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Goodell Gets Enough Votes to Lead N.F.L.

By [JUDY BATTISTA](#)

NORTHBROOK, Ill., Aug. 8 — Roger Goodell slept with a football when he was 6 years old, and early in his career with the National Football League, he chauffeured the former Commissioner Pete Rozelle through New Orleans during a Super Bowl. On Tuesday, he became the league's fifth commissioner, winning one of the most powerful jobs in sports on the fifth ballot of a secret vote of the 32 team owners.

Goodell's election to succeed [Paul Tagliabue](#), who is retiring after nearly 17 years, completes a remarkable 24-year rise from intern at the league office, Goodell's first football job, and turns the league over to a new generation of leadership. When Dan Rooney, the [Steelers'](#) owner and co-chairman of the league's selection committee, went to the hotel room to tell Goodell, 47, that he had been chosen, Goodell embraced the 74-year-old Rooney.

In a speech to the owners in support of Goodell's candidacy, Rooney had said that he was looking for the best commissioner and he had no doubt it was Goodell. Goodell has agreed to a five-year contract, although he is expected to serve much longer. He will take over before the regular season begins on Sept. 7.

Goodell joked that he was fortunate that he had just put on his pants when Rooney knocked on the door. That, too, was a peek at a decided shift to Goodell's easy public manner, a marked contrast from Tagliabue, who rarely let his wit show in front of cameras.

Goodell's selection is an indication that owners did not want to tinker substantially with the league. Under Tagliabue's leadership, it is operating near its peak, a \$6-billion-a-year business with a new labor deal, lucrative television contracts and dozens of new stadiums.

"We're continuing something that has been very strong," said [Robert K. Kraft](#), the [Patriots'](#) owner and a member of the selection committee. "Roger said he got his M.B.A. from Pete Rozelle and Paul Tagliabue."

Goodell's closest challenge came from Gregg Levy, the league's outside counsel, who emphasized his knowledge of labor issues in his interviews with owners. Levy drew surprisingly strong support in the early balloting. On the next-to-last ballot, Goodell had 23 votes (he needed 22 for election) and Levy had 8; Al Davis, the [Raiders'](#) owner, abstained. Owners ultimately choose Goodell by acclamation.

In the end, Goodell's vast experience in the league swayed the owners his way. During his years at the N.F.L., and particularly since he became the chief operating officer in 2001, Goodell has been involved in everything from stadium deals to labor negotiations to licensing and sponsorships. That knowledge will be critical as the league faces significant challenges, in the coming months and over the next decade. Despite the lucrative period that Tagliabue oversaw with Goodell as his lieutenant, Goodell did not build his candidacy on a desire to continue along the same path.

“The league has always tried to find a better way of doing things and be responsive before we need to,” Goodell said. “That has been a hallmark of our leadership under both Commissioner Rozelle and Commissioner Tagliabue.”

He added: “My theme was it wasn’t time for status quo. We need to keep innovating. I don’t think it was a vote for the status quo.”

In March, the league completed a new collective-bargaining agreement with its players union. It ensures, theoretically, continued labor peace, but several owners said that Goodell’s first challenge would be working out the significant revenue sharing issues that still cause divisiveness among owners. The owners have yet to determine how much money teams would receive under the new revenue sharing plan.

That plan, it is hoped, will close the gap between the highest- and lowest-revenue teams, but those negotiations figure to be difficult. In addition, there are two periods — November 2008 and November 2009 — when either the owners or the players union can opt out of the current deal, if they are not happy with how it is working. That would set off a new round of negotiations to avoid a season played without a salary cap or a potential work stoppage.

“The pressure I feel for him is to address the labor issue and the revenue sharing issue,” the [Giants](#) co-owner John Mara said. “There are a lot of people who are very concerned about that and it’s something he’s going to have to pay immediate attention to.”

Those issues are imperative to maintaining the short-term stability of the league. But there are also big-picture decisions that may present the biggest hurdles for Goodell. Tagliabue said recently that he believed professional sports would change as much in the next 10 or 15 years as they did in the last 30 to 50 years, in part because of the internalization of sports and the rapid innovations in digital media.

The N.F.L. has never had much success overseas, with NFL Europe failing to capture the imagination of the European sports fan. International growth is likely to be on the league’s agenda. Asia, where basketball and baseball have far surpassed football in popularity, could be of particular interest because of the new openness to the West that is expected as a result of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The N.F.L. has already started talking about playing a game in China.

“You can’t be in any kind of business and not be internationally based; the future of the game depends on that,” said Frank Vuono, a partner in 16W Marketing and a former vice president for licensing for the N.F.L. “The new commissioner has to do more to develop the game internationally.”

The league will also grapple with how to make money through new media, including distribution of content via the Internet and mobile phones. Those efforts, which remain in their early stages, will aim to harness the interest of the young demographic so central to the league’s marketing.

“New media is where a lot of the action is, but as of yet, the revenue streams are running way behind the traditional sources,” said Ed Desser, the president of Desser Sports Media, a consulting firm, and a former executive vice president of strategic planning for the N.B.A. “The money from new media will be a lot more than it is today, but when you’re the N.F.L., and you generate so much money from television, it’s hard to

deal with the relatively meager amounts that any new media will generate because, by definition, it starts slowly, and it is completely dwarfed by cable and network TV.”

Los Angeles, the nation’s second-largest media market, is still without a team nearly 12 years after the [Rams](#) and the Raiders left. Goodell has been the league’s point man in its efforts to return to Los Angeles, and the decision of whether and when to put a team there will be one of the hallmarks of Goodell’s tenure. The N.F.L. wants to appeal to young Latino and Asian-American fans who represent the changing face of Los Angeles and the United States.

Although the N.F.L. is widely credited for having the most successful drug-testing and penalty policy in professional sports, the recent scandals in cycling, track and field and baseball are reminders that the N.F.L. could soon face issues involving performance-enhancing drugs.

When Goodell was asked what he had learned from his two mentors, Rozelle and Tagliabue, he said it was the same thing: “It’s the importance of the game,” he said. “And you can’t lose focus of that. That’s why fans love the N.F.L., and we have to keep producing that.”

Richard Sandomir contributed reporting for this article.

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