

Goodell's Press Conference

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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After last week's debacles in the NFL and Goodell's retreat into a cave somewhere, I read a number of references to Goodell as a Nixonian figure. These were amusing and vaguely resonant. Then came Friday's Follies as Goodell surfaced publicly and assured us that he would not resign, that he would get it right, and that the NFL remained a moral leader that America could count on.

If this was Goodell's version of Nixon's "Checkers speech," the greatest political speech in American history, it fell far short of that standard. Perhaps he should have mentioned his family pet that he was given by some owner, even if there never was such a gift.

For those who don't recall the circumstances of the "Checkers Speech" it came during the 1952 presidential race when Nixon was Eisenhower's running mate on the Republican ticket. In a campaign in which corruption was a major issue, Nixon was faced with charges that he had a secret "slush fund" bank-rolled by cronies. Eisenhower was close to dropping Nixon from the ticket and Nixon purchased thirty minutes of television time to defend himself. It was sensationally effective and included a reference to the family dog, Checkers, that had been a gift from one of his supporters. The speech saved his career and connected him to the voters of Middle America in a way no Republican had since the 1920s.

Roger Goodell continued to play the role of Pete Rozelle, as envisioned by Roger Goodell. The arrogance was there, but the credibility was missing. The assertions of rectitude were repeated *ad nauseam* and they fell on deaf ears. His wooden personality seemed more pronounced than ever. While he was speaking, messages appeared on the television screen mocking his answers. Rozelle had been treated by the NFL beat writers and television reporters with deference, but Goodell had never attained Rozelle's status as a minor deity. During the press conference even some reporters for the NFL Network as well as those networks in contractual relationships with the NFL were on the attack.

As he went back and forth between first person singular and plural - I did this, we did that - there was never any real

clarification of who did what and when, or what did he know and when did he know it. Repeatedly Goodell tried to dismiss the mistakes while assuring everyone that "we will get it right." After months of not getting this one right and after years of not getting anything right on the concussion issue, why would anyone expect Goodell or the NFL to get anything right? No new committees and task forces created "to get it right" and no support given to organizations dealing with the issues of abuse will change the overall equation.

In the end Roger Goodell was doing his best to "Protect the Shield" but it was much too late for that. He had tried to protect it by serving his friends at the Baltimore Ravens and it exploded in his face. He had tried to protect himself and that didn't work either. If he had simply tried to "get it right" he would have been on much firmer ground.

Of course Roger is not the problem. The NFL owners that he has served very well are responsible for what this league does and does not do. Goodell and his predecessors made the NFL owners a pile of money, made many of them millionaires by milking the television networks, massaging politicians, and subduing the workers. In the end Goodell's biggest mistake was setting himself up as the moral policeman of the league, especially the players, and pretending that somehow the National Football League was the defender of morality in America. It is not, and it never was. It is a football and entertainment business cartel, even while it is a national obsession. It is neither the arbiter nor the creator of American moral standards.

While all of this was going on the NFL issued a statement that it accepted the medical evidence that one of three NFL players will leave their career in football with brain damage. This should have received the biggest headline this week, and this should have been the topic discussed extensively across the country. This acceptance by the NFL comes at least two decades after it began to publicly deny this link and did its best to discredit the research and researchers who had been developing this evidence. For that alone there should be a special place reserved for the NFL in hell.

When the current flurry passes and if Roger Goodell is or is not the NFL Commissioner, there needs to be a major national discussion of this harsh reality. If you play

football you are endangering your brain, if you let someone you love such as your children play football, you are endangering their future. Football is a violent sport, and no small part of its appeal is its violence. It seemed in the past that this was violence without major consequences. It can no longer be regarded in this way.

In the late 19th and early 20th century when football was producing an alarming number of deaths, the nation took note, discussions were held, and some attempt was made to reduce those numbers. Well the numbers on brain damage and football are now in, and even the NFL is admitting to them. It is time for another discussion of the safety of the game and whether or not it should continue, and if so in what form.

It's time to Protect People rather than Protecting the Shield.

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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