

For Cheaters, NFL Means Not for Long

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Last week, the once “model” franchise of the NFL, the New England Patriots, winners of 3 Super Bowls in 4 years, were caught cheating in their season-opening 38-14 victory over their AFC East division rival New York Jets.

During the game at Giants Stadium, NFL security confiscated a video camera and tape from Matt Estrella, the Patriots’ video assistant, when he was working on the New York Jets’ sideline. Estrella was taping the Jets’ defensive coaches as they signaled to the players on the field.

NFL rules state “no video recording devices of any kind are permitted to be in use in the coaches’ booth, on the field, or in the locker room during the game” and that all video for coaching purposes must be shot from locations “enclosed on all sides with a roof overhead.”

The anti-espionage rule was re-emphasized in a September 6, 2007, memo sent to all NFL head coaches and general managers. The memo stated that, “Videotaping of any type, including but not limited to taping of an opponent’s offensive or defensive signals, is prohibited on the sidelines, in the coaches’ booth, in the locker room, or at any other locations accessible to club staff members during the game.”

Because the Patriots blatantly violated this rule, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell fined New England’s head coach Bill Belichick the NFL maximum \$500,000 and the team \$250,000. In addition, if the Patriots make the playoffs this year, they must forfeit next year’s first-round draft choice, but if they fail to reach the playoffs, they forfeit their second- and third-round picks.

Estrella was also caught shooting unauthorized video last season during the Patriots’ 35-0 stomping of the Packers. The league also reviewed possible violations of the number of radio frequencies the Patriots were using during the game, as the team had no satisfactory explanation for irregularities in its communication setup.

Despite Belichick’s subterfuge in allowing his videographer’s access to the Jets’ sideline, he was, ironically, the only NFL head coach that didn’t attend off-season meetings to grant greater access to the NFL for the media.

In negotiations with the Pro Football Writers of America, the league now mandates that coordinators be made available at least once every two weeks, position coaches have to be made available upon reasonable requests, and every player must appear in the open locker room period at least once a week and after games. Also, six team organized off-season practice sessions must be open to the media, along with locker room access. Previously, Belichick would not grant the media access to his assistant coaches.

While the media won this battle, it may be losing the war. This season, the NFL is restricting news organization websites not affiliated with the NFL to posting 45 seconds of video/audio clips a day of team personnel at team facilities. This includes material from interviews, news conferences and practice footage. These organizations must also post links to NFL.com and the 32 teams’ sites.

The move is intended to steer more fans and advertisers toward its own NFL Network cable channel and NFL websites. The restrictions don’t apply to the NFL’s game broadcasting partners, the Fox, NBC, CBS, ESPN and DirecTV networks.

This season the NFL is also requiring sideline photojournalists to wear vests bearing logos of Canon and Reebok, the league’s official camera and outfitter, respectively. Various media groups, including the PFWA, Radio-Television News Directors Association, American Society of Newspaper Editors, Associated Press Sports Editors, and National Press Photographers Association are reviewing whether these new rules restrict their rights. If so, legal action will surely follow.

It seems that no one, not even its own coaches, can get enough of the NFL.

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