

# State of the Game



**38%**  
think he should go

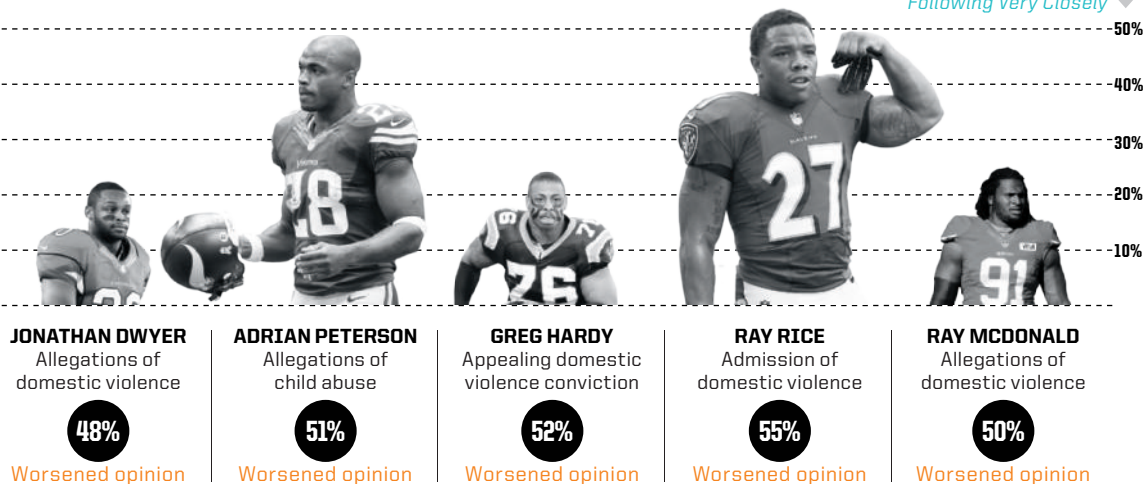
**34%**  
are unsure



# 20%

Of fans who are following the latest news surrounding **Roger Goodell** think the NFL commissioner **should keep his job** based on the events of the past few weeks . . .

How closely fans have followed each issue, and how it has affected their opinion of the NFL:



\* Of those who follow the story very/somewhat closely

... So says a poll conducted last weekend by SPORTS ILLUSTRATED through Marketing & Research Resources, Inc. The responses (collected from more than 500 NFL fans, with a margin of error of plus/minus 4.33 percentage points) reflect changing views about the game—including the author's own | **BY TIM LAYDEN**

On the third night of February in 2008, little-used Giants receiver David Tyree plucked a football from high in the air, pinned it to his helmet and crashed to the ground. Millions gasped in disbelief. It was not only the signature moment of the 42nd Super Bowl, not only one of the most remarkable plays in the history of the NFL, but it was also, in the unreal vacuum of that instant, fantastical and life-affirming in the way that sports can be. We caught the ball with Tyree and we fought to yank it loose like Patriots safety Rodney Harrison. We let our eyes grow wide and mouthed a silent *Wow*, like back judge Scott Helverson, who signaled that Tyree's catch was good. We all marveled together.

It was scarcely different for me. The hours following the game were a riot of energy. The Giants had finished off their 17-14 upset of New England, which was attempting to complete the first perfect season since the 1972 Dolphins. Lit-

tle field-side cannons fired confetti, and commissioner Roger Goodell stood tall in his blue suit as he presented the Lombardi Trophy to New York owner John Mara. I raced onto the field to interview the victors as one of coach Tom Coughlin's grandchildren made snow

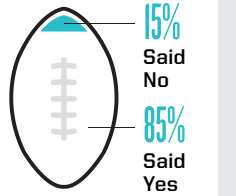
angels in a pile of pastel-colored paper. Writing until dawn, I closed my game story for SPORTS ILLUSTRATED with that cuddly image: a little kid in the confetti. Then I fell asleep like much of America had done a few hours earlier—wasted yet entertained; exhausted yet naively fulfilled by a silly game. It had been a good night for football.

