Jake Lebowitz

Professor Allen

American Studies

Senior Essay

**NFL’s Damaged Image Due To Ignorance and Domestic Violence**

Sports provide the rest of society a time to get away from the negative aspects going on in their life. The chance to sit down and watch your favorite team or favorite player perform at his or her best is a moment that so many people cherish. Society holds these players to such a standard because of how bright the spotlight is that the media puts them in. That light is built from a combination of many things, but none more important than the money these athletes make both on and off the field. Through both their respective teams and their own name, they create a brand for themselves that builds with the success they have on the field. David Carter brings to life the idea that high profiled athletes build up a certain image and brand that is going to benefit both themselves and their teams financially.[[1]](#footnote-1) Part of that brand comes from sponsors that these athletes pick up through their careers. Their respective teams will also have sponsors that athletes will be obligated to contribute along with their own. That will then lead to fans of that player purchase items associated with his or her, which shine that player’s light even brighter. Money is such a tremendous factor, really the driving factor, in something being successful, and that is no different with the National Football League. Essentially, there are three stakeholders in the NFL being successful: the players, the fans, and the media. Each hold a specific role in making the NFL what it is today, which happens to be the most profitable sports organization in the country. The fans part comes into play when they purchase a jersey with the players name on the back or a sweatshirt with the NFL logo plastered on the sleeve. The players are the ones who produce well enough that encourage those fans to head to the stores and purchase such items. The media builds those players up to be larger than life, which entices the fans even more to show support them and the league. When these fans go ahead and follow such players, their popularity clouds what they see in these players. They obviously want to focus on the good that these athletes show on the field, rather than see the negatives off the field. As Prettyman states in her novel regarding role models in athletics, “If athletes like… are to be role models whom we want those we love to be like, than we must no longer turn a blind eye to their behavior off the court.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The problem with building these players up so large, it is that much higher of a fall when the media brings them down. But it is not always because of the media that these players fall faster than they grew.

Football is one of the most violent sports this country has ever seen. The athletes that participate in football on a daily basis are considered some of the most physically gifted and strongest athletes any where in the country. However, it is essential that these players separate their play and violence on the field from how they act in society, around there family and significant others. Playing the game of football may force a sense of hyper-masculinity, which leads to off the field issues. In recent months, several players have fallen victims of their own hyper-masculinity, and have forgotten to leave their violent side on the football field. It is not just that these men take their violent streak home with them, their social status, as professional athletes seem to allow them to believe they are above the law. Michael Welch agrees wholeheartedly that there is a correlation of hyper-masculinity and social status. [[3]](#footnote-3) The childhood that a football player had can also relate to their violent temper off the field. It just so happens that these players at the heart of the NFL’s issue right now are all black. Two of these players had childhood’s where the significant black male was absent and therefore, was raised by a single mother.[[4]](#footnote-4) Even though it is a stereotype that has been associated with black athletes, it is hard to ignore the effect a father would have had on Adrian Peterson and Ray Rice as they have become that grown black male figure in their own household. The NFL devalues black masculinity because of the expectations the league has for its players on the field. Along with these two players, Greg Hardy and Jonathan Dwyer are the other two members that have become part of the NFL’s darkest hour due to domestic violence. As the media picked up one case, a second would follow and from there, would become a domino effect at the hands of the players, the league, and the media. NFL players are held to a higher standard because of the sports popularity and the money they make; so when they attract negative attention by way of domestic violence due to hyper-masculinity, an attribute which the NFL prides itself on, it provides the media with enough ammunition to give the league a black eye.

The recent months in the NFL have been like nothing the league has ever seen. The amount of negative attention is new to the NFL, not that the league never attracts negative publicity, but it rarely sees its image and credibility under such scrutiny for such a period of time. The type of negative publicity the NFL is seeing right now is in the case of domestic violence. Domestic violence is nothing new for the NFL because it has been dealing with such issues dating back close to twenty years ago. The most obvious case of domestic violence related to the NFL, one that was headline news across all outlets, has to be OJ Simpson’s situation. OJ Simpson was considered one of the best running backs to play the game. So even after he was retired, when he was accused of stabbing his ex-wife and her friend, and even though he was acquitted, he was still part of the NFL image and now was being put on trial for such a heinous crime.[[5]](#footnote-5) This was just the beginning of a long, straining issue that the NFL had to deal with, while none may have been as news worthy as OJ’s case, there were without question several that forced the NFL to quiver. Among the other cases includes Rae Curruth in 1999, who shot and killed his girlfriend, Shawne Merriman, who choked his wife in 2009 and most recently, Dez Bryant in 2012, who struck his mother across the face.[[6]](#footnote-6) Even though the past twenty years have been full of domestic violence cases, the NFL has not seen such activity like it has the past several months. Since February, there have been four different domestic violence cases that involve NFL players. Those cases were made clear in the news outside and inside the sports world. However, nothing came to fruition until several months later once the media caught wind of the details and decided it was evident that these issues were too large to overlook. In February, a video was released of Ray Rice pulling his fiancée, who was unconscious, out of a hotel elevator. For the next several months, apologizes would take place along with hearings, but no punishments issued by the NFL. Several months after the initial tape was relseased, the Ravens helped Ray and his fiancée, Janay Palmer, set up a press conference that allowed Ray to apologize, while making it seem like he had his wife’s support.[[7]](#footnote-7) The ravens held such a firm hand in this press conference because they made it seem like Janay was equally at fault, even though everybody who saw the video knew she was simply just the victim. This was such an ignorant move by the Ravens to try and force something that needed to happen on its own, by way of Janay and Ray. It wasn’t until July when the NFL finally made a move in enforcing a punishment for Rice. Greg Hardy was accused of domestic assault of his girlfriend back in July, but it wasn’t until the middle of September, three weeks into the football season, that his team, not even the NFL, took action. Also in September, Adrian Peterson’s domestic violence situation came to light, and due to the previous cases, once again his team decided to take action. The Arizona Cardinals immediately penalized Jonathan Dwyer, also accused in September, once the accusations came about. Over a span of seven months, the NFL endured a very rocky time, but the biggest issue was why it took so long for actions to be taken by the league.

