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Brady and Goodell

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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The success of the NFL derives in part from its mastery of the electronic media as the league is able to blanket that world at all times and places. There is no off-season for the NFL. On the rare occasion, there can be drawbacks to this dominance. The last seventy-two hours is not what the media mavens at the NFL would call "a good run."

John Dowd, the author of the Dowd Report that fingered Pete Rose as a habitual gambler, said yesterday that Tom Brady was "ambushed" by Roger Goodell and the NFL. Dowd claimed that the process and decision on Brady violated "fundamental fairness and due process" in a case "without any standards at all."

This is one of many opinions and analyses that flooded the electronic media when Goodell, in his usual clumsy way, announced that the four game suspension of Brady would stand. The key "new evidence" that led to the decision was the revelation that Brady had destroyed his cell phone containing potential evidence in the case of the deflated footballs.

In his written decision Goodell drew comparisons of Brady's action to NFL drug violations. It is similar, he noted, in that it is an attempt to "secure a competitive advantage in, and threatens the integrity of, the game." Goodell added that the punishment was "lenient" considering the nature of the violation. Some found this comparison a bit over the top. Some found it insulting. Others found it silly.

Following the release of this decision the NFL's lawyers headed to a Manhattan court seeking legal cover for Goodell. A few short hours later the NFL Players Association headed to a Minnesota courtroom, a friendly place over the years, seeking to overturn the decision, and indeed to put another limit on Goodell's power. The NFLPA called Goodell's decision a "new low, even for them..." Less than twenty-four hours later the Minnesota court sent the case to New York. The New York judge assigned to the case urged the parties to seek a settlement of the case without litigation, and ordered both Brady and Goodell to appear in his courtroom twice in August.

At an emotional news conference Robert Kraft, New England Patriot owner and strong defender of Roger Goodell, called the Commissioner's decision "unfathomable" and confessed that "I was wrong to put my faith in the league." He went on to say that there was no evidence that anything had been done by anyone to the footballs, and that Tom Brady is an honorable man. He concluded: "it is completely incomprehensible to me that the league continues to take steps to disparage one of its all-time great players and a man for whom I have the utmost respect." Not exactly a ringing endorsement for the hapless Commissioner.

Is this an important development or it is just some sound and fury signify nothing? Only time will tell. When Goodell faces his next crisis of leadership and the next round of calls for his dismissal, will it matter that Robert Kraft is no longer in his corner? Goodell better hope that it does not. Kraft is a powerful force within the NFL owners group and his influence is said to be considerable.

As to Kraft's comment that he was "wrong to put his faith in the league," one can only agree and wonder. It is remarkable that anyone who has spend so much time in the NFL could maintain "faith in the league." Over the decades owners have attacked one another, sought to squeeze one another and the league, especially in the form of the commissioner. Indeed there has been a remarkable degree of inconsistency over the years at a level that would shake anyone's faith. The growing profitability of franchises is the one thing that reinforces faith.

Then there is Tom Brady, the golden boy of the New England Patriots and the heartthrob and man-crush of football America. The most beloved player in the NFL for over a decade has risked his legacy in what can only be understood as an action by an arrogant man who believes his popularity has put himself beyond the rules of the game and the rules of common sense.

This was a simple matter really, even a trivial matter involving the common practice of quarterbacks who want their game day footballs inflated to a particular level. If Tom Brady had just owned his actions and admitted that he had made a mistake, apologized to the fans and the NFL, and expressed deep contrition, all this would have quickly passed.

Instead he lied about it from the get go even as current and past NFL quarterbacks called him out for the lie. Of course he checked the pressure on the balls, and of course he could tell the difference by touch of an over-inflated from an under-inflated ball. His odd press conferences and public denials were transparent, and his decision to destroy his cell phone and 10,000 text messages was just plain idiotic. It defies all credulity that he did not take this action in an effort to hide something.

The only people buying Brady's story are Robert Kraft and the New England football faithful. Unfortunately this means that we can look forward to an entire season of the whiners residing in Patriotland who have mastered the art of whining even when winning.

If all of this doesn't put you off NFL football and hero worship, at least in the off season, then there is little hope for sport in America. Then again maybe Sheldon Richardson can salvage the reputation of the NFL.

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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