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Sports

NFL meetings: Goodell stresses integrity issues

Thursday, April 03, 2008

By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Roger Goodell, a Washington & Jefferson College graduate, will give the commencement speech at Shadyside Academy in June, and those graduating seniors likely will hear a theme the NFL commissioner has drummed into his constituents here all week.

Integrity, integrity and more of the same.

It's a topic that dominated the annual NFL meetings because Goodell pushed it, and they concluded yesterday after the 32 owners unanimously approved a policy proposed by the commissioner titled "Integrity of the Game and Fair Competition."

Perhaps spurred by the lingering New England Patriots' Spygate case, the new policy requires all club owners, executives and head coaches to certify annually that they have complied with league rules and policies and have reported any violations they know. Spygate prompted a rules change adopted this week that permits NFL defenses to have one helmet with a radio transmitter to receive signals from the sideline.

Goodell also pushed for the league to find ways to make late-season games more meaningful than they sometimes are.

"The integrity of the game means more than anything," Steelers chairman Dan Rooney said as the meetings ended. "The more we talk about it, that's never going to bother me. Roger was very big on it, he talks about that a lot."

The new policy in effect is similar to ones at the service academies in which students are required to turn in themselves or others if they know of cheating.

"You may say, isn't that going a little far?" Rooney said. "Not when you're talking about the integrity of the game. We don't have anything else. My father would talk about that. That's one thing that was so important to him, the image of the league so the people could trust. As with him -- and I hope it's also with me and with [son] Art -- if I shake hands with somebody, it means everything."

Goodell, who succeeded Paul Tagliabue as commissioner in 2006, moved from his first day on the job to clean up the league's image. It began with his personal-conduct policies in which he suspended many players for their conduct off the field, even before they were convicted of anything.

"I think everybody came down here with an eye to protect and preserve the integrity of our game," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said. "I think we had legitimate discussion along those

lines. The limited number of rules changes shows our game is healthy and well."

Even Patriots owner Robert Kraft and coach Bill Belichick received ovations from fellow owners and coaches when they stood up at a general meeting here and again expressed remorse for what they did and vowed never to let it happen again.

Goodell fined Belichick and the Patriots and docked them a first-round pick in the draft for videotaping opposing coaches as they signaled in defensive plays from the sideline, something that will be diminished by allowing a radio helmet on defense next season.

"I paid a price for that mistake," Belichick said. "It was my mistake. I'd say going forward, as difficult as dealing with some of this situation has been, we've taken it as a positive and done a lot of things in our organization to reorganize a number of things ... I think if that was the intent of the commissioner's penalty, then, at least for the New England Patriots, that was certainly achieved."

The NFL continues to pursue the Spygate case in their negotiations with former Patriots employee Matt Walsh, who has alleged he has information on illegal acts by New England that go beyond what has been acknowledged by them.

"We hope to get a resolution soon," Goodell said yesterday. "I would like to see [the evidence]. The reality of it is, we haven't gotten any new facts yet, for seven months."

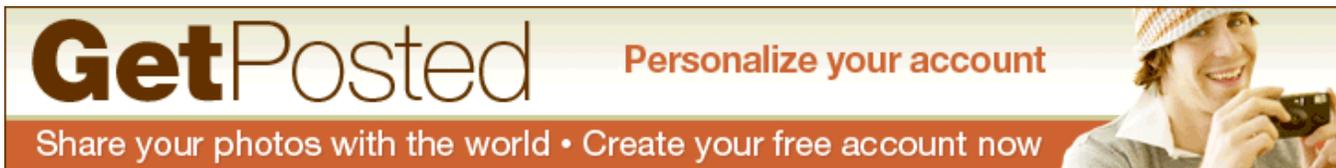
Goodell said if Walsh does not soon agree to show the evidence he supposedly has, "I will run out of patience" and the matter will be over. It's a matter U.S. Senator Arlen Specter also has pursued because two of the teams in his jurisdiction, the Steelers and Eagles, were beaten by the Patriots on the way to their Super Bowl wins. The Steelers lost AFC championship games to the Patriots after the 2001 and '04 seasons, and the Eagles lost to them in the Super Bowl after the '04 season.

But Dan Rooney said yesterday that it's time for the league to put Spygate behind everyone.