The NFL’s commissioner and public relations department, two of the more essential aspects of the league’s make up, always wants to make sure that the league’s image is in top notch, because if the slightest crack forms in their shield, the credibility and popularity are going to be at risk. And when their popularity starts to be in question, than the profits are going to be on a downward spiral. So for a business that succeeds because of its profits, mainly by fan bases, it is essential that the image never be tainted, even if that means neglecting criminal activity. Apparently, domestic violence falls under the category of not going too far to protect the image. The moment the NFL and its officials caught wind of domestic violence issues regarding some of their players, they knew that they had to cover it up. The only problem with covering up these types of situations is that when another case comes along, it doubles the burden, and soon enough, there is going to be too much to cover up. However, according to a former executive of the league, that is not the case, in fact, the NFL could cover up more than anybody would expect. Jerry Angelo was an NFL executive for 30 years; ten of them were spent as the general manager of the Chicago Bears. During his time, he was one of the best at his job along with one of the most well respected executives in the league. So when he comes out and says teams did not discipline players in “hundreds and hundreds” of domestic violence incidents during his 30 years, it is hard to turn away.[[8]](#footnote-8) The worst part about this was how exactly the NFL would go about covering up these cases. Their type of “investigation” into it would be to ask if everyone involved was ok and if things between the parties were good. If so, the league and team would move on and sweep it right under the rug. It will never be revealed on who was involved in these hundreds of hidden cases, but one has to wonder: what if a big name player, say a superstar or face of the franchise, was involved? Would it have mattered or was it just standard around the league?

The NFL and its franchises may have been able to hide ‘hundreds’ of domestic violence cases over the past 30 years, but we are in a different age right now. We are currently in the age where media is such a pivotal point of society and sports, that even if a league like the NFL wanted to cover up situations, it would be difficult because of media coverage. Every team has numerous beat writers that have the sources to break news that players in the locker room aren’t even aware of. There are times when so much media coverage positively affects the NFL, but times like these are when teams wish the league wasn’t so popular. It doesn’t help when two of the bigger stars in the league are at the center of domestic violence cases in today’s age. Adrian Peterson and Ray Rice are both running backs in the NFL and are both considered to be in the top tier of players at the position. They also are viewed as the face of their respective franchises. In the span of one week, a second video of Ray Rice and his wife in the elevator was released followed by the arrest of Adrian Peterson for his assault on his four-year-old son.[[9]](#footnote-9) It may be one thing if a third string player or an undrafted rookie is at the heart of a domestic violence investigation, but when two of the game’s brightest players stand center stage, is a completely different story. Aside from these two men being superstars on the field, their popularity off the field encourages even more media coverage, furthering the impossibility for the NFL to hide. It doesn’t help the league when females, the main demographic of these domestic violence cases, continue to support these players that are at the center of the issue. As seen in the picture above, keep in mind this takes place after Adrian has been reprimanded, a Minnesota Vikings fan is wearing an Adrian Peterson jersey while holding a lark stick, which is the object Adrian used to in the case he is being investigated for.[[10]](#footnote-10) Hiding domestic violence from society is not easy, yet somehow the NFL succeeded in doing so for many years, but that time has passed and they finally have to pay the price and give answers to their issues. Gary Myers puts the past several months in perspective and what the NFL is facing going forward. “Goodell’s beloved shield and the league’s image have been taking a terrible beating.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The NFL has had a rough, to put it lightly, couple of months and they did not do themselves any favors in trying to cover up incidents that most people take seriously in society. For the NFL to have allegedly covered up ‘hundreds’ of domestic violence cases in recent years is a black eye in itself. It is as much about domestic abuse as it is about the NFL and its decisions on how to protect their image. One can see why they would hide so much, being how much negative publicity the league is receiving right now. The NFL has to hold some accountability for these cases because by neglecting to take action on the previous acts of violence, without intending to do so, sent out a message to the players that they could get away with certain actions. It shows the players that the league is going to have a sense of leniency if they get in trouble off the field, and that is the wrong message. It is a message that can be pointed to when deciding the main reason these certain cases are rising to the forefront. The NFL is in the midst of maybe its darkest days since its inception over close to 100 years ago due to a combination of four players: two of the games brightest stars, one rising star a third year player trying to make a name for himself. They were not alone because without the media pressure and continuous coverage, these four could have fallen under the same rug those hundreds of cases got swept under.

What does it take to be a “star” or “face of the franchise”? How easy is to for those titles to be taken away from a player? The NFL is full of players that span from rookies to five-year veterans to ten-year veterans. Each player comes into the league with a certain story and continues to build that story as they ascend up the ranks in the National Football League. While these players built their stories with the play on the field, the league and fans did their part in buying merchandise connected to the players. With each jersey purchased along with each marketing campaign, a player’s story grows, and those aspects are not in their control. Some of these players have the ability that allows for peers, media members and fans to consider them ‘stars’ of the game. That ability not only comes from the play on the field, but how players act off the field interacting with the fans as well how they portray themselves with the media before and after the game. The players control their identity off the field because with one poor interview, their image is going to be damaged, but with a stellar and positive time with the media, there will be nothing for the media to use against him. The term “star” or “face of the franchise” seems to be used by fans for numerous players mainly because who they believe are the best players on the team, but it is rare to actually have a legitimate “face of a franchise” in today’s day in age. With so much media coverage comes members of the media asking incredulous questions, comes pressure to be a perfect citizen, and for many it is just too big of a burden to carry. Part of that burden includes staying out of trouble with the law, and domestic abuse is something the NFL has dealt with in the past. That violence comes from the notion of hyper-masculinity and some athletes not understanding how to leave a certain side of them between the lines. Stepping off the field needs to reminiscent of walking out of a certain pair of shoes and into another; two different situations. Two players, Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson, have garnered the ‘star’ and ‘face of the franchise’ label due to numerous reasons. Those include their stellar play on the field year in and year out, the constant accountability with the media and fans when they play poorly and being a model citizen in the community. Greg Hardy is a man that led solely by his play, has reached a point in his young career that media members are starting to whisper about his place among the best in the league at his respective position.[[12]](#footnote-12) Jonathan Dwyer is a player that has not yet reached the level of these other players. Each of these players endured their own journey to where they are right now and it is important to understand who is accountable for their actions, what may have caused the drastic turn of events and more importantly, why domestic violence has tarnished each of their careers.

