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CFL introduces unprecedented domestic violence policy

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(From left to right) Stephanie Cadieux, Minister for Children and Family Development, BC Government, Jeffrey L Orridge, CFL Commissioner, and Tracy Porteous, Chair, Ending Violence Association BC, during the CFL's violence against women policy media conference in Vancouver, British Columbia on August 6, 2015. MARKETWIRED PHOTO/Canadian Football League

VANCOUVER — Even if you've seen the video of Ray Rice hauling his unconscious fiancée out of the elevator last November, it's an unimaginable scenario where a woman could get knocked unconscious by an at-the-time NFL player.

Except, of course, for those who can imagine it. Or, worse yet, live it daily.

And that is exactly who the CFL's unprecedented policy on violence against women and children is geared toward — both its victims and offenders.

“Never before have we seen this much public dialogue related to sexual and domestic violence,” Ending Violence Association of B.C. executive director Tracy Porteous stated in a speech she later said almost brought her to tears. “Last year, the hashtag: ‘Why I stayed and why I left,’ came forward after the viral video of Ray Rice from the NFL was seen by the world punching his fiancée into unconsciousness in an elevator. That was followed by a hashtag: ‘Been raped, never reported,’ as a result of a number of disclosures of sexual assaults that caused nine million women to say, yes, I was sexually assaulted (followed by) thousands of stories that ensued about (Jian) Ghomeshi and Bill Cosby that were broadcast.

“Feminists have been working on this issue for the last 40 years. The hashtag that we should all be tweeting is, ‘Our time is now.’

Porteous called the men's and women's co-led anti-violence program the first of its kind in Canada, adding the CFL is the only national, male-led professional athletic association taking on such an initiative.

The announcement was made at BC Place Stadium ahead of Thursday's game between the B.C. Lions and Edmonton Eskimos — two teams who have been front-runners with outreach programs raising awareness on attitudes toward violence.

“Because it's the right thing to do and because it affects all of us,” said Lions president Dennis Skulsky, adding Lions players have embraced the training they have undertaken over the past four years. “It wasn't tough to get them to speak up and be part of this.

“We have a tide of fans and people and we have a voice in the community. I can’t think of a better way to use that voice.”

In fact, the policy reflects such common sense that initial reaction to the announcement on social media was that the policy wasn’t nearly harsh enough.

“You could always pick holes about what you could do or should do,” Skulsky said. “This is a starting point.”

One that will see employees throughout the league, both on the field and in the offices, undergo mandatory annual training, while a blanketing CFL-wide policy will impose sanctions meant to send a clear signal to perpetrators, ranging from fines and suspensions all the way up to a lifetime ban.

But even more important may be the door that has now been opened to provide support to affected women and families.

As such, CFL commissioner Jeffrey Orridge said he expects an increase in the number of reported cases of abuse — whether domestic, sexual or verbal — as well as the underlying attitudes that foster violence.

“They’re encouraged to do it and certainly they have an outlet to do it,” Orridge said. “Anybody who is involved as an employee with the CFL, whether it’s a coach, an official, a player, a member of the staff or the executive team, we’re all held to the same standards now.

“We’re raising awareness, we’re educating people and we’re also providing assistance to those who have been subjected to violence,”

But the commissioner wouldn’t go as far as to say how potential future signings of players with a history of violence will be



ed by the policy.

“The idea, because we’re making a statement and because we’re very public about it and because we have a definite position about it, I think in a lot of ways this may be hopefully a deterrent to other behaviours that have happened,” he said. “And, certainly, we don’t want those behaviours to be perpetuated.

“Change isn’t always easy.”

ESKIMOS REACTIONS

VANCOUVER — The reality of domestic violence hit Len Rhodes hard the day the president and CEO of the Edmonton Eskimos went on a ride-along with the Edmonton Police Service.

It was two years ago, but the memories are all too clear.

“What I saw that occurs overnight in our own city, our own backyard, is absolutely disgusting,” Rhodes said during Thursday’s announcement of the CFL’s anti-violence policy at BC Place Stadium. “More than half the calls are related to domestic violence, and neighbours next door to your own house may be involved. Maybe someone in your own house? “And by the time they get to a women’s shelter, the damage is already done. We’ve got to intercept the behaviour before it occurs.”

The Eskimos have donated more than 1,000 pairs of shoes to women’s shelters over the past three years.

“Violence against women is not cool, violence against women is not acceptable and it’s time we take a stand,” he said. “The last time I looked, it’s men causing the problem, so it’s about time men got on board and stop this issue immediately.”

The Eskimos began on July 16, 2014, when they partnered with the Calgary Stampeders and the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters to form the Leading Change program, where players interact with young males in schools on the issue of violence.

“Leading Change is about changing attitudes and behaviours,” Rhodes said. “We’ve got to stop the attitudes that exist out there and some young men haven’t had the best role models, but that’s absolutely no excuse.”

Eskimos players Mike Reilly, Matt Nichols, J.C. Sherritt and Ryan King have been instrumental in the workshops.

“Our CFL players are key influencers within the community,” Rhodes said. “When they get in and speak, the young men’s ears perk up.

“Maybe a parent or a teacher spoke about the same thing for 100 times but the kids don’t listen. But when a pro player from the CFL walks in, there’s a real difference.”

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