

3/9/06 – NFL Network Interview with Commissioner Paul Tagliabue

Paul Burmeister:

Okay Commissioner, Wednesday night you said you were more relieved than anything. You've had 24 hours to step away from it a bit, maybe exhale for a while, is that still your overriding feeling?

Commissioner Paul Tagliabue:

Well, I think now, probably, I have a little better sense that we accomplished something that was important for the game, important for the league, and for the fans, so maybe I'm getting beyond relief to a little sense that everyone feels they had to give, but everyone felt they gave to get something done that was very positive.

Burmeister:

So there is maybe a feeling that there was something, a feat accomplished more so than a disaster avoided?

Commissioner:

I think so definitely. I think that when you look back, we discussed dozens and dozens, of different ideas internally, dozens and dozens of different ideas with the Players Association, and we did make some really significant structural improvements. Hopefully, they will be improvements. The way the salary cap is going to be structured is different and hopefully better. The way we are dealing internally with some of our internal revenue sharing arrangements and incentivising teams to build stadiums, help them build stadiums, involve some structural changes so, it was just not another extension, it was tried to improve and extend and I think in the end that's what we accomplished.

Burmeister:

I heard a lot about the role you played Wednesday evening in the final meeting, an impassioned speech, rallied the troupes, at least built consensus amongst all of the owners.... how did you do that?

Commissioner:

Well, I don't quite remember because some people said I gave a wonderful talk about the history of the game and the evolution of the player arrangements in pro sports and it's something that after 35 years, has become as much a part of my own brain as my own family's history, so, I feel very strongly that pro sports has moved in a very positive direction over the last 30 years, from the mid-seventies to today, in terms of the balance between management and players and the contractual arrangements and I think David Stern and the NBA get a good hunk of the credit, for starting down the salary cap path and then we came in and everyone's arrangement has evolved in its own direction, but it's a lot better than what was in place in the 60's and through the 70's, in my judgment, and that was basically the thrust of my speech, ...so that everybody should try to keep it working, it'd be great for the game and, Al Davis jumped in and said that he's been around 10 years longer than I have, but he supported a good deal of what I had set forth and I think that Al had a great impact on the meeting because he does have tremendous perspective and when he comes in and says it's time to make the decision for the good of the game, it has a lot of impact and he reinforced what I had said.

Burmeister:

Were you surprised that it was Al Davis, the one to get up and do that?

Commissioner:

Not really, because when I first became commissioner in '89, Al called me and spoke with me on a number of occasions and had some really good advice about how to change the relationship with the Player's Association and to make it less adversarial and less confrontational, and build a relationship of respect and trust. We've tried to do that over the years, Gene Upshaw and I, and the owners and the Players Association Executive Committee. It's reflected in many things we do, meeting together in Indianapolis at the combine and talking about safety and issues and the rules of the game, but Al gave me that advice 17 years ago, and it's some of the best advice I've ever gotten, and he and I have always been on the same page when it comes to trying to make this system work fairly.

Burmeister:

When you were addressing all of the owners in that speech, did you get back to the history of the game, and the sharing and the teamwork that someone like Wellington Mara brought up or did you focus more on how popular and how strong the league was going right now?

Commissioner:

Well, as best I can remember, the first thing that I talked about was, that in my first year I think as a young attorney involved with the NFL, I accompanied Pete Rozelle to the federal court house in New York to testify in the Curt Flood free agency case in baseball, and from that point forward, I got a real immersion in how cantankerous the relationship was and how destructive it was, if you fight with someone that should be your partner, you are going to waste a lot of energy, so if you can build a relationship and then spend your energy on promoting the game, working with youth football, building great stadiums for the fans, expanding the league, moving into new communities, into the Hispanic community, into communities that might feel disenfranchised when it comes to football, those are the things that really can build, and you can't do that if you're just spending all of your time fighting with the players, so that was the core of the speech, I think, if it was a speech, it was not really a speech, it was an answer to a question. And, over the 37 years that I've been involved, I've seen periods of great energy directed in the right direction and then great lost opportunities because of conflict over issues that were that close to being resolved and weren't resolved and then people spent five years of energy trying to put the pieces back together.

Burmeister:

And with all that's happened the past few weeks, and the past couple of days, I'm sure it's difficult, as you pointed out, to remember the specifics of that speech, but was the tone one of a parent kind of lecturing kids about getting something right, or more of a friend counseling a friend?

Commissioner:

I think it was a little more like a General who's telling the troops that the time to pull together and you know do the right thing was here, step up and make a decision that was going to involve some compromise. And it would not be easy, but it had to be done. It was sort of a commitment to make the decision and not to continue to think that there were easy solutions.

Burmeister:

Looking ahead now Commissioner, the speculation in the last 24 hours, that the end might come this spring for you as far as your tenure; can you talk about your short term future here at the NFL?

Commissioner:

I think it is speculation, because I have not really focused on the future. A couple of years ago, when I extended my contract we did have some discussion, myself, and half a dozen owners who were on my contract committee, if that is what you want to call it, we did talk about a timeline, but most of the focus was on trying to ensure that there was a well-structured succession plan. in process, or a transition process, as you know in '89 when Pete Rozelle retired, it was very protracted and fractious and in 1960 after Bert Bell's death, it was very protracted and fractious, and I feel that, and I know the owners feel, that we should be smart enough to do this in a seamless way, so we did have a lot of those conversations. But I have been so busy in the last few months I don't even know what city I am in, much less what I want to do in the next couple of years.

Burmeister:

Does it feel like it is going to be easier to think about the end, whenever that time comes, now that this is in the rear view mirror?

