

“We Have Work to Do, and We’re Doing It:” An Analysis of Roger Goodell’s
Rhetoric During the NFL’s Ongoing Concussion Crisis

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ABSTRACT

Throughout Roger Goodell's term as commissioner, the National Football League (NFL) had to address the long-term health issues caused by head injury, which damaged their organizational image and caused an ongoing crisis. Using Coombs' research on organizational crises (2015) and Benoit's image repair theory (1995, 1997), I argue Goodell and the NFL used multiple strategies to attempt to repair the League's image for their audiences. Indeed, a closer look at texts used by Goodell and the NFL during his first decade as commissioner revealed three distinct stages of crisis repair between 2007 and 2016, all of which were unsuccessful because of a failure to address one primary audience—former NFL players. Using rhetorical criticism of the NFL's crisis discourse, I argue that Goodell's repeated missteps led to an evolving organizational dilemma that can best be understood as a compounding crisis.

Keywords: image repair theory, compounding crisis, NFL, Roger Goodell, concussion.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: The NFL’s Ongoing Concussion Crisis	1
Introduction.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	5
A Brief History of the NFL and Head Trauma	7
Aim of the Study.....	13
Literature Review.....	15
Chapter 2: 2007-2011: Making the Game Safer for Our Guys on the Field Today	26
Goodell’s First Strategies.....	28
Conclusion	39
Chapter 3: 2012-2015: Improving the Science for the Military and the Future of Football	41
Worsening the Crisis.....	43
Conclusion	58
Chapter 4: 2016: Repairing the Leader’s Image	61
A New Strategy.....	65
Conclusion	77
Chapter 5: The Future of the NFL, Roger Goodell, and the Concussion Crisis.....	79
Review of the Findings	80
Conclusion	85
References	87

Chapter 1: The NFL's Ongoing Concussion Crisis

Introduction

In recent years, the National Football League (NFL) has been accused of hiding or not distributing correct information regarding the long-term effects of brain injuries while encouraging players to continue to play a physical and violent game (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013; Raffel, 2013). For years, the League denied the existence of any sort of connection between football and long-term brain trauma despite the evidence and research proving otherwise. However, as former players found themselves with major brain damage, the NFL's audiences began to demand answers from the League (Deford, 2012; Easterbrook, 2013; Edwards, 2013). As the issue gained more attention and a new commissioner took over, the League had to address the issue and did so in a variety of strategic ways. However, with each organizational response came criticism from both their internal and external audiences. And with each criticism came another response from the organization, followed by more criticism, thus beginning a never-ending cycle between the NFL and its audiences.

With a problem as critical as head trauma and the associated short- and long-term health concerns, how could a multi-billion dollar organization with this amount of attention make so many bad decisions while dealing with the problem? Why did the NFL commissioner and spokesperson of one of the most popular organizations in the world continue to ignore the requests and questions of the former players who helped make the League what it is today? With the sheer number of people watching the League and evaluating every single one of their moves, how did NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, and the League handle this organizational crisis so poorly for so long? I intend to answer these questions by reviewing Goodell and the NFL's long-term handling of the concussion crisis. I will do this by reviewing the rhetorical strategies that Goodell and the NFL used and show that, while occasionally ethically and morally correct,

they were incorrect in their choices and method, thus creating a poor reputation for their leadership and an evolving and never-ending crisis.

To review these strategies, it is important to understand the organization's leadership. In 2006, Roger Goodell was voted in as commissioner of the NFL (Maske, 2006). Unfortunately for him, he began his new position the same time the concussion issues began to really gain national attention. The previous commissioner, Paul Tagliabue, considered the problem to be a "pack-journalism issue" and chose to do little, making only minor corrective actions (Wolff & O'Brien, 1994; Fainaru-Wada, 2013). Primarily, Tagliabue created the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury committee, made up of team doctors and researchers, to distribute information, but the name alone implies the little knowledge they had on the subject (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Once Goodell became commissioner, former players, fans, and media expected the crisis to be handled more thoroughly (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). This meant that every single choice Goodell made was being analyzed. While many of these choices were shown to be in favor of the health and safety for the current players, these solutions were not the answers much of the NFL's audience was expecting. Indeed, this lack of attention to the former players would be the foundation of the immense criticism Goodell has faced the last ten years.

Despite all of this, not everyone has criticized Goodell's work as commissioner. Financially, the League's profits have grown exponentially under his stewardship, almost doubling since 2006 when it was at just over \$7 billion to over \$13 billion in 2016 according to early projections (King, 2016a). This financial gain has made him well respected by the NFL team owners and others who are reaping the benefits of these staggering profits. Many of these same people have even spoken out in defense of him, calling him a "caring" and "great person" who "people would actually like if they met him one-on-one" (King, 2016a).

Although some believe he is quite likeable on a personal level, many others still believe he is responsible for seriously damaging the NFL's reputation, and I argue nothing has been more damaging than how he has handled the concussion crisis. Therefore, I believe it is important to analyze the actions of the NFL for this and several other reasons. First, the NFL has a rather large amount of power, is recognized by millions of people, and functions as a multibillion dollar organization (King, 2016a). Second, when an organization that has this much recognition across the country is dealing with a serious health issue that affects so many people within and outside of their organization, their rhetoric and actions need to be reviewed. This is especially true in the case of the NFL, which long denied a connection between football and long-term brain health despite the scientific evidence proving the link (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Third, their denial also needs to be reviewed because of the length of time they have been doing it - nearly thirty years. The previous commissioner spent most of his term ignoring the evidence, with his final years largely criticized by the news media (Fairnar-Wada, 2013). Within Goodell's first few years as commissioner, the issue finally began to be more fully addressed and steps were taken to change the conversation – something that was expected (Vrentas, 2016). However, almost every action he took was treated with criticism, causing a loss of confidence (Bedard, 2016). Finally, it is important to understand how the distrust of someone in power can affect the organization he or she represents.

It is my intention to argue that the NFL went into a state of organizational crisis after stories came out about former players having traumatic and fatal incidents as a result of head trauma from playing football. This forced the League into a state of image repair to fix their organizational reputation for the players, media, and fans. Spearheaded by Goodell after he was named commissioner in 2006, they used various types of documents and partnerships to try to

rebuild the perception of the NFL as an organization that understands health issues and cares about player safety. I argue that Goodell attempted to rhetorically influence the message by using several strategies. He did this, first, by having the NFL do their own research and presenting only their own information for an extended period of time and, second, by trying to appeal to the audiences' emotions while attempting to prove they had made improvements in the game. These strategies completely ignored the trauma the former players were facing, causing many of the main stakeholders, including the former players, media, and fans to criticize Goodell and the NFL for every reaction to the crisis (King, 2016b; 2016c). This distrust has not only continued throughout the concussion crisis, but it has carried over to many other issues since. It is the purpose of this research to show that these repeated mistakes caused the crisis only to evolve, thus never truly ending it. This in turn has damaged the NFL's image, Goodell's reputation, and caused criticism of his judgment, decisions, and rulings in many other cases.

In this thesis, I will first give a brief background of the NFL and their recent history regarding the issue of player safety, specifically dealing with concussions and head injuries. It is then my intention to use Coombs' research on organizational crises (2015) and Benoit's image repair strategies (1995, 1997) as a foundation on which to review specific documents and strategies that Goodell, as a representative of the NFL, used throughout his first ten years as commissioner. These documents will include internal literature, memos, press releases, and conferences that dealt with concussions. As I will explain more thoroughly below, many of these documents follow issues that brought negative attention to the League and the overarching concussion crisis, and were thus used to bolster the NFL's own image. I will show that upon review of these documents, despite some improved knowledge and positive steps the League took to help with current player health and safety, the rhetoric used by Goodell and the NFL has

been ineffective in repairing their damaged image. By reviewing multiple documents aimed at varied audiences, I believe a direct disconnect between the main spokesperson and audience will be revealed. It is then my intent to show that because of this disconnect, their issues have amassed with time, causing their crisis communication to defy the basic findings of previous theoretical research. With this, I intend to propose a new compounding crisis communication theory, one that can more fully describe and evaluate the development and evolutions of a crisis and help scholars better understand long and ongoing organizational crises in the future.

Statement of Problem

When reviewing the NFL, or any other major sports organization in the United States, it has to be analyzed differently than other organizations because of its unorthodox structure. The National Football League is a professional sports organization comprised of thirty-two teams, with the NFL itself acting as a governing body that oversees every team, coach, and player (Constitution, 2006). Each of these thirty-two teams are unique – all have their own history, traditions, rituals, heroes, rivals, and beliefs that organizations, cities, players, and fans support. Because of this, I believe the coaches and medical staff themselves are viewed as secondary offenders to the crisis – they allowed players to play injured, but it was because of the League’s overall lack of and distribution of knowledge that this happened. The teams continue to have support from their fanbases, while the overarching governing organization that is the NFL is taking the blame.

Overseeing the governing body and all thirty-two teams including every single person, action, and outcome is the *principal executive officer*, also known as the commissioner (Constitution, 2006). This person, who is voted in by the ownership of the individual NFL teams, is expected to be “a person of unquestioned integrity to serve” the League and the multilayered business (Constitution, 2006). He has jurisdiction to discipline teams and

individuals, hire employees, and negotiate contracts among many other duties and responsibilities (Constitution, 2006). This power can be somewhat controversial but derives from the NFL's constitution and by-laws and the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the League and the National Football League Player Association (Pacifci, 2014). Through these powers, he is given the responsibility of interpreting and establishing policy (Constitution, 2006). Simply stated, the ability and freedom he is given to make decisions is quite expansive, as he alone reads the situation that is brought to him and he alone decides what next appropriate action should be taken. This can prove to be a difficult task as many fans in the League are quite passionate about the game and know who the leader of the organization is, consequently giving many of them an opinion about the commissioner's actions.

Also, and quite importantly, this person is seen as the main spokesperson of the League. He has the ability to establish a public relations department which is "under his exclusive control and direction" (Constitution, 2006). Therefore, we can assume that whether or not the commissioner is actually delivering the NFL's message, any correspondence that comes from the League's communication office is being delivered on behalf of the commissioner. Indeed, Roger Goodell has been the face of the business-side of the League since the first day he stepped into office in 2006 (King, 2016b). Much more visible than his predecessor, Paul Tagliabue, he has been a huge factor in what has made the NFL the defining sport of the country (Bery, 2013; Vrentas, 2016).

As the face of one of the most popular organizations in the United States (and possibly even the world), Goodell is also a very polarizing figure. As the commissioner of the NFL, he is seen as the image of the business, not the sport itself. After ten years of being in this role, the largely increased profits alongside his famous initial goal of reaching \$25 billion by 2027 has

given him strong support from the team owners (Bledsoe, 2015; Vrentas, 2016). However, as he has been so public in and criticized by so many different audiences for his handling of multiple issues including player health and safety, rule changes, and on-field and off-field punishments, his personal reputation as the leader of the League has largely fractured (Babb, 2016; Bedard, 2016, King, 2016a; Vrentas, 2016). In reference to his reputation, one article simply stated, “the public hates this man” (King, 2016a). In fact, an early 2016 public policy poll showed that only 19% of fans surveyed believed Goodell was doing a good job (Public, 2016). While many fans have varied opinions on why he may or may not be performing well as the commissioner, I believe a major part of this statistic, along with past complaints, is the result of Goodell’s ongoing lack of effective crisis communication when dealing with player health and safety and former player concussions.

A Brief History of the NFL and Head Trauma

Football, head trauma, and long-term brain health became a problem well before Goodell took over as commissioner (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Before I go any further into Goodell’s poor choices related to football and head trauma, I must first give a brief history of the subject that put the League into the crisis they were in when he became the leader of the NFL. The crisis started to take shape in the 1980’s when Pete Rozelle was commissioner. Up until that point, head trauma in the academic and scientific fields was actually understudied. In general, people widely knew nothing about the seriousness of head trauma or that concussions had long-term effects (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). However, in the early 80’s, researchers finally began to study head trauma in hospital patients, producing information that was so shocking that *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article calling concussions “a silent epidemic” in 1982 (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). As doctors began to study it in football, they quickly found that coaches, trainers, and doctors considered these injuries to be minor (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru,

2013). When players had head trauma during games and practices, there was no information or evidence readily available to stop the players from going back in to the game. In fact, while at a cross-disciplinary conference designed to understand more about concussions in 1996, many former players explained that throughout their entire careers they had largely ignored head traumas, playing through any issues they may have had for fear of losing their jobs or disappointing their teammates (Bailes, Lovell, & Maroon, 1999). From their perspective, football was a factory full of players who were considered interchangeable parts (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Each player has a back-up who can easily replace him if he was seen as weak or ineffective in his position. This mindset was not only troubling but common throughout the entire League.

These problems grew exponentially worse in the 1990's when former players who were reaching their 50s and 60s began to report more neurological problems. Hearing the stories, Paul Tagliabue, who was then the commissioner, was asked about concussions at a panel (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). He brushed off the seriousness of the problem by calling it a "pack journalism issue" and cited a low number of head injuries reported by the NFL team doctors since 1989 (Wolff & O'Brien, 1994). The general lack of knowledge, along with the biased concussion "statistics" that were distributed, were not well-received by the reporters who were in attendance, prompting multiple articles criticizing the League including one by *Sports Illustrated* (Wolff & O'Brien, 1994; Fainaru-Wada, 2013). Shortly thereafter, as a reaction to the growing criticism, Tagliabue finally acknowledged the potential danger of concussions and created the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee (Coates, 2013).

This was controversial for two reasons. First, the person that was put in charge of the committee was Dr. Elliot Pellman, a rheumatologist with a degree from Guadalajara who dealt

with bone and joint disorders (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Named the leader to what would be one of the biggest and most influential brain-study committees, Pellman had no background, education, experience, or scientific publications on the subject (Moskovitz, 2015). Furthering this controversial choice was that he was practicing rheumatology, was the New York Jets team doctor, and was Tagliabue's personal doctor (Fainaru-Wada, 2013; Petcheskey, 2013).

However, Pellman's lack of knowledge and views on the subject "were perfectly aligned with the NFL doctrine at the time, as articulated by Tagliabue and the NFL's PR machine" (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). These views were what made Pellman's leadership controversial for the second reason: he influenced the research and published articles that not only had faulty science but encouraged the NFL's messaging around football and head trauma.

Out of the League's flawed research came 16 articles that, among other things, belittled concussions and their effects. Beginning in 2003, the MTBI committee published multiple articles that, over a short amount of time, forced researchers to question the integrity of the committee (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). The first couple articles cited statistics from their own team doctors while the third disputed another study that suggested repeated concussions can lead to longer recovery times. The fifth article began to stir controversy as it claimed that professional football players are less susceptible to brain injury due to the fact they are physically more able to recover from them. Less than two months after that, they published another article that claimed

Players who are concussed and return to the same game have fewer initial signs and symptoms than those removed from play. Return to play does not involve a significant risk of a second injury either in the same game or during the season.

It also went on to say that this theory could even be applied to younger athletes, including those playing in college and even high school (Ezell, 2013). One of the most controversial articles, the idea that players who went back in showed fewer symptoms than those who sat out following a brain trauma was not well received (Moskovitz, 2015). Unfortunately, the outlandish beliefs and publications started to give both the committee and the journal the articles were published in a poor reputation.

Each of these articles were all published in the same journal—*Neurosurgery*. This controversial research caused some to be rejected by peer reviewers and later disavowed by some of the authors (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). As most articles have to be approved by peer reviewers to be published, *Neurosurgery* was different. The editor-in-chief, Michael L.J. Apuzzo, who was appointed in 1992, made it possible for articles to still be published even if rejected. Those who rejected it were given an opportunity to explain their opinions of the articles, but as some of those reviewers noted, few read the comments section, so what was published was considered “gospel.” (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). The collection of these articles were so controversial that some researchers referred to it as the Journal of No NFL Concussions (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). All of this research, led by Dr. Elliot Pellman, made the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee a “defender of the NFL” (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013) while claiming to be an intelligent and scientific research group.

