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How Management Relates to The Success of a Professional Sport League: A look at the NBA
and NFL

For years now the National Football League has been notoriously dubbed by fans and players as the “No Fun League.” Fans look to strict rules regulating celebrations as just one justification for this nickname. Unfortunately, a plethora of other issues have plagued the NFL for years pitting players and, in most cases, fans against team owners and the league commissioner, Roger Goodell. The NFL is a business, and like all businesses, success is heavily reliant on the individual or individuals running the show. Yes, the NFL is a successful organization; they are an organizational powerhouse pumping hours of weekly content into fans homes across the country. They make millions annually in advertisement revenue. So what’s the problem? For players and some fans, the NFL “restricts freedom of expression.” For some players, the NFL forces them to play for a certain team at a set rate using an extremely outdated system called the “Franchise Tag.” Another reason for players bitterness towards this league stems from the past forty years, where they allegedly hid details of playing football’s correlation to long term brain injuries, blacklisting scientists from their industry. Many fans believe the NFL should hold players to the same legal standard as every American citizen. For example, if a lawyer gets caught beating his wife, would he be suspended from work for four weeks, only to

return as if nothing ever happened? Some disgusted fans might argue this approach has been taken for players for years. The issues run long, and many are starting to wonder if a major adjustment of management is long overdue.

The National Basketball League seems to have a firm understanding on fair management while also delivering exceptional content to their fans. In turn, they have seen success in beginning to globalize their massive organization. The NBA commissioner, Adam Silver, is outspoken about the rights of the players in the league, while keeping fan interest an obvious priority. The Silver-led NBA supports free speech of players, emphasizes mental health of athletes, and gives every free agent the opportunity to sign with whatever team they desire.

The NFL is miles behind the NBA in terms of restricting players and maintaining shady business practices, and their fans have certainly caught on. As resentment towards the league seemingly continues to grow each year, a direct competitor in the XFL is emerging. Vince McMahon, self-made billionaire and Chief Executive Officer of the WWE, a multibillion-dollar, global, sport-entertainment powerhouse, revitalized the league for a comeback after failing to compete with the NFL head on in 2001, as well as an abundance of other issues. McMahon however, has learned from his mistakes, and observed the growing disdain for the NFL in accordance with the fans lack of alternatives. In 2020, a few weeks after the Super Bowl when football interest is arguably at its peak, the new XFL will kick off. Though no official announcements have been made, Sports Business Journal reported ongoing contract negotiations with both FOX and ESPN to broadcast their games (Ourand, 2019). The NBA, on the other hand, maintains its market stronghold in the United States, as there are no signs of competition in the distant future. It is clear the NFL's management needs to change in some capacity if they want to continue succeed over the next several years. The NBA's management, on the other hand, is

always listening to their fans and players, making their organization a sure success for years to come.

A Commissioner is, as Merriam-Webster defines it, an administrative head of a professional sports league. A league's respective constitution defines their powers. Roger Goodell has been acting as the NFL's Commissioner since September 1 of 2006. His thirteen-year reign has been met with much scrutiny, making him the poster child for the "No Fun League." Much of Goodell's criticism roots from inconsistent and reactive disciplinary action issued to players. Prior to the 2014 season, Cleveland Browns receiver Josh Gordon was suspended sixteen games, a full season, for failing a drug test due to his marijuana use. Though his suspension was later lowered to ten, many questioned whether the severity of the offence justified the action taken. That same year, Ray Rice, star running back for the Baltimore Ravens was dealt a two-game suspension for striking his then-fiancée in an elevator. Again, many questioned the legal standard players should be held to. If smoking marijuana is a worth nearly a full season's suspension, how is domestic violence only punishable by two games? If a lawyer, doctor, or teacher is charged with domestic violence, they would be fired. Why is a professional football player any different? Does the revenue they bring to an organization really justify their acts? Five days before Rice was able to return to the field, surveillance video of the incident was released. The Raven's quickly terminated his contract, and Goodell suspended him indefinitely (Brown, 2016). Ironically, a neutral arbitrator overturned the sentence due to an NFL's "abuse of discretion." Goodell's inconsistent approach to acting as judge, jury, and executioner has done no favors for his decision-making credibility. Following allegations of Tom Brady and the New England Patriots deliberately deflating footballs for a competitive advantage during a playoff game in 2015, the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) requested that a neutral arbitrator would

