

The Ray Rice case and the violence of American football

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The video showing professional football player Ray Rice of the Baltimore Ravens punching and knocking out his fiancée and now wife Janay Palmer last February has dominated US news coverage over the past few days.

Shortly after the tape's release, the Ravens terminated Rice's contract and the National Football League (NFL) suspended the 27-year-old running back indefinitely, effectively ending his career.

Rice's actions were deplorable and the victims of such violence invariably suffer long-time physical and emotional scars. But nowhere in the round-the-clock media coverage and sanctimonious statements of NFL officials, team owners and political figures like Obama and Vice President Joseph Biden was there the slightest insight into the broader, social causes of such violence. Instead, the coverage has followed the predictable pattern of demonizing Rice and presenting this as solely the problem of a bad individual.

So frenzied has been the media that Janay Palmer, who grew up with Rice and married him a month after the events depicted in the video, posted on her Instagram: "To make us relive a moment in our lives that we regret everyday is a horrible thing... To take something away from the man I love that he has worked his ass off for all his life just to gain ratings is horrific." In an interview with ESPN, she added, "I want people to respect our privacy in this family matter."

These comments were met with a torrent of on-air denunciations of the 26-year-old woman as a delusional abuse denier.

The professed concerns for women by the NFL and the billionaire team owners are entirely hypocritical. In the Rice case itself, Commissioner Roger Goodell had imposed a two-game suspension and an additional one-

game loss of pay for the assault that left Palmer unconscious.

Every detail of this attack was known, and there was even footage of Rice dragging the unconscious woman out of the elevator where the assault took place, when Goodell imposed the token penalty.

It was only when video of the actual blow being struck was made public Monday that Goodell and the Baltimore Ravens changed course and imposed a penalty that effectively ends Rice's career and may ruin him and his family financially.

What is of paramount interest to the NFL is not protecting potential victims of domestic violence but eliminating any threat to the league's revenue stream.

The fastest growing segment of the fan base and market for the \$10 billion-a-year sports league is girls and women. Females currently make up 46 percent of NFL fans, with an average 63 percent of women 12 and older identifying themselves as fans.

In the recent period, the NFL has promoted "Breast Cancer Awareness Week," with players wearing pink cleats and pink sweat bands, and launched a new line of women's football apparel. It is these crass commercial interests, rather than considerations of principle, that led the league to collaborate with women's groups and draft stiffer penalties for domestic violence.

The brutality shown by Rice cannot be separated from the ethos of violence long promoted by the NFL to fill its stadiums, sell multibillion-dollar television rights and market its merchandise.

The NFL is known for publicizing "big hits" and it rewards with millions of dollars players who can deliver and take such hits. If Rice had delivered a similarly brutal blow on the football field, it would have been highlight-reel material for ESPN and other networks.

The vast majority of its players come from economically deprived backgrounds, where violence, including domestic violence, is commonplace. The small fraction of football players who make NFL teams have careers of only a few years before injury or age put them on the scrap heap.

Their precarious conditions make the players much more vulnerable to the enormous pressure to risk their health, as well as the health of their opponents, to escape a life of poverty for themselves and their families.

In such an atmosphere—where the more violently a player tackles and blocks can mean the difference between being cut from a team or securing a lucrative career—is there any surprise that such violence will not be limited to the gridiron?

The NFL's supposed "anti-violence" campaign is all the more hypocritical because of its constant promotion of militarism. Every NFL pre-game activity includes introducing a military honor guard, and in open-air stadiums, military jets will do a "fly over" as the National Anthem is being played.

In this regard, Vice President Biden's comments to MSNBC reporter Tamron Hall after Rice's firing were particularly disgusting. Promoting his role in the passage of the 1994 Domestic Violence Act, Biden said, "the most vicious form of violence" was that perpetrated against women. In a White House press statement on the video Obama said, "Hitting a woman is not something a real man does."

Blowing up a woman with a drone-fired missile is, however, something a "real president" does. No one needs lectures on morality from war criminals responsible for the murder and maiming of countless women and children in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere.

There is no excuse or defense for Rice's behavior. But this and similar cases of domestic violence by professional athletes cannot be understood, let alone any real solutions proposed, unless the root of the problem is addressed. Such a situation is the inevitable result of the subordination under capitalism of professional sports and all facets of popular culture to private profit.

Despite their high salaries, the players are essentially used as gladiators to ensure far more money for the team owners and investors. In pursuit of this, the league

knowingly and systematically sacrifices the limbs and lives of the athletes.

The NFL has conducted a decades-long effort to deny and conceal the devastating physical toll the game's violence incurs on former and current players. In May, a group of retired NFL players filed a class-action lawsuit alleging that professional football knowingly supplied them with illegal narcotics and addictive painkillers in its pursuit of profits.

In another lawsuit settled in 2013, the NFL agreed to pay \$765 million to over 4,500 former players who had sought legal compensation for long-term brain damage from repeated and severe concussions during their careers.

Head and other debilitating injuries contribute to the short life expectancy of players. An athlete with a career of four years or more in the NFL will live on average to the age of 55, compared to the average life expectancy of 75 for males in the US.



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