There were a few scientists who tried to challenge the League and their terrible research, and one who famously did this was Dr. Bennet Omalu. The neuropathologist discovered chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or CTE, after testing former Pittsburgh Steelers Mike Webster’s brain in 2002. Near the end of his life, the Hall of Fame linebacker began exhibiting strange and unusual traits and habits that were unlike his personality. After killing himself, Webster’s body

ended up at the morgue that Dr. Omalu worked at, giving Omalu the opportunity to study his brain. What he found was a disease similar to that of punch-drunk syndrome, but different and undiagnosed (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Omalu discovered a tau protein buildup that was the result of repeated injuries to the brain in football players (Fainaru-Wada, 2013; What, 2016). A degenerative process, the brain tissue slowly dies away, leaving the buildup of the tau protein which essentially strangles different parts of the brain. This can cause changes in personality such as depression, mood swings, confusion, impaired judgment, and many other brain issues, with those changes occurring at any point in the lifetime (Omalu, DeKosky, Minster, Kamboh, Hamilton, Wecht, 2005). Compounding these issues, CTE can only be diagnosed after death (What, 2016).

Dr. Omalu, along with a few other scientists, published their findings claiming there was a link between football, repeated mild traumatic brain injuries, and this brain disease as shown by Webster's brain (Omalu et. al, 2005; Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Unfortunately the beginning of a long disagreement, they were immediately discredited by Dr. Pellman and the MTBI committee, with Dr. Pellman saying Dr. Omalu was "completely wrong" with what he had discovered (Casson, 2006). As this was completely against the League's own messaging at the time, the MTBI committee instead continued to publish their own biased research while discrediting others that did not favor the League's opinion (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). As this battle continued on, more and more former players died in strange ways, but the League continued to deny any sort of connection between the two. The media continued to report on the former players' behaviors and deaths, especially as former players began to speak out with concerns for their own and others' health. This was evident in 2006 when former New York Giants linebacker Harry Carson was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame (Fainaru-Wada

& Fainaru, 2013). During his speech, which was unscripted, he called out the NFL for their lack of caring about the former players. Carson said he was honored to be inducted into the Hall of Fame and honored to play in the NFL with the people he did (Carson, 2006). However, he explained that he felt he and the others all played hard to make the League what it had become, yet they were all being ignored by the League as they faced their own problems. Carson begged the League,

I would hope that the leaders of the NFL, the future commissioner, and the players' association do a much better job of looking out for those individuals. You got to look out for 'em. If we made the League what it is, you have to take better care of your own (Carson, 2006).

Feeling that the League no longer cared for them, this was a major call for action on a big stage that put the NFL in a negative spotlight. Fortunately for Tagliabue, shortly after his speech, a new commissioner was named and he would no longer deal with this problem.

The new commissioner, Roger Goodell, was voted in on the second day of what was supposed to be a three-day discussion (Maske, 2006). Though he was one of five finalists, his accomplishments and length of time with the League made him the obvious choice for the position. Indeed, immediately after graduating magna cum laude from William and Jefferson College with a degree in Economics, he wrote personal letters seeking employment to all thirty-two teams and the commissioner's office, which ultimately hired him as an intern in the public relations department under then-commissioner Rozelle. Greatly influenced by his parents—his father, a D.C. lawyer and U.S. Congressman, and his mother, a womens' rights activist—he aggressively climbed the occupational ladder over the course of twenty-five years with the NFL, including multiple vice president roles (Schottey, 2017). As the new commissioner, Goodell was

able to use both his economics and public relations backgrounds to change the perception of the League. And one of the first things he had to deal with was the challenge of fixing the League's image as the growing PR crisis continued to mushroom (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013).

Unfortunately for Goodell, he struggled to do this.

Many fans of the League love watching the sport due to the physical nature and violence associated with the sport (Deford, 2012). Goodell, a huge lover of the game and incredibly knowledgeable of the League (Kaplan, 2016), has attempted to keep the players on the field safe, including making over forty rule changes since he has been in office, while not taking away from the characteristics that make the sport popular (King, 2016a; Vrentas, 2016). But, as he took over the position, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) and its direct and prevalent connection to former players was something he knew the League could no longer ignore (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). He tried to ensure current players were getting better treatment, he created rule changes to make the game safer, and he had NFL funds donated to research and others organizations, including the United States Army and youth football Leagues, to increase knowledge about brain health and trauma. However, with each step he took, he was criticized (Vrentas, 2016; King, 2016b). While promoting health and safety now and into the future, Goodell chose to mostly ignore the former players and their families who were suffering. He did this by constantly saying there was a need for more information and knowledge while refusing to acknowledge an actual connection between the sport and brain trauma, which in turn angered many fans. Instead, Goodell's reputation repeatedly took hits for making what could be considered positive, corrective steps.

I argue that all of this mishandling eventually led to the problems that he now suffers. Though player health and safety has been the longest crisis Goodell and the NFL has dealt with,

a few other crises have occurred during his tenure that gained national attention. Throughout these crises, he was given opportunities to react appropriately and set a precedent going forward. However, because his strategies in handling the concussion crisis were misdirected, it was expected that he would once again mishandle each new crisis. Constantly criticized throughout each new crisis, the NFL was negatively put in the spotlight across national news. Whether or not one was a fan of football, it was hard not to realize that Roger Goodell and the NFL were in trouble.

Aim of the Study

This ongoing situation and crisis is important to study because the NFL, football, and player health and safety are incredibly prevalent in our lives. Football and Sunday have long had an interwoven relationship, but now, through Goodell's leadership, football is also popular on Monday, Thursday, and even Saturday. Goodell has also established new multi-million dollar contracts with ESPN, NBC, and CBS (Bery, 2013). Fans can access football whenever they want through the NFL Network, websites, and social media accounts the NFL owns and operates (Vrentas, 2016). Without one even wanting to be a fan, it is becoming increasingly hard not to be very aware of the NFL.

Socially and economically, the League plays a major role in the American culture. Because of this, we need to study it to understand how the NFL's actions are affecting our society. Often, we use cultural pedagogies to shape what we should think and how we should behave (Silk, 2012). In relation to sports, Michael Silk (2012) explained that the sporting culture "is involved in the production of assumptions about the world, influences our lives, and plays an important role in the production of our identities and experiences...and ultimately shapes behavior." Indeed, this role becomes even more important and persuasive during a time of crisis, as rhetors use discourse and symbols to shape how we behave. Thus, as Charles Conrad (2011)

argued, “It is socially important and scientifically interesting to ask why rhetors engage in deceptive or misleading rhetoric.” Therefore, I am asking the following: how has Roger Goodell and the NFL rhetorically handled the ongoing concussion crisis that has aged and changed over time? And, how might this ongoing concussion crisis be impacting perceptions of the NFL and their leadership? In the case of Goodell’s handling of the concussion crisis, no matter how effective, helpful, or positive the response may be, the audience seems to react to the person, not the message. This, in turn, has affected his own reputation, causing a large amount of distrust between some of the main stakeholders and Goodell. Following basic organizational crisis communication steps, the crisis, having been established as trauma related to former players’ head injuries due to playing football, has resulted in multiple organizational responses and lasted much longer than necessary. Goodell, using image repair strategies, has shifted and redirected the conversation according to his own agenda, but he has not received a true resolution for the crisis. I believe that this ongoing series of events and the discourse Goodell used in response to the concussion crisis made many stakeholders feel he could not be trusted in handling other serious issues reasonably.

To analyze this discourse, terms and theories surrounding crisis communication, image repair, and reputation will be reviewed and used as a foundation for this research. While this research is incredibly useful, I believe a more thorough analysis needs to be used to review what is happening with the NFL and Roger Goodell. My intent, then, is to explain a new idea involving crisis communication which I refer to as a compounding crisis. Simply explained, the initial crisis arises for the organization (concussions), the spokesperson/rhetor responds with the intent of ending the crisis (first by creating an internal memo for players), the audience reacts (the current players have more information, but many questions arise), but the crisis does not

actually end. Unfortunately for the spokesperson, the audience does not approve of the proactive step that was taken due to the misdirection of the spokesperson's initial response. This causes the spokesperson to take another step that the audience also disapproves. This slight change in response causes the crisis to evolve and the repeated reactions by both the organization and audience creates the compounding issue. It is necessary to understand that each step taken is in response to the initial crisis, though, as I will explain, there were related and unrelated issues that arose throughout that also affected his responses. For Goodell, every step he took was related to the overarching concussion crisis. The main problem was that he used too many of the ineffective image repair strategies while continuing to ignore the main audience that brought the crisis to light: the former players.

Literature Review

To thoroughly analyze the NFL's concussion issue, it is necessary to do a review of organizational crisis communication and many of the ideas that can play a role in that communication. An organizational crisis is defined by Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007) as "a specific, unexpected, and nonroutine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high priority goals." For the purpose of this study, I will review the definition of an organizational crisis and explain how both the organization's speaker and audience influence the messaging. I will then offer strategies that the organizational rhetor can use throughout the crisis, including apologia (Hearit, 2006) and Benoit's image repair theory (1995, 1997), to rehabilitate the organization's image. Throughout this, I will also discuss how issues management and legal litigation can both affect the organization's response throughout the lifespan of a crisis.

Timothy Coombs (2015) further defines an organizational crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health,

safety, environmental, and economic issues.” He also notes a crisis “can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2015). When organizations are facing a crisis, they must understand the crisis does not just begin and end, but that a crisis lifecycle exists. Research has developed multiple “lifecycles” of crises, but they narrow down and naturally fall into the simple three-stage crisis: precrisis, crisis event/crisis response, and post crisis (Coombs, 2015; Hoffman & Ford, 2010). The precrisis stage focuses on preventative measures. The organization must consider crises that could arise and have responses prepared in case the crisis occurs. The second stage is the actual act of, response to, and the containment of the crisis (Coombs, 2015; Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Referred to as the crisis event or crisis response stage, this requires the organization to recognize it is happening and end it as quickly as possible (Coombs, 2015; Hoffman & Ford, 2010). This also requires that the organization responds to the crisis while recognizing their audience. The final stage, post crisis, is what happens after the organization and audience believe the crisis is over (Coombs, 2015). This implies that all crises have an end whether or not they end well for their organization, which is judged by their stockholders and stakeholders. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the crisis event or crisis response stage and what that entails for the organization and their rhetoric.

An organization is in a crisis when its stakeholders perceive the organization is in crisis due to an event or series of events (Coombs, 2015). When working with organizational crises one must remember that audience perception is key (Benoit, 1995). Courtwright believes that image is a combination of two components: a projection of corporate identity (what the organization wants the audience to think about them) and a reflection of public opinion (1995). Despite the message and image the organization tries to create, the only image that should matter

is that which the audience holds. This can be difficult for organizations because they typically need to consider multiple audiences when they are crafting their messages (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Multiple audiences implies multiple opinions, desires, and expectations, so persuasion can be constrained. Hoffman and Ford (2010) note that organizations “must figure out how to address the often-conflicting goals of the various audiences involved” if they want to create an effective crisis response. As audiences are affected differently by the crisis, the organization must figure out which audience they must direct their messages towards.

Coombs identifies this audience as the target audience with two audiences in a crisis: victims and nonvictims (2015). Victims are the people who were somehow hurt by the event that has brought about the crisis. For the NFL, these are the former players and their families who have suffered from CTE or other degenerative brain diseases as a result of playing football. The nonvictims can be “divided into potential victims and voyeurs” (Coombs, 2015). Potential victims are people that were not hurt by the actual crisis but could have been. In the case of the NFL, these are the current players or recently retired ones who have not seen the effects of football and brain trauma but still could. The third audience is the voyeur audiences who are “watching the crisis to see how the organization responds but are not at risk of being harmed” (Coombs, 2015). These audiences use different ways to evaluate crises, whether that be through traditional or social media. Voyeur audiences for the NFL have been the media and the fans. All of these audiences have been important for the NFL, but as I will show later, they have failed to address their messaging appropriately.

Organizations must take these audiences and their opinions into account as they craft their messages. “If these audiences dislike the crisis response, it will damage their relationships and future interactions with the organization in crisis” (Coombs, 2015). As a crisis “is

perceptual” and “stakeholders...help to define an event as a crisis” (Coombs, 2015), audiences naturally want to know how and why the crisis occurred. Attribution theory is the idea that people assign responsibility for negative and unexpected events (Coombs, 2015). When a crisis arises, this attribution occurs because the audience has found the act undesirable and they believe the organization is responsible (Benoit, 1995). According to Coombs (2015), “attributions shape how a stakeholder feels and behaves toward the organization.” When an organization or a representative of the organization repeatedly makes claims that the audience is not looking for or does not want to hear, it can worsen the situation for the organization. This idea also implies that different members of the organization take more or less blame throughout the process (Benoit, 1995) and the person who is delivering the message can hurt its effectiveness.

Leadership is important when handling an organizational crisis. The person who is actively responding will be associated with both the organization and the crisis directly. How they handle it is also important because “leadership can have a major impact on the effectiveness of the crisis management effort” (Coombs, 2015). Good leaders should be able to detect when there could be or is about to be a crisis and have a plan prepared to fix it. However, crises happen whether or not organizations are prepared for them, thus the leader of the organization must be able to direct where the organization goes from that point. Not only do they set the direction for the organization, but they must regain the confidence of their main stakeholders (Lucero, Kwang, & Pang, 2009). Ware and Linkugel (1973), who studied individual responses in crises, stated “in a rhetorical situation as complex as that of accusation and response, a speaker would be expected to attempt to change the meaning of some, but not all, cognitive elements in the minds of the audience.” Applicable to organizations, the CEO, or the commissioner in the

case of the NFL, should respond to the problem as quickly as possible to repair their credibility with the audience. This is especially true when the organization's integrity is being questioned.

The regaining of credibility does not always happen though, and this can have negative impacts on the reputation of the speaker and organization. A reputation is an evaluation stakeholders have placed on the organization and its leaders. They are "built through direct and indirect experiences with organizations" (Coombs, 2015), which create the perceived image the stakeholders have of the organization. To handle their reputations, organizations want to ensure their image is favorable. Indeed, "how publics view the reputation of a company prior to, during, and after a crisis often plays a pivotal role in how effectively a company responds to and recovers from a crisis" (Turk, Jin, Stewart, Kim, & Hipple, 2012). Audiences make attributions for crisis responsibility, thus forcing a more positive or negative reputation for the organization and its leader. Stakeholders typically base their personal views of the leadership on indirect experiences of situations they believe leaders mishandled (Coombs, 2015). Coombs (2015) further states, "crisis responsibility can be a threat to an organization's reputation because stronger attributions of crisis responsibility produce greater reputational damage." Unfortunately for CEOs, their personal reputation is often associated with the organization's reputation. When a crisis happens to an organization, not only does the leader have to actively handle the crisis, but they have to or at least should consider their own alongside the organization's image. These constraints, along with audience perception, affects their organizational response.

Audience perception is important for the organization's crisis response strategies. Organizations must react to a crisis by engaging with their audiences. Not only must the organization and leader figure out what arguments to make, but they must also know how to present them (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Described more thoroughly by Seeger and Ulmer (2002),

they explain, “Crisis communication concerns the processes whereby organizations create and exchange meanings among stakeholders regarding the risk of crisis, cause, blame, responsibility, precautionary norms, and crisis-induced changes in the organization and its relationship to stakeholders.” To be effective, the organization has to understand what the expectations are of the audience and “use their communication strategically...to purify their damaged images” (Hearit, 2006). The organizations can then use these expectations to understand how to appropriately create the immediate messaging the audience is looking for.

