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55 Yard Line

# CFL set to announce long-in-works policy on violence against women Thursday



By [Andrew Bucholtz](#)  
August 5, 2015 5:29 PM  
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After almost a year of work, the CFL is set to unveil an official policy on violence against women in a news conference Thursday in Vancouver.

Violence against women and domestic violence in particular has been an issue in the CFL before with [players like Lawrence Phillips](#), but the discussion of an official policy really went to a new level last year following the NFL's [Ray Rice](#) saga and the Canadian league's unprecedented decision [to keep Rice out](#). There were [calls for the CFL to develop an official domestic violence policy](#)

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then (which the league said was then in the early stages), and those calls doubled in November after *The New York Times* wrote about CFL players with past domestic violence accusations (who themselves were only a few of the CFL players with those accusations in their background). CFL VP Matt Maychak then spoke to *55-Yard Line* about the league's efforts to develop an official policy, and it seems those efforts have now borne fruit.

We don't know the details of the new policy yet, but we do know the group that's involved, and it's a promising one. Thursday's press conference will include CFL commissioner Jeffrey Orridge and two CFL team presidents, Dennis Skulsky of the B.C. Lions and Len Rhodes of the Edmonton Eskimos, but it also includes a provincial government minister (Stephanie Cadieux, the B.C. minister of children and families) and most crucially, two respected figures from organizations working to end domestic violence. Those would be Tracy Porteous and Clare Freeman. Porteous has been the executive director of the Ending Violence Association Of B.C. since 1995, and Freeman is the executive director of Hamilton's Interval House. Both have been involved in national efforts and strategies to prevent violence against women, and Porteous' group has a long-running and effective partnership with the CFL's B.C. Lions. These women are prominent names in the fight against domestic violence, and if they're involved, that bodes well for what the league has come up with.

It's notable that Maychak said in November the league was involved in heavy consultation with prominent groups in the field, and that they wanted those groups to take the lead on this policy. Here's the key part of what he told me then:

*"We're going through a process right now of consulting the leading organizations in Canada," Maychak said. "We've been consulting leaders in the field, talking with the minister's office. ...I'm compiling information and reaching out to these groups."*

*Maychak said the idea from the league's standpoint is to be open and receptive to ideas, rather than coming in with a preordained plan of what they want to do.*

*"To be honest, I don't know where we'll wind up," he said. "We want to bring options to our board and have something in place for next year."*

*Maychak said it's incredibly important from the league's standpoint that their eventual policy is informed by experts in the field, not just league officials and team governors.*

*"The last thing that we want is to have 10 guys in a boardroom who are unfamiliar with this," he said.*



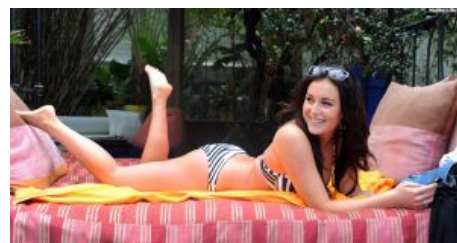
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The timeframe has obviously run a little later than Maychak anticipated, but it's more important to get this right than it is to get it done quickly. The CFL is in a complicated position here, too, and that may have created some of the delays. For one, this has often been a second-chance league for players the NFL's passed over for one reason or another, and lately, the NFL's been passing on some of those players thanks to domestic violence allegations. All four of [the CFL players discussed last November](#) with past domestic violence allegations had those allegations play a role in their departure from the NFL. Interestingly, three of those four are now out of the league; Argonauts' defensive back [Brandon Underwood](#) is the only one left. Any policy will have to address not only if players like Underwood should be punished by their teams (often years after the incident in question; the one involving Underwood took place in 2011,) but also what the threshold for punishment under this policy should be (accusations? evidence? charges brought? conviction?), and if players with past domestic violence accusations should be allowed into the league at all. None of those questions are easy to answer, as the circumstances around different players often vary widely, and that's why the league has historically left decisions on who to sign up to teams rather than having a CFL-wide policy.

So, how did the CFL get to this policy? Well, after Rice's release from the NFL's [Baltimore Ravens](#) last summer, we saw then-CFL-commissioner Mark Cohon [take the unprecedented step of banning teams from signing him](#) on Sept. 8. That made sense, as there may have been a CFL team willing to roll the dice on him given his talent, and that would have been a major black eye for the league. It's notable that NFL suspensions, such as what Rice received, [do not actually bar the CFL from signing players](#); only active NFL contracts do. Thus, extraordinary action was needed to keep Rice out, and Cohon did that by saying signing him would bring the league into disrepute. That's far from a cohesive policy, though, and having the commissioner rule case-by-case is far from ideal, both from a policy standpoint and from the standpoint of inviting potential discrimination lawsuits.

The Rice case itself likely got this effort going, but it also motivated some calls for the CFL to develop a national policy (from [Gary Lawless of The Winnipeg Free Press](#), from [this corner](#), and from others), and the growing attention paid to domestic violence across sports was also likely a factor. Fortunately, though, the league appears to have taken its time to come up with a cohesive approach and let experts in the field lead the way on this one. Any CFL policy is likely to draw some criticism, given the complexities of this issue, and whatever the league announces Thursday may well be imperfect. Having a league-wide policy alone is a big step forward for the CFL, though, and the signs heading into this one are positive.



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