"We should get over it," he said. "We have to move on, do what we have to do, be prepared to look at things and do what's right."

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Sports

NFL Spring Notebook: Steelers playbook from Cowher era turns up on eBay

Thursday, April 03, 2008

By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Steelers playbook anyone?

Working on a story about how coaches protect their playbooks and such in the information age of high technology, a writer asked Steelers coach **Mike Tomlin** what kind of precautions he uses.

"I'm not a big tree-killer, if you will," Tomlin said. "What I mean by that is a lot of what we do is word of mouth. The things we hand out are absolutely necessary to hand out. As long as you proceed with that caution, you are pretty safe."

Tomlin noted that [eBay has for sale right now](#) a 2004 Steelers playbook. Indeed, the Buy It Now price is only \$10, and you might be able to get it for less.

"You are bidding on a 2004 Pittsburg (sic) Steelers offensive playbook from during coach **Bill Cowher's** (sic) tenure!" the description with the ad reads. "This is a must for any coach or diehard fan!!!!"

The ad goes on to say that it is a digital download, which means the thing can be sold over and over again.

Were the Steelers that loose with their playbooks back then? Arizona Cardinals coach **Ken Whisenhunt** yesterday told about Steelers offensive guard **Chris Kemoatu** leaving his playbook in the dining hall on the eve of their Super Bowl XL victory in Detroit.

"We as coaches saw it," said Whisenhunt, the team's offensive coordinator then.

"We grabbed it and had it with us."

Kemoatu walked into the meeting that night before the Super Bowl carrying a little black book under his arm. The coaches knew it wasn't his playbook, so Whisenhunt said Cowher quizzed him on it.

"Chris, I need to see your playbook," Cowher said.

Kemoatu was reluctant to give it to him.

"I need to see your playbook," Cowher repeated. "Hand it over."

Finally, Kemoatu gave up the small black book.

"It was the room-service menu," Whisenhunt said, laughing.

Rule changes

The NFL passed several new rules yesterday:

- The owners eliminated the forceout rule on sideline pass receptions or interceptions. If a player does not get both feet in bounds, even if he can't because he is forced out by the opposition, there is no reception or interception.
- Decisions on the opening coin toss can be deferred, the same as it has been in college football for a while. The winner of the coin toss can now defer his choice to start the second half of the game rather than the first.
- 5-yard penalties for minor facemask infractions were eliminated.

Playoff changes are rejected

The proposal to reseed playoff teams was resoundly defeated without coming to a formal vote. In a show of hands, only a few shot up in favor of it.

The Steelers were strongly opposed to the proposal which, if were in effect last year, would have had them play at Jacksonville in their playoff opener because the wild-card Jaguars had a better record than the AFC North champ Steelers.

Early roster limits unchanged

The NFL took no action on various proposals to expand the offseason and training camp rosters by more than 80. In past years, teams often would take more to camp because they received exemptions for those on their roster who played in NFL Europe, which disbanded after last season.

But, sources said, there's no way the league willingly would expand their rosters at this time with a possible fight over the collective bargaining agreement looming again soon. That's a chip -- more jobs, even if it's only in the offseason -- they won't give away outside of a CBA agreement.

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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Steelers' Tomlin shrugs off scheme talk

By Scott Brown
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PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Two years into his job as head coach of the Steelers, Mike Tomlin still can't make people forget about his past.

Specifically, they recall that he became a disciple of the 4-3 defense after breaking into the NFL as a defensive backs coach under Tony Dungy in Tampa Bay.

The significance of his NFL upbringing is that the Steelers have a long and successful history with the 3-4 scheme that defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau employs. So, when the Steelers do something as simple as hosting free-agent defensive tackle Anthony "Booger" McFarland, it prompts the questions of whether Tomlin is trying to stock his team with players that will allow him to switch his defense.

"A lot of people like to trace my origins to Tampa, Fla., but I coached a little football in college prior to that," Tomlin said at the NFL owners meetings. "I've been involved with a 3-4 defense, a 4-3 defense. The longer you coach, there's many ways to skin it. You better skin it in a direction that lends itself to your guys being able to do what they do best."

Tomlin made it clear this week that he is not changing direction in regard to the way the Steelers play defense, no matter what signals he sends out that suggest otherwise.

Those include the recent meeting with McFarland, who always has played in a 4-3 defense, and they even can be tracked back to last year with the drafting of Lawrence Timmons and LaMarr Woodley.

