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In N.F.L. Labor Fight, Battlefield Moves Online

By RICHARD SANDOMIR

On Wednesday morning, N.F.L. Commissioner [Roger Goodell](#) sent an internal memo to his staff telling it that he would take a \$1 salary if owners lock out players. His promise to slash his compensation from about \$10 million was reported on [Twitter](#) by an NFL Network reporter, provided by the league to the Sports Business Journal, then reported and posted on Twitter by other outlets, including [NFL.com](#).

Hours later, DeMaurice Smith, executive director of the players union, responded on Twitter that he would work for 68 cents if an agreement is reached by the [Super Bowl](#).

The Goodell-Smith volley was the latest in a dispute that is the first in sports history to be played out extensively on digital turf. With the current labor agreement between the league and the union expiring March 3, the two sides are jabbing, countering and needling each other on Twitter, [Facebook](#) and on Web sites devoted entirely to the possible lockout. Their online dueling is designed, in part, to woo fans to their corners.

“Fans buy the tickets, fans buy the products, fans fill the stadiums and can have influence on politicians,” Paul Hicks, the league’s executive vice president of communications and government relations, said in an interview. “I think owners and players are highly sensitive to fan opinion.”

Hicks is a central figure in the league's strategy to disseminate information as quickly as possible, like Goodell's recent letter, which was e-mailed to five million fans and explained the league's collective-bargaining position.

"You need to sell your idea and use every opportunity you can at a speed that is not generally normal in a business environment," Hicks said. "We have a campaign mentality. We want to market our proposals and the way we want the game to be in the future."

News conferences used to be the primary arena for leagues and unions to state their cases and respond to what the other side was saying.

Now a retort is a click away. Both the league and the union hope for an extensive back-and-forth on Twitter among like-minded users.

On Jan. 21, the league took to Twitter to highlight a poll that said 99 percent of respondents opposed Congressional involvement in the stalled labor talks. In his riposte, George Atallah, the union's assistant executive director, whose role is similar to Hicks's, wrote, "Those are [Kim Jong-il's](#)," referring to the North Korean leader.

Atallah and Hicks play their similar roles in different ways. Hicks, 54, is rarely quoted, unlike his predecessor, Joe Browne, and does not use Twitter, although members of his staff do. Atallah, 32, has become a public personality because of the labor dispute; he uses Twitter regularly and is frequently interviewed.

"I have a responsibility to make sure the players' side is accurately portrayed and to the media to be a credible source of information," said Atallah, who has a media staff of six. "Player engagement leads to fan engagement."

The union has asked fans to lobby Congress, sign petitions and unite with players on "Let Us Play Day" earlier this month to demand that there be no lockout.

Both Atallah and Hicks had previously worked at public relations firms. Atallah was hired by Smith in 2009 from Qorvis Communications. Hicks arrived at the league last summer from Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, taking a position that has traditionally gone to a league insider, or a former sportswriter.

“Paul’s been here for five months,” said Browne, now a senior adviser to Goodell, “and there are very few half-truths that the union has put out that we haven’t responded to.”

Doug Allen, a former official of the players union, said that in 2006 when there were tense talks that eventually led to an extension of the labor agreement, the union had a modest Web site.

“We did a little, but no social media,” he said. Now, with both sides better equipped (only the union uses Facebook), he added, “It alters the atmosphere, but I’m not sure it changes the leverage on both sides. It would, if one side were doing it and the other weren’t.”

Indeed, the digital back-and-forth illustrates, 140 characters at a time, the divide that exists behind closed doors between the negotiators over revenue sharing (the league wants to share less); the proposed 18-game season and the impact on players’ health with two extra games; the urgency (or lack thereof) of the talks, and the league’s refusal to let the union look at its books.

“A while ago,” Atallah said, “the N.F.L. did some post about there not being enough meetings — that we didn’t want to meet — and we happened to be in a meeting at the time. So I tweeted it.”

On any given day, the online exchanges and competitive claims might look alternately substantive or silly. Regardless, there is a sense that the league and the union have learned from politics, and the need to respond to their opponent’s positions.

The league’s [NFLLabor.com](#) Web site on Wednesday offered a glimpse of its strategy. One item reported on Goodell’s phone call on Tuesday to a [Denver Broncos](#) fan and blogger; another post quoted the Falcons’ owner, Arthur Blank, as saying that the league is “ready to do whatever it takes” to reach a new agreement but that the union must “step up with the same sense of urgency.”

A section of the [union's lockout Web site](#) comes with a clock counting down to the labor agreement's expiration date, and links to articles and Twitter posts that favor its position.

The success of the online strategies, however, cannot be easily measured. William B. Gould IV, a law professor at [Stanford University](#) and a former chairman of the [National Labor Relations Board](#), said that the league and the union are trading views online about issues that are easily understandable to football fans.

“They’re trumpeting their positions to the public,” he said. “But my sense is that this stuff does not fundamentally change things in disputes that are difficult to resolve.”



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