

The New Orleans Saints' "bounty" program and violence in American sports

By David Walsh
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On March 2, the National Football League (NFL) issued a statement detailing the findings of a lengthy investigation into a "bounty" program operated by an assistant coach and between 22 and 27 defensive players on the New Orleans Saints during the 2009, 2010 and 2011 seasons. The Saints won the Super Bowl in February 2010.

Under the program, payments—out of a pool to which the defensive players in question contributed—were made to Saints players who injured opponents. Players received \$1,000 for "cart-offs" (an opponent carried off the field) and \$1,500 for a "knock-out" (an opposing player unable to return to the game).

In important games, the promised rewards were apparently increased. Defensive captain Jonathan Vilma reportedly offered \$10,000 to any fellow player who could knock Minnesota Vikings quarterback Bret Favre out of the National Football Conference championship game in January 2010.

According to the NFL, the bounty program was administered by defensive coordinator Gregg Williams, now a coach with the St. Louis Rams, "with the knowledge of other defensive coaches." The statement noted that "Funds were contributed on occasion by Williams." Former Washington Redskins players allege that Williams oversaw the same type of program from 2004 to 2007 when he was defensive coordinator with that team.

The league noted that although Saints head coach Sean Payton "was not a direct participant in the funding or administration of the program, he was aware of the allegations, did not make any detailed inquiry or otherwise seek to learn the facts, and failed to stop the bounty program." General Manager Mickey Loomis, according to the NFL, was instructed by Saints owner Tom Benson to discontinue the program, but he "did not carry out Mr. Benson's directions."

The league has promised that commissioner Roger Goodell "will determine the appropriate discipline for the violation." Williams issued a public apology, as did Loomis and Payton. The latter's statement acknowledged that the violations "happened under our watch," and added, "We take full responsibility."

The sports establishment and media have responded to the revelations as one might expect, on a spectrum that ranges from hypocrisy to cynicism. Various sports columnists have called

on Goodell and the NFL to impose stiff penalties on the Saints, including fines and suspensions, to demonstrate that they "mean business" about player safety.

David Haugh, in the *Chicago Tribune* ("Punishment Vital in NFL Bounty Scandal"), writes that the league has to intervene "to remind teams where the line exists between the hard hitting that traditionally makes the game great and hired thuggery." The columnist notes claims by "cynics" that "everybody in the NFL does it," but, he adds, "Not everybody gets caught. The Saints got caught. Now the NFL has a duty to respond harshly."

In the *Washington Post*, sports writer Tracee Hamilton describes the bounty program scandal as the "NFL's put-up-or-shut-up moment." She writes that Goodell needs to send a message to every team: "Hire Gregg Williams and his ilk at your own peril. In other words, put a bounty on his head."

On the other hand, Michael Rosenberg at SI.com suggests that cleaning up professional football is "like cleaning up dirt." He goes on, "if you have ever stood on the sideline for a single NFL series, or seen the limps and grimaces in the locker room afterward, or talked to a former star who says he wishes he never played the sport, you understand that Goodell's challenge is almost impossible."

Most of the NFL players who reacted in public treated the Saints story as old news. Former defensive back Darren Sharper commented that the system of incentives for injuring opponents was something that "has happened thousands and thousands of times over." Another retired player, offensive lineman Damien Woody, noted that such a bounty program "happens all over the league."

Trevor Pryce, a former defensive lineman, told the *New York Times*, "Trust me, it happens in some form or way in any locker room." Retired safety Matt Bowen, who played for Williams with the Redskins, told the *Washington Post*, "I guarantee Gregg Williams isn't the only one who did this. He's just taking the fall."

Contrary to the claims of the NFL and its apologists, such as the *New York Times*, which assures its readers that Goodell "has made player safety a focal point," the league, the team owners and the media encourage levels of violence that make serious injuries inevitable. The brutality is seen as essential to

the game's appeal. However, problems arise when the public gets a glimpse of the harsh reality, as it has in the current controversy.

