Conspiracy Theories Surrounding The Deflategate

On the night of January 18, 2015, major headlines were developed. The National Football League (NFL) held the American Football Conference (AFC) championship game which featured the New England Patriots and the Indianapolis Colts (Hassett 103). The winner of this game would advance to Super Bowl XLIX. As the game ensued, the Colts struggled on their offensive possessions, only coming up with seven points at halftime. Meanwhile, the Patriots dominated on the field and scored seventeen points before halftime. In the middle of the second quarter before halftime, Indianapolis Colts linebacker D'Qwell Jackson intercepted a pass by New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady in the endzone. After intercepting the ball, he took the football to the Colts sideline during his celebration and had noticed something was unusual with the football. D'Qwell took the football to a Colt's equipment manager and then had notified head coach Chuck Pagano of the anomaly. It had been discovered that the footballs the New England Patriots had been using were underinflated, which makes the footballs easier to catch and throw. The Patriots ended up winning the AFC Championship 45-7 against the Colts, and advanced to the Super Bowl to play the Seattle Seahawks. In the two weeks between these two games, the Patriots were under investigation to find out what happened to the footballs being used and if and how they were intentionally tampered with.

Once the news broke out about the Patriots using underinflated footballs during the AFC Championship game, a lot of speculation began between different media outlets, organizations, fans, current football players, and even players that were retired. This news broke like an "infectious disease" (Eager). Speculation has not stopped in the past four years since the event about how and why the footballs were tampered with. The footballs did not have a deciding factor in the outcome of the game. The Patriots really pulled away in the second half, extending their score and holding the Colts to only seven points. One thing that is for certain is that they way that footballs are handled and prepared before games has changed drastically. There are more precautions taken so that this situation does not happen again (Eager). In spite of this incident, many conspiracy theories were developed to figure out what actually happened with the footballs.

What is mainly being argued during the deflategate is whether or not footballs the New England Patriots were using during the game were tampered with or not. Many conspiracy theories had been developed by fan bases to help them understand the situation and why certain actions took place. These theories will be talked about more in depth later on, but they include: Tom Brady and his equipment managers planning to deflate the footballs before the game, the punishment Roger Goodell gave out over the scandal was mainly to distract the public from the actually truth and other problems around the league (Carey).

Over the course of the investigation, the way the New England Patriots organization behaved during interviews was important. The Patriots wanted to 'repair' their organization in a way so that it could return to how they used to be. This was called the "Image Repair Theory" (Cruz). An organization's image, or how they are represented, is important. They want to come off as strong and no about everything that is going on, instead of weak and confused. The Patriots staff showed their knowledge of the situation and appeared to know what was going on. They were determined to prove that their organization was innocent at the matter at hand.

The entire scandal and some conspiracy theories that were formed shined a lot of light on starting star quarterback Tom Brady. He is from San Meteo, California, and was born on August 3, 1977 (Biography.com). He played football and baseball in high school, and was excellent in both. Tom attended high school at Junipero Serra High School (Biography.com). He attended the University of Michigan to play football after he graduated highschool in 1995. Barely playing his first two years on the team, he became the starting quarterback his junior year. That year, he threw “350 passes for 2,636 yards” (Biography.com). During his senior season, he lead his team to the Orange Bowl and was able to win that championship. Next up in his career, he had partaken in the 2000 NFL Draft. Tom was a sixth-round pick, drafted by the New England Patriots. He became the starting quarterback in his second season. During that season, “he proved himself a strong leader with a powerful arm. Anyone who doubted his abilities only had to look at the team’s record, an impressive 11 wins to 3 losses in the 14 games he started” (Biography.com). That same season, he led the Patriots to their first Super Bowl victory and was named MVP. Now in his twentieth season in the NFL, Tom Brady currently has six Super Bowl victories (Jones).

Some of these theories were formed for a number of reasons, most of them by different fan bases. The theories that are made will form by what those beliefs and their emotions towards the organization or scenario that it is about. For instance, if you are not a New England Patriots fan, you will try and come up with different conspiracy theories to try and make certain players on the team look bad. Another could be making conspiracy theories to justify a player or a person's actions. The different fan loyalties can have a huge impact on what conspiracy theories are formed. Research has found that “people tend to accept conspiracy claims that are consistent with their predispositions and reject those that are counter-attitudinal” (Carey 1). What this is saying is, depending on one’s belief, determines if they will accept the conspiracy theory being presented. In other words, if the conspiracy theory goes with the beliefs a person currently has, then they will accept the theory. If theory goes against a person’s beliefs, then it will be rejected. Some of these theories made could have been made to make the National Football League and the organizations under it look bad, but there are lots of facts and evidence to back up the claims of each theory formed.

