

COMMISSIONER TAGLIABUE
INTERVIEW WITH PETER KING-SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
February 6, 2004

Peter King : Paul, take me back to Sunday night. Tell me, first of all, what you thought of the football game, sitting there watching what might have been one of the best Super Bowls of all time, or maybe the best.

Paul Tagliabue: It was a tremendous game. It started off slow but it turned out to be the best Super Bowl game I have ever seen. It was just great football. I thought that we were headed to overtime. After Carolina scored, I thought we were headed to overtime.

SUPER BOWL ENTERTAINMENT

PK: When did you first realize that the halftime show had gone awry?

PT: As soon as I started watching it.

PK: So you watched the whole thing?

PT: No. I said as soon as I started watching it. At the beginning of the halftime show, I was doing an interview on CBS Radio. The booth was a few booths away from mine on the press box level. Then I went back to my booth and started watching the show about halfway through. Immediately I could see that I didn't like it. I didn't like anything that I saw. I didn't like the flag trashing. Certainly in that context it was outrageous. Also, in the context of the first anniversary of the Columbia shuttle tragedy and the context of having paid tribute to the military before the game and having the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff there and all of that. The whole thing was an outrage. It was way off the mark in terms of what we were expecting.

PK: And then to be topped off by the Janet Jackson thing probably sent you further into orbit.

PT: That I didn't even see. I got so frustrated with the thing and since it was coming towards the end, I was talking to some of our people about second-half plans, such as where I was going to be and when I would be heading downstairs. So I didn't even see that but people told me what happened.

PK: Do you have to walk a fine line in your job between trying to do the right thing for your partners, in this case, Viacom and CBS, and holding on to firm control of your product?

PT: No. CBS was on the same page as us. MTV was not. I had spoken to Les Moonves in mid-December and talked to him at some length telling him that we were on the verge of terminating MTV as the halftime producer and needed his cooperation and support. I told him that this was the NFL and CBS Sports' audience. I told him that we had been in

business together for 40 years and we both had great reputations for quality and class in sports. We had a common interest in recognizing this was a mass audience of 100 million people and that the age ranged from eight to 80. I wanted him to assure me that he understood that and that he would get with the MTV people and make sure we had a Super Bowl halftime that was appropriate for that. We didn't have issues with CBS here; we had issues with MTV.

PK: In other words, at the end of the day, even CBS couldn't control them.

PT: Yes. That's perfectly obvious that CBS couldn't control them. But CBS certainly had the same objective that we did. I know that from conversations with Moonves in December and from conversations Roger Goodell had with CBS. What CBS and the NFL wanted was what you saw on the pregame show. Things such as the Dick Enberg piece on the astronauts. Other great pieces like the one by Lesley Visser on Jake Delhomme down in Cajun country, Willie Nelson, the spirit of Texas, the Texans as the host team, Houston hosting for the first time in 30 years, the Hispanic music and then culminating with the tribute to the astronauts on the field after I had been over to NASA on Tuesday. I was sitting with one of the astronauts during the first quarter in my suite. I greeted the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff before the game. I watched the anthem with President and Mrs. Bush. And that's what we wanted. The whole pregame, most of which was televised, was the NFL and CBS. Then someone else got the keys to the car and crashed it at halftime.

PK: Paul, one other thing about this. In your mind, should there be any mistaking now that every halftime show is going to be an NFL production.

PT: The key is that it will be controlled by the NFL and the network televising the game. We have to use our own production companies for the most part, except in that rare instance where you might have a network that is in the family entertainment business, like Disney. You don't want to exclude a Disney kids production just because of what MTV did. We have to be much more explicit as to what our standards are to whoever we retain. It's a product of the NFL and the televising network, not some other entity or affiliated company.

PK: When you got back to New York, tell me what you set into place to begin the process of making sure this doesn't happen again.

PT: The first thing I did was meet with my people. And we started on Sunday night before we got back to New York. We started during the second half of the game. That's when we put out our statement. And I knew very well what I had done to try and avoid this. We continued discussions Monday morning in Houston and on the plane. I also made those comments at the MVP press conference on Monday morning based on my own thoughts and discussions I had with people Sunday night and Monday morning that we were going to not just review things, but that we would change our policies, our people and our processes where we had to. And then we just continued that on Monday afternoon in New York. We sent a memo out to the clubs to give them a little

background. We started to understand what we had to do with the FCC and the Congressional Committees. I spoke with representatives of the Congressional Committee on Tuesday and told them I would be glad to come down and tell them what I thought had happened and that I agreed with their comments that the programming was totally inappropriate. We've been working on that and other things since we have a league meeting next week. The league meeting is on the NFL Properties stuff and has been long-scheduled for Thursday in Orlando. So we've been working on a lot of different things since Tuesday.

CONGRESSIONAL HEARING

PK: What message are you going to try and give Congress on Wednesday?

PT: The message is fairly simple. What you saw on the television and in the stadium during the pregame right up to the anthem was CBS Sports and the NFL. You saw the NFL at its best during the first and second half of the football game. And you saw someone else driving the car in a reckless fashion at halftime. We take responsibility for that because we gave them the keys to drive the car recklessly. But we certainly were not pushing the envelope. We certainly were not looking for this kind of a halftime program. Just go back two years when we had pregame entertainment featuring the Boston Pops and Aaron Copeland featuring Lincoln's Portrait, Barry Manilow, and U2 doing the tribute to the victims of 9/11. We're not pushing the envelope. We're trying to do things that are right. In this particular context, go back to May when we started talking to NASA, we had to take account of the fact that everything we did in Houston had to be respectful of the first anniversary of the loss of the astronauts in the Columbia tragedy. And we've had that in our minds ever since. We'll talk about those things and then some of the more specific issues. We were clear with what we wanted. We were clear with what CBS wanted. The NFL and CBS were both on the same page. How did the car crash?

