



FORUM: SPORTS IN THE 1970s

Unnecessary Roughness: The NFL's War on Drugs in the 1970s

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In April 1970, the African American defensive end Houston Ridge's \$1.25 million lawsuit put the issue of drug use in professional football in the public eye. It also raised questions about the league's exploitation of athletes for the sake of profits, at any cost. Plagued by a hip injury sustained during a game in October 1969, the twenty-five-year-old former San Diego Charger's suit charged conspiracy and malpractice, naming team personnel and both the American Football League (AFL) and the National Football League (NFL) as defendants.¹ Ridge's suit claimed that he was permanently disabled, in part, because of the mix of amphetamines, barbiturates, and methandrostenolone given to him by the Chargers, "not for the purpose of care," but for the purpose of performance enhancement. And they had done so "without warning him of the consequences."² An X-ray later revealed that he had broken his hip, but the drugs had so dulled his sensation of pain that he had continued to play, exacerbating the injury.³ A married father of four who now had to walk with the help of crutches, Ridge also filed a worker's compensation claim, accusing the Chargers with willful misconduct.

Ridge's drug revelations were by no means exceptional in the league. In January 1971, former offensive guard for the St. Louis Cardinals, Ken Gray, made headlines when he sued the team for \$1.795 million in damages for "alleged breach of contract and alleged use of drugs on him without his consent."⁴ The release of several tell-all books by former football players, such as Dave Meggyesy's *Out of Their League*, also confirmed the widespread, team-sanctioned use of amphetamines, narcotic analgesics, and steroids for the purposes of performance enhancement. The former St. Louis Cardinal turned athletic activist Meggyesy had quit at the height of his career in 1969 to protest pro football's increasingly "dehumanizing" nature. "A lot of NFL trainers do more dealing drugs than the average junkie," the white linebacker explained.⁵ In Meggyesy's eyes, the NFL had become the United States's "version of bread and circuses," as teams coerced players to perform at high levels, regardless of the conditions or potential harms, all for the sake of profits.

¹Established in 1960, the AFL rivaled the more-established NFL until they merged in 1970. Originally based in Los Angeles, the San Diego Chargers were part of the AFL until the consolidation. For more on the AFL, see Ed Gruver, *The American Football League: A Year-by-Year History, 1960–1969* (Jefferson, NC, 1997).

²"Ridge's Suit Claims Football Allowed Harmful Drugs' Use," *Washington Post*, Apr. 18, 1970, F5; "Ridge Claims Drug Abuse in Pro Football Lawsuit," *Baltimore Sun*, Apr. 18, 1970, B1.

³Mark Asher, "Use of Drugs by Chargers under Probe," *Washington Post*, May 27, 1973, D6.

⁴Gray Names Cardinals in \$1,795,000 Lawsuit: Use of Drugs Cited," *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 1971, F1.

⁵"Ex-Pro Gridder Meggyesy Decries Use of Drugs in NFL," *Baltimore Sun*, Nov. 3, 1970, C1. See Dave Meggyesy, *Out of Their League* (Berkeley, CA, 1971). Other tell-all books from this period include Paul Hoch, *Rip Off: The Big Game* (New York, 1972); and Peter Gent, *North Dallas Forty* (New York, 1973).

Meanwhile, the NFL denied any culpability for and knowledge of institutionalized drug abuse across the league. Its initial response to Ridge's allegations was rather feeble. It put posters in the club locker rooms warning against the use of any drugs not "specifically prescribed, recommended, or approved by your team doctor or personal physician," thereby framing the problem as an issue of *player* misconduct.⁶ The NFL also banned trainers from dispensing prescription drugs to the players, and yet, it chose not to remove any of the team personnel named in Ridge's lawsuit; they all continued to work in the league without penalty.

The ensuing debate over how to define and solve the NFL's drug problem embodied larger struggles between the team owners and players over the trajectory of the sport at a moment when it was becoming more intensely commercialized. For Ridge, Gray, Meggyesy, and other pro gridders, the NFL's profit-driven policies and practices had created the inhumane conditions that encouraged player drug use. Their analysis built on the critiques of the Athletic Revolution of the late 1960s. This broad movement for "athletes' rights"—which involved hundreds of protests against discrimination and exploitation in college sports programs across the nation—condemned the increasingly "administrative structure of sport and the relative powerlessness of athletes."⁷

The push for athletes' rights at the collegiate level helped to inspire collective action in the professional ranks, with the reinvigoration of labor unions such as the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA).⁸ Demanding better benefits and disturbed by the growing power of the team owners working in concert with Commissioner Pete Rozelle, the players voted to strike in 1968 and again in 1970.⁹ After the NFL–AFL merger, African American tight end John Mackey served as the first president of the consolidated NFLPA from 1970 to 1973, and in 1972 he became the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit (*Mackey v. NFL*) that led to the overturning of the "Rozelle Rule" in 1976—a league bylaw that had restricted players' ability to act as free agents since 1963.¹⁰ Against the backdrop of this broader fight, the debates that Ridge's lawsuit inspired were as much about labor control as they were about drugs.