The Steelers selected Timmons in the first round with the idea that he could play either inside or outside linebacker (the team has moved him inside after he spent the 2007 season backing up outside linebacker James Harrison). They also took Woodley, who played defensive end at the University of Michigan, in the second round and converted him to outside linebacker.

"We've got a great deal of continuity in terms of (the 3-4). We play great defense. It's not broke, so why fix it?" Tomlin said. "To me, part of good coaching is doing what your guys do well and putting them in position to be successful."

One fundamental difference between the 3-4 and the 4-3 is how pressure on

the quarterback is generated. The latter generally relies on the four down-linemen; in the former, outside linebackers figure more prominently in the pass rush.

Given how much players move before and after the snap and how defensive coordinators try to disguise what they are trying to do in today's NFL, there is a question as to how much of a difference there is between the 3-4 and the 4-3.

After all, each is simply a base defense.

"A lot of it's semantics," Carolina Panthers coach John Fox said. "Everybody plays the same spacing. It's just kind of really where you start with the numbers with (defensive) linemen and linebackers."

Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio, however, said the difference between the 3-4 and the 4-3 is more than just "labeling."

Bills coach Dick Jauron agreed.

"Almost everybody is multiple, but to greater and lesser degrees," Jauron said. "I don't think too much is made of (the difference) because offensively you handle those schemes a little bit different. Your protections change some; your matchups change some."

Teams won't have to change against the Steelers for the foreseeable future.

They still will line up in the 3-4 and try to disguise where they are bringing pressure from by sometimes morphing into a 5-2 alignment, among other things.

Tomlin can only laugh about the talk that the Steelers will change their basic alignment. After all, he said, most if not all defenses in the NFL show so many different looks during the course of a game that calling one a 3-4 or a 4-3 is almost irrelevant.

"Whether it's football or otherwise, everybody always wants to be able to put people in a box, and I understand that," Tomlin said. "I don't try to defend what we are or who we are. It's barbershop talk. Let people have their fun."

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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Steelers hardly above the fray

By Joe Starkey
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Thursday, April 3, 2008

"We trust that today's roster move ... will send a message that we will not tolerate this type of conduct."

Apparently, Steelers chairman Dan Rooney forgot to add "unless you're an important player" to that absurd team-released statement, issued March 20 after the Steelers cut wide receiver Cedrick Wilson, who had been charged with assaulting his former girlfriend.

The Steelers sent a message, all right, one that is affirmed every time team MVP James Harrison - charged March 8 with assaulting his girlfriend - shows up to work out at the club's South Side practice facility.

It's the same message high school, college and professional sports teams have been sending forever. Namely, that the best players are treated differently than everyone else and routinely are excused for boorish and sometimes even criminal behavior.

That's just business in the pros. Wilson is a fringe player. Harrison's a star. We understand.

It was the Steelers who dragged ethics into the discussion. They didn't have to say anything when they cut Wilson, a move that apparently freed money to sign center Justin Hartwig.

Never mind that the legal process hasn't played out, that Wilson's ex-girlfriend says the story of him walking into a restaurant and punching her was "overblown" and that the charges could very well be dropped. The Steelers were going to *do the right thing*.

Please.

Can we finally smash the myth that the Steelers are somehow above the fray?

The only saints in this league are the ones who play in New Orleans. The Steelers are no more righteous, and no less righteous, than any other franchise operating in a cutthroat industry where the attempt to win regularly trumps good ethics.

That goes for everyone -- the Patriots and Ravens and Cowboys and Dolphins and Bengals.

And, yes, the Steelers.

The Rooneys' reputation as decent, everyday folk is well-earned. They are good people. Professionally, their mission is to win and make money - and in pro football, that is rarely accomplished by playing nice.

If the drive to win leads the Steelers to draft a player who tested positive for marijuana in college, as offensive tackle Marvel Smith did, so be it.

If it means bolstering the backfield by acquiring a player with a questionable history, oh well. Two years ago, the Steelers signed Najeh Davenport, who faced a felony charge of second-degree burglary and a misdemeanor count of criminal mischief when he entered the NFL in 2002. He settled the charges by performing 100 hours of community service.

Davenport ran into more trouble last season when he pleaded not guilty to domestic violence, child endangering and unlawful restraint in a confrontation with the mother of his 5-year-old son.

