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## How the NFL exploits young men



By Allen R. Sanderson

In about two months, representatives of the National Football League and media outlets will descend upon Chicago for the 2015 player draft. Much has already been made in this newspaper and elsewhere about the likely financial and nonmonetary costs and benefits of our being the host city.

Bottom line: If we're exceedingly lucky, we break even.

But the greater issue, which has not been addressed at all, is that we are essentially complicit by aiding and abetting a scheme in which largely — and large — young African-American males continue to be exploited. We shouldn't be celebrating this three-day event but instead denouncing and protesting it.

For the past three or four years, these talented athletes who will be paraded across the stage at the Auditorium Theatre have been performing in front of adoring fans in college football stadiums around the country and for millions of television viewers for remuneration — room, board, tuition, fees and books — that is a tiny fraction of their actual worth to the National Collegiate Athletic Association and its member universities. Now, having put in countless — and the NCAA and coaches prefer that it be countless and in secret — hours of work, the best of the best now get a chance to be selected by one single NFL franchise for the next few years instead of being able to interview with all 32 prospective employers.

With a straight face and no recognition of the irony, the NFL and other professional sports leagues actually employ the term "draft" for these exercises to complete their rosters, a word that connotes, for amassing a military force and other purposes, exactly what it is: the lack of choice.

The target demographic for this three-day television spectacle is young males who would rebel at the very notion that they would not be allowed some semblance of choice in location, occupation and employer in their own professional careers.

Why did City Hall not pursue the 2016 Democratic or Republican National Conventions, now slated for Philadelphia and Cleveland, respectively? Or stick a toe into the water for the 2024 Summer Olympic Games? (Or, given our recent weather, perhaps we should consider the 2022 Winter Games, on which the International Olympic Committee is frantically trying to get a city to bite.) Someone must have done the math and decided they weren't viable "investments."

Perhaps this event was our very small consolation prize because there is no way in hell — nor February — there will be a Super Bowl in Chicago. Our Mistake on the Lake (aka the Soldier Field renovation) sealed our fate in that regard. A complementary snub: There are now 39 college football bowl games played in December and January each year, and not one of them is in Chicago.

So what made this particular draft so attractive to us, given the concessions that this newspaper has well-documented? For many years the NFL held this spring formal in Madison Square Garden in New York. Then in 2004, New York Jets' owner Woody Johnson failed in his attempt to get a stadium built for him in Manhattan, which was opposed by the Garden, Broadway theaters and many other civic groups. In a display of pique or petulance, the NFL pulled the event from its long-time location and moved it in 2006 to the home of the Rockettes, Radio City Music Hall, where it has remained until now. After modest dissatisfaction for years, the NFL finally went on a shopping tour.

Chicago and Los Angeles were the two cities the NFL courted seriously for this year's draft. But in reality, with no team in LA, which would have presented some embarrassment for the league, that city was not a credible alternative and, thus, we basically bid against ourselves. If that situation changes, and there is some change in the air, the NFL would move from Chicago in a New York, or Los Angeles, minute.

So on the evening of April 30, with May 1 just hours away, and President Barack Obama's designation of the Pullman neighborhood as a national monument still fresh in our minds, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell will take the stage and announce that "with the No. 1 pick in the 2015 NFL draft, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers have selected ..."

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