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## Safety issues come to a head in NFL

### Could league's vow to get tough on vicious hits end up hurting the sport?

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John G. Zimmerman Associated Press  
Philadelphia Eagles linebacker Chuck Bednarik (60) stood over an unconscious Frank Gifford after he leveled the New York Giants halfback on Nov. 20, 1960, at New York's Yankee Stadium. The impact of the hit sent Gifford to the hospital with a concussion. Fifty years later, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell has promised the stiffest penalties in league history for vicious hits.

Rule 12, Section 2, Article 8 of the NFL rule book requires 941 words and 22 paragraphs to explain everything about unnecessary roughness that every NFL player is expected to remember in the nanosecond before he hits a player.

League Commissioner Roger Goodell, however, has summed up the crux of the matter in fewer words.

"Players are expected to play within the rules," he wrote in a letter to players and coaches last week. "Those who do not will face increased discipline, including suspensions, starting with the first offense."

It is on that cautionary note that we begin Week 7 of the 2010 NFL season, preceded by a week of hype, emotion and hyperbole that was unique even in the overheated annals of the NFL.

"They give me a helmet. I'm going to use it," Miami Dolphins linebacker Channing Crowder said. "If they're going to keep making us go more and more and more like a feminine sport, we're going to wear pink every game."

"This will help our game," said Merrill Hoge, the ESPN analyst and former NFL running back who had to retire at 30 because of post-concussion syndrome. "It will make it purer, safer and better."

Those two points of view form the assorted expectations for today's games, when we will see how or if the "gladiatorial nature" of the NFL, in one former player's description, is changed by tighter officiating and beefed-up consequences, particularly for helmet-to-helmet contact and other fouls against defenseless players. And we'll see how tighter enforcement and stiffer penalties play with the tens of millions of fans who will tune in.

Through the first six weeks of the 2010 season, the NFL listed 46 players on its injury list with concussions or other head or neck injuries, up from 24 a year ago. Thursday's report listed 12 players who missed practice, had limited participation or participated in practice while being treated for or recovering from head or neck issues.

Included on that list were Eagles wide receiver DeSean Jackson, Ravens tight end Todd Heap and Browns receivers Joshua Cribbs and Mohamed Massaquoi, all of whom were injured last week after collisions that led to the imposition of \$175,000 in fines against three players — James Harrison of the Steelers, Dunta Robinson of the Falcons and Brandon Meriweather of the Patriots - for violations of Rule 12.2.8.

Elsewhere, management of head and neck injuries has been an

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### Long-term effects

Beyond the injury reports lurks the threat of lingering, debilitating illness, dementia and death caused by repeated hits to the head, as documented by researchers at Boston University and at the University of Pittsburgh.

The combination of all these elements has brought about a heightened vigilance by the NFL that - depending on your point of view - is either a betrayal of football's foundations or a chance to return the game to where it should be.

Hoge opts for the latter. Many NFL players, he said, are doing an "atrocious" job of putting into practice the fundamentals they learned in high school and college, opting instead to launch themselves, head-first, into the fray rather than apply the lessons of classic coaches like Vince Lombardi, the late Packers coach for whom the Super Bowl trophy is named, and Chuck Noll, who won four Super Bowl titles with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"Let's talk about how you strike an opponent and block him," Hoge said. "Chuck Noll would say 'same foot, same shoulder, drive forward to the targeted area.' And the targeted area is the numbers, striking up and through the opponent. ..."

"We're trying to make this complicated, and it's not. If you force players to use correct fundamentals, the majority of the things that happened last Sunday don't happen."

Mike Pereira, the former NFL director of officiating who now works for Fox Sports, says players have become too concerned with speed and style.

NFL rules do not require players to wear hip pads, thigh pads or elbow pads, and the lack of pads can jeopardize not only the player but anyone who rams his head into an unpadded elbow or thigh. Pereira said he expects to see a rules change requiring that pads be worn.

"You have to cushion as many areas as you can," he said. "If players lose a tenth of a second, then they lose a tenth of a second."

### Sacrifices suggested

Pereira also believes that players may have to sacrifice some of the freedoms they enjoy in the NFL and return to the discipline associated with more stringent rules on the college and high school level.

"In college, you can't lead with your head, period, on offense or defense. You can't lower your head to make a tackle. You can't lower your head to ward off a tackle," he said. "The NFL is looking at these things. They're even talking about eliminating the three-point stance."

"Another thing is that players come into the league with a different mindset: It seems that the game evolves into more entertainment value than sports value," Pereira suggested. "Players have more freedom, and I think the commissioner and the rule-makers are going to take a look at that."

