

PETE ROZELLE: THE PASSING OF A LEGEND

By: Kevin Purvin

"Pioneer"-To open or prepare for others to follow.¹

"Innovator"-one who affects a change.²

The above are terms used to describe Pete Rozelle, the former National Football League (NFL) Commissioner, who died December 6, 1996 from brain cancer. His twenty-nine year term as Commissioner can be described as nothing less than remarkable. Rozelle's rise to his position as Commissioner and one of the most powerful men in sports did not happen overnight, but was a road that encountered struggles between politics, power and million dollar agreements and the ego of each NFL franchise owner. Despite these obstacles, Rozelle was able to balance competing interests and transform a tiny operation, the NFL, into one of the most successful and popular professional sports leagues today.

Born Alvin Ray Rozelle, Rozelle became known as "Pete" after an Uncle said that he looked like a "repeat" of his father. Eventually "repeat" transformed into "Pete" and the legend of Pete Rozelle began. Upon graduating from the University of San Francisco Pete Rozelle began a career in public relations. He worked for three years as the Los Angeles Rams publicist. He eventually left the Rams to work for a year with a public relations firm before returning to the NFL in 1957 to become the Rams' general manager. It was not until 1960 that Rozelle was elected as pro football Commissioner at the young age of thirty-three.

Prior to his appointment as Commissioner, the NFL was popular, but it had yet to achieve the stardom that many had envisioned. The popular notion is that professional football went big time in 1958, when the Baltimore Colts beat the New York Giant in the first overtime NFL championship, but a better guess might be the day in 1960 when the owners anointed

1. WEBSTER'S NINTH NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 894 (1991).

2. *Id.* at 624.

the thirty-three old as Commissioner.³ It was obvious from his contributions and innovations to football that the owners had made the right choice.

The league began to expand to its greatest heights due to Rozelle's vision. In forging a merger with the upstart American Football League (AFL), he produced what is now the single most anticipated annual sporting event, the Super Bowl. Millions of people all over the world flock to watch this most popular event, which is annually one of the most watched events on television. Along with the Super Bowl, Rozelle also realized that the NFL needed to be broadcast in prime time to attract a wider audience toward the sport, which is where his concept of "Monday Night Football" arose.⁴ He recognized that "Monday Night Football" was the ingredient needed to attain the popularity which he had envisioned for this sport. Rozelle did not let go of this idea until he sold it to Roone Arledge at ABC.⁵ From that point on, "Monday Night Football" has routinely been one of the most viewed television shows.

Even with the successes of the Super Bowl and "Monday Night Football", Rozelle's biggest accomplishments were his concept of revenue sharing among the owners and his fight for one single television contract for the entire league, rather than for individual teams.⁶ His innovations in these areas might be credited as the main reasons for the NFL's growth and expansion since its inception. Both aspects enabled a smaller market team, such as the Pittsburgh Steelers, to compete with other larger market franchises by enabling each NFL team to divide the income made by football so that each team is accorded equal revenues. It was these ideas that enabled the NFL to grow from twelve franchises, when Rozelle began his tenure as Commissioner, to where football is today, thirty teams and with an ever-growing popularity rating.

Under Pete Rozelle, charity became a major aspect of NFL policy. Due to his efforts, the NFL now has a close tie with the United Way Charities and also contributes a major donation to

3. Dick Heller and Thom Loverro, *Rozelle took NFL into Modern Times*, THE WASHINGTON TIMES, December 8, 1996, at C1.

4. "Monday Night Football" is the concept where two football teams compete during Monday evenings and are a broadcast on prime time television on ABC.

