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Domestic Violence in the National Football League

Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the relationship that existed between domestic violence incidents involving National Football League (NFL) players and the popularity of the league. With more media coverage on players' off the field exploits there was potential that players committing crimes as heinous as domestic violence was having an impact on how fans consumed the NFL's products. This was initially sparked by the widely publicized incident featuring former Baltimore Ravens running back, Ray Rice. As the league struggled to figure out on how to best handle player discipline for domestic violence the public opinion of the NFL diminished.

Fan behavior was the measurable component for NFL popularity and was examined by looking at metrics such as television viewership and game attendance. Domestic violence incidents were totaled from an NFL player arrest database. The incidents were examined for physical violence and any resulting player releases. By compiling secondary data describing fan behavior and comparing it to total domestic violence incidents among NFL players it could be seen that fan behavior was generally unchanged by NFL players committing domestic violence. The study provided a look into the impact of players off field behavior on the business of the NFL.

What was found was there was not conclusive evidence that a relationship between domestic violence in the NFL and the league's popularity exists. Despite predictions that fan behavior display a noticeable change in relation to domestic violence incidents in the NFL, the data did not reflect such a finding, and statistical tests did not reflect a significant relationship. For the NFL, it may reveal that behavior of their fans, such as attending games or consuming NFL products from home, may not be hampered by the off the field follies of the league's players. However, having already weathered a storm of criticism regarding the league's policies and demeanor towards domestic violence, understanding how people respond to such incidents could prove critical for the NFL long term.

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Domestic Violence in the National Football League

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Executive Summary

This study was conducted to examine the relationship that existed between domestic violence incidents involving National Football League (NFL) players and the popularity of the league. With more media coverage on players' off the field exploits there was potential that players committing crimes as heinous as domestic violence was having an impact on how fans consumed the NFL's products. This was initially sparked by the widely publicized incident featuring former Baltimore Ravens running back, Ray Rice. As the league struggled to figure out on how to best handle player discipline for domestic violence the public opinion of the NFL diminished.

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What was found was there was not conclusive evidence that a relationship between domestic violence in the NFL and the league's popularity exists. Despite predictions that fan behavior displays a noticeable change in relation to domestic violence incidents in the NFL, the data did not reflect such a finding, and statistical tests did not reflect a significant relationship. For the NFL, it may reveal that behavior of their fans, such as attending games or consuming NFL products from home, may not be hampered by the off the field follies of the league's

players. However, having already weathered a storm of criticism regarding the league's policies and demeanor towards domestic violence, understanding how people respond to such incidents could prove critical for the NFL long term.

Introduction

Domestic violence, sport consumer behavior, better known as fan behavior and the National Football League (NFL) have been individually studied, analyzed and researched extensively (Barrabi, 2014; Sweeney, Schramm-Possinger, Gregg & Stranahan, 2016; Snyder & Morgan, 2005; Wakefield, 2016; Lauricella & Werly, 2016). Most recently the NFL and domestic violence have been intertwined in countless reports and studies. However, these concepts have not been tied together in an effort to examine a relationship between domestic violence in the NFL and impact fan behavior. Those concepts, along with an understanding of what domestic violence is, were evaluated in order to examine what relationship existed between the popularity of the league of the domestic violence incidents of its players.

Domestic violence has been an ongoing issue in the United States for decades, with significant progress having been made since the 1960s (Snyder & Morgan, 2005). Despite the progress it remains a major issue with 30% of female murder victims being at the hands of their significant other (Snyder & Morgan, 2005). The NFL has had their own struggles with domestic violence with 140 current and former football players being reported to law enforcement for domestic violence from 1989 to 1994 (Barrabi, 2014). Despite a history of incidents, the NFL has not had a strict anti-domestic violence policy in place (Lauricella & Werly, 2016). With NFL players idolized as heroes in their communities, the actions of domestic violence offenders in the NFL and how the NFL has handled those players has been in direct view of their fans (Lauricella & Werly, 2016). In spite of more recent events and media coverage the behavior of NFL fans in

relation to domestic violence committed by NFL players has not become a widely explored topic.