again hear an appeal of Brady's four game suspension citing "the NFL's history of inconsistency and arbitrary decisions in disciplinary matters (Gagnon, 2015)." The NFLPA argued Goodell should not be an arbitrator, citing probable partiality. They referred to another scandal where coaches put bounties on players, in which case Goodell removed himself after admitting his partiality (Roberts, 2018). Brady's suspension was overturned in a district court, but reinstated in a appeal court. Instead of taking the matter to the Supreme Court, he decided to accept the suspension (NFL.com, 2016). This particular case drew Goodell much heat. Shirts and towels with a picture of Goodell with a clown's nose have since become a fan necessity when attending Patriot games at Gillette Stadium in Boston, Massachusetts.

David Stern, the NBA's former Commissioner, was no stranger to controversy. In 2007, referee Tim Donaghy was convicted and admitted to gambling on games he officiated and calling them in his favor. Donaghy's most obvious biased officiating took place during the 2002 Western Conference Finals between the Sacramento Kings and Los Angeles Lakers. Observing free throw numbers alone would raise eyebrows, as free throws take place as a result of a referee calling a foul when one is shooting the ball. During this game, the Kings shot twenty-five free throws, falling in line with the average number of free throws attempted a game during that season (twenty-eight point eight was the average). The Lakers managed to attempt forty free throws that game. The Lakers final earned score of one-hundred-and-eight points meant they could have scored thirty-eight percent of their points from the free throw line, a ridiculously high percentage (basketball-reference.com). It certainly did not help when Stern claimed two years later his "dream finals matchup" would be the Lakers v. the Lakers. Ironically, in 2011 during the NBA lockout, a striking period over a failure to negotiate a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (which will be explored later), Chris Paul, one of the best point guards in the league,

was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers, one of the best teams in the league. They won the championship two years prior, and was home of one of the best players of all time, Kobe Bryant. During that time period, Paul's team, the Hornets, were financially unstable, and, in an unprecedented move, the team was sold to the twenty-nine other team owners in the league. Though Stern vowed day-to-day operations would remain in the hands of the Hornet's staff, he decided to veto the trade citing "the best interests of the hornets." Many argued the trade was more than fair, as the Hornets would be receiving five players, three of which had been or would be All-Stars, and another that had just won the coveted Sixth Man of the Year Award, as well as a first round draft pick. Though this trade would most likely have made both teams exponentially better, Stern thought otherwise, contradicting his dream finals scenario (Harris, 2017).

Needless to say, NBA fans and players alike were relieved when Adam Silver took over as Commissioner in 2014. It wasn't long after that Silver faced his first test which came in the form of Donald Sterling. Sterling, seventy-nine years old and owner of the Los Angeles Clippers at the time, was heard on an audio recording released by TMZ discussing how he didn't want his girlfriend, a Hispanic and black woman, publicly hanging out with minorities, bringing them to his games, or posting pictures with them on her Instagram (TMZ.com, 2014). In response, Silver fined Sterling two and a half million dollars, the maximum allowed under the NBA Constitution, as well as stripped him from nearly all of his authority over the Clippers. Sterling was indefinitely banned and forced by other owners to sell the team on the grounds of violating the NBA's constitutional by-laws. It was the most severe punishment a commissioner had ever imposed on a professional sports owner (Price, 2014). How this issue was dealt gave Silver plenty of brownie points among fans and players alike. Finally, there was a commissioner who reacted to a controversy appropriately, no matter the sport.

