

PRO/CON: Is media coverage of the NFL's problems fair or foul?

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Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Peterson (center) navigates through members of the media after making his first court appearance, Wednesday, Oct. 8, 2014, in Conroe, Texas. A Texas judge has tentatively set a Dec. 1 trial date for Peterson on a charge of felony child abuse for using a wooden switch to discipline his 4-year-old son. Photo: AP Photo/David J. Phillip

PRO: Is the NFL to blame for players' private lives?

BALTIMORE — An angry group of media commentators and politicians have taken to the newspapers and TV airwaves attacking the National Football League. Its crime: not properly policing the private lives of two of its most visible players.

No one is excusing the behavior of Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Peterson. Their behavior, and that of a handful of other NFL stars, has been outrageous.

Domestic violence and child abuse are serious crimes. They go against our laws and our morals. People guilty of such crimes ought to receive stiff punishment. But this is America. They deserve a fair trial. In the likely event they are found guilty, they deserve punishments that fit their crimes.

In the meantime, let's get real. The NFL can urge its several thousand players to behave morally. However, it cannot watch them 24 hours a day without seriously violating their privacy and civil liberties. It's the same as if we asked companies like NBC News, IBM, General Motors or Exxon Mobil to invade their workers' private lives.

Open Season On NFL

These media types have appointed themselves as moral judges of our lives. They keep yelping for the resignation of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and tough punishment against his league's 32 football teams. Since the players being punished are all African-Americans, one can only wonder if there's a faint aroma of racism in the air.

Yet it was open season on professional football long before Rice and Peterson became the media's favorite targets.

The Washington Post, led by its passionate opinion writers, has waged a war to get Redskins owner Dan Snyder to change his team's nickname. Snyder, to his credit, has strongly defended his First Amendment right to free speech.

Attacks on the Redskins make little sense. Repeated polling shows a large majority of Native Americans are not offended by the name Washington Redskins. Many even take pride in the team's portrayal of its mascot as noble, determined and strong. The support for the nickname is even stronger among its fans and the general public.

Rarely a day goes by that the Post's writers fail to highlight a story promoting one or another feature of their drive to change the "offensive" name. The crusade is intense and one-sided.

A Rush To Judgment

The Post's Sally Jenkins even wrote that Congress should "step in and regulate the business of these 32 billionaire plunderers." Calling the NFL team owners thieves is unfair.

Fifty senators — all of them Democrats — have written to the NFL commissioner. They want the Redskins name changed. Given Congress' poor job performance, Jenkins' suggestion ought to make everyone think twice.

Ironically, until the last few years, the Redskins enjoyed flattering support from the Post and other D.C. media. Sports writers and commentators dined out in the team's press box and were guests in the owner's sky box.

Enough already! One suspects that the chatter coming from the liberal media and many in the Democratic Party is merely an attempt to distract the public from President Barack Obama's failures. He's fallen short in his policies internationally and at home.

Rushing to judge someone without a proper trial — especially by the media and politicians — is never appropriate. It's especially wrong when they seem to echo the Red Queen's declaration in "Alice in Wonderland": "Sentence first, verdict afterward."

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CON: Don't blame the messenger for bad news

VIENNA, Va. — Blame the messenger. It may be the oldest play in the playbook. Blaming the media for just reporting on all the trouble the National Football League is in is just an easy way to move attention away from its problems.

That they resorted to such tactics only highlights the trouble the NFL finds itself in. Casual viewers and perhaps even the next generation of fans may drift away from the sport.

In a perfect world, breaking news wouldn't necessarily come to us from TMZ, blog blasts and ranting commentators on cable. But the heyday of serious news ended long ago.

Whatever the news source, there's no mistaking that Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice sucker-punched his fiancée in an elevator and dragged her body into the hotel corridor. There's no mistaking that the NFL has a serious problem when it comes to violence within its ranks. And no can deny there's a problem with the long-term health of its players.

Brain Injuries A Big Problem

For a light can go out in a fan's heart. Not that long ago boxing and horse racing ranked among the top sports in the land. They drew huge crowds until the public decided that they were too crooked and, especially in the case of boxing, too violent.

Football is a violent game. We all know that. But it can be easily forgotten with the bright graphics, loud theme music and freeze-framed action offered to us from so many camera angles.

Brain-related injuries are the most common injury in today's pro game.

The career expectancy for the average NFL player is 3.5 years, according to its players union. Wide receivers last only 2.81 years on average and running backs fare even worse at 2.57 years.

Sure, some players are cut from teams because somebody better came along. Yet the numbers strongly suggest that more hobble to the exits due to career-threatening injury.

For many, retirement soon becomes a nightmare. A new study reveals that nearly 30 percent of former NFL players will end up developing brain disease like Alzheimer's or dementia.

Fans Falling Out Of Love?

What does this medical evidence mean for youth leagues and high school teams?

A recent poll by ESPN found that 57 percent of parents said that recent stories about the increase in concussions in football have made them less likely to allow their sons to play in youth leagues.

"Should you let your child play football?" The Boston Globe asked earlier this year. President Barack Obama doesn't think so, and has said that if he had a son he wouldn't let him play professional football.

Pop Warner, the largest youth football organization, saw participation drop nearly 10 percent from 2010 to 2012, ESPN reported. Roughly 60 percent to 70 percent of all NFL players started in the Pop Warner program.

Can a sport survive at such a high level when fewer and fewer kids are playing it? Will the next generation choose a sport that's seen as increasingly unhealthy to those who participate in it?

Today's NFL has a lack of leadership, especially at the top, meaning current Commissioner Roger Goodell. The league is increasingly haunted by long-term health concerns. And fans are starting to fall out of love with the sport.

Critics can blame the media all they want. Yet today's NFL has many more serious issues than the next news report about its state of disrepair.

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Quiz

- 1 What piece of evidence does the CON author mention, but the PRO author does not?
 - (A) the leadership of the NFL
 - (B) the problem of violence in the NFL
 - (C) the quality of media coverage in the U.S.
 - (D) the long-term health problems in the NFL

- 2 Read the following claim by the CON author: "There's no mistaking that the NFL has a serious problem when it comes to violence within its ranks." Which of the PRO author's statements responds most directly to the above claim?
 - (A) "The NFL can urge its several thousand players to behave morally."
 - (B) "Their behavior, and that of a handful of other NFL stars, has been outrageous."
 - (C) The NFL cannot watch players "24 hours a day without seriously violating their privacy and civil liberties."
 - (D) "People guilty of such crimes ought to receive stiff punishment. But this is America. They deserve a fair trial."

- 3 What type of evidence do BOTH the PRO and CON authors use to support their arguments?
 - (A) polls of Americans
 - (B) quotes from scholars
 - (C) personal experiences
 - (D) the point of view of parents

- 4 What evidence is LEAST relevant to the PRO author's claim that newspapers and TV are unfairly going after the NFL?
 - (A) that polls show Native Americans and fans support the Redskins name
 - (B) that the Washington Post has waged a campaign to get the Redskins name changed
 - (C) that the Democratic Party is trying to distract the public from President Obama's failures
 - (D) that only Democratic senators have written to the NFL to get the Redskins name changed

Answer Key

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