed its people, leaving them struggling with converging crises that have impoverished the population and eroded trust in authorities, a U.N. expert said Friday.

Olivier De Schutter, the U.N. special rapporteur on poverty, sounded the alarm at the end of a 12-day visit to Lebanon. In an interview with The Associated Press, he said it is critical that Lebanese politicians realize they cannot rely indefinitely on foreign aid and humanitarian assistance.

Still, De Schutter said it was not too late for the government to take measures to help protect the impoverished in this nation of 6 million, including 1 million Syrian refugees.

The economic crisis in Lebanon has

been described as one of the worst in the world in 150 years. It has plunged more than half the population into poverty in just months, left the national currency in freefall and sent inflation and unemployment soaring.

Doctors, nurses and teachers have left the country in droves; schools have struggled to reopen amid a crippling fuel crisis and the poorest families are forced to marry off their daughters early or send their children to work to cope with the meltdown. De Schutter warned of a “wasted generation.”

After more than a year without a fully functioning government because of political bickering, Prime Minister Najib Mikati’s Cabinet was formed in September. But disagreements have once again spawned a paralysis; the Cabinet has not been able to meet for weeks.

De Schutter’s mission was to assess the government’s plans to confront the formerly middle-income country’s quick descent into poverty. The government, he said, has no time to waste.

“Very often the answers I got were a

reference to the Lebanese population’s need to be supported by humanitarian assistance, by international donors. That however is not a long term strategy,” De Schutter said.

He described Lebanon as “one of the most unequal countries in the world,” with 10% of the population in control of 70% of the assets. Critical tax reforms are essential and shareholders in large commercial banks must bear the largest part of the sector’s financial losses – and not the small depositors as has been happening for months.

“We know this government has a limited time to start and implement reforms,” De Schutter warned. Lebanon’s next general elections are due in the spring.

De Schutter also said social safety dependent on funding from international financial institutions such as the World Bank currently only cover one tenth of the population. A national plan, not dependent on foreign aid, must be in

place to protect the country’s destitute, he said. He said he would advise the United Nations to condition aid on reforms, expand social protection and use public finances better. Lebanon’s donors have also made reforms a condition for assistance.

“It makes no sense to pour money into humanitarian support if these reforms are not implemented,” De Schutter said. “This is the government of the last chance.”

However, the government, which has said that talks with the International Monetary Fund for a recovery plan are a priority, has been beset once again by internal fighting.

One problem has been the course of Lebanon’s probe into the Aug. 4, 2020, explosion at Beirut’s port, when hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate ignited after a massive fire. At least 216 people were killed and some 6,000 were injured. Entire neighborhoods of Beirut were badly damaged.

Rodgers

Continued from Page 16A

Pokrywczynski said the Packers organization also missed an opportunity to rein in the crisis.

“The coach said we are following all the protocols, and it was pretty obvious all the protocols weren’t being followed,” he said. “The team had a chance to say we are going to seriously review all our protocols and see where we can do better. That would have softened it. I think the team missed that.”

The Packers were fined \$300,000 by the NFL for not following protocols and Rodgers and teammate Allen Lazard were fined \$14,650 each for the same offense.

Social media can make public relations problems worse, and it might have an effect on how soon this controversy passes. Social media can amplify a controversy, but it also rushes to the next issue when it comes along, leaving current controversies behind. In either case, it is another reason why companies might lie low instead of reacting to what Rodgers did and said.

The typical reaction to a such a crisis is to address the issue, offer a solution and follow through quickly, which usually tamps down the fuss, but social media changes that calculation, Harris said. The better action now by less-affected brands may be to do and say nothing that will poke the social media bear.

“We have an environment right now where things that weren’t controversial before are. And now you have to take a

political edge to it. And ‘Wow, this is just amplified noise and feeling,’” Harris said.

Rightly or wrongly, winning could be the fastest way to make the controversy dissipate.

“If he wins, people tend to forget about things. Some of them will forgive him,” Harris said. “We are talking about a fan base that is broad and deep and represents all kinds of interests.”

Clampitt said Rodgers previously had a squeaky-clean image. That might not hold true going forward.

“He didn’t lie, he equivocated. When you equivocate, you run the risk people are going to take it the wrong way. People delay judgment. Now the judgment came,” he said.

In the end, there’s no question Rodgers was duplicitous, and people can put that wherever they like on the continuum of lies, Harris said.

“It’s not a great look,” he said. “When you talk about celebrity and endorsers, one of the aspects that goes into it is trust and expertise. He was trusted because he is an aspirant person and he does well on the football field and everybody likes ‘go team.’”

“The problem is, some of these folks start thinking they are experts in every area because they tend to be listened to. And that expertise just got whacked, and whacked down.”

Natalie Brophy contributed to this report.

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