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Organizational Justice in the NFL

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(including questions)**

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In this paper, we adopt an organizational justice perspective to analyze recent policies and practices of organizational governance in the National Football League (NFL). Specifically, we examine the NFL's disciplinary policies to better understand how governance structures are constructed in relation to, and in pursuit of, justice. Much of the scholarship surrounding sport discipline has investigated justice from a legal perspective (e.g. Ambrose, 2008), primarily assessing the legality and mechanisms of punishment without more fully engaging the organizational aspects. Within sport management, scholars have discussed the applicability of retributive justice to assess punitive actions (Dixon, Turner, Pastore, & Mahony, 2003). The purpose of this paper is to provide the conceptual framework to examine player perceptions of the NFL's disciplinary policies. It is also important to recognize limitations in the ways in which organizational justice informs our conceptualization of justice in sport.

The NFL has become the preeminent professional sports league in the United States, with unrivaled popularity and correspondingly unmatched revenues (MacCambridge, 2004; Gaines, 2011). Over the last decade, however, threats to the NFL's success have begun to emerge; most notably from a seemingly untenable incongruence between the sport's multiple forms of physicality and the governance structure which actively regulates the sport's violent bodily practices. The league has faced a barrage of NFL players entangled in the criminal justice system, perpetuating a growing perception of NFL players as self-indulgent (McCarthy, 2007; Kruk, 2005), egocentric (Walker, 2005), and increasingly immoral (Associated Press, 2005). Additionally, media reports began to note the multitudes of former NFL players suffering from depression, dementia, and the enduring effects of head trauma (including high rates of suicide)—consequences of the sport's necessarily violent physicality (Keating, 2012).

Through axiomatic discourses of decadence and debilitation, the league has come to see players as the internal dynamite threatening to implode the league's success. The NFL has chosen to address these perceived problems through the expansion of its authority and punitive purview. By introducing enhanced disciplinary policies, the NFL has in recent years prioritized two distinct forms of self-governance: the Personal Conduct Policy (PCP), governing off-field player behavior; and the Player Safety Initiative (PSI), governing on-field player conduct. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has steadfastly maintained that such policies are vital to the maintenance and enhancement of the NFL's brand: "I'm not going to hand off the brand and the reputation of the NFL to somebody who is not associated with the NFL. I promise you that. That is one of the number one jobs as a commissioner in my opinion" (Reed, 2011).

Toward an understanding of punishment within the discourse of brand protection, an organizational justice analysis will elaborate and allow for better understanding of the NFL's actions and policies. Organizational justice theory is the study of people's perceptions of fairness within organizations (Greenberg, 1987). Research on organizational justice has focused on organizational members' perceptions of that which they receive (outcomes) and the means by which these outcomes are obtained (procedures). Punishment, as a negative outcome, remains one of the most efficient ways to direct behavior toward a specific practice (Arvey & Ivancevich, 1980). While punishment practices may be encumbered with potential for employee blowback and dissatisfaction (Trevino, 1992), reactions to punishment are based on the perceived fairness of the procedures and outcomes of the disciplinary event (Trevino & Weaver, 2010). Perceptions of fairness are shaped by many factors, including perceptions of control, consistency, impartiality, decision quality, correctability, and ethicality (Tyler, 1988). For example, NFL players' attempts to negotiate greater control of the disciplinary process through collective bargaining would support the procedural justice proposition that the perceptions of control of the disciplinary process impacts perceptions of the legitimacy of the punishment (Thibaut & Walker, 1985; Greenberg, 1990).

However, organizational justice has certain limitations. Indeed, the ontological foundation of the theory presents a conceptualization of justice as a tool for economic efficiency. Punishment as organizational justice serves to

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perpetuate a manageable and controllable workforce or membership. To paraphrase Foucault (1978), the NFL requires techniques of discipline to govern players' conduct so as to efficiently produce its football product. This reduction of players to mere tools for production may suggest a need to reassess our construction of justice, at least insofar as we strive to achieve justice within and through sport organizations. Additionally, use of punishment levied upon the individual player for individual acts, on or off the field, serves to isolate and subjugate the individual without recognizing that the player is the manifestation of societal and sporting culture, particularly the result of the commodified and exploited body. As scholars of sport management, it is vital to move beyond heuristics of control in search for a conceptualization of justice well suited to the ethics of human action.