The purpose of this research was to study the behavior of NFL fans to the domestic violence incidents of players within the NFL. Public views were determined to be generally negative believing that the league had mishandled domestic violence incidents, having done little to adequately punish the offenders which in turn showed apathy towards the issue until a specific incident (Barrabi, 2014; McCarthy, 2016; Taylor & Keith, 2014). What remained unexamined was the behavior of fans in response to NFL players being accused and charged with domestic violence and the league's handling of those players. The purpose of this research was to analyze fan behavior towards the NFL and how it has been influenced by domestic violence in the NFL. This research attempted to identify what relationship exists between domestic violence involving the NFL and its players and the popularity of the league.

This research had a practical application because it provides the sports industry a deeper understanding of public response to negative league and player actions. It provided examples of how a professional sports league can be impacted by events that happen outside the game itself. Additionally, it shines a light on an ongoing social problem that has stolen some of the spotlight from one of North America's most popular professional sports leagues.

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between domestic violence incidents involving NFL players and the popularity of the league through examination of NFL fan behavior. The research question of this study was:

What relationship exists between domestic violence in the NFL and its popularity?

The aim of this research was to examine the relationship that domestic violence incidents involving NFL players has with fan behavior which was used to quantify the popularity of the league.

Background

Domestic Violence and Football

Football has long been a violent sport. The stereotypical football player is often thought of as big, fast, tough, aggressive and violent. The problem was when that aggressive and violent behavior leaves the gridiron and enters the home of players. Domestic violence is not a newly occurring type of crime, as numerous campaigns have been undertaken to combat domestic violence over the last 50 years. Unfortunately, it is a frequently occurring crime, with up to four million women being physically abused by their husbands or partners on a yearly basis (Snyder & Morgan, 2005). As part of the Violence Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, Congress passed into law the Violence Against Women Act of 1994. The legislation recognized that violence against women as a crime. Federal law defines domestic violence as:

A pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone. (Domestic Violence, 2017, para. 1)

Domestic violence typically occurs in relationships where one person looks to exhibit control over the other person. This is very much like the behavior on a football field where one player looks to dominate and exhibit control over their opponent. Being in control and violent their entire lives can also lead football players to commit domestic violence (Taylor & Keith, 2014). These factors have contributed to football players being part of the problem rather than the

solution. Barrabi (2014) points out that 140 current and former pro and college football players were reported to the police for violent acts against women from 1989 to 1994. Barrabi also points out that of 713 NFL player arrests from 2000-2014, 85 were for domestic violence. That is nearly 12% of NFL player arrests resulting player-related domestic violence. The pattern of violence has yet to stop in the NFL despite an increased awareness of the problem.

Fan Behavior in the NFL

Every professional sport, regardless of whether it is minor league or major league relies on its fans for off-field success. Measuring fan behavior is a widely studied process and has many different approaches. Some of the most effective methods of analyzing fan behavior are to observe how fans consume the product that is the NFL. Consumption of such a product can be measured in fans attending games, fans purchasing NFL merchandise and fans watching the game on television broadcasts. The popularity of a league is often measured with these metrics. The higher these figures reach, the more popular the league and improvements over previous years can show a growth in popularity or vice versa. The NFL is considered the most popular and profitable sports league in North America (Sweeney, Schramm-Possinger, Gregg & Stranahan, 2016). However, even North America's most popular sport is not immune to the consequences of its players' actions. While polling fans can often be used to gauge fans' reactions, it is more often that fan behavior is the true method to judge how fans respond to everything the NFL and its players do. Disgusted or upset fans may stop attending games, purchasing merchandise or even not watch the games on television at all anymore. Even if a fan's reaction is the result of a single team's actions it can reflect on the popularity of the entire league.

What is the NFL doing about it?

