

1-13-1993

NFL and NFLPA Labor Peace?

Richard C. Crepeau
University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "NFL and NFLPA Labor Peace?" (1993). *On Sport and Society*. 227.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/227>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
January 13, 1993

A week ago the National Football League and the NFL Players Association reached an agreement on a new seven year contract, marking the end of a labor dispute that goes back to the twenty-four day strike of 1987. The settlement was reached three weeks after an apparent agreement had broken down, and four months after a federal jury in Minneapolis had ruled Plan-B free agency to be in violation of anti-trust laws. Following that decision Judge David Doty urged both parties to arrive at a settlement of their dispute, telling them that he would impose a settlement if necessary.

The new contract goes into effect with the 1993 season, and will be in effect through the end of the century. The player's insistence on free agency has been met. Five year players will be free agents with a few restrictions, including the ability of each team to declare one player a franchise player, a limited signing period, and a salary cap.

The draft will be reduced from 12 rounds to seven, and there will be a cap placed on rookie salaries. In addition the owners will pay the players \$195M in damages and attorney's fees. The group of twenty players who were plaintiffs in this case against the NFL will not be restricted in any way under the terms of this new agreement.

This is the end of a significant chapter in the history of labor relations in professional football and a milestone in the history of sport. The relationship between the NFL and its players has been one of great controversy and struggle, and for the most part marked by the dominance of ownership.

The first attempt by the NFL to get control of its players was the institution of the draft in 1936 which controlled salary competition for new players. Until the 1950s there was total control by the owners. The players first challenged ownership by forming the NFL Player's Association in 1957, but it took ten years before there was a collective bargaining agreement.

In the meantime the AFL formed in 1959 and their players organized in 1963. During this period player salaries were rising under the pressure of inter-league competition. The merger of the two leagues in 1966 with legislative approval by

Congress ended that pressure and salaries dropped. The merger also resulted in a unification of the players associations.

In 1968 Detroit guard John Gordy and Chicago lawyer Dan Schulman drew up a list of 21 demands to present to the owners. The major issues were minimum salary, higher pension payments, and the recognition of agents. Pension payments in football were \$1.4M as compared to \$4.1M in baseball. Minimum salary was \$5000 and 20% of players earned less than \$15,800. There was the threat of a strike as training camps were boycotted by players, but the owners preempted a strike with a lockout. Under pressure from the television networks, the owners settled. The pension payment was doubled, and minimum salary was raised to \$12,000.

In the wake of the settlement the owners moved to break the union by harassing player representatives; cutting them, trading them, or placing them on taxi squads.

There was another strike in 1970 with only 21 of 1300 players crossing the picket line. With that show of solidarity the owners settled again doubling pension payments and other benefits.

In 1974 the player's union under the leadership of Ed Garvey moved to end all restrictions on free agency. Under attack was the Player Reservation System, also called the Rozelle Rule, which made player movement virtually non-existent. This strike failed as player unity was broken when Roger Staubach led a number of veteran players, mostly whites, across the picket line.

In the meantime John Mackey and the NFLPA took their argument to the courts where in 1977 the Rozelle Rule was declared an illegal conspiracy to restrain trade. This meant that players had won free agency. But in labor negotiations Ed Garvey agreed to a system that was just as restrictive in return for financial considerations for the players. This was a remarkable and nearly incomprehensible action.

Revenues continued to skyrocket throughout the 70s and 80s as TV money went higher and higher. Player salaries lagged behind and were considerably lower than those of their counterparts in professional sport.

In 1982 there was a fifty-seven day strike with Ed Garvey and Gene Upshaw leading the players and Jack Donlon representing the owners. The 1982 strike was won by the owners with no change in

player movement, and some increases in pension, severance pay, and minimum salaries. Union solidarity was missing and games continued with scab players brought in by owners.

At the end of this five year contract in 1987 the players struck again seeking free agency. A twenty-four day strike was a failure, and the union went back to the courts. And that long and winding road has now reached its end after passing through the Federal Courts in Minneapolis.

The hope is that this settlement will bring labor peace to the NFL along with some justice to the players who, despite what you may think, have not shared equitably in the massive profits made by the National Football League. Whether it will remain to be seen.

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.

Copyright 1993 by Richard C. Crepeau