Winning back Cuban-American Marlins fans may be tough sell for manager, experts say

By Johnny Diaz, Staff writer

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Miami Marlins manager Ozzie Guillen's public apology Tuesday may help mend his relationship with South Florida's Cuban-American community, but winning back fans won't come easy, say some media and advertising analysts.

Guillen apologized repeatedly at a morning news conference for recent comments he made in a Time magazine piece about how he "loved" and "admired" Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Marlins officials announced Tuesday they suspended the manager for five games, as residents picketed outside the new Marlins stadium in Little Havana.

Guillen is hardly the first figure to earn people's scorn. Other sports stars, celebrities and politicians have regretted remarks they made publicly. Some never saw their careers recover, while others were able to rebuild their image.

In Guillen's case, this was far from his first verbal blunder. He has made inflammatory remarks including a homophobic slur in 2006 when he was manager of the Chicago White Sox.

"Ozzie is known for speaking very off the cuff and expressing thoughts that for many are strange and even inflammatory. That's Ozzie being Ozzie," said Scott Becher, executive vice president and managing director at Fort Lauderdale-based Zimmerman Advertising. "This case is a little extreme because in the process Ozzie has offended a pretty sizable chunk of the Marlins fan base. It's unlikely that Cuban-Americans will ever forget Ozzie's sentiments."

Another celebrity who regretted his choice of words was former CNN anchor Rick Sanchez, who was fired in 2010 after implying in a radio interview that Jews controlled the media. He apologized, called his words "tired and mangled," and he was hired nine months later to provide analysis for the Florida International University football team.


Analysts say each moved in the right direction branding-wise by admitting their mistakes, and the first step was a public apology, as Guillen did.
The mea culpa showed "how intense the Cuban community felt about that statement," Fred Fejes, a media professor at Florida Atlantic University, said of Guillen. "They may forgive him, but they won't forget this. It may be impossible to wipe the slate clean."

Marlins first baseman Gaby Sanchez, who is Cuban-American, said he was pleased with how Guillen handled himself Tuesday.

"He definitely looked very sincere to me," Sanchez said. "We just have to move forward and just continue."

Guillen could further improve his image by supporting local Cuban-American groups and nonprofit community organizations in Miami, said Stephen A. Greyser, a Harvard Business School professor who studies brand marketing and sports management.

"Some of that is philanthropic. Some of it is getting out there and speaking to relevant community groups about the importance of understanding your heritage," Greyser said. "It will help to restore his reputation."

But it may be too soon to tell what impact Guillen's apology will have on fans and on the team.

"Did Ozzie seem sincere in his apology? Yes!" Becher said. "It's not unusual for sports fans to give their stars a second chance."