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COMMUNICATIONS

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FOUR PLAYERS SUSPENDED FOR PARTICIPATION IN SAINTS' PAY-FOR-PERFORMANCE/BOUNTY PROGRAM

Four players – Scott Fujita, Anthony Hargrove, Will Smith, and Jonathan Vilma – were notified today that they have been suspended without pay for conduct detrimental to the NFL as a result of their leadership roles in the New Orleans Saints' pay-for-performance/bounty program that endangered player safety over three seasons from 2009-2011. Participation by players in any such program is prohibited by the NFL Constitution and Bylaws, the standard NFL Player Contract, and the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

The specific discipline was determined by Commissioner Roger Goodell after a thorough review of extensive evidence corroborated by multiple independent sources. Under Article 46 of the Collective Bargaining Agreement and the standard NFL Player Contract, a player is subject to discipline by the commissioner for conduct detrimental to the integrity of and public confidence in the NFL. The discipline imposed today for such detrimental conduct is as follows:

- Scott Fujita (now with the Cleveland Browns) is suspended without pay for the first three games of the 2012 regular season. The record established that Fujita, a linebacker, pledged a significant amount of money to the prohibited pay-for-performance/bounty pool during the 2009 NFL Playoffs when he played for the Saints. The pool to which he pledged paid large cash rewards for “cart-offs” and “knockouts,” plays during which an opposing player was injured.
- Defensive lineman Anthony Hargrove (now with the Green Bay Packers) is suspended without pay for the first eight games of the 2012 regular season. Hargrove actively participated in the program while a member of the Saints. Hargrove submitted a signed declaration to the league that established not only the existence of the program at the Saints, but also that he knew about and participated in it. The evidence showed that Hargrove told at least one player on another team that Vikings quarterback Brett Favre was a target of a large bounty during the NFC Championship Game in January of 2010. Hargrove also actively obstructed the league's 2010 investigation into the program by being untruthful to investigators.
- Will Smith of the Saints is suspended without pay for the first four games of the 2012 regular season. Smith, a defensive end, assisted Saints defensive coordinator Gregg Williams in establishing and funding the program during a period in which he was a captain and leader of the defensive unit. Multiple independent sources also confirmed that Smith pledged significant sums to the program pool for “cart-offs” and “knockouts” of opposing players.
- Linebacker Jonathan Vilma of the Saints is suspended without pay for the 2012 NFL season, effective immediately per league policy for season-long suspensions. The investigation concluded that while a captain of the defensive unit Vilma assisted Coach Williams in establishing and funding the program. Multiple independent sources also confirmed that Vilma offered a specific bounty -- \$10,000 in cash – to any player who knocked Arizona quarterback Kurt Warner out of the 2009 Divisional Playoff Game and later pledged the same amount to anyone who knocked Minnesota quarterback Brett Favre out of the 2009 NFC Championship Game the following week (played on January 24, 2010). Vilma is eligible to be reinstated after the Super Bowl in 2013.

Fujita, Hargrove, and Smith may participate in all off-season activity, including preseason games, prior to the suspensions taking effect. Each player disciplined today is entitled to appeal the decision within three days. If an appeal is filed, Commissioner Goodell would hold a hearing at which the player may speak on his behalf and be represented by counsel.

“It is the obligation of everyone, including the players on the field, to ensure that rules designed to promote player safety, fair play, and the integrity of the game are adhered to and effectively and consistently enforced,” Commissioner Goodell said. “Respect for the men that play the game starts with the way players conduct themselves with each other on the field.”

The evidence conclusively demonstrated that from 2009-2011 Saints players of their own accord pledged significant amounts of their own money toward bounties, that players accepted payments for “cart-offs” and “knockouts” of injured opposing players, and that the payout amounts doubled and tripled for playoff games.

Commissioner Goodell concluded, as he did with the Saints’ non-player employees, that it was appropriate to focus on those individuals who had a higher degree of responsibility and whose conduct warranted special attention. While a significant number of players participated in the pay-for-performance program, whether by contributing funds to the pool or collecting cash rewards, the players disciplined participated at a different and more significant level, Commissioner Goodell noted.

“In assessing player discipline,” Commissioner Goodell said, “I focused on players who were in leadership positions at the Saints; contributed a particularly large sum of money toward the program; specifically contributed to a bounty on an opposing player; demonstrated a clear intent to participate in a program that potentially injured opposing players; sought rewards for doing so; and/or obstructed the 2010 investigation.”

Each of the four players disciplined today met one or more of those criteria, Commissioner Goodell said.

The evidence supporting today’s disciplinary decisions is based on extensive documentation and interviews with multiple sources. The information was developed by NFL Security, working with independent forensic analysts, and the disciplinary decisions are each based on evidence that has been independently corroborated by multiple sources. The facts supporting the discipline issued today are largely the same as the facts that Commissioner Goodell relied upon in March in assessing discipline on the club and several non-player employees. Those facts have been part of the public record for two months and have not been disputed by the team or the individuals involved.

“No bounty program can exist without active player participation,” Commissioner Goodell said. “The evidence clearly showed that the players being held accountable today willingly and enthusiastically embraced the bounty program. Players put the vast majority of the money into this program and they share responsibility for playing by the rules and protecting each other within those rules.”

The NFL Players Association received the confidential March 2 and March 21 reports on the Saints matter that were distributed to the clubs. In addition, members of the NFL staff, including the NFL Security investigators, met with NFLPA officials to review the results of their investigation. A number of current and former players, including each player disciplined today, were offered the opportunity to be interviewed with counsel present. One player (Hargrove) submitted a written statement in which he did not dispute the existence of the program, but no player agreed to be interviewed in person. In addition, the NFLPA publicly stated that it conducted its own investigation into this matter, but it has shared no information from that investigation with the NFL.

Commissioner Goodell also has advised the NFLPA of the names of all other players shown by the NFL’s investigation to have participated in the Saints’ pay-for-performance/bounty program but were not disciplined. The commissioner again invited the union to provide recommendations on how best to promote fair play, player safety and the elimination of bounties from the game at all levels. He said that identifying the other participants may assist the union in its stated desire to advance those goals.

Discipline for the Saints and club management was announced by the NFL on March 21. The Saints were fined \$500,000 and forfeited two second-round draft choices (one in 2012 and one in 2013). In addition, suspensions without pay were issued to former defensive coordinator Gregg Williams (indefinitely), head coach Sean Payton (2012 NFL season), general manager Mickey Loomis (first eight regular-season games of 2012), and assistant head coach Joe Vitt (first six regular-season games of 2012).

LEAGUE-WIDE INITIATIVE ALSO ANNOUNCED

In a memo sent to NFL clubs today, Commissioner Goodell re-emphasized that any program of non-contract bonuses, however it is characterized, is a violation of league rules.

To ensure a full understanding of these rules, the commissioner informed the NFL clubs of several measures that will be completed prior to the opening of the 2012 preseason:

- The policies prohibiting bounties and any related activity will be re-stated and re-emphasized for all league personnel, detailing with specificity the scope of prohibited activities.
- Each NFL head coach will be required to review the relevant league rules with his players and assistant coaches during mini-camp or preseason training camp.
- Information will be distributed to each player in the league on how to confidentially report violations of rules pertaining to player safety and the integrity of the game.
- Programs will be developed to teach safe and fair play, and respect for the game and its participants, at all levels of play. Several Saints employees have expressed their strong interest in participating in the development and implementation of these programs.

Commissioner Goodell also re-emphasized in the memo to the NFL clubs that it remains everyone's obligation to ensure that the rules designed to protect player safety, fair play, and the integrity of the game are consistently followed and effectively enforced.

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