



## Pro Football's Bounty System

That's how I felt when I first heard the news that professional football players were paid a bonus if they hurt an opposing player so badly that he had to be taken out of the game.

An NFL investigation revealed that as many as 27 New Orleans Saints players and former defensive coordinator Gregg Williams were part of a "bounty" system that awarded cash bonuses: \$1,000 if a player had to be carried off the field and \$1,500 if one was knocked unconscious. Payouts increased dramatically during the playoffs.



[The New York Times reported](#) that defensive captain Jonathan Vilma (No. 51) offered a \$10,000 cash award for knocking Minnesota Vikings quarterback Brett Favre out of the National Football Conference championship in January 2010. Despite taking several hard hits during the contest, Favre finished the game. So, presumably, no one collected that particular payoff.

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The NFL said the total amount of money in the pool might have reached \$50,000 or more during the 2009 playoffs. If you'll recall, that was when the Saints marched all the way to a Super Bowl victory.

Is anyone surprised by all of this? Really?

Professional football is the closest thing we have in this country to the gladiator battles of ancient Rome. Of course, we're a lot more civilized than fans were 2,000 years ago. Our combatants aren't allowed to battle to the death. But you can't persuade me that the players *and their fans* are emotionally much different from the screaming throngs back then.

Rome's rulers knew all about how to use "bread and circuses" to keep the masses happy. Is what we have in America today really all that much different? I don't think so.

According to the NFL, neither coach Sean Payton nor general manager Mickey Loomis did anything to stop the bounties when they were made aware of them. In fact, the *Times* reported that Loomis did nothing even when ordered to by team owner Tom Benson.

It appears that the bounty system was administered by Williams, who subsequently was hired by the St. Louis Rams. When the accusations were made public, Williams said he had made a "terrible mistake."

Peyton and Loomis issued a joint statement that read:

We acknowledge that the violations disclosed by the NFL during their investigation of our club happened under our watch. We take full responsibility.

This has brought undue hardship on Mr. Benson, who had nothing to do with this activity. He has been nothing but supportive and for that we both apologize to him.

These are serious violations and we understand the negative impact it has had on our game. Both



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of us have made it clear within our organization that this will never happen again, and make that same promise to the NFL and most importantly to all of our fans.

Peyton and Loomis didn't exactly fall on their swords, did they? If that's the most contrite apology these coaches and their highly paid PR flacks can devise, somebody should encourage them to look for a new line of work.

In 2008, Williams spent one season with the professional football team in the town I now call home. He was the defensive coordinator for the Jacksonville Jaguars.

OK, maybe I should have said "semi-professional" football team.

Anyway, the controversy over the bounty program at the football program in New Orleans generated a ton of discussion in [Jacksonville](#). Guess what? Nobody here ever did any of that bad stuff — not even Williams, when he was the defensive coordinator here.

So far, only two players who played for Williams have agreed to speak on the record. But both of them — former linebacker Clint Ingram and former defensive end Reggie Hayward — say that while Williams encouraged a "very aggressive" defensive style of play, nobody was ever promised a reward for injuring an opposing player.

As it happens, I have a big problem with all that talk of rewards. Am I really supposed to believe that a professional football player who is making close to a million bucks a year (many of them get a lot more than that) would really be motivated to cream an opponent for a measly thousand bucks or so?

Let's see. I'm making more than 50 grand for playing an hour of football. And for 1/50th of that amount, I'm going to jeopardize my career and my reputation? I don't think so.

[The Wall Street Journal agrees](#) with me. The newspaper conducted an extensive "review of every regular- and postseason Saints game since 2009." Guess what? The newspaper concluded: "Seldom did a Saints-inflicted injury force an opponent to leave the field."

Right. The bounty program — if it even existed — was an almost total flop. "In 48 regular-season and six postseason games," the newspaper reported, "such incidents occurred only 18 times."

In other words, when more than two dozen big, burly professional football players were offered a bounty to put an opposing player out of commission and had a few dozen opportunities to do so per game, they were able to disable someone only once in every three games.

By the way, according to the *WSJ* review, the Saints player with the most lethal hits was safety Roman Harper. He had four game-ending tackles in 54 games, fewer than one of 10. For this he was allegedly paid \$1,000 per hit — or \$1,500 if the poor victim had to be carried off the field.

So all in all, havoc-wreaking Harper could have earned an extra \$6,000 over those three years. But Harper's salary at the time was \$7 million a year. Do you really think that six grand would have meant anything to a guy making more than *one thousand times* that much money?

Despite all the anger and indignation in the media, I think this whole "bribe 'em to hurt someone" story is a bunch of baloney. There simply wasn't enough money involved.

Do I believe that some of our professional gladiators would be willing, even eager, to "play dirty," if that's what it took to win? You bet. And it's nothing new. My first football hero, Otto Graham, said that eye-gouging, foot-kicking and finger-twisting happened all the time when he was playing. And that was 50 years ago.



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Has the game gotten cleaner and more sportsmanlike since then? There are millions of dollars at stake every day. I don't think so.

But why blame the players for giving the public what it wants? It isn't the gladiators fault; the fans are to blame. If we're willing to howl for blood, the guys with on the field will give it to us.

Until next time, keep some powder dry.

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