

NFL REPORT – FALL 2005
COMMISSIONER’S VIEW

TRADITION AND CHANGE

When I was in China not long ago speaking about the NFL, a university student asked me to describe the distinguishing characteristics of the NFL as an enterprise.

I responded by saying that the NFL had many unique features, but two came readily to mind – tradition and change. These qualities are longstanding hallmarks of the National Football League. We even identify them as being among the core values that guide our operations and decisions.

“We recognize that the NFL’s traditions are an asset, but we also embrace change,” reads our mission and values statement. “We do not rest on our accomplishments. We seek new ways of performing in response to fan interest, technology, and the best practices and business models of other organizations. We balance the need to change with the utmost respect for what has been accomplished.”

Tradition and change will be brought into sharp focus in several ways during the 2005 season.

As the New England Patriots try to become the first team to win three consecutive Super Bowls, we will celebrate the history of the Super Bowl at age 40. Super Bowl XL is an opportunity to look back at the road to 40 and honor the tradition of what has grown to become America’s number-one event of every year.

Before we arrive in Detroit for Super Bowl XL, however, we will embrace change in a dramatic way by playing the first NFL regular-season game in 86 years outside the United States. On Sunday night, October 2, the San Francisco 49ers and Arizona Cardinals will attract more than 100,000 fans to Estadio Azteca in Mexico City for this historic game.

Interest in American football has been building in Mexico over several decades. It is the country with the most NFL fans outside the United States. Our fans in Mexico, passionate and knowledgeable, are ready for this next step. We also have many fans in the U.S. of Hispanic descent, many with links to Mexico, and this game will be especially meaningful to them.

As international interest in our game continues to grow, we will look at the potential of playing more regular-season games abroad in the years ahead in cities that have expressed interest. This would include cities in Canada, Europe, and Asia.

The development of American football as a global sport reminds us that a similar process of growth took place for the game in the United States. In the first half of the 20th century, pro football’s popularity ranked somewhere behind baseball, boxing, horse

racing, and college football. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the 1965 Harris Poll that proclaimed the NFL to be America's favorite sport for the first time ahead of Major League Baseball. The survey noted that "the full potential of NFL football has hardly been tapped and television can undoubtedly play the major role in broadening the fan base."

The NFL's partnership with television did indeed take our league to the next level, blossoming into another important tradition. And, like our many other traditions, it continues to evolve. This is the final year of our current television contracts before several changes take place in 2006, including Monday Night Football moving to ESPN, our Sunday night games switching to broadcast television on NBC, and wireless and video-on-demand technology becoming a bigger part of the NFL media landscape.

Another tradition is the stability of our labor relations between NFL clubs and players. We are approaching two decades of labor peace. The economic strength and on-field competitive balance of our system have created the premium television and entertainment entity in professional sports. Maintaining and building on that tradition of labor peace and prosperity, however, will require our players and clubs to once again accept change.

As always, it is a delicate balance between tradition and change.