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Pete Roselle

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Some called him the Pope of the National Football League. Others saw him as a minor deity of the mid-twentieth century's religious devotion to sport. Whatever the perspective, it is clear that Alvin "Pete" Rozelle is among the most significant figures in the history of Sport in America and the world in the Twentieth Century.

Born in South Gate, California, in 1926 Rozelle played tennis and basketball at Compton High School, entered the Navy during the war, and returned to take the Compton Junior College sports information job and work simultaneously as a stringer for the Long Beach Press Telegram. In 1952 he was hired by Tex Schramm as public relations man for the Los Angeles Rams. After leaving in 1955 he returned to the Rams as a 31 year old General Manager in 1957.

Following the death of NFL Commissioner Bert Bell the owners met in June of 1960 to choose a new commissioner. On the tenth day of deliberations and the twenty-third ballot the thirty-three year old Rozelle was chosen to succeed Bell as Commissioner of the National Football League.

It took Rozelle no time at all to establish his credentials and build on the solid foundation laid by Bert Bell. It was clear by 1960 that television was the key to the future, and Rozelle signed a contract between the NFL and CBS in which the league pooled the TV package and shared the revenues. It was quickly struck down by the federal courts as a violation of anti-trust law. Rozelle and other sports commissioners went to Congress for relief.

Congress responded with the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961 allowing the sale of television rights by the league rather than individual franchises. It not only saved the small market franchises in the NFL, but it guaranteed greater revenues across the board. The \$4.65M per year contract with CBS in 1962 became the \$14M per year contract of 1964 giving each team \$1M before they opened their doors for business on the season. Today that figure is \$40M.

Rozelle displayed his power and leadership again in 1963 when he suspended Paul Hornung and Alex Karras one year for gambling, letting everyone know who controlled the NFL.

Rozelle's next great achievement was guiding the NFL through the challenge by the American Football League. He lost the battle and won the war. The AFL survived and reached parity with the NFL, but Rozelle managed the merger of the two leagues in 1966 and remained Commissioner. Again he displayed his skills in dealing with Congress by shepherding the Football Merger Act through that body with the help of Senator Russell Long and Representative Hale Boggs, both from Louisiana. It exempted the merger from anti-trust violation and within nine days the NFL awarded New Orleans an expansion franchise.

Out of the merger came two things, more television money and the Super Bowl, which also meant more television money and more revenue generally.

With all this money about it is not surprising that the players might like to see a greater share coming their way. Again Pete Rozelle showed great skill in preventing the NFL Players Association from becoming a strong advocate for the players. Time and time again Rozelle overcame the obstacles of court rulings, outmaneuvered Ed Garvey, and broke their strikes. Convincing the television networks to show the scab games during the '87 strike may have been his boldest move.

Certainly the Super Bowl is Rozelle's most visible legacy. It is the premier sports event in the United States and is seen worldwide. As a spectacle it is largely Rozelle's creation. It was Rozelle who used the two week span before the game to manipulate the press, lobby the politicians, and stroke the fat cats of American business. The emergence of the Super Bowl as an exercise in conspicuous consumption with the corporate tents and parties, Rozelle's state-of-the-league press conference, and the lavish parties and half-time shows, made Super Sunday a mid-winter American festival and ritual.

He was wise enough to support Monday Night Football, created NFL properties and NFL films, and turned NFL merchandise into another major revenue stream for the League. He opened the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He was responsible for changing the social habits of a nation on Sunday afternoon and Monday night.

His only real setbacks were two: The success of Al Davis in moving the Oakland Raiders to Los Angeles while winning his case in court, and the decision to go ahead with games on the Sunday following the assassination of President Kennedy.

My sharpest memory of Pete Rozelle will always be his yearly interview with Brent Musburger on the Super Bowl pre-game show. It was always an exquisite performance by Rozelle who maintained his dignity in the face of the fawning and insipid questions offered up to him. It was like watching a deity toy with a mere mortal.

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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