But in truth the sport was already changing beneath my feet. I will never embrace a football game in quite the same way I did that night.

As you read this, we are nearing the end of one of the worst months in modern football history, a month that could someday be remembered as the period in which the most popular sport in America began sliding from its peak. First came the Ray Rice video from inside the elevator, delivering the reality of domestic violence to televisions and laptops in a way that is seldom seen outside a prosecutor's office while making a mockery of the running back's initial pun-

If your son wanted to play tackle football, would you let him?

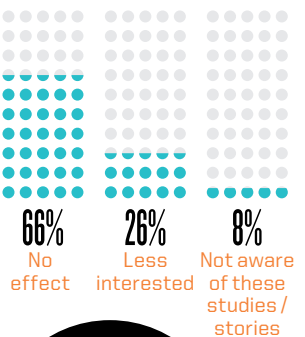
(Those without kids were asked to respond theoretically.)



91% of those who had played tackle football themselves said yes.

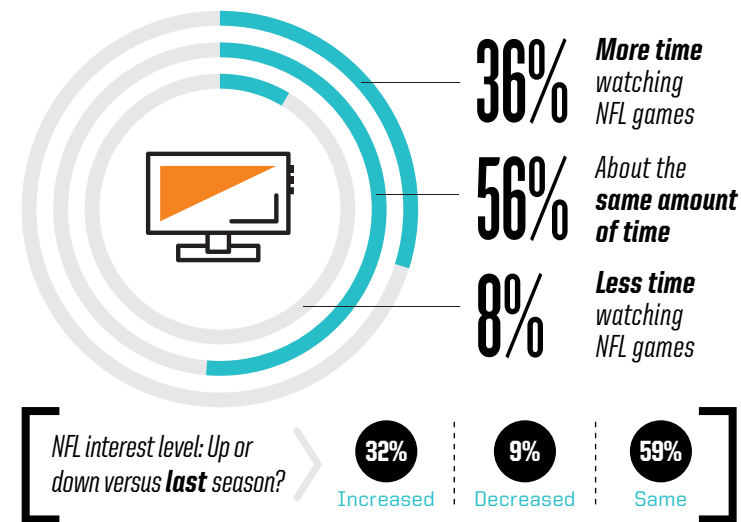


What effect have recent studies and news stories about the long-term health risks of head injuries to football players had on your interest in the NFL?



Only 38% of fans were familiar with the degenerative brain disease CTE—chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

Fans were asked: Over the past two years, are you spending more, less or the same amount of time watching NFL games compared with what you did before that?



**44%**

of female fans say they have watched the NFL more often in the past two years than they did before that.

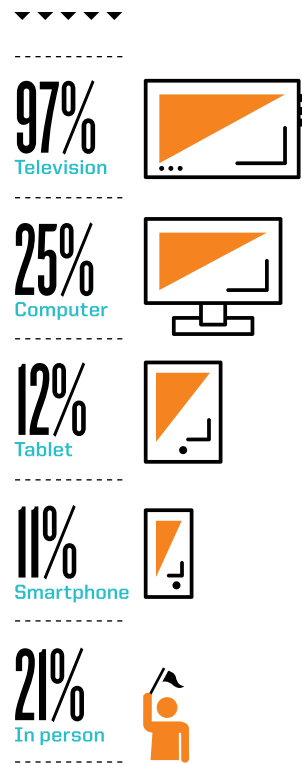
**GOODELL'S FEMALE APPROVAL RATING: ONLY 20% WANT HIM TO STAY**



FROM LEFT: SETH WENIG/AP; MARK I. REBULAS/USA TODAY SPORTS; MATTHEW EMMONS/USA TODAY SPORTS; EVAN THREKEM; TOM PRATER/MANGLIO JOSE SANFELIZ/AP

ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

Which of the following ways will you watch NFL games this season?