Ray Rice grew up without a father. Growing up in New Rochelle, New York, Ray may have been too young to understand that he was without a father. Rice’s father was tragically killed as a victim of a drive-by shooting.[[13]](#footnote-13) Luckily for Ray, his cousin was able to step in and provide that father figure role until Ray was 11, when unfortunately, his cousin was tragically killed in a car crash.[[14]](#footnote-14) The lack of a father figure, in a black household, is nothing new to society. For a fair amount of time, societal norms have seen many homes missing that father figure, specifically black dominated homes. It is a stereotype that has controlled out society, but when there are negative stories coming out, like Ray Rice’s, and their childhood comes into play, it is hard to disagree with the stereotype. Nevertheless, our duty as scholars is to be critical of stereotypes, especially racial ones. Dating back to 1998, it is a statistical fact that black men and women have been the victim or accuser of more domestic violence cases than whites.[[15]](#footnote-15) While having a father may have been beneficial for Ray, his skin color was already factor in domestic violence. For Ray Rice, one has to think if he would be in the position he is today if he had that father figure growing up and was able to witness how a grown man treats a women. The lack of a father figure, but even more, being black, for Ray most definitely plays a factor into why Ray is in the midst of a nasty domestic violence case.

Ray Rice was the first of four NFL players to have their names tied up in a domestic violence case. Ray Rice has been in the NFL since 2008 and ever since then, he has been the cornerstone of the Baltimore Ravens. His on the field play has been spectacular, leading him to several pro-bowl appearances as well as helping the Ravens to a Super Bowl championship in 2013. Off the field, Rice was everything that a team wanted in its superstar. He was always available for the media and took part in the league’s Play 60 campaign.[[16]](#footnote-16) Play 60 is a campaign that the NFL has had for several years that brings kids together for 60 minutes a day and entices them to participate in physical activity. It is the NFL’s top community outreach and players love to be a part of it. The NFL wants some of their top players part of this program, which is why Ray Rice is involved. Ever since entering the league in 2008, Ray Rice has been every owners dream in the sense that he performed phenomenally on the field and professionally off it. Every story about Rice had to do with something he did on the field, not off it. However, it is safe to say that he is not going to be a part of the campaign in the near future. This past February, Ray Rice took it upon himself to change his career for the worst when he lifted his hand and struck his wife. However, the only information we had of this occurrence was a video released by TMZ, a video that showed Ray dragging his unconscious fiancée out of an elevator.[[17]](#footnote-17) TMZ is known for breaking news in the entertainment business with celebrities, but sports is something that they have only ventured into recently and are not usually breaking news like this. Sports constantly intertwine with the entertainment world usually because of relationships, but also because sports are part of the entertainment business. Fans are being entertained while watching games, so TMZ took advantage of this connection. While the word had already spread of Ray being in a domestic dispute, nothing was shown to the public, until the media made the first play and essentially pressured all involved. Move forward several months and TMZ comes back and drops an even bigger hammer on everybody by releasing the video everybody was clamoring for to solidify what people were assuming from the first video. On September 8th, TMZ released the full-length video from the night of the incident, and this time, we see Ray striking his wife across the face, her head hitting the rail in the elevator, and falling to the ground unconscious.[[18]](#footnote-18) For Ray Rice, the Ravens and the NFL, this video was the worst thing that could have happened.

When this video came out, Ray Rice knew he was in for a world of hurt; his wife was going to suffer even worse. Ray quickly went from a star in the NFL to a man nobody wanted to show his or her support for anymore. But what about his wife Janay and the effect this video has on her? While this video provided clear evidence on what happened inside the elevator, it never had to be released. A video of Ray dragging his fiancée out was more than enough for everyone involved to understand what occurred behind those doors. “The footage of Ray assaulting his partner doesn’t teach us anything. It just further degrades her humanity.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The media, especially TMZ, holds equal accountability for the pain that Janay Rice has dealt with because every day, she has to deal with this video plastered all across the Internet. Not only does Janay feel the pain, but also backs up her husband in blaming the media for forcing her family to “relieve a moment in our lives that we regret.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The NFL can deal with Ray any way they want, so can the judicial system, but that is not going to change the way women are viewed in our society and how much domestic abuse takes place. Janay is just another victim of this violence, but because her fiancée is in the NFL, it caught national media attention. We’ve become witnesses to the demise of a great football player, but even worse, we’ve become aware that domestic violence is not going to go away so easily. As Katie McDonough stated so eloquently, “But our culture’s disregard for women’s humanity – the fact that women can’t have a reasonable expectation of safety and privacy, remains the same as it ever was.”[[21]](#footnote-21) While McDonough is talking about our culture as a whole, the NFL’s culture and its disregard for women’s humanity relates back to the concept of hyper-masculinity. The NFL culture is wrapped around masculinity and how hard you can hit your opponent; the amount of rage you build up each play.[[22]](#footnote-22) That rage and masculine side of these players is hard to just turn on and off when they step on and off the field. The running back position, played by Rice, endures the most contact out of any player because they are asked to carry a ball and run through defenders for the good of their team. Due to that, Michael Welch conveys through his study, there is a link between running backs and violence committed against women.[[23]](#footnote-23) Of the one hundred football players arrested for violence against women used Welch’s study, 38 of them were running backs and wide receivers. The next highest number was 21, leaving running backs as a part of the majority positions ensuing violence on women. The amount of violent rage a player like Ray Rice provides during games is not a normal amount for an individual, but for an NFL player, it is what’s expected of them. But what is not expected of them is bringing that rage home with them. Hyper-masculinity is a major concern for society, but because football is such a masculine driven sport, but that does not mean there can’t be some control for these athletes when they leave the athletic centers. When the second horrid video came out, Ray was at the center of the NFL universe, in large part due to the media, but what the NFL didn’t realize was that this was just the beginning of what was going to be the darkest time in the league’s history.

