

Goodell

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

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The opening of the new NFL season also marks the fifth anniversary of the elevation of Roger Goodell to the position of NFL Commissioner. It also marks the resolution of the biggest issue that he has dealt with in his role of leadership of the most popular and successful sports league in the United States.

Goodell became Commissioner at a point when the NFL was more popular than ever before with the public, was making more money than ever before for both owners and players, and was enjoying a period of extended labor peace that had been nearly unthinkable in the Age of Pete Rozelle's union busting years.

Goodell came to his position as Commissioner with an undergraduate degree in economics, no MBA or advanced degree, but with training and experience in the ins and outs of the NFL unmatched by any other candidate for the position. He had worked for the two previous commissioners, had held a variety of positions and performed numerous duties in the league. Moving from what was essentially an unpaid internship with the Commissioner's Office in 1982, Goodell was able to get a paid position with the Jets in 1983 and within a year he was an assistant in their public relations department.

He continued to climb the NFL ladder. In 1987 Pete Rozelle appointed him as assistant to Lamar Hunt, the head of the AFC, and in 1990 Goodell was hired by Commissioner Paul Tagliabue. Through the next decade Goodell worked in nearly every vital position in NFL operations. In December of 2001 the Commissioner appointed him as NFL executive vice-president and chief operating officer.

Perhaps his most important experiences were in marketing and television, and indeed he developed an expertise in these areas and he seemed to be most interested in them. Goodell was a powerful influence in developing the wide marketing net cast by the league, and was always finding new ways to extend the reach of the Brand. On the television front he was deeply involved in contract negotiations with the networks, and was an important force in pushing for the creation of the NFL Network.

Goodell once said of his experience in the league offices that he had earned his MBA working with Rozelle and Tagliabue. And he might have added he learned from two of the very best who had

expertise in the two vital areas of public relations and labor relations. When he moved to the Commissioner's Office on September 1, 2006, Roger Goodell could not have been better prepared. It also meant that he had achieved one of his life goals. The other was to make his father proud of him.

Five years into his Commissionership Goodell has already left a significant imprint on the NFL. With the successful navigation of the league through the labor strife of the past year, Goodell has added significantly to what will be his legacy. Indeed if he accomplishes nothing else, bringing the league through this minefield without a work stoppage and ensuring ten years of labor peace will place him at the top of any list of rankings for sports commissioners.

It is true that the final assessments of the new contract cannot yet be made, and it is true that we do not know exactly what Roger Goodell's role was in bringing an end to the lockout. What we do know is that it ended, and to bring it to an end, someone had to convince the owners to accept less than what they wanted and the players to give back some of what they had. This was no easy task in either case, but it was the owners who created the phony crisis in the first place by reopening the labor contract, and therefore it is not difficult to conclude that it would be the owners who would be the most difficult to move off their position. The consensus seems to be that it was Commissioner Goodell who managed to broker the final settlement.

In addition to the overriding issue of the labor contract, Goodell faced what must at times have felt like an endless stream of issues and minor crises. The issue of player off-field conduct confronted him in the Michael Vick and Ben Roethlisberger cases, as well as several less headline producing incidents. In addition the sensationalized Spygate Affair involving the New England Patriots and Bill Belichick created many more headlines than it was worth, but still proved to be a bit more than a minor headache for Goodell. It also allowed him to look strong in the face of a powerful NFL coach.

Goodell has been caught in apparent inconsistencies in dealing with his new conduct policy. His application of the standards across the board among players, and a seeming lack of application to owners, although a reality, is certainly nothing new in the history of the league. Pete Rozelle's reign as Commissioner was strewn with such inconsistencies. For Goodell "protecting the shield" and "protecting the brand" has taken precedence over consistency, and appearances have been at the heart of his actions.

The league record on injuries and what constitutes acceptable violence on the field of play has always been one of ambiguity at best. In dealing with the concussion issue and long range brain damage to players, the league has long maintained a position of denial. Once the evidence reached beyond the self-evident stage, Goodell tried to stake out a position of "leadership" on the issue. However advocating a longer season seemed to further stain the Commissioner's reputation, and call into question the sincerity of his concern for player health and safety.

At times Goodell has shown a penchant for expansion of his own powers. The notion that the Commissioner should be prosecutor, jury and judge in conduct cases, and the notion that the Commissioner has the power to punish someone for conduct before they were members of the league, seems a questionable overreach.

For some Goodell has lacked the finesse and the public relations skills of his predecessors, at times appearing to be absolutely wooden in his public role. For others, Goodell's heavy handedness is seen as exactly what is needed in the NFL in this time when player conduct has emerged as a major public concern, or so say the sports reporters.

For me several things remain to be seen. How long will the players accept Goodell's ever extending reach of discipline? Over the long run will Goodell be able to manage the contention among owners over such things as revenue sharing and equity within the league? And will the Goose that has been laying golden eggs for nearly two decades continue to do so? And perhaps most important of all, will the concern over protecting the Shield and the Brand, come to completely overshadow the main business of the NFL, which one assumes, remains football.

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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