There are many responses to organizational crises, but the first that needs to be reviewed is apologia. Organizational apologia is a “broad term that means to respond to organizational criticism by offering a vigorous and compelling defense” (Hearit, 2006). Apologia may seem to infer an apology, but that is not always the case. Hearit (2006) defines the difference: “apologia refers to the act of giving a defense, whereas apology typically means the offering of a *mea culpa*.” Apologia is in fact a broad term, as an organization can attempt to offer a compelling defense in a number of ways (Hearit, 2006). This type of rhetoric “may or may not include admitting responsibility for a negative event” (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Many times, this depends on whether or not they can be legally liable for the event that brought on the crisis.

Unfortunately legal liability can limit the organizational response, as it is believed that organizational apologies are highly discouraged by their corporate attorneys (Patel & Reinsch, 2003). Hearit (2006) states, “to apologize and admit guilt is to assume responsibility and culpability.” If the apology is directed towards the victims of the crisis, then it can be seen as an admission of guilt, thus potentially creating a legal situation for the speaker and the organization (Hearit, 2006). These legal constraints thus cause an ethical and rhetorical problem for the organization. The organization must be careful in addressing the victims, but the speaker must

also be careful in how his or her organization is perceived by audiences (Tyler, 1997). Patel and Reinsch (2003) argue, “A corporate apology can be an important element in perceived goodness because issuing an apology can affect the opinions of citizens.” In fact, they continue to argue that this can affect future litigation brought against them as judges and juries could use the organization’s image as a foundation for their judgment (Patel & Reinsch, 2003). However, as legal liability is still a very real concern for an organization and its leadership, organizations have started to “apologize” by offering compensation rather than actually admitting to wrongdoing (Hearit, 2006). Paying the victims shows that the organization acknowledges there is indeed a problem, but offers no legal admittance. Whether or not the compensation is accepted, and despite the legality, organizations and their leaders must still find ways to again be in favor with their audiences.

Regardless of the reason for the messages or the manner in which they are distributing the messages, all organizations act with the intention of restoring their damaged images (Hearit, 2006). To do this, their messages are strategically performed in a way that refutes the accusation brought against the organization to repair their damaged image (Hearit, 2006). Multiple scholars have come up with different types of explanations or guidelines in which to analyze an organization’s rhetoric, but for the purpose of this thesis, I review Benoit’s five strategies within Image Repair Theory.

This theory was developed and published by William Benoit in 1995 and expanded in 1997 and 2015. Building upon Ware and Linkugel's original individual apologia strategies, Benoit created five broad strategies for organizations to use which include denial, evading responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit, 1995; Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Denial is the act by which the speaker denies having ever

committed the act they are accused of, denies it ever having occurred, or denies that the act that occurred was harmful (Benoit, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Hoffman & Ford, 2010; Lucero et. al., 2009). The second strategy is evading responsibility, which has four subcategories, provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intention (Benoit, 1997). For the purpose of this paper, I will define defeasibility and use that strategy for my analysis. As described by Benoit, speakers use defeasibility to claim that there was a lack of information or control to prevent the events that caused the crisis (1997). The third strategy is reducing the offensiveness of the act, and this strategy has six subcategories: bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation (Benoit, 1997). Again, for the purpose of this study, bolstering will be the strategy that is focused upon. Bolstering is an act that is used to try to restore positive feelings towards the organization by which the rhetor attempts to remind the audience of their positive attributes while offsetting any negative feelings the audience may have (Benoit, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1999). In doing this, the speaker tries to personally “identify himself with something viewed favorably by the audience (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). The fourth strategy is corrective action which is a promise by the organization to correct the situation by either repairing the problem or trying to prevent it from happening in the future (Benoit, 1997). The final strategy is mortification, which is the act of actually accepting responsibility for the event that caused the crisis. This is typically followed by an apology (Benoit, 1997).

Many of these responses and others that were not mentioned do take into account the idea of values advocacy and what the organization’s audiences believe to be important in relation to the crisis. Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) have studied and offered three ways organizational rhetors use values advocacy in crisis communication. First, they argue that it can enhance the organization’s image by enhancing beliefs the organization perceives the audience to have. By

expressing societal values, they associate themselves with those same values (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). As image is how others interpret the subject based on their own beliefs, values and attitudes, image also reflects on to others how they should act. This works well for organizations as they can not only reflect the public's opinions but also actually influence the audience's opinion to be that of their own (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). Second, values advocacy techniques allow organizations to deflect criticism throughout the crisis. They can attempt to distract and pull attention to what they want their audiences to believe in or believe the organization is capable of doing (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Hoffman & Ford, 2010). Third, organizations establish values they can draw from in the future, whether or not they are in a crisis. This can give the organization credibility in the future by already having an understanding of what the organization believes in (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994).

Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) also argued that these benefits can be achieved in four ways: by making explicit appeals to audience's values, showing how the organization and their products uphold similar values, discussing past philanthropic work or partnerships, and praising individuals who uphold and enact those same values. Unfortunately, the use of values advocacy can often be criticized as nothing more than image rebuilding for the organization (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). Organizations have to be careful and attentive when interpreting their audiences beliefs and values. This can cause more issues and problems, something that can hurt the organization and their crisis repair strategy.

Values advocacy also plays an important role in issues management within organizations. Hoffman and Ford (2010) explain that "an issue arises when there is a level of agreement that some problem exists, but there is not agreement on whether or not it is serious enough to merit action." As questions remain about what should be done with issues, unlike crises which

demand a response, audiences perceptions of the issue is much more important to organizations in making their next move. The response, which can be delivered in any number of ways, often elicits an engagement between the organization and their audiences rather than the organization having to directly answer the crisis (Hoffman & Ford, 2010). These issues can be a part of the overarching crisis, or they can be separate, but either way the organizational response is done in a way to improve the organization's image. Again, organizations are attempting to prioritize values for their audiences.

Used effectively, Benoit argues that these strategies *should* work in repairing an organization's image (1995). Currently, theory holds that when the audience response occurs, the crisis ends; however, I believe it actually evolves based on the audience. Hoffman and Ford do say an organizational crisis response can be a long-term process which forces an organization to adapt to events and the audience (2010). But, as previously mentioned, organizational crisis theory is a three-step process, essentially a beginning, middle, and end. I argue that in some cases there is not necessarily an ending, but rather an evolution of the crisis. The crisis occurs and the organization formulates their response based on what they believe the audience will want to hear or what they want the audience to believe. If the response is received poorly, the crisis does not end but rather compounds. This happens because the organization has to take into account the original, foundational crisis as well as the new factors or issues of which the audience disapproves. The memories of the original crisis still linger with the audience, but now new opinions have surfaced revolving around the most recent organizational response related to the same issue. Thus, the crisis evolves and forces the organization to create yet another new response. If the audience response continues to hold negative perceptions of the organization then, they will continue to struggle to find the crisis' end. This is what I believe happened with

Goodell and his responses regarding the NFL concussion crisis. I now intend to show that Goodell ignored what the audience wanted to hear and instead did multiple other acts to try to change rather than solve the problem. His strategies in responding to the crisis and its related issues change and do so specifically, breaking down into what I identify as three different time periods. After years of watching Goodell constantly ignore his audience, his reputation suffered and when other issues came up, there was a complete lack of trust in his judgment. All of these incorrect actions compounded causing a never-ending crisis for Goodell and the NFL.

Chapter 2: 2007-2011: Making the Game Safer for Our Guys on the Field Today

After Goodell became the commissioner in 2006, he understood that the League was in a crisis regarding concussions (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). As many former players aged, more were dying in strange ways, each story adding to the overarching dark cloud that surrounded the NFL and their image. Knowing they were going to have to address this before it damaged the League's future, Goodell quickly took steps to rectify the crisis. As the leader and main spokesperson of the League, Goodell took charge of the situation, trying to find ways to repair the League's image. However, Goodell's attempts failed, eventually hurting the League's image and his own personal reputation as well.

Upon review of multiple documents that were distributed during Goodell's time as commissioner, I argue that during the first four years of his term he used Benoit's denial strategy, reducing the offensiveness of the act, and corrective action strategies to attempt to repair the NFL's image. Unfortunately for the League, these did not work in repairing the organization's image because the actual crisis at hand was blatantly ignored as Goodell's actions were done to benefit the future of the League rather than the former players. Simply put, almost every single action was directed towards the wrong audience. The few moments where the League did reach out to the former players were severely weakened due to the refusal to admit the link between football and long-term brain health.

Benoit's strategies have a tendency to overlap, causing the crisis response to contain several strategies to repair the organization's image. However, there are multiple elements to these strategies, so for the purpose of this study, I will explain the definitions and scope I have used to evaluate this time period. The first strategy is something that is both explicit and implicit in the way that it is used. Denial, which is the refusal to admit any sort of connection between

the organization and the crisis (Benoit, 1995), was used to reject any possibility of a relationship between football, head trauma, and long-term brain health. Closely tied to this is reducing the offensiveness of the act, which can be done in a number of ways. I argue that Goodell does this through three specific strategies. First, he does this through minimization, a technique that is similar to denial except that he downplays any and all possibilities of anyone believing there is a connection without actually saying there is not one (Benoit, 1995). Second, he offers compensation to former players (the only real attempt at acknowledging their health issue) in the form of The 88 Plan (The 88, 2007). As I will explain later, they make this offer, but it is so limited in its scope it is almost shameful to offer to the former players. Finally, bolstering is used as part of reducing the offensiveness and is a technique they constantly use. During this first time period, Goodell and the League point out the things they have already done for the current players but do not set goals for the future (which is somewhat done in the second time period as well).

The third image repair strategy that is used is corrective action, which Benoit (1995) defines as the pledge to rectify the situation that brought them into the crisis. This fails massively for them for two reasons. First, the overall crisis is about the former players and their health. The only attempt at making amends with them is through The 88 Plan, which when announced was limited to coverage of only one major head-health issue (The 88, 2007). By doing this, they essentially told the players that anything outside of the specific disease was not acknowledged by the NFL. Second, many of the “corrective actions” that were taken were directed towards the current players, primarily through dissemination of information. While the information was helpful and more than they had done in the past, the NFL put all of the pressure and responsibility on the players to do something with the information they were given (NFL,

2007; Poster, 2010). Whether or not the players read it, the League seemed to think the players no longer could say they were unaware of the repercussions of playing football. Goodell and the League could say the information was available and they had distributed it for the players' consumption, essentially wiping their hands clean of any future problems the players may face.

These strategies are often woven together intricately and firmly, as many of Goodell's steps started with an attempt at a corrective action, but underlying it all was his and the League's refusal to admit any sort of connection between the sport and head trauma. This constant tie-in between these strategies is ultimately their downfall as much of the League's image repair discourse was completely contradictory. Yes, they were getting information to their players, but along with it was their refusal to admit there was a possibility that the former players were suffering from this brutal sport. Moreover, in an attempt to protect their brand, they used their own faulty science to deny the link and ultimately create the information the players received.

Goodell's First Strategies

To get caught up on the situation, to understand exactly how severe it was, and to learn about the research that was going on in the field, Goodell called for a Concussion Summit early in his tenure as commissioner (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Indeed, this summit was the first official step Goodell made in fixing the crisis, and, by making a corrective action, the first step in repairing the image of the League. In June 2007, medical personnel including doctors, trainers, consultants, and others were gathered together to present their findings and "debate the science of concussions" (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Each attendee received a packet full of information including the Mild Traumatic Brain Committee's *Neurosurgery* papers and a laminated sheet titled, "Concussion Information for NFL Players and Family" (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Never before had the organization hosted a conference or event on the topic.

The act alone of hosting the summit immediately after Goodell's start as commissioner showed the effort and change the League tried to make.

However, the summit was met with widespread criticism and considered a disaster by many (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). One of the reasons for this negative reaction was that the League invited many of their own doctors and researchers who had already been criticized for publishing research that favored the NFL's position, and then they distributed their information to everyone who attended. They also invited some doctors who had published documents contradicting the NFL's research or had at least spoken out against the League, but the NFL failed to invite some of the biggest names in CTE research at the time including Dr. Bennett Omalu (Mihoces, 2007). Although the summit was intended as a way for the NFL to regain credibility by showing they were taking concussions seriously, the blatant refusal to invite some doctors who were leading the way in CTE research was viewed as a way to ensure the summit would offer the NFL the possibility to refuse to admit an actual connection between the sport and CTE. With all of the controversy the summit caused, Goodell needed to take more actions (Mihoces, 2007).

With information compiled from the summit, the League issued an internal memo that was distributed to all players and team personnel in August 2007. The memo was an outline for everyone within each organization about "the recent steps...taken to address the management of concussions in the NFL" (NFL, 2007). Grasping for credibility, the League referred to the summit that was hosted in June, offered a pamphlet on concussions, and announced the establishment of a confidential hotline for players to use if they or a teammate were being forced to play against medical advice (NFL, 2007).

Using the information from the summit and the previous research from the MTBI, the pamphlet was created to give players what Goodell considered to be a convenient way to identify symptoms of a concussion if they took a hit to the head. It also explained, in a somewhat demeaning way, that a concussion is more than a “ding” to the head, and then listed symptoms and information about the steps that should be taken if the player believes he may have a serious head injury (NFL, 2007). Though useful information for the players to have, the pamphlet had two negative outcomes. First, it placed the liability on the players if they did get a concussion. Before, former players had said they were unaware that the sport they were playing was doing somewhat terrible things to their long-term health because of the League’s lack of sharing information and the “be-tough” mentality that was encouraged (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). On the surface, the effort seemed credible for the League, but instead this naturally put all of the responsibility of playing safe and identifying the symptoms if they had any directly on the player. The NFL could claim that with the information given it was now up to the injured player to tell the medical staff when they were having a problem. They would have to make the decision to receive treatment and come out of the game - something that most competitors do not want to do.

Second, the evidence the League used to create this pamphlet was research from their *own* medical staff, a point emphasized to ensure others realized they were all collectively taking appropriate steps to address the issue (NFL, 2007). Unfortunately for the League, this was not a good choice because they had already been criticized by the media for using their own doctors (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Despite inviting some outside doctors to the Concussion Summit, they continued to only acknowledge and distribute research that was created by their own NFL-influenced and paid-for doctors (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013; NFL, 2007).

This was furthered by a statement in the concussion pamphlet that was found to be quite controversial:

Current research with professional athletes has not shown that having more than one or two concussions leads to permanent problems if each injury is managed properly. It is important to understand that there is no magic number for how many concussions is too many (NFL, 2007).

It was this deliberate minimization that allowed the League to be able to avoid the discussion on their own terms. Denying the existence of an issue in relation to their organization gave them a way to dispute the common idea that they were responsible for the issues, consistent with Benoit's form of denial (Hearit, 2006). To the NFL, it allowed them to negate a connection between football, concussions, and long-term health care, further reducing the offensiveness of whatever previous actions they had been accused of.

Despite the facts that were medically inaccurate and potentially damaging, the memo served two purposes for the NFL. First, it attempted to show the internal audiences that the League was actually taking the issue seriously and was ready to move forward. Understanding that some players either do not know the symptoms or do not want to admit them due to potential loss in playing time was important for the League to figure out how to help them going forward. Second, the pamphlet and memo addressed one of the major complaints of the former players – that they were never given the proper information to help themselves (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru; 2013). The current players now had at least some more “facts” and guidelines at their fingertips, though this would not help the former players who were already suffering from this lack of information during their playing time.

