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Dolphins Fail the Test on Bullying, and Now It's Up to the Commissioner

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How do you bully a 6-foot-5 starting offensive tackle in the N.F.L.?

This is not the first question that should come to mind in the wake of the hazing story coming out of the Miami Dolphins' locker room during the past week. The proper response is to mourn the absence of civility in the N.F.L. and to demand that Richie Incognito, the lineman accused of bullying and threatening a teammate, Jonathan Martin, to be exiled from the league.

But in a league defined by its violence, where every player aspires to impose his will on opponents, how does bullying become so intense that a massive football player stands up, leaves the team and simply goes home?

Did Incognito, a veteran with a checkered history and a reputation as a dirty player, do this on his own? Or did he have the help and participation of teammates who went along for the ride?

In Miami, it was apparently a combination of the two.

Judging from their reactions, some of Incognito's teammates enjoyed watching Martin being used as the butt of jokes.

Incognito has been suspended indefinitely by the Dolphins, accused of crossing a long-established line of rookie hazing to torment Martin. Yet Dolphins cornerback Will Davis said to reporters earlier this week of Incognito: “He’s a funny guy. Everybody loves him.”

Wide receiver Mike Wallace was more effusive.

“I love Richie,” he said. “I think he’s a great guy. He’s an intense guy. Everybody knows that. I think he was just being Richie.

“I love playing with Richie. I wish he was here right now.”

This is the Wallace who posted on Twitter, after the N.B.A. player Jason Collins announced he was gay: “All these beautiful women in the world, and guys want to mess with other guys.”

Not what one would call an enlightened locker room.

But do not blame the so-called locker-room culture for what has burst into the open in Miami. Blame an absence of leadership. Indeed, the big losers in this are the teammates of Martin and Incognito, who allowed this fire to rage until it was out of control. Some, like Wallace and Davis, appear to have been amused. Others might have decided it was best to simply stay clear.

As if the N.F.L. didn’t have enough headaches on the field and off — concussions, drug testing, crime — now the commissioner has to deal with bullying in the locker room.

I’ve been in plenty of locker rooms, from grammar school through high school and college, and things can be raunchy. There is name-calling, talking about mothers and girlfriends.

By the time the players reach the N.F.L., a billion-dollar business played by millionaires, one would hope, they have flushed this out of their systems.

Clearly, that is not the case, though on teams with great leadership, locker-room tensions don’t usually reach the commissioner’s office. Now that these have, Roger Goodell must deal with Incognito. A lifetime ban would be too harsh. But a suspension, possibly for the rest of the season, even if the Dolphins were inclined to bring Incognito back — which they do not seem to be — seems fair. That, and a stern message to the players that the days of hazing young players — from making rookies pay for dinner to carrying veterans’ bags — are over.

My concern for Martin is how this will mark him for the rest of his career. Many are paying lip service to how terribly he has been treated, but in locker rooms and team

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offices — and not just in Miami — there may always be whispers that Martin is “soft.”

The N.F.L. is not the Boy Scouts. Professional football is not an ordinary workplace. In a world where most fans make their livings, corporations would look at Incognito’s résumé and run the other way. In the N.F.L., personnel directors might look at Incognito — crude, troubled and violent, but also a former Pro Bowler — and say, “He’s our kind of guy.”

As for Martin, at another time and in a different context, he would be lauded for refusing to be provoked. He obeyed the biblical decree to turn the other cheek, that “if someone hits you on the side of your face, let him hit the other side, too.”

It’s a wonderful sentiment. But the N.F.L. has its own bible, and that passage isn’t in it.

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