**The NFL heard the truth from Beth Wilkinson. Then they made it disappear.**

**I**n the end, Beth Wilkinson’s report on the Washington Football Team was everything it should have been: comprehensive, hard-hitting, and most of all, indicting — shedding light on a toxic culture that existed for years under team owner Dan Snyder.

Then, it disappeared faster than a season-ticket waiting list.

Lisa Friel, the NFL’s special counsel for investigations, said Wilkinson was asked to present her findings to the league as “a series of oral reports” and that “we do not have a written report from her.”

Apparently, the league accepts findings by Snapchat now.

Even the summary of the findings was red hot. Friel described the culture under Snyder as “very toxic,” and the league’s press release offered the following:

“Bullying and intimidation frequently took place and many described the culture as one of fear, and numerous female employees reported having experienced sexual harassment and a general lack of respect in the workplace.”

Friel said the decision not to release the report was, in part, to respect those who stepped forward with their stories. It’s a laudable reason.

But 40 of those victims previously called for the investigation to be released, and several have gone on the record with their experiences.

One of the big reasons for not releasing a report, though, is an attempt to hide or obfuscate one of Wilkinson’s reported recommendations — that Snyder be asked to sell the team.

As a reminder, five months ago, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell indicated the investigation was wrapping up. Shortly thereafter, a D.C. area syndicated radio program, the Sports Junkies, reported that one of Wilkinson’s recommendations was for Snyder to sell the team.

On Thursday I asked Friel: Was that recommendation made?

Her response: “Beth wasn’t tasked with making recommendations about what should be done in terms of accountability by any individual person.

“She was tasked with reporting on the workplace culture and making recommendations for what could be done for the workplace culture as a team to improve it.”

Translation: That wasn’t her job.

Wilkinson responded to an email from The Times-Dispatch Thursday asking the same thing by acknowledging the question but asking that all inquiries be directed to the NFL.

If Wilkinson indeed recommended a sale, it would have been a point of no return for Goodell.

Instead, he scanned the room and realized the reality — he works for the owners, not the other way around, and it’s extremely unlikely they would have voted to remove one of their own, particularly when there wasn’t a “smoking gun” connecting Snyder with the alleged assaults.

So we land in the middle ground — Snyder “voluntarily” steps away for an undetermined period of time, the most discreet discipline since Michael Jordan discovered his true passion was baseball.

In the interim, Snyder’s PR team (he has his own private advisors, in addition to the team’s crew) will head into overdrive to spin the story as a triumph of progress.

Already this week the Football Team got ahead of the story by naming Dan Snyder’s wife, Tanya Snyder, as co-CEO in a story exclusive to the Wall Street Journal.

The Journal’s piece dipped its toe into the many allegations that had been made.

“The team’s cheerleading squad, the nucleus of multiple sexual harassment allegations, has been abandoned in exchange for a co-ed dance outfit,” the Journal wrote.

Sure makes it sound like the cheerleaders were the issue.

Dan Snyder also identified the true problem in Washington: Not enough Dan Snyder.

“Dan Snyder acknowledges that he had to change himself and become more deeply involved than in the past, when he was often distant from the management of his franchise. ... He thought one of his greatest mistakes was not being more active as the franchise rotted on and off the field,” the Journal’s [piece](https://www.wsj.com/articles/dan-snyder-washington-football-team-investigation-11624931972) read.

If Snyder was curious what exactly happened inside his organization on his watch, it was helpfully compiled by Wilkinson.

The NFL has never shied away from gruesome details — Ray Rice’s domestic violence video warranted a 96-page report from Robert Mueller.

Rice was a player, though, and players are expendable.

Given the opportunity to send the message that owners are held to the same high standard, the league instead circled its wagons, receiving a crucial report not as a permanent record but a campfire tale.

# 'A dream come true': Taylor Heinicke prepares for an emotional game at Lambeau Field

The final year of Brett Heinicke’s life was filled with a number of happy moments.

Heinicke had instilled his lifelong love of the Green Bay Packers in his son, Taylor, and the youngster grew up idolizing Brett Favre.

Sundays were filled with brats and Packers games, and in February 2011, the Packers won their first title since Taylor was 2 years old.

Later that year, on Oct. 1, Old Dominion starting quarterback Thomas DeMarco was injured minutes before halftime of a game against UMass.

Taylor, a freshman, wasn’t supposed to play that season — a redshirt was the plan. But he had wowed the coaches during camp, and in the locker room, they told him he’d be playing the second half.