The moral panic over players' drug use helped to obfuscate the exploitative and dictatorial practices of the team owners and league officials. The NFL took advantage of the racialized calls for "law and order" beyond sport in order to distract from their own culpability in the drug issue. When President Richard Nixon declared his "War on Drugs" in June 1971, it embodied a racial double standard. It offered second chances and rehabilitation for white drug users in the suburbs, while encouraging increased policing and punishment for Black drug offenders in U.S. "inner cities."¹¹ Given their precarious status both within and beyond football, African American players, from Ridge to Mackey, were often the ones sounding the alarm about the dehumanizing aspects of what scholars now call the "sports-industrial complex," the multilayered system that generates profits off the backs of athletic laborers, with little regard for their overall health and wellness.¹²

To counter the bad publicity surrounding the Ridge lawsuit, several NFL teams claimed to be waging their own war on drugs as the start of a new season approached in August 1971.¹³ Not yet league-mandated, these decentralized efforts mostly involved educating players about the

⁶Asher, "Use of Drugs by Chargers under Probe," D6.

⁷Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* (Chicago, 2003), 188.

⁸Allen L. Sack, *Counterfeit Amateurs: An Athlete's Journey through the Sixties to the Age of Academic Capitalism* (University Park, PA, 2008), 65.

⁹Michael Oriard, *Brand NFL: Making & Selling America's Favorite Sport* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 58–9.

¹⁰For more on the Rozelle Rule, see *ibid.*, 60–4.

¹¹Theresa Runstedtler, *Black Ball: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Spencer Haywood, and the Generation that Saved the Soul of the NBA* (New York, 2023), 148–9.

¹²See Earl Smith, *Race, Sport and the American Dream* (Durham, NC, 2007).

¹³Dave Brady, "NFL Clubs Wage War on Drug Use, Abuse," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 19, 1971, D1.

negative impacts of drugs, especially illegal street drugs, rather than the performance-enhancing drugs—from stimulants to painkillers to steroids—that NFL teams had long encouraged players to use. More of a public relations campaign than a concerted plan to tackle systemic drug use, these efforts focused on maintaining a clean image of the NFL in the eyes of mainstream Americans, casting drug abuse as something that existed on the streets rather than in their locker rooms.

Teams tended to approach the players' drug education through the lens of law and order. At their training camp, the Washington Redskins brought in Dr. Edward Lewis, the chief media officer of the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, to give a lecture about drug abuse, complete with gruesome slides of drug-related deaths. Team trainer Bobby Gunn had hired the speaker, and even he admitted, "I had hoped that Dr. Lewis would dwell more on amphetamines and barbiturates—uppers and downers—and the risks of anabolic steroids.... But he hit the hard stuff more."¹⁴ Similarly, the Dallas Cowboys hired Haskell Bowen, the author of *High on Campus*, a book about drug abuse for students, to talk about the dangers of LSD and heroin. The Cowboys also subjected its players to urine drug tests during their physical examinations.¹⁵ Thus, teams put the onus back on the players to prove that they were staying "clean," while the brutal physical conditions of the game that Ridge and Meggyesy had exposed remained the same.

Alongside these initiatives, the NFL began to position itself as an uplift organization that could use its media reach to help steer young fans, particularly Black youths, away from drugs. NFL Films, a subsidiary of the league, began working in conjunction with the National Clearinghouse of the Drug Abuse Foundation set up by President Nixon "to disseminate drug-abuse information nationwide."¹⁶ The Clearinghouse and NFL Films produced public-service shorts in which players warned viewers about the hazards of illegal drug use. One such commercial featured footage of Green Bay Packers African American safety Willie Wood tackling a ball carrier, while his voice in the background declared, "That's the way I like to crackdown in action. I'd like to wrack up the drug traffic, too."¹⁷ The following season, the NFL continued to air antidrug spots during its broadcasts, including one featuring Kansas City's Black cornerback Jim Marsalis "with a pre-natal drug addicted baby on his lap."¹⁸ Given that these shorts often starred African American players, they seemed to be directed at Black youths living in poor urban neighborhoods: the presumed battleground of the United States's war on drugs. Yet, the hypocrisy of the NFL's public-service ads was not lost on its critics, who argued that the league appeared to be "rallying around the drug issue as a means of self-defense."¹⁹ After all, as Ridge, Meggyesy, and other players claimed, the NFL remained complicit in its athletes' ongoing use of performance-enhancing drugs.²⁰