When a top player in the league is in trouble for a violent crime, the spotlight is going to be on the league, which makes it harder for any other player or players to escape the light if they commit the same act. A lot of collegiate level football players dream of playing in the NFL when they leave college, but not all have the skill and opportunity. So for those who do receive that opportunity, whether it comes from being drafted or signed as an undrafted free agent, it is imperative that they do not take it for granted. Greg Hardy and Jonathan Dwyer have both led different careers in the NFL up to this point both on the field and off. Interestingly enough, both men came into the league at the same time. In the 2010 NFL draft, the Carolina Panthers selected Hardy in the 6th round at number 175 while Dwyer was selected only thirteen picks later at number 188 by the Pittsburgh Steelers.[[24]](#footnote-24) Greg Hardy plays defensive end and over his first few years, has slowly ascended towards to the top of his position. He has been a force on the defensive side of the ball for the Panthers and has since adapted the nickname Kraken, also known as a mythological sea creature, because of his tenacity and seriousness when he steps between those lines.[[25]](#footnote-25) On the field, he has been what Carolina wanted of him and then some, and as for off the field, the same could be said. The worst issue that Hardy faced was in 2011 when he was concussed in a motorcycle accident; other than that, he has been a team’s dream player.[[26]](#footnote-26) Jonathan Dwyer, like Ray Rice, is a running back and has not had the same success that Hardy has had in his short professional career. Already on his second team, Dwyer has been buried in the depth chart and was stuck behind two other running backs, meaning the chances he would see the field on a weekly basis was slim to none, barring an injury. Much like Hardy, Dwyer was a man who came to work, spoke to media members, and went home with no reason for the media to trash him. Both of these men are forever linked with each other because they came from the same draft class, but they are now also linked together for all the wrong reasons. In a different era, maybe even in a different year, as horrible as it sounds, these two men could have gotten away with their domestic violence cases, but due to the overshadowing media coverage of domestic violence on the NFL, there was no where to hide for these gentlemen.

The hardest thing for a professional athlete to deal with is that feeling of uncertainty. Uncertain when they are going to be able to step on the field and contribute to their team. Unfortunately for Greg Hardy, this is the position he was in with the Carolina Panthers. Before this season, Hardy had a different kind of uncertainty, this time pertaining to his contract. Hardy wanted a long-term deal so that he could stay with the team that drafted him while making the type of money that corresponded with his play on the field, but the Panthers were reluctant to give such a hefty contract to a player at his position. After months of back and forth, the Panthers decided to go ahead and place the franchise tag on Hardy, which means Hardy is signed to a one year deal with the salary that equals the average salary of the top five contracts at his position. Hardy and the Panthers had until a certain date, July 15, to work out a long-term contract or else he was going to play the entirety of the season under this tag.[[27]](#footnote-27) This provided incentive for Hardy to play lights out so he could shed that tag and get the contract he feels he deserves. However, Hardy did not get the chance to prove himself because of his off-field conduct, which forced the second situation of uncertainty. Back in May of this year, Hardy was accused of using violence on his girlfriend in his luxury apartment. As his girlfriend stood on trail, she gave grave details of the situation as she remembers from that night. After Hardy flung her from the bed, threw her on a bed covered in rifles, slammed the toilet seat lid on her arm, dragged her by the hair room to room and wrapped his hands around her throat, she recalls, “He looked me in the eyes and told me he was going to kill me.”[[28]](#footnote-28) As physical as the position of defensive linemen may be, they are a position, according to Welch, that has not been ones to create domestic disputes.[[29]](#footnote-29) However, one has to wonder if the concussion suffered a few years ago may have had an effect on him mentally. The judge seemed to believe that the girlfriend was telling the truth, or was at least compelling enough in her statements, and found Hardy guilty on domestic violence, and ironically that decision came down on July 15, the last day he and the Panthers had to finalize a long term deal. It is safe to say July 15 is not going to be a memorable day for Hardy in the coming years, but it is also the day that changed his life on and off the field, for the worse. With this decision came the unwarranted decision by the league and the Panthers on how to handle Hardy’s situation. In the Ray Rice case, there was visual evidence, which helped further the NFL’s decision on a punishment, but is video necessary. According to Sports Illustrated, it would have had a drastic effect on Hardy’s case. “If there were a Greg Hardy video, would Greg Hardy be playing on Sunday?”[[30]](#footnote-30) The next phase of uncertainty that Hardy was going to face was the type of backlash he was going to receive from the media, the league and the Panthers. It was safe to assume, at this moment, Hardy was not going to receive that long term contract he desired, and even worse, may not even see the field to prove his worthiness for this team. The only person Hardy can blame is himself for committing such a heinous act on two individuals that have no reason to be victims.

When you are the final member of a trend, it is very likely things will be handled differently than they were for the prior situations. Also, when you are not overly popular in the league and a player with extreme popularity is at the heart of the NFL news for the same reason you are in the news, not much is going to be said about you. That could be both a positive and negative thing, depending on which way you look at it. Growing up, Dwyer faced the challenge of dealing with a serious disorder that many people continue to deal with throughout their life. Dwyer was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) at a young age and encountered difficulties when he was going through school, including doing his homework in a timely fashion.[[31]](#footnote-31) ADD can have more than just an effect on completing homework, especially as a person gets older. An important question to ask, especially since ADD affects the brain and the way it works, has to be if this type of disorder enhances violence. Rafael A. González is a member of the Forensic Psychiatry Research Unit at the University of London and conducted a study with colleagues to determine if ADHD by itself was linked directly to violent behavior in adults. The study itself included over 7,000 adults and asked question revolving around violence, repeated violence, as well as the level of violence. Overall, González found that ADHD alone was only slightly predictive of violence, but the hyperactive behavior was the impetus for violence.[[32]](#footnote-32) That hyperactive behavior can also be detrimental to hyper-masculinity because hyperactive behavior, when talking about ADHD, enhances violence from the individual. So the issue pertaining to these players and their actions off the field come from too much violence, and that hyperactive behavior enhances the chance for a violent interaction. Coming out of the 2010 NFL draft, Jonathan Dwyer was not expected to be a feature player for the Pittsburgh Steelers, and that showed when he was released a short three years later. Luckily for him, the Arizona Cardinals needed some depth at the running back position, so they signed him this past offseason. The Cardinals obviously were not anticipating Dwyer to be part of a disgusting domestic dispute at his home. Fast-forward through the offseason workouts and Dwyer was accused of aggravated assault on his 27-year-old fiancée and his 18-month-old child.[[33]](#footnote-33) In total, Dwyer was facing five charges: one count of aggravated assault causing a fracture, one count of aggravated assault involving a minor, two counts of criminal damage and one count of preventing someone from calling 911. This is the first encounter, between these four athletes, that the NFL has had a child involved in a domestic violence case, and when a child, especially at such a young age, is involved, it just makes it feel that much more real. As seen from Greg Hardy and Ray Rice, coverage on domestic violence cases in the NFL is going to be high, but for Dwyer, he, in a strange way, was fortunate enough that his situation was during the whirlwind of Adrian Peterson’s case. When the media would talk about the months of domestic violence in the NFL, Dwyer was not at the forefront because he was not very popular, or as popular as the others, but that allowed for him to deal with his issues privately rather than having the public breathing down his neck like Palmer and Rice have.

