

NFL Cheerleaders

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - NFL CHEERLEADERS
MAY 15, 2018

The National Football League is one of those American entities that likes to think of itself as quintessentially American, embodying the very best of America. It has gone the extra mile to wrap itself in the flag and other markers of American "patriotism," particularly those that cast a favorable light on the league and cost little or nothing in the way of effort and commitment. Image is the thing, substance is superfluous.

From its entrance into the national consciousness in the late 1950s under the guidance of Commissioner Bert Bell and, then, under the leadership of Pete Rozelle, the league did its best to capture and hold the title of America's National Pastime. Rozelle was a genius of public relations and political manipulation and took the NFL to its current lofty position.

Television and, more recently, the new forms of electronic media have been central to the development of the NFL. Rozelle courted and massaged the television and Madison Avenue leaders and threw just enough crumbs to those easily coopted in Washington politics. He also understood that the jock sniffers and macho men may have been at the core of the league's initial success, but it would be necessary to attract all segments of the society to create a truly powerful national institution. Above all, he knew that sex sells.

Cheerleading, in the history of the United States, goes back to the early years of intercollegiate athletics. In the World War I era, cheerleading went from a male dominated activity to a female centered one. Over the course of the 20th century, the female cheerleader became an object of desire and a natural partner to the football hero, most often the quarterback.

It may seem natural then, that cheerleading found its way into the NFL, where most teams developed some sort of cheer or dance squad as part of sideline activities during games. With the coming of the Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders, most emphatically not the Dallas Cowgirls, the role and form of cheerleader was defined.

Sex and sport have been linked ever since the first whiff of testosterone was in the air. Faux sex surrounds all our sporting events where young women decorate the landscape with wiggles, jiggles, and giggles, passing as a cross between glamorous role

models and purveyors of sexual titillation. We live in an age, as the literary critic R. P. Blackmur once said, in which "the drum-majorette of fourteen" displays "sex as a force without having to take account of it."

In Dallas, the cheerleaders were given a high profile position on the sidelines, and they were dressed out in skimpy outfits designed to catch the eye and attention of the male fans. The intent was to use sex to sell, without selling sex. Over time, the activities of the cheerleaders in Dallas and across the NFL, expanded to the admirable charity work but less admirably to more and closer contact with fans, especially male fans, off the field and away from the stadium.

In the past few months, a number of cheerleaders and former cheerleaders have begun to publicly question these activities and the atmosphere surrounding them. According to the *Washington Post*, in 2013 the Washington team took its cheerleading squad to a Costa Rican resort for a photo shoot for a calendar. Although the finished product would not show nudity, some of the squad was required to be topless and others wore only body paint during the shoot.

The resort was secluded, but the team invited sponsors and suite holders as spectators, all men, to the photo shoot. At the end of the day, several of the women were required to serve as escorts for male sponsors who had specifically requested them. Some of the cheerleaders said they felt they were being pimped out by the team.

The emergence of this story followed the filing of two lawsuits by former cheerleaders against teams and the NFL. Since then, a cascade of reports and statements by current and former cheerleaders have come pouring out. One of the common themes in these reports is the exploitation of the women by the teams, especially by placing them in compromised positions with male fans without adequate security.

The cheerleaders are generally not paid, and their freedom is sharply curtailed by team regulations and standards of conduct involving public and social media activities. The Washington team has denied any improper activity, and the league office has passed the buck, saying that cheerleading squads are a team, not a league, activity. Thus, we see another example of Roger Goodell's leadership style. Time to give him another raise.

On another subject, this past weekend Tiger Woods played his best golf since his comeback from surgery and from scandal. There were flashes of the brilliance that once made Woods the biggest attraction in sport. He is not likely to ever achieve his previous level of performance, but this weekend there were reminders of past greatness.

It is easy to write off Woods given the collapse of his personal life and his golf game over the last several years, but if you want to try to come to some understanding, and perhaps even sympathy, for Woods, then I would recommend the recent biography, *Tiger Woods* by Jeff Benedict and Armen Keteyian. (See my review for the New York Journal of Books <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/tiger-woods>).

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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