In April 1973, Ridge received \$260,000 in settlement of his civil damage suit against the San Diego Chargers, along with \$35,000 in worker's compensation benefits. Four former players for the Chargers, three of them African American, had given depositions in the lawsuit, and the evidence was damning for both the franchise and the NFL. Their depositions and other

¹⁴Ibid. See also "Drugs Keep NFL's Eyes Open," *Washington Post*, Aug. 8, 1971, C1.

¹⁵Haskell Bowen and Gordon R. McLean, *High on Campus: Student Drug Abuse, Is There an Answer?* (Wheaton, IL, 1970). Bowen was a former high school teacher who took leave from his job to live with addicts in the Haight-Ashbury area of San Francisco to gather material for his book.

¹⁶Leonard Shapiro, "Taylor Makes Points on Drugs," *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 1971, B4.

¹⁷Ron Rapoport, "Anti-Drug Campaign: Is It Doing More Harm Than Good?," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 23, 1971, E1.

¹⁸Seymour S. Smith, "NFL Gets Involved in Community," *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 3, 1972, B2.

¹⁹Shapiro, "Taylor Makes Points on Drugs," B4.

²⁰Former Detroit Lion defensive tackle Alex Karras corroborated Meggyesy's claims: "All the teams deny the existence of pills in their training rooms, too, or they keep it hush-hush. It is very stupid to deny it because it is very prevalent and absolutely true." See "Karras Charges NFL Drug Use," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1971, C3.

sworn statements revealed that a variety of drugs (amphetamines, painkillers, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, muscle relaxants, anabolic steroids) “were ordered in bulk through an arrangement between the team doctor, the team trainer and a San Diego pharmacist.” Knowledge of this scheme reached up the chain of command, as the names of five front-office personnel, including that of head coach/general manager Sid Gillman, appeared on the bulk prescriptions.²¹ Testimony also exposed that these practices were commonplace throughout the league.

Around the time of the settlement, Sandy Padwe of *Newsday* published an investigative report about the NFL. He discovered that many athletes used drugs as means to cope with the intense violence and unrelenting pain of professional football. Through interviews with numerous players, Padwe found that despite the recent lawsuits and the NFL’s warnings and education efforts, “Drugs remain[ed] as much a part of professional football as the goalposts.”²² Players took stimulants to pick them up, depressants to bring them down, steroids to bulk them up, and analgesics to reduce their aches. Bubba Smith, a Black defensive end for the Baltimore Colts, admitted that he bought amphetamines from a “private source.” “I use them when I feel I need them,” Smith confided. “That’s mostly when I have to play when I’m hurtin’.”²³ As the NFL, fearful of more lawsuits and bad publicity, began to discourage teams from distributing performance-enhancing pills, Smith and other athletes were forced to go underground, while drug use remained an open secret in the league.

Meanwhile, the revelations from Ridge’s lawsuit prompted California medical authorities and the San Diego County District Attorney’s office to start their own probe into “allegations of promiscuous and indiscriminate use of drugs by the San Diego Chargers.”²⁴ They had also caught the attention of federal law makers. Representative Harley O. Staggers (D-WV), Chairman of the House Commerce Committee, had quietly convened a special subcommittee to investigate “the use of drugs to artificially stimulate performance in athletics.”²⁵ He had decided against holding public hearings, fearing that they might “spur more experimentation by youngsters.” In May 1973, Staggers announced the results of his subcommittee’s year-long probe: “In some instances, the degree of improper drug use—primarily amphetamines, commonly referred to as uppers or pep pills, and anabolic steroids used to increase weight and improve strength—can only be described as alarming.”²⁶ However, he chose not to intervene directly after “receiving constructive responses and assurances” from the commissioners of the United States’s three major professional sports leagues (Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and the NFL). “I think self-regulation will be intensified and will be effective,” Staggers stated.