Also in September of that year, in conjunction with the NFL Players' Association, Goodell and the NFL announced the "88 Plan" designed to help former players who were suffering from "dementia" (The 88, 2007). Under the plan, former players would receive up to \$88,000 per year to pay for their medical bills if they fit the plan's criteria. This compensation was an attempt to reduce the offensiveness of the act and was one of the few times the NFL actually proactively addressed the former players. However, the guidelines to receive the yearly money were strict and rigid, requiring a match to what was "defined by the 88 Plan," and was based on the NFL's own doctors and research (The 88, 2007). So again, the NFL was using their own science to distribute information that they considered to be helpful, which was considered a slap in the face by many of the former players for multiple reasons. Most importantly, head trauma from playing football was causing diseases other than dementia (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013), but the NFL was refusing to acknowledge it. This left many former players unable to receive any benefit from the plan; therefore, they continued to suffer mentally and physically, while racking up bills from medical treatments.

The information and plan were the only major actions taken regarding concussions for the next two years. While both corrective in their own rights, the external audiences were still not satisfied with the actions that were taken (Easterbrook, 2010). As more outside research was published showing direct connections between the sport and serious head trauma and health, the NFL still refused to acknowledge the link and, instead, continued to publish and base their statements on their own research (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Much of this biased research concluded "no NFL player had experienced chronic brain damage from repeat concussions, and that professional football players do not sustain repetitive blows to the brain on a regular basis" (Breslow, 2015). This was never more evident than in the testimony Goodell gave to Congress

in October 2009 (Legal, 2009). An opportunity to have an honest discussion about the issues the League and the former players were facing, Goodell instead saw it as a chance to bolster their image by discussing all of the “wonderful” things the League has done to correct the concussion crisis through medical enhancements and player protection, all while still denying the connection.

In Goodell’s opening statement, he recognized that the hearing was called to discuss concussions, but he also stated “it is important to discuss our overall commitment to the safety and welfare of the football’s most valuable assets – those individuals who play our sport” (Testimony, 2009). He emphasized this by showing all of the steps the League had taken to keep the players safe not only in regard to their brain health but also many other ways by saying “the millions of dollars we spend on prevention, treatment, and research of injuries will pay off for our current and future generations of players both in football and other sports” (Legal, 2009). Following this, he listed pension, disability, and medical benefits as initiatives the League had taken to improve or assist with the health of the players (Legal, 2009). Again, while all positive actions, it is easy to see how Goodell’s comments were an attempted distraction for the hearing committee to bolster the NFL’s image in overall health and safety of players.

Goodell’s public relations background shone through when he finally reached the topic of concussions and explained what he considered to be proactive steps the League had taken. First, he admitted that the League understood “that concussions occur in football and other sports and that they can have serious effects if not properly treated” (Legal, 2009). This was known because of all the research the NFL had a hand in producing over the previous 15 years and, through their own graciousness and for the benefit of others, had made public. Listing examples of funding and research, he summarized all of their efforts by stating his “approach to this

concussion issue in football has been simple and direct – medical considerations must always take priority over competitive considerations” (Legal, 2009). As evidence for this, he listed four major steps he and the League had taken. First, they were committed to research to address the needs of the retired players. He stated they had given more than \$5 million to research over the past fifteen years (this would dramatically change in the future) to understand the science around concussions. Through this he admitted there have been disagreements, but that the science will help the League improve the sport. Second, he and the League had created and modified playing rules to reduce head and neck contact, thus creating a safer environment for the players on the field. Third, their policies on treatment of concussions had improved as the new policies were created by the League without the influence of individual organizations. Moreover, these policies were now executed by the team doctors and medical staff, not by the coaches or players, and these team doctors and staff had also “pioneered the use of neuropsychological testing for players" who experience concussions (Legal, 2009). Finally, he stated that research was one of the strongest contributions, as their own medical staff had done tremendous work before and after the Concussion Summit the League had hosted. He stated that this is helpful not only to the understanding of concussions and the treatment of the players on the field, but also to youth football players (Legal, 2009).

Despite Goodell’s attempt to spin all of these statements as good things, all of his comments were laced with controversy. It was widely known that the NFL’s medical staff and MTBI committee was controversial (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013), but Goodell continued to reference their research anyway. Much of the reasoning for this was their denial of CTE’s connection to football, something that Goodell makes sure is stated before the conclusion of his statement:

Recently, a number of media stories have been published about a condition known as CTE – chronic traumatic encephalopathy...How susceptible athletes and others are to this condition, and the precise causes and contributing factors, are issues for scientists and doctors to study and decide. It is fair to assume that head trauma may play a role...Whatever its incidence, CTE is not limited to football players, but is instead a broader public health issue that needs to be recognized as such. For our part, we want to encourage and contribute to that research (Legal, 2009).

Once again, he addressed the issue but did not take responsibility for it. He said it “may play a role” (Legal, 2009), but without actually admitting that football can definitely cause head trauma, Goodell tried to minimize the NFL’s role in the long-term health issues the former players were facing. But, by acknowledging at least the possibility of a link, Goodell was able to use the NFL as the leader in the research going forward, making it appear as if they were making corrective actions for the health of the sport and those who play it.

He concluded his statement by making very rhetorical and non-directive statements saying that “more can be done for the retired players” (Legal, 2009), but did not explain what or how they were going to do that. The one promise he did make was that their already existing pensions and 88 Plan would not change; therefore, they would not lose anything they already had based on any new programs the League would potentially create. Goodell made it seem like there was a corrective action by pointing out the compensation that former players were able to receive (only if they had ALS), but he also gave no real direction and only promised to not make any changes to plans that were already insufficient for many, many players.

As the panel was unsatisfied with the opening statement, the testimony took a turn when Goodell was questioned by the committee. Despite Goodell’s opening statement listing all of the

corrective actions that had been taken, the committee challenged him to stand by the League's policies and research. In fact, Congresswoman Linda Sanchez asked Goodell to read a specific part from the pamphlet they had distributed to the players and team personnel in the fall of 2007. This part was none other than the controversial statement that said "current research had not shown that repeated concussions lead to permanent problems" (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Following his reading, she went on the offensive, saying, "the NFL has this kind of blanket denial or minimizing the fact there may be this link" (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013; Legal, 2009). She then compared them to Big Tobacco, saying the NFL had done similar strategies that they did in the 1990's. Goodell responded with, "Well, Congresswoman, I do believe that we have embraced the research, the medical study of the issue." He committed to the research, what they had specifically done, but blatantly ignored and denied the connection between football and long-term head trauma. This continued throughout Goodell's testimony – as the committee pressed him to admit to a connection, he would not admit to one (Legal, 2009). Instead he got personal, attempting to show how he, on behalf of the League, truly did care about the issue. He responded at one point by saying, "I can think of no issue to which I've devoted more time and attention than the health and well-being of our players, and particularly retired players" (Legal, 2009). While clearly meant as a positive statement about the NFL's commitment to player safety, Goodell's comment seems less than fully genuine.

Following the disaster that was Goodell's testimony, the NFL sent out a press release and memo announcing a "stricter statement on return-to-play following concussions" (Raffel, 2009). Announced to NFL teams by Goodell, it was meant to be a supplement to the statement and pamphlet from 2007 that encouraged a conservative approach on return-to-play policies that were meant to be implemented immediately. Within the press release, it stated that the

supplement was developed by a group of doctors, medical experts, the NFLPA, and “the NFL’s medical committee on concussions” (Raffel, 2009). Using corrective action and bolstering strategies, Goodell tried to encourage knowledge and health within the League but also made the formal press release for the external audiences to know they were making changes. Notable here is the fact that they did not refer to it as its proper title, the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee. The MTBI committee had a very poor reputation due to its over-influenced research and publications. So not only did Goodell need to distance the NFL from the committee, he needed to remove it altogether if he was going to improve the League’s image.

This is further illustrated when Goodell and the League attempted to make another corrective action by trying to “distance itself from its tumultuous past regarding concussions” after they announced changes to the Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Committee (Schwarz, 2010b). First, they changed the committee’s name to the Head, Neck, and Spine Committee. Second, they removed the controversial Dr. Pellman from the committee and named two new co-chairmen who both had backgrounds and experience in neurological surgery.

These changes achieved two major outcomes for the NFL. First, despite it being the same committee with the same goals, the NFL attempted to create a separation and give the committee a fresh start through the name-change. All of the controversial research that was published in the years leading up to this would be associated with the MTBI committee, rather than this non-controversially-named committee. Second, and in relation to that, the name-change also implied a growth in their knowledge on the subject. After further research, they knew that the neck and spine were much more relevant to brain trauma, and they could use more of the expertise of some of their committee members (Schwarz, 2010b). This showed they were continuing to make corrective steps, while still being able to deny any connection between

football and head trauma because of the lack of available evidence. As long as they were making improvements, then they could continue with using their excuse that “more work needs to be done.”

The following year, the NFL released a poster that was hung in locker rooms for the players and coaches to see that included much more direct language than in the information that had been previously handed out (Poster, 2010). The newly renamed Head, Neck, and Spine Committee spearheaded the creation of the poster with the full support of Goodell after he told the members the League “needed to be the leaders” in the medical research (Poster, 2010). The poster was noted as being “by far the NFL’s most definitive statement on the cognitive risks of football” (Schwarz, 2010a) and contained the most “up-to-date scientific” evidence regarding concussions. The poster listed four subjects: “Concussion Facts,” “Concussion Symptoms,” “Why Should I Report My Symptoms?,” and “What Should I Do If I Think I’ve Had a Concussion?” (Poster, 2010). Notably missing from the poster was the controversial quote regarding current research that was noted above. It also warned players that repeated concussions “can change your life and your family’s life forever” (Schwarz, 2010a). However, the poster did not directly state what the change might be, carefully eluding any direct, causal connection that concussions caused by playing in the NFL do result in long-term damage to the brain.

The poster was redesigned a few months later, making it cleaner and more professional-looking (NFL, 2010). The new poster had the title “Concussion” larger and bolder, almost yelling what its intention was, making it impossible to miss. The text exactly the same as the previous poster, save for the addition of one line under the “Why” section. This sentence, which the NFL’s Head, Neck, and Spine Committee felt the player needs to be reminded of reads,

“Your brain is the most vital organ in your body” (NFL, 2010). This poster, while now displayed in the NFL’s locker rooms, was also distributed to young athletes in the California area and made available through the Centers for Disease Control (NFL, 2010).

This poster was another example of the NFL’s corrective action and denial strategies the League and the committee used from Goodell’s direction. That is, they continued to separate the NFL from the previous committee by being harsher and acknowledging a potential connection, but they still chose to use their faulty and biased science. Though it was good information for the players to have, it was not complete because of the NFL’s insistence on the refusal to admit to a connection. Also, because of that refusal, the former players were still ignored, and the actual action did not help repair the League’s image.

Conclusion

Much of this time period can be summed up by my previous statement: the information was good for the players to have because it contained some useful information they previously had not known or received, but because the NFL was so insistent on directly denying or minimizing the connection between football, head trauma, and long-term brain health, the current players were still only receiving some of the important information. Goodell, as the leader of the NFL, appeared to make proactive steps to improve the safety of players on the field and gave them some information to help them when they were off the field, but much of this was based on their own, flawed science.

This information was also controversial because it was directed at the players and team personnel. Goodell continued to focus on helping the current players rather than finding legitimate ways to help the former players. Each moment a denial was made was another moment Goodell told the former players that their health issues were not caused by their sport, thus giving the NFL no reason to help them. One might assume that as former players continued

to die in strange ways and class action lawsuits were being filed, Goodell would start reaching out to the former players to figure out how to help them. Unfortunately, this could be seen as an admittance to the link and doing that opened them up to legal liabilities from those former players. This was not an option to a bottom-line-minded man like Goodell, so the NFL instead supported them through strictly-ruled payouts and empty rhetoric. That was as far as Goodell was willing to go.

This understandably did not bode well for Goodell or the League going forward. More players did die and more were diagnosed with CTE, with many of them and their families feeling that Goodell and the League had forgotten them (Goodell, 2012a). This was a new issue for Goodell and one that would transition into another rissue. As more former players died, families asked themselves whether or not they should let their children play the sport (Deford, 2012; Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). This was a nightmare for Goodell and something that he was going to need to address before the League's image was tarnished in more ways. With an impending collective bargaining agreement the NFL and the NFL Players Association were working on set to take over the NFL's media coverage throughout 2011, Goodell and the League would be able to find a way to address their image in different, and hopefully, more effective ways. Indeed, Goodell did switch image repair strategies in 2012 and would continue to follow these same strategies for four years. Rather than addressing the situation and the people that started the entire crisis, his rhetoric widely emphasized the great work the League was doing. However, during this next time period, he began to address external audiences including fans and the media to change the image of the NFL.

Chapter 3: 2012-2015: Improving the Science for the Military and the Future of Football

Throughout 2011, much of the discussion surrounding the NFL was focused on the Collective Bargaining Agreement between them and the NFLPA (Rosenthal, 2011). Because the NFL season depended on that agreement, players, fans, and the media were concerned with little else. In a way, this was beneficial to Goodell and the League because this allowed them time to reflect and revamp their messaging. As Hoffman and Ford wrote (2010), organizational crises can be a long-term process, so many strategies may be used throughout the crisis repair. Due to this long-term process, organizations must be able to adjust to multiple audiences and their responses. Throughout the first time period, I argued that Goodell and the League attempted to use Benoit's image repair theories of denial and reducing the offensiveness of the act to repair their organizational image but failed to do so because their messaging was directed to the wrong audience and lacked appropriate information. I will now argue that from 2012 through 2015, Goodell and the NFL adjusted their strategies to Benoit's evading responsibility and corrective action as they continued to address the wrong audiences and attempted to repair their increasingly damaged image.

As the crisis evolved and other related issues arose that compounded the crisis, the image repair strategies had to change as well. No longer fully denying the link between concussions and long-term health problems, Goodell instead began eluding the connection by using defeasibility, a strategy specific to Benoit's evading responsibility. This strategy is used when outright denying can no longer be used, but they still cannot or do not want to admit any sort of responsibility for the crisis at hand (Benoit, 1995). For Goodell, admitting to the concussion link could mean legal liability, but continuing to act as if they had zero responsibility in the situation would only hurt their image further. Thus, he used defeasibility to point out that there had been a

lack of information or science to fully provide answers to players' health issues. However, he also used Benoit's corrective action to keep the conversation moving forward, showing everything they had done through bolstering strategies and values advocacy (NFL Health, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015). Specifically, Goodell and the NFL promised to take action to correct the safety problems in the game and did this by donating money to research groups to improve the science related to head trauma and creating partnerships with outside organizations (NFL Health, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; National, 2012; U.S. Army, 2012). Both of these things were done with the intention of making the game safer for their players, which in a way supported their claims that the present information was not complete. The money and the efforts the League put forth were beneficial, but the messaging behind them was an attempt to help the League's image.

Also during this time period, patterns in Goodell's rhetoric emerged that gave the impression that he was insincere and his statements were rehearsed. Goodell did this throughout many of his documents, repeatedly using words like "work" and "priority" to convey the NFL's efforts throughout the concussion crisis (Breslow, 2013; King, 2015; NFL Health, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015; Goodell, 2012a; National, 2012; NFL, 2013a; Goodell, 2012b; Oconnell, 2015; Smith, M. D., 2013; U.S. Army, 2012). This repetition gave Goodell a common theme that audiences would hopefully remember, slowly influencing their opinions each time those specific words were heard. However, I will argue this strategic type of rhetoric failed to improve the NFL's image because, along with other strategies, Goodell's overall message lacked direction and too often seemed disingenuous and opportunistic.

Goodell's rhetorical strategies in this second time period also showed a significant shift into whom the messaging was directed: external audiences, specifically fans and media. As his rhetoric during the first time period was directed entirely at the players and team personnel,

external audiences were less likely to hear of the improvements the League was making. Nevertheless these external audiences continued to hear about the deaths of former players. To ensure these audiences received the new messages, Goodell, continuing to be the main spokesperson and controller of all messaging, used this combination of messaging to reach them. However, the League faced problems from the beginning because they continued to use their own controversial researchers, continued to ignore the former players' problems, and, again, never apologized for what happened to the former players during their playing careers. In what follows, I show how Goodell used a combination of evading responsibility, corrective action, and bolstering to attempt to improve the League's image, and then argue they ultimately failed because of their shortcomings regarding the former players.

