



The Bunkhouse Chronicle
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Columnist

Unsportsmanlike conduct

The biggest problem with the NFL isn't the mostly meaningless and entirely self-congratulatory fad of anthem protests. The biggest problem with the NFL is that the product is becoming unwatchable. A football game lasts, on average, about 3.5 hours. A prime-time game between two teams with anything on the line can last even longer. By the end of that 3.5 hours the audience has been mugged to exhaustion by an endless series of artless and grating commercials selling everything from crass patriotism to pickup trucks, from beer and bikes to pizza and male enhancement products. The marketing is a clue: The NFL believes its audience is a jingoistic, beer-swilling, truck-driving fat guy with erectile dysfunction, and accepting that scheme is the real price of admission. And that's if you stay home to watch. Considering it costs over \$500 dollars for a family of four to attend a football game with bad seats — where you might also enjoy being mugged by partisan drunks in the parking lot — why bother to buy a ticket?

You can also, we are told, buy an "all access" football package from your television provider, which will cost you somewhere in the neighborhood of three hundred bucks, which is the same as buying three hundred dollars worth of Drano and pouring it up your nose. To stay home and watch the very intermittent feat of superb athleticism, or the very rare game where the outcome is still undecided after 2.5 hours, one must agree to be endlessly battered about the head and neck by Joe Buck's day-old beard, Jimmy John's Sausage WhamDog, Dodge Trucks, and Nationwide Insurance, snazzy jingles and all. The game? That has been reduced to occasional, mostly predictable live-action, sometimes even three or four plays in a row before it's interrupted by more commercials, two-minute warnings, or whistles and flags and zebra conferences, which always

trigger more commercials. My personal favorite marketing strategy is when they bookend the jaw-dropping excitement of a punt — fair caught — with 11 minutes of commercials extolling the virtues of the Archer Daniels Midland Corporation, and a charity spot begging parents — who are presumably watching — to let their children play outside. Before and after the requisite barrage of commercial breaks, while the players stand around or sit on the bench fiddling with notebook computers — which must be tremendously exciting when actually in the stadium — we might even get to watch the referees trot off the field, don the headgear, and stick their heads under the hood so that an unseen inquisitor in the NFL Star Chamber can decide whether or not the game can continue. There is something undeniably Orwellian about how the game is officiated. But it gets better: While the refs are under the hood receiving instructions from the NFL Mothership, we get to watch the contested play — which happened 15 minutes ago — from an endless series of angles. We get to replay that important moment in all of our lives in slow motion, super slow motion,

and then, just for kicks, in actual human speed. We get close-ups — coffee-breath close — of reactions from coaches on the sidelines, or of some guy in the stands wearing a bumblebee costume and beer-cozy hardhat beseeching the heavens for interdiction. Also, we get to listen to booth-blatherskites like Joe Buck moon over an offensive lineman with a life-long passion for origami, or a tough-luck linebacker with gang tattoos who just signed for \$25 million, guaranteed, who bought a Lambo and a house for his long-suffering mother, who also has gang tattoos — on her neck. If that isn't the height of entertainment, I really don't know what is. When the game is actually played it is now soured, at least for this former fan, with droll predictability, shameless showboating, me-first whining, sideline temper tantrums, and routine unsportsmanlike behavior that is exactly the opposite of what coaches all over the country tell its youngest players — and their parents — the game is about. If all of the character-building that football allegedly provides results in people like Aaron Hernandez, or Greg Hardy, or Ray Rice, or PacMan Jones, or Chris Rainey or any of the dozens

of other NFL players arrested in the last few years, I'm sure I can do without. Oh sure, there are lots of football players who don't beat their girlfriends in elevators, or wave guns around in nightclubs. Dozens of genuine good guys like Jason Witten, JJ Watt, or Larry Fitzgerald aside, there is no longer a payoff in the product worth overlooking the air of spoiled, aggressive showpiece thuggery that now clouds every game in every stadium. It says something about the state of the game when fans worry an entire off-season that a key player might get arrested. The NFL, in many respects, has become professional wrestling with pads. They are equally unwatchable events, operating on many of the same theatrical themes — one just lasts interminably longer than the other. At least in professional wrestling someone just gets hit with a folding chair, and then gets dramatically pinned while toothless trailer park grandmothers rend their garments and throw popcorn on the bad guy. As for the protests, it's hard to imagine a more disingenuous way to air supposed grievances over inequality, given that the minimum allowable salary, for a

rookie, is \$469,000. For veterans of the game, who have played at least 10 years, the minimum salary is \$1 million. Minimum. That does not count signing bonuses, endorsement deals, or any other bells and whistles that might adorn a tender — for guys who probably won't even play that much during the season. This for a job, remember, that outside of mere entertainment — and we are seeing how dubious that is — contributes virtually nothing of actual value. I might make an exception for the engineering required to build some of those magnificent stadiums (often forged in sweetheart deals and at taxpayer expense), but that is a by-product of the game. Take away the entertainment aspect, and the game itself offers nothing more of intrinsic value than the bread and circuses of ancient Rome. Don't get me wrong: I hope every player in the NFL makes as much money as they possibly can. I really do. But I have a hard time getting behind a self-conscious protest made by people whose very lives demonstrate — with perfect irony — how talent and opportunity can be converted into financial

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