

Lingering Items--Clueless Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, March 16 2011 6:57 PM - Last Updated Friday, March 18 2011 6:41 AM



It's hard to know exactly what to call the NFL "situation" at the moment. The players and their union walked away from the bargaining table last Friday at 4 p.m. so that their lawyers could decertify the NFLPA as a union and then a handful of players could turn around and sue their employers for anti-trust violations. On the heels of those activities came the NFL owners' move to then lock them out, although since there is no union it's really unclear what a lockout could actually mean in practical terms.

Nonetheless, this hasn't and won't stop the inevitable public relations war over the hearts and minds of the fans, as if swaying the fans one way or the other will help determine the outcome of this dispute.

To the owners' credit, they aren't much acting like the fans view of this matters all that much. In that they're just being honest. To the owners, this is a high stakes game that will in large part determine the value of the multi-million dollar investment they call a football franchise. Sure the revenues getting split up are provided directly and indirectly by the fans, but they know that alienating the customer base in an industry like this isn't all that relevant of a concern. The fans will return when football resumes. They always do.

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The players, on the other hand, seem to think that influencing fans will make a difference. If you're a fan of Twitter and have any inclination whatsoever to follow the literally hundreds of pro football players with Twitter accounts, you'll see an amazing consistency in their recent messages: "fans, we feel your pain."

There is almost no scenario where the players will ever feel the fans' pain. The disconnect between those who play our professional sports and the people that watch them has never been greater than it is now. It's not just the money players make, though that's a big part of it. It's also the way players conduct their lives. Everything about what most of them do away from the field is designed to keep the barrier between them and the public impenetrable.

But to further the myth anyway, there was Drew Brees, a nice guy, a good quarterback but a clueless businessman, taking an unfortunate and ill-informed shot at the owners' last offer. He claimed it was all for show, whatever that means.

In truth, the owners presented a very comprehensive, very serious offer to the players. Maybe it wasn't acceptable because it still involved givebacks on revenues, but to essentially call it meaningless isn't helpful, particularly when the union hasn't yet produced for public consumption any of the proposals they've made.

There's actually a reason for this. The union hasn't made a single serious proposal throughout the negotiations. All they've done is respond to what the owners have proposed with a loud and resounding "no" each and every time. They've shown little interest in solving the problems presented but great interest in sounding like they are being abused in the process.

What's really stopping these two sides from solving their problems is that they can't even agree there's a problem to solve. The players only want the gravy train to continue unabated. The owners, who actually are the businessmen in the room, see a future where the train has a little less gravy. Until the union accepts the fact that the owners believe there is a problem to solve, the standoff will continue and no amount of quips or tweets or ill-informed opinions by players like Brees is going to change that.

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It may be that the owners were spoiling for a lockout all along. But the way the union negotiated with them, it's pretty clear that they also got what they wanted, a chance to litigate in what is surely a dead-end strategy.

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There was a letter to the editor in Wednesday's Akron Beacon Journal that essentially called Ohio State football coach Jim Tressel the "shame of Ohio." Well, if his misdeeds are the worst shame visited upon Ohio, then we're in pretty good shape. But I've taken a look at the budget deficit in Ohio and the proposed method of solving it and I'm pretty sure that's not the case.

On the day that letter appeared also came the story that the Indiana Department of Labor had concluded their investigation into the death of Notre Dame student Declan Sullivan, who was sent atop a hydraulic lift in winds gusting up to 60 miles per hour last October by Notre Dame football coach Brian Kelly to film practice, only to have that lift tumble over and crush him.

The Indiana Department of Labor concluded that "the evidence overwhelming demonstrated that the university made a decision to utilize its scissor lifts in known adverse weather conditions." For that Notre Dame was given a "knowing" citation and fined a mere \$77,500, or about \$172,500 less than Ohio State fined Tressel for not being forthcoming about a couple of emails.

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What's most telling about the Notre Dame situation is that this knowing violation didn't just occur on Kelly's watch, it occurred with his direct involvement. Kelly knew the weather was bad. Kelly allowed the student to ascend on that lift anyway and Kelly didn't order him back down, despite the worsening weather.

In fact, the weather that particular day last October was severe over a very wide swath, including Columbus, Ohio. Tressel, the so-called shame of Ohio, confronted that same situation on that same day. Responding generally to a question about the severe weather (and before anyone knew of Sullivan's death) Tressel told the media that he purposely didn't ask his student videographers to use the hydraulic lift that day because it was far too windy. Indeed, he talked about how he worried about their safety. Shameful, I know.

Declan Sullivan lost his life because Kelly didn't harbor those same concerns. And for that, no one, but no one, is calling for Kelly's dismissal or calling him the shame of Indiana or South Bend or even just Notre Dame.

The point, I think, is not so much that Kelly is a bad guy because he isn't. He's a decent and honorable man, like Tressel. But the consequence of his inaction on that day cost a student his life. The consequence of Tressel's inaction, at best, was the delay in an investigation over whether a couple of star players traded body art for pieces of memorabilia that they owned.

See, this is what happens when we knee-jerk our reactions to situations that are more complicated than can fit into the scroll at the bottom of ESPN. Perspective is lost and easy answers are demanded. But the easy answers aren't always the right answers. I'm not suggesting that Notre Dame should fire Kelly but if there's a coach that should be, he sure would be a more viable candidate than Tressel.

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