Domestic violence in the NFL has been an issue for decades. Notable incidents of domestic violence such as now Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon being arrested in 1995 for domestic violence (Barrabi, 2014). It was common place for players to be arrested, however, there were countless incidents that were covered up (Lauricella & Werly, 2016). Former NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue's focus was on growing the game of football and not the off-field digressions of the players (Barrabi, 2014). When Roger Goodell took over as commissioner he made it his personal mission to clean up the league and its image. He introduced a Player Conduct policy in 2007 that was intended to hold players accountable for their off-field behavior (Sweeney, Schramm-Possinger, Gregg & Stranahan, 2016). Off-season crimes rose 61% the year following the policy change despite the change and nothing more was seemingly done by the league to prevent further domestic violence crimes (Sweeney, Schramm-Possinger, Gregg & Stranahan, 2016). All it took was the actions of a single person to change the course of one of the most powerful organizations in North American professional sports. On February 15th, 2014, now former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice punched his then fiancée Janay Palmer in an elevator, knocking her unconscious and dragging her out of the elevator before being arrested on charges of domestic violence. This incident was caught on security camera in the elevator.

While domestic violence incidents among National Football League (NFL) players was not a new occurrence this particular incident would create a public relations nightmare for the league. The Ray Rice incident may have ignited a media and public relations firestorm for the NFL but it was not the first time a player has been arrested for domestic violence. Ray Rice's transgression and the events that followed were highly covered in the media, something that seemingly not happened before. Despite the NFL and domestic violence laws existing simultaneously for over 50 years, the league had done little to nothing to combat the crime

within its own ranks prior to the Ray Rice incident. In fact, prior to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell implementing new player conduct penalties, despite not collectively bargaining with the National Football League's Players Association (NFLPA), it was common to see players receive harsher punishments for failing drug tests, marijuana possession or DUI charges. One of the main complaints with the mishandling of the Ray Rice incident was the initial two game suspension that Rice was dealt for his domestic violence charge. That suspension would be upgraded to indefinitely after TMZ released footage of Rice punching Palmer, showing the public the true brutality of the incident (Taylor & Keith, 2014). While Rice would be able to appeal the ruling due to the NFL's weak policy regarding domestic violence. With the release of the video there was a feeling among fans and sponsors that the punishment was disproportionate to the crime. Corporate sponsors, such as COVERGIRL and Anheuser-Busch, released public statements scolding the NFL for not handling the situation better (Sweeney, Schramm-Possinger, Gregg & Stranahan, 2016). NFL fans and the public also voiced their opinion that Rice's punishment was far too lenient for the abhorrent nature of the offense (Lauricella & Werly, 2016). Roger Goodell would respond with a revision to the Player Conduct Policy after admitting he had gotten it wrong the first time with Rice's suspension. In an effort to standardize punishments for players who committed domestic violence crimes, Goodell put in place a policy that stated any player that committed domestic violence faces a six-game suspension. Additionally, a second offense is stated to lead to a lifetime ban that requires players to petition for reinstatement after a year absence should they wish to play again (Taylor & Blackmar, 2014). The change to policy was a way to standardize the punishments for domestic violence which had been arbitrary at best with prominent players able to continue playing without rebuke (Barrabi, 2014). Taylor and Keith, 2014, reported that the league changing its domestic violence policy

