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## Tip of the (salary) cap to the Pats

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Ever since Aaron Hernandez was arrested on murder charges, and even days before that, the New England Patriots organization has come under some heavy criticism from the public and the press. Has the so-called “Patriot Way” hopelessly lost its way? Has the franchise’s moral compass gone haywire ever since Myra Kraft passed away?

As a longtime season ticket holder, I may have rose (and blue) colored glasses, but in my mind the Pats should be praised, not condemned, for its effort to rehabilitate Hernandez from his checkered past. The team took a chance on the University of Florida product, giving him an opportunity to turn his life around.

It certainly backfired on the team, but not out of any fault of the Kraft family or the coaching staff.

The Pats were as stunned and surprised by the tragic turn of events as anyone. There is no way they could have anticipated that Hernandez would have gone irretrievably off the deep end. Time and time again, we see instances in which an offender's dark side is hidden from family, friends and certainly employers. The Patriots didn't have the benefit of a crystal ball when offering him a handsome contract extension last August.

At this juncture, the team must deal not only with the loss of one of its star players, but with the hard hit to the salary cap linked to Hernandez's \$12.5 million signing bonus. Because of rules contained in the NFL's Collective Bargaining Agreement, the Patriots are not able to recover money already paid their former tight end. But the other shoe drop is the accelerated cap impact brought about by Hernandez's release from the team.

I don't claim to comprehend all the salary cap rules (I am good with numbers, but when they are preceded by a dollar sign, my eyes glaze over). Apparently, the team's swift action to sever ties with the disgraced player after his arrest was not especially cap-friendly. Even though it would have benefited the team to wait until the league moved to suspend Hernandez, the Patriots did the right thing by immediately terminating his contract.

Hernandez's departure from the team had nothing to do his football skill or ability to perform on the field, but the tragic developments that were totally outside the team's responsibility

or domain. The NFL should adjust the cap hit to be favorable to the Pats.

If the significant salary cap penalty stands, even after further review, it will likely have a chilling effect around the league on the willingness of clubs to take a chance on a troubled player. The Eagles took a risk in signing Michael Vick after he was released from prison, and that worked out well, at least in terms of off-the-field behavior. As a society, we all benefit when immature athletes are given an opportunity through professional sports for a second chance with which to overcome their youthful transgressions.

Sadly, Aaron Hernandez squandered his golden ticket. Hopefully this will not ruin it for other prospects who have baggage from their younger days.

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