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Goodell's Quagmire

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The continuing saga of the NFL and Ray Rice has now become basically the Roger Goodell story. The Commissioner has not managed to stay ahead of the news cycle and has failed to cut his losses. Rather than to accept responsibility for his mistakes and missteps he has continued to deal in what now seems to be his only task as Commissioner, to Protect the Shield. And it's not going well.

At each point of protection Goodell has found his credibility slipping further and further away. He wants the public, a public now much bigger than NFL fandom, to believe that he is primarily interested in the issues of abuse and assault rather than in just having the appearance of such interest. He has repeatedly tried to change the conversation from what happened, to what will happen if only we trust the NFL and Roger Goodell.

After maintaining that the NFL had not been able to get the full video of Ray Rice punching his finance from the police or from the hotel, various reports surfaced that the video had been sent to the NFL. There were contradictory reports from law enforcement agencies about what they would do or not do when receiving such a request, and indeed if they ever got such a request from the NFL.

Hotel security personnel said they had viewed the video repeatedly and perhaps as many as forty people on the hotel staff had viewed it. Yet the NFL, with its vaunted security division, somehow could not get a peak at the video. And indeed if the video did reach the NFL offices why did the Commissioner not receive that information or that video?

These and other questions have dogged Goodell this week. He has pleaded ignorance on the video and/or on the deliverance of the video.

ESPN's "Outside the Lines" reported yesterday that Ray Rice had told the Commissioner in June that he had hit his finance, and this brought into question Goodell's "shock" when he saw the full video. As I suggested last week, if you saw the first video you could not have been surprised by what was in the extended version of the video. It simply offered graphic detail of what was implied in the abbreviated version. In addition Goodell knew that Rice had

been indicted on aggravated assault charges, a month after the initial arrest had been for simple assault. Would that, and video #1, and Rice's statements to Goodell be enough to clarify things for the Commissioner? You would think so, if in fact Goodell's primary interest was taking a stand on this issue rather than "Protecting the Shield."

So over several months this story has continued to unravel. Goodell first handed down a two game suspension to Rice. The Commissioner was heavily criticized and he vigorously defended his decision. A month later the Commissioner announced he had made a mistake and although he could not increase the punishment on Rice he was instituting a new NFL policy on abuse that would require a six game suspension, and then a lifetime ban for a second offense. This new policy had enough ambiguity in it to leave the Commissioner with a lot of discretionary power in dealing with individual cases. You might also notice that it has not been applied to Rice because it would not be dramatic enough at this stage in Goodell's dance.

The Commissioner then went on television and fielded softball questions about the entire matter and all was well. Then came all the other revelations about the travels of the full video, and the reports on what Rice had told the Commissioner back in June.

What to do now? Fess up. Throw yourself before the mercy of the court of public opinion.

It is probably too late for that. So it's time for another diversionary move.

The Commissioner yesterday announced that he had appointed the former head of the FBI to do a full investigation of the entire affair including the travels of the video. It will be an "independent" investigation. Well, yes, except that two NFL owners who are lawyers will oversee the investigation, but only to make sure the investigators have full access to information from the NFL. They will not in any way interfere with the investigation. They promise!

It should also be noted that the NFL has a long history of cooperation with the FBI, and that the NFL security team employs many ex-FBI agents. Given the oversight by owners and the history of cooperation between the FBI and the NFL, is this really an "independent" investigation. Well, yes it

is, because Roger Goodell says it is, and because as you hear and read news reports the majority of them accept Goodell's terminology and call it an "independent" investigation.

And one more thing. There is no timeline for completion of the investigation and the issuing of a report. This will allow the Commissioner to refrain from answering any more questions about the affair "because there is an ongoing investigation." This will prevent Roger Goodell from making any more unsustainable public statements.

For that the NFL owners should be grateful.

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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