Worsening the Crisis

Goodell's strategic responses came later in August 2012, timed just as football season across all levels began in the United States. In under a month, the NFL announced a health and safety website, emailed a letter to fans, created their first annual health and safety report, and announced partnerships, all in relation to player health and safety. Many of the documents and statements were impeccably timed, some immediately following very negative announcements related to the NFL. Timing played a role in another way, as this month of formal announcements by Goodell came only two months after the unified class-action lawsuit by over 2000 former players was filed (Avila, 2012). Following negative press after the announcement of the lawsuit, they quickly put together these formal messages, one after another, hoping to quickly enhance their image.

The first was the announcement of NFLEvolution.com, a health and safety website where visitors could find "information on the many programs, initiatives, and partnerships the NFL and NFL member clubs support to protect the health of the members of the NFL family and to

encourage safe play at all levels of football” (Goodell, 2012b). Goodell’s introductory letter for the website was for a short time immediately seen upon landing on the site’s homepage and later easily available through a direct link located on the same page. His letter included the quoted statement above and summarized some of the efforts the League had made throughout the crisis, including improvements for former players and younger players. Beyond the introductory letter, this informative website contained tabs titled, “To Our Fans,” “Safety for Your Kids,” “Players and Alumni,” “Military Partners,” “Medical Research,” and “Resource Center,” which listed their intention, partnerships, research, and statistics in further detail. Nowhere on the website was any sort of typical information you would find on a sports website like roster, schedule, or highlights. Solely used to distribute information about health and safety, this was a clear indicator of the NFL attempting to influence the discussion on concussions. The website contained the exact information the League wanted people to know about their research and partnerships, stating statistics that proved their efforts had been working in lessening damage to football players. Goodell depicted the League as the leader of this discussion and argued their “position offers an opportunity and responsibility” that they “not only accept but embrace” (Goodell, 2012b). Goodell wanted their external audiences to believe the League was doing the right thing, so to find out exactly what that was, it was all placed in a centralized location for the audiences to see and read.

A week later, Goodell wrote another letter, this time emailed to fans, specifically parents, about football safety. He began the letter by saying that “the health and safety of players at all levels of the game is our first priority.” He explained that “through the leadership of our NFL Head, Neck, and Spine Committee” they were “finding new ways to protect players, adapt to scientific discoveries and promote a culture of safety” (NFL, 2012). Following the same

patterns that he had been previously using, Goodell continued his rhetorical strategy of calling the collective group of himself, the League, and medical experts the leaders of this initiative as they discovered more research, implemented it across multiple platforms and organizations, and ultimately, made the game safer (Goodell, 2012b). Listing examples of various partnerships that had been created and the existence of NFL Evolution.com, he showed he and the League had taken multiple corrective actions to make the game safer. Sending the letter to fans with the intent of it reaching parents showed they understood the concerns the growing issue had brought about, and that they would handle the issue “intelligently and delicately” going forward (Goodell, 2012b). But this was also another way to bolster their image, something they would need to continue to do going forward.

On August 30, 2012, the NFL filed for dismissal of the concussion litigation lawsuit (Rovell, 2012), but they also announced a new partnership between the League and the United States Army (U.S. Army, 2012). The purpose of the partnership was identified as a “long-term initiative to enhance the health of its soldiers and players by sharing information, providing education, and engaging in discussion on concussion and health-related issues” (U.S. Army, 2012). Goodell’s influence was quite prevalent in many points throughout the press release, as many statements were made jointly between Goodell and US Army General Raymond T. Odierno. Together they explained that the partnership was “built upon the mutual respect shared by the two organizations,” and that both organizations hold similar values, which include “pride and passion, dedication and determination, and an enduring belief in the power of team” (U.S. Army, 2012). After discussing the importance of and ways for players and soldiers to get help with treatments, they concluded the release with a final call for action from both parties:

By coming together in this historic effort, we are combining and strengthening our forces. As we continue to focus our efforts on encouraging safer environments, we will continue to celebrate the spirit of competition and determination that define our two organizations. Working together, we will ensure longer careers and healthier lives. Working together, we all become stronger. And working together, we have the power to make a real difference (U.S. Army, 2012).

This final paragraph of the press release was something that came from the NFL, as the repetition throughout the last few sentences were reminiscent of Goodell's recent and ongoing rhetorical strategies. Again, the word "work" was used, but in a slightly different way. This time serving as a verb, they were able to emphasize this was an ongoing process and that both organizations would be making these efforts together. Again, these sentences were empty without real direction. Each sentence contained a goal or intention of what the NFL and the Army was intending to do, but did not explain how it was going to get done. Rhetorically, these sentences were empowering because these efforts were clearly going to be made together, but their lack of specific details left more questions than answers.

Overall, this partnership was something that could have possibly helped the NFL's image because of the value Americans place on the military. Indeed, in a post 9-11 world, the intersection between sports and the military became a common thread and storyline (Silk, 2012), so the NFL's partnership appeared to be a natural fit. The NFL, as a popular group is able to rely on cultural pedagogies to reinforce and influence what we as a culture find important. By forming this partnership with the Army, the NFL was able to support and emphasize those values by making them appear as if they were their own. Goodell and the League could impress upon their external audiences what they believe will be a beneficial partnership while still upholding

societal values, thus hoping to improve their organizational image. With the Army's actual involvement, the partnership gave the NFL positive attention because not only was this in conjunction with the military, but they were finally able to offer a legitimate, societal organization outside of their own that they were able to help.

While a positive and beneficial partnership for both organizations, but the announcement of the joint venture did not help the League's image as much as they had hoped for two reasons. First, the message was addressing an external audience, once again ignoring the former players. While useful information could be gained from the potential research that would be done and shared between the two organizations, there was no mention of how any of this would affect the former players who were already suffering. Second, the message failed because of the timing of the announcement as not only did the League ignore the former players, but they did so blatantly by announcing the partnership the same day as the former players' formalized legal filing. Whether or not any of these two organizations' audiences approved of this partnership was lost as the partnership was overshadowed by the news of the legal filing. Again, a positive step and corrective measure, it did nothing to repair the image of Goodell or the League.

Shortly after this announcement, the NFL filed for dismissal of the former players' lawsuit, a week later, the League issued a press release announcing a \$30 million grant to the National Institutes of Health for research related to concussions (National, 2012). Again, attempting to make a strategic action, within the statement they explained the rarity and impact of such a grant by naming it the NFL's "single-largest donation to any organization in the League's 92-year history" (National, 2012). Attempting to show the leadership of the League, Goodell is quoted within the release saying,

We hope this grant will help accelerate the medical community's pursuit of pioneering research to enhance the health of athletes' past, present, and future. This research will extend beyond the NFL playing field and benefit athletes at all levels and others, including our military (National, 2012).

After the negative press received from the lawsuit and the League's denouncement of the lawsuit, the League used different strategies to repair their faltering image. Announcing a large grant was their financial way of avoiding responsibility for their previous acts because they were making a sort of financial restitution for the future. Emphasizing the need for more research for the protection of their players, this was a way they showed they were serious about doing whatever they could to make the game safer going forward. That the research benefited military and athletes in other sports showed fans the League was sensitive to the subject of brain trauma.

However, announcing this when they did was another failed attempt at repairing their image for at least a couple reasons. First, the research went to an institute that had doctors who were on the NFL payroll (Hruby, 2013). Medical research associated with the League already had a negative reputation. Previous research done by the MTBI committee had been criticized, and any research that had not been in line with the League's prior messaging was ignored or disavowed by the NFL and their doctors (Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). Research that was done by the League was now a concern, so in acknowledging the past accusations and reputation, the League immediately claimed the grant would have no influence (which was later shown to be not true). Second, this announcement came immediately following the negative press they received from the dismissal filing, but once again, the announcement did not directly affect the former players thus ignoring them once again.

The final strategic message of 2012 came in the first-ever annual NFL Health and Safety Report (NFL Health, 2012). Starting in 2012, the League began issuing annual reports, typically around the start of football season, that contained information about multiple aspects of player health and safety including everything from head trauma to ankle problems. The 2012 report came out after the concussion-media blitz noted above, but was a sort of way to wrap everything they had done up in a nice and neat little package. From 2012 going forward, each yearly report started with an introductory letter from Goodell (similar to that of the letter on NFLEvolution.com) and offered a section called “NFL Health and Safety by the Numbers” summarizing player health and safety as its purpose. Within each of these reports was information about their partnerships, adding to each annual report as more were made, briefly giving background information and the positive results that came from each partnership (NFL Health, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015). Essentially, this report functioned as a summary of all of the corrective actions Goodell and the League had made. This document provided one-sided examples of everything good they had done, including the controversial research their own doctors produced, in one location for anyone to read. Health and safety statistics were listed without context, losing any of the negative details or constraints that may be associated with them. For example, it lacked the number of undiagnosed concussions that still took players out of the game even for a temporary period of time. Ranging anywhere from 32-52 pages long, these annual reports were again used to bolster the League’s image by showing the corrective actions they had made. As long as they were continuously making new partnerships, they continued to evade responsibility by emphasizing that more work would always need to be done.

Goodell and the NFL started 2013 with an incredibly insensitive message after receiving information that would undoubtedly be bad news for the League. Much-loved former player

Junior Seau was perhaps one of the “greatest linebackers” to play in the NFL and “beloved across the League when he retired in 2010” (Elwood, 2015). In the spring of 2012, he committed suicide by shooting himself in the chest, leaving his brain unharmed. A shock to many, this was the highest profile case among the players who committed suicide, putting the crisis on a new level (Isidore, 2013).

Following his death, stories were told of him doing uncharacteristic things like withdrawing from family, drinking excessively, and gambling large amounts of money, similar to stories of other deceased former players who were found to have suffered from CTE (Smith, S., 2013). After scientists at the NIH tested his brain, they determined that he did, in fact, suffer from CTE (Pilon & Belson, 2013). Following an announcement made by the NIH, the NFL released a short statement that only briefly touched on the conclusions of the testing. After thanking the Seau family for their cooperation with the testing, the NFL immediately tried to avoid the possibility of being blamed for Seau’s decline and eventual suicide stating, “The finding underscores the recognized need for additional research to accelerate a fuller understanding of CTE” (NFL, 2013a). Placed as the second sentence of a five sentence statement, the NFL immediately showed they were unwilling to take any blame for his downfall. That their lack of sympathy proved they were more concerned about their perceived image than the actual results was evident with this statement. Explicitly calling for more research continued their strategy of evading responsibility and showed that despite the number of former players who were or were going to be diagnosed with CTE, the League still needed more information before they would admit a connection.

Within this short statement, a sentence about the amount of money they had donated to the NIH and the amount that would go to the NFLPA as a part of the new CBA was also

included. The mention of the CBA was the only brief moment they addressed the former players as some part of the agreement did include money that would go towards retired players and health issues they could face (NFL, 2013a). Simply though, the audiences were just reminded of the money the League was giving for research going forward. Serving as a reminder of the steps they had taken since Goodell became commissioner, the NFL did not want people to correlate Seau's issues with the League.

The five-sentence release concluded with a final statement: "We have work to do, and we're doing it" (NFL, 2013a). An insensitive statement to end a release that was regarding the health of a man before his suicide, Goodell finalized it with a meaningless phrase. Appearing as a corrective action, Goodell offered no meaning or direction for what this would actually mean. The word "work" offered an endless number of possibilities but no definition. Instead, it continued to be a common and repetitive theme throughout Goodell's strategic rhetoric that joined past statements and would continue going forward.

Again, around the start of football season, in August 2013, the NFL announced a new program called "Moms Football Safety Clinics" that were adopted and implemented by teams throughout the NFL (NFL Evolution, 2014). These clinics were established after a new issue related to head trauma began to take shape. After hearing of the potential damage football could cause, parents across the country were concerned and questioned whether to let their children play football (Belson, 2013; Fainaru-Wada & Fainaru, 2013). In fact, even President Obama, who did not have sons, said he would not let those hypothetical children play football (Breech, 2014). Knowing this issue could affect the health of the League into the future, Goodell established these clinics to provide helpful information to moms who have children who are considering or play tackle football...[and] include classroom instruction on proper equipment

fitting, concussion awareness lectures and the heads up tackling technique as well as participating in on-field drills” (NFLFoundation.com, 2016). Through these clinics, mothers received hands on knowledge, learning themselves how to play the game safely to encourage their children to do the same (Belson, 2015). A different type of corrective action, it was a way Goodell could address this new issue that was a part of the ever-growing concussion crisis, and attempt to ensure that another generation of players and fans continued to grow their multi-billion dollar organization (Belson, 2015; Bell, 2014). These clinics were hosted by several teams with current and retired players serving as trainers and coaches. Goodell was even present and participating at many of them (Belson, 2015). Being present was a way he could ensure fans knew he actually cared about the health of those who were playing the sport.

Shortly after, Goodell and the League announced another hands-on and long-term partnership with GE called the Head Health Challenge, which was designed to “accelerate concussion research, diagnosis, and treatment.” A five-year competitive program, it “aims to improve the safety of athletes, members of the military, and society overall” (About, 2016). Throughout the next couple of years, the organizations announced different challenges to create programs or products to help with various parts of brain trauma. These included methods for diagnosis and prognosis of mild traumatic brain injuries, innovative approaches for preventing and identifying brain injuries, and advanced materials for impact mitigation – all programs with results intended for use by those currently playing the sport.

After the winners of the first challenge was announced, Goodell commented, “These studies hold the promise of advancing brain science in important ways. The health and safety of our players is our top priority, and this challenge extends that commitment to the general population as well” (Oconnell, 2015). In one sentence, he used two common strategies to make

a statement that sounded good but was again empty. First, the word “priority” was another repetitive term he used throughout this period and always in reference to advancing the science (Breslow, 2013; NFL Commissioner, 2015; Oconnell, 2015; Smith, M.D., 2013). This word placed the players’ health above making money, because their science would improve the safety of the players. Second, though the program is in part spearheaded by the NFL, the science and technology gained from it would benefit more than football players, something that Goodell has repeatedly emphasized throughout this time period including in the partnership with the Army (U.S Army, 2012). As this is a corrective action for player health and safety, it again fails in repairing their image because it does not help the former players who already had brain trauma. The League even encouraged scientists outside of their payroll to advance the science, but once again it would only help the science in the future, doing nothing to treat what had already happened.

Also in August 2013, Goodell continued their image repair strategy with a letter to fans and parents by “touting the League’s record on safety” (Breslow, 2013). This letter was quite possibly in response to the publishing of two excerpts from the book, *League of Denial* (2013). The book itself was published later in October, but these two excerpts alone were controversial and shocking enough to cause concern for Goodell and the NFL. In conjunction with PBS’s *Frontline*, both the book and documentary heavily detailed the controversy and the League’s response to football’s concussion crisis (Breslow, 2013). In Goodell’s letter, the financial contributions and partnership-bolstering continued, reminding or making fans aware of the newly announced \$60 million partnership with GE and Under Armour (who joined on shortly after the initial announcement) along with the \$30 million donation to the NIH as a part of the \$100 million that they had put forth towards general medical research. Their efforts in helping people

other than professional football players was also mentioned when Goodell said their “actions influence college, high school, and youth football.” He also stated the League would continue to be an “advocate for safety in all sports...[to] support the health and well-being of NFL players and athletes at all levels” (Breslow, 2013).

