

NFL needs consciousness-raising campaign on domestic abuse, say experts

September 11 2014, by Clifton B. Parker

The NFL has reached a tipping point with its problem of player violence against women, says a Stanford scholar who believes the football league needs a culture shock.

William B. Gould IV, professor emeritus at Stanford Law School, said public outrage over [domestic abuse](#) by NFL players has forced the league to confront a long-simmering issue.

On Monday, the Baltimore Ravens terminated running back Ray Rice's contract and the NFL suspended him indefinitely – the same day a video surfaced showing the NFL star knocking out his future wife with a punch in February. The league had originally suspended him for only two days, provoking criticism nationwide.

"The reaction to the initial penalty set the stage," Gould said. "They have to do something about this disturbing pattern of [violence](#) and abuse against women."

Gould, a scholar of labor and discrimination law, said the NFL's public relations issue has become much larger than the potential legal problem involved in firing a player. Rice was dismissed from the Ravens under the NFL's personal conduct policy. While he has no recourse in arbitration (unlike baseball players in their more powerful union), Rice could still sue in court, Gould added.

Gould foresees Rice arguing that he had already been punished once and

that the termination and suspension is a case of double jeopardy. A trial might prove uncomfortable for the NFL, which would have to explain, for example, why it wasn't aware of the video showing Rice punching his then-fiancee.

"No matter what happens," Gould said, "the NFL comes out looking bad."

Last week, the NFL announced more substantial measures on domestic abuse perpetrators: six months for first-time offenders and indefinite suspension for second-time offenders with review after a year. Commissioner Roger Goodell also apologized for giving Rice a light sentence in his original ruling in July.

Cultural roots of violence

Robb Willer, an associate professor of sociology who has studied violence against women, said that research shows that when men are more motivated to behave in a "masculine" way, they tend to shift blame for violence against women from perpetrators to victims, as in the Rice incident.

"I think we may be seeing that dynamic at work here. In the very masculine culture of professional football, where men are consistently striving to demonstrate their masculinity both on and off the field, team and league leadership have taken violence against women lightly," Willer said.

"This is something we might expect in an ultramasculine culture where men are striving to establish their masculinity. This sort of environment can generate a distorted view of who is responsible for violence against women," he said.

He suggests that professional sports leagues approach the punishment aspect of domestic abuse seriously.

"The NFL to date has failed in this regard and should respond more seriously to violence against women if they want to help support a national culture that condemns this form of violence," he said.

Given the violence by male athletes against females, a consciousness-raising campaign would be a good step in the right direction, Willer said.

"Young men are highly influenced by sports in general, and athletes in particular. Sports leagues, teams and athletes can help us build a culture that condemns, and hopefully deters, violence against women by speaking out on this important social problem," he said.

Beyond Rice, other NFL players currently linked to domestic violence allegations include San Francisco's defensive tackle Ray McDonald and Carolina's defensive end Greg Hardy. McDonald played for the 49ers last Sunday after being recently arrested on suspicion of domestic abuse against his pregnant fiancée. Hardy, who was convicted in July of assaulting his ex-girlfriend, is playing for the Panthers.

'Historical attitudinal problem'

Roger Noll, a professor emeritus of economics, says the NFL has an attitude problem.

"The significance of the new information about Ray Rice is that it adds weight to the criticisms of the historical attitudinal problem among so many NFL participants: players, coaches, management. Football has a long history of looking the other way concerning violent behavior, and the problem seems to be getting worse," said Noll, who researches the economics of sports.

Domestic abuse is a big problem, but so are other types of violent or irresponsible behavior by football players, he said. "Of course, the vast majority of football players do not do these things, but enough do to justify the inference that the NFL stands out as needing to do a lot more to deal with its bad apples."

Apart from domestic abuse, Noll cites incidents in recent years in which players in New Orleans were encouraged to injure opposing players and in Miami, where players tolerated the racial harassment of teammates. "These cases show that the problem is systemic, not just isolated instances of bad behavior."

One question is whether fans – especially female fans – care about the high incidence of [violence against women](#) associated with NFL players.

Noll said some NFL fans will care, but others do not get upset about the off-the-field bad behavior.

"While NFL management is embarrassed by the recent cases of domestic abuse and other violent behavior, the effect on what matters most – attendance and TV ratings – as yet appears to be quite small," he said.

In the very long run, Noll said, the NFL's popularity may be hurt somewhat, but the effect may not be large.

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: NFL needs consciousness-raising campaign on domestic abuse, say experts (2014, September 11) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-nfl-consciousness-raising-campaign-domestic-abuse.html>

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