Dr. Robert Cantu, a clinical professor of neurosurgery at Boston University School of Medicine and co-founder of the Sports Legacy Institute, said players should practice without helmets a couple of days a week and that drills should be adjusted accordingly.

"Throw out the (head-to-head) 'Oklahoma drills.' They're bad for the spine," he said. "Cut out unnecessary hard hitting in practice. The NFL has already outlawed the four-man wedge, because you had to have a wedge buster whose job was to stick his head in and break it up. That was a good beginning, but there has to be more."

The power of the wallet, however, is likely to be the most significant factor that could alter today's games.

NBC Sports analyst and retired defensive back Rodney Harrison says he would budget tens of thousands of dollars each year to pay fines for improper hits. Replacing fines with suspensions, which penalize the team along with the player, raises the cost for such hits to unacceptable levels, he said.

Harrison, who says he suffers headaches and light sensitivity as a result of his hard hits as a player, said players need to start looking out for each other on the field.

"In 2006, I was going to make a tackle, and (Titans receiver) Bobby Wade hit me and blew my knee out," he said. "He could have stopped and gotten in my way, and I wouldn't have made the tackle. He didn't have to go for my knees. But he hit me unnecessarily."

"That's an example of a guy not taking care of his fellow players, and I see it all the time. Chop blocking, rolling up on people's knees ... it's stupid. It is the players' responsibility to take care of one another."

### Prevailing attitudes

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Harrison said he played with a "warrior mentality," and that same spirit was on frequent display during the superheated, media-driven chatfest generated by Goodell's rules mandate.

Some is generated by attitude - the attitude of today's players and by those who cover them.

Jim Rome, whose radio show airs in Houston on KILT (610 AM), reflected the views of some younger fans when he said, "The NFL has always been about one thing: lighting up suckers, knocking out chumps, smoking fools and talking noise about it. You take that away, and you're compromising a national obsession."

James Harrison, the Steelers player who received last week's stiffest fine, skipped practice Wednesday and said he was considering retirement. But on Thursday, he said, "I have come to the decision that I cannot and will not let the league office stop me from playing the game that I love."

ESPN analyst Mark Schlereth, a retired offensive lineman, also was critical of the league, saying, "It's too bad the acronym NFL has been taken, because you could name (the NFL) the National Hypocrite League. You know what the NFL players should do on Sunday night or Monday night? Play two-hand touch. Go out on the field, and nobody hit anybody. Let's see how popular your game is if nobody's hitting anybody."

The Texans have the week off, so they haven't participated in the supercharged rhetoric. Safety Bernard Pollard, however, contended recently that the speed of NFL players practically guarantees there will be helmet-to-helmet contact, inadvertent or otherwise.

"Everybody is moving," he said. "You can have a receiver going to the ground, and you try to dodge them, but you get a penalty because he's going in your direction. I just hope we ain't playing flag football in a couple of years. But the NFL knows what it's doing. We have to respect the rules."

### 'Concussions happen'

Tight end Owen Daniels, who described Meriweather's hit on Heap as a "blatant spear," told ESPN, "You want to keep football as it is. It is a violent sport. It's a collision sport.

"Concussions happen sometimes. As long as they (hits) aren't blatant, as long as you're not going after somebody's head, I think it's all right. I think you have to take guys out of the game when they're not playing clean."

Pereira, the former head of NFL officials, said those who complain that the NFL is changing the rules are wrong.

"They haven't changed a single, solitary rule. The same rules that are in place Sunday were in place last Sunday," he said. "But the league is looking at the Rutgers kid being paralyzed, at high school kids who don't have enough players because parents are worried about the dangers involved, and it is doing the wise thing."

This is not, of course, the first time that football has found itself confronting a crisis involving violent play.

More than a century ago, in 1905, 18 people died on the field, and President Theodore Roosevelt worked out a compromise with the presidents of Harvard, Yale and Princeton to alter the rules of the game to permit the forward pass and to outlaw all massed formations and gang tackling.

Two players died during the 1960s in the American Football League, and in 1978, a hit by Raiders safety Jack Tatum left Patriots receiver Darryl Stingley a quadriplegic until his death in 2007.

And research continues into the degree to which repeated head trauma can cause lasting neurological damage, including a newly discovered condition that can mimic Lou Gehrig's disease.

The goal, even among fans such as Dr. Robert Stern, director of the Center for the Study of Traumatic Encephalopathy at Boston University Medical Center, is to keep Football as We Know It, with modifications.

"We don't want to make the game wimpy or less aggressive. We just want it to be safe," Stern said. "So give me a powerful blow that knocks the wind out of a player, and I'll be really happy."

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