Suddenly sick to his stomach, Taylor threw up, then ran out on the field and led the Monarchs to a come-from-behind victory, scoring 21 unanswered points in the fourth quarter.

Brett was in the stands that day — it was family weekend — and watched for the rest of the season as his son led Old Dominion to the second round of the FCS playoffs, giving him a large bear hug after the final game, a loss to Georgia Southern on Dec. 3.

Thirteen days later, Brett died at age 50 of a heart attack.

At the time, it appeared Brett had seen Taylor at the pinnacle of his athletic career, quarterbacking the young ODU program to new heights.

It still seemed that way in early 2020, when Heinicke went back to ODU to finish his degree, having bounced around the NFL and XFL waiting for an opportunity that never came.

Then came the playoff game against the Buccaneers, and the wins against the Giants and Falcons, and now, almost 10 years after his father’s death, Taylor Heinicke will start for the Washington Football Team on Sunday at Lambeau Field.

“To actually be on the field, competing, it’s going to be a dream come true,” he said.

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Of the many things Taylor Heinicke inherited from his dad, humility and work ethic are particularly evident.

Brett Heinicke never bragged about his own athletic exploits. Born in Wisconsin, he was a state champion in high school golf in Ohio, and had his pick of college offers, deciding to play for Hawaii.

Asked why his dad picked Hawaii, Taylor shrugged.

“I don’t blame him,” he said. “I mean, playing golf in Hawaii.”

Taylor doesn’t know much about his dad’s athletic career. Brett never bragged about it, and he never even taught the sport to his son.

“I look back at it now and I’m [expletive] off at him because he never took me out to golf,” Taylor said.

He said the two played together a couple of times, at high school football fundraisers.

“He didn’t have it then,” Taylor remembered with a laugh. “He was getting all angry, so that’s probably why he didn’t teach me.”

What Taylor did learn was the secret family recipe for brats, which Brett would make before ODU games — he’d bring in the leftovers the next day for the coaches.

Brett was a regular presence in Norfolk that first year, and helped build out the Monarchs’ weight room.

He was passionate about the Packers, and Taylor remembers him getting upset in 2007 after Favre lost to Eli Manning and the Giants in overtime of the NFC title game.

“I didn’t really understand it, but he told me, ‘I’m sorry, I just want you to experience this, you know, with me one time,’” Taylor remembered.

“And it turns out in 2011, they won the Super Bowl my senior year of high school. And that was the last Super Bowl we got to watch together. ... It was a really cool experience that I got to enjoy that. It just makes this game that much more meaningful.”

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Taylor Heinicke is in a tenuous spot entering Sunday’s game.

After success in his first appearances, he has struggled in the past two games, including scoring no second-half points last week against the Chiefs, one of the league’s worst defenses.

The struggles came after comments by coach Ron Rivera suggesting he wanted Heinicke to rely less on his scrambling and improvisation, and more on making safe plays and being a game manager.

On Monday, Rivera and his assistants brought in Heinicke and discussed what they wanted from the quarterback.

“You start to get kind of a cloudy mind like, ‘What’s going wrong?’ ‘Am I doing everything wrong?’ ‘What’s going on here?’” Heinicke said. “So it was nice to just sit down with the coaches, really clear things up and just have a new start.

“It’s a new week. You can’t change what’s happened the last two weeks. Let’s start with a clean slate this week and work to get better.”

Rivera suggested he encouraged Heinicke to use his playmaking ability more, something that will be essential if Washington is going to keep pace with the Packers.

But even amid the struggles, Rivera has been publicly supportive of Heinicke and given no indication that he’s considered pulling him for backup Kyle Allen, though if Ryan Fitzpatrick returns from injured reserve, that would likely be a tougher decision.

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Shortly after Brett’s death, Taylor got a tattoo to remember him by. It has an angel and a quote from the book of John: “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”

Taylor’s joy is still evident as is his gratitude.

He said in the minutes before Sunday’s game he’ll think about not just Brett, but his mom, Diane, and others.

“When the national anthem is going, I really start thinking about all the people that have helped me get to this point and have molded me into the person I am today,” Taylor said. “[Brett] is the first one I think about. Whether it’s him, my mom, you know, my best friends, trainers, coaches, stuff like that. I think about them all. And I go out there and play for them.

“This week obviously more so, being in Lambeau Field against Green Bay. It might get a little emotional there at the beginning, but again, I’m just excited for this opportunity.”

Asked how his dad would feel about the past year, and a start at Lambeau Field, Heinicke smiled.

