



# op/ed

by barry irwin

## ENSURING INTEGRITY

There is a popular notion that if horseracing somehow managed to have a league office running the show, our troubled game would be saved.

To this, I say, "Hold on jess a minute there, pard."

Let's look at what happened this week with professional football's scandal over the alleged deflation of footballs supplied by the New England Patriots in their game a week ago against the Baltimore Ravens.

The National Football League has what by any measure is a powerful league office. Many in racing think that a similar organization would be able to put our disparate houses in order.

Word from the media leaked that as many as 11 of the 12 footballs brought for the game by the Patriots had not been pumped with the requisite amount of air. The NFL has rules in place to deal with this issue.

Yet look how long it has taken the NFL to swing into action during the short span between the time the infraction was discovered and reported until the premier event of the season.

Surely there is nothing more important to the NFL than the Super Bowl. It is the end-all and be-all of the sport. In importance it supersedes the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness or the Belmont...or for that matter the entire Triple Crown as a unit. In racing we also have the Breeders' Cup. So no one event is as defining to a sport as the Super Bowl is to professional football.

Yet, even with a league office in place and a public relations network that is the envy of other sports, the NFL dropped the ball...or, on this case, didn't want to acknowledge that there was a ball.

Surely a national discussion on deflated footballs can only take away from the build up to the game itself. The NFL must want people talking about the relative merits of the two teams and not the pigskin.

The media has engaged in a feeding frenzy the like of which has not been seen in professional sports over a game-related issue in memory.

At issue is whether the "Deflatriots" have once again flaunted the rules of football by trying to take an edge. The issue is whether they once again cheated. The club is a fabulously successful franchise in terms of winning games. But after their coach was caught cheating by videotaping practice sessions of an opponent, their off-the-field antics sullied their public image.

Yes, that's right: the public perception.

Because, when all is said and done, the public perception is all that matters, because the public supports football by buying tickets and watching TV.

This time the cheating took place on the field of battle. Deflated footballs are easier to throw and easier to catch.

Other than the manipulation of cleats on a shoe, no other form of cheating in football directly impacts the outcome of a game more than manipulation of the ball itself.

So, with their vaunted and powerful league office, what did the NFL choose to do from a sportsmanship and PR standpoint?

Ah, I see: they chose to ignore it for the week.

Instead of tackling the issue head on with the alacrity required and get "Deflate-gate" behind them, they stuck their head in the sand and chose to pretend it didn't happen.

Given how the NFL dealt with the leaked video of a player brutalizing his wife in an elevator, I guess its handling of the deflated footballs should not come as a surprise.

But, for a moment, let's do some pretending of our own. Let's pretend that we never saw that football player dragging his semi-conscious wife by her hair out of that elevator like a caveman. And, for the sake of illustration, let's pretend that the NFL got on the deflated footballs from the get-go.

I humbly submit to you that no matter what the NFL revealed to the public and no matter what fines or penalties they decided to mete out, the public (there's that darn pesky public again!) would not have been satisfied.

Reason? This was cheating that involved trying to tilt what is supposed to be a level playing field. Americans have made football their favorite sport, surpassing baseball. Fans want to believe in the results and feel good about the games. They don't want to put their hearts and souls into an enterprise that is not worthy of their loyalty.

And, as sick as it may be, fans mostly likely are a lot more disturbed about the deflation of footballs than they are about a domestic dispute, unless of course it has something to do with another football player from days gone by named O. J. Simpson.

So what is the answer to the dilemma of how to safeguard the integrity of this game and other games as well?

Answer: an independent agency not aligned with team owners, the hierarchy of the NFL or its participants. What a police review board in theory is supposed to be.

So what has all this got to do with horseracing you ask?

We have the same dilemma. But we have a ready-made answer. It is USADA--the United States Anti-Doping Association.

In the Lance Armstrong case, one in which the government of the United States of America fumbled the ball on the 5-yard line, USADA picked up that ball and carried it over the goal line for a touchdown.

Nobody wants the government involved in racing. We don't want the states or the Feds involved. The Feds showed how little they could be trusted in the Lance Armstrong case.

But we need the government to do one thing for us and that is to use its standing to empower USADA. So let's not make the mistake of confusing what the Feds can do for us by characterizing their involvement as governmental meddling.

USADA is the solution not only because it is effective at what it does, which is to ensure the integrity of sport, but because its independence from the sport itself and its hierarchy is embraced totally by a public hungry for a return to the ideals of sportsmanship.

This year legislation will be introduced naming USADA to fill a role that has been bungled time and time again by insider alphabet groups in racing. I hope that all participants in racing realize the importance of this measure and do whatever it takes to support the initiative when it is introduced.

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