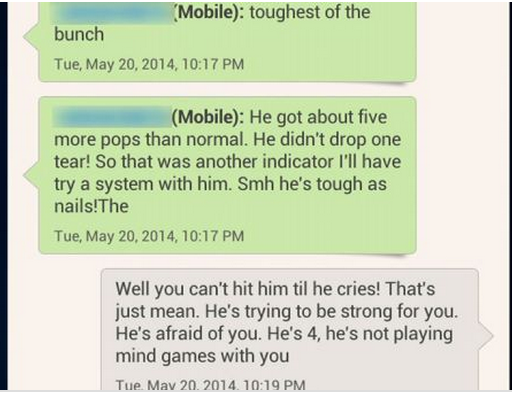
Greg Hardy and Jonathan Dwyer may not have the largest impact on the league in terms of play, but what they did off-field spoke louder than any of their on-field actions ever have. Being a professional athlete is a privilege that so many collegiate athletes wish they could have, so when that opportunity arises, it is important to take full advantage of it. With that privilege comes the attention of the media, and it becomes widely understood that with this profession there is going to be positive and negative media attention. That privilege does not just start and end on the field, it starts on the field and doesn’t end until you go to sleep that night. Hardy and Dwyer seemed to forget that they are not known for just their on-field performances. They seem to have neglected the fact that they are not above the law because they play in the NFL. What they do off the field is going to be magnified by the NFL media, especially when domestic violence cases are already the focus of the league. These two men were, dare I say, lucky that two of the game’s most popular players committed the same act and took most of the spotlight. While Hardy beating his girlfriend along with Dwyer assaulting his wife and child were as bad as it gets, it somehow did not stand remotely close to what Adrian Peterson, the star running back for the Minnesota Vikings did solely because of the media presence that follows the career of Peterson.

When the media and the fans consider you to be super-human and the best running back in the league that without question adds pressure to an already pressured-filled career. Ever since coming out of college, Adrian Peterson has been at the top of the running back position after being drafted seventh overall in the 2007 NFL draft by the Minnesota Vikings. Year after year, the Vikings knew that they could count on Peterson to be their workhorse and carry the team to as many wins as possible. Unfortunately, late in the 2011 season, Peterson was severely injured, tearing his ACL and MCL, an injury that forces athletes to miss close to 12 months of action. Adrian made it his mission to rehab continuously and make it back before the start of the 2012 season in September. So often players return too quickly from these injuries and face setbacks, but when Adrian made his comeback, it had doctors, players, and media just in awe. Just 11 months after reconstructive knee surgery, Peterson came back better than ever and led the league in rushing yards while coming just 7 yards short of the all time season rushing record. His doctor, the world-renowned Dr. James Andrews, had four simple words to describe what Peterson just accomplished: “Can anyone believe this?” [[34]](#footnote-34) This remarkable comeback only furthered his popularity with the fans and garnered even more respect from the media and his counterparts. He showed dedication to his craft and made sure that he put on a performance week after week that he and his fans could be proud of. The pressure was at an all time high for Peterson both on the field and off it, because he was now the center of attention in the NFL, whether he asked for it or not, by winning the MVP award after his incredible season. Quarterbacks have dominated the award in the past decade, so for a running back to take the trophy home, something special had to happen on the field, and Peterson was magical. With Peterson dominating on the field, his presence with the media and society was going to grow, and that is not always going to turn out to be a positive thing.

“Adrian Peterson is one of the most down-to-earth superstars I have ever met.”[[35]](#footnote-35) These were the words spoken by former Minnesota Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, during an interview, when asked to describe Adrian Peterson. Easy for a player who spends everyday with Peterson to utter these words, but what does it say about the man Peterson is in the locker room when he is having trouble off the field? It seems that Peterson transforms into a completely different individual when he leaves the athletic complex and steps back into society as Adrian Peterson the man, not the player. The Vikings wanted to paint Peterson as this star player with a perfect image that fans and little kids could look up to. It is hard for the Vikings to continue to feed their fan base that painting when Peterson continues to get in trouble off the field. In two separate incidents, Peterson was cited for driving 109 in a 55 zone and was accused of resisting arrest after getting into a scuffle at a Texas nightclub.[[36]](#footnote-36) While these aren’t in the realm of domestic violence acts, they are still incidents that because of who Peterson is, they are going to garner a certain amount of attention from the mainstream media. However, they did not garner nearly as much attention as his incident a few years later did, which happened to come several months after signing a $100 million dollar contract with the Vikings. Do the two coincide? There is no certainty, but it is possible that money may have blurred Peterson’s vision. The incident revolved around an accusation of rape that not only involved Peterson, but also two relatives, one being his brother who was a minor, and four women. The report states that drinking was involved along with Peterson and a woman getting into an argument over sexual intercourse. The investigation, much like the police report filed, was quite lengthy, but Peterson continued to pledge his innocence and took it as far as getting a polygraph test to prove his point. [[37]](#footnote-37) With all this being said, there were never any charges filed and Peterson never faced a day in court. However, that did not mean his image was permanently damaged. Luckily for him, that knee injury occurred the following season, and his comeback provided fans and media to focus solely on his play and neglect to look back on his issues off the field. Much like Ray Rice, one has to wonder if these off the field issues have anything to do with the environment in which Peterson was brought up as a child.