“His biggest thing was after every game, he told me how proud he is of me, and he’d give me a big hug,” Taylor said. “He had a signature bear hug. I know he would be doing the same thing today — more so this week.”

Then he added, with a laugh: “I mean, he would definitely be proud of the Bud Light sponsorship as well, as a big beer drinker. He’s going to be there on Sunday. He’ll crack one open and enjoy the game. So yeah, I’m excited for it.”

# Washington's vaccine problem isn't a 'personal issue.' It's a public disservice.

**‘S**pace Jam: A New Legacy” isn’t the most grievous harm LeBron James has inflicted on America this summer.

James set the tone for big-name athletes when he refused to discuss his vaccination status earlier this year. His sports agency, Klutch Sports Group, is run by his childhood friend Rich Paul, who has taken a similar stand on the issue.

Which brings us to the Washington Football Team.

Klutch represents two of the young defensive stars in D.C., Chase Young and Montez Sweat.

Sweat said outright earlier this summer he didn’t plan on getting the vaccine. Young said only that he’s “not going to disclose my personal information.”

Early returns show they’re not alone.

The Football Team, like the rest of the NFL, has special protocols for unvaccinated players to follow. They must wear masks at all times when not practicing, even during outdoor walk-throughs, and they cannot join their teammates to eat in the cafeteria or socialize in the locker room. In addition, it appears Washington has given its vaccinated players special yellow wristbands to denote their status at the facility (coach Ron Rivera wouldn’t comment about the wristbands when asked).

Players, of course, may voluntarily choose to follow those protocols. But they create major inconveniences.

A Wednesday night tally revealed that eight of the team’s 11 defensive starters are following the unvaccinated protocols.

Washington has the league’s worst vaccination rate, with just 60% of players receiving at least one shot according to the Associated Press. Even that number is padded by the extra-large rosters at training camp. When the team makes cuts, the number is likely to go down, not up.

The NFL as a whole is now at about 85% of players with at least one shot (per the AP), a tribute to the league’s messaging and efforts on the issue.

What’s happening in Washington is an aberration, not the rule, but it’s quickly becoming a public harm.

Young and Sweat’s stances are backed up by defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, who reposted a video to Twitter this summer making a number of demonstrably false claims about the coronavirus.

Asked by The Athletic, Del Rio responded: “I have personal views that would probably not sit well with my professional occupation right now. I think I’ll just leave it like that.”

But the problem in Washington right now isn’t just a lack of participation. It’s also an abundance of tolerance.

Vaccinated players Jonathan Allen, Terry McLaurin and Ryan Fitzpatrick were all asked this week about their teammates. Their responses:

Allen: “You can’t make a man do or not do anything he doesn’t want to do.”

McLaurin: “I do respect each and every one of my teammates’ decisions to choose what they decide, vaccination-wise.”

Fitzpatrick: “It’s a personal choice. That’s the end of the discussion for me. I’m going to respect whatever you do.”

We’ve reached a point in the pandemic where it’s time for the messaging to change.

Respecting choice was appropriate and proper when the vaccine was new and relatively untested. (Full disclosure: I didn’t want to be first in line either. I’ve since gotten the shot.)

That was then. This is now. There have been more than 4 billion COVID shots administered worldwide.

There is no longer a lack of quality information, there is a surplus of it.

To help nudge his players towards the vaccine, Rivera brought in a Black doctor from Harvard — an immunologist — to address the team at the beginning of June.

A day later, Sweat made his famous statement: “I haven’t caught COVID yet, so I don’t see me treating COVID until I actually get COVID.”

That’s not a man who needs more information. That’s a man who needs to listen to the information being provided.

Football players are famous for doing whatever it takes to play. They famously take shots of Toradol, a painkiller, to return to the field after suffering gruesome injuries.

Right now, what it takes to play is a vaccinated team, one that won’t lose games because key players didn’t do their part.

Rivera, who endured a public bout with cancer in the middle of the 2020 season, gave an impassioned plea on Tuesday for his players to get vaccinated. At the end, he laid out what’s on the line.

“We have to understand that we do as a football team, as individuals, we have to understand what’s truly at stake,” he said. “To some degree, this tells us a little bit about us.”

This isn’t just a defining moment for the unvaccinated. It’s a defining moment for all of us. The excuses being offered aren’t good enough, and the indifference in the name of unity is only creating bigger divisions.

It’s time for Washington’s vaccinated players to step up and look out for themselves and their community and request the same respect they’re showing others.