

Players too could see need for crackdown

by Jim Trotter

For the CliffsNotes version of why NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell came down so hard on Tennessee Titans cornerback Adam "Pacman" Jones and Cincinnati Bengals receiver Chris Henry Tuesday, listen to the dialogue that took place among the 62 player representatives last month at the NFL Players Association meeting in Hawaii.

"We wanted to clean up our image a little bit," said former San Diego Chargers receiver Keenan McCardell, who attended the four-day event. "It was starting to go in the other direction, and that's something we really don't want. We feel like we have one of the best games - if not the best sport - in the country, in the world.

"We don't want to come across as people always breaking the law and then trying to get off. We wanted to be proactive about this thing. We wanted to try to get something settled and have some ground rules on what kind of conduct you should have."

Goodell provided just that, releasing a new personal-conduct policy that is filled with sharp teeth and gray areas. Most notably, the policy states that club and league employees - players, coaches, executives, secretaries, accountants, ball boys, you name it - will be held to a higher standard and will be subject to discipline even if they haven't been convicted of a crime.

That last part doesn't sit well with some players, who believe the presumption of innocence should apply in the NFL, as it does in the courtroom. They also wonder how many transgressions - and which transgressions - could result in suspension.

The policy also states that teams could be disciplined and fined for players who violate the new guidelines, although no specifics were provided in Tuesday's release.

The common theme from players and executives was that the policy was necessary, even with its unanswered questions. By unofficial count, players and coaches had at least 60 brushes with the law last year - and are on a pace to surpass that total this year.

Goodell reiterated the need to protect the integrity of the league, but equally important is the need to protect its image. Damage that with fans and corporate sponsors, and you could wind up injuring the goose that lines everyone's vaults with golden eggs.

"You get tired of seeing guys get in trouble and get arrested for all this stuff," Chargers running back LaDainian Tomlinson said. "It paints a bad picture of the NFL, and it's going to hurt players when they're trying to do marketing deals outside the NFL."

So, we are back where we began, talking about image and money. The two are inseparable when it comes to pro sports. The NFL has a great product and some outstanding young men, and the last thing it wants is for the perception of players run amok to morph into reality.

That's why Goodell had to act. USA Today Tuesday ran 41 headshots of players who have had brushes with the law in the past year. The pictures, and their jarring, in-your-face nature, left some coaches and players with emotions that fluctuated between embarrassment and anger. No one need ask how league executives felt.

It's being painted in some corners that Goodell is using newly granted powers to enact the policy, but the reality is that the commissioner has always had it. Every standard player contract, not to mention Article XI of the collective bargaining agreement, empowers the commissioner to discipline players when their conduct is detrimental to the league. Goodell is simply the first to hand down a one-year suspension for conduct not dealing with gambling or substance abuse.

The action no doubt will get the attention of the players, who said they expected something harsh but still were surprised when the punishment was announced. Contrary to an ESPN report, the player reps in Hawaii did not push for Jones to be banished from the league.

"There's no way that, when we were talking, 80 percent of the players felt that he should be kicked out of the league," said Chargers rep Roman Oben. "Nothing could be farther from the truth."

"That's nowhere near true," McCardell said. "Kicked out permanently? No. I can't believe that someone would say that ..."

"I knew something was going to come down, but I didn't know what. It's hard to take a man's livelihood from him for a year - I didn't think it'd be that severe. But the union, like the league, has agreed that it's time to stand up and do something."

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