

## Storm Clouds

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, July 24 2007 7:00 PM -

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If ever there was a time to love the sport and not the players, now is that time says Gary Benz. Has there ever been a time when all three major league sports were operating under such serious clouds at the same time? A cheater chasing one of the most hallowed records in sports. One of the NFL's biggest stars indicted on horrific charges. And a NBA ref about to plead guilty to fixing games.



If ever there was a time to love the sport and not the players, now is that time. While it has probably happened any number of times in the past, it is difficult to remember a time when all three major league sports were operating under such serious clouds at the same time.

Baseball's deliberate ignorance of its mushrooming steroids problem is coming home to roost for good in the next week or so when Barry Bonds finally surpasses Hank Aaron's career home run record. The dark underbelly of those that are allowed to lace up the spikes every Sunday in the NFL is being revealed in the form of one of its most prominent players, Michael Vick, who now has been ordered not to report to training camp because of a multi-count indictment over dog fighting. Meanwhile, the NBA's integrity hangs in the balance as the Tim Donaghy referee scandal is spreading like a wild fire. As a sports fan, if you don't find all this just a bit dispiriting then you've either lost your capacity to be surprised or you just don't care anymore.

Much has been written about each of these topics already and many more words are yet to be spilled. But it is the combined effect of all three that most serves to alienate the average sports fan at a time when none of these leagues are in a position to afford it, even if they don't know it or don't care about it.

The issue with Bonds, for example, has polarized the game in a way that Commission Bud Selig still can't fully appreciate. He may fiddle over the decision as to whether to follow Bonds around in order to witness the historic event, but

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Selig's overall strategy is to simply drag this issue out long enough in the hope that the fans simply lose interest. The Mitchell Committee, by all accounts, has made virtually no headway in its investigation of steroids. Selig seemingly strong-armed New York Yankees user Jason Giambi into talking to Mitchell but then reportedly let him off the hook by not even asking him about other players. What did they talk about, the weather?

Selig, as Commissioner now and as an owner when steroid use became rampant, is paralyzed by indecision and the only thing suffering in the process is the foundation of the game. What is all the more disgusting in this entire debate is the utter lack of courage by the players or their union to stand up for what is right-the good of the game. Each continues to play the "we don't know all the facts" game as a way of avoiding the issue all together, fully failing to recognize that they all stand as unindicted co-conspirators as a result of their inaction.

The fact that Bonds is even being given the opportunity to play this year is perhaps the most reprehensible aspect of this whole matter. The grand jury testimony regarding Bonds may have been illegally leaked, but that fact doesn't make what that testimony supposedly says about Bonds steroid use any less credible. Bonds can continue to act as if his continued abuse of the drugs was inadvertent, but he can't hide behind the fact that he did use and baseball can't hide behind the fact that he hasn't been penalized for it. In fact, he's been rewarded for it.

The fans in San Francisco are simply delusional about this issue, choosing to take the short-term feel good approach of one of their own rather than consider the long-term implications. The Giants managing general partner, Peter Magowan, who approved Bonds for the one year contract he's playing under this season, is far more interested in the additional revenue that the circus that is Bonds will generate than in protecting the game at any level. And Selig, he just wrings his hands.

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In many of the same ways that Bonds and his co-horts has already threatened the integrity of baseball, so too does what is taking place in the NBA threaten the integrity of that game.

The reason gambling is, in many ways, worse for a sport than illegal drugs begins and ends with the simple fact that it is the tipping point between sport and theatre. You can always toss out a druggie or two from the game, but trying to rid the sport of a reputation that its outcomes are pre-ordained is a much more vexing and serious problem.

The story that is emerging about Tim Donaghy will not be easily swept under the rug by Commissioner David Stern, despite his attempt to minimize the damage by letting the story break during the death days of July. Stern's performance, and it was a performance, during his press conference Tuesday morning showed him at his shakiest. Clearly traumatized by the issue, he nonetheless gave fans little comfort by essentially creating more questions than he answered.

Two things in particular stand out. First, Stern gave the fans no idea how long the investigation was going on or how it even came to light. Was the league watching Donaghy or was the league contacted by the FBI? It pushes the limits of his credibility for Stern to say, as he did, that this problem begins and ends with Donaghy. If Donaghy was indeed making phantom calls, how is it that none of his fellow referees noticed, and if they noticed, didn't say anything? If that's true, doesn't make them at least partially complicit, even if they didn't reap any benefits personally? Any referee in any sport can and will blow a call. But if a referee is doing enough of that in order to deliberately alter the outcome of a game, certainly someone in the league had to notice before it would have otherwise been brought to their attention.