When I chose this topic, I knew very little about the deflate-gate scandal and only knew about one of the conspiracy theories tying into it. After doing lots of research, I found that there was so much more than just the one theory. I will be talking about three of the theories associated with this scandal but after my research, this topic really peaked my interest. All of the conspiracy theories people will come up with is remarkable, and the evidence they find to back up those claims is interesting. The theories that are made makes me want to dig deeper into the whole scandal to find out what actually happened, and even form my own conspiracy theory. I could also take the information that I learned and discuss it with my family and friends to listen to their opinion on the matter so they could form their own theory.

There are some people that theorized that the weather had a huge factor into the footballs being deflated, but this was proven not to be the case. If the weather was indeed a factor, this would have caused air to be leaked from the footballs. An experiment was made by scientist Jack Blumenthal. His experiment tested this theory. The components of his theory are as follows: “Measurements were made on a new standard Wilson NFL football and on a used high school football. Both balls had a water-repellent coating, but the new NFL ball seemed to shed water more quickly. Lengths and diameters of the balls were measured with precision calipers that could be read to 0.001 in” (Blumenthal 1). The footballs were tested in both warm and cold

temperatures, with wet and dry balls. After measuring the footballs in these conditions when the experiment was over, it was concluded that weather did not have a contributing factor as to why the footballs used during the championship game were so deflated.

The next theory that was made was that starting Patriots quarterback Tom Brady and Patriots equipment managers planned to deflate the footballs before the game. After the AFC Championship win, interviews were held after the game. During the interviews, questions were already being asked about the underinflated footballs. Head coach Bill Belichik, who was first to be interviewed, was questioned about the footballs to see if he had any prior knowledge of anything occurring. He goes on to state, “To me, the footballs are approved by the league and game officials pre-game and we play with what’s out there. And that’s the only way that I have thought about that” (Fox 10 Phoenix, 2:21-2:36). By Coach Belichik’s statement, he claimed that he did not have anything to do with the footballs being deflated. Next was quarterback Tom Brady, who the theory is centered around. After being asked about the deflated footballs and his involvement, he states, “I don’t have any, I didn’t alter the ball in any way. I have a process that I go through before the game and before I go in. I pick the balls that I want to use for the game. When I pick those balls out, to me they’re perfect. I do not want anyone touching the balls after that, rubbing them, putting any air in them, taking any air out. To me those balls are perfect and that’s what I expect when I go on the field” (ABC News, 0:14-0:56). By his statement, he also claims he did not have any idea how the footballs were deflated. The actual investigation then began to see if they were telling the truth. A piece of evidence that was found on camera was a Patriots locker room attendant taking the footballs into a bathroom and then walking out with them moments later. He also claimed he had nothing to do with the balls being deflated (ESPN 1).

The last conspiracy theory made that I will be talking about is that Roger Goodell’s punishment over the scandal was actually meant to distract the public from other problems surrounding the NFL. After it was decided, when all of the evidence came forward, that Tom Brady was at least ‘generally aware’ of the footballs being deflated, the punishments came rolling in. Tom Brady had been suspended for four games the next season. As a collective team, the Patriots had two high draft picks taken away from then in the next NFL draft, and were fine one million dollars (Jenkins). There are some people thinking that this was too much of a punishment, and this was all just a distraction from actual problems. Some believe that the “league is always far more worried about appearances than reality” (Jenkins 1). The league could be trying to make amends for other scandals that occurred that had a less harsh punishment. One of these cases could include Aaron Rodgers stating he tries to ‘push the limit’ on how much air is put into a football. This is claimed to be not cheating and is more of a quarterback's preference (Jenkins).

If the conspiracy theorist Charles Pigden looked into these theories, he would say that it is good that people are questioning the outcome of the scandal. It is good for society to question such things and to form their own conspiracy theories based on their beliefs. Pigden states in an article, “To call something a ‘conspiracy theory’ is to suggest that it is intellectually suspect” (Pigden 219). Sometimes investigators are not always right with evidence that they find, so it is not a bad idea for the public to perform their own smaller investigations. You never know what other evidence could be found. Pigden would agree that these are all good conspiracy theories to challenge, so that the real causes can be discovered.