was in response to massive public outcry. Despite Goodell's policy change many still questioned the league's priorities when it came to domestic violence. Goodell's policy change would be immediately tested with two other players being accused of domestic violence in short order. Ray McDonald, playing for the San Francisco 49ers at that time, was charged with domestic violence but was allowed to play the same week of his arrest (Wertheim & Kaplan, 2014). Former Carolina Panther, Greg Hardy, was another high profile debacle for the NFL. Hardy was originally given misdemeanor charges for domestic violence after his then girlfriend reported him for a vicious beating (Wertheim & Kaplan, 2014). Despite the charges, Hardy was allowed to continue playing only being benched by the Panthers after public scrutiny (Wertheim & Kaplan, 2014). With the NFL's brand and 'protecting the shield' established as a priority, the public view was that the league only cared to protect its own image (Lauricella & Werly, 2016). That image however, may have already been tainted. Recent national surveys have shown that 69% of Americans and 70% of NFL fans believe that the league has an epidemic of domestic violence (Leal, Gertz & Piquero, 2015). Others feel that the league's weak stance against domestic violence and sloth-like approach in addressing it conveys a message that the NFL does not value women (Dockterman, 2014). Even players, current and former have spoken out. Chris Johnson, former teammate of Ray Rice, called for the league to take a stronger stance against domestic violence (Wertheim & Keith, 2014). Former player, Scott Fujita, took to twitter to share his feelings after Rice was handed his initial two game suspension. Fujita said "The message to my wife & 3 daughters today? The business that's been a big part of our life, really doesn't give a f**k about you" (Dockterman, 2014). While the more recent domestic violence incidents have been highlighted in the media, the league's mishandling of the domestic violence among their own ranks has been an issue for an extended amount of time.

Why is this important?

Despite being considered part of the entertainment industry, the influence the NFL wields on society leaves many to believe that the league is obligated to do more to combat domestic violence. Fans pay close attention to the actions of professional athletes and idolize them. A study done by Sailes (2001) showed that 66% of those polled believe that athletes have a social and moral responsibility to serve as role models. Role models can have a profound effect on how fans behave in regards to a team or league, they often become a fans favorite player. The league has made changes to its policy regarding players committing domestic violence crimes but the occurrences have not stopped. The league remains popular yet fans have developed their own opinions of how the league has handled the issue. This research sought to explore what relationship exists between domestic violence in the NFL and its popularity.

Method**Research Question**

This research was designed around the gathering of secondary data regarding domestic violence, fan behavior and the National Football League (NFL). All data that were collected were drawn second hand from other sources and were mainly quantitative in nature. Fan behavior was used as a way to quantify the popularity of the NFL. The measurement of fan behavior was determined with three metrics, total fans attending NFL games, total fans watching NFL games and total buyers of NFL branded merchandise. The purpose of this research was to explore what relationship existed between domestic violence in the NFL and its popularity.

Desired Sample

The sample data that this research attempted to access was the National Football League seasons, years 2000 to 2016. Crimes committed by NFL players began being compiled in a central location in the year 2000 and any data regarding domestic violence prior to that year were

difficult to locate and incomplete. The year 2016 was the most recently completed season for the NFL. Additionally, this sample provided the most recent data for the study.

Sampling Method

A typical cases sampling method was selected due to the years selected being “typical” of a particular phenomenon. With domestic violence statistics for NFL players beginning to be compiled in 2000, any year starting in 2000 and beyond would be considered typical. This sample also included the number of people who watched NFL games on television. The number of fans that attended NFL games in person each year and total buyers of NFL sports logo apparel that were used as indicators of fan behavior and the league’s popularity.

Procedure

The desired sample was determined by examining that available data that were available regarding NFL players and domestic violence incidents. The data from the USA Today database ranging from 2000 to 2016 that was determined to be the preferred sample.

Online databases were used to acquire secondary data with sources such as Sports Market Analytics and Pro Football Reference. Three variables were targeted to show the popularity of the NFL, which is a product of NFL fan behavior. The variables were total number fans attending NFL games, total number of fans viewing NFL games on television and total number of buyers of NFL apparel. Domestic violence incidents that had reported physical violence and domestic violence incidents that resulted in a player’s release were also included to give a more in-depth look at the domestic violence incidents. An Excel spreadsheet was created to accumulate data in a central location. The table had columns labeled year, total number of domestic violence incidents, domestic violence incidents with physical violence, domestic violence incidents resulting in a release, total number of fans viewing NFL games on television,

total number of fans attending NFL games and total buyers of NFL apparel. As data sets were located, they were recorded into a single spreadsheet together to be compared simultaneously.

