

NFL should take leadership role after massacre

Published on Saturday December 15, 2012

By Cathal Kelly

Maybe this once, they might do it in a way that has some purpose.

The New York Giants — the closest thing there is to a local team of Newtown, Conn. — will wear decals on their helmets. They'll read "S.H.E.S." — Sandy Hook Elementary School. As per league directive, all teams will observe a minute's silence.

That's kind of them. Meaningless, but kind. It's the sort of gesture that masquerades as altruism. It's meant to make you feel better about yourself.

The NFL could do so much more. Here's a suggestion.

By tomorrow afternoon, the initial sluggishness will have worn off. Things will be moving fast. The political operatives will be right in the middle of this mess, trying to figure out how best to use the murder of schoolchildren to prop up their own agendas, while not being seen to be doing that.

This is the pattern of these tragedies — shock (so-called), calls for national unity (a phony war while the right and left get their operatives into place), people wondering "Why?" (so that they can supply their preferred answer), and then — as soon as possible, since no side wants to be held accountable for supplying solutions — the forgetting.

That's the political class at work. Underneath them, the great proletarian mob will already have begun turning on each other. For all their obsession with the symbols of comity — flags at half-mast, handwritten signs hung from front-yard tree branches — America doesn't get along very well. They're probably the most divisive semi-functioning democracy on Earth.

That's the real root of America's mass-shooting problem. Guns are the necessary instruments. Paranoia is the cause.

Americans don't trust each other, neither as individuals nor their institutions. So they must have guns.

This is the foundational flaw in the otherwise reasonable arguments of the gun-control lobby. They assume that everyone who owns a gun is an idiot who cannot accept the plain truth of statistics (nearly 30,000 Americans die because of guns every year — the majority in suicides).

These people know their guns are dangerous. That's a risk they're willing to take in order to protect themselves from *other people with guns*. This vicious cycle cannot be closed.

If they banned the sale of all guns in the U.S. tomorrow, there would still be an estimated 270 million firearms in American homes. A properly maintained gun lasts forever. Were the government to suggest removing those weapons, the psychotic wing (i.e., pretty much all) of the National Rifle Association will have been proved right. That's a recipe for real violence.

And so, America is long past fixing the gun problem, with the brevity that word implies.

This is a generational conundrum — meaning it will take generations to solve.

What is required at the outset is one strong voice, one rallying point.

Who's going to take the lead on this issue? What cultural actor has the necessary bona fides to speak to all Americans in strong, plain language that everyone not only hears, but also receives?

No politician can do it, nor is there a leading private citizen who has not taken a side in the culture wars. The institutions are all compromised. For a country that goes on so much about leadership, it has no leaders. What it has, at best, are chieftains.

It also has the NFL.

Nearly three quarters of all Americans watch football. Fewer than half attend a place of worship — and that's amongst the highest attendance rates in the developed world. Given the time Americans spend watching, tithing and fretting over football, it's become a secular religion.

That's made the NFL rich (not unlike most churches). They might do something in return.

The NFL (and other leagues besides) has already done a power of good on the great American social issue of the last half of the 20th century — racial integration. Without ever announcing an organized campaign, the NFL helped do that only through example.

Sports made racism intolerable by appealing to universal values — teamwork, friendship — and then casting them against the costs of bigotry — loneliness, isolation. The NFL didn't tell anybody what to think. It created a visual tableau that was more powerful than rhetoric — black and white, arm in arm, working together for common cause.

Appeals to reason on fraught issues never resound. They're fraught precisely because everyone involved is unreasonable.

What's required is an appeal to emotion, to an aspirational view of America.

The NFL could start this process today. It would have to be limited. No calls for gun bans.

But how about a moment's silence not for those already dead, but for those who have yet to be killed? How about a moment's silence for all the future victims of guns? We know to a certainty there will be more. That slight change of script, delivered in 16 NFL stadiums, would shake an entire country.

Let Americans consider the idea of a world they could change but choose not to. It's easy to mourn the past. It's harder to ignore the future.

It's a political statement. Like all successful businesses, the NFL smartly avoids those. But this could be the league's great issue going forward, something they spend years confronting.

There has to be more to this than millionaires in spandex beating the hell out of each other. For this enterprise to have any meaning, it must be connected to the broader community. It must shoulder some responsibility.

Starting today, the NFL could reach beyond itself into the real heart of America. That's a dangerous place.

It won't. But it could. And since this problem is not going to change, maybe it still will.