**SSUNS - Position Paper**

**Topics:**

1) Expansion  
2) Concussions and Head Safety  
3) Players and Criminal Offenses

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**Committee:** National Football League 2016

In an era where safety is at a premium, the National Football League (NFL) must find a way to maintain players’ health while growing its viewership. This can be done through expansion, as various potential fan bases have yet to be seized, not only in the United States, but internationally (i.e. Canada, England). Focus must also be placed on the rising issue of concussions, as several lawsuits have been laid out, chiefly due to the post-retirement of head injuries. There is also an issue of morals: the NFL’s suspension policy is flawed and must find a way repair its tainted image.

The NFL has long pondered an expansion, but never quite pulled the trigger. However, if ever there were a time to do so, it would be now. After several consecutive years of positive growth, the NFL’s ratings have gone down for a number of potential reasons (presidential election, decline of television, lack of true superstars). One could hypothesize an explanation for such a drop, but only one thing is for certain: they must do something about it, and quickly. Expansion abroad would add new life to the somewhat limited fan base it has today. It would provide huge economic benefits and would add some flavour to an increasingly bland array of teams. Watching the same teams go head to head every season with mostly the same core of players can be entertaining to an extent, but after a while fans will go on hoping for some new source of excitement. Therefore, an expansion to London and Toronto would be beneficial for all parties involved. Toronto has a history with major sports. They have had tremendous success in both Major League Baseball (MLB) and the National Basketball Association (NBA), consistently ranking among the top teams in attendance. They have a wealthy population that has endured strong growth in previous years, and are willing to loyally support any team the league throws their way. For a brief stint, they even had success hosting games for the Buffalo Bills (until turnouts began to fade near the end), and there is no doubt they would pour their heart into a football team that they could call their own, and would add a population, that for the most part, has yet to been exploited. Economically, they are more than capable, financially on par with states such as Los Angeles and New York, and coupled with a burning desire to stand by their sports teams by any means possible, the only question that remains is why they hadn’t thought of this earlier. London, on their end, provide an equally intriguing fan base. They are already familiar with what the NFL has to offer, having hosted games annually, consistently drawing large turn-outs. They feature a massive population of 8.5 million, and similarly to Toronto, are financially capable. This would expand the NFL’s viewership to uncharted territory, and would be a huge step forward in expanding the league internationally. The one problem a potential London expansion would face (and it is a big problem) is distance. It is 3 500 miles away from New York and would make it impossible for players to recover in time to prepare for Sundays. If it can overcome this hurdle though, London provides an intriguing possibility as a potential expansion team, and one that the league should seriously consider in order to make some real headway in viewership numbers.

Concussions are also a huge problem in the league today and poses the league’s biggest threat. With dozens of retired players having committed suicide due to traumatic brain injuries and donating their brains to science, it was proven that there was a strong correlation between concussions and long-term effects. Over a hundred players suffer concussions every year due to incompetent decision-making, and it’s them who end up paying the price. However, for several years, the league had denied any impact which concussions may have had on long-term diseases, such as dementia and depression, and it has finally come back to bite them. Beginning with former safety Ray Searage in August 2011, over 4 500 players have collectively merged a lawsuit claiming that the league engaged in a conscious effort to deceive players in regards to the long-term effects of brain injuries. When it finally confessed the dangers of concussions in 2009, it was too little too late. The league donated $1 million to research on Chromatic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) in January of 2010, and another $30 million towards research on brain trauma to the National Institues of Health in September. In 2011, the NFL donated $100 million to Harvard University. Despite their best efforts, the league has still lacked the necessary advances player safety, and finds itself in a very difficult situation. The league attempted to establish a “stricter” concussion protocol, but players still returned to games after taking the mandatory concussion evaluation. An example of this was in Week 1 of the 2013 NFL season, when wide receiver Jeremy Kerley suffered a blow to the head and promptly returned to the game after passing the concussion evaluation. Concussion rates as a whole went up, as in 2015, players suffered a total of 182 concussions during the regular season, a 58% rise over 2014. No matter how much money is put into concussion research, none of the league’s existing problems will ever be solved if the league does not take the proper course of action. The league has done much to identify concussions among players, but little to actually prevent them from arising in the first place. Since 2009, the most notable change the NFL had made was moving kick-offs up by 5 yards in order to reduce the speed of collision. 7 years and millions of dollars later, the league still has yet to find a way to effectively reduce the rate of concussions. Among the different courses of action the league should take is an overhaul in helmets. Since 1986, NFL helmets have barely changed despite the fact that they were initially designed to prevent skull fractures, rather than concussions, presumably one that could absorb impact to reduce brain trauma. This presents a difficult task since it would require the consent of the players, who are very particular about fit and comfort, more so than their safety. Therefore, if the league were to introduce a newly designed helmet in the near-future, not only would it have to provide a significant safety upgrade over the old one, but it would also need to feel like the helmets that NFL players have learned to like since their childhood days. Furthermore, there must be real action taken in the way of rule changes. As of yet, the NFL has not done anything significant enough to make a real step towards reducing head injuries. Among these rule changes could be to remove kickoffs altogether, which would eliminate the majority of collisions and forcing players to wear more equipment, as it would not only give the players more protection, but it would also slow the game down, thus reducing high-speed collisions.

Another difficulty the league faces is repairing its largely tainted image from years’ past. Crime has gone up among players as a whole. The only way we can fix this problem is by imposing a zero tolerance policy in which players are cut upon any kind of criminal action. Playing football is a job just like any job, so why should players get a free pass for their impudent crimes? These are the players we look up to, these are our new generation’s role models. Do we really want our future generation to take after men who are future murderers? There are several examples of these star criminals, such as Ray Rice, Aaron Hernandez and Greg Hardy. The fact that the NFL values talent over morals is tarnishing its image, and on top of that, it’s completely unethical. Players have abused the league’s violence policy and as a result, are ruining the NFL’s reputation it long built up. We cannot have criminals running on the field just as we can not have criminals performing any other type of practice. This kind of criminal action must be condemned, and harshly, since the rate of DUIs and assaults are rising. There is also the issue of substance abuse policies. The NFL’s substance abuse policy has serious flaws, as players are only tested once a year. It would seem favorable to scrap the substance abuse policy altogether, and allow these players to put their own health at risk. If a player wants an edge on their game, he should be able to use the necessary means if harming nobody but himself. So while it is indeed that criminals guilty of domestic violence should be punished (and harshly), it is not fair to restrain a player from his ability to improve his performance. It should be his right to put his health at risk in exchange for better results, and contrary to popular opinion, it is not the league’s place to intervene in any such matters.

In short, if the NFL wants to improve financially, expand internationally and regain its image, it must take the necessary courses of action to do so. That means exploiting potential fanbases and getting Europe involved. It also means replacing the criminals in our league and replacing them with well-educated men. And of course the biggest concern, that is the growing threat of brain injuries, must be treated in such a way that player’s do not feel like moving targets. It’s great if the NFL talks about things like expanding to London, researching concussions and repairing the league’s image, but it means nothing if it doesn’t materialize, so providing concrete goals (such as expansion to London and Toronto, new helmets and heavier equipment, and zero tolerance for domestic violence) will go a long way into actually achieving goals rather than simply talking about them.