

Resting guys raises issues of integrity

by Jerry Magee

Professional sports once recognized what could be termed "the code." It was not written out, but it was observed. It was this:

That out of fairness to all teams involved in a championship competition, any team opposing one of them shall extend itself to the fullest.

A noble concept. Sadly, it has been largely forgotten, nowhere more than in the NFL, in which for most franchises advancing to what I think of as "The Show," the playoffs, and gaining the most favorable of positions within them takes precedence over all else.

At the moment, we are seeing several expressions of this me, me, me attitude. In New York, Tom Coughlin of the New York Giants is being evasive concerning whether he will expose his leading athletes when his side engages the New England Patriots in the Meadowlands on Saturday evening.

"I don't think anybody would question that we have the right to do what's best for our team," Coughlin has said.

At the top of my lungs, I would question it. The Patriots, coached by a confessed cheater, Bill Belichick, are within one game of matching the all-victorious regular season that the Miami Dolphins of 1972 achieved. To me, Coughlin owes it to those '72 Dolphins to have the Giants make the most sincere of efforts in this game. All of the Giants, all the time.

In Indianapolis, Tony Dungy, the NFL's resident saint, has indicated he plans to make only token use of Peyton Manning when the Colts, their postseason status assured, go against the Tennessee Titans on Sunday. How distressing. The game may be meaningless for the Colts, but it is all-important to the Cleveland Browns, who must have Indianapolis win in order to advance and exclude the Titans from the postseason. The Browns play in Cleveland earlier in the day against the San Francisco 49ers.

Dungy is the last individual one would expect would take such a stance. A year ago, he took a more high-minded approach. In the regular season's final weekend, the Colts were matched against the Miami Dolphins and Dungy kept Manning around long enough to throw 37 passes. He completed 22 for 282 yards and two touchdowns and Dungy's side won 27-22. That worked out pretty well for the coach, whose team went on to capture Super Bowl XLI.

To get back to Coughlin, on ESPN in the minutes prior to the Chargers-Broncos game here on Monday evening, the network was streaming a question at the bottom of its screens: "Do the Giants owe it to the other coaches in the league to play their best players against the Patriots?"

Seeing that question, I wished I could address it. I wanted to say, "No, they don't owe it to the other coaches. They owe it to the game. They owe it to being aware of the sort of conduct that has been responsible for pro football becoming the game of our times, and it was not acting wholly in a team's best interests. "They owe it to the sturdy lads from the mill towns who in the 1920s went out on Sunday afternoons and beat the bejesus out of one another, not for the fees they were promised, which were hardly more than a pittance, but for the sheer love of it.

"They owe it to all the grizzled, bleeding linemen who have hunkered down in the awful cold of Green Bay in December.

"They owe it to Pete Rozelle.

"They owe it to the Buffalo faithful. Those people often suffer to go to games in that weather, but they go.

"They owe it to the members of the Bills teams that showed up in four straight Super Bowls. They never won, but they taught us something about striving and, being denied, continuing to strive.

"They owe it the families that had so much to do with pro football gaining the nation's attention, the Maras and the Halases and the Rooneys.

"They owe it, yes, to Al Davis, who with his instinct for going for the jugular had a good deal to do with the AFL and the NFL getting together.

"They owe it to Lamar Hunt, who no longer is around, which is sad. Hunt knew something about putting a league's interests ahead of the desires of its franchises."

What I have been attempting to say here is that resting players in order that they can be fresh for the playoffs may improve a team's chances, but there is something far more important. Think of it as integrity. A league is nothing without it.

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