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N.F.L. Scolded Over Injuries to Its Players

By ALAN SCHWARZ
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WASHINGTON — The commissioner of the [N.F.L.](#) faced heated criticism Wednesday before the House Judiciary Committee, with lawmakers, former players and even a former team executive accusing the league of neglect in its handling of active and retired players with brain injuries.



Brendan Smialowski for The New York Times
N.F.L. Commissioner Roger Goodell testified before a Congressional committee that was investigating head injuries in football.

With evidence mounting of a link between playing professional football and cognitive impairment in later life, and news reports of poor medical treatment for some former players with dementia and other signs of mental decline, the committee repeatedly challenged the commissioner, [Roger Goodell](#), to defend the league's policies and research.

“The N.F.L. sort of has this blanket denial or minimizing of the fact that there may be this link,” Representative Linda T. Sánchez, Democrat of California, said to Mr. Goodell during the daylong hearing. “And it sort of reminds me of the tobacco companies pre-'90s when they kept saying, ‘Oh, there’s no link between smoking and damage to your health.’”

When pressed, Mr. Goodell would not say whether he thought there was a link between football and cognitive decline among N.F.L. players. He did say, “I can think of no issue to which I’ve devoted more time and attention than the health and well-being of our players, and particularly retired players.”

“We are changing the culture of our game for the better,” he later added.

In his opening statement, the committee chairman, Representative [John Conyers Jr.](#) said the issue of brain injuries in football warranted federal scrutiny because “the N.F.L. is a monopoly whose existence was legislatively sanctioned,” referring to the antitrust exemption for broadcasting that has helped the league grow into a multibillion-dollar operation. The league is also arguing a case before the [Supreme Court](#) hoping to expand its antitrust privileges.

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“I say this not simply because of the impact of these injuries on the 2,000 current players and more than 10,000 retirees associated with the N.F.L. and their families,” said Mr. Conyers, Democrat of Michigan. “I say it because of the effect on the millions of players at the college, high school and youth levels.”

Several Republican members of the committee said that Congress should have no role in regulating football on

either the professional or youth levels. “We cannot legislate the elimination of injuries from the games without eliminating the games themselves,” said Representative [Lamar S. Smith](#), Republican of Texas.

The hearing included testimony from Mr. Goodell and the players union’s executive director, DeMaurice Smith; doctors from the league’s committee on concussions; and researchers who have found brain damage commonly associated with boxers in 10 deceased N.F.L. players, most of them younger than 55.

[Tiki Barber](#), Merrill Hoge and George Martin, all former players, and Gay Culverhouse, a former [Tampa Bay Buccaneers](#) team president, gave inside views of league medical trends.

Family members of injured players also testified: Eleanor Perfetto, whose husband, Ralph Wenzel, is now institutionalized with dementia at age 66; and Dick Benson, whose teenage son died of a brain hemorrhage in 2002 after repeated concussions playing high school football.

Missing from the two panels of witnesses was Dr. Ira Casson, the co-chairman of the N.F.L.’s committee, who has been criticized for discrediting outside research and for his role in the league’s study of brain injuries in retired players. Independent experts have said the study is flawed by conflicts of interest, statistical and sampling problems.

None of the three primary authors of the committee’s research — Dr. Casson and the co-chairman David Viano of Wayne State University, and Dr. Elliot Pellman, [the Jets’](#) team physician — were present.

When asked why Dr. Casson was not present to testify, Mr. Goodell said the committee did not request him. Mr. Conyers disputed that, and an aide for Mr. Goodell handed him a note that led Mr. Goodell to say he would get back to the committee to clarify his answer.

Ms. Sánchez and Representative [Anthony D. Weiner](#), Democrat of New York, criticized the N.F.L. committee’s continuing brain study of retired players. Independent experts have warned that the study could have negative effects on youth sports if conclusions of few risks are improperly derived.

Mr. Weiner said, “Wouldn’t it be perhaps most wise to put the brakes” on the study, and “start from scratch to try to get this right?”

“This is a worker safety thing — no different than if someone was coming off the assembly line at a production plant and 20 years later, they all had arthritis in their right knee,” he added. “We’d look at it the exact same way.”

Mr. Goodell responded: “We want you to have confidence in the study. That’s one of the reasons for 15 years we’ve been involved in this issue. We have published every piece of data in the N.F.L. We have published it publicly, we have given it to medical journals, it has been part of peer review. We don’t control those doctors. They are medical professionals. They’re scientists. They do this for a living.”

Mr. Smith, of the players union, was also criticized for its sluggishness in addressing the issue of concussion risks years ago and for not better educating its players. “We will do better,” Mr. Smith said.

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He and Mr. Goodell were warned not to allow players' health care to become embroiled in contract negotiations.

Mr. Conyers repeatedly pressed Mr. Smith and Mr. Goodell to turn over all medical records to Congress for independent review, and they agreed to do so.

However, in an interview after his testimony, Mr. Goodell said he had agreed to turn over league studies and research that had already been released, not player medical records. Turning over such records, he said, could cause confidentiality conflicts, and "there's going to be a lot of issues."

"Whatever the committee asks — that we can do — we will," he said.

Ms. Sánchez, in a subsequent interview, said: "Unfortunately, I didn't find him to be a very helpful witness. He was really vague on certain things and didn't know the answers to certain things. The committee had requested that Dr. Casson be there to be able to answer questions like that, and obviously he was a no-show."

Although the hearing's most contentious portions involved the N.F.L., a consensus emerged that how the N.F.L. and its players handle the issue of brain-injury management will, however indirectly, influence behavior on the youth and high school level.

Representative Dan Lungren, Republican of California, said the N.F.L. and its media partners had to discourage the celebration of overly violent play.

Representative Mike Quigley, Democrat of Illinois, said that although Congress focused mostly on N.F.L. policies on Wednesday, "the norms of the N.F.L., for better or worse, become the norms of high school football players."

Katie Thomas contributed reporting.

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