PK: As the week went on, there seemed to be something happening every day. Not only that, but then "Playmakers" got cancelled and you sort of got rapped for being heavy-handed in that thing for basically forcing ESPN to cancel this fairly popular show. And then the Claret thing happened. At any point this week, did you think, "Can't we bask in the glow of this game for 10 minutes?"

PT: Absolutely. You'd like to have more moments like I had with Tom Brady and Bill Belichick at the MVP and winning coach press conference on Monday morning.

PK: Do you remember what you talked to them about?

PT: Yes. I talked about the fact that you had a young quarterback joining an elite group. Only three other quarterbacks have ever won the Super Bowl MVP two or more times. And he's got many years to go. I asked Bill Belichick if he's ever had a game that taxed the heart more than this one. And he said no. Then he alluded to that when he took the podium and said it was the most grueling game he'd ever coached. I told them that I was

going to say a few words at the very end about the halftime entertainment and that it was certainly not to detract from their tremendous accomplishment. I was going to talk all about their accomplishment first, but I couldn't look at the media without saying something further relative to the halftime show. And Belichick said that he understood and that he had only heard about it that morning, but that they were 100 percent behind the NFL.

COLLEGE ELIGIBILITY RULE

PK: Do you remember what your immediate reaction was when you heard of the Claret ruling?

PT: I wasn't totally surprised. Most of these labor exemption cases that we and the NBA have lost, we've both lost for the most part in the trial court in the first round and won them in the appellate court in subsequent rounds. I've been looking at court decisions for 35 years. I was preoccupied with other stuff, including getting ready for the league meeting in Orlando. We're trying to send some stuff out to the clubs for the NFL Properties meeting. I was focused on the NFL Properties meeting yesterday morning when Jeff Pash came in. I said that you're at the end of the first quarter and you'd better get ready for the second quarter. And you'd better win. I told him to let me know what you need me to do, if anything, and he said he would. And then it occurred to me that I should call Rich McKay as the chairman of the Competition Committee. I called Rich right away and asked him to speak to Duke Babb and Grant Teaff (at the American Football Coaches Association). Then we gathered some of our Management Council staff in our conference room because I wanted to go over some things that they should do with the clubs. I wanted Peter Ruocco to assign different people on the staff to talk to each of the teams. And I wanted them to set up a conference call with the Competition Committee, which they did. They set up an 11:00 AM conference call with the Competition Committee to give them advice and see what questions they had. So that was basically it. For the rest of the day, other people took over and did everything that had to be done.

PK: It seems to me that the whole decision is probably very hurtful to the NFL in the long term. But it is the most hurtful to college football because for the NFL, if a guy is not ready to play, you cut him and move on. There are other players. Do you view this, not only for the part that you have a such a good partner in the NCAA and college football, but just long-term that this is not good for football in general?

PT: I look at it in two steps. First of all, it's not yet a decision. It's an interim ruling. It's subject to appeal. It's not final. Until you have a final decision, you worry about the short-term implications more than the long-term implications. It's interim. There are many things we are going to have to do in the interim period. There is a hearing next Wednesday before the judge. I still have very strong confidence in our position that we'll eventually win. That's step number one. If we get to the longer term and have the negative decision, then it's certainly not positive for our clubs or our league. It's not positive for college football players or for college football. It's not positive for young

athletes in sports generally. We're a long way from being there. We're still working with an interim decision. It's not final. And we ultimately feel this will be overturned.

PUBLIC'S EXPECTATIONS OF NFL

PK: My last question is this. If Pete Rozelle was a commissioner for a time when this league was growing, and growing on television and a lot of different markets, and you are a commissioner for these times when much of the major issues are litigious in nature and you need somebody on major matters, like whether to play after 9/11 and on Maurice Clarett, and on minor matters like the rules of the game, is it more important now or as important now to have somebody who is fairly unflappable in the face of these mini-crisis that you had to face this week?

PT: It's a heck of a lot less litigious now than it was during Pete Rozelle's time. In 1972, we had something like 32 anti-trust cases pending against the National Football League. Today we have zero. Other than Clarett. We're at a record low in terms of litigation. This isn't any different than the things I went through with Pete Rozelle. You've got the court decisions. You win sometimes and you lose sometimes. You take appeals. You have contingency plans that you work on. You have things that outrage the public, whether it's a 10-week strike in 1982 or replacement games in 1987. Pete always used to say that the NFL would do well unless it shoots itself in the foot. You don't ever want to get to the point where you're doing things that are damaging yourself. This is no different than situations we've been in in a number of cases in the past.

I was thinking yesterday about a couple of different things that Rozelle used to say that are pertinent right now. One is that the public interest in the NFL and the fan base of the NFL is so much more massive than any other sport and the expectations are so different, that you can never compare yourself to anyone else. You have to do it right your own way and with your own set of standards. He always used to say that. Don't worry about how someone else is doing it. Make sure we do it in a way that is satisfactory to us because the expectations are higher because of the size of our fan base and the interest in our sport, including the Super Bowl. And the second thing he used to say is that you always need to recognize that you live in a fish bowl and that whatever you do, you have to be prepared to read about it on the front page of every newspaper in America, so you better do it right. There is total transparency. It's a fish bowl. Those two things are relevant right now.

PK: Paul, at the end of this week, do you feel drained, frustrated, worn out, happy about the game, all of the above?

PT: I feel a lot better at the end of the week than I did at the beginning of the week because I've gotten over the feeling that I was kicked in the stomach. I feel a lot better now than I did on Sunday night because we're addressing all these issues. We've started to explain to people what happened. We've got a league meeting next Thursday and there's a lot going on and people are working hard.

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