Goodell and the NFL are taking action to avert a public relations and legal disaster and maintain the fiction that professional football is still played according to common-sense, semi-civilized rules of conduct, and that a line in fact exists between the coaches' and players' conduct and "hired thuggery." As columnist Rosenberg points out, "What Gregg Williams did was drop the pretense."

The league, which generated some \$11 billion in revenue this year, has considerable financial interests at stake. A public outcry over official indifference to injuries would hurt its marketing appeal with many parents, and might even prompt ambitious politicians and prosecutors to intervene.

Furthermore, as Rosenberg remarks, Goodell is acting against the Saints' "bounty" program centrally out of concern for the "legal protection of his league, which has been sued by injured former players and could be sued by future ones." The NFL is attempting to stake out a claim as having serious safety concerns.

The facts speak otherwise. The rates of physical disability and premature death among former NFL players, forced to smash into each other on a regular basis, are staggering. Players are far larger and more damaging than they used to be. A 2011 *New York Times* article explained that while in 1970 only one NFL player weighed 300 pounds or more, "That number has expanded...from three 300-pounders in 1980 to 94 in 1990, 301 in 2000, 394 in 2009 and 532 as training camps began in 2010."

A December 2010 CBSSports.com column asserted, "The NFL is killing its players, literally leading them to an early grave.... According to a 2006 report in the *St. Petersburg Times*, for every season a player spends on an NFL roster, his life expectancy decreases by almost three years.

"The average American male lives to be almost 75. According to the *Times* report, an NFL player, whose career lasts roughly four years on average, lives to be 55. The more years a player spends in the NFL, the more games and practices he survives, the quicker he dies."

Hundreds of former players, some 715, according to the calculations of one commentator, are currently involved in class action suits against the NFL. On February 24, for example, 52 former players and their wives filed suit in Eastern Pennsylvania, led by Carl Hairston, a former defensive end for the Philadelphia Eagles, Cleveland Browns and Arizona Cardinals.

The suit claims that the NFL has long been aware of the dangers of repetitive traumatic brain injury and concussions and "actively concealed the information from the Plaintiffs and all others who participated in organized football at all levels."

It continues, "Rather than warn players that they risked permanent brain injury if they returned too soon after

sustaining a concussion, the NFL actively deceived players, by misrepresenting to them that concussions did not represent serious, life-altering risks.... Many of these players have suffered brain damage and latent neurodegenerative disorders and diseases as a result of the NFL's acts and/or omissions."

The current state of professional football, and sports in America in general, has to be placed in a wider social context. The problem does not lie with the population's innate fascination with violence, as the superficial "radical" critics assert. The problem lies with the diseased state of American society.

The US has been continuously at war for more than a decade in various parts of the globe, inflicting death and destruction on vast numbers of people. Both major parties threaten more and bloodier wars. The American military and CIA murder political opponents at long range with the most sinister and deadly weapons. Hollywood films glorify what are essentially US military death squads.

In their language and demeanor, leading politicians, including the president, increasingly resemble mafia bosses when discussing the "terrorists" they are seeking to track down and kill.

(Professional football has long borrowed its terminology from the military. The Washington Redskins defense under Gregg Williams, for example, called blows that knocked out opposing players "kill shots.")

At home, American society is more and more polarized along economic lines. A handful of individuals control trillions of dollars in wealth and live behind high walls, protected by an army of private security. More than 2 million people are locked up in prison. The powers that be give a virtual green light to the police to carry out repression.

The candidates for leading office are without exception reactionary defenders of the rich. The population seethes in discontent and can find no means of expressing its outrage in a healthy fashion within the official political process. In a type of "bread and circuses" strategy (without the bread), the ruling elite encourages the most debased sentiments in the population, seeking to forestall a social upheaval aimed at its wealth and privileges.

Is it perhaps not enough to ask: what kind of professional sports activity is such a society likely to produce?

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