

Posted on Sun, Nov. 16, 2008

NFL players shouldn't complain about increased fines for dangerous hits

BY LEONARD SHAPIRO

The NFL's rank and file apparently is not at all happy with commissioner Roger Goodell's decision to crack down on a variety of on-the-field transgressions -- late hits, helmet-to-helmet contact, cheap shots -- by imposing hefty fines and the occasional suspension for dangerous play.

That's definitely a mistake on the part of the rank and file, not Goodell, and it's been surprising to see the reaction of the NFL Players Association to the commissioner's attempt to make an admittedly violent sport as safe as possible.

You almost had to laugh a few weeks ago, when Pittsburgh safety Troy Polamalu publicly criticized fines leveled at his teammate, receiver Hines Ward, by saying his sport was becoming "like a pansy game." But it was no laughing matter the next week, when Polamalu sustained a concussion, an injury that clearly was not inflicted by flower power.

Last week, NFLPA interim executive director Richard Berthelsen told The Washington Post that the number of fines leveled by the league office this year is "something the players feel is getting out of hand. We've now covered two-thirds of the league in terms of our player meetings, and we've heard that over and over. The players feel it has definitely gotten excessive."

Berthelsen added that the issue definitely will be a major point of discussion, and likely contention, when the union and the league discuss a new collective bargaining agreement. The NFLPA, he said, would like to see an independent arbitrator established for players to appeal any on-field disciplinary action.

Currently, only Goodell or one of his designated executives hears player appeals.

In response to Berthelsen, Goodell told the Post, "What we're trying to do is support the policies and the rules that are established -- with a great deal of the players' input, by the way -- and that are designed in large part to protect the players on the field from a safety standpoint, make the game as safe as possible for them."

Nevertheless, Berthelsen and some of the players say they are particularly concerned about fines after the fact, even when no penalty is called.

"Now, it stands to reason that some plays are missed on the field," Berthelsen said. "But the players feel there are cases when even the review of the play shows no penalty and there is still a fine imposed. The players know it's a violent game, and they feel that's not taken into consideration. It comes up in virtually every conversation that we have with players, and it definitely needs to be addressed at the bargaining table."

Berthelsen pointed to one of the scariest plays of the season to make his point -- a helmet-to-helmet hit by New York Jets safety Eric Smith on Cardinals wide receiver Anquan Boldin in September. Both players sustained concussions, and Boldin had two facial fractures and needed his jaw to be wired, forcing him to miss two games. Smith was fined \$50,000 and suspended for a game.

"People who have seen the play say there was movement by both players in the air that set up the helmet-to-helmet contact," Berthelsen said. "If it's not intended and it's just something that happens as part of the game, virtually all the players we talk to feel you have to take that into consideration if there was not intent. . . . When someone has to defend their actions, when the league has to defend what it has done to an outside arbitrator -- if it's a safety issue, they should be able to easily demonstrate that to the arbitrator."

Perhaps an arbitrator might be in order, and there are plenty of former players with law degrees and even experience as judges who could handle cases fairly.

Then again, the players now on the field have to take some responsibility on this issue. That is obviously easier said than done. Over the years, there have been countless examples of football players in particular having little regard for what seemingly is in their best health interests. Fear of failure has something to do with it, as does fear of coaches who want players as aggressive as possible.

How many times have we also heard of receivers, running backs and defensive backs throwing knee and thigh pads in the trash bin before a game, the better to feel lighter and get a little more speed on the field?

How many times have we heard about players going doctor shopping, searching for one who might differ with the advice that they would be better off having surgery or sitting out a few games?

Coaches have to do a better job teaching safer technique and disciplining players in-house for late hits and dangerous plays. And we in the media need to stop glorifying the train wreck collisions in our stories and highlight packages.

Watch a game these days, and you see players going way over the line -- piling on after the whistle, spearing, chop-blocking, leading with their helmets -- on almost every play, usually with no flag flying. Until they start taking some responsibility, I'm all for Goodell trying to get their attention any way he deems necessary to keep a violent, dangerous sport as safe as humanly possible, with or without an arbitrator looking over his shoulder.

© 2008 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>