Bob Stoops was Adrian Peterson’s coach at Oklahoma University. When he heard about the situation in which Peterson found himself,, he stopped to mention that Peterson “had a good, strong family around him.”[[38]](#footnote-38)One may use the word strong in a certain sense, but in this case, it did not seem like the most potent word to use to describe Peterson’s childhood and his supporting cast. Much like Ray Rice, Adrian Peterson grew up in a household that lacked a father figure, but in Peterson’s case, it was at the choice of his father. Due to the fact that his father was a felon, his mother was forced to raise he and his five siblings on her own. Adrian is not shy about his upbringings and how he was brought up as a Christian boy. Much to the chagrin of Peterson, if he ever got in trouble, there was going to be repercussions to face from his mother. During the time Peterson was a child, especially in the south, it wasn’t uncommon for parents to punish their children with whippings. It is important to understand where Peterson comes from and the cultural norms of that community. More specifically, black Christian families believed in corporal punishment based of their biblical passages. “Proverbs 13:24… He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him… People may find this abhorrent, but Peterson can use freedom of religion as a defense.”[[39]](#footnote-39) The choice of implement that was used for whipping was a personal decision, but the outcome was always the same. For Peterson, his mother took it upon herself to discipline him when she felt the need. She would use her hand, switches (thinner part of a tree branch) and belts to punish her Adrian and his five siblings. “I don’t care what anybody says, most of us disciplined our kids a little more than we meant sometimes. But we were only trying to prepare them for the real world. When you whip those you love, it’s not about abuse it’s about love. You want to make them understand what they did wrong.”[[40]](#footnote-40) These words, spoken by Bonita Jackson, rang throughout Houston, Minnesota, and everywhere else that had a vested interest in Adrian Peterson’s domestic violence case. Peterson was brought up in a time when physical punishment was expected and taken, but as a child, he may not have understood exactly what the purpose was. What is widely evident is that Peterson believed that in the world we live in today, punishing your child with physical harm is still allowed. Lynn Davis, CEO of the Dallas Children’s Advocacy Center said it best when comparing the different times we are in. When referring to what happened to Adrian as a child, “My guess is did that happen to Adrian as a kid? Quite possibly, but that was 20 years ago. We’ve advanced hopefully as a society.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

The life of a child is so precious because they have so much to look forward to. The people responsible for making sure that child lives long enough to see it all are the parents. So when the parents fail to do so, we have the right to question their parenting and how they go about treating their children. Adrian Peterson has fathered at least six kids out of wedlock and does not have the luxury of spending time and taking care of all of them.[[42]](#footnote-42) Last year, his two-year old son Adrian Jr., who lives with his mother most of the time, was severely injured due to domestic violence. The mother’s boyfriend, Joseph Patterson, did the unthinkable and beat up Adrian Jr. to the point where his injuries later resulted in his passing.[[43]](#footnote-43)As a father, losing a child is the worst feeling in the world, and losing your child at the hand of domestic violence from a man you don’t know makes it even worse. However, one would have to think that losing a son to domestic abuse would cement a memory in Peterson’s mind to never lay a hand or object on his child, no matter the situation. Unfortunately, that was not the case as Peterson, a year after losing one son, felt the need to punish a different son the way he was punished over twenty years ago.

 The NFL was just getting over the dramatic and non-stop coverage of the Ray Rice affair, so having an even bigger star of the game turn up in the news for the same issue was the last thing the league wanted. With the season already underway, Peterson was participating in the games and garnered the usual focus of the media that a superstar gets in this league. When the reports that Peterson was involved in a domestic abuse case rose, every ounce of the media’s attention turned from his on the field stats to what just happened off the field. Adrian Peterson was accused of hitting his child as a form of punishment. Much like the Ray Rice incident, without visual evidence, people were just left to use their imagination of what an All-Pro NFL player could do to a 4-year old boy. Above are just a few of the images released by the Houston Police Department that show the carnage that Adrian Peterson left behind after he was finished disciplining his son.[[44]](#footnote-44) These pictures are the definition of disturbing because there is nothing in the world that a 4-year-old boy could have done to receive lashes and wounds as horrifying as these. This was equivalent to the second Ray Rice video coming out for the NFL, and very well could be considered even worse because a child was the prime victim. When these photos were published along with more and more information on the case, Peterson came out and confessed to his actions. Peterson doesn’t seem to understand that we are in a different time compared to the days he was getting punished. Much like when he was a child, Peterson used a switch when he gave his son, as he put it, a ‘whooping’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Peterson was handling the situation completely wrong, especially since he was in the spotlight and everything he said was going to be magnified. Adding to the pictures and his statement of giving his child a whooping, it came out that Peterson has a whooping room in his house for when his children act out of line,[[46]](#footnote-46)nonchalantly told the mother of his son “Got him in the nuts once I noticed,”[[47]](#footnote-47)and the even called his son brave while texting the boy’s mother about what had just transpired, as seen in the picture below.[[48]](#footnote-48) Peterson, when asked why he would do this to his son, referred back to his childhood beatings and how those hard times made him into the man he is today. “To be honest with you, I feel very confident with my actions because I know my intent… I would never eliminate whooping my kids because I know being spanked has helped me in my life.”[[49]](#footnote-49)The other three cases of domestic violence, the idea of hyper-masculinity was easily part of the reason for the players actions, however, with Peterson, that does not seem to be the case because he is simply portraying the type of parenthood he received. He is simply replicating how he was brought up, having no effect on if he took his action on the field back to his home. Part of the reason why the media and society have turned on Peterson coincides with that last quote. Obviously the pictures of the scars and the text messages spark some hatred, but the fact that Peterson still thinks in this day in age that it is alright to punish his kids with whips and belts is a concept that many people just can not wrap their heads around. While this was obviously taking a toll on his personal life, his career was at a stand still not only with his team, but his sponsors. One of Peterson’s most cherished events includes the Special Olympics Minnesota, within six days of the accusations hitting the mainstream media; the committee decided “we are abstaining from any engagement with Adrian Peterson at this time.”[[50]](#footnote-50)That was just the beginning as General Mills, a popular Minnesota based company that had featured Peterson on their cereal box covers, was next to follow suit. All of them pale in comparison to Nike, maybe the largest sports brand in the world, and Peterson was one of their top football player representatives. Just recently, Nike decided they could no longer have their brand name associated with a man in such hot water with the sports world and dropped Peterson from their coveted list of athletes.[[51]](#footnote-51) Adrian Peterson quickly went from one of the most loved athletes in the game to a man who had his fatherhood questioned and looked at as an abuser. Whatever image he seemed to have before this incident, it can be assured his image is now tainted, along with the NFL’s.

