

US: National Football League officials locked out

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With the National Football League set to open training camps later this month, the league's on-field officials remain locked out. The contract for the 121 officials expired on May 31, and three days later the NFL broke off negotiations.

On July 17 the NFL announced that they would begin hiring and training replacement officials. Three days later in Dallas, the NFL assembled a number of replacement officials for their first training clinic. Their intended trainers, former highly respected officials who the league retains as officiating trainers, refused to participate, and were all subsequently fired and ordered to turn in their NFL computers.

"We feel that we're fired," said Jerry Markbreit, an official-turned-trainer who was the referee in four Super Bowls. "They haven't formally notified us, but it sure feels like we're fired."

The other eight former officials asked to return their computers were Red Cashion, Ron Botchan, Bill Schmitz, Ben Montgomery, Jim Quirk, Sid Semon, Tom Fincken and Dean Look. These officiating trainers, who are not currently members of the union, have 265 years of combined service with the league and have worked 22 Super Bowls.

"They wanted us to train the replacements which we would absolutely not do," Markbreit said. "We were all officials for 20-plus years... How could we face our people? There wasn't a question about us doing this. We knew this was coming."

"It's very discouraging for [the league] to have put us in this kind of situation."

The NFL issued a statement saying the trainers were not fired but were seasonal employees "who have decided not to work at this time. We asked for their NFL-issued laptops back so that those who are working right now can use them."

The officials contend the league planned the lockout as part of its negotiating strategy and never put a serious effort toward seeking an agreement before the old one expired.

Before the start of the regular season last year, the NFL locked out the players for four months. A 10-year contract was eventually agreed upon. Scott Green, the president of the National Football League Referees Association, stated, "Lockout seems to be their negotiating strategy with everyone. We don't want to be locked out. We want to get back to the table and get this resolved."

The officials say their wage offer was for a smaller increase than they received in the collective bargaining agreement that expired in May. The NFLRA indicated it would cost each of the 32 teams \$100,000 per year to meet its proposals.

The officials also point out that although the NFL is America's most popular and highest revenue generating sport, salaries for its officials are well below those of the other major sports (National Basketball Association, National Hockey League and Major League Baseball). In comparison, the average starting salary for a first year NFL official is \$78,000, in contrast to a Major League umpire who makes \$120,000 a year.

The NFL is the only major sports league that does not employ full-time officials. Most current referees spend 25 to 35 hours a week preparing for their role on Sundays. Involved is film study, dealing with constantly changing rules and points of emphasis, extensive travel, and maintaining a high degree of physical fitness to enable 50-year-old men to keep up with 20-year-olds without seriously injuring themselves.

These and similar reasons are why the other major

sports leagues went to full-time referees years ago.

Moreover, with the recent exposure of the danger and long-term severe health effects that can result from repeated concussions, the NFL has mandated that the officials need to take an active part in protecting the safety of their players. The league's injury and safety panel has directed that officials must receive concussion awareness training, and to remain alert for possible concussions during games.

Officials for the first time will now have the power and responsibility to alert the medical staffs to get players medical attention.

In emphasizing this critical new role that officials will be assuming, the NFL Players Association has been "supporting" the officials by referring to them as its "first responders."

According to *Forbes* magazine, the average value of an NFL team is \$1.04 billion.

The NFL's current television contract, which expires in 2013, was worth \$20.4 billion. In its new television contract covering the years 2014-2022, the networks (CBS, NBC, FOX and ESPN) have agreed to pay the NFL \$39.6 billion for the rights to broadcast America's most popular sport.



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