

# NFL

7-25-2011

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## Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "NFL" (2011). *On Sport and Society*. 60.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/60>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
JULY 25, 2011

Today was Day 129 of America Held Hostage. No, the Ayatollah Komenhi and his band of fanatical hostage takers have not returned. This is not the ABC television news mantra that was featured during the Iranian Hostage crisis and spawned "Nightline" and made a celebrity out of Ted Koppel. This was something far more significant.

It was Day 129 of the NFL Lockout.

If you are like me, you wondered what exactly constituted the crisis. There were no real games lost, no demand for the release of political prisoners, nor was anyone in fact locked out of anything of any significance.

The Lockout was a simple little tactic by the NFL owners who were trying to pry some cash out of the hands of players, to then be inserted into their own pockets. Some owners might still have believed that such a lockout, if highly successful, could rid the world the NFLPA once and for all. Of course only the most radical of Tea Party Owners would still be dreaming that dream.

By the middle of last week it seemed as if the Lockout was coming to an end. At least that was being signaled by the always quotable Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys. He was quoted as saying that all there was left to do in the process was analogous to "circumcising mosquitoes." When I first heard this phrase I was amused, and like most people interpreting The Jones, assumed that his meaning was that the process was nearly over, and all the big issues were settled.

Then I started to think about the actual process of "circumcising mosquitoes." How difficult a job might this be? How long might it take? How much micro-surgery might this involve? And what of the anesthesia? How delicate an operation might that be? This got me to thinking that the King of Dallas might have meant that there was still much to be done, and that it was going to be a delicate and difficult road ahead.

I have yet to discern the full meaning the mosquito analogy, but luckily we are not going to live to see Day 131 of America Held Hostage by the NFL. We will have

football of the professional kind, and it will more awash in money than ever.

I will sleep well tonight.

It might be worthwhile here, to look at a bit of the history leading to the NFL Hostage Crisis. The League and the NFLPA have a history of contention and bitterness that goes back for well over a half century.

In its early years, the NFLPA was in turn ignored, manipulated, lied to, and the object of hostility from league owners, as well as the first two NFL Commissioners, Bert Bell and Pete Rozelle. Under Rozelle's Reign, the NFLPA tried repeatedly to gain an equal footing with the owners in controlling their working conditions. They could not do so. The role of Rozelle was to protect the power of the owners, and at times he was ruthless in doing so. The rancor of the 1970's and '80s ran long and deep.

During the Rozelle Reign the NFLPA went through several strikes, lockouts, and lawsuits, seeking to accrue some power to impact their working conditions. Above all they sought the freedom to sell their talents in an open capitalist marketplace. The owners, while proclaiming the virtues of capitalism, preferred the power inherent in a cartel, and the economic system of socialist sharing among themselves.

In the end this led the NFLPA to change course. Under the leadership of Gene Upshaw and following the disastrous strike of 1987, the union went back to the courts. This tactical shift necessitated the decertification of the NFLPA as a union. It was also at this point in 1989 that Pete Rozelle stepped down as Commissioner, to be succeeded by Paul Tagliabue. It was a fortuitous choice.

Facing an ever hostile legal environment and understanding the importance of labor peace for all concerned, Paul Tagliabue approached Gene Upshaw seeking to open a new era in Management and Labor relations in the NFL. This process was initiated by the courts and facilitated by a positive working relationship and mutual respect between Tagliabue and Upshaw. The result was a settlement of the lawsuits and the signing of a new Collective Bargaining Agreement in January of 1993. This agreement was renewed in 1996, '98, 2000, 2002, and 2006.

The result of this labor peace was that all concerned were making more money than ever before, as the owners and players both saw their incomes skyrocket. It was the best of times and the best of times.

Following the 2006 Agreement, Paul Tagliabue retired as Commissioner, and the semi-youthful Roger Goodell was chosen as Commissioner. Goodell had worked his way up through the ranks of the NFL bureaucracy, and was well trained by both Pete Rozelle and Paul Tagliabue. Goodell once said he had earned his version of an MBA working for his two predecessors.

Unfortunately an increasing number of owners found it impossible to enjoy their new found wealth and prosperity. They liked the idea of becoming richer, but they were uncomfortable with the idea of the players getting richer. The player's share of revenues began to look excessive to the owners, and so they took the golden goose by the neck and began to twist. The owners, in one of the most palpable acts of greed in our Age of Greed, decided they wanted more, and the players should get less. Thus, the coming of the Lockout.

Not only was Paul Tagliabue gone, but Gene Upshaw had died, and his replacement, DeMaurice Smith, was very much an unknown quantity. The key question now would be could these two men learn to work together, control their constituencies, and prevent the slaughter of the golden goose.

Thus far the answer seems to be yes, but there is much yet to be revealed.

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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