

1. NFL Network
2. ESPN

Commissioner Roger Goodell interview with NFL Network's Rich Eisen

March 21, 2012 – 2:35 PM ET

Why did you hand down the punishment that you handed down on the Saints?

It is very clear. We have a serious violation of an existing rule that threatens the health and welfare of our players. In addition, this went on for three years and it was investigated. We were misled. There were denials throughout that period. Meanwhile, there continued to be risks to our players and to the integrity of our game. So it calls for a very significant and clear message.

Do you feel you were lied to?

Clearly we were lied to. We investigated this back in 2010. We were told that it was not happening. It continued for another two years until we got credible evidence late in the 2011 season. We were able, obviously, to identify significant information that verifies from multiple sources that this was going on for a three-year period.

For those who feel you have brought the hammer down too hard, what would you say?

I don't think we can be too hard on people who put at risk our players' health and safety. That is a critical issue for us going forward, and it has been in our past. We will always protect that. We will always make the decisions that are best for the game long term and for our players.

Reading the finding of facts, there was an email that was mentioned that Sean Payton received from a close associate offering up some money for a bounty on Aaron Rodgers. The fact that there was somebody from outside the Saints organization involved, what did that set off in the league office. How much did that play a role in these penalties today?

I don't think it was as big a factor, other than the fact that it was clear that this was widely known and that if you weren't aware of it as head coach, you should have been aware of it. That's a critical factor to me. As a head coach, it clearly and specifically states in your contract that you supervise the coaches and the players. This is something as a head coach to be held accountable and responsible for. All of us are responsible for maintaining the integrity of the league and also making sure we are doing everything possible to ensure the safety of our players.

Of the quarterbacks that were mentioned that the league found had bounties on them absent was the name Peyton Manning, who the Saints played in the Super Bowl. To the best of your knowledge, was there no evidence uncovered that Peyton Manning was the subject of a bounty in the league's biggest game?

We put together all of our information and released all of our information both on March 2 and again today. Any information we can credibly present, we have done so. We have been as transparent as possible here. It is clear that this policy was violated. It is an important one. We took actions as quickly as we could, but wanted to be thorough and fair. We think that while it is a strong message, it is an important one to send, that we are going to protect our players.

Did you speak to Coach Payton today?

I did not speak to Coach Payton today. I had two meetings with him in the last two and a half weeks.

What about the players involved? For the moment, nothing has been handed down. What can you tell us about that part of the ongoing investigation?

As I stated in the documents, I've had several conversations with the leadership of the NFLPA, DeMaurice, in particular, and other players who have contacted me, including those in a leadership position. I've probably spoken to over two dozen players in the last couple of weeks. We want to continue to have that dialogue. We want to understand what was going on. My focus here initially was on the team and management and coaches, but certainly I am disappointed that players would have identified opposing players and intentionally tried to injure them. That is something that we are going to continue to do and that's next up.

The word 'disappointed' has shown up quite a bit. What is the one emotion that would describe what you are feeling right now as Commissioner of the NFL?

Unfortunately, I've been dealing with this over the past few months. As you find out what's going on, you are disappointed, angered. There are a lot of great people who coach, play and are involved and care deeply about this game. The game doesn't need to be played this way. That has been made clear by the players and coaches that I've spoken to. We need to change the culture. This is another step in changing that culture. This type of behavior and accepting this type of a program is not going to be tolerated.

**COMMISSIONER ROGER GOODELL
WITH ADAM SCHEFTER ON ESPN SPORTS CENTER (3:10 PM ET)
ESPN**

March 21, 2012

Roger, why did you see the need to hand down the most severe penalties in NFL history?

It's clear that the violation we have here is of a very important rule. One, anything that puts at risk the health and safety of our players, that's a very important policy and rule and we're going to uphold that. Second of all, it went on for three years with denials from club officials and we pursued it aggressively. Once we found out that it was absolutely happening within the organization, we had to deal with it seriously. It is an important policy to uphold.

