NFL Prepares for CBA Showdown

By Jeffrey W. Larroca

By the time this article is printed, Super Bowl XLV (that's 45, for those unfamiliar with Roman numerals) between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers will have been played. I hereby offer my prediction and rationale: Pittsburgh 27, Green Bay 16. Why? This is Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger's third Super Bowl, while it is the first for Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers. When in doubt, I go with experience.

After the game, no matter who wins, the next most pressing football question will be: How long will it be until Super Bowl XLVI?

On March 3, 2011, the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) between the National Football League's owners and players expires. Though the issues are a great deal more high profile and the amount at stake is astronomical in comparison to the average labor contract (the NFL exceeded $8 billion in revenues in 2009), this labor dispute is much like any labor dispute in that it pits management against workers in an effort to hash out a deal that covers wages and working conditions. The employers want as much leverage over their employees as possible and for as long a deal as they can negotiate. The employees, on the other hand, want not only more money, but better working conditions, a greater say in how the business is run and more information about that business. If the two sides can come to an agreement, one of the most enjoyed and profitable professional sports leagues can go on without interruption. If not, with no deal in place, the owners will either lock the players out or impose their own deal (upon which the players will strike), and there will be no football (at least, not with the players we have come to know) until the two sides can bridge their differences and agree on a contract. So, what exactly do the two sides want? There are numerous issues, and even more potential compromises and remedies, but at heart, as with most CBA negotiations, it comes down to one thing.

Cash.

The employers, or the owners, want more money. Currently, the players receive just under 60% of the league's revenues. Before the revenues are cut-up between owners and players, however, the owners get a credit for operating and investment expenses. The owners want their credit increased from $1 billion to $2.4 billion. This desire is borne of the fact that many of the owners are building bigger and better stadiums, like Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who just shelled out $1.2 billion for his state-of-the art facility in Arlington, TX. That would mean a significant cut for the players, a cut they deem unjustified. After all, if the owners spend more to upgrade their facilities, the players argue, the result will be more seating (and more expensive seating – luxury suites can go for half a million dollars a season); higher ticket sales; and, higher ticket and concession prices. It is no coincidence that the Cowboys' new stadium sells a $60 pizza and a $9 draft beer.

But, as the saying goes, money isn't everything. The players are also cognizant of the disparity in bargaining power. The owners are claiming financial distress but refuse to open their financial records to the union to back up their case. The players are also aware of their own vulnerability. Jerry Jones doesn't suit up. They do. Jerry Jones' entire career can't be abruptly and violently ended by a blind-side sack or a helmet-to-knee blow. Their careers are on the line every game. That is why one of the aims of the players is an increase in the players' pension fund to assist injured former players.

The owners have their own grievances. Currently, they argue, the players are handsomely paid. The median salary for an NFL player was $770,000 in 2009. While the players counter that the average career is 3.3 years, the amount of money that most of them make is impressive. Take, for example, the St. Louis Rams' first-round pick from last year, quarterback Sam Bradford. To sign him, the Rams agreed to a six-year, $78 million contract, with $50 million of that being guaranteed. So, without having even thrown one pass in the pros, Bradford was owed $50 million. That is why one of aims of the owners is having a rookie wage scale, much like the National Basketball Association.

These are only some of the additional factors influencing the respective positions of the parties. Moreover, there are numerous suggestions that may help the two sides come to an accommodation. For example, there has been talk of extending the season from the current 16 regular season games to 18. Obviously, this would mean more cash for both sides. However, it also means two extra games where a player can get injured.

There has not been labor strife in the NFL for well over 20 years. In 1982, there was a strike-shortened season, and there was another one five years later in 1987. During the 1987 labor impasse, NFL teams were literally grabbing guys off the street (referred to as "scabs" by the striking pros) to play games for three weeks, and it wasn't until later in the season when a deal was struck. It's impossible to know how things will shake out this time, but I hope you enjoyed Super Bowl XLV. The next one just may be a little longer in arriving.

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Note: I was born in Washington, D.C. and I am a long-suffering Redskins fan. Two of the Redskins' three Super Bowls were won in the strike seasons of 1982 and 1987, respectively. The Redskins haven't been to the Super Bowl in almost 20 years.

Maybe a strike isn't such a bad thing.●

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