Since the Sterling Saga, Silver has taken many steps to grow the NBA brand on an international level. A total of forty-five countries are represented in the NBA, the most in an American sport league besides the MLS (Major League Soccer). For comparison, the NFL is represented by twenty-seven countries, almost half the NBA's number (LAGalaxy.com, 2017). Acknowledging their diversity, the NBA has explored numerous international endeavors such as the NBA Global Games, where NBA teams compete with each other and foreign teams on courts outside the United States and Canada. In 2015, the NBA started the NBA Africa Game, an annual exhibition game that takes place in Africa where Team Africa, represented by continental natives, takes on Team World. These games are examples of the NBA providing foreign markets the opportunity to attend an NBA game while also using their respective native players to demonstrate relativity to their respective market, an area the NFL has failed miserably.

In 1989, the World League of Football, later known as NFL Europe, was founded. The league consisted of teams ranging from the Netherlands and Spain, to the United Kingdom and Germany, in an attempt to globalize the NFL. In 2007, Roger Goodell announced that the league was disbanding, as they would attempt to develop a new international strategy. The league reportedly lost thirty million dollars per season, and have not attempted such an international expansion ever since (Starcevic, 2007).

The NBA's successful interaction with foreign markets not only exemplifies their opportunistic and entrepreneurial mindset, but their solidarity among all people, an area of obvious contrast between the NBA and the NFL. Unfortunately, the NFL is notorious for an owner's mentality, where owners and general managers do everything, they can to maintain a stronghold on their players. This has been evident in a number of cases, but most publicly when Colin Kaepernick started kneeling for the National Anthem. On August 26 of 2016, Kaepernick,

a quarterback for the 49ers remained seated during the National Anthem, citing “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color.” This was in response to the police shootings of unarmed black men. As the weeks went on, Kaepernick began kneeling, rather than sitting. Players across the NFL soon followed, kneeling to show solidarity with Kaepernick and emphasize their support of his message. Meanwhile, NBA players showed solidarity in their own way: locking arms. Two years prior, some NBA teams wore shirts with the words “I Can’t Breathe” on them, in reference to Eric Garner’s controversial death after being choked by a police officer. On May 23 of 2018, the NFL owners ruled that players can no longer kneel during the national anthem without being punished. Some still decided to and were met with according fines . On the other hand, though the NBA players committed a finable offense by not following the dress code with their “I Can’t Breathe” shirts, no such fine was imposed (Schmidt, 2018).

If there is anywhere an owner’s mentality is apparent in the NFL, it’s in free agency. Free agency seems to be the issue that frequently causes disputes. A free agent is a professional not currently contracted to any team, and is free to sign wherever he or she pleases. Unfortunately, players, no matter the league, did not always have this freedom. From the early to mid 1900s, there were no contract negotiations. Owners approached players with set contracts, and players were honored to sign them. Then, in 1962, one player changed everything. R.C. Owens’s contract had expired with the San Francisco 49ers, and he decided to sign with the Baltimore Colts. 49ers owner Vic Morabito was so provoked that he refused to speak to Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom ever again (Schotney ,2017). The next year, Pete Rozelle, NFL Commissioner at the time, put the “Rozelle Rule’ into place. This allowed any team who lost a player in free agency to be compensated financially or with draft picks. In 1976, the United

States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit ruled this law unconstitutional, saying it violated Section One of the Sherman Antitrust Act. The court found the rule restrained trade by denying professional football players the right to freely be contracted for their services (Strauss, 1980). The solution was silly and further gave way to the NFL's owner's mentality over players. It came in the form of a new rule called "Plan B." This allowed each team to retain the rights to thirty-seven players each season, without any say of the player. "A protected player is unable to sign with other teams without giving his old team the first chance to sign him or forcing his new club to compensate his old club if he goes elsewhere. (Freeman, 1922)" To the surprise of nobody but the owners, this too, was ruled unconstitutional. Freeman McNeil, a running back for the New York Jets sued the league in 1992. The District Court of Minnesota said the rule again violated Section One Sherman Antitrust Act for the same reason as the Rozelle Rule (Quinn, 2012). The owners responded by agreeing to full free agency, except one player can be restricted instead of thirty seven. Said player would then be paid the average of the five highest players in the league at their respective position. This is called a franchise tag, and it is one of the most pressing issues the NFL is facing going into its next CBA negotiations. A CBA, or Collective Bargaining Agreement, is a written agreement between team owners and a respective players union outlining conditions for players such as payment, working conditions, and contractual clauses. All major sport organizations in the United States have a CBA, and each come with their own issues. The franchise tag is extremely pressing issue because it not only permits a player from leaving a team if they are unhappy, but also limits the amount they can make. This past season, Le'Veon Bell voluntarily sat the final year of his contract in an effort to have the Pittsburgh Steelers not franchise tag him. It looks like players might finally get their way in 2021 when the new deal is negotiated, or a lockout could follow.