The special subcommittee’s main recommendations showed a clear double standard at work: record-keeping for the teams/leagues versus punishment for the athletes. Staggers proposed that sports franchises “be required to file complete copies of all drug bills and to file reports of any drug incidents involving team personnel with league headquarters.” Players would

²¹Asher, “Use of Drugs by Chargers under Probe,” D1. See also Dave Brady, “NFL ‘Malpractice’ Settled for \$260,000,” *Washington Post*, Apr. 11, 1973, D1; and “NFL ‘Bennies’ Held Responsible in \$260g Suit,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 2, 1973, 7.

²²Sandy Padwe, “Drugs in Sports: Not by Tape Alone Do Athletes Survive,” *Newsday*, Apr. 23, 1973, quoted in U.S. Senate, Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee on the Judiciary, *Proper and Improper Use of Drugs by Athletes*, June 18, July 12, and July 18, 1973, 358 [hereafter *Proper and Improper Use*]. This article was one installment of a four-part series in which Padwe explored drug abuse in professional and amateur sports.

²³*Proper and Improper Use*, 358.

²⁴Asher, “Use of Drugs by Chargers under Probe,” D1.

²⁵“Congress to Investigate Use of Drugs in Sports,” *Baltimore Sun*, Apr. 27, 1972, D5. For more on the Staggers Commission, see Nathan Michael Corzine, *Team Chemistry: The History of Drugs and Alcohol in Major League Baseball* (Urbana, IL, 2016), 87.

²⁶“Widespread Drug Use among Athletes Revealed in Report,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 12, 1973, D1. See also “Sports News Briefs,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1973, 22; and “Hearing Cites High Drug Use,” *Jet*, June 7, 1973, 51.

also be required to notify teams of all the medications they used. Although there were no stated penalties for the franchises or leagues if they failed to act, Stagers advocated “stringent penalties” for athletes’ illegal drug use, including fines, suspensions, and even lifetime bans, if justified.

A few weeks later, Senator Birch Bayh (D-IN), the head of the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, convened a series of public hearings on the “Proper and Improper Use of Drugs by Athletes.”²⁷ The three days of testimony in June and July 1973 only reinforced Stagers’s findings. Yet, despite ample evidence illustrating that player drug use for performance enhancement and pain relief was a systemic problem, encouraged by the inhuman expectations and profit motives of team owners, federal law makers entrusted the leagues to self-regulate, while the ultimate responsibility for the drug problem fell back onto the shoulders of individual players.

At the same time, there was a growing conflation of illegal street drugs and performance-enhancing drugs in public discussions. This confusion worked to the NFL’s advantage, for it helped the team owners and league officials to side-step their own responsibility in the matter and to position themselves on the side of law and order when scandals arose.

In June 1973, Dave Anderson of the *New York Times* published a sensationalized report alleging that four NFL star players were under surveillance for trafficking “illegal and dangerous drugs.”²⁸ Anderson claimed to have gathered information from narcotics agents on the federal, state, and local levels, and yet both the players and the agents remained unnamed. Reputedly, two teammates were suspected of dealing cocaine in a “multimillion dollar smuggling ring,” while another player reportedly helped to finance a cocaine dealer. The fourth player, “an alleged smoker of hashish,” was purportedly “connected with substantial supplies of it.” Even though these rumors of drug trafficking remained vague and unsubstantiated, they sent the NFL’s top brass into damage control.²⁹

The league denied any knowledge of the investigations but pledged to cooperate with law enforcement. An NFL spokesman stressed that they already had a “security program” in place that underwent “periodic review” and had been “used as a model by other professional leagues.” He emphasized, “We spend upwards of \$300,000 a year on the program, and that amounts to one of our largest expenditures.”³⁰ Jack Danahy, a former Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) agent with over twenty-five years of experience, was the league’s security director. Danahy had a security contact in each of the NFL’s twenty-six franchise cities who collaborated with other law enforcement groups.³¹

To “strengthen its drug-control image,” the NFL also announced plans “to establish tighter guidelines regarding the dispensing of drugs, particularly stimulants, by its teams.”³² Commissioner Rozelle told reporters that he hoped to get approval for an expanded, league-wide drug policy at the upcoming annual meeting of the team owners on June 26. Echoing the recommendations of Stagers’s special subcommittee from a month earlier, Rozelle’s

²⁷*Proper and Improper Use*. For more on Bayh’s Senate hearings, see Corzine, *Team Chemistry*, 86–8; and Runstedtler, *Black Ball*, 159–60.

²⁸Dave Anderson, “U.S. Agents Link 4 N.F.L. Stars to Drug Traffic,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1973, 58.

