

Women in SportsWorld

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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Roger Goodell is the Commissioner of the most popular professional sports league in the United States. This week he demonstrated just how much he learned at the feet of his predecessors, Paul Tagliabue and especially Pete Rozelle.

A month or so ago Goodell in his position as judge and jury of player conduct made a decision to suspend Ray Rice for two games as punishment for Rice's punch out of his soon to be, and in fact now, wife. Part of the incident was caught on video, as is everything these days, and so it was difficult to ignore. I would guess most of the football community in this country saw the video, along with a good portion of the general population.

As a result Goodell's decision on appropriate punishment was widely anticipated. When it came and was a two game suspension there was surprise, shock, and outrage across the spectrum of reactions. Comparisons were made to other Goodell rulings for violations of the conduct code and these produced disbelief as to the leniency of Rice's punishment.

Goodell's first impulse was self-defense. He rationalized on the basis on Rice's remorse and previously clear record. The Commissioner claimed the decision was consistent with other punishments he had handed out to players who violated the conduct code when it clearly was not. He reiterated his concern and the concern of the league about the issue of domestic violence. He was unconvincing.

It took about a month before Goodell backtracked on his decision. He could not change it, but did allow as to the fact that "I didn't get it right." Moving back and forth between first person and third person, I and We, Goodell danced around the issue.

He then made this ludicrous claim: "The public response reinforced my belief that the NFL is held to a higher standard, and properly so. Much of the criticism stemmed from a fundamental recognition that the NFL is a leader, that we do stand for important values, and that we can project those values in ways that have a positive impact beyond professional football. We embrace this role and the responsibility that comes with it. We will listen openly,

engage our critics constructively, and seek continuous improvement in everything we do."

The NFL is "held to a higher standard?" Higher than what and by whom?

The NFL is "a leader." What kind of leader? Do we really live in a society in which we take guidance from a sports league whose main aim is to enhance its profits and public power?

"We do stand for important values." What values exactly? Is the NFL the protector and purveyor of moral values?

The Commissioner then assured us that the NFL would have a "model policy on domestic violence and sexual assault."

Pete Rozelle would have been proud of his wunderkind. Reclaim the moral high ground even if you have trampled on it and it took a month of public outcry to actually figure it out. It wasn't a mistake per se, but a mistake because it tarnished the Image of the Shield.

Goodell's new position was not a moral one, but a public relations one. It is not what the policy will actually accomplish that is important, or even what that policy is.

What matters to the NFL and Goodell is simply how the policy is perceived. The way in which much of the press carried on about what a great thing Goodell had done by admitting an error, ensures that the public perception of the NFL will be as a league that cares, and that Goodell as a Commissioner, who gets it.

The new policy guidelines look strong and tough. They are however full of enormous loopholes and vagaries through which the league and Commissioner will be able to do their dance.

Two other issues concerning women were in the news in the last few weeks. I once thought that the worst head of any sports organization was Gary Bettman, Commissioner of the NHL. Over the past few years I have been forced to change my position. Sepp Blatter, the President of FIFA, has overtaken all competitors in the area of insensitive and just plain idiotic decisions and public statements.

His latest decision may not be his worst, but it is bad enough. The 2015 Women's World Cup will be played in Canada where the pitch will be of the artificial variety. Neither FIFA nor the Canadian hosts will discuss the matter, even though the installation of grass would be a relatively simple and inexpensive matter. When English Premiership exhibition games were held in the U.S. the teams insisted on grass fields, which meant putting sod over the plastic stuff. FIFA had no problem with that, and no problem doing so for a pre-World Cup friendly in St. Louis in May.

Will Blatter, FIFA, and the Canadian Soccer Association listen to the women as they did to the men? Not likely. They may, however, have to listen to the courts of Canada.

Finally, back in the world of the NFL where ESPN serves as a major PR arm of the league, the World Wide Leader has produced its latest sexist triumph. ESPN is now offering a Fantasy Football League for women. The three faces of the league are the non-tennis Williams sisters who offer advice to women on choosing a fantasy team. They have created a "relationship based rating system" that categorizes players as "Marriage Material," and "Boyfriend Potential,"

Apparently the World Wide Leader in Sports does not think that women have the brainpower and knowledge of the NFL to play regular fantasy football. Nor apparently does ESPN realize that the NFL fan base is about 50% female.

All of which shows that in the world of sport the place and role of women is seen by some of the most influential leaders in sport as something other than equal.

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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