NBA free agency did not exist until 1988. Before then, players were not able to sign with other teams. Their only way on to another team was to be traded. The only two conditions that had to be met were: the player played in the league for seven or more years, and through two NBA contracts (Peterson, 2014). Since, those qualifications have changed, and players are now free to sign with whatever team they please after their rookie contract expires. The NFL should certainly look to adopt this method of free agency. Not only does it present a fair opportunity for players to take their talents elsewhere, but also provides the opportunity for the players to make more money.

The health of professional athletes is a concern in any professional sports league. The NBA, a league featuring a non-contact sport, does not have to undergo the same injuries players suffer from as the NFL, a game based on collisions of the human body. Either way, a league that is open and supporting of their players and their injuries is highly regarded, and the NBA is no stranger to that. In fact, with mental health gaining public awareness, the NBA is keeping up. The NBA is opening an office for “players to seek treatment and counseling outside the framework of their individual teams, if they want. Existing team physicians and other resources will still be available too.” This came on the heels of Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan, two All-Stars, publicly writing about their struggles with mental health in an effort to show that professional sports athletes are not immune to these challenges. Even before the public was aware of these issues, the previous Collective Bargaining Agreement discussed this initiative (Aldridge, 2018). This is yet another example of the NBA showing the utmost support of their players. Unfortunately, the NFL has not been as stellar.

In 2002, Dr. Bennet Omalu discovered CTE in deceased NFL player, Mike Webster’s, brain. CTE, or Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, is a progressive degenerative disease caused

from repeated brain trauma and is often found in athletes. When he showed his findings to the NFL, he was blacklisted from his industry (Steiger, 2016). One NFL insider even claimed Omalu's discovery could lead to the end of football. The NFL was based on collision - they marketed the violence. That seemingly started to become in jeopardy. The NFL has since faced a plethora of lawsuits filed by players and families of players seeking compensation for brain injury, but the league maintains that these injuries were not caused by football. However, numerous private settlements have been made to appease the suing parties (*The League of Denial*, 2013). This issue went so far that in 2008, the United States House Judiciary Committee grilled Goodell on the correlation between football and brain injury, as well as what steps have been taken to protect players (Associated Press, 2009). Since then, the league has made some changes. Certain hits on players have been barred and have even been punishable by suspension. More shock absorbing helmets have been adopted by teams, but the first prohibition of certain helmets was only implemented last year (Wilner, 2018). To this day, the NFL maintains its stance that their sport and brain injury have no correlation.

The NFL is a business. However, that does not mean they should go to these ethically questioning steps to protect their organization. An interesting question is: "How would the NBA react if they were in the NFL's shoes?" Would a scandal unfold? Would they do all they can to hide the issue from the public, and even blacklist a revolutionary scientist? It is hard to answer considering how different the sports are, but given their past transparency and willingness to support players, especially under Adam Silver, the league would probably handle the issue much more appropriately.

The most important question to ask with all these presented issues is “Does any of this really matter?” Is it affecting the sport organizations? A look at attendance, viewership, and revenue tell a damning story.

