

Why the NFL doesn't change

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

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America is extraordinarily tolerant of the NFL. “Pro football, it seems, can do anything but drive us away,” [wrote the *Chicago Tribune*’s Phil Rosenthal in August](#). He described moves the NFL has made that would ruin another business: undercut your partners, maintain a nonprofit status while paying huge executive salaries, accept unnecessary public subsidies, stay out of Los Angeles so your teams can use the prospect of moving there as leverage to keep demanding those subsidies.

And this: alienate women, who make up 45 percent of the NFL’s viewership.

Rosenthal wrote this at an early stage of the controversy surrounding the league’s handling of Ray Rice, the star running back for the 2013 Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens. Rice was suspended for two games for dragging his unconscious fiancée Janay Palmer (now his wife) out of a hotel elevator, as documented by a security camera. It struck a whole lot of people as a mild punishment for the crime. And one needn’t have been a cynic to imagine more to the story.

So the appearance, via gossip site TMZ, of additional video showing Rice striking Palmer in the head inside the elevator has unleashed a still-greater wave of anger toward the league and its dominant commissioner, Roger Goodell. (I have not watched the video and do not plan to.) Rice was suspended indefinitely, player penalties for domestic violence have been strengthened, and Goodell admitted that the league made a mistake. But questions and accusations are arising about the league’s handling of other domestic-violence cases, cases that didn’t happen to be videotaped. And after a law-enforcement source claimed to have sent the second video to the league in April, the inevitable question—what did Goodell and the NFL brass know, and when?—became still more urgent.

More than one commentator has called on Goodell to resign if it turns out that he had already seen the second tape, or that he should have. An investigation, led by a former FBI director whose law firm has had extensive (and lucrative) dealings with the league, will reportedly take place under the supervision of two team owners.

But whether the league was dishonest or incompetent in this or any other case is ultimately secondary to the bare fact stated by the *Tribune's* Rosenthal back in August: "The NFL blazes its own trail, and it's tough to envision anyone else emerging from the scorched earth and burned bridges in its midst quite as soot-free and unsinged."

The league has learned, through extensive experience, that it can do things no one else can and still profit. This is the league that appears to have ignored serious warnings about the long-term effects of concussions for years. It locked out its own players in an age of mind-bending profits. Even as a player-safety lawsuit—since settled—threatened to damage the league beyond repair, the NFL locked out its *referees*, risking both player safety and the integrity of the game's own outcomes. Even a franchise as perpetually woebegone as the Minnesota Vikings was able to secure nearly half a billion dollars in public money for a new stadium, partly by the inevitable threat to move to L.A.

There have been missteps and bad bets along the way. But betting on Americans to move on and keep tuning in on Sunday, Monday, and Thursday has always paid off for the nation's biggest sports league.

A tougher line on domestic violence is something to be welcomed, of course. So is accountability at the top of a powerful organization. But the pathologies of the sport don't exist in a vacuum. If the NFL has gone easier on players who hit women than it has on players who smoke marijuana, this doubtless has as much to do with the league's estimation of the public's prejudices as with its own internal culture. The Ray Rice jersey exchanges won't change that unsparing calculus. Even Goodell's possible resignation won't.

Only one thing will: a smaller audience.