

November 8, 2013

Prized for His Aggression, Incognito Struggled to Stay in Bounds

By BILL PENNINGTON

He was a timid Little Leaguer teased by opponents and belittled by teammates. He was mocked for being pudgy and gentler than the other boys, even though he was bigger than most of them.

Then, urged by his father, the Little Leaguer fought back, pummeling one of his tormentors, blackening both his eyes.

The chunky boy grew up to become a menacing 320-pound N.F.L. lineman who was largely unknown outside football circles — until he was accused of being a big-league bully.

Richie Incognito was suspended by the Miami Dolphins, his third N.F.L. team in five years, amid allegations that he bullied Jonathan Martin, his teammate on the offensive line who left the team last week and has not returned. The news hardly came as a shock to most of those who had crossed paths with Incognito since his college years. A snarling, tattooed, 6-foot-3 dynamo, Incognito dominated opponents even as he stretched the boundaries of civil conduct during games and in everyday life.

But whatever trouble Incognito encountered — and there were numerous scrapes with the law, with coaches and with teammates from New York to Oregon — there was always a football team that wanted him. In a game in which intimidation rules, coaches mostly prized Incognito's aggression and were willing to overlook his other problems.

But how did Incognito, plump-cheeked and boyish even in his college photo, transform into a man suspected of terrorizing his own teammate, referring to him publicly as the Big Weirdo? It would be simplistic to point to a childhood fistfight as a turning point, but people from Incognito's past still remember the teasing he endured as a kid, and the response he delivered.

The fight "sent the right message to the town," said Seth Bendian, who gave Richie private baseball instruction near his hometown, Bogota, N.J. "And Richie remained a nice, quiet kid."

Incognito became more aggressive as his career developed until he landed in Miami, which had a locker room culture that seemed unchecked. Glimpses of that world that have emerged in recent days have ignited a national debate over the fuzzy area between camaraderie and bullying.

Martin's lawyer said Thursday that Martin had endured more than a year of physical and verbal abuse, including a threat against his sister. He blamed Dolphins

teammates, but did not single out Incognito. Martin, who reportedly has kept a menacing and racist voice mail from Incognito, is cooperating with an N.F.L. investigation. At the center of it all is Incognito, 30, who has spent virtually his entire adult life struggling to keep his behavior within accepted limits of propriety.

If that was a challenge, it could be because his uncompromising aggression and noted mean streak have so often been prized in football.

In 2005, less than a year after off-field transgressions ended his college career at Nebraska and Oregon in the same summer, Incognito was selected by the St. Louis Rams in the third round of the draft.

Mike Martz, the Rams coach then, said the team wanted players with attitude. "Because that's the way the game is played in the N.F.L., obviously," Martz said. "That nastiness is evident, especially in Incognito."

This week, one of his teammates and friends from Nebraska and the Rams, kicker Josh Brown, assessed Incognito differently.

"There were rumors that he would barricade himself in his room, signs of depression," Brown, now with the Giants, said. "There was fighting and outbursts."

Brown shook his head.

"I know that's not the whole Richie," he said. "That's what's sad. But it's in there."

In Bogota, those who knew Incognito in the late 1980s and early 1990s are shaking their heads, too.

"That's the not the nice kid we knew," said Pat McHale, a former youth baseball coach and the current Bogota mayor. "His family was strait-laced. His father was the director of umpires."

Richie's father, Richard, a self-described devotee of the artist Norman Rockwell, grew up on the packed streets of Union City, N.J., a gritty landscape not often depicted on a Rockwell canvas. Just as Richie was turning 12, the Incognitos moved to Glendale, Ariz. At Mountain Ridge High School, Incognito, once teased for his size, quickly became the school's featured athlete. Richie worked hard, but he did lead the team in penalties, according to Jim Ewan, the coach.

Ewan did not expect Incognito to have a controversial future or be labeled a troublemaker.