The letter also addressed another issue that had taken form as health and safety became the League’s priority. Throughout Goodell’s early years, he made rule changes to encourage safer on-field play. Unfortunately, some felt Goodell and the League were removing a key element of the game: the brutality (Bledsoe, 2015; King, 2016a; Smith, 2010; Vivona, 2016). This feeling grew with each new rule change and it was something Goodell, who was a fierce fan and protector of the game (Vrentas, 2016), addressed in this letter. His line-straddling rhetoric began almost immediately,

It includes a commitment to deliver the game that the fans love and the safety that players deserve. As a League, we have an unwavering commitment to player health and making our game safer at all levels. This is, and will remain, our top priority (Breslow, 2013). Addressing both the “sport is not tough anymore” and the “sport is too dangerous” audiences, Goodell tried to appeal to both by showing he valued both of their opinions. After listing the number of rule changes, financial contributions to science, and various other ways they were helping the game, he concluded the letter by saying, “Football will remain the hard-hitting, physical sport that you love. And we will continue to be vigilant in seeking ways to make the game even better and safer” (Breslow, 2013). By beginning and finishing the letter with this sentiment, Goodell attempted to address another issue that was gaining traction within the concussion crisis, and one he probably personally cared more about, while not trying to seem insensitive to the overall crisis still at hand. Again, he continued to tout the many things they

had done while letting fans know that they were in a transition period in making improvements on various levels of the game. Whether or not this transition period ends for the NFL remains to be seen.

Other than these sorts of repeated strategies, 2014 was marked with controversy for Roger Goodell. He received criticism for his handling of two domestic violence issues and his apparent terrible and unfair judgments throughout both (King, 2014b). The first case involved Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice who hit his girlfriend in an elevator and dragged her out of it on Valentine's Day. Goodell suspended Rice for only two games which immediately received criticism (Key, 2014). He defended himself, but shortly thereafter the League announced a new personal conduct policy that initiated an immediate six-game suspension or longer for violators of the policy (Almasy & Nichols, 2014). What appeared to be an acknowledgment of his leniency before, Goodell attached a letter that acknowledged his prior mistake regarding Rice (Key, 2014). Within the letter he wrote, "I didn't get it right. Simply put, we have to do better. And we will" (Almasy & Nichols, 2014).

Shortly after Goodell's new policy had been instated, Minnesota Vikings running back Adrian Peterson was arrested for child abuse after repeatedly hitting one of his sons with a tree branch, which Peterson characterized as a disciplinary whipping (Bieler, 2014). After missing nine of the Vikings' first ten games of the 2014 season, Goodell and the NFL suspended Peterson without pay for the remaining six games (King, 2014b). Considered to be a bit shocking, this was in coordination with Goodell's newly announced Personal Conduct Policy (King, 2014b). Both instances, relative in nature because of their off-the-field actions, were disciplined in completely different ways by the man who dealt out punishments for all players, coaches, and team personnel. As there was no consistency, Goodell was criticized for his actions

and many of the League's audiences wanted him to resign. Even some in his most supportive audience, the individual team owners, felt his job was safe, but knew his credibility was damaged (King, 2014a). Underlying all of this were the continued efforts to make the game safer that had been started in 2013, but the discussion regarding concussions remained relatively secondary. However, once the unrelated crises calmed down, the health and safety of players and former players remained, forcing Goodell to continue the image repair. A sort of distraction from the other negative attention, he used this rhetoric to remind people of all of the positive partnerships, science, and work that had been done to help the players on the field.

Insisting on talking about "where the League is going, not where it's been" (King, 2015), Goodell continued his strategy of talking about the great things the League was doing for the health and safety of players, while avoiding talking about the health of former players. In an "edited" interview with Peter King in early 2015, Goodell was asked about his reaction to player Chris Borland's recent decision to retire early because of his concern for his future health. Specifically, King wanted to know whether or not he thought that incident would have an impact on parents' concerns regarding the sport. Goodell never actually answered the question; rather he immediately began bolstering his and the League's record of handling the crisis,

We've been working on the safety of our game throughout our history – with an incredible focus on it during my personal time as commissioner...¹We've seen a reduction of concussions by 25 percent just last year. That's continuing a three-year trend on that issue (King, 2015).

Rather than addressing the Borland issue in any way, he evaded by stating that many improvements had been made. He also continued by stating something he believed was

¹ This pause in his answer was one of the "edited" portions of the interview. I did not remove anything.

important for people to know, “NFL players are living longer than the average American male” (King, 2015). Though there were some health issues, those who made it to the professional level actually had a longer life-span – he just failed to acknowledge that some of those lives were wrought with horrible problems.

King (2015) pressed the question simply by stating, “But you obviously see the stories of the broken-down old player.” Once again, Goodell avoided the question by discussing the benefit of the rule changes and additions that he had made. He also included that many former players had told him they wish those rules had been in place when they played. He continued to King, “So I think you’re overlooking a lot of the improvements that have taken place – not just in the medical, but in the fields and the rules and the training.” Once again, he did not answer King’s question, but evaded any responsibility by shifting the blame onto King for not knowing enough about their programs.

Later in the interview, King specifically asked Goodell where the League hoped to go during 2015, following the previous tumultuous year. Goodell spoke of the corrective action they were doing to make the game safer, strategically placing words throughout his response to emphasize the efforts the League had taken.

Well, to some extent, it’s that the things that we’re doing are working. The changes that we’re making to the game are making it better and safer. The changes that we’re making to our policies to keep our stadiums full are working... We need to continue to work at it. You can’t get complacent. It’s working. The changes that we’re making to our personal conduct policy are working... We’re seeing the quality of the game continue to improve to be safer. So it’s working... The work that we’re doing in youth football, as I said, the numbers of participation-for the first time in five years, high school football is up... Those

are the kinds of positive changes that are [coming] because of a lot of the efforts that we've all made...The expectations of the NFL continue to rise, whether they're internal or external (King, 2015).

Bolstering the League's changes, Goodell rhetorically glossed over the good things he and the League has done to make the game safer. Again, using repetition, he used the word "work" to emphasize what the League had and were doing in the field and that this work was important to them. And, by addressing expectations of their fans, he emphasized the importance and value they held in their audiences' opinions. However, without these audiences' support, the League would suffer going forward.

Conclusion

Throughout the rest of this time period, Goodell and the NFL used the same messages they had previously used, but they annually updated many of them with the new developments that had been implemented. Each year an annual health and safety report went out, a new competition in their health initiative was announced, and more letters were written and sent to fans. And, each year these messages all contained updates of the great things the NFL had done to encourage the research and improve the science of head trauma. What is important rhetorically is that Goodell was able to take many opportunities to draw similar conclusions: no matter where they had been and where they were currently, there would always be a need for more research. This is why he so often used Benoit's image repair strategies of evading responsibility and corrective action. As the spokesperson of the League, Goodell stood in as the League's representation, stating empty sentences that on the surface appeared to be positive, but lacked substance or any real direction for the audience to follow. Frequently, he claimed there was a "need for more research" or a need for more ways to address the compounding issues (Goodell, 2012a; Goodell, 2012b; National, 2012; Smith, M. D., 2013). By shifting the focus to

his claim that there was a lack of existing information regarding concussions and long-term brain trauma, he and the League were able to evade responsibility in the crisis. To enhance this, he again repeatedly listed steps the League had taken to improve the science, but listed efforts put forth towards the external audience, specifically by appealing to their values.

Throughout this time period, he also strategically repeated specific words. The word “work” signified an ongoing action – the League had been working on the problem and would continue to do so because there had been success (U.S. Army, 2012; Breslow, 2013; Smith, M.D., 2013; NFL, 2013a). The word itself also served as a sort of one-word combination of his evading responsibility and corrective action strategies. As long as there was science that needed to be discovered, the League cannot be held responsible for any brain trauma or degenerative disease that is discovered. However, they would continue to do this important work for the betterment of the game and health of the players. He also uses this word and other words like “priority” (Goodell, 2012a; Goodell, 2012b; National, 2012; Breslow, 2013; NFL, 2013a; Oconnell, 2015) and “leading role” (Smith, M.D., 2013; NFL Health, 2015), when discussing player health and safety and research across multiple documents and speeches. Repetition holds “certain persuasive consequences” and, specifically, “has undoubted rhetorical force” (Fahnestock, 2011). Using these repeatedly signifies the specific goals of Goodell’s rhetoric. Not to be mistaken, similar language was used during the first time period, but not as frequently as the main focus then was distribution of information to the players and team personnel. Unfortunately for Goodell, throughout this second time period, his empty sentences continued to alienate both audiences and produce more personal issues that had to be addressed within this compounding crisis.

I believe this type of stale, strategic, repetitive rhetoric slowly damaged Goodell's own reputation throughout the first nine years of Goodell's tenure as commissioner. As previously mentioned, 2014 brought about new crises that also tarnished his reputation, going so far as to having people question whether or not he should be the commissioner any longer (Arthur, 2014). This question never really went away, as Goodell was not trusted by many of his audiences. Surprisingly, in 2016, the League stopped flat-out denying the relationship between football and long-term brain trauma and even admitted there actually is a connection (Fainaru, 2016). They continued to make changes to improve the science of the field, but they never acknowledged or apologized to the players who were suffering and dying. As a result, the image of the NFL never improved and Goodell's own personal reputation worsened. However, rather than solely focusing on the League's image, the League (specifically the team owners) decidedly do less, and instead began to focus on fixing Goodell's personal image. This, I will argue, did little to fix his reputation and little to fix the League's image for many of their audiences. Unfortunately, for Goodell and the NFL, this further compounded the concussion crisis issue.

Chapter 4: 2016: Repairing the Leader's Image

As I have discussed in the two previous chapters, Goodell and the League had been criticized for their mishandling of the concussion crisis and many of the issues within it. While this hurt the League's image, Goodell's own personal reputation faltered as well, with fans and media questioning whether he would keep his position as the commissioner (King, 2014; Babb, 2016; King, 2016b; Vrentas, 2016). Considered to be "obstinate, heavy-handed, and overpaid," a public-policy poll found that "only 19% of self-described NFL fans had a favorable opinion of Goodell" (Kaplan, 2016). That he was not liked by these external audiences never truly had an effect on his career; Goodell never lost the support of the owners because of the increasing profits for which he had largely been credited (Babb, 2016; Bedard, 2016; Vrentas, 2016). However, following years of intense scrutiny from the media and many others on social media, his biggest supporters knew his image needed an overhaul (Kaplan, 2016; Vrentas, 2016). In this chapter, I argue that in 2016, Goodell and the League continued to use the same bolstering strategies that were used during the second time period (2012-2015) related to the concussion crisis. However, the significant change in the image repair strategies was that not only were they trying to fix the League's image but also Goodell's personal reputation.

Unfortunately, the League began to receive more negative attention because of Goodell's handling of other crises. As one writer described it, "the constant stumbling and bumbling by Goodell and the NFL office in recent years has eroded any confidence that passionate fans and its players have in Goodell" (Bedard, 2016). These events included both Adrian Peterson's and Ray Rice's domestic violence cases, as well as "Deflategate." As previously mentioned, Goodell's handling of both domestic violence cases was considered unfair and controversial. However, Goodell also received criticism for his handling of "Deflategate," which was the name

coined by the media that referred to the controversy that ensued following the 2015 AFC Championship game when the New England Patriots were accused of deflating their footballs to give quarterback Tom Brady an unfair advantage (Nocera, 2016). Goodell investigated and dealt a harsh punishment, despite the fact much of the evidence was circumstantial. However, as this was the second time in recent memory that the Patriots had been accused of cheating, “it was made clear to the commissioner that there would be repercussions for him if he went too easy on the Patriots” (Nocera, 2016). Goodell fought the Patriots for over 500 days, eventually winning after the courts backed his decision to suspend Brady for four games of the 2016 season (ESPN.com, 2015). Although he won, many saw Goodell’s behavior as that of a power-hungry leader (Hurley, 2016; Vivona, 2016).

Of course, also included in the sentiment that people no longer trusted Goodell was his handling of the concussion crisis and the legal litigation with the former players (Bedard, 2016; Kaplan, 2016). This consistent crisis along with his diminishing reputation never truly allowed the criticism of Goodell and his health-related efforts to end (King, 2016b). The crisis even hit a new audience, as the story of Dr. Omalu and the NFL made its way to the silver screen in the movie *Concussion*. Oscar-nominated actor Will Smith portrayed Dr. Omalu in the movie, which painted the NFL as the villain throughout the story. This put a spotlight unlike any other on the concussion crisis and forced Goodell and the League to embrace the dialogue rather than ignore the crisis (Vrentas, 2015).

Because of this never-ending criticism, Goodell had to continually reevaluate and improve their policies. The combination of Deflategate, the “PR fiasco that was 2014” (Kaplan, 2016), and the ongoing concussion crisis, along with other high-profile instances that occurred during his tenure, never gave Goodell or his reputation a chance to recover and repair.

Unfortunately for Goodell and the League, it appeared that “his reputation was stuck” (Kaplan, 2016). However, the movie *Concussion* did force a new discussion, and as this subject had been a part of his personal mission (Kaplan, 2016), the crisis became a part of his own personal image repair strategy. While Goodell never seemed personally concerned with fixing his image, the owners were, so they took actions in 2016 that they hoped would fix his personal reputation and image as the commissioner of the NFL (King, 2016a, Vrentas, 2016).

Leadership can have a major impact on the effectiveness of an organization’s crisis management effort (Coombs, 2015). The CEO or leader of an organization is important in helping the organization overcome the crisis because they have to set a direction as well as re-establish confidence among stakeholders (Lucero et al., 2009). Their “appearance will set the tone of engagement towards the organization’s internal and external publics,” showing the severity at which the organization views the crisis and “their resolve to return the situation to normalcy” (Lucero et al., 2009). As I have shown, in some ways, Goodell did this correctly by starting the image repair process with the concussion summit not long after he became commissioner. He then attempted to show their audiences that the League cared about the situation by taking some action throughout his first ten years as commissioner. Through much of this, he appealed to the values of the external audiences and tried to shift the conversation to be more cohesive with their messaging. Coombs (2015) stated that when organizations use values advocacy, they “attempt to influence how people prioritize their values, and to convince audiences that organizational values and individual values are compatible.” Therefore, the organizational response becomes an attempt to mold their audiences’ beliefs to what the organization needs or wants them to feel in the hope of ending a crisis.

Indeed, Goodell attempted to do this, but he never completely listened to the NFL's audiences regarding the health of the former players. His consistent use of denial and defeasibility gradually built up, angering more people. Unfortunately for organizations, "the more severe [audiences] perceive a crisis to be, the more negative are their perceptions of the organization's reputation" (Claeys, A., Cauberghe, V., & Vyncke, P., 2010). This ongoing crisis caused the NFL's integrity to be questioned, thus causing the head of the League to be questioned as well. In their article, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves" (1973), Ware and Linkugel wrote that "an attack upon a person's character...does seem to demand a direct response. The questioning of a man's moral nature, motives, or reputation is qualitatively different from the challenging of his policies." In the tenth year of his term as Commissioner, Goodell's was personally attacked more than ever from external audiences in the news media and by fans on social media. This reaction from the audiences forced Goodell to not only address the League's reputation, but his own as well.

