

Bounties

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The shocking news out of the NFL this past week was that football is a violent game and that violence is encouraged by coaches. I suspect most American boys learned this basic truth about football when they were six or seven years old.

Football is a collision sport. The object is to hit the other guy harder than he can hit you, and if that is achieved consistently your team will win and you will be regarded as a very good player. The violence in the game is at the heart of its appeal to both those who play and those who watch. The big hit, the solid tackle, and physically subduing your opponent is a most satisfying feeling.

Is anyone who played the game at any level surprised that coaches are paying bounties for this kind of aggression? I can recall from very early on in my short football career that coaches encouraged players to "take out" the star of the opposition. Inflicting injury is how you "take out" someone. Cash rewards were not the payout for a "take out," but the total admiration of your friends and the coaches were. For adolescent boys what could be a more powerful incentive?

Well, yes that too, and it came along with the attainment of hero status.

If the practice of bounties is as extensive as it seems, why did the hordes of NFL reporters not notice it? And why, only now, do these reporters condemn the practice? Does anyone actually think that their feigned shock is sincere? The hypocrisy of the sports press is once again mind bending, just as it was when the baseball writers expressed shock and outrage over steroid use once it became a public issue.

So what's the big fuss over the cash incentive program run by New Orleans Saints coaches for their defensive players? Reportedly \$1000 was the reward for a "cart off" and \$1500 for a game ending injury. In the playoffs rewards doubled. As many as 27 players were involved and the NFL collected over 18,000 documents totally over 50,000 pages of material on the New Orleans Saints.

First, bounties are a violation of NFL rules. According to Roger Goodell no performance incentive payments, or bounties of any kind, can be given by a team to its players. The rule is designed to promote "competitive integrity and player safety." Bounties are also a violation of the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

Second, at a time when the NFL is trying to promote player safety in the face of the concussion studies of the past few years, this is a particularly damaging revelation. The NFL is facing a myriad of law suits over concussions and their long term effects and these suits include brain damage and death. One report has identified more than 35 filings involving about 700 former players and family members against the NFL.

Greg Williams, the Saints defensive coordinator, has been identified as the source of the Saints bounty program, and many who played for Williams in Washington and Buffalo have said they operated under similar programs. Indeed players across the league have been quoted as saying that bounties are a common practice and have been organized by players as well as coaches. Many players characterized bounties as a routine part of the NFL game.

There have been numerous calls over the past several days for Goodell to severely punish Williams and the Saints. The scandal has been compared unfavorably to the Patriots Spygate Scandal in which Bill Belichick was fined \$500,000 and the Patriots were fined \$250,000. If the penalties for the Saints exceed those put on the Pats, it would no doubt have to include suspensions of coaches. Those players who were found guilty of illegal hits over the past couple of seasons faced suspensions and fines, and if it turns out these punishable hits were encouraged by coaches, then the coaches should be given even longer suspensions than the players.

If these practices were common across the league, then will Goodell have to punish everyone involved in them? If so, the wreckage left across the NFL could be formidable. So the Commissioner is now faced with some difficult decisions, the first of which will be what to do with the Saints, and the second will be whether to investigate the bounty practices across the league. If the practice is not fully investigated and punished, Goodell will risk strengthening the cases of those suing the NFL by calling

into question the NFL's sincerity in reducing concussions and related injuries.

Goodell is caught in a dilemma. He can both punish the guilty and risk angering owners, coaches, and players, or he can punish only the Saints and hope that is enough, while leaving an opening for those with law suits against the league.

In the end Goodell and the NFL are caught in a position which stems from the inherent nature of football, a violent and dangerous sport that can and does inflict permanent damage on those who play. As Michael Oriard has pointed out in *Brand NFL* "a sport in which players did not risk such consequences would not have football's primal appeal," as "football and pain have an intimate relationship that every player comes to know too well." The football "culture of toughness is indeed dangerous, as it drives players to risk crippling injuries to earn the respect of coaches, teammates, and themselves."

There is a delicate balance that must be achieved between the brutality of football and its rules, which are designed to produce what has been termed "controlled mayhem" and "sanctioned savagery." An unbalancing in either direction risks destroying either the appeal of the game or its ability to produce some measure of safety for its players.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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