"The first red flag is whatever happened at Nebraska," he said.

A lot happened at Nebraska.

As an 18-year-old redshirt freshman, he warred with the older starters in practice, often fighting after the whistle was blown. The coaches punished Incognito for the tussles, but at least one coach said he admired Incognito's spunk. Incognito became a starter at left tackle in 2002. In his second game, he was accused of spitting on a Troy State linebacker. In his fourth game, he threw multiple punches at a Penn State defensive end until he was ejected. In the second-to-last game, which was on national television, he received a personal foul in a pivotal moment, contributing to a loss against Colorado.

After a whistle at one practice that season, he was accused of hitting a backup lineman, Jack Limbaugh. "He did that kind of thing to a lot of his teammates," Limbaugh said. "I just walked off the field. A fight is what he wanted, but I wasn't going there."

Incognito was suspended for fighting in practice during 2003, and Nebraska sent him to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kan., which treats psychiatric and behavioral problems. He was reinstated and was named an All-Big 12 Conference All-Star. But before the 2004 season, Incognito was found guilty of a misdemeanor assault charge. He was still on the roster until he fought a teammate in the locker room that summer. The new Nebraska coach, Bill Callahan, dismissed him.

He was quickly accepted into Oregon as long as he sought anger management therapy.

Incognito's stay was less than two weeks, not long enough to even participate in a full practice. He never registered for any courses, according to the registrar's office.

Incognito then signed with an agent, who helped support him until the 2005 draft. He was a first-round talent, but he fell to the third round because of his history of unruliness. Incognito was a mainstay on the Rams' offensive line for five turbulent seasons during which he clashed with opponents, teammates, coaches, referees and even fans who booed a losing team. He committed 38 penalties in that period, including a league-high seven personal fouls.

A 2009 poll of N.F.L. players by The Sporting News named Incognito the league's dirtiest player.

That season, in a loss to Seattle, Incognito received two personal fouls after the whistle. In another game, he was twice penalized for head-butting a defender. When he argued with Coach Steve Spagnuolo on the sideline after the head-butting fouls, he was benched and then released.

Incognito found a new home at the end of 2009 in Buffalo. He mostly stayed out of trouble but rubbed some teammates the wrong way.

For the 2010 season, the Dolphins gave Incognito a one-year contract. He vowed he would be a changed man and embarked on a makeover that included yoga, meditation and counseling. He began taking the drug Paxil, he told NFL.com, which can be used for conditions like depression and social-anxiety disorders.

Before the 2011 season, the Dolphins gave Incognito a three-year, \$13 million contract with a \$3.25 million guaranteed signing bonus, and there were fewer documented incidents of misbehavior. He declared himself a new man. "I'm not saying I'm done with evolving," he told The Sun Sentinel in August. "I know there is a lot of work ahead, but I've done a lot of work mentally and physically to change some things."

After the 2012 season, he was awarded the Good Guy Award, voted on by local news media. The Dolphins chose Incognito for a public service advertisement exhorting fans to behave properly at games.

But he received a trespassing warning after a suspected bar fight in Miami Beach this year.

And then Martin came forward with accusations of workplace abuse. Since Incognito's suspension from the Dolphins, other allegations have surfaced, including a report that the police in Florida in May investigated an accusation of molestation made by a female volunteer at a Dolphins charity golf tournament. Incognito was not charged.

Incognito and his agent have declined interview requests since his suspension. While Incognito has been widely villainized, several of Incognito's teammates have supported him. Quarterback Ryan Tannehill called him the "best teammate I've ever had." He said Incognito was Martin's best friend on the Dolphins.

Meanwhile, back in Incognito's hometown, Bogota, people struggled to connect the pudgy Little Leaguer with the man now accused of bullying.

"My kids were Richie's babysitters," said Nick Barese, president of Incognito's youth baseball league. "Things couldn't have been more normal. I don't know what happened."