Commissioner:

Yes, I think this is very important because it did involve some structural changes and it did get us over some issues with the Players Association, in terms of how much was too much for teams to stretch and commit to in terms of salary, you know, player's salaries will grow from a hundred million a team in the 2005 season up toward 160 to 170 million a team at the end of this deal, and that is a big stretch for many of the teams, and I was concerned that the Player's Association not push so hard on salaries and cap percentages, that other things would go by the boards. I think in the end, Gene Upshaw and I agreed that it was really important to keep funding youth football, and increase the funding of youth football, so this was important, but my whole experience in the NFL has been very rewarding, going back 37 years, so when I am no longer doing this, what will make me feel proud, I just think the ability to work with so many great owners and so many generations of great players, is what it's about. You know about a month after I got this job, I had the privilege of sitting on the dais of the touchdown club dinner down in Washington D. C. next to then Supreme Court Justice Byron White, who had played in the NFL, and I was getting an award a month after I got the job, so I had to get up and give an acceptance speech, and I didn't know what to say, I hadn't done anything. I said to Justice White, that I know I was standing there as a representative of the coaches and the players who make the game great, so I thanked them, and I still feel the same way. Just the ability to work with coaches and players and have a greater structure where they can do what the fans love and what the athletes' love, which is to compete and entertain people. That is what it is all about. And to have the players and the coaches and the community too, and do the things off the field, that the public expects athletes to do in terms of serving kids and being role models and being constructive.

Burmeister:

Speaking of ability, how about the ability to make and also keep peace? 17 seasons, heading into your 18th, never been a stoppage of work on your watch, is that something that you're going be most proud of?

Commissioner:

It will certainly be right at the top of the list, although right now, I don't think the last couple of months have been too peaceful. We have had some shouting matches and we have had some late nights and short tempers, both across the collective bargaining table and

internally, but when you say that we started in '92 with an agreement and it could go out as far as 2011, and not have a work stoppage that would be a negative, I think that's a pretty good accomplishment. I started this in '69, we had problems with the union in 1970, we had work stoppages in '74, '77, '82, and '87, it was like twice a decade, I think it would have a negative impact on the game overall, and to be able to say it has been relatively smooth for 17 years and, no pre-season game, no regular season game have been cancelled for that period of time and a lot of positive things have been accomplished. That is important to me.

Burmeister:

And the issues have been different in 17 seasons, we remember what happened most, the past couple of weeks, that's freshest in our mind, but is there a common cord that you've tried to strike amidst all of the 17 seasons, all of the issues that have come up that's kind of rung true all of the time that's helped you maintain the peace?

Commissioner:

I've learned a lot from Pete Rozelle, and from those owners who had to make compromises. Ralph Wilson tells a story about, I think he had to loan money to the Oakland Raiders to keep them in business in the early 60's. And when you hear his stories about the early New York Titans, where the crowds were so sparse, they became the New York Jets later, but the crowds were so sparse, it took less time to introduce the fans to the players, than introduce the players to the fans. When you have people like that who went through those tough times, you learn from that. It is like having your parents live through the Depression. You learn that as good as the good times are, they just don't fall in your laps. I think all of the owners understand that. Trying to maintain that mindset and not take success for granted I think is important. And then with the players, I think it goes back to what Al Davis told me in 1989, respect them, be firm, they'll be firm with you, but they understand what's important for the game, and if you understand what is important for the game, and their place in the game, then you'll have a healthy relationship. That's easier said than done sometimes. But that's the way I've tried to approach it.

Burmeister:

Finally, Commissioner, do you think about your legacy at all and what it might be?

Commissioner:

Legacies are for other people, that is often said, it's trite, but my legacy I guess, is a basketball player who maybe did some good things in football.

Burmeister:

Maybe?

Commissioner:

I hope so.

Burmeister:

I'm pretty sure you have. Thanks for spending time with us.

Commissioner:

Thanks.

Burmeister:

How much concern did you have at any point in this process, that the deal might not get done?

Commissioner:

I always was an optimist, in my own mind that it would get done, but in the last 3 weeks, I really started to think that I was wearing rose colored glasses because I couldn't see how it was going to get done. I couldn't see how we were going to bridge the differences with the Players Association across the table. There were so many issues that had been discussed for so many weeks and no progress had been made. Not just on the economics but on contractual issues, franchise players, length of contract for drafted players. We had made no progress whatsoever, and then internally, I knew that everybody wanted to reach a consensus but to find the specific arrangements that people could buy into, I had really begun to think that I was looking at a true rose colored glasses, and then, so I came down here really quite pessimistic, frankly to Dallas. Over the weekend, Gene Upshaw and I worked out the franchise player rules and we limited the length of contract for players drafted in rounds 2 through 7 to 4 years. There couldn't be any 5 or 6 year contracts. That took a lot off of the table right away. And then when we came down here, I felt very quickly, that as firm as owners were on many, many institutional issues, there was a determination to do what was best for the game, and to get an agreement done. Al Davis said to me very early in the meeting, "You've got the votes". And I said, "I do"? He said: "Yeah, now you just have to figure out what they're voting on." So I said: "that's not too easy". But it was only when he said that, after the first 4 hours that I finally had the sense that maybe he is right. But then it still was not easy to figure out what it is we were going to put on a piece of paper, and say we all agreed to. And committing the digital media, committing some future revenue streams, and committing to develop them in intelligent ways and dedicating significant pieces of that from the high revenue teams to fund the revenue sharing that is needed, and also understanding that moving into areas of best practices in helping teams help themselves, I think there was a good feeling that what we agreed to is a good program for both to going forward in helping but also getting people to build there own stadiums and prove their own local presence

Burmeister:

Thank you.