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## *After Unsteady Steps to Punish Domestic Violence, N.F.L. Faces Scrutiny Again*

By KEN BELSON and BILL PENNINGTON OCT. 21 2016



The N.F.L. indefinitely suspended Giants kicker Josh Brown after the release of documents that mention abuse of his ex-wife. Credit Al Bello/Getty Images

After one of the most egregious cases of domestic violence among National Football League players two years ago, in which a star on the Baltimore Ravens was caught on video knocking out his fiancée, the league vowed a not-again, get-tough approach.

The player, Ray Rice, was suspended indefinitely after an uproar regarding his initial punishment, a two-game suspension. Public service announcements featuring players denouncing

domestic violence were broadcast during games. A former prosecutor was hired to lead a newly formed unit to help the league investigate cases without relying solely on the authorities.

And the commissioner, Roger Goodell, after the public burst of anger over Rice's conduct and the initial limited penalty for it, instituted a policy of six-game suspensions for players found to have committed abusive acts against a spouse or partner.

Yet the N.F.L. is once again facing a crisis after revelations this week regarding a Giants player who admitted to the team that he had abused his wife and was allowed to remain on the roster after only a one-game suspension from the league.

Police documents released Wednesday showed that the player, kicker Josh Brown, wrote about being "physically, verbally and emotionally" abusive to his wife. The team took him off its active roster on Friday, and the league suspended him indefinitely with pay.

Brown made the comments in emails and journal entries as part of a marriage counseling exercise that was included in the investigative file compiled by the police in King County in Washington, where Brown was arrested on a domestic violence charge in May 2015. Brown and his wife have since divorced, and prosecutors declined to bring charges.

Both the Giants and the league are reviewing how they handled the situation, asserting that they did not learn the full details until the police files were released Wednesday, closing the legal case.

The league investigation by the former prosecutor, Lisa Friel, bumped up against the refusal by the police to release details of the case until it was closed. The player's ex-wife also declined to cooperate.

But the fallout from the case points to the league's scattershot approach to deciding whether a player should be suspended, and for how long.

The six-game suspension rule, for instance, has rarely been fully enforced; just three out of 10 players who were potentially affected by it have received a suspension of that length. In most cases, because of what the league calls mitigating circumstances, players involved in domestic abuse cases have been suspended for two or three games.

In the one case when a penalty of more than six games was imposed, Greg Hardy's 10-game suspension was reduced to four by a league-appointed arbitrator.

In Brown's case, it remained unclear whether the Giants had informed the league that he had told team officials he had abused his wife. But the team said it had been aware of the abuse when Brown signed a two-year, \$4 million contract in April. After the Giants and the league looked into the case, the league imposed a one-game suspension in August.

Advocates for domestic violence victims said the league could have taken a harder line earlier in the case.

“If the mitigating factors were that his ex-wife didn’t cooperate, we know that many victims don’t want to cooperate,” said Judy Harris Kluger, the executive director of Sanctuary for Families, an organization based in Manhattan that helps victims of domestic violence. “That should not have precluded the N.F.L. from acting. They should have learned that by now.”

In response to the Rice case, Goodell announced that four women would help shape the league’s policies. Among them was Friel, the former head of the sex crimes prosecution unit in the Manhattan district attorney’s office. Friel, a Giants season-ticket holder, was given the title of senior vice president, special counsel for investigations.

The police files in Brown’s case show that members of Friel’s department contacted the police in King County but were largely rebuffed. It was unclear what other steps she or her office had taken, and the league declined to make her available for an interview on Friday.

Critics question whether the efforts the N.F.L. took to address domestic violence were tough enough, as the league weighs the removal of key players from the field against satisfying victims’ advocates who urge no tolerance for any abuse.

“Goodell can say, ‘This is our standard, and we look at each case individually,’” said Mark Conrad, the director of the sports business program at Fordham University. “But if the range of penalties is that high, it calls into question how tough the policy is.”

The case has in particular stung the Giants, a team that had been seen at the forefront of raising awareness of the domestic violence problem.



Comments by the Giants co-owner John Mara regarding Brown have been heavily criticized.

Credit Bill Kostroun/Associated Press

One year ago, at their October home game against the Dallas Cowboys at MetLife Stadium, the Giants hosted an event to raise awareness of domestic violence. The turnstiles were overseen by volunteers from a coalition of domestic violence advocacy groups, including My Sisters’ Place.

The volunteers encouraged fans to use social media to speak out against domestic violence as part of the “No More” campaign championed by Mariska Hargitay, a star of “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit.”

The co-owner John K. Mara, quarterback Eli Manning and Tom Coughlin, the team’s coach at the time, were among the Giants who made public service announcements for the “No More” campaign, and those messages aired on the stadium’s four jumbo video screens during timeouts.

Mara, however, came under fire Thursday after an interview on WFAN radio in which he conceded that

Brown had admitted the abuse to the team. Mara went on to say that the team did not know “the extent of it,” suggesting that whether a player was kicked off the team was a matter of degree.

Outrage once again has poured out on social media and the airwaves. Even the mother of a Giants player, Eli Apple, who was the team’s top draft choice this year, vented her anger.

“As a domestic violence survivor,” Annie Apple posted on her Twitter account, “reading these Mara comments makes me sad, angry and completely baffled. He just doesn’t get it. This is sad.”

Mara had previously defended the decision to keep Brown.

“I have four daughters and seven sisters, and I know I have to face each one of them,” Mara said when the team chose to keep Brown after his first suspension was announced in August. “These are not easy decisions. It is very easy to say, ‘The guy has been accused,’ ‘Get rid of him,’ ‘Terminate him,’ but when you are sitting at the top of an organization and you are responsible for a lot of people, you better make more informed decisions than that.”

In London, where the Giants are preparing to play the Los Angeles Rams on Sunday, Coach Ben McAdoo also stood by his player while avoiding questions on Brown’s future with the team.

“We’re not going to turn our back on Josh,” McAdoo said. “He’s a teammate and a guy we’re hoping makes strides.”

When a reporter mentioned a zero-tolerance policy toward domestic violence, McAdoo replied: “When did I say zero tolerance? We’re looking to get as much information as we can so we have all the facts and can make an informed decision.”

“I do not support domestic violence,” he added, “if that’s what you’re asking. I do not condone it.”

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