²⁹Dave Brady, “Border Guards Defending Drug-Toting Football Players,” *Washington Post*, June 24, 1973, D6. Countering the allegations in the *New York Times*, Brady reported that five Canadian Football League (FL) and three National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) football players (not NFL players) had been caught drug smuggling.

³⁰“NFL Denies Knowledge of Drug Trafficking Facts,” *Washington Post*, June 13, 1973, E4. See also “NFL: Unaware of 4 in Drug Probe,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1973, C5; and “NFL ‘Willing’ to Help Wage War on Drugs,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1973, E9.

³¹“NFL Plans Tighter Drug Security,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 14, 1973, D1.

³²“4 in NFL Linked to Drugs: Smuggling, Use of Dope Reported,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 12, 1973, C1.

proposals included the appointment of a new drug-oriented medical director and the mandatory filing of teams' drug-related information with the league.

Meanwhile, Staggers's subcommittee disclosed an additional recommendation for the league—one that it had not made public back in May. It called on the NFL to "use a spot-check urine analysis to determine if players use narcotics."³³ This was a bold move, since urinalysis was still a relatively new technology in 1973 and not yet widely used in professional sports or other civilian industries. In North American pro sports, it was virtually unheard of, except in horseracing and Olympic competition.³⁴

The possibility of mandatory urinalysis provoked an immediate outcry from the NFLPA, as an affront to their civil liberties, labor rights, and bodily autonomy, and further evidence of the increasing authoritarianism of the professional sports leagues. NFLPA Executive Director Ed Garvey called the proposal "an absolute invasion of privacy," maintaining that the prevalence of improper drug use among the players had been blown out of proportion: "It's not only degrading, but the implication is that the players are guilty until proven innocent."³⁵ Garvey urged Commissioner Rozelle to meet with player representatives to address the issue.

In late June, at the NFLPA's annual meeting in Chicago, the players' outrage bubbled over. They felt targeted as scapegoats, both criminalized and dehumanized—a foreboding sign in terms of the league's intersecting labor and racial politics. They also resented the fact that no one—not the special subcommittee, nor the NFL—had consulted them about drug use in the league. After a nearly five-hour discussion with other player representatives, the NFLPA's African American president John Mackey announced that the union would fight urinalysis and the other proposals from Staggers's subcommittee. "We're not going to stand for ball players being treated like animals," the San Diego tight end announced.³⁶ The union rejected the league's framing of the drug issue as a matter of player delinquency, for which the solution was more policing and punishment. "Whatever problem there is has been created by management," Mackey argued. "If players have been taking amphetamines, the pills have been given by trainers and physicians."

For Black players especially, the proposed changes to the NFL's drug policy evoked the United States's longer history of slavery, in which African American chattels served the financial interests of their white owners. Conjuring the image of an auction, Mackey told reporters, "The next thing you know, they'll be putting us on the block and the owners will be looking at our teeth before a trade is made."³⁷ The league seemed all too willing to compromise the dignity and rights of its players in order to preserve its "clean" image and project itself as a source of law and order.³⁸ Its tactics played into the worst stereotypes about Black criminality in the midst of the Nixon's War on Drugs.

Commissioner Rozelle met with NFLPA leadership in Chicago, in a long and confrontational closed-door session. The player representatives reiterated that they did not believe the league had a problem with "hard drugs," and that the charges of amphetamine abuse were greatly exaggerated. They also proposed that the league establish a joint commission on the

³³"Committee Recommends Drug Checks to Rozelle," *Washington Post*, June 15, 1973, D6.

³⁴"Could Come Later," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1973, F1, F11. On the history of workplace drug testing in the United States, see Kenneth D. Tunnell, *Pissing on Demand: Workplace Drug Testing and the Rise of the Detox Industry* (New York, 2004), 14–6; and Carolyn Boyes-Watson, "Corporations as Drug Warriors: The Symbolic Significance of Employee Drug Testing," *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society* 17 (1997): 185–223.

³⁵"Asks Urinalysis in NFL as Drug Curb," *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 1973, C2. See also "NFL Players Call Proposed Urine Test 'Absolute Outrage,'" *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1973, F1, F3.