5. Jim Murray, *Rozelle was Super Man for the NFL*, LOS ANGELES TIMES, December 8, 1996, at C1.

6. Heller and Loverro, *supra* note 2 at C1.

charity in each Super Bowl city. Charities in San Diego, where Rozelle resided, have benefited immeasurably by Rozelle contributions, sometimes with Super Bowl tickets used in auctions and paid for personally by Rozelle, other times with direct gifts.⁷

Rozelle not only had the vision to look ahead; he had the intelligence and courage to deal with issues that confronted him. He set the standard for the league's intolerance of gambling when he suspended Paul Hornung, one of the game's most popular players, and Alex Karras in 1963 for betting on games. He forced Joe Namath, the former New York Jets quarterback, to drop his interest in a Fort Lauderdale, Florida restaurant because of questions about the shady character of his partners. Rozelle was able to draw lines in the sand and make them stick.⁸

Despite his deep love for the game and his passion for expanding the popularity of the NFL, he also realized that there was life outside of being the NFL Commissioner. Pete Rozelle surprised nearly all of the NFL owners when he announced his retirement in 1989. What astonished them even more was that he really meant "retirement" in every way. He literally disappeared from the public scene, quietly dispensing advice when asked, but never publicly. He rarely went to an NFL game after his retirement, although he equipped his home with satellite dishes and three television screens, so he could still watch the sport he truly loved.⁹

Despite Rozelle's numerous accomplishments and innovations, perhaps the best way to truly grasp the essence of his importance to the NFL is in the words of his peers. Former NFL coach Don Shula commented that "Pete Rozelle was perfect for the game when it needed him most. The growth of the NFL is due to the great leadership it has always gotten from its Commissioner, and Pete's innovative ideas and leadership helped make pro football the most popular sport in America."¹⁰ Baltimore Ravens owner Art Modell added, "He set the stan-

7. Herb Klein, *Remembering Pete Rozelle. He was humble in a sea of egos*, COPLEYPAPERS, December 10, 1996, at D1.

8. *Id.*

9. *Murray, supra* note 5.

10. *League Community Mourns Former Leader's Death*, USA TODAY, December 9, 1996, at 4C.

dard for which other Commissioners, past, present and future, will be judged. He was the Commissioner of Commissioners. He was a great visionary and he was fair."¹¹

While these comments, made by many of Rozelle's allies, were praising, perhaps the most glaring show of respect has come from Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis. The Oakland Raiders maverick owner was Pete Rozelle's most famous adversary. The relationship exploded when Davis took the NFL to court in his effort to move the Raiders from Oakland to Los Angeles in 1982. Davis, despite his publicized quarrels with Pete Rozelle, recognized the genius that Rozelle brought to the NFL. "I am deeply saddened by his passing. We were adversaries. We were rivals. We were friends. The thing I admired most about Pete Rozelle was his passion and love the National Football League. Pete's passing brings the realization of how time is so precious and moments of glory so fleeting."¹²

It is not just the owners of the NFL teams that recognize the passing of a great leader and visionary, but even former players and politicians. Ex-Buffalo Bills quarterback and 1996 Republican Vice Presidential candidate Jack Kemp, speaking to a group of state lawmakers in Washington after Rozelle's death remarked, "I cannot today go to this podium and not have a chill down my back and a tear in my eye for the wonderful memory of a great American and a great patriot. Pete Rozelle was a very dear friend of mine."¹³

While Pete Rozelle was the ultimate leader for an entire sport, he was also a man devoted to his family and friends. "As good as Pete Rozelle was at his profession, he was even better as a father," Anne Marie Rozelle Bratton told some four hundred mourners at a memorial service for Rozelle in Beverly Hills. "He dedicated himself to me. He never broke a promise."¹⁴

Upon Pete Rozelle's passing, the sports world, not just football, lost one of the truly great leaders, pioneers and gentlemen of its time. Pete Rozelle will undoubtedly stand forever as an

11. *Id.*

12. *Davis Mourns Death of Old Adversary*, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, December 8, 1996, at 3.

13. See *supra* note 10.

14. Associated Press, *NFL Notes Rozelle, The Person, is Fondly Recalled*, LOS ANGELES DAILY NEWS, January 8, 1997, at S10.

example of how one man can bring out the best in a sport by giving it the best of himself. Other sports and leagues should be so lucky to have witnessed one of the great Commissioners transform one sport from a weekend hobby to a national obsession. Pete Rozelle will truly never be repeated.