Attendance is a peculiar topic when dealing with these two sports for a few reasons. Primarily, NFL games are played mostly in stadiums, whereas NBA games are played in an arena. For context, the NFL venue able to hold the largest capacity is MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey. The enormous stadium can seat eighty-two thousand, five hundred people for football games (MetLifeStadium.com). The smallest venue is Dignity Health Sports Park in Carson, California which is able to hold up to twenty-seven thousand people (DignityHealthSportsPark.com). The NBA’s smallest arena, on the other hand is the Smoothie King Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. The arenas maximum capacity is only sixteen thousand eight hundred and sixty-seven. The United Center in Chicago, Illinois is the largest and can hold up to twenty thousand, nine hundred and seventeen fans (Weinstein, 2018). With all that said, the NFL saw their lowest attendance since 2010 during the 2018 regular season (McClung, 2019). One might argue these numbers are not reliant on fan interest but are due to the rise in streaming services, making games more easily accessible. However, the NBA just set an attendance record for the fourth straight year, making this narrative obsolete (Carroll, 2018). Perhaps attendance does not matter. Maybe, for some reason, attending NBA games is becoming more of a trend. Observing viewership numbers might be more appropriate, as they are not limited to a maximum capacity seating. Unfortunately, that argument would be flawed, as NFL teams only play sixteen games a year, whereas NBA teams play eighty-two. Fans would, as a result, probably be more likely to tune into a football game more often than a basketball game. Therefore, positive or negative trends were attempted to be observed to see if more are or less are watching these

respective sports. Statista.com reported that the NFL had declined by three million viewers from 2010 to 2017, a percent change of negative seventeen percent (Feldman, 2018). Due to the high number of NBA games and how many different channels they can be watched on, long term numbers and trends are not available.

Observing each respective sports' championship game viewership is eye-opening. From 2015 until 2017, the NBA Finals, a best-of-seven game series, averaged twenty point two million viewers, the highest since the 1998 NBA Finals (Paulsen, 2018). Their hot streak was broken in 2018 when they attracted seventeen point seven million viewers. It should be noted that this Finals matchup was a sweep, meaning the victors achieved glory by only playing and winning the first four games. However, these are still great ratings for a sweep, as the 2007 Finals only drew nine point three million viewers in the San Antonio Spurs sweep over the Cleveland Cavaliers. (Statista, 2018). The NFL's Super Bowl is a monster in itself. The day of the game is almost akin to a national holiday. Viewers range from die-hard fans of the game to those who only watch Super Bowl itself, if that. The last three years, though, saw a steady but vast decline in viewership by twelve percent. This past year's game, in particular, drew the lowest viewership numbers in eleven years, with a relatively low number of ninety-eight point two million viewers (Statista.com). Relative to the NBA, however, the NFL seems to be doing just fine. Nevertheless, looking back on recent trends tell an interesting story of fans opting to not watch the Super Bowl, but choosing to watch the NBA Finals.

The most impressive comparison between the NFL and the NBA lies in overall earned revenue. In 2017, the NFL's revenue grew by nine hundred million dollars to fourteen billion dollars, almost a seven percent growth from the year prior. On the other hand, the NBA generated seven point four billion in 2017, up twenty-five percent from 2016. Observing these

numbers would suggest the NBA is growing thrice as fast as the NFL. Fortune.com reports that these numbers suggest NFL revenue to be approximately twenty-eight billion dollars by 2029, in line with the twenty-five-billion-dollar goal by 2027 that Roger Goodell set in 2010. Using the same calculation with the NBA's recent growth and revenue, they are estimated to earn over sixty-eight billion dollars by 2029 (Morris, 2018). These different numbers and statistics do not only give way to the continuing rise of the NBA, but even suggest they will shortly take the NFL's place as America's Game.

The NBA and NFL are very different organizations; they exhibit two completely different sports, and evidently manage and conduct their businesses in their own unique way. As seen in the points demonstrated, it might be time for the NFL to rethink their management strategy and take some pages out of the NBA's playbook while they are still ahead. Being more supportive of their players in areas such as their contracts, health, and freedom of expression, as well as looking to expand globally at a more gradual pace would certainly benefit the league. However, an ideal place to start would be moving on from Roger Goodell and electing a former player to serve: one who better understands the wants and needs of those who, in one way or another, generate the league's revenue. On the other hand, the NBA must stay on track with their current strategy. A league managed as well as theirs will surely continue to see an abundance of success in the years to come.

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