

NFL punks finding it harder to stay employed

by Tim Sullivan - CNS

The National Football League does not need to cut corners. It can afford to navigate the straight and narrow and forgo unnecessary detours down dark alleys.

It can choose to insist on citizenship.

The most powerful operation in American sports is stronger still because of rookie Commissioner Roger Goodell's intolerance for trouble. In drawing a more stringent league-wide line on personal behavior, Goodell has rebalanced the risk/reward decisions of individual teams. He has forced executives who once winked at character flaws to take a harder line while affording them the inestimable opportunity to affect moral superiority.

Case in point: Tank Johnson.

Three days after Chicago's suspended defensive tackle was pulled over for speeding, arrested for being "DUI impaired to the slightest degree," but released uncharged, the Bears cut him loose Monday with singular sanctimony.

"We are upset and embarrassed by Tank's actions last week," Bears General Manager Jerry Angelo announced. "He compromised the credibility of our organization. We made it clear to him that he had no room for error. Our goal was to help someone through a difficult period in his life, but the effort needs to come from both sides. It didn't, and we have decided to move on."

Though Angelo's rhetorical piety would seem inconsistent with the slack he cut Johnson en route to the Super Bowl last season, Tank Johnson will find no sympathy in this corner. When a man flagrantly disregards the terms of his probation, and six unregistered firearms are found at his home, he essentially forfeits the expectation of additional reprieves. If the Bears have chosen to cure a headache by cutting him, who could really blame them?

Yet in abruptly waiving Johnson without a fresh indictment, much less a conviction, the Bears have acknowledged that the old rules of NFL conduct are obsolete. Worse actors than Johnson have been afforded more chances under previous commissioners.

This new sheriff, it seems, is a stickler.

"Roger is watching all 32 teams and how you conduct your business," Chargers General Manager A.J. Smith said Monday. "That's going to trickle down to the team that has a problem with the individual player.

"Young kids are going to make mistakes, and I think the team and the league are going to be there (in support). But Roger Goodell has made it known that there will be zero tolerance for repeat offenders. The image and integrity of this league is a top priority with him."

This is as it should be, and as it is and has been in virtually every other corporate culture. Few companies would condone the felonious conduct that has become an unpleasant staple of NFL news. Few businesses could easily justify the intangible expense of recurring embarrassment and eroded reputation for the sake of expendable employees.

Nobody needs that kind of aggravation, least of all an enterprise as successful and image-conscious as the NFL. Players as problematical as Johnson, Pacman Jones, Chris Henry and Terrence Kiel are entitled to due process, but none of them is entitled to crime without consequence. None of them, anymore, should expect that talent alone will cover their multitudinous sins.

Roger Goodell has raised the bar and lowered the boom.

Not so long ago, the length of a player's rap sheet had little bearing on his NFL prospects. Baltimore linebacker Ray Lewis pleaded guilty to obstruction of justice in a murder case and resurfaced on the cover of the Madden 2005 video game. Ricky Williams has had more second chances than Lindsay Lohan. At various times in their existence, the Raiders could easily have been confused with a halfway house.

Those NFL players who committed crimes in one place have usually been able to carry their baggage to some other league city, sometimes with an increase in salary. "If a guy's a great player," said Smith, reflecting on NFL history, "you give him 10 chances."

No more. No need.

In implementing a stricter code of conduct and imposing stiffer sanctions, Goodell has effectively relieved local operators of the inherent conflicts in punishing their own players, and provided them a set of streamlined standards.

Henceforth, NFL general managers shouldn't be as concerned that the criminals they cut may come back to haunt them in some other uniform. Neither should teams be as tempted to gamble on borderline characters when the penalty for their false steps could be six games or more.

Case in point: Terrence Kiel.

Nearly four months after the Chargers cut their prodigal safety, he has yet to resurface with another NFL team. This, remember, is a 26-year-old former second-round draft choice who played regularly for a team that finished 14-2. Five years ago, a player of Kiel's capabilities would have been snapped up like a half-priced Porsche.

"In the old days, it was, 'I'll just get another job,'" Smith said. "Now you're not going to get another job. ... I wonder if (character problems) will get cut on the spot."

Though some consider Goodell's approach to discipline Draconian and the quality of his mercy strained by commercial considerations, his primary responsibility is institutional rather than individual. Like Shakespeare's Brutus ("Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more."), Goodell justifies his methods by his mission.

"The vast majority of our players (understand)," the commissioner said Monday at the NFL's rookie symposium in Florida. "There's a select few that don't. And they get a lot of focus ... and have a negative impact on the other players in our league and the NFL in general."

Better to cut bait than to be on the hook to hoodlums.

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