94% said they will watch most often on TV. Just 5% will choose to watch most often on mobile devices or on a computer.

How important is it to you that the NFL addresses each of the following issues? Issues below are ordered from most to least important

EXTREMELY IMPORTANT

ishment, a two-game suspension. Then came outrage over the fact that two defensive linemen were still in uniform: the Panthers' Greg Hardy, who had been found guilty of assault on a female and communicating threats, and the 49ers' Ray McDonald, who had been arrested for suspicion of felony domestic violence. (Carolina later placed Hardy on a paid leave of absence.)

Even as the league scrambled to formulate Shield-saving, damage-control responses to three domestic abuse cases, the news broke on running back Adrian Peterson: charges of reckless or negligent injury on a child. Again, there was startling visual evidence, and this time the perpetrator was one of the game's biggest stars, a Sunday-afternoon superhero who whipped his four-year-old son with a tree limb stripped of leaves. Peterson was deactivated, reactivated and then put on paid leave by the Vikings, the latest action coming shortly after megasponsor Anheuser-Busch publicly harrumphed over bad

behavior by NFL players. On Sept. 17, Cardinals running back Jonathan Dwyer was deactivated after also being charged with domestic violence.

This was a new chapter in football's decline, but it wasn't new to the larger narrative. Thirteen months before the Giants' victory in Glendale, Ariz., Alan Schwarz of *The New York Times* reported that neuropathologists had tied the suicide of former NFL safety Andre Waters to brain damage caused by playing football. The story was significant and chilling, and it played like the first wave of an ocean storm, lapping ashore far ahead of dangerous winds.

Eight years and much journalism later, there's no questioning the connection between football and brain damage, only its scope. In what's left after domestic violence in the NFL and traumatic brain injury at all levels of the game, I find little worthy of embrace. I can't help but wonder if the two are connected, and if the violence between the white lines can't help but spill into everyday life.

**F**OR A long time the game raced forward because so many Americans love it. I'm one of those Americans. Some of my fondest memories center on playing catch in the backyard with my father after watching NFL and college games together. I was the quarterback on a successful small-town high school team, and while I wasn't good enough to make the varsity at Division III Williams, I played on the freshman team for a memorable coach and remain friends with grown men who still revel in that experience. There are millions like me, with warm feelings about a sport now proved dangerous and possibly corrupt. When I became a journalist, the fairy tales dissolved, and I no longer cared who won or lost. But I've written more stories about football than any other sport, and for a long time it was the one game that best connected my soul and my brain. Now that passion brings me embarrassment because we know so many more truths.

NYC/TOUCHER/GETTY IMAGES (MONEY); REBECCA COOK/REUTERS (GIH)

The reality of brain damage has spilled into locker rooms across the country. After playing just one game this season, Connecticut quarterback Casey Cochran retired, citing repeated concussions. Cochran is the son of a zealous high school coach, a child raised with a football in his hand. Yet he told reporters, "People have to start realizing how much health means. As much as I love football, as many memories as I've gotten out of it, your health is more important. It's just a game." A week after Cochran's decision, Texas quarterback David Ash, who passed for 2,699 yards and 19 touchdowns in 2012, also quit because of repeated concussions.

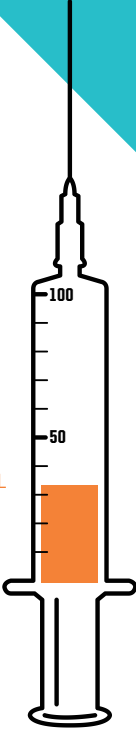
If the pervasiveness of concussion research and bad publicity renders these decisions unsurprising, it's important to consider how shocking they would have been less than a decade ago, when football players still routinely played through all forms of pain. Last week Matt Suarez, a 5' 7", 145-pound freshman

