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Two Issues for the NFL

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - TWO ISSUES FOR THE NFL
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As is generally the case, the Super Bowl served as a distraction from more serious issues and problems in the NFL. One exception was the issue of Race, particularly the hiring of African-American coaches in the League. The firing of Brian Flores as the head coach of the Miami Dolphins and the subsequent filing of a lawsuit by Flores against the Dolphins pushed the issue back out of the shadows.

In addition to the general issue of discrimination in hiring, Flores charged teams with conducting "sham interviews" with him in order to comply with the Rooney Rule. Perhaps, more explosive was Flores saying he was paid by Dolphin's owner Stephen Ross to lose games to give the Dolphins a better position in the draft.

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell met with civil rights leaders to discuss the matter of discrimination. The obvious failure of the Rooney Rule became the subject of much discussion, and, although the NFL dismissed the Flores lawsuit as "without merit," the Commissioner said that the League "must do better."

Goodell reiterated that the League believes in diversity, but it had fallen short in the hiring of African-American head coaches. Also, he admitted that he had no solutions to the problem and that the Rooney Rule had not been the answer and needed to be scrapped. In point of fact, the Commissioner has little power over the owners on this matter.

There were nine head coaching vacancies in the NFL this year and two African Americans were hired. That comes to 22% of the available hires. It also means that the number of minority head coaches was five out of a total of thirty-two. Of these five, three are African Americans in a league where seventy percent of the players are African American.

This is an issue whose history is now over three-decades old. In 1989, Art Shell was hired as the head coach of the Raiders and was the first African-American head coach in the post-segregation era. The number doubled in 1992 and went up to three between 1996 and 1998. In 2000, the number fell back to two.

A 2002 study, "Black Coaches in the National Football League," led to the formation of a Diversity Committee in 2002, and then in 2003, the NFL adopted the Rooney Rule. By the end of the 2004

season, there were six African-American head coaches. The number remained stable until the end of the decade with the exception of 2006 when the number reached seven. In 2011, there were eleven, a high point reached again in 2017 and 2018. In 2019, the number fell to four. It now stands at five minority head coaches.

So clearly there is a problem, and clearly that problem resides with the ownership group of the NFL. What will be done and what impact the Brian Flores lawsuit will have remains to be seen.

For a very long time, the NFL looked for ways to attract women to the game because they saw women as a way to increase the potential growth market. The coming of Monday Night Football (MNF) was the first significant step in that direction. By the early 21st century, women constituted 50 percent of the audience for MNF.

To encourage further growth, the NFL began to hold workshops for women, attracting over ten thousand participants, and the NFL learned that nearly 80 percent of those attending also played fantasy football. In 1994, NFL Properties chose Sara Levinson from MTV as its president, with the aim of developing new merchandising lines for women.

Several problems cast a shadow on this success. Various reports of, and arrests for, sexual harassment and violence against women involving NFL personnel surfaced. The most shocking involved Ray Rice and the widely seen video of him punching his girlfriend in 2014.

More recently, the cheerleader scandals, most notable but not exclusively, involving the NFL team in Washington made headlines. The John Gruden emails with their insults and misogyny added to the NFL's image problems.

Roger Goodell had to face a new round of questioning and criticism at his Super Bowl news conference this year following additional charges of sexual harassment in the Washington front office and by team owner Dan Snyder. A week earlier, Tiffani Johnston, former cheerleader and marketing manager for the team, charged Snyder of harassing her at a dinner, forcing her into his limo, and **of** hiring prostitutes for an event at his home. Goodell promised a league investigation of the matter rather than a team led investigation. Goodell's mantra, we "must do better," was heard once again.

These charges by Johnston and others came in the middle of negotiations by Snyder and the State of Virginia for a new stadium. It would cost the citizens of Virginia a mere \$1 Billion in diverted revenues according to the *Washington Post*. Maybe the State of Virginia will do better.

Goodell was also questioned about a survey by the *New York Times* of female employees, both present and past, who worked in the NFL. Many women surveyed felt that the League had failed to deliver on Roger Goodell's promise of a new culture in the league. One respondent put it bluntly, "Everything's excused in the name of football."

So, amidst the hoopla heading into Super Bowl Sunday and the affirmation by TV ratings that the NFL is Number One by most measures, when the cheering stopped, Roger Goodell was faced with the fact that all was not well.

As Goodell says, the League "must do better." The owners and not the Commissioner will determine if the League can do better.

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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