³⁶"Pro Gridders Will Fight Urine Test, Says Player Rep," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1973, D1.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸"O.J., Brown to Fight Urine Tests," *Chicago Defender*, June 28, 1973, 42; "People in Sports: Drug Tests Are for Cows," *New York Times*, June 28, 1973, 62.

drug issue, composed of players and team owners, before instituting any policy changes.³⁹ Their concerns about the lack of player input regarding drug policy dovetailed with their larger concerns about labor rights, particularly the “lack of freedom for the individual player under the standard contract and the players’ lack of bargaining power.”⁴⁰ As Mackey declared, “We gave up all the rights we intended to give up when the merger between the NFL and the AFL went through.”⁴¹ Competition between the NFL and AFL had temporarily given the players more leverage in the 1960s, but the leagues had used their political clout to gain a Sherman antitrust waiver from Congress in 1966, paving the way for their full merger in 1970. Now back to one league, with the Rozelle Rule still in place, the players found themselves stripped of power. The NFLPA was already preparing for a possible strike in 1974, when they were slated to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement with the league.⁴² The NFL’s handling of the drug issue exemplified the increasingly dictatorial rule of the team owners, now that their monopoly was restored with the recent consolidation.

A few days later, after the team owners’ annual meeting in New York City, Commissioner Rozelle announced that they had approved his additions to the league’s drug-control program—the same recommendations that he had outlined earlier in the month.⁴³ However, thanks to the NFLPA’s resistance, the NFL had tabled its plans to institute mandatory urine tests—at least for the time being. Rozelle still imagined the league’s drug problem as a criminal rather than health and safety matter, maintaining that he and the team owners “were groping for solutions just like all law enforcement agencies throughout the world.”⁴⁴ The players continued to contest this framing of the issue. “Congressman Harley O. Staggers was not warning the NFL about the use of hard drugs, only legal drugs that can be gotten with prescriptions,” NFLPA Executive Director Garvey stated. “The players have nothing to do with dispensing those.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, by 1974, the NFL had effectively moved the public conversation away from the systemic, league-sanctioned use of performance-enhancing drugs to the individual misdeeds of players using street drugs. The league was no longer looking for team trainers who dispensed amphetamines in the locker room, but rather for players with illegal narcotics procured in the street. Its reframing of the issue drew automatic associations with the drug trade in Black urban neighborhoods, and not surprisingly, Black athletes increasingly bore the brunt of this criminalization.

Beyond the NFL, in the United States’s evolving war on drugs, calls for personal responsibility and punishment increasingly replaced any discussion of the systemic forces that caused drug use. In 1973, after a decade of supporting drug rehabilitation programs in New York state, Governor Nelson Rockefeller spearheaded the passage of the nation’s harshest narcotics laws to date. Over the course of the next decade, U.S. drug policy became more focused on policing and punishing individuals, particularly poor African Americans, just as the federal government was disinvesting from domestic social programs.⁴⁶ In some respects, Black pro football players were the canaries in the coal mine, sounding the alarm about the harmful

³⁹“NFL Brass, Players Non-Committal after Meeting,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 24, 1973, B1; “Rozelle, NFL Players Chat with Little Result,” *Washington Post*, June 24, 1973, D6.

⁴⁰“NFL Brass, Players Non-Committal after Meeting,” B15.

⁴¹“Pro Gridders Will Fight Urine Test,” D1.

⁴²“Problems Beset Grid Owners,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 24, 1973, B15.

⁴³Cameron C. Snyder, “Drug Abuse among NFL Players Casts Shadow on Owners’ Meeting,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 26, 1973, C1, C8; “NFL Drug Abuse Plan to Implement Old One,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 27, 1973, C1.

⁴⁴“NFL Drug Abuse Plan to Implement Old One,” C1.

⁴⁵Dave Brady, “Garvey’s Word to Rozelle: ‘Clean up Your Own House,’” *Washington Post*, June 27, 1973, D6.

⁴⁶Julilly Kohler-Hausmann, *Getting Tough: Welfare and Imprisonment in 1970s America* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), 31; Elizabeth Kai Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 3–4.

effects of the punitive and neoliberal turn in U.S. politics. Building on the critiques of Ridge and Mackey, African American Representative Ron Dellums (D-CA) argued that professional sports provided an apt microcosm of these broader shifts in the United States. “I think when you move to the level where economics overrides all human considerations, that is a society that is rapidly becoming so decadent that it’s spelling out it’s [*sic*] own destruction,” he told *Black Sports* magazine. “The way we’re commercializing professional athletics, the way we’re dehumanizing athletes reflects everything that is wrong in our society.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁷Eric Siegal, “Rap with Rep. Ron Dellums: Congressman Seeks Safety in Sports,” *Black Sports*, Aug. 1974, 44.