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Domestic violence game plans played up by leagues

On Dec. 2, members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation held a hearing to shed light upon the four major sports leagues for their failure to punish players in connection with acts of domestic violence and failure to aid victims.

Domestic violence is a large societal problem not unique to sports. However, Congress decided to become involved in the issue because professional sports players are household names and are capable of setting an example.

Thanks to TMZ, public interest was sparked when the popular gossip site posted a video showing then-Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice punch and knock out his wife (then his fiancée) in an elevator.

Soon after, when alleged cases of athletes such as Adrian Peterson of the Minnesota Vikings began to make headlines in the media, the general public suddenly realized the prevalence of domestic violence among athletes and began to scrutinize the leagues for their poor handling of these issues.

Major league sports have now faced immense pressure to “up their game” in handling matters of domestic violence as they arise among professional athletes.

At the hearing, the committee's chair, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., said “there is a long list of players in the NFL, the NBA, the NHL and Major League Baseball who have been charged with, and in some cases convicted of, domestic violence, and the leagues have done little or nothing in response. In fact, the press has reported that a culture of silence within the leagues often prevents victims from reporting their abuse to law enforcement. This has to change.”

Present at the hearing on behalf of major sports leagues were executives and players' association officials from the

NFL, NBA, NHL and MLB to address changing domestic violence policies and holding players more accountable.

Here is a summary of how the four leagues testified on how they are working to revamp domestic violence policies:

- The NFL has consulted with more than 100 experts on this issue. The goal is to set clear rules for misconduct to establish a fair process for the players. The NFL plans to create a conduct committee responsible for reviewing and recommending changes to its personal conduct policy going forward.

The NFL is deploying a mandatory education program for more than 5,000 men and women in the NFL family to ensure everyone understands the full scope of this behavior and is familiar with warning signs associated with these crimes.

The league will be training response teams to help prevent and respond quickly to family violence and sexual assault, including safety, medical, legal and financial support. It is further planning to continue raising awareness and supporting the National Domestic Assault Hotline and the National Resource Center.

- The MLB recently met with organizations focused on addressing domestic violence and providing support to victims. It has organized a committee to develop education, training materials and programs for players, staff and their families as well as posting information at ballparks regarding hotlines and shelters.

The league is developing mandatory response protocols that will include providing confidential counseling and treatment for victims and counseling and intervention for perpetrators.

Futures Without Violence will assist in implementing education programs for all baseball players and clubs. Beginning this year, all top prospects will be educated in domestic violence in the Rookie Career Development Program.

TIME-OUT

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During spring training, every major and minor league player will be educated by Futures Without Violence.

It is also developing a stand-alone policy that addresses domestic violence and sexual assault prior to the upcoming season.

Because the commissioner has authority under the league's collective bargaining agreement to discipline players for conduct that is detrimental or prejudicial to the best interest of baseball, the MLB has proposed revisions to the disciplinary policy that would make it easier for the commissioner to impose an appropriate level of discipline on players who commit acts of domestic violence and have that discipline upheld in arbitration.

However, the MLB does not have the right to insist on changes to player discipline until its current collective bargaining agreement expires in 2016.

- The NBA recently reviewed all of the organization's programs, policies and efforts in the area of domestic violence. It determined there is more to be done to prevent domestic violence from occurring and promised to learn and improve on how the league handles the issue.

The NBA will be holding new awareness and educational sessions with players, family members, league and staff. League officials recognize that

discipline is part of the process and believe that discretion and neutral arbitration for the players is a fair process. The league desires to provide fair but firm discipline when necessary.

- The NHL pledged to raise awareness and provide education regarding domestic violence and to penalize offenders with the intention of deterring future misconduct.

The league will observe its strict policies, practices and procedures regulating the personal conduct of its players that encompass situations of domestic abuse. It has an educational program in place that addresses domestic violence among other issues, which includes educating players at rookie orientation.

The NHL's current collective bargaining agreement (in effect until 2020) allows for the league and its clubs to have authority to enforce rules regulating players' off-ice conduct. Under the CBA, the commissioner has broad authority to act and impose discipline when a player is guilty of conduct that is detrimental to the league.

And the league standard form employment contract provides that teams can discipline players for conduct that violates the rule requiring a player to conduct himself on and off the ice according to the highest standards of honesty, morality, fair play and sportsmanship and to refrain from detrimental conduct.

Although the Senate hearing may only be symbolic and too narrowly tailored toward athletes specifically, it is important that the issue of domestic violence no longer be swept under the rug until it becomes popular in the media.

Only time will tell if the major leagues will actually follow through with their proposed plans and go on the offensive against domestic violence or if the testimony was simply an “all talk” defensive move in response to taking a hit from the Senate.