Adrian Peterson made a decision that not only affected his family, but his team, the league, the media and society. We live in a society; where to many, punishing your child with physical harm is inexcusable. But this is where the race of Peterson comes into play because in his culture, the line between abuse and discipline are varied. However, when members of the same community, who received such punishments as a child, deplore of Peterson’s actions, than it starts to cross over into abusive punishment.[[52]](#footnote-52) Disciplining your child is still around, but the way Peterson is used to punishment is not the way it works these days. With the superstardom that comes with Peterson also comes a tremendous amount of media attention, and in this situation, a whole lot of negative attention. Ever since Peterson was drafted out of college, he has had that spotlight nailed to his back, but never seemed to notice it because of all the positive attention he would attract. The NFL had their worst stretch of months spanning from the beginning of the Ray Rice saga to the end of the Adrian Peterson case, and even though the investigations are over, the outcry and conversations are long from gone. These four athletes portrayed the type of behavior that is unacceptable for people in their situations. With as much Adrian was one of four men who played a hand in tarnishing the NFL’s image and each man holds a certain amount of accountability in that sense. However, there is one man who had a hand in all four situations and had opportunities to squash the media’s negative publicity by acting on these issues rather than just sitting back and watch his league come crumbling down.

Every business in the world can be associated with a single name. When anything happens within a company, that person is the final voice of reason and has the authority to right the wrong or support something good. In sports, that person is known as the commissioner and the man who holds the reigns as the NFL commissioner is Roger Goodell. Roger Goodell holds power over every athlete, coach, general manager, owner, and even media in the NFL, so when a decision of his, or lack there of, is made, it effects the entire league. That much power can be dangerous because if there is an issue, and it is handled incorrectly, than Goodell is going to be scrutinized, but if he gets ahead of something, he will be praised. The media has such a crucial role in Goodell’s actions because if the media backs a certain story and forces enough pressure for something to happen, it falls right back to Goodell to enforce a ruling. It is a power-struggle between the media and Goodell, a struggle that is often won by the media and that never bodes well for the commissioner. Over the past several months, Goodell has faced the hardest stretch any commissioner has had to face in terms of player repercussions and media control. To say Goodell was placed in a difficult and uncomfortable situation would be an understatement, but it is how he handled it all that would be publicized by the media and what would ultimately effect the long term of the players and the league. What came with handling this situation was the punishment for each player and if they would suffice with the media. Unfortunately for Mr. Goodell, he failed in applying the proper punishments as well as the timely manner in which those failed punishments were handed out. It got to the point where the media were clamoring for Goodell to relinquish his position as commissioner or even be fired. Accountability was important here and even Goodell couldn’t accomplish that feat properly.

A commissioner is always going to have their critics. It is simply a position where it is impossible to keep everybody happy because everybody has different opinions on each subject. However, these past few months, every member of the media seemed to be on the same page when criticizing Goodell for his job in handling these domestic abuse cases properly. Roger Goodell has been the NFL commissioner for eight years and throughout that tenure, he has never received as much criticism and heat as he has these past few months. When the NFL was dealt the hand of four of their players tied up in domestic violence cases, it was essential that they handle them the correct way because they were not only under the spotlight of NFL media, but mainstream media outlets like CNN and ABC as well. The decisions that Goodell had to make not only had an affect on the players careers, but an affect on the image of the NFL and how they are looked at from the outside world. When the first domestic violence case surfaced, the NFL just stood by and did nothing. When the second case was thrown on Goodell’s desk, Goodell didn’t lift a finger and just stood by as the media urged him to make a move. The Ray Rice video surfaced in February with the second video hitting the webs in September, and between those times, Goodell was nowhere to be heard from. When Goodell finally decided to come out and talk, he sounded like a fumbling idiot. “I got it wrong on a number of levels.”[[53]](#footnote-53)Those are the words that Goodell continued to utter as he ducked more questions than he answered. With every word that came out of Goodell’s mouth, the media in attendance and watching on television grew angrier and angrier. They were all baffled at how Goodell was handling such an important situation and wondering why it took him so long to step in front of the nation and confront the issues at hand. Greg Hardy was found guilty for attacking his girlfriend and continued to play for the Panthers because Goodell refused to make a statement and take action against him. What’s even more horrifying about that is that he stands by his decision even after the entire backlash he as received.[[54]](#footnote-54) However, this is not the first time Goodell has delayed or neglected a case involving his players. Since Goodell took office, he has had 50 cases involving NFL players with eighteen of them resolved through diversion programs which allowed players to avoid charges or prosecution.”[[55]](#footnote-55) These diversion programs send the message that “this isn’t such a big deal” and it is all about saving the guys career and avoid wasting time in trial. This was all happening under the control of Goodell and the simple fact that a guy’s career is more important that putting away a man who laid his hands on a women or a child is simply disgusting. This also conveys to the athletes that hyper-masculinity is totally acceptable in society. This goes way beyond football, but such diversion programs build these players up like they are above the rest of us. These types of situations need to be fixed, but until the man at the epicenter of it all starts to take accountability and force action, nothing is going to change for the better.