The Steelers did not attempt to send a message by cutting Davenport. They are waiting out the legal process.

Entering the 2006 draft, some teams might have had misgivings about Ohio State receiver Santonio Holmes, seeing as he was the unmarried father of three children by two women. He'd also been arrested and charged with disorderly conduct after a 2003 altercation involving Ohio State football players and a group of women, one of whom reportedly sustained a broken jaw.

Holmes, held out of the opening series of the Michigan game as punishment, pleaded not guilty. Charges were dismissed when a prosecution witness reportedly could not identify Holmes as having been involved in the fight. Holmes' attorney told the Columbus Dispatch his client was trying to break up the fight.

The Steelers traded up in the first round to take Holmes, who subsequently was arrested twice in a 25-day span.

A disorderly conduct charge out of Miami was dropped. Holmes later was charged with domestic violence and assault against the mother of one of his children.

In a police affidavit, Lashae Boone alleged that Holmes was "choking (her), throwing her to the ground ... and slamming her into a door."

The Steelers did not attempt to send a message by severing ties with Holmes. They let the legal process play out. Charges were dismissed when Holmes' lawyers assured a Franklin County (Ohio) judge that Holmes was participating in counseling through the NFL.

Rooney claims the Wilson and Harrison incidents were "completely different."

That hardly appears to be the case. Both are charged with hitting a woman.

If anything, the Harrison incident seemed scarier. According to a police affidavit, the 6-foot, 242-pound linebacker broke down a bathroom door, snapped his girlfriend's cell phone in half as she tried to call 911 and hit her in the face with an open hand, knocking off her glasses.

Within days, Harrison was back at the Steelers' practice facility, working out with teammates.

Get the message?

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PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

NFL owners approve rule changes

By Scott Brown
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PALM BEACH, Fla. -- A handful of rule changes were approved on the final day of the NFL owners meetings, including one that means officials will no longer have to make a judgment call on whether wide receivers would have gotten two feet in bounds had they not been pushed out.

The so-called "force-out" rule passed unanimously, and the significance of it is receivers will now have to get both feet down in bounds for a catch to be ruled a completed pass. The only exception to this is if a defender carries a receiver out of bounds before he gets one or both feet down.

"I think it's going to be a lot easier to officiate," Colts coach Tony Dungy said of the new rule, "and I think offenses will just know that you've got to get both feet in."

Other proposals that passed Wednesday included:

- The elimination of the 5-yard face mask penalty. Referees will have to decide whether touching or grabbing the face mask is incidental contact or warrants a 15-yard personal foul penalty.
- The review of field goals via instant replay. All field-goal attempts except for those that go over the uprights will be subject to review. Those that go over the uprights are not reviewable because camera angles would make it difficult to make a conclusive judgment.
- The coin toss rule. Teams that win the opening coin toss will have the choice of deferring the choice of kicking off or receiving until the start of the second half. Previously, teams that won the toss had only the option of kicking off or receiving.

No reseeding for now

A proposal for playoff reseeding was tabled and will be discussed when the owners meet in May.

The competition committee withdrew the proposal yesterday because of a lack of support from the owners.

Under the proposal, the teams with the best two records in each conference would secure the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds for the playoffs. The next four playoff

teams in the AFC and NFC would get seeded based on overall records.

The Steelers oppose a change to the current system because it wouldn't necessarily reward a team for winning its division.

"I'm not in favor of the rule because it de-emphasizes division play," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said. "Those are some of the chief rivalries that make this an entertaining game. I'd like to see that continue."

Losing patience

The NFL continues to negotiate with the lawyer for the former Patriots videographer who may have more evidence that New England illegally videotaped opponents.

Roger Goodell has said he is anxious to meet with Matt Walsh, but frustration may be setting over Walsh's insistence on certain conditions before he talks to the NFL commissioner.

"I don't know if we can get much softer than we have with respect to our ability to want to negotiate and to meet his demands," Goodell said yesterday. "But at some point I will lose patience with that."

Patriots owner Robert Kraft said earlier this week that Walsh never signed a confidentiality agreement with the team. Goodell said Wednesday that the Patriots have not threatened legal action against Walsh if he comes forward and speaks with Goodell.