In the announcement, Sean Payton falsely denied that the program existed, and he encouraged false denials by his staff. How much of a factor in his ultimate punishment was his lying, and was the cover-up worse than the crime?

Well, I hold head coaches accountable. One, having this program is very serious to me, as I mentioned; but two, to deny its existence, to link investigators to its own ownership, that's a significant problem, and even if you aren't aware of something, you should be aware of something like that in your organization. That is his direct responsibility as the supervisor of players and coaches, and he should have known what was going on in his organization.

When you gave the message to Saints owner Tom Benson, what was his response to you?

Obviously, disappointed. He knew because we had given him all of the information several weeks ago that this was a serious violation. He wants to obviously win and do it the right way so I think he's disappointed and sorry that the Saints were being portrayed this way and in a position where they haven't upheld the rules the way he believes in them.

What was the one piece of evidence that made you say, 'I have to take the action that I'm about to'?

It's not just one piece of evidence. That's the interesting point here. There's a tremendous amount of information corroborated by several different sources. It's very clear that this was happening on a regular basis and was clearly out of control, and that they identified specific players and targeted them for injury. That's simply unacceptable in the NFL or in any game of football.

There seem to be a number of programs going on around the league where players receive payments for certain incentives and certain hits. What made the Saints case different in what has gone on around the league, and in what other people say is routine?

There are several different issues. Non-contract bonus payments are against our rules. What happens if some of those are for interceptions? But if those rules aren't adhered to, it escalates, and it escalates to things that are troublesome, such as injuries and targeting for the big hit or taking a player out of the game or cart-offs, which was the term that was used in the Saints' case. That's unacceptable in our game so we are going to eliminate all bounties. There will be no non-contract bonus payments permitted in the NFL, and we will rigorously make sure that that's enforced.

Why not announce the punishment for the players along with the punishments for the rest of the Saints organization?

I would have, but the Players Association wanted some time to investigate this and talk to its own players. I've spoken to well over two dozen players over the past couple of weeks, including players in a

leadership position. They take it very seriously. I wanted them to have the opportunity to make a recommendation to me and make sure I've heard from them fully before I make a final decision.

So do you have any idea when we might hear from you on the players?

I'm expecting to hear from the NFL Players Association. They have meetings later this week. I'm expecting to hear from DeMaurice (Smith) at some point about what they think are the appropriate steps to take.

This was a major blow to the Saints organization, and already there have been a number of callers to the league office from New Orleans today to complain. What do you say to the fans of New Orleans about this?

New Orleans Saints fans are great fans. I know that firsthand from spending as much time as I have down there. They're passionate about their game and I understand their disappointment and frustration, but I also understand that they love the game of football and they want it to reflect well on their city, their great city and the great fans that they have. This is not the way the Saints or the city want football to be played. Football doesn't need to be played this way, and it won't be played this way going forward.

Roger, what do you say to the people who say that your penalties here in this case are too harsh?

It's a very, very significant violation of our policies. Not only does it identify an opposing player and try to remove him from the game, but second of all, continuing to mislead and misrepresent what was going on in your organization, you have to be accountable and responsible in the NFL, and that's part of what you're going to be held to. The simple message here is: people are going to be held accountable.

We've seen you hand down big fines, big discipline. Sean Payton makes about \$7.5 million a year. Have you thought about the fact that you're literally taking \$7.5 million away from the table from Sean Payton?

A lot of the people here who could have been injured and could have had their careers taken away and could have had significant financial considerations so it's more than Sean Payton here. There are hundreds if not thousands of players and coaches that this reflects poorly on so I don't take any of this lightly. I spent a great deal of time, a lot of sleepless nights, trying to figure out the right thing to do. I met with Sean directly on two different occasions over the past two weeks so I think we've done our homework here. I listened carefully and I have to do what I think is in the best interest of the game long-term and the integrity of our league.

Last question: how confident are you that we will never see anything like what you have said the Saints are guilty of doing?

I certainly hope not, and our punishment is designed to let people know that we are going to hold them accountable and responsible for what goes on in their organizations. I certainly hope it won't happen again, not only on the team level but also with the players.

###