Average yearly NFL attendance data was originally the target data set for this research. Unfortunately, the variable was unable to be obtained. Total number of fans attending NFL games each year was obtained from Sports Market Analytics, an analytics website that compiles various data and information from the NFL. The available data only reached back to 2011 and created a limitation that required additional data to be found. The data were added to the table for each year starting in 2016 and reaching back to 2011. Pro Football Reference was accessed to compile complementary data sets.

Television ratings were the initial metric that was targeted as part of fan behavior. However, the available data were not totaled for a season or even a singular network. Available data were split into singular games which was too specific for this study. Instead a total number of fans viewing NFL games on television was determined to be an ideal metric for measuring fan behavior. This data set was acquired from Sports Market Analytics as well. The available data set ranged from 2011 to 2016.

Merchandise sales, or in this case, total buyers of NFL apparel were determined to be a method to measure fan behavior. However, due to the NFL and its teams not being publicly traded companies their financial data is not required to be released. This created a major challenge in finding merchandise sales or any other financial data. This challenge forced the data set to be omitted. The column on the spreadsheet was kept for potential replications of the study.

Domestic violence was tallied manually by counting how many domestic violence related incidents were recorded by USA Today's online database. The database was sorted by category with a manual count of the number domestic violence incidents tallied by year. The total number

of incidents each year was then recorded on the data spread sheet. As total number of domestic violence incidents were examined the number of those incidents that involved physical abuse were tallied per year as well. Physical abuse within domestic violence is defined as “Hitting, slapping, shoving, grabbing, pinching, biting, hair pulling, etc. are types of physical abuse. This type of abuse also includes denying a partner medical care or forcing alcohol and/or drug use upon him or her” (Domestic Violence, 2017). These data sets were also acquired from the USA Today online database.

Results

The sample for this study consisted of NFL seasons from the year 2000 to the year 2016. It was selected based on a combination of set delimitations and limitations. Because of this, and the size of the population itself, it would be hard to justify any claim that the sample represents the population as a whole. However, due to the changes in technology, society and the NFL as a whole the sample is relevant to current issues unlike a sample drawn from 1980 to 1996. Secondary data were collected and analyzed.

The average number of domestic violence incidents yearly approached six per year ($M=5.82$) with as many as 11 incidents in one year. That results in 64.7% of the years within the sample having at least six incidents. On average, 4.29 of them involved physical violence and resulted in an average of 1 player release per year. In 6 of 17 years sampled or 35.3%, no player was released as a result of domestic violence charges or accusations against them. The total number of fans attending NFL games ranged from a minimum of 16,306,889 to a maximum of 17,788,671 people resulting in a mean of 17,252,116.24. The mean number of fans watching NFL games on television was 121,183,500 however that includes an outlier and 7 missing data points.

A correlation was used to determine the relationship between the total number of domestic violence incidents and the total number of fans attending NFL games. There was no significant relationship between the aforementioned variables, $r = -.001, p > .05$. The results of a second correlation test also showed that there was no significance between the total number of domestic violence incidents and total number of fans viewing NFL games on television, $r = -.649, p > .05$. The results of an ANOVA showed that on average there was no significant change in attendance with respect to total number of domestic violence incidents, $F(8, 16) = .300, p > .05$. The results of a second ANOVA showed moderate significance at best on average in television viewership with respect to total number of domestic violence incidents, $F(3, 9) = .001, p > .05$. A Bonferroni-adjusted alpha of .0125 was used for all analyses, $p = .0125$.

Discussion & Conclusion

What does all of that mean?