Fans think an average of

34%

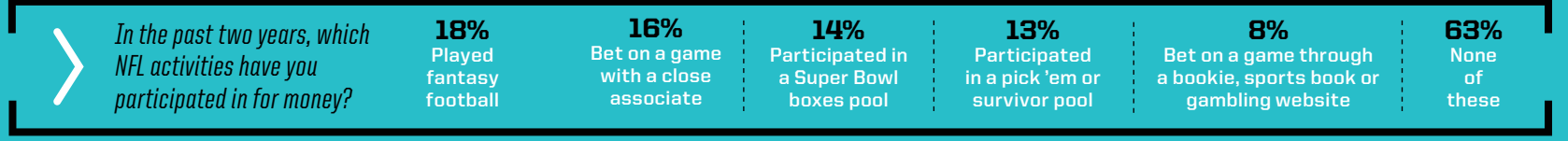
of all active NFL players use PEDs. 22% of all fans say they are less interested in the NFL because of this.

Do you think an NFL player should be suspended if he tests positive for any of the following drugs?

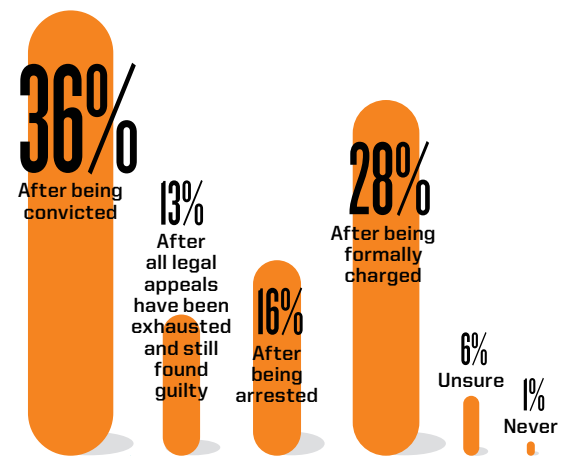


37%

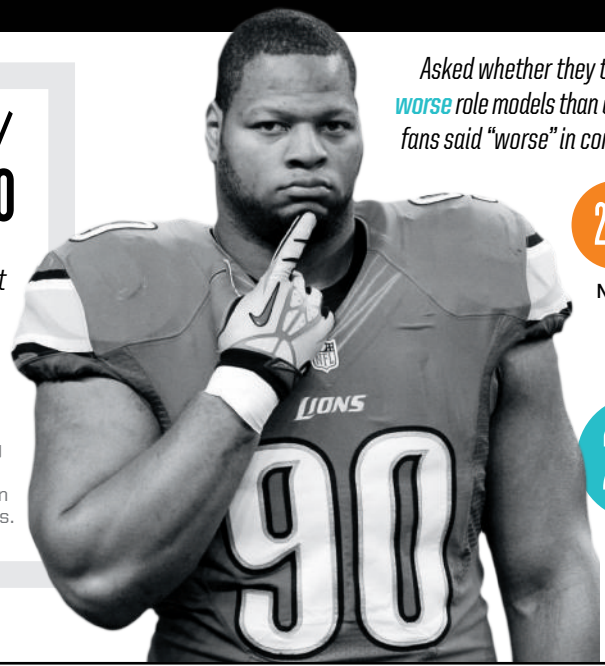
OF FANS WOULD SUPPORT LEGISLATION TO LEGALIZE GAMBLING ON THE NFL.