There are many different NFL cases that can relate to the Deflategate scandal. First was what was called the ‘Immaculate Reception’. On December 23, 1972, an AFC divisional playoff

game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders took place at Three Rivers Stadium (Bair). With 22 seconds left, the Raiders led 7-6. The Steelers had possession of the ball, and were on their own 40 yard line. On the last play of the game, Terry Bradshaw, who was the Steelers quarterback at the time, dropped back to pass the ball to one of his receivers, Frenchy Fuqua. Fuqua had a collision with one of the Raider defenders and the ball went flying back towards the line of scrimmage. Everyone thinking the game was over, Franco Harris is scene with the football running towards the end zone. Harris presumably caught the ball before it ever hit the ground, winning the playoff game for the Steelers (Bair). This play was one of the greatest football plays in NFL history. The play had also caused conspiracy theories to form. One of them being called the 'Riot Theory' (Bair). After Franco Harris scored the game winning touchdown, the field was covered with fans in celebration of the win. The refs were not sure what to do and could not control all of the people that were on the field. So they called the play a touchdown. This theory relates to the deflategates theory of the NFL protecting their appearance. The NFL did not want to ruin one of the greatest plays in league history.

The next case that can compare to the theories surrounding the deflategate scandal is the Super Bowl forty seven blackout. Super Bowl forty seven took place at New Orleans' Superdome, and was a match between the Baltimore Ravens and the Sanfrancisco 49ers (Weber). The Ravens were winning the game 28-6 when all of a sudden the blackout happened. The lights came back on thirty minutes later. When the game resumed, the 49ers started driving down the field scoring points, pulling the game to a one-score deficit (Weber). The Ravens still ended up winning the Super Bowl that year. The cause of the power outage was said to be, "a mysterious abnormality in the system" (Weber 1). Conspiracy theories started going around that the power outage was not an accident, and was motivated to help the 49ers win the Super Bowl. One person who believed in this theory, was the star starting linebacker for the Baltimore Ravens, Ray Lewis. During an interview, he had stated, "I'm not gonna acuse nobody of nothin - because I don't know facts. But you're a zillion-dollar company and your lights go out? No. No way" (Patra 1). This could be an example of the NFL trying to cover up their image and the mistakes they have made throughout the years.

The last case that can compare to the theories surrounding the deflategate is when the New England Patriots were accused of videotaping defensive hand signals of the New York Jets to gain a competitive advantage in the 2007 season. The Jets head coach Eric Mangini, who used to be an assistant coach for the Patriots, was aware of the videotaping instances in the past when he was a coach there (Brewington). The commissioner of the NFL, Roger Goodell, began an investigation that lasted four days. When the investigation concluded, the Patriots were found guilty. During an interview, Goodell said the videotaping the Patriots conducted was limited. The consequences were that, "Belichik got hit with the maximum fine allowable - $500,000. It was the largest fine levied against an NFL coach. The Patriots organization was also fined $250,000, and the team forfeited its first round pick in the 2008 draft" (Brewington 1). Apparently, the penalties were given out before the actual physical evidence was gathered up and presented. Investigators also destroyed the evidence right when it was found. People began to think that the penalties and destroying the evidence immediately was just to protect the NFL's public image, just like the deflategate scandal.

Conspiracy theories are a good way to connect with others beliefs and opinions. That is how relationships grow. Challenging what officials tell us means that we are critically thinking and that is great for society. You should not always believe what someone tells you. Being able to think for yourself and ask questions is important for life. If you just go about your life not

wondering what could be, or that everything is just fine in this world, then life itself would not be interesting. Asking questions is apart of life, and it leads to having interesting conversations with those that have the same beliefs as you. Just as Charles Pigden stated, if something is called a conspiracy theory, that theory can be intellectually challenged. So by forming conspiracy theories in certain situations and asking questions about other conspiracy theories made, helps to grow relationships and makes life all the more interesting.

The conspiracy theories made during the deflategate helped peak interest in the NFL. More questions were asked about the integrity of the game and if the face of the NFL was more concerned about their image rather than finding out the truth and giving out the correct punishments. Conspiracy theories are based on one's belief, and whether they are accepted or not depends on others own beliefs. We do not all have the same opinion on everything. It is good to ask questions and challenge those theories that are being made. What really happened during the deflategate may not ever come to light, but by making out own conspiracy theories can result in our own questions being answered.