# **PRO/CON: Is media coverage of NFL scandals out-of-bounds?**

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**PRO: Frenzied assaults on NFL show weird bias of sports writing elites**

BALTIMORE — Just in time for this fall’s congressional elections, a jeering section of media pundits and politicians have taken to the airwaves denouncing the National Football League for not properly policing the private lives of two of its most visible employees.

No one is excusing the unconscionable behavior of Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Peterson or a handful of other NFL stars, mind you.

Domestic violence and child abuse are serious violations of our criminal and moral codes, and their perpetrators ought to receive stiff punishment. But this is America. They deserve a fair trial and — in the likely event they are found guilty — appropriate punishments that fit their particular crimes.

In the meantime, let’s get real. The NFL can urge its several thousand roster and taxi squad players to behave in a morally upright manner, but it cannot do 24-hour surveillance on them without seriously violating their civil liberties anymore than NBC News, IBM, GM or Exxon Mobil can ride herd on their workers’ private lives.

Yet day after day the self-appointed moral arbiters of our lives keep yelping for the resignation of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and the application of tough sanctions against his league’s 32 football teams. Since the players being punished are all African-Americans, one can only wonder if there’s a faint aroma of racism in the air.

Yet it was open season on professional football long before Rice and Peterson emerged as media whipping boys.

The Washington Post, led by such passionate columnists as Mike Wise, Sally Jenkins and Robert McCartney, has conducted a lengthy campaign to badger Redskins owner Dan Snyder to change his team’s nickname. Snyder, to his credit, has been steadfast in defending his First Amendment right to free speech.

The push to raise public consciousness began a few years ago — ironically, at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian — even though repeated polling shows a large majority of Native Americans are not offended by the name Washington Redskins and that many take pride in the team’s depiction of its mascot as noble, resolute and strong. The support for the nickname is even stronger among Redskins’ ticket holders and the general public.

Rarely a day goes by that the Post fails to highlight a story promoting one or another aspect of their drive to change the “offensive” name. The crusade is so intense and so one-sided that even less-than-alert readers have to wonder if they’re being jobbed.

Jenkins in a recent column even urged Congress to “step in and regulate the business of these 32 billionaire plunderers.” Fifty senators — all of them Democrats — have written to the NFL commissioner urging a name change. Given the legislative branch’s job performance over the last decade, Jenkins’ recommendation ought to give everyone particular pause.

Ironically, until the last few years, the Redskins enjoyed almost fawning support from the Post and other D.C. media. Sports writers and commentators dined out in the team’s press box, and a host of Washington media celebrities were guests in the owner's sky box and were often highlighted on national TV.

Enough already! One suspects that the chorus of pious rhetoric emanating from the left-wing media and many in the Democratic Party is merely an attempt to distract the public from the shortcomings of President Barack Obama’s foreign and domestic policies.

H.L. Mencken, the iconoclastic sage of The Baltimore Sun, once defined puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy.”

So it is with the anti-football harpies. Rush to judgment — especially by the media and politicians — is never seemly, especially when they seem to echo the Red Queen's declaration in "Alice in Wonderland": “Sentence first, verdict afterward.”

### CON: NFL must stop blaming its critics and start correcting its flaws

VIENNA, Va. — Blame the messenger. It may be the oldest audible in the public relations playbook, but that hasn't stopped defenders of King Football from calling the play.

That they resorted to such tactics only underscores the trouble the National Football League finds itself in with casual viewers and perhaps even the next generation of fans.

In a perfect world, breaking news wouldn't necessarily come to us from TMZ, blog blasts and cable rants. But the heyday of Edward R. Murrow ended long ago.

Whatever the source, there's no mistaking that Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice sucker-punched his significant other in an elevator and dragged her body into the hotel corridor. There's no mistaking that the NFL has a serious problem when it comes to violence within its ranks and even the long-term health of its players.

For a light can go out in a fan's heart. Not that long ago boxing and horse racing ranked among the top sports in the land. They drew huge crowds until the public decided that they were too crooked and, especially in the case of boxing, too violent.

Football is a violent game. We all know that. But it can be easily forgotten with the bright graphics, loud theme music and freeze-framed action offered to us from so many camera angles.

During the NFL's work stoppage in 2011, I detailed for Esquire magazine about how brain-related injuries were the most common injury in today's pro game.

The career expectancy for the average NFL player is 3.5 years, according to its union. Wide receivers and running backs fared even worse, lasting only 2.81 years and 2.57 years, respectively.

Sure, some players are cut from the roster because somebody better came along. Yet the data strongly suggests that more hobble to the exits due to career-threatening injury. For many, retirement soon becomes a nightmare. A new study reveals that nearly 30 percent of former NFL players will end up developing Alzheimer's disease or dementia.

What does this mounting medical evidence mean at the grass-root level? For the youth leagues and high school teams?

A recent poll by ESPN found that 57 percent of parents said that recent stories about the increase in concussions in football have made them less likely to allow their sons to play in youth leagues.

"Should you let your child play football?" The Boston Globe asked earlier this year. President Barack Obama doesn't think so.

Pop Warner, the largest youth football organization, saw participation drop nearly 10 percent from 2010 to 2012, ESPN reported. An estimated 60 percent to 70 percent of all NFL players started in the Pop Warner program.

Can a sport survive at such a halcyon level when fewer and fewer kids are playing it? Will the next generation embrace a sport that's seen as increasingly unhealthy to those who participate in it?

Football hasn't always been king. Nearly a half-century ago, Super Bowl I took place at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The stadium had 30,000 empty seats. "Nobody cared," Green Bay Packers receiver Max McGee later told HBO. From such humble beginnings, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle made the championship game into the world's biggest sports event.

Current Commissioner Roger Goodell is a far cry from Rozelle. Today's NFL has a lack of leadership, especially at the top. It's increasingly haunted by long-term health concerns. And there's a fan base that's starting to grow disillusioned.

Critics can blame the media all they want, but today's NFL has many more serious issues than the next news report about its state of disrepair.

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