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Tagliabue to Step Down in July

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NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue announced yesterday that he will retire in July, ending a nearly 17-year reign in which he led the country's most successful professional sports league to new heights of popularity and wealth.

With new television and labor contracts secured, Tagliabue, 65, said he felt the time was right to step aside. He plans to speak to the league's 32 team owners Monday about officially launching a search for a successor, and indicated that he will stay on the job until a new commissioner is chosen even if that takes longer than his July 31 target.

"This is not an easy decision for me [but] I know it's the right decision," Tagliabue said in a conference call with reporters. "I have no doubt about that. And when I say right, I mean right for the league. . . . I came to the conclusion in the last 10 days this was the optimum time."

Tagliabue accomplished what may have been the most daunting task a sports commissioner can face: taking a foundation of success to an unimaginable level. Under Tagliabue, for instance, league revenue rose from \$970 million in 1989 to nearly \$5.8 billion last year.

"He shepherded the league through the next generation of sports business," said David Carter, a professor of sports business at the University of Southern California.

"Unprecedented TV deals and long-term labor peace -- I'm not sure under what other circumstances he could have left on a higher plane."

Candidates to replace Tagliabue, several owners said, will include Roger Goodell, the league's chief operating officer; league counsel Jeff Pash; Eric Grubman, the league's executive vice president of finance and business transactions; Atlanta Falcons President Rich McKay; and Baltimore Ravens President Dick Cass. One owner said that Goodell would be the front-runner at this point but that it was far too early in the process to make any reliable predictions.

Tagliabue is invoking a clause in his contract that enables him to serve as a senior adviser through the expiration of the deal in May 2008. A former Washington attorney, he has worked for the league since 1969 and has been commissioner since October 1989, overseeing a period in which the NFL has entrenched itself as the nation's most popular sport by a wide margin.

"It's a sad time because he's a wonderful guy," Pittsburgh Steelers owner Dan Rooney said. "I really feel bad about it, but it's the right thing for him. He gave a lot of time and effort to this league and he's done extremely well. . . . It wasn't a big surprise. He sort of accomplished everything there was to accomplish. We got the TV deal. We got the labor deal [and] revenue-sharing. Pete Rozelle [Tagliabue's predecessor] did an incredible job in his time. Paul's time was to bring [the league] up to a great level from a business standpoint."

Tagliabue did so by surpassing the legacy of a legend. Despite lacking Rozelle's public relations flair, he built the

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league into something far bigger than even Rozelle could have imagined. Working quietly and efficiently behind the scenes, he achieved what he wanted. Most recently, he got the owners to settle disputes among themselves and with the players' union this month by ratifying a new labor deal along with a modified plan for revenue-sharing among the teams.

"He'll be remembered as one of the greatest commissioners in the history of professional sports," New York Giants President John Mara said. "When he took over, he had big shoes to fill, but he went about the task of filling them and the results speak for themselves. The NFL has enjoyed unparalleled prosperity and growth and he'll be sorely missed. He accomplished everything he set out to do and he leaves the league in great shape."

Tagliabue told Rooney of his decision early yesterday and Rooney informed the other 31 teams at noon via e-mail. Rooney was a member of the committee that negotiated Tagliabue's last contract extension. Tagliabue was paid approximately \$9.5 million per season.

Tagliabue retires with the NFL at the height of its popularity. It has a new set of TV contracts worth almost \$4 billion per season, and Tagliabue got the owners to ratify a six-year labor agreement with the union that runs through the 2011 season.

The NFL has never had a work stoppage with Tagliabue as commissioner, and his close relationship with players' union chief Gene Upshaw enabled the two to complete extensions of the labor deal seamlessly in previous negotiations. This negotiation was far more contentious, in part because Upshaw was pushing for economic gains for the players and in part because the owners were in a combative internal tussle over how much locally generated revenue the teams should share. But Tagliabue pushed through the deals during a two-day owners' meeting at a Dallas airport hotel that ended 13 days ago. He delivered a forceful address to the owners during the meeting about the need for them to resolve the dispute and work with the players to benefit both sides.

Union officials sensed during the labor negotiations that Tagliabue was weary enough to retire, and Tagliabue told Upshaw last week that he was considering buying a boat over the weekend for use in retirement. Tagliabue had signed his last contract extension to complete the labor and TV deals and the owners, knowing that Tagliabue was on his way out, long ago had begun informally debating possible successors.

Those close to him in the league office and among the owners had hoped he would agree to stay as commissioner for at least another season, having seen instances in the past in which he would work to the point of virtual exhaustion, then bounce back quickly and come back eager for more. The one project they hoped would keep Tagliabue in office was putting a franchise in Los Angeles, a process that the league has put in motion. But Tagliabue said yesterday he'd already pushed back his original retirement target of last spring, and he wasn't going to push it back again.

"I don't think anyone is surprised by this," Jacksonville Jaguars owner Wayne Weaver said. "It's pretty well known he wanted to get the [collective bargaining agreement] and TV in place and once it was, he could make an exit. I actually thought he'd do it at the end of this year, but it's something we all expected. In my opinion, he's the most effective commissioner in all major league sports. The CBA was a little rich for my blood but, as he said, it beats the alternative. . . . It's going to be very difficult to replace him."

Said New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft: "In the end, he was really an employee, but he also was the boss of 32 owners. You needed great judgment and skill to balance all of that, and he was able to do it. He was such a strategic thinker. He was always three to five steps ahead of the other guys."

The owners are scheduled to gather Sunday in Orlando for the annual league meetings that run through Wednesday. Tagliabue said the search will include consideration of candidates from outside the league and the owners eventually will be presented with a list of possibilities that will include minority candidates. Next week, then, the league will begin

contemplating Life After Tagliabue.

"We'll go to the meeting next week and discuss it, give everyone a chance to voice their opinions," Rooney said. "We will not have a candidate by the meeting. We want to give everyone a chance to say what they feel. It gives us a chance to step back a little and see where we are and how we want to proceed. I can assure you we will get a zillion candidates and we want to give everyone a fair shake."

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