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Proposal to reseed playoffs withdrawn

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. - A show of hands made it obvious that reseeding the NFL playoffs wasn't such a good idea.

So the league's competition committee withdrew the proposal Wednesday after an informal vote sent it "down in flames," according to New York Giants co-owner John Mara.

The owners did pass several resolutions, including eliminating the forceout on receptions; allowing teams to defer their decision to the second half when winning the opening coin toss; and making field goals and extra points subject to replay review to determine whether the ball passes over the crossbar and through the uprights.

In addition, any direct snap from center that is untouched by the quarterback now will be a live ball; in the past it was considered a false start and the play was blown dead. The 5-yard penalty for incidental contact with a facemask has been eliminated, with the 15-yarder remaining for any grasping or twisting of the facemask.

Tuesday, the owners approved a communication device in the helmet of one defensive player.

Competition committee co-chairman Rich McKay, president of the Atlanta Falcons, was not surprised about the lack of support for reseeding, in which a wild-card team with a better record than a division winner would play at home in the first playoff round.

"This idea we wanted to push this year to get the discussion going," McKay said. "There were not a lot of hands up, so we withdrew the proposal for now.

"There is the historical idea that a division champion should have a home game."

Which was exactly why Patriots owner Robert Kraft opposed reseeding.

"I do believe if you win a division, it's good for your fans to know you will have a home game," Kraft said. "To win a division, there is a reward and we wanted to keep that."

There remains concern about late-season games becoming meaningless when teams already have secured their playoff positions. Commissioner Roger Goodell indicated discussions of reseeding are not dead.

Tennessee Titans coach Jeff Fisher said eliminating the forceout rule was approved unanimously and that it will help officiating. A receiver now must get two feet inbounds unless he actually is carried out of bounds by a defender after catching the ball.

Fisher also noted how strongly deferring the choice on the coin toss, currently the rule in college, was accepted 30-2.

Reviewing field goals was a slam dunk for the owners after a kick by Cleveland's Phil Dawson to tie a game at Baltimore hit the support behind the crossbar, then came back onto the field. Officials got the

call correct despite not being allowed to use replay. Now they can.

Goodell also was given a pledge by the owners to support his protection of the integrity of the game, something for which he has been praised in his 18 months in charge. The NFL's image has taken some hits with the Michael Vick and Pacman Jones situations and the Spygate scandal. Goodell acted swiftly in all those cases, impressing the league membership.

Also:

n Goodell reiterated he wants to meet with former Patriots employee Matt Walsh, who has indicated he has more information about the team taping opponents' signals. But Goodell added "at some point, I will run out of patience."

n McKay said the competition committee will look into scheduling more games between division opponents late in the season to combat the possibility of meaningless matchups.

n The committee will investigate what to do with the defensive player who has the communication device when that player also is on special teams. He suggested the device would be cut off during such plays.

n Goodell emphasized the owners' support for NFL Network and his optimism that the channel will wind up on the main tiers of the major cable outlets with which the league currently is feuding.

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Coin toss switch tops list of NFL rule changes

By Jarrett Bell, USA TODAY

PALM BEACH, Fla. — NFL coaches are going back to school on the coin toss.

League owners adopted the college rule that allows the option to decide whether to kick off or receive the football until the second half after winning the pregame toss.

"It just gives you another option," said Jacksonville Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio.

Under the previous rule, NFL coaches almost always elected to receive the ball after winning the toss. College coaches defer more than 90% of the time.

Del Rio thought the new rule will prompt NFL coaches to defer more than half of the time.

"But if you have Peyton Manning," he said, "you might take the ball and get up seven."

Added Cleveland Browns coach Romeo Crennel: "College coaches defer all the time. I don't think I'd defer a lot because I like my offense; I want them to have the ball as many times as possible."

Owners also adopted the college rule that eliminates the forceout on catches and interceptions.

It simplifies the officiating, with possession and the ability for a player to get two feet inbounds as the sole criteria. Of roughly 33,000 plays last season, just 15 involved calls that applied the forceout rule.

Other measures that passed allowed an offense to decline a defensive penalty on multiple-foul plays when the offense is flagged for delaying the game with a spike, and erased a quirk that didn't allow the defense to recover muffed illegal forward handoffs.

Also, field goals are now allowed for instant replay reviews and the 5-yard facemask penalty was abolished.

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