NFL arrests overhyped: James Alan Fox

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Study reveals football players less criminal than general population.

With the ink barely dry on its federal appeal to reinstate Tom Brady’s suspension for “more probabl(y) than not” being “generally aware” of footballs being purposely deflated, the NFL revealed last week that the marquee quarterback’s jersey is the top seller this season. Apparently, a significant share of the fan base believes Brady is innocent, or at least was treated unjustly.

Meanwhile, the attention has shifted to more important debates over the suitability of talented but troubled players when they are implicated in actual crimes and misdemeanors. In early August, for example, the San Francisco
49ers released Aldon Smith, an accomplished pass rusher with a long history of lawbreaking, immediately after his latest arrest for hit and run, DUI and vandalism. Smith’s free agency didn’t last long, however, before the Oakland Raiders seized the opportunity, signing the linebacker to a contract worth as much as $8 million.

“Aldon is an extremely talented young player,” noted Jack Del Rio, Oakland head coach. “We welcome him to the Raiders family and expect him to bring his best every day and be a great teammate.”

“I’m just excited to be (part of) an organization who looks out for their players,” Smith said after his first game as a Raider, calling it “a fresh start.”

Meanwhile, the larger question is whether off-the-field misbehavior is indeed a significant problem for the NFL, or just hype. After all, every move of high-profile athletes is scrutinized for potential headline fodder.

Notwithstanding a stream of stories about domestic violence allegations involving Ray Rice and Ray McDonald, as well as about other crimes and other offenders, CNN, CBS and Sporting News recently featured the surprising claim that the perception of rampant criminality among NFL athletes is misguided.

A new study by criminologists at the University of Texas-Dallas reported that NFL players actually have a lower arrest rate than the general population of males ages 20-39.

Upon closer scrutiny, the finding is not unexpected. NFL players are rarely implicated in property crimes, which make up the (ahem, Detroit) lion’s share of arrests. Why would a pro athlete who drives a Mercedes steal a car? Why would someone earning six or seven figures shoplift?

When it comes to physical and sexual assault, however, NFL players do not fare as well.
The concern for off-the-field aggression is hardly new. From 2004 to 2007, arrests of NFL players for violent crimes spiked upward. In 2008, the NFL implemented a policy punishing teams for having multiple suspensions. Besides losing the services of banished players, the franchise would forfeit part of the unpaid salaries.

To some, financial disincentives are inadequate. “The only way to get the attention of teams inclined to roll the dice on the Ray McDonalds of the world,” wrote Mike Florio at Pro Football Talk, “will be to attach the loss of future draft picks when a player with a propensity for getting into trouble gets into trouble.”

This hard-line approach discounts reclamation projects who thrived when given the chance. What would have become of Carolina’s Cam Newton, Denver’s Aqib Talib, or Pittsburgh’s Michael Vick had they been permanently barred from football or considered untouchable by all 32 teams?

After Aaron Hernandez’s arrest on murder charges, the New England Patriots were sharply criticized for having signed the player to a long-term contract despite the reckless and ruthless lifestyle away from the game that ultimately led to his murder conviction. However, teams should be encouraged to take a chance on troubled athletes. Many will make the most of the opportunity.

In 2013, the Patriots signed undrafted wide receiver Kenbrell Thompkins even with his lengthy history of youthful transgressions that included seven arrests for drugs and armed robbery. After surviving final cuts, Thompkins reflected on how playing football was his salvation.

“I’m living in the moment … trying not to look in my rearview mirror,” said the fleet-footed receiver. “I don’t only love football, but I feel like I need football in my life.”
For every success story, there are others that turn out badly. When that happens, the only one to blame is the disgraced athlete, not the organization that believed in second chances.

*James Alan Fox, a member of the USA TODAY Board of Contributors, is a criminologist at Northeastern University*