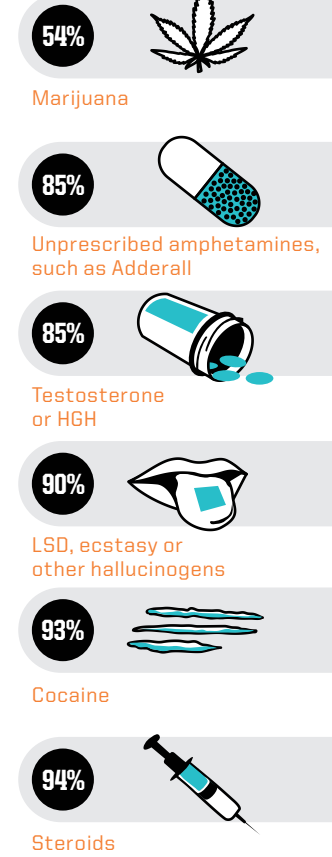
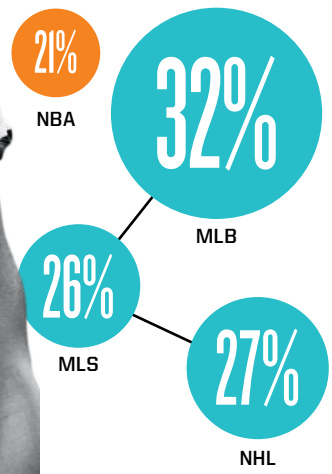
At what point do you believe an NFL player should be suspended if he is implicated in a violent crime?



46% of fans believe that NFL players are **not good** role models.



Asked whether they think NFL players are **better** or **worse** role models than athletes in other leagues, more fans said "worse" in comparison with all but the NBA.



SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT

- Off-field violent crimes by players
- Head injuries affecting current/retired players
- PED usage
- Inadequate/inconsistent disciplinary policies
- Abuse of pain meds or other prescription drugs
- Cost of attending games
- Lack of leadership from commissioner's office
- Injuries that keep star players off the field
- Contribution to violence in society
- TV blackout rules
- Commercialization of football
- Lack of parity among teams

48%

of fans opposed expanding the NFL season to 18 games.

cornerback at D-III Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, was concussed in a midfield collision with a tight end during practice, his fourth documented concussion since fourth grade. Suarez loves football. "To me, it's been pretty much everything since fourth or fifth grade," he says. "I take pride in being the smallest guy on the field." Now he's being strongly encouraged by doctors and coaches to walk away. "I still want to play," says Suarez, "but I don't want to be one of those guys that gets carted off."

The breakdown of an entrenched societal institution such as football doesn't occur overnight or even over a few years. TV ratings and rights fees for the NFL kept rising until the latter reached the current level of roughly \$50 billion through 2022; fantasy football and other types of gambling provided an entry point for huge swaths of the population that otherwise lacked hard-core interest. The NFL became a runaway train, and there was a voracious innocence about

it all. Fans and media embraced the violence of the game; ESPN even hosted a weekly segment called "Jacked Up," which enjoyed immense popularity (and seems unconscionably tone-deaf in hindsight). Domestic abuse was occurring, but it was mostly out of sight.

Now that willful blindness is largely gone. On Sept. 15, Geoff Gass, 38, shut down a popular Vikings message board that he had run for 11 years because he was disgusted at posters who supported Peterson's behavior and brief reinstatement. The hotel chain Radisson immediately pulled out as a team sponsor, and three days later Procter and Gamble withdrew its participation in an on-field NFL promotion planned for Breast Cancer Awareness month.

Yet even with all that's taken place, much of America remains addicted to the NFL and to football, and like any addiction this one holds a fierce grip. Stadiums will not suddenly sit empty on Sunday afternoons (or on Friday

nights in Texas), televisions will not suddenly go unwatched. Fantasy lineups will be filled, suicide pools will be played. Last Thursday evening I rode my bicycle past a schoolyard where 22 little boys in oversized pads smashed into one another while fathers yelled in their ear holes, surely just like their fathers had yelled in theirs.

