



When now former NBA player Jason Collins revealed that he was a gay athlete last year, it was hard, actually, to appreciate the courage it took. To understand it, no better context exists than the circus that is the Miami Dolphins at the moment.

Richie Incognito, the hulking lineman who seems hell bent on trying to outlive the suggestion his last name would seem to mandate, is a crude, boorish, possible racist with deeply rooted insecurities. He's bullied his way through the NFL at various stops and while his behavior at times has caused a few teammates to just shake their heads, it's always been in the sort of "that's Richie just being Richie" sort of way. His past has been his prologue will no seemingly ill effects.

Jonathan Martin is a Stanford-educated second year lineman of some talent who put up with an unceasing amount of verbal crap from Incognito and other "teammates" until he could take it no more. It seemed mostly related to his status as first a rookie and now a second year player. He left the team last week and on the way out the door after an unspecified run-in during a team lunch he decided not to go quietly.

The stress of the abuse seemed to overwhelm Martin and by all accounts he has nothing particular in his background that elicited the attacks. But could you imagine if he did? Could you imagine if he had been Jason Collins? Every person has a breaking point. Yet, since then little sympathy has been generated his way, in particular little sympathy from "teammates" and others ensconced in and vested with the perpetuation of the unique culture of a professional sports locker room and its status as the last bastion of the all boys club.

There's enough disappointment around about those who have stood silent or defended Incognito at the expense of Martin to fill up a book the size of a typical Stephen King novel. Others better suited to that exposing that sort of outrage have weighed in. Personally, though, I was disappointed in Brian Hartline's reaction. Rather than come to Martin's defense or at least add a balanced perspective, Hartline evaluated the politics of the situation and his place in the locker room and came out squarely against Martin. I would like to think an Ohio State athlete schooled under Jim Tressel would have reacted better than that.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming amount of analysis about this situation inevitably lands at the intersection of jock behavior and NFL culture. But it's not just NFL culture for the same kind of abuse takes place not just in NFL locker rooms but in the locker rooms housing male athletes in virtually every athletic pursuit from middle school to professionals all across the country if not the world. The typical male athlete is infused with arrested development anyway so it shouldn't surprise that the behavior that starts young carries over to well beyond the point it ceases to make any sense whatsoever.

Most "locker room behavior" isn't clever. It's the same sort of derogatory abuse that picks first at the scabs of the most vulnerable. Nothing Incognito said or did to Martin, for example, is any cleverer than the towel-snapping and wedgie escapes of high schoolers. The only thing that's changed really is the economic status and the physical size of the participants.

Until you can stop and consider this culture for a moment you can't begin to fathom how difficult it would have been for Collins to be an openly gay athlete during the prime of his career. Collins may have been wrestling with his own sexuality for years, conflicted by it, tortured by it, but all the while the overhang to the self-analysis was the unforgiving, uncompromising attitudes of his "teammates." The chances of acceptance were always slim and that is the real tragedy of the kind of culture that Incognito, Harline and all the others coming to his defense are trying to protect. Collins, Martin and all the others deserve better.

To an extent, athletes reflect society, but only to an extent. There is plenty of intolerance these days for anyone the least bit different. Sarah Palin is on her latest book tour railing against religious intolerance by ginning up for profit a phony War on Christmas supposedly being waged by people who just want the same religious freedom to not have her beliefs mainstreamed on them. Indeed we're so accustomed to institutionalized intolerance that middle America is to willing to accept without even a sliver of the outrage we have for Incognito a Congress that wants to deliberately preserve the right of businesses to discriminate against gays and transgenders.

But yet in most workplaces where professional athletes don't toil, the kind of behavior that Incognito attempted to justify in his shameless Fox Sports interview would never be tolerated. Most workplaces are even well ahead of Congress. They already outlaw discrimination in any form. If they didn't, if they tolerated the abuse of others, productivity would fall at roughly the same rate that liability to a major dollar lawsuit would rise.

For some reason though, Incognito and all those who by word or deed support what he did to Martin are essentially trying to convince the rest of us that professional athletes (any athletes, really) should be held to a much lesser societal norm. To that a simple question: to what end?

It's not just the particular abhorrent words that Incognito used to refer to Martin that offend. It's the whole approach. It's the notion that a co-worker, someone supposedly working just as hard as Incognito to reach the same goal for their employer, should nonetheless be subject to unceasing abuse because of status that offends. Incognito, quite frankly, is just too stupid to understand that concept. Listen to his interview again and you'll see what I mean. I'd say his agent should be fired for green lighting the interview but an agent with integrity and a sense of decency wouldn't be associated with Incognito in the first place.

But guys like Jason Collins understand better than anyone what a nitwit like Incognito never will. It's the notion that status is irrelevant. Performance is what matters and those who are offended by status of any kind aren't just lunkheads but cancers to the goal of the enterprise. They can't even see the small irony in calling themselves teammates of a player they can't tolerate.

I'm not naïve to think that this problem is limited to the Dolphins. I've covered sports and have been in plenty of locker rooms. The fate suffered by Martin, for example, is commonplace. Women, who make up an ever increasing segment of the working sports press, still get the occasional eye roll and sexist attitude from their subjects. It's improved, but it's not been eliminated.

This is why above all else that NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell had no choice but to launch an investigation into the Dolphins' farce. It speaks to an entire multi-billion dollar enterprise and its own attitudes toward a diverse workforce. The NFL's bread is buttered on the backs of its multitude of corporate sponsors, none of which would want to be directly associated with any organization that openly tolerates the kind of conduct Martin exposed.

But Goodell has to do more than just punish the Dolphins and if past is prologue, he will. Goodell showed an uncompromising approach to the New Orleans Saints that in large measure eliminated an analogous form of misconduct, bounty hunting of opponents, by subjecting it to significant consequence. That, too, was a behavior initially justified by the supposedly singular nature of the NFL culture. It was fraud as defense just as Incognito's explanations are now. And if, in his investigation, Goodell finds that Dolphins officials and/or coaches helped facilitate Incognito's behavior then they should suffer a fate similar to that of Sean Payton, the New Orleans Saints head coach.

There's no reason, no good reason anyway, that the NFL or any professional sports team should tolerate an atmosphere where racial slurs, derogatory comments about sexuality or family or friends, should be seen as just part of the bouillabaisse that makes our sports unique. The Incognito situation can and should serve as a flashpoint for a sea change in behavior. There are plenty of Jason Collinses in the NFL right now and even more that desire to play professional football but don't dare dream for fear of the abuse they'd be subject to in the name of preserving an antiquated culture.

It's time for the NFL to be a leader once again not just for itself but this time for a whole swath of our culture.