

NFL finally guards its 'impact players'

By Karen Guregian / NFL Notes | Sunday, December 6, 2009 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Columnists

Perhaps there is no one more heartened or gratified by the NFL's decision to put in place better safeguards for players who suffer head injuries with its newly rewritten policy on concussions than former **Patriots** [[team stats](#)] linebacker **Ted Johnson**.

A member of the Pats three Super Bowl championship teams, Johnson has been a strong advocate for the league's adoption of more stringent rules. As a player who had six reported concussions during his career, and what he claims were close to 100 more in the unreported category, Johnson said Friday he met with commissioner Roger Goodell last year to relate how his quality of life has been gravely impacted by post-concussion syndrome, and what he felt needed to be done by the league going forward.

You could hear by the emotion in Johnson's voice that he is very pleased with the latest developments.

"It makes you feel good to see there's at least a dialogue and people aren't ignoring it, and realizing this is serious stuff," Johnson told the Herald. "This isn't bad knees and hips. When you're talking about your brain, it's tricky stuff and it's scary stuff. The thing about the NFL, you can only deny for so long. Your committee can refute the facts for only so long. The research is overwhelming in terms of what it shows for potential long-term health risks. With multiple concussions, you just can't ignore it.

"The NFL is very image conscious. So eventually, I knew it had to fall on the side of right, as opposed to sweeping it under the rug," Johnson said. "Taking a proactive stance, I think, is terrific."

In the past, a player had to be knocked unconscious to be deemed ineligible to return to action on the same day. Last week, Goodell sent a memo outlining changes to the concussion policy. Under the new guidelines, any players displaying concussion-like symptoms (i.e., memory loss, persistent dizziness, headaches) are prohibited from reentering a game.

There has been further discussion about having players definitively diagnosed with a concussion take a mandatory week off. That would take the decisions away from the team and the players, which is especially important when an independent doctor makes the diagnosis.

"You have to take it out of the players' hands," Johnson said. "For sports, it's a business driven by revenue. They don't like to see their stars not playing. If they were to pass that (more stringent policy) and make that a rule, that would be something to see. That completely goes against the culture of football. But you have to protect players from themselves. There has to be a desire to want to protect players from themselves.

"Our bodies are commodities, but at the same time, we live long after football's done, so you'd want and hope that your employer would take that into account."

Two years ago, after suffering through times when he spent 20 days a month in bed due to severe post-concussion symptoms, Johnson went public with his story and claimed Patriots coach **Bill Belichick** subjected him to hard hits in practice while he was recovering from a concussion - against the advice of the team's trainer. In response, Belichick said he had received no cues from Johnson about being hesitant to participate in contact drills.

"It was tough for me to tell my story initially. I knew there would be backlash, I knew there would be criticism, I knew there would be doubt," Johnson said. "I took a hit, I'm not going to lie. I had my pants pulled down (publicly) in New England and it wasn't fun at all. But for me, there is a moral compass that guides me. I like to think at the end of the day, I'm going to do what's right. This issue is so much bigger than the Patriots. It's bigger than the NFL. It's about the long-term health of these guys.

"Football is the best game. It's the best thing that happened to me. But you just want to be educated so you're making an informed decision. At least you fully understand the risks in continuing to play.

"I retired in 2005 because I knew I'd get a concussion the first hit I took. And I'd get them the rest of the year, and I knew I couldn't live with that anymore. I never heard about post-concussion syndrome until a year and a half after I retired. ... Now, you just hope guys can't claim ignorance any more. There's been so much (information) out there. You can't just say,



Photo by Herald file

'Well, I didn't know.' That's not going to fly anymore. They do know. And I feel good about that."

Still, there is the recent episode of Steelers wideout Hines Ward questioning quarterback Ben Roethlisberger for sitting out a pivotal game last weekend against Baltimore due to a concussion.

Said Johnson: "Until you've walked in somebody's shoes, you should keep those opinions to yourself."

The former linebacker, who is among seven former NFL players to agree to donate their brains to Boston University's school of medicine upon death, said he was impressed by Goodell during their meeting, and left convinced the commissioner would act.

"I've got to give it up to the commissioner," Johnson said. "I'm telling you, he seemed as sincere and genuine in trying to figure this out. He wanted to do what was right. I give a ton of credit to the commissioner for how he's handled it."

Current Pats players, meanwhile, voiced their approval of the updated policy when asked about it last week. They're glad the topic is being weighed and studies are being done so their best interests are being served.

"I think it's a good thing they're looking into it, but it's not up to me to decide," said guard Stephen Neal, who has endured the effects of a concussion. "You don't realize how much of a problem it can be unless you go through it."

Neal agreed it was tough for players to police themselves, even with injuries involving the head and brain.

