The NFL mocked the integrity it preaches by inflicting clueless officials on the sport Americans love most in a move to get the upper hand in labor negotiations

The governor of Wisconsin said it. Vince Lombardi's biographer said it. So it seemed did just about everyone who talked about it the morning after. They couldn't sleep after watching the Green Bay Packers-Seattle Seahawks football game.

The explanation for this mass insomnia is that Americans cannot abide injustice. We expect fairness in all things, including the games we play and the games we watch. We lose sleep when we witness crimes committed against the ethos of fairness.

The crime committed in that Monday night football game was the theft of a victory from the Packers. It was perpetrated by the arrogant, greedy, hypocritical organization of team owners that runs professional football, the National Football League.

The victims were not just the Packers and their fans, but everyone who supports the NFL empire by buying game tickets or being part of the television audience that generates much of the NFL's $10 billion in annual revenue.

These victims are easy marks because they love football too much. Any other enterprise that treated its customers as shabbily as the NFL does would have faced a consumer rebellion that would have forced it to change its ways or be driven out of business. The NFL knows fans aren't going to boycott the game they love.

By locking out its professional corps of game officials and replacing them with incompetent substitutes, the NFL cynically exploited fan loyalty and for three weeks destroyed that which its spokesmen repeat ad nauseum as a tiresome platitude—"the integrity of the game."

In the name of "the integrity of the game," the NFL fines players who wear the wrong color sox, assesses a penalty when a player celebrates a touchdown with a gesture not approved by the NFL, suspends a player such as the Packers' Erik Walden for having an argument with his girlfriend and fines New England Patriot's coach Bill Belichick $50,000 for having the temerity to touch the sleeve of a replacement official whose incompetence helped steal a victory from his team.

Yet in the one part of professional football that truly is about the integrity of the game—applying the rules of the game—the NFL owners opted to trade integrity for a labor negotiating tactic by foisting substitutes who were unfit to officiate at games on the players and

their fans.

One of the replacements was on the payroll of an NFL team. Another boasted of his support for a team in Internet postings. Another was a professional poker player. The rest were merely unqualified.

As game after game was marred by the serial gaffes of the clueless substitutes, commissioner Roger Goodell, doubtless at the instruction of his bosses, praised the work of the replacements. “Very credible,” he said.

The public knew better and was saying so, but the NFL wasn’t listening—until the fiasco at Seattle. Everyone saw it: The Packers, after being victimized repeatedly by dead-wrong calls, won the game by intercepting a pass. But then, no, the confused, inept replacement officials said the Packers didn’t win, and the NFL backed them up. The ensuing uproar, a national expression of disgust in front-page newspaper stories, editorial pages, television, radio and Internet sports commentary and the condemnation by football enthusiasts in forums ranging from the oval office to corner bars, finally got the NFL’s attention.

As if by magic, two days later the locked-out officials were welcomed back with a new contract. Goodell, somehow managing a straight face, said the settlement had been in the works for a long time and had nothing to do with the farce in Seattle. Right, and the Green Bay player, photographic evidence to the contrary, really didn’t intercept the pass, something Goodell’s office also said.

The NFL did not admit its mistakes and it did not offer Green Bay redress. So much for the “integrity of the game.”

Don’t think about this too long—it’s the kind of unfairness that won’t let you sleep.