

Getting It Right Off The Field

Over the past year, we have seen two major sports franchises – the NFL and NBA – dealing with large scale public controversies. These are organizations that need help from conflict resolution experts.

In November 2013 there was the bullying incident with the National Football League's (NFL) Miami Dolphins. In the middle of the 2013 National Basketball Association's (NBA) play-off was the release of a tape recording of then Clippers owner Donald Sterling making racial comments about Black Clipper Players. The NBA's Atlanta Hawks are also dealing with racially charged comments made by their general manager Danny Ferry. During an internal investigation of Ferry's comments, emails were discovered in which Hawks owner Bruce Levenson is reported saying that Black fans were keeping suburban White fans from attending games. The controversy over the Redskins' name is unresolved. Finally, at a time when the NFL should be enjoying the start of a new season, domestic and child abuse charges, indictments and convictions are filling the headlines with the handling of the incident involving then Baltimore Ravens' Ray Rice getting most of the attention.



In his press conference on Friday, September 19, 2014, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said, "I got it wrong in the handling of the Ray Rice Matter, and I'm sorry for that. But now I will get it right and do whatever is necessary to accomplish that." At this point, what that seems to mean is an internal investigation into how the NFL handled the Rice affair, providing funding to the House of Ruth which provides services to victims of domestic violence, disciplinary action, and a committee to review NFL personal conduct policies. The actions outlined by the Commissioner have their place, but the focus is after the action has occurred. What we did not hear was an intent to develop a comprehensive approach to addressing these serious problems.



What's needed is a comprehensive system that includes education, conflict management skills, conflict coaching, ombuds-like services, and confidential counseling that begins the moment a player contract is signed and continues through retirement. At rookie training camp, there should be as much attention paid to educating players on off-the-field issues such as these as there is on teaching a player the system used on the field. There also needs to be comprehensive services for player's spouses, partners and family, beginning with the first contract.

This is true for the NBA. In dealing with the issue of racial insensitivity, the Atlanta Hawks announced they will be hiring a Chief Diversity Officer; NBA Commissioner Adam Silver announced, this week that the NBA will be evaluating their policies.

In the interest of full disclosure, I am a sports fan. I enjoy a good game, be it football, basketball and, yes, baseball. I will even watch a round of golf sometimes. Growing up in a family with 5 boys, I learned to watch, play, and enjoy all kinds of sports. These days, watching is not as enjoyable and that has nothing to do with the play on the field or the court. Both the NBA and the NFL have tremendous influence and have an opportunity to develop a model program. I hope for the lives involved and yes, the sake of the game – they will slow down and get it right. I also hope you'll join me in promoting discourse about conflict management as these and other similar controversies capture public attention. As always, feel free to send any other comments or suggestion to me at cheryl.jamison26@gmail.com.



The **ACR 2014 Annual Conference is 2 weeks away** in Cincinnati, Ohio. Hotel rooms are almost gone and registration is brisk. If you have not registered or reserved your hotel room, please do it today. Visit the website for more information, www.acrannualconference.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cheryl L. Jamison". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Cheryl L. Jamison, Esq.,
President, ACR