



Pro Football

The NFL's Costly Divorce

Tom Van Riper, 07.31.08, 4:20 PM ET

In the blessed world of the NFL, few things are more precious than a legendary quarterback playing for a storied franchise, and both having big years together.

That's why the pending messy divorce between Brett Favre and the Green Bay Packers can't help but hurt the league. The NFL was a big winner last season when Favre, an eight-time pro-bowler, led a resurgent Green Bay team to a 13-3 season that ended just one overtime period short of a Super Bowl.

"Favre brings an old-school authenticity to the NFL that resonates with fans," says Don Hinchey, a sports business consultant with The Bonham Group. Favre's No. 4 jersey, Hinchey points out, is still among the top three sellers in the league.

After announcing his retirement in March, 38-year-old Favre has decided he wants to return for another season. The Packers, seemingly committed to young Aaron Rodgers, their 2005 first-round draft pick out of the University of California, would rather he stay away. The two sides are trying to hammer out an agreement that would land Favre, who has turned in reinstatement papers to the league, with another team.

Packer fans, arguably the most die-hard in the league, will continue to fill Lambeau Field and tune in each Sunday no matter who's under center. The loser here figures to be the NFL and its post-season television ratings.

Last season's exciting NFC title game between the Packers and the New York Giants drew 53.9 million viewers, according to Nielsen Media Research, over 10 million more than the Chicago Bears-New Orleans Saints matchup the year before.

Sure, the presence of the big-market Giants had something to do with those numbers. But a conference championship game featuring two traditional franchises--including the one that comes complete with a historic stadium, a high-profile quarterback and the ghost of Vince Lombardi--is a sure bet to draw casual viewers along with the die-hards.

Want proof? The game drew 23 million more viewers than the Giants-Vikings conference title game in 2001. In fact, the last time television viewership for an NFC title game exceeded 50 million people was in 1996, when Green Bay took on Dallas.

Similar results show up for the Super Bowl, too. The 1998 game between the Packers and the Denver Broncos drew 90 million viewers, a figure not reached again until 2006. The big story line that year: Brett Favre vs. John Elway in a battle of all-time gunslingers.

Call Green Bay the Notre Dame of pro football. When they're good, fan interest intensifies and the league comes out on top.

Of course, a marketing juggernaut like the NFL is always bigger than one team or one player. Whether it's Favre, Elway or Joe Montana, the league always marches on after its legends retire (which in Favre's case will be after a season or two with another club, it appears).

But that points to yet another potential problem with the very public airing of the Favre-Packers saga. Looking ahead, what will Favre's image be?

"When the faces of the NFL retire, you want to see them go out on top, with their heads held high," says David Carter of the Sports Business Group. While he's represented the NFL as well as anyone for the last 15 years, Favre clearly isn't taking the smooth, honorable road to retirement.

"This isn't going to make anyone happy," Carter says, "no matter how it works out."