And if they did notice, how could they not do something sooner? This is the second thing that stands out about the Stern press conference. He said that the league certainly would have liked to have terminated Donaghy sooner but was told that the investigation was best aided by not terminating him until he did. That

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may be true if the ultimate goal is criminal prosecution, but it seems like the ultimate goal for the NBA should have been protecting the game first and foremost and then let the criminal justice process have its hacks at him.

Here's why. If Stern knew that Donaghy was affecting the outcome of games and did nothing about it in order to let the investigation run its course, how can we be sure that the games Donaghy affected didn't impact the standings? And if they impacted the standings, it is likely that they impacted who qualified for the playoffs and who didn't, the seeding of the teams in those playoffs and, ultimately, the pecking order in the NBA draft. By letting the investigation run its course, how can any franchise be certain that it hasn't been negatively impacted for years to come? But it this way-if the difference is one or two additional ping pong balls in the lottery that ultimate gets you, say LeBron James and not Darko Milicic, wouldn't that bother you as a fan?

The answer, of course, is that you can never be sure. And while that doesn't necessarily mean it's time to blow up the sport, it does mean that Stern has to do more, much more, than rail against Donaghy as some sort of rogue or that this was some sort of isolated incident. Even if that is possibly true, the effect of his actions is hardly isolated.

It may very well be that some fans don't mind having their outcomes scripted. That's why the WWE is so popular. But in any sport where the outcome isn't supposed to be preordained, such as basketball, no issue threatens to bring it down more quickly than someone on the inside who's been gaming the system. And whether Stern wants to admit it or not, putting in place a whole new set of procedures to safeguard the integrity and the transparency of his sport is what it will take to even begin scratching the surface of removing the whispers that will inevitably followed the next time LeBron James gets clobbered going to the basket and the whistle isn't blown.

As for the NFL and its Michael Vick problem, it may not threaten the league in the same way that the Donaghy incident threatens the NBA, but it is a public relations

nightmare of the first order that can't be minimized, either.

Commissioner Roger Goodell has been rightfully applauded for drawing a line in the sand early on that bad behavior will not be tolerated. He, too, has rightfully held up Adam "Pacman" Jones as the poster child by suspending him a year. It wouldn't be too much to ask, frankly, for him to consider suspending the entire Bengals team for a year or so given the institutional problems it has. But having taken himself so far out on that limb, Goodell finds himself hamstrung by the Vick incident in a way he never anticipated.

The indictment against Vick couldn't be more damning and includes charges of interstate illegal gambling, dog fighting and animal cruelty. It is sufficiently well detailed and documented (read a copy of the indictment [here](#)) to make it reasonable to draw some conclusions about Vick, at least in the same way Goodell drew some conclusions about Pacman following his indictments.

It did Goodell no good to initially avoid the suspension of Vick by trying to distinguish his situation from the numerous run-ins that Pacman has found himself in the center of. What Goodell didn't realize is how heinous Vick's alleged conduct is viewed by the average person. Goodell also didn't appreciate the ability of the internet as an organizing tool, which was on full display when PETA and others picketed outside of Goodell's office in New York last week. When PETA showed up in Atlanta next that was enough for Goodell to at least take a mid-term approach and order Vick not to report for camp until the NFL's investigation is complete.

If the NFL has any hopes of surviving this public relations disaster, one of two things need to happen. Either the indictment against Vick has to get dropped or the NFL has to keep Vick on the sidelines until the legal system runs its course. The first is unlikely and the second will undoubtedly be challenged by the union. But that is one case that Goodell should be more than willing to take on, for it's far better to have an arbitrator force Goodell to let Vick back at work than it is for Goodell to appear as though he's making an exception for Vick because of his

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status in the league.

While no one is predicting the ultimate demise of any of the leagues, what this does do is further cement in the minds of the fans that investing in them and particularly the people who play them doesn't come without great risk.

Unfortunately, it's a message that isn't likely to register all that much with any of these leagues. After all, right now, if you're willing to part with \$260, you can get an authentic Michael Vick jersey by ordering it through the NFL's official web site.