Pressure leads to action. In the sports world, the fans and media are two of the loudest collective voices and when they speak, they are heard. If they show praise of someone, that person is going to garner more attention than they were previously and if those voices bring down someone, their stock within the sport will crumble. Roger Goodell was under an immense amount of pressure to take action on these players; especially Rice being that he had videos released and was the first of the players to be accused. While these players were going to have to face the judicial system for separate punishments, it was in Goodell’s best interest to take it upon himself and hand down punishments that correlated to the league. He needed to make a statement right from the start and he failed to do so. Even with knowledge of the situation and already viewing the first of the Rice videos, he handed down a two-game suspension for Rice.[[56]](#footnote-56) The outrage that came from Goodell only suspending Rice for two games for knocking out his wife was astronomical. When Greg Hardy was accused of domestic violence, he continued playing! The pressure from media outlets, fans, even sponsors started to grow and grow, and each passing day that Goodell didn’t correct his wrongs, the could over the NFL got darker and darker. Due to the lack of action taken by Goodell along with the constant negative attention due to domestic violence, Proctor & Gamble, one of the NFL’s largest sponsors during October for Breast Cancer Awareness Month, pulled out of the relationship and decided to no longer associate themselves with the NFL.[[57]](#footnote-57) The month of October is so essential for the NFL in terms of helping awareness and product income, so having their main sponsor pull out gives the NFL a horrible dent in their image. When Goodell finally witnessed the second Rice video, he realized his mistakes, albeit way too late, he extended the punishment from two-games to indefinitely.[[58]](#footnote-58) Ray Rice was the only player that received a punishment from Goodell and his team, whom subsequently cut him from the roster hours after the second video was released. Hardy, after playing in several games, was placed on the NFL exempt list, which allows the player to continue to be paid but is not allowed playing or practicing with the team.[[59]](#footnote-59) Due to the constant pressure of the media, as well as its beloved sponsors, the Vikings initially made the same mistake that Goodell made and only punished Peterson for a short time; one game. When the pressure mounted after that decision, they were forced to place Peterson on the exempt list and distance themselves from him for the time being.[[60]](#footnote-60) The Arizona Cardinals were the only team that got it right by immediately reacting after they got wind of the Dwyer case. Part of the problem leading up to this decision was that the NFL never had any rules in place with how to handle this type of situation and because of that, Goodell and the teams were not sure what the right way of punishing the players were. This does not provide an excuse for those involved and their lack of action, but it is something that Goodell promised would be fixed so these issues are not dragged out over time like these cases were.

The best way to move forward and plan for the future is by leaning on the mistakes made in the past. Goodell understood than he needed to take a stand on domestic violence and create a system within the NFL that would not only produce a positive effect with the media, but also give the sense to the players that hyper-masculine actions are not acceptable. Once the dust settled on the media pressure and all the suspensions were handed down to the players, Roger Goodell and his NFL counterparts came to their senses and created a new system that involved domestic violence and concrete punishments for not only players, but executives and all members of the NFL community. The new plan in place states that 1st time offenders of domestic violence get an immediate six games suspension and 2nd time offenders get a lifetime ban.[[61]](#footnote-61) To say this is an improvement for the NFL and its stand on domestic violence would be a grand understatement. This not only solidifies for the league that this conduct is no longer acceptable, but it provides a shadow over players for when they think about laying a hand on somebody else while off the football field. Goodell was did not stop there because he knew how important stopping domestic violence was, not just for football, but society as a whole. With Goodell’s stamp of approval, the league has begun to seek assistance for its domestic violence problem by enlisting domestic violence experts. This group is comprised of four women who have esteemed knowledge on the topic of domestic violence, spanning from a prosecutor of 28 years that focused on sex crimes to a 20-year advocate with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence group.[[62]](#footnote-62) While this is undoubtedly a step in the right direction for Goodell, it is also without question a way to feed the media and get them off his back. He understands how horrible his league and his own personal image looks right now, so bringing in women to help with the issue will get the media to start praising him again.

Through all these domestic violence cases, Roger Goodell does not deserve a free pass, and the media made sure of that. While the players are the ones who acted out of place, it is the commissioner that provides a type of environment that makes it seem that hyper-masculine activity off the football field is okay. The NFL has so many plans in place for a player who fails a drug test or shows up late to practice, but to not have something in place for domestic violence, especially with the past the league has with it, is baffling. Goodell will never admit it, but these measures were at the aid of the constant pressure by the media and teams. The Vikings were not going to stand by and lose their sponsors just because Goodell wouldn’t step up and punish Peterson. Goodell has taken the right steps to make sure the future of the game does not go through a span like it just endured, but it is not going to just stop with the group of domestic violence advocates. Roger Goodell was never going to break from the pressure, but he did bend, thankfully, he bent by taking the proper steps to helping the NFL in the long run.

The NFL faced one of the most challenging times any company or league could face. Several of the games players were at the center of domestic violence cases, two of them being two of the games brightest stars. It is not only a tribute to the lifestyle these men life today, but it goes back to when they were children. Growing up in a certain home, raised by a certain figure and even the color of the skin all play a part in the type of man these players have become. Society continues to be divided, especially in Peterson’s case, in terms of how to implement a certain mentality in your family. This is something that might never change, and rather than the media call it abuse, they may need to see it as life lessons. Hyper-masculinity is something that will never become a non-issue, but it must become an issue that can be contained. Especially for football players where they have constant physical contact, a program or group, much like the domestic violence group, needs to be implanted to help players deal with off the field masculine outbursts. The NFL has built an environment that allows for the players to be built up to be bigger than everybody else, for fans to few them as athletes and not individuals. If these men are allowed back into the NFL in the near future, how are the fans and the media going to embrace them? This is a question that is worth monitoring because if the fans decide to look the other way and continue to embrace these players, than society as a whole has a long way to go in treating domestic violence as a serious matter.

These players’ careers and life are never going to be the same. They will forever be tied to the darkest days of the NFL and have these domestic violence cases hanging over their heads. Ray Rice and Jonathan Dwyer may never see the field again because as free agents, teams may look at them and realize they are carrying more than just their football baggage, but baggage that attracts nation wide attention. Greg Hardy and Adrian Peterson are different because they are technically still a part of their team, so when and if the league reinstates them, it will be intriguing to see how their respective teams handle the situation. The league is a business, so it would not be overly surprising to see a man of Peterson’s presence for the Vikings and the league playing again this season, as disturbing as that may sound. The NFL’s image may never be the same after this, but one has to believe they have learned from their mistakes. The future of the NFL and domestic violence are not only in the hands of the four women, but also in Goodell’s hands, the player’s hands and even the media’s hands. For as large as the NFL is nationally, if they start to make a difference with domestic violence, than maybe society can follow suit and the issue can be contained as a whole.

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