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NFL's brain-jarring hits reverberate through time

By Derrick Z. Jackson, Globe Columnist | October 31, 2009

EVEN WITH an enfeebled Willie Wood sitting right behind him in a wheelchair this week, NFL chief Roger Goodell still refused to acknowledge the damage football is causing to players' brains. For me, this was sickening.

Wood, who played safety for the Green Bay Packers in the 1960s, was one of my childhood heroes. I still remember cheering his interception and 50-yard return that helped the Packers win the first Super Bowl in 1967. He weighed just 180 pounds. Still, his tackling was so fierce that even his teammate and fellow Hall-of-Famer Ray Nitschke, the mean-faced linebacker, said the second-scariest Packer, after coach Vince Lombardi, was Wood.

The scary thing Wednesday was the sight of Wood at a House Judiciary Committee hearing. Now 72 and suffering from dementia, he wore a Packers hat and coat as he slumped in his wheelchair. Wood's guardian, Robert Schmidt, told the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel said that because of Wood's size, many of his tackles were "like a bus and a Volkswagen at the point of impact." Now he could only listen as Goodell, the National Football League commissioner, denied the impact of the sport on men like Wood - despite exploding evidence that football players are inadvertently blowing up their own brains.

When asked directly by Judiciary Committee chairman John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat, whether there is a link, Goodell muttered, "You're obviously seeing a lot of data and a lot of information that our committees and others have presented with respect to the linkage. And the medical experts should be the ones able to continue that debate."

Conyers said, "I just asked you a simple question. What's the answer?"

Goodell said, "The answer is, the medical experts would know better than I would."

Conveniently, Goodell's ranking medical expert was not there. Dr. Ira Casson, cochairman of the league's research panel on football brain damage, did not appear. In a blatant show of disrespect to the committee, Goodell claimed that Casson's presence had not been requested. Yet The New York Times reported the day before the hearing that the Judiciary Committee had tried several times to contact Casson, who did not respond.

The NFL clearly did not want Casson to face the likes of Representative Linda Sanchez, Democrat of California, who rightfully likened the league's obfuscations to Big Tobacco's past denials about the dangers of smoking. She played a clip of a television interview where Casson bluntly said "no" several times when asked whether head trauma in football is linked to various types of premature memory loss and disease. In 2007, Casson told the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, "players who have two or three concussions over a year test no differently neurologically than those who had one." The doctor's blithe statement should give pause to all youth football parents about the world their children are entering.

The danger extends way beyond the helmet-to-helmet and spearing hits that do get penalized in games. It comes, too, from the play that currently is completely legal: the head-knocking of linemen in the trenches; the knees taken to the head while making a tackle; the lowering of the shoulder to blast an opposing player, with one side of the head almost always receiving at least a glancing blow.

The danger also comes from announcers screaming on television, "What a hit!" The more than 4 million boys who play high school and youth football emulate everything they see the pros do.

Without a serious change in how the head is used in football, there is no telling what damage we will see tomorrow. In the pros, players have grown so much bigger and faster that what was once a collision between a Volkswagen and a bus is now between a sport utility vehicle and a semitrailer.

Today, Wood's primary vehicle is a wheelchair. Another Packers Hall of Famer, Willie Davis, once offered a vivid description of Wood's tackling. "There was never a tree too big for Willie to chop down," Davis said. Now that the sport has chopped Wood down, Roger Goodell must be forced, for the sake of millions of children, to work with independent brain experts to make the sport safer. The fact that football is now officially dangerous for players' mental health can no longer be denied.

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