

New NFL Rules a No Brainer

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was a little kid, if I couldn't grow up to be a lawyer like my dad, then I wanted to be Matt Vanden Boom. Boomer lived down the street from me and happened to play safety for the Wisconsin Badgers.

Matt was named first team All-American and All-Big Ten and is remembered as one of the toughest hitters in Badgers history. I got to see him play in Camp Randall three times, and my folks even got me a number 39 Badgers jersey with "Vanden Boom" on the back.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to be at the game against Michigan in 1981. The Badgers upset the top-ranked Wolverines 21-14, and Matt had three interceptions and helped hold All-American receiver Anthony Carter to one catch. Thankfully my dad has the game on videotape.

Matt was drafted by the Buffalo Bills in 1983 and signed autographs at Gordy's Super Market in Kimberly before training camp. Sadly, Matt's career was cut short after sustaining a concussion in a pre-season game. Matt was also an Academic All-American, so he was able to walk away from football to start a successful 25+ year career here in the Fox Cities as a financial advisor with Prospera Investment Services and Lakeview Investment Services.

Matt is not alone, as the violent nature of football has left lots of NFL players with concussions, also ending many of their careers. That's why union lawyers for the NFL Players Association have worked with Commissioner Roger Goodell to investigate ways to decrease concussions.

In a memo sent to NFL chief executives, club presidents, general managers, head coaches, team physicians and head athletic trainers, Goodell wrote that Dr. Ira Casson and Dr. David Viano resigned from the league's committee on concussions and he would soon be adding new members "who will bring to the committee independent sources of expertise and experience in the field of head injuries."

Congress even held a hearing to investigate the preponderance of concussions in the NFL. At the hearing, both the NFLPA and several Congressmen criticized Dr. Casson after he discounted independent and league-sponsored studies linking NFL careers with heightened risk for dementia and cognitive decline.

Goodell assured teams that the NFL would continue to invest in research designed to improve equipment safety. Former NFL coach and TV analyst John Madden is leading a panel of coaches that will look into reducing concussions outside of games by reducing offseason work, limiting helmet use and contact in practice, mini-camps and training camps. Additionally, the NFL will hold a conference on concussions in Washington in June that team medical personnel "will be required to attend."

The NFL and the Players Association have also approved independent neurologists to evaluate head injuries for all 32 teams as part of a new program and tightened rules regarding when players can return to action after suffering a concussion. Before, players were prohibited from playing only if they lost consciousness after suffering a concussion. The new rules expand the list of symptoms that would preclude a player from returning to a game or practice on the same day, including: forgetting assignments or plays; abnormal neurological examination; persistent dizziness, vertigo, or loss of balance; and new and persistent headaches, especially if accompanied by sensitivity to light, nausea, and vomiting.

Hopefully the new measures will allow players to have both long football AND post-football careers.