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NFL could always use another dose of sportsmanship

By Richard Eckstrom
S.C. Comptroller

Wednesday, August 27, 2014



Eckstrom PROVIDED

I'm always excited to see Clemson or USC athletes ascend to the NFL, but it was particularly thrilling to watch former Gamecock quarterback Connor Shaw play in the preseason Monday Night Football matchup between the Cleveland Browns and Washington Redskins.

Mr. Shaw, who wasn't picked up in the NFL Draft but was signed by the Browns as free agent, delivered a sterling performance. As one of three Cleveland quarterbacks to play in the game, he completed an impressive eight passes in nine attempts for 123 yards and a touchdown.

It was especially noteworthy because his team's stable of quarterbacks includes Johnny Manziel, the much-hyped first-round draft pick and Heisman Trophy winner. Mr. Manziel performed poorly, completing just 7 of 16 passes for 65 yards and a touchdown.

I've never met either man, but media reports portray the two as polar opposites. Mr. Manziel is often characterized as brash and outwardly confident. His off-field antics and partying have invited scrutiny. And he has been sometimes criticized for displaying an unsportsmanlike attitude. Indeed, during this game, he was caught by TV cameras making an unfortunate hand gesture toward the opposing team – a gesture for which he was fined by the NFL.

Mr. Shaw, on the other hand, is frequently described as affable, soft-spoken and well-grounded. He has burnished a reputation as a true team player whose leadership and positive attitude uplift those around him. You're unlikely to read about him making rude hand gestures, either on or off the field.

That's one reason it was so gratifying to see Mr. Shaw outshine his fellow rookie quarterback and punctuate his outstanding performance with a Hail Mary touchdown pass in the final seconds of the game.

The real value of athletic competition is that it can be used to teach important life lessons. It can promote the importance of teamwork, of respect for opponents, and of hard work as a means of achieving success – ideals which carry us far in all aspects of life.

And athletes are in a unique position to impress these ideals upon their fans, particularly the young people who look up to them as role models. That's especially true of high-profile players such as quarterbacks.

At the time of this writing, the Browns have selected another quarterback, six-year veteran Brian Hoyer, as starter for their regular-season opener on Sept. 7. But let's hope for more playing time for Mr. Shaw, not just because of his Palmetto State connection but because of the other qualities he brings with him.

The NFL could always use another dose of sportsmanship, and America can certainly use more positive role models for today's youth.

Richard Eckstrom is a CPA and the state's comptroller.

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