To improve and attempt to repair Goodell's personal image, I argue Goodell and the League tried to use the concussion crisis to their advantage. As this was considered a personal priority and "core issue of his platform" (Kaplan, 2016), he continued to bolster what they believed to be their own corrective actions. While discussing improvements for the current players, his messages were directed to external audiences to appeal to their values. Part of this involved limiting his public appearances, making his messages more planned and calculated. Rather than reacting to defamatory statements, he worked in the background while letting others respond (Babb, 2016). However, many formal, prepared, and proactive messages that came from the League had Goodell's name attached to them. These documents, which I detail more below, were used as corrective action and bolstering image repair strategies. Any document that

required any sort of denial or defeasibility came from others within the League. To make my argument, I analyze a statement made by the League, a “defense” announced by the Vice President of Communications, a Congressional report, two memos from Goodell, and the announcement of a health and safety campaign. At the time of this writing, I believe this once again failed for the Commissioner, because despite the fact that his appearances were limited and only used when positive information was being distributed, negativity still surrounded his and the League’s image. These efforts were all meant to repair Goodell’s and the League’s image, but they failed because they *still* continued to ignore the health of the former players. Instead, Goodell and the League put their efforts towards focusing on the future. Much of what they were doing appeared to be a false, public relations campaign that people continued to not understand (Devineni, 2016). While there were definitely improvements made during this year, the reputation of the leader gave the League another issue to deal with, thus compounding the crisis even more.

A New Strategy

This change in strategy can be pinpointed to January 2016, when Joe Lockhart was hired by the League (Babb, 2016). Lockhart, President Bill Clinton’s White House Press Secretary during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, was brought on to be the Vice President of Communications for the NFL and was told his primary responsibility was to “manage the League’s reputation” (Kaplan, 2016). While that covered a wide variety of subjects, his main task was to “repair Roger Goodell’s image” (Kaplan, 2016). At this point in Goodell’s career it seemed that every time he spoke he was being criticized for it (Bedard, 2016). Kent Babb with *The Washington Post* (2016) wrote that “his tenure has been marked by remarkable growth and considerable turmoil...Goodell’s public image is so poor the League office itself isn’t sure how to rehabilitate it.” Another writer coined this new image repair as the #RemakeRoger campaign,

playing into the criticism he had received across social media platforms (Bedard, 2016). Seeming to have chosen to no longer fight these perceptions held by the external audiences, at times he appeared to have accepted the role of villain in the NFL (Babb, 2016; Kaplan, 2016). To Goodell, the reputation and criticisms of “the shield” were placed even above his own personal reputation (Bledsoe, 2015; Kaplan, 2016). While the owners understood and appreciated Goodell, they did not like the image that surrounded him (Vrentas, 2016). So in understanding the need to fix both their leader’s and the organization’s image, the League attempted to first repair Goodell’s.

The first true corrective action that was made in the entire concussion crisis was during a congressional roundtable in March 2016. When asked about the science and whether or not the existence of a link existed, the NFL’s senior Vice President of health and safety responded by saying, “The answer to that question is certainly yes” (Fainaru, 2016). For the first time ever, a senior official of the NFL acknowledged the link they long denied (Fainaru, 2016). Simultaneously, they disavowed all of their previous responses and actions that denied the connection. Though it was not directly said by Goodell, who for years avoided answering the question, the NFL released a statement the following day, “The comments made by Jeff Miller yesterday accurately reflect the view of the NFL” (Fainaru, 2016). As all communications and comments from the NFL are directed by Goodell, this statement can be read as a major change on his behalf. Indeed a major step, the League acknowledged a link but did not acknowledge this as a possibility for the past deaths and current issues many former players were still facing, thus continuing to ignore the former players. However, the lawyers of former players who had sued the NFL over the damaging effects of concussions to their health, began using Miller’s admittance within hours for an appeals case to cast doubt on the legitimacy of a previous

settlement some saw as too little. The League responded by giving a nameless statement denouncing the letter, which in turn denounced the former players concerns about their health (Fainaru, 2016).

Before Lockhart's arrival, both of the NFL's statements could have had Goodell's name attached directly to them, prompting criticism and public outcry, but it was noticeably left off. Adding his name would have possibly diminished its importance in the overall image repair because he could have been criticized or called a hypocrite after years of denial. Another example of this came shortly after an article was published by *The New York Times*, which ran with the following headline: "NFL's Flawed Concussion Research and Ties to Tobacco Industry" (Schwarz, Bogdanich, & Williams, 2016). A long, investigative report, this article accused the League of using incorrect data to create many of their early CTE studies that were published in scholarly journals including *Neurosurgery*. It also described and explained ways the NFL and the Tobacco Industry were tied, mostly through similar actions and people who helped cover up any reports of the connection between football and CTE. Rather than letting Goodell respond as he typically would have before, the League itself demanded a retraction from the *Times* and Lockhart himself wrote a rebuttal letter (Lockhart, 2016). This letter used the same bolstering strategies Goodell had used in the past, starting with,

the NFL has been on the front lines supporting research, changing the rules of the sport, engaging in partnerships with the military, NCAA, CDC, and others, advocating for sport safety legislation and promoting concussion awareness all in an effort to make sports safer (Lockhart, 2016).

Following the image-bashing that was *The New York Times* article, the League responded quickly, reminding audiences of what they had actually done. Almost immediately, though, the

letter went on the offense as Lockhart denied some of the accusations that were made against them. The claims were clearly identified by Lockhart, titling the *Times*' claims as Research "Allegations" and Alleged "Ties." His own responses to those claims were titled, "The Facts Prove Otherwise," in which he explained why he felt these specific parts of the *Times* article were false. This article, which was written in true Lockhart-style (King, 2016ba), did not do much to repair the League's image. It appeared to be much like their previous attempts of denial with its combative and harsh tone, a knee-jerk reaction to a report. Even though it did not come from Goodell, the rebuttal was consistent with previous NFL strategies, tying many of them together. He finished the letter by saying, "The NFL is not the tobacco industry. It had no connection to the tobacco industry. Nor did it follow the tobacco industry playbook to conceal data to skew scientific research" (Lockhart, 2016).

Unfortunately, no matter what Lockhart or Goodell said, past mistakes would continue to tie the League and Big Tobacco together. The thought had been publicly addressed during the 2009 Congressional hearings wherein Goodell arrogantly responded to this and other accusations. As this comparison was still a common sentiment, it proved that little had changed during those seven years of organizational image repair. Unfortunately for Goodell, he had been the leader of the crisis during this time, thus his reputation was upheld in a negative way. Though Lockhart was indeed the person responding, the League as a whole once again denied a claim that related to the head health of their former players. With the integrity of Goodell and the League constantly in question despite the corrective actions they made for the future of the League, their image repair again was failing. Audiences attributed much of the past denials to Goodell, and though his name was not directly attached, their negative perceptions of him and the League continued.

This only worsened in May when a Congressional report was published, confirming an investigation that was published in December, 2015. Writers from ESPN's *Outside the Lines* wrote an article that stated the NFL had actually tried to influence \$16 million of the 2012 donation to the NIH (Fainaru & Fainaru-Wada, 2015). Having previously called it "unrestricted," Goodell and the League once again looked like they had lied and tried to influence science related to football and concussions (Ley, 2015). A mere two months after being accused by *The New York Times* for using faulty science for their players' health in the past, this article accused them of attempting to influence the research their donation was going towards (Pallone, 2016). The report confirmed the investigation, finding that the League was trying to "funnel the final \$16 million to another project that would involve members of the League's brain injury committee" rather than it getting distributed to other independent researchers (Ley, 2016). A spokesman for the NFL officially responded by rejecting the idea of any wrongdoing and insisted they would review the information (Fainaru, 2016). This was quite reminiscent of the earlier years of NFL concussion research and their influencing of the research to coincide with their own messaging. Rather than being able to tout the amount of the donation and information that was being gained from it, they instead were put back on the defense. And, while answering an entire new round of questions and concerns, they were again denying any wrongdoing. Not using his name was a smart decision for Goodell's image, but it did not help the League's image.

Following the tumultuous first half of 2016, which included acknowledging the connection between football and CTE, *The New York Times* article, and the congressional report, Goodell finally made two corrective actions to repair the League's bruised image in the form of two formal announcements. The first arrived as a memo that was sent to all 32 teams, directly

from him, to inform the teams the League was going to hire a physician who would work with the League office on a full-time basis as the Chief Medical Officer. The purpose of this position was to establish an actual practitioner who would oversee the NFL's actions in relation to player health and safety, building upon initiatives that had been "designed to accelerate science, identify new technologies and means of preventing and treating injuries, and make our sport safer" (NFL, 2016b). As they felt they had already done a lot of work in this area, the memo gave Goodell another opportunity to remind and bolster their past actions. This announcement allowed the League to establish someone to oversee their many programs and prevent them from making any more mistakes. A positive message, it was an opportunity to make a corrective action without outright admitting they had already made numerous errors.

Within this memo was a second major announcement that many in both the internal and external audiences had waited a long time to hear: the controversial Dr. Elliot Pellman had officially retired. In another attempt at a corrective action, it was actually stated in the memo that Goodell requested Pellman retire and he accepted (Seifert, 2016). Often, when controversial characters retire there may be questions as to whether or not they were forced into it or just outright fired. In this case, there was absolutely no doubt. According to ESPN, Goodell finally understood "that the NFL must demonstrate strong leadership on health and safety and that its players and fans need to trust the League" (Seifert, 2016). For many years, Pellman was negatively tied into the concussion crisis, publishing controversial papers, doctoring reports, and encouraging players to continue playing while seriously injured. After years of criticism, audiences questioned why he was still involved with the League, especially after the football and head trauma acknowledgement earlier in 2016, which he directly disagreed with (Draper, 2016; Ley, 2016; Moskowitz, 2015). This individual was one of many reasons audiences felt Goodell

did not listen to them (King, 2016a) and had his own agenda. Finally, it seemed Goodell understood the perception and made this corrective action. Unfortunately, while a positive step in the overall concussion crisis, it still did not address the former players. There was no comment about Pellman's past discretions, "scientific research," or mishandling of funds. Goodell acknowledged the existence of a negative perception but did not acknowledge the basis of the perception. The subtle bolstering showed Goodell made the corrective action for the League, but because the discretions had gone on for so long, this was only a small step and audiences were still hesitant to trust the NFL.

A short five days later, the NFL and the NFLPA together announced a new policy to enforce concussion protocol during games (NFL, 2016a). This policy, which was designed to "focus on enforcing game-day concussion protocol," gave Goodell "full discretion over disciplinary action for violations" (Fitzgerald, 2016). Disciplinary actions were listed, including a requirement of violating team members to attend educational classes and fines for teams who violated or encouraged the violation. If teams repeatedly broke these protocols, Goodell had full rights to determine what appropriate discipline should be then taken. He even was able to force teams to forfeit their draft picks if he believed the protocol was broken due to "competitive considerations" (NFL, 2016a).

This, a corrective action done to improve the current players' health and safety on the field, actually hurt Goodell's image for two reasons. First, this kept him side-by-side with owners and front office staff. The NFLPA would not give him more power to punish the players if they did anything to violate it (for example, cheat on the on-field concussion protocol), but they conceded to let him continue working with his biggest supporters while punishing them. For those who questioned his ability to separate himself from his friendships with the owners,

one need only look to his intensity in punishing the New England Patriots and owner/buddy Robert Kraft following the “Deflategate.” However, his passion and insistence on ensuring they were punished led to the second problem: power.

After Deflategate, many people including players, fans, and the media felt he was too power-hungry, constantly pushing and taking an increased number of steps to punish an NFL star and one of the most successful teams in recent years. Through this new concussion protocol, he had entirely too much freedom and ability to punish the violators. According to the release, he “retain[ed] sole discretion in determining penalties for violations of the game-day concussion protocol” (NFL, 2016a). Guidelines were not established, which essentially gave Goodell the right to make up punishments as each violation occurred. And with each violation that occurred, Goodell could try to say he was being fair, but the policy provided nothing to keep him in check. Rather than audiences seeing this as a potentially effective way to make the game safer, his power in punishing violators became the focus (Cosentino, 2016). Unfortunately for Goodell, this was just another event that added to his reputation of being a power-hungry individual (Hurley, 2016; Vivona, 2016). Already considered to be “obstinate, heavy-handed, and overpaid,” the commissioner’s disciplinarian style had been a major factor in hurting his relationship with many of his audiences (Kaplan, 2016). Even team owners who were his strongest supporters felt he had begun to abuse his power (Vrentas, 2016). Coined by Peter King as the “conduct commissioner” (2016), indeed he once again appeared to consider holding the role of sole disciplinarian a major part of his job. This protocol, while potentially effective in improving the health and safety of players on the field, added to the reputation of him being a power-craving individual that was in charge of one of the biggest and well-known organizations in the world.

Possibly the biggest and most deliberate image repair strategy in 2016 was the announcement of the “Play Smart. Play Safe.” campaign. This campaign was announced in mid-September just as the League’s season began, and “just four months after the congressional investigation concluded that the League improperly influenced a major government research study on football and brain disease” (Devineni, 2016). On the day of the announcement, Goodell appeared on various networks including *The Today Show* and had his own introductory letter for the program published in *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as the program’s website, PlaySmartPlaySafe.com (2016). By doing these interviews and publishing the information across multiple platforms, he bolstered his new program to multiple audiences. A clear public relations move, Goodell was using this program to improve his own and the League’s image. This was not surprising though, as a few months before many owners were quoted as saying the League had a PR problem regarding player health and safety. They felt Goodell and the League had made many proactive steps, but that their messaging had not been promoted enough (Gantt, 2016). This program would attempt to do exactly that.

This major announcement included two key parts. First, it included a donation of another \$100 million to fund various forms of scientific research to improve player health and safety (Goodell, 2016). Again, only a few months after the League was found guilty of tampering with their previous “unrestricted” donation, Goodell had to make it clear that this money and its use would not be influenced by the League. In the letter, he clarified the donation would be used “for independent medical research and engineering advancements” (Goodell, 2016) He also explained that this \$100 million donation was made in addition to the previous donations, also worth a total of \$100 million, made to advance medical research. All of this money, Goodell explained without giving any specific details, was donated because the League’s primary interest

was “keeping our players and the public informed about these important health issues” (Goodell, 2016). Each dollar they had spent brought new information they believed had helped the sport. It also just added to their never-ending collection of actions they made in attempting to remedy the problem without admitting there actually was a problem.

The second thing Goodell did in this announcement was establish four pillars on which the program was built: “Protecting Players,” “Advanced Technology,” “Medical Research,” and “Sharing Progress” (Goodell, 2016). Throughout the letter, the purpose and goals of each pillar were described and included an example of one of their past partnerships or initiatives. These four pillars were part of their “goal of making the game safer” and were meant to simply explain the progress they had already made. These pillars were similar to the goals Goodell had provided before in the Congressional statement in 2009 and on NFLEvolution.com. The adjustment and editing of these pillars signified a change in their goals, or rather showed how the goals evolved based off of the things Goodell and the League had actually done in the ten years leading up to this. In this, Goodell tried to influence the audiences’ values by explaining that the actions he and the League had taken were good and were what the audiences should actually value. However, some of these previous actions were met with criticism, which Goodell acknowledged in the letter when he wrote that he and the NFL “know there is skepticism about our work in this area” (Goodell, 2016). But through the Play Smart Play Safe program, he was again prepared to provide information to change that perception. This showed that he and the League had taken better actions to improve the science in football, concussions, and long-term brain health. The creation of the program’s website helped him do this, as Goodell and the League were able to place all of their corrective actions in a central and convenient location, summarizing everything in ways best suited to bolster the League’s image.

Much like the second time period, Goodell used repetition of specific words in the letter to emphasize and influence the reader. Again, he used the words “priority” and “leader” throughout the letter as a way for the audience to see the severity in which they were taking the issue. Textually, a paragraph early in the letter is one of the most interesting:

The NFL has been a leader on health and safety in many ways, and we’ve made some real strides in recent years. But when it comes to addressing head injuries in our game, I’m not satisfied, and neither are the owners of the NFL’s 32 clubs. We can and will do better (Goodell, 2016).

Immediately, Goodell identified the NFL as the leader throughout the last few years in this science, but by saying “in many ways” he conceded without actually saying that more work needed to be done – something he had emphasized for a long time. However, what is most important for the image repair is that he then defined who “we” is: himself and the owners.

