

Al Davis

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE

October 11, 2011,

Over the past weekend news came of the death of Al Davis at the age of 82. It did not make the nightly news in France or the newspapers that I saw. It was not until returning to England on Monday that I, really by chance, stumbled across the news of Davis' death. I can say I was surprised and somewhat taken aback by the possibility that I might have missed the death of such an important figure in the history of sport in America, particularly the history of the National Football League.

It could be argued that Al Davis was the most important figures in NFL history. He was certainly one of them. His career in football spanned all of the second half of the 20th century as well as the past 50 years of NFL history. Davis was involved in some way in nearly every important decision and development affecting professional football. As an assistant coach, coach, general manager, operating general partner, owner, commissioner of the AFL, and nemesis of Pete Rozelle, Al Davis shaped and reshaped the face of professional football both on and off the field.

Davis attended Wittenburg College and Syracuse University graduating with a degree in English. He had a passion for literature, jazz, and military history. He played junior varsity football. His first coaching jobs were at Adelphi University as line coach, and in the Army as head coach at an Army base. Davis worked in the personnel department of the Baltimore Colts at age 24. He later was an assistant coach at the Citadel and Southern Cal.

As with so many great coaches of his generation, Davis learned the offensive game working for Sid Gilman, head coach of the Los Angeles, and then San Diego, Chargers. At age 33 he was hired as head coach of the Oakland Raiders of the American Football League, where he was named coach of the year in his first year on the job. There years later, having reversed the fortunes of the Raiders, he was named Commissioner of the AFL, as it moved into lethal combat with the NFL.

When the two leagues merged Al Davis was not only excluded from the negotiating process, but was not informed of the decision until it was final. Pete Rozelle was named Commissioner of the new NFL, and Davis was left to contemplate his future. He had been a strong and significant figure in the war between the two

leagues, and he was not prepared to accept the position of second banana in the new NFL. When he returned to the Oakland Raiders there was no doubt a sigh of relief in the Commissioner's office, knowing that Davis would not be joining them. He was now part owner and "managing general partner" of the team, a title that he coined for himself.

Davis' Raider teams played wide-open offensive football and aggressive defense and played it very well. Raider teams coached by John Madden amassed a record of 103-39-7 over ten years. Davis was a great judge of talent acquiring excellent players and excellent coaches. Davis hired Art Shell, the first African American head coach in the league, Tom Flores, the first Hispanic head coach in the league, and Amy Trask, the first woman head executive in the league. Davis' teams won eleven conference championships and three Super Bowls in five appearances.

During the 1970s and into the 80s Davis remained a force in the NFL, repeatedly challenging the power of the Commissioner while being part cause and part catalyst in bringing down the imperial rule of Commissioner Rozelle. He served on many of the most important league committees and generally played a significant role on them.

Most famously Davis challenged the league policy on moving a franchise, and was able to defy Rozelle and the owners who voted to stop him from moving the Raiders from Oakland to Los Angeles. It was a move motivated largely by greed and one that failed to produce the windfall profits from pay TV that Davis had envisioned for himself. But he did defeat the NFL in court and curbed the power of the Commissioner. This court decision also set off a great deal of franchise movement, which in turn contributed to expansion.

Indeed there developed a strong animosity between Rozelle and his nemesis. Still Davis was respected for his football knowledge by many coaches, some prominent executives, and owners including Carroll Rosenbloom and Tex Schramm. He remained close to many of his former players including Gene Upshaw, the Executive Director of the NFL Players Association. His relationship with Upshaw led him to advise the new Commissioner, Paul Tagliabue, on ways to settle the labor disputes that plagued the NFL for decades.

There were those around the league that came to despise him. At one NFL meeting an owner placed a parrot at the meeting room

door, and each time someone entered the room the parrot called out "Fuck you, Al Davis."

Davis was a shrewd business man. He acquired 10% ownership of the Raiders at a bargain price when he returned from the AFL Commissioner's office. Ultimately he turned that 10% into majority ownership and control of the franchise, squeezing out Wayne Valley who had brought Davis to the team. "Just win, baby," was a slogan for more than football.

As time passed Davis seemed to lose his genius and the Raiders fell on hard times. Many blamed him for the Raiders' problems pointing to the many ill-advised personnel decisions he made in recent years. His eccentricities that had once seemed interesting, and perhaps even charming, became marks of an odd and strange personality out of touch with reality. Many thought time had passed Al Davis by and now time has simply passed for Al Davis.

Everyone seems to have Al Davis stories and quotations from across the last half-century. Dave Anderson has often told the story of how Davis called him one day and asked Anderson to stop referring to him as a "sinista" character. Anderson was puzzled by the request because he knew Davis liked that characterization. Davis explained that his mother read the *New York Times* and she did not like her son described in that fashion.

There were many peculiarities. Although Jewish, Davis developed an admiration for the efficiencies of the Nazi regime. He always wore silver and black, the team colors, and "the Silver and Black, came to be the unofficial team nickname. He was only seen in public wearing a silver and black sweat suit.

Having defeated the Commissioner in court, testified against him in Congressional hearings, and once charging that Rozelle had his own Gestapo, the Commissioner must have been a bit surprised when Al embraced him and wished him luck as Rozelle left the room having announced his retirement as Commissioner.

My favorite Davis quote comes from one of his players who recalled how Davis would run his hands through his hair, suck air through his teeth, and say "'Let me just say this, young man. Anything good in this life is worth cheating for.'"

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be good sport to be a bad loser.

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