The purpose of this study was to determine what relationship exists between domestic violence incidents among NFL players and the popularity of the NFL. Descriptive statistics of domestic violence incidents in the NFL reveal that nearly every incident was a domestic violence incident that involved physical violence, averaging 4.29 incidents with violence. Despite the high rate of violence, the average of players released due to their involvement in domestic violence incidents was only 1 per year. With six separate years passing without a single player release despite the severity of their alleged crimes. Based on the data fan behavior was not noticeably or consistently changed due to NFL players committing domestic violence crimes. There was no significant relationships present and additional research and analysis would be necessary due to gaps in the data. Other factors that impact fan behavior such as prices, team success, and the economy, were not able to be eliminated as potential influences of fan behavior and could have

had an impact. However, based on the secondary data acquired, fan behavior did not appear to be impacted enough about NFL players committing acts of domestic violence to stop or reduce their consumption of the NFL. Such offenses committed by players have not stopped fans from attending games or watching games on television.

Despite the public outcry that formed during the events of the Ray Rice incident, fan behavior did not match initial predictions (Sweeney, Schramm-Possinger, Gregg & Stranahan, 2016). There was not a substantial change in fan behavior, even as acts of domestic violence continued to be committed by NFL players. Fans continued to consume the NFL and its products, continuing to grow the popularity of a league that turned a blind eye to domestic violence among its ranks for decades (Barrabi, 2014). This was despite an increased media attention around players committing domestic violence crimes (Barrabi, 2014). While the NFL was not immune to the consequences of its players' actions, the impact appeared minimal from the data that was available.

Limitations and Delimitations

The biggest limitation to this study was missing data. Two variables, total number of fans watching NFL games on Television and total buyers of NFL brand apparel, had gaps in data. The data missing for total number of fans watching NFL games on television started in the year 2007 and stretched back through the remainder of the sample to the year 2000. The data missing for total buyers of NFL brand apparel fell between 2000 and 2010. The missing data took away from truly examining the relationship between domestic violence incidents in the NFL and fan behavior with only one variable having data available for every year in the sample. The total number of NFL fans watching on television missing seven years of data limited the accuracy of the analysis. The inability to access some data was another limitation to the study. The NFL is

not required to release its financial information which would include data like merchandise revenue. Access to revenue numbers and possibly television ratings or total number of viewers would complete the data sets for the sample. Another limitation to the study resulted from choosing fan behavior as a variable to measure the NFL's popularity. Due to there being multiple variables that can impact fan behavior, focusing on just one without acknowledging or eliminating the others potentially limits the findings.

There were delimitations set for this study from the beginning. The sample itself was a delimitation as it was not set any further back than the year 2000. Since the USA Today Database of NFL arrests did not reach further back in the past than 2000 it was determined that finding similar data to what was extracted from the USA Today database would be difficult to locate. Due to the limitations encountered regarding total buyers of NFL branded apparel it was decided to omit the data set entirely from the study. It was decided that without more than a few years' worth of data that any result or conclusion drawn from the results would be untrustworthy.

What is next?

Moving forward, there are several suggestions to improve upon the study. Gaining more access to data, such as NFL merchandise revenue or total buyers of NFL fan apparel, would allow for fan behavior to be further examined. More data, such as more years, could also be acquired regarding total number of fans viewing NFL games as moderate significance was initially discovered despite a number of missing data points. Another approach would be to focus on a specific demographic within the NFL fan base, such as gender. Examining how female NFL fans respond to domestic violence, a crime that statistically targets more women, could show clearer results. Additionally, a fan survey could be attempted, asking NFL fans directly about their views of domestic violence in the NFL and how they have responded to previous and

potential future incidents. Such knowledge would allow the league to better refine its policies and to understand how fan behavior can change from events that happen off the field. That would require the administrator(s) of the survey to have a greater reach such as someone within the NFL itself.

Summary

To summarize, this study examined the relationship between acts of domestic violence committed by National Football League players and the popularity of the league. The public outcry that followed the highly publicized Ray Rice incident specifically led one to believe that the NFL's popularity had taken a hit due to a tarnished image. With fan behavior used as a measurement of popularity and a sample that contained every year from 2000 to 2016, this study examined the correlations between the total number of domestic violence incidents each year and metrics measuring fan behavior. Despite limited results the study showed that additional research is necessary to truly understand the relationship between domestic violence in the NFL and the popularity of the league.

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