



July 2007

NFL Clips Clips

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For years, many have joked that “NFL” is an acronym that stands for “No Fun League” rather than “National Football League”, mainly because of the League’s clamp down on on-field celebrations and other aspects of player behavior. But now many media outlets have their own reason to bemoan heavy-handed controls imposed by the NFL Commissioner’s Office. New League rules relating to credentialing of media outlets covering the league are considered by radio, television and newspaper reporters to be no laughing matter.

The NFL, like other professional sports leagues, has long exerted close control over its content. The league has exclusive contracts with television and radio networks to provide live broadcast feeds of its games. There are restrictions on the amount of game footage that can be shown on local and national news programs. League rules even range beyond these areas to cover access to league and team facilities, players and coaches. They also include restrictions on the amount and style of the presentation of content that is accumulated in accordance with league rules.

As sports coverage moves beyond just radio, television and newspapers, the NFL has continued to re-examine and re-invent its media credentialing process. In 1995, the league forbade media outlets to put “game information” online, except for television stations which were simulcasting a signal online in its entirety. This meant no highlights and no interviews could be put online unless they were part of a simulcast of the authorized game feed or news program. The league has continued to refine its rules relating to online video in the past two years and recently announced rule changes which will further affect those – including broadcasters – who wish to cover their local NFL team. The changes fall into two broad categories: (1) Sideline Media Access and (2) Online Use of Interview/Press Conference/Practice Video and Audio.

In 2006, the NFL established rules governing sideline access of non-network television video crews during games. It concluded after the 2006 season that the rules effectively reduced sideline congestion and improved safety for players and sideline personnel. In fact, the rules worked so well that the league decided to expand sideline access. The 2007 season will see an increase in the number of television video cameras on the sidelines. Up to five local television station cameras from each team’s local market will be allowed on the sidelines during the game

to serve as a “pool feed” which must be made available upon request to other stations and to the NFL or the teams for their own use.

This means there will be ten cameras total; if fewer than five cameras from stations from the local market of a team playing in the game request access, more than five cameras from the opposing team’s market stations will be allowed. This is in addition to the network cameras and NFL and club cameras that also have sideline access. It is important to note that these cameras may shoot video *only* for use in their broadcast feeds – *no online use of this footage is permitted*.

It is this last restriction on online video that leads to the second, and significantly more controversial, set of rules. The new rules state:

- ☞ No action from an NFL game may be streamed via on an Internet website.
- ☞ Websites are limited to 45 seconds per day of audio and/or video of NFL employees (which includes players *and* coaches) from NFL facilities. This includes footage of team practice.
- ☞ This content can be available for only 24 hours before it must be taken down and replaced with new audio and/or video.
- ☞ There is no limitation on the amount of “talking head” audio or video – meaning station employees can talk to their hearts’ content.
- ☞ There is also no limitation on the amount of audio or video of an NFL employee that is shot off of NFL premises, so stations can set up interviews outside of stadium or practice facilities and use as much audio or video as they like.
- ☞ The media webpage containing this content must contain links back to the NFL.com website and the site of any NFL team whose employees are featured permitted.

Several major media organizations have protested these new restrictions. With the knowledge that there is little if any legal right to access to the NFL’s privately-owned facilities or its employees, officials from the American Society of Newspaper Editors (a Fletcher, Heald & Hildreth client), the Associated Press Sports Editors, the Radio-Television News Directors Association, the Newspaper Association of America and other media associations have mounted a public interest campaign designed to highlight the importance of the league’s widespread media partnerships. These organizations have either written letters to or met with NFL staff in an attempt to negotiate a more reasonable set of rules that benefits the league, the media and, most importantly, the fans, who will lose out on the hard-hitting, in depth interviews that the NFL’s own websites won’t provide. Let’s face it: 45 seconds is barely enough time to interview a couple of players and show a play or two from practice.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in a video produced by Houston Chronicle blogger John McClain. He interviews Houston Texans players and management while an assistant with a stopwatch stands by to tell him when he is exceeding his limit. Check it out at http://blogs.chron.com/nfl/2007/06/video_mcclain_annamegan_try_to.html

Unfortunately, while McClain's video and his brethren's efforts may have highlighted this issue, they have not changed the NFL's policy. Discussions between the League and the media continue but to date, the League has conceded only that the 45-second limit applies to the NFL employee's responses, but *not* to the interviewer's questions. So it does not look like much progress will be made before NFL training camps open later this month.