"Everyone is competitive and they want to get out there," Neal said. "But you have to have a good relationship with the training staff and have trust with them, and then they have to trust you, that you're telling them the truth."

As for players feeling compelled to play due to peer pressure, Adalius Thomas, the Patriots' alternate player rep, said that's a load of bull.

"It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. When someone is injured, the only person that can talk about that injury is that person especially with a concussion," Thomas said. "You don't want to take that chance, where something can happen where a player dies on the field because he had a concussion and you didn't pay attention to it. Hindsight is 20-20, but I don't think anyone wants that on their watch. That would be really bad for the game if that happens. I think the NFL is doing a good job as far as looking into studies, and stuff like that, and getting information to back what they're doing. But it will be interesting to see how they proceed with it."

Would Thomas support a mandatory week off for a player diagnosed with a concussion?

"I don't think you need to go overboard and say if you get hit hard, you have to sit out a week," Thomas said. "I think if a player doesn't show any symptoms, and he passes his tests, that's one thing, but if there is any doubt in their mind, it kind of takes is out of their hands. I think it would be a good thing. But at the same time, it's not my decision to make."

Neglect well-documented

The concussion issue segues nicely into Roman Phifer's sobering new documentary "Blood Equity," which I viewed last week. The former Patriots linebacker produced the film, which provides viewers with a stark portrayal about the harsh treatment and cruel realities facing many former NFL players following retirement.

Some of the film's subjects, like late Hall of Famer Mike Webster of the Pittsburgh Steelers, dealt with the staggering effects of post-concussion syndrome after suffering repeated concussions while playing.

Whether it was Webster's tale, or that of former Baltimore Colts star John Mackey, who suffers from dementia, or former **Buffalo Bills** lineman Donnie Green, who is in a homeless shelter, the stories are poignant and informative.

It presents a grim view of the NFL Players Association and its former leader, the late Gene Upshaw. It talks about the struggles of retired players to receive pensions and disability payments. While it would have been nice to hear a voice from the union's side (other than Upshaw's oft-quoted and preposterous assertion that current players hold no responsibility for their forebears), that doesn't diminish the power and impact of the presentation. Ownership also gets kicked pretty good.

"(Ownership) doesn't give an (expletive) about you," Giants Hall of Famer Harry Carson said in the movie. "They use you up, chew you up and spit you out."

Fellow Hall of Famer Mike Ditka, another interview subject and outspoken opponent of the NFLPA, provides some of the harder-hitting remarks. Ditka isn't sure what kind of impact, if any, the documentary will have, but is glad something is being done about concussions.

"There's a lot of awareness that's been created, particularly with this stuff about concussions," Ditka told the Herald on Friday. "But as far as concrete things being done, I don't think there's been a lot done. I think the '88 Fund' is a step in the right direction, the plan that was named after John Mackey. The disability thing hasn't changed one bit, and will never

change unless it's being ruled on by independent doctors.”

Ditka says it's frustrating because those empowered to act have a tendency to think only of today's players, not the ones of the past.

“It would be different if it was a bunch of guys trying to take advantage of the system,” Ditka said, “but that's not what this is about. This is about guys who need help.”

Proceeds from Phifer's documentary have been targeted for Ditka's charity, Gridiron Greats.

Brees a real PlayMaker

New Orleans linebacker Jonathan Vilma, writing about Monday night's win over the Patriots on his PlayMaker Mobile page, had some interesting things to say about his quarterback, Drew Brees, who threw for five touchdowns against the Pats.

“To play like that against a Belichick defense was huge. He did things against them that no one has ever done before, which only adds to his credibility as one of the best quarterbacks in the game,” Vilma wrote of Brees. “He has such football smarts and he prepares harder than anyone I have ever seen. Teams are always going to try to pressure him in different ways, but he always gets the ball off, throws with great accuracy, completes a big percentage and leads the league in touchdowns.

“He's not afraid to sit in there with everything coming at him and deliver the football on time and in the right place. He does a lot of mental work. I pride myself as a film study guy. I watch a ton of film every week and when I get tired of watching and finally get up to leave, I walk past the quarterback room and there he is, still watching film. He grinds it out like no one else. It's very impressive to watch and it's why he's as good as he is.”

Another sack by Urlacher

Injured Bears linebacker Brian Urlacher couldn't have hurt his quarterback, Jay Cutler, any worse if he threw him to the ground. This is what he told Yahoo.com last week: “Look, I love Jay, and I understand he's a great player who can take us a long way. But I hate the way our identity has changed. We used to establish the run and wear teams down and try not to make mistakes, and we'd rely on our defense to keep us in the game and make big plays to put us in position to win. Kyle Orton might not be the flashiest quarterback, but the guy is the winner, and that formula worked for us. I hate to say it, but that's the truth.”

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