But the game is irretrievably altered. There's no more viewing an NFL Sunday without feeling manipulated by the spectacle and wondering about the collateral damage to the players and their families. (Goodell's press conference last Friday could have turned the tide, but it served only to further embarrass the league.) There's no more watching a football game at any level without fearing for the brains beneath the helmets and the overall long-term health of the participants. Culture changes glacially, but we are all in a different place. The joy I felt learning the game, playing the game, writing the game? That joy might be damaged beyond repair. □

COURTESY OF NFL (REDSKINS LOGO); ALTHELMAN/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (TRACKER); JED JACOBSON/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LEVIN'S STADIUM)

TIM VARNELL



## Counterpoint

One school is bringing back football, and it's not alone  
BY RYAN WHITE

**BACK IN THE 1970S—WHEN** a concussion was getting your bell rung, and getting your bell rung made you tough—Robin Baker was a high school quarterback in Arizona who took one particularly character-building hit. "Coach runs out, puts ammonia in front of my nose, asks me if I can count to three," says Baker, who is now the president of George Fox University in Newberg, Ore. Two plays later the QB was back in the game. When friends hear that story, they "look at me and go, 'We knew there was something wrong with you,'" Baker says, laughing. "That may be true."

There's evidence to support the claim. Given the negativity surrounding the sport on and off the field at all levels, why would anyone start a football program in 2014—especially the head of a Division III school with 2,219 undergraduates and an athletic department budget of \$2.2 million?

To Baker, the answer is simple. "Football's part of the American fabric," he contends.

George Fox isn't alone. Seven schools, from NAIA up to Division II, introduced teams this year. According to the National Football Foundation, that brings the number of college teams across all divisions to 767, an all-time high. From his bright third-floor office overlooking the quad, Baker sees an endearing tableau: college football that looks like the idea of college football, with student-athletes reading books and pursuing real majors and, maybe, wearing letterman sweaters. The preferred nomenclature is "cocurricular," not "extra." Everything on campus is part of the university's educational mission.

The Bruins last played in 1969, after which football was axed

due to cost and difficulty finding enough players. When Baker moved from school provost to president in 2007, bringing back football became a "passion." At that point the biggest events on the George Fox athletic calendar were home soccer games on Saturdays. Baker says he loves soccer, but he wanted a sport that created more campus atmosphere on fall weekends, providing greater engagement for current students and attracting new ones.

George Fox set a fund-raising goal of \$7.2 million, an ambitious figure, but more than 90% of it has been raised. The school has at least 120 more men on campus this fall than it did two years ago (half the team arrived in 2013), which will help balance a male-female ratio that had grown to 62% female.

Concussions? A concern, but they are for all athletes on campus. Amateurism? That's a richer school's fight. Agents? C'mon. Insurance? "They're more than willing to cover us," Taylor says. It just costs more than volleyball.

Back in Baker's office, talk turns to crisp fall days, to families and friends mingling with students and alumni—to football. Not the sport so hotly debated these days, but the one that makes millions dig ratty sweatshirts from the closet each September.

Why start a football team in 2014? Because the game won't be a minor league ATM at George Fox. It'll be a sepia-toned piece of genuine Americana. Because 3,659 people showed up on Sept. 6 to watch George Fox lose, 30-27, to NAIA start-up Arizona Christian, and almost no one left unhappy. □



25%

of fans said the Washington Redskins should change their team name.

79%

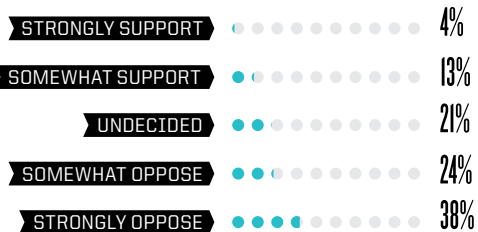
said they did not consider Redskins an offensive name.

10%

of all fans considered the name Redskins "very offensive."



Fans were asked: In general, do you support or oppose using taxpayer dollars to fund building NFL stadiums?



34%

of fans said the events of the past month regarding NFL player conduct or the commissioner's office have negatively impacted their stance on public funding for NFL stadiums.

68%

of fans were not aware, before taking this survey, that the NFL is classified as a tax-exempt entity (page 28).

85%

of fans don't approve of this.



40%

of fans said they believe that in 20 years, the NFL will not closely resemble today's game in terms of rules regarding contact and player equipment.