

Can Football Be Bully-Free?

Football's Tough Image Has Made the NFL Very Successful—and Has Been Generally Terrible for the Players



ENLARGE

Richie Incognito (left) and Jonathan Martin in August Associated Press



By Jason Gay

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It's not worth convincing everyone. Seriously. Why bother? You're never going to persuade every skeptic that NFL offensive lineman Jonathan Martin was bullied out of a job with the Miami Dolphins. Even now, after a damning NFL-commissioned report, released Friday, which found a pattern of "abusive, unprofessional behavior" of Martin and others by select Dolphin players. Even with a clear pile of evidence, neatly presented, there will always be enablers who believe that a football player like Martin is to blame for letting a situation get bad like this, that football lives by different rules, that bullies can be bullied back, and that as a football player, Martin should have known this.

These enablers want to feed a fantasy. They perpetuate the image that football is a fortress of toughness, impenetrable, immune from political correctness, bound by an old-school code (no snitches, no softies) indecipherable to clueless outsiders (i.e., wimps like you and me).

It's an image that has helped make the NFL very successful. And it has been generally terrible for the players.

I want to get back to that image in a bit. Let's first address the Martin report, authored by independent counsel Ted Wells, who with his team interviewed more than 100 members of the Dolphins organization, as well as extensive sessions with Martin and his principal antagonist, fellow lineman Richie Incognito. The report is a frequently soul-crushing venture inside Miami's locker-room culture and the backward belief that hard men could be built by stripping them down. It is full of regrettable language and crude episodes—Martin being hit with racial abuse and vulgar remarks about his mother and sister; an unnamed player being ridiculed with homophobic taunts by players (and a coach); a Japan-born trainer being "jokingly threatened" with physical retaliation for the attack on Pearl Harbor, by players wearing rising sun headbands.

It is a cascade of idiotic, hurtful behavior. It's stupefying that anyone can believe it was merely good-natured ridicule.

The report shows the raw internal suffering of Martin, a second-year player from Stanford, as he struggled with the repeated harassment. It's all there: his shock at mistreatment, moments of anger and panic, the efforts to placate his abusers by playing along with the madness. Martin leans on his mother for help. He asks his father for advice. He turns the other cheek. He attempts to embody the stereotype he thinks he needs to be to survive, to make it stop.

And yet he keeps sinking. He is isolated inside the game he loves. His distress reaches a point where Martin sends a text message to a friend outlining the pros and cons of continuing to play. The cons are devastating:

- *I hate going in everyday.*
- *I am unable to socialize with my teammates in their crude manner*
- *I already have a lot of money. I could travel the world, get my degree. Then get a real job*
- *I could lose 70 lbs and feel good about my body*
- *I won't die from CTE*
- *Maybe I'll start to LIKE myself*

Wells's report is careful to state that it cannot trace all of Martin's mental distress to treatment by Dolphins players. It adds, however, that "we can say that there is a temporal relationship between the abusive conduct and the onset of the serious depression that Martin reported."

That cycle needs to be broken. As Wells's report states, football behavior will never be confused with an accounting firm or a law office. But you cannot help to read the report and be struck by the futility of this Dolphins harassment; there's no indication this culture had any practical use in terms of on-field performance. Antisocial behavior was justified under a twisted idea of bonding.

Football gets away with it, because it's football. The game has long been protected by a thick layer of institutional and public denial—no matter how many ugly truths are revealed about this beloved game, Sundays remain church, and 100 million-plus will always watch the Super Bowl.

This popularity obscures realities. We act shocked when beloved players go broke, go haywire, have trouble adjusting to life after the game. These guys had everything—how did they mess it up? We're increasingly aware of their broken bodies, of the potential long-term effects of head injuries—but there's a cold assumption another player will be willing to take their place.

Because there always is another player willing to take their place.

We don't like to see our idols rendered vulnerable. But the game needs to stand up for Jonathan Martin and, more important, the next Jonathan Martin. If football is truly a team sport, a teammate cannot be made to feel alone in the game.

A fantasy has been fed for too long. A lot of money has been made treating football players as indestructible gladiators, giants of toughness.

How about treating them as people?

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