The NFL's predictable bad day

By Benjamin J. Dueholm
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In a poignant passage from his recent *New Yorker* feature on the coaches and players of the New York Jets, Nicholas Dawidoff describes the hardscrabble and downright traumatic backgrounds many of the players come from. “Football is my father,” one of them says. It’s a sentiment that sums up the commitment beyond money and professionalism that many players have to this unusual sport.

Professional football has terrible dangers and long-term costs, which I recently explored in the *Century*. If there is something meaningful to weigh against this, it is probably that player ethic that contains—in whatever ghostly form—a kind of family loyalty and esprit de corps that is largely vanished from modern capitalist American culture. Football may be exempt from the laws and customs that govern the rest of life, but it is widely understood to operate by its own code, which is more rigorous in its own narrow terms.

So it happens that a sport plagued by health concerns and labor disputes has been rocked more sharply by a flagrantly blown call--a call made by an official replacing the locked-out union members who typically manage the game--than by any lawsuit or ex-player suicide. On Monday night, the Green Bay Packers lost a game on a touchdown that was seen only by a referee. Everyone else saw an interception, including the back judge in the officiating team, who was waving his hands above his head to signal a change of possession even as his colleague ran up to signal the game-winning touchdown:

It was, by unanimous consent, the crowning disaster of three weeks of terrible officiating, an embarrassingly conflicted call that determined the outcome of a very important game.

In this instance, the NFL players’ sense of betrayal has a special pathos. Within the constraints of rationality and foresight that affect all of us, they know the dangers of their sport. They know their time in the game is likely to be short, and they know

their outsized talents and unthinkable risks will generate revenue mostly for other people. But they also expect the game on the field to be decided by their own striving, not by the woebegone incompetence of referees who, however hard they try, are just not capable of managing professional games. When the league, in order to chisel a few million dollars out of referees, shows such disregard for the integrity of the players' vocation, it sparks real outrage.

It was, however, inevitable that such a moment would come. As Matthew Yglesias pointed out, the NFL's implied position was not that the regular refs were no better than the replacements, but rather that they were producing "inefficiently high quality" in game play. The league was betting, from the start, that audiences would endure the inevitably inferior play under the replacements and thus either bring the officials' union to its knees or replace the officials altogether. The message for the players and their own union would be clear as well. The money saved flows back to the league and its teams as pure profit. It was, in retrospect, naive to imagine that the sport's voracious business ethos could be kept out of the tiny corner held sacrosanct by its players.

Even the gold-plated cynicism of the NFL and commissioner Roger Goodell could not finally resist the demands by fans and players to return to something like the old, dangerous and insanely profitable status quo. I honestly expected the league to hold firm, even in the wake of this bizarre indignity, on the assumption that the fans would not tune out. Instead, the league modified its demands and moved, as of this writing, to get the regular officials back on the field for the season's fourth week of games. Goodell still got some of the changes in the labor deal he had originally sought, especially the non-monetary ones. But his big gamble on fans' willingness to endure the replacements proved, in the end, a little too risky.

For whatever ethical margin one might claim in defense of football fandom, this is a good if minor development. The replacement officials' gratuitous failures and the out-of-control greed their hapless situation represented threatened to stir deeper fan anxieties about a sport in which a life-altering injury can occur on any play. Goodell's brinksmanship may have done that anyway, even now that a deal has been reached. The sport was barreling almost uncontrollably toward just such a moment, with disability and death and huge sums of money in its train.

The question now is whether the moment represents a bump in the road or a genuine change of direction for a sport whose position in America has never been more powerful or more precarious.