This collective group is consistently acknowledged throughout the rest of the letter and initiative in general. First, he singled himself, by saying he personally was not content with the work that had been done. He then specifically identified the thirty-two owners as having the same feelings, thus making them an integral part of this program. Indeed, this was the same group that was the largest financial stakeholder of the organization and the same group that stood behind Goodell during the last few years as he was ridiculed and criticized by players, coaches, fans, and the media (Babb, 2016; Vrentas, 2016). Defining this group gave them all a purpose, which was used in an attempt to simultaneously fix both the League’s and his own image. He did this by constantly repeating the efforts this specific group had put forth in the campaign. Unfortunately, this again failed as this same group had a reputation for being more concerned with their bottom line rather than the health of those who were bringing in the money. Goodell

and the League could have been doing good things with their work, but they were not going to get credit for it because to many this looked like a PR campaign for both Goodell and the League (Devineni, 2016).

As with other instances in the past, the former players were mentioned in the letter and on the website, but only briefly. Goodell again attempted to bolster their work with the former players who were already suffering and those who might in the future by commenting on their eagerness to implement the terms of the “historic settlement” they reached with the former players and their families (Goodell, 2016). The plans put in place were listed with few details on the website, but the majority of the site emphasized the progress going forward. By emphasizing the idea that he and the League were ready to begin paying out the lawsuit that was actually brought against them made it seem like they actually cared about those players rather than the millions of dollars they were going to lose. But, this ridiculous statement lacked the details of what happened with the former players, the League, and this lawsuit.

It seemed in 2013 that when the \$765 million settlement was reached, many people assumed the lawsuit was over and few cared about the litigation. In fact, when researching for this thesis, many websites that had extensive concussion coverage contained articles with timelines of concussion litigation that end with the initial settlement and are never revised (Ezell, 2013; NFL, 2013a; Petchesky, 2013). However, from 2013 to 2016, repeated appeals, blocks, and changes had been made to the settlement as the initial deal lacked actual benefits and real compensation for suffering retired NFL players (Barrett, 2014; Breslow, 2014; Belson, 2016). These repeated motions or the controversy associated with them were not mentioned in this letter or the website, despite the fact that much of it was still tied up in court at the time of the letter’s publication (Goodell, 2016). Blatantly omitting these details helped the League avoid negative

attention while announcing Goodell's new campaign. Instead, they chose to appear enthusiastic about compensating the former players without admitting they were the cause of the lawsuit.

The "Play Smart. Play Safe" campaign was a planned and deliberate attempt at fixing the League's and Goodell's image. Making it about himself and the owners gave the initiative a personal connection that many in his audience might have seen as proactive and corrective. The annual Health and Safety report even took on a slightly different tone as it came out later than usual, containing and emphasizing the "Play Smart. Play Safe" campaign and its initiatives. The opening letter from Goodell was mostly a shortened, word-for-word version of the "Play Smart Play Safe" campaign letter (Health, 2016). However, upon review, these actions were all just updated, new and improved versions of previous programs. NFL Evolution.com was an early version of this campaign, with its website and pillars that addressed many actions the NFL had made to progress the science related to football, head trauma, and long-term brain health. That website was ineffective and the NFL stopped updating it in 2015, not even three years after it was created. It was then replaced by PlaySmartPlaySafe.com and the program's evolved initiatives and pillars. As this is early on in the program's creation, it will be hard to tell if this will last much longer or do much more than the previous website. But, one thing that was definitely common throughout both websites was Goodell's image as the leader, ensuring fans that he was doing what he could to make the sport safer in the future.

Conclusion

Goodell's appearances in 2016 changed dramatically, having him only make announcements in planned ways, rather than having his name attached to reactions. Many of his audiences did not like him, so having his name or image attached to any message, whether it be positive or negative, seemed to elicit a negative response. Even though many of their efforts evolved, his personal appearance continued to hurt the League's image repair. As he continued

to bolster their efforts and make the League seem like they had made multiple corrective actions, the audiences continued to distrust him. After ten years of successes and mistakes, the number of issues have compounded the crisis. It seems that no matter what image repair strategies Goodell uses for himself or the League, his reputation as the leader of the League will never truly be repaired.

Chapter 5: The Future of the NFL, Roger Goodell, and the Concussion Crisis

On Monday, December 12, 2016, the Supreme Court of the United States declined to hear “two challenges to the estimated \$1 billion settlement between the NFL and thousands of its former players who have been diagnosed with brain injuries linked to repeated concussions” (*Supreme Court*, 2016). In refusing to hear the challenges, the Court put an end to the class action lawsuit initiated in the summer of 2011 by nearly 20,000 former players against the NFL. Some of those former players were likely to start receiving their payouts as early as March 2017. For the NFL, the lawsuit meant they “admitted no fault as part of the settlement” and, just as important, that they might “never have to disclose what it knew and when about the risks and treatment of repeated concussions” (*Supreme Court*, 2016). It also meant they got off rather light. As Michael McCann, writing for *Sports Illustrated* (2016), put it:

While the NFL’s pledge to pay about \$1 billion sounds astronomical, it is in fact a much more modest figure when considering two dynamics: first, the league takes in about \$13 billion a year in revenue and second, the \$1 billion will be paid out over 65 years. The math underscores this point: \$1 billion over 65 years is \$15.4 million a year, a figure that is even less impressive when incorporating the impact of annual inflation.

Although some former players who opted out of the class action lawsuit might still sue the NFL separately, the decision was, at least for the NFL, a welcome end to a long and costly legal battle. In fact, Brian McCarthy, the NFL’s Vice President of Communications, was the only member of the organization to comment on the Court’s refusal, noting rather simply that the “league was pleased with the decision” (*Supreme Court*, 2016).

One reason the NFL was happy the lawsuit was finally settled was because there was evidence that the ongoing focus on concussions and CTE was hurting their bottom line. As was

widely reported during the 2016 season, the NFL's television ratings were down dramatically from the previous year, which meant decreasing advertisement revenue (Pilon, 2016). So bad were things that some even began marking the year as the start of football's decline. As Mary Pilon wrote about it in the *New York Post* (2016), "the decline in the ratings underscores a bigger truth that no one wants to face: Nothing lasts forever. And that includes the popularity of professional football." Although numerous reasons were cited for the decline—the 2016 presidential election, changes in media consumptions and NFL players protesting police killings of unarmed black men—the concussion crisis was widely seen as one contributing factor (Pilon, 2016). Indeed, as this thesis has shown, it would be more accurate to say that Roger Goodell and the NFL's mishandling of the concussion crisis was one of the reasons the League's image had begun to darken.

Review of the Findings

After reviewing a number of documents revealing Goodell's and the NFL's rhetoric regarding the concussion crisis, I have shown that he incorrectly used a variety of messages targeted towards various audiences during his first ten years as commissioner. Indeed, as the crisis aged, both the messaging and the audiences evolved, as Goodell had to adjust his strategies as expectations and situations changed. These significant changes in strategies exposed three separate time periods in which Goodell's messages had similar characteristics and patterns. Though it ultimately seems to have failed, all of these efforts were put forth in an attempt to repair the image of the NFL.

The first time period occurred from 2007 to 2010, almost immediately after Goodell was voted in as commissioner. Throughout this time period, Goodell prioritized the internal audience as he attempted to improve the awareness of health and safety for current players by distributing memos, letters, a pamphlet, and a poster. In doing so, Goodell used Benoit's denial, reducing the

offensiveness of the act, and corrective action strategies (1995) to repair the League's image while claiming to make the game safer. These strategies failed for two reasons. First, much of the information that was used came from the NFL's own controversial science and doctors who appeared to put the best interests of the League before the actual health of the players. Second, the messaging was unsuccessful because he and others within the organization blatantly denied a connection between football and long-term brain health, thus failing to address the health of the former players. This lack of attention made it appear as if Goodell and the League no longer cared about those who helped build the sport and cared more so for the League's bottom line. The former players were the reason the crisis had begun, yet the NFL chose to not help them as they were struggling or dying.

The second time period, from 2012 to 2015, saw a dramatic change in Goodell's rhetoric when discussing the concussion crisis. After working out a new collective bargaining agreement in 2011 (Rosenthal, 2011), Goodell's messaging targeted the League's external audiences, using press releases, a website, and annual health and safety reports among other materials, which the fans and media would be more easily able to see. Rather than outright denying the connection, he used evading responsibility (Benoit, 1995), specifically the defeasibility strategy, to elude the connection, possibly for legal litigation reasons. He continued to use corrective action (Benoit, 1995), but he also used the bolstering strategy (Benoit, 1995) to inform the public of the actions the NFL was taking in regards to overall player health and safety. These programs and initiatives helped the current players, youth athletes, and the military specifically, but again, they failed to truly do anything for the former players. The class action lawsuit from the former players began during this time period (Avila, 2012), as did the initial \$765 million settlement (Belson, 2013), but that eventually was overturned in court, with appeals and new judgments

delaying the payout through 2016. As this was the only formal mention of the former players, Goodell's rhetoric again failed in repairing the NFL's image.

The final time period, 2016, was the beginning of a completely new group of strategies as Goodell's personal reputation was also in need of an overhaul. Indeed, some of the strategies from the previous time periods were used again, including bolstering (Benoit, 1995), but they were no longer just attempting to fix the League's image. His connection to the delivery of the messages also changed, as those messages that were negative did not include his name, keeping him out of the public eye, while positive messages were distributed by Goodell personally. These messages again targeted the external audiences, hoping to show them the actions the League had made to help with player health and safety. But, once again, they failed to address the former players in any direct way. Unfortunately for Goodell and the NFL, despite some positive efforts and programs that were put forth in the field of health and safety, his continued lack of truly addressing the former players is what hurt their image. After nearly ten years of trying everything but what was actually needed, Goodell never repaired the League's image and, in fact, has potentially made it worse.

It was Goodell's repeated mistakes throughout these three time periods that created the compounding crisis for the NFL and himself. Rather than fixing the League's image, it worsened with responses to each new issue that arose. I believe this concept of a compounding crisis is something that we need to further understand within the overarching ideas of organizational crisis and response. Currently, we have crisis response theories that look at the crisis, the organizational response, and the audience response, leading us to a conclusion of the crisis (Coombs, 2015). But, as is evident with the NFL, there are so many more elements that can play into those three basic steps that prevent the crisis from ending. With the case of the

NFL, audiences were repeatedly unsatisfied with Goodell's messages and actions. Rather than moving on from the crisis, he constantly had to respond to the audiences' opinions. What is more, issues arose that were indirectly related to the crisis, thus demanding separate responses from Goodell or the League. Each organizational response, followed by an audience response, followed by another organizational response created a sort of theoretical widening funnel, with the crisis at the base and each message looming larger and larger over top of it. As Goodell was constantly the individual delivering these messages, or involved in the delivery of these messages, the crisis also became very much about him, not just the situation. In this case, the leader had to not only defend the organization's image and propose new solutions, but he had to do the same for his own personal reputation. All of these elements, whether directly or indirectly related to the beginning of the initial crisis, created the massive crisis that the League is still having to address and will continue to do so for some time.

It is definitely probable that legal litigation is the reason the NFL and Goodell neglected the former players for so long. Apologizing could be a form of admitting guilt, thus opening them up to different sorts of lawsuits. However, based off of research by Patel and Reinsch (2003), it is possible that they could apologize for their past transgressions, without facing legal repercussions if they carefully worded it. In fact, admitting the League *may* have held some responsibility and apologizing for that possibility may have been better than much of the messaging Goodell and the League distributed for the number of years they did it. Unfortunately for Goodell and the NFL, public opinion had already been decided and the government had already chosen its side, with both opinions vehemently known. Rather, if Goodell took a step back and let the League acknowledge that they now understood through new science that the former players were not properly equipped to have played this incredibly physical sport, then the

entire crisis could have ended much sooner for the League. Compensation for those former players would still have to have happened, as that is the new form of apology (Hearit, 2006), but their image may have not suffered from the long-term repercussions this compounding crisis has brought on. Indeed, Goodell and the League would have appeared to be listening to their audiences. The former players would have more quickly received the help they needed, and the fans and media, who expected this to happen, would have potentially given them credit for the actions the League was taking. Instead, out of fear of legal repercussions, Goodell and the NFL chose to avoid the health of their former employees while everyone watched and criticized.

The NFL is an incredibly recognizable brand in American culture and possibly even the world. The organization itself is distinctive in that the NFL acts as a governing body over the thirty-two individual teams that people within the American culture, the fans, actually connect with. Somewhat oddly, its structure and representatives are much more commonly known than most other culturally-significant organizations. In this way, it stands as a cultural touchstone – we know and understand enough of how the business side of the League operates, and while there is much criticism, the NFL is still a major part of our everyday lives. Sports, and especially football, have never been more popular or financially valuable (Bery, 2013; Isidore, 2013). A part of our popular culture, the sports industry is part of what shapes our assumptions of the world. They influence us, so we look to them to understand how to behave, act, and think, what to like and dislike, what is right and wrong (Silk, 2012). As we look to sports organizations to “aid us in making sense of our lives” (Silk, 2012), it should be no surprise, then, that so much attention and criticism is given to Roger Goodell and the NFL. We expect them to be morally righteous, taking care of their employees playing on the field no matter how brutal and physical the sport can be. However, what is surprising is how an incredibly recognizable, and powerful

organization was able to do this for so many years. Even with their sheer number of resources and ever-growing popularity on their side, Goodell still continued to make mistake after mistake, seemingly contradicting with society's morality related to the former players and long-term brain damage. Ultimately, it was Goodell's and the League's constant neglect of the former players that made their external audiences and even some of their internal audiences lose trust in the organization. Instead, they further compounded the crisis for the NFL, damaging the League's and Goodell's image along the way.

As scholars, we can use the NFL's failures to further understand how a compounding crisis works and affects organizational image repair. Unfortunately for the NFL, this story is not going to disappear any time soon. As long as Goodell is leading the player health and safety initiatives, there will always be criticism and questions of his motivations. Granted, Goodell has attempted to improve the health and safety of the sport through rules, partnerships, and research funds, thus making it safer for the current and future players. While some of these efforts have created positive results (Health, 2016), others have been plagued with controversy (Conway, 2016). If these strategies continue going forward, Goodell, no matter what responses he offers, may continue to struggle with an image issue throughout the rest of his tenure. Using these ideas as a template, I believe this thesis is a foundation of which much research can grow. The controversy and mistakes of Goodell and the NFL are what will continue to give us material to study this organization, thus watching this specific compounding crisis grow.

Conclusion

After many years of attempting to repair it, it seems that the image audiences have of Goodell and the NFL is going to be held for a long time. Increasingly, audiences more vociferously react and critique their new policies and announcements, and for good reason. If Goodell and the League are going to put policies in place that affect the health and well-being of

a player, then their rhetoric needs to be reviewed to ensure that it contains actions and improvements to the sport and its players, not just distributed to improve their image. One such example of this happened in Week 1 of the 2016 season after Carolina Panthers quarterback Cam Newton took a horrific-looking blow to his head. As this was a direct hit, it appeared he should have been removed from the game to go through concussion protocol, but he was, in fact, not. The NFL was criticized as their brand-new concussion policy was already broken, with the NFL essentially explaining that their medical staff and the team's medical staff felt that there were no signs or symptoms of a concussion. Tom Ley, writing for *Deadspin.com* (2016), explained what this actually meant, "The power of the protocol is based on the NFL's ability to subjectively define two key terms: 'concussion symptoms' and 'big hits.'" As long as there is a lack of reliable science, Goodell and the League have deniability with the sport and head trauma. And with the payout of the settlement to begin in 2017, the League also does not have to admit fault or negligence that may have occurred. A blatant dismissal of their former employees, Goodell and the League have created a divide between the organization and the audiences that may never fully go away.

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