Warrior culture and muscle men in the NFL

By Arthur Remillard
November 27, 2013

When this year's NFL season opened, Miami Dolphins offensive tackle Richie Incognito was a "good guy." At least that's what the South Florida chapter of the Pro Football Writers Association thought. In 2012, they gave Incognito the "Good Guy Award" for being "a respected voice in the locker room" and a reliable representative of his team. Joining the Incognito praise-train, NFL.com ran a piece detailing Incognito's supposed moral makeover.

The Saint Louis Rams had cut Incognito in 2009 after he delivered two head-butts in a single game, a violent punctuation mark to a career defined by erratic behavior on and off the field. But the lineman soon began confronting his problems. When he arrived in Miami, Incognito was taking medication for depression and anxiety, and practicing meditation to mitigate his aggression. Proof of his turnaround came during a 2013 pre-season game, when the Houston Texans' Antonio Smith ripped off Incognito's helmet and swung it at his head. Incognito walked away, a gesture that seemingly validated his newfound powers of restraint.

So Incognito's image appeared to be trending up, until late October when a teammate— second-year lineman Jonathan Martin—left the Dolphins and sought treatment for emotional distress. Days later, news stories revealed that Incognito had been harassing his young counterpart, as evidenced by a series of racist, homophobic and threatening texts and voice mails. The Dolphins reacted by suspending Incognito and denouncing his actions. But reports allege that coaches had called upon the Incognitio to "toughen up" Martin. And the NFL more generally suffered a black eye when some players and commentators assumed a blame-the-victim posture, chastening Martin for, among other things, violating a locker room "code" of silence.

To critics like Thomas Rios, all of this is proof of a wayward "warrior culture" in professional football. "The NFL measures manhood using savagely Darwinian standards," he charged. Brian Phillips piled on, declaring "a war on warrior culture" and reserving his harshest rebukes for those who ridiculed Martin's mental distress

in a time when the game has a decided “suicide problem.”

Indeed, warrior metaphors are commonplace in professional football—as they are throughout the sports world. The Cherokee referred to their version of lacrosse as “the little brother of war.” Players used sticks that resembled battle clubs, and the game’s violence resulted in severe injuries and even the occasional death.

Just as the lines between games and war are fluid, the opposite is also sometimes the case. In his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga draws attention to 2 Samuel 2:14, when Abner challenges Joab to combat by announcing, “Let the young men now arise and play before us.” The ensuing battle confirms for Huizinga that “Play is battle and battle is play.”

Huizinga insists, however, that both the player and the warrior live by a code of honor, one shaped by “courage,” “tenacity” and access to “spiritual powers.” In other words, these are not lawless misanthropes. Advocates of the “muscular Christian” movement of the mid-19th century made similar distinctions as they acclaimed the high virtues of athletics. British author Thomas Hughes depicted the mindless “muscle man” as someone who exploits his body and succumbs to his “fierce and brutal passions.” The “muscular Christian,” on the other hand,

> has hold of the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man’s body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth.

With this in mind, we might conclude that the Incognito affair unveils not the problems of a “warrior culture” but rather an absence of it. When the 2013 football season started, Incognito was a “good guy” and a role model for healthy, rule-bound competition. But behind closed doors, he was a “muscle man” living in a world that celebrated, enabled and encouraged his exploits. While this might be normative in the locker room, it runs afoul of the ethical standards of our time—as shown most pointedly by the strict anti-hazing policies that exist in the military. Professional football would do well to recover *this* brand of warrior culture, one that prizes achievement and teamwork but not at the expense of human dignity.

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