Everyone's a critic (and not just of LT)

by Chris Jenkins

He's done the fan thing, lived it. In fact, San Diego may have no greater fan of the Chargers than Brian Giles, East County born and raised. He played the game himself at Granite Hills High.

GAME OVER - Over the course of one playoff game, LaDainian Tomlinson went from civic icon to scapegoat. CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred. Baseball, though, is where Giles came to truly understand the mentality and perspective of the sports fan. Not just as a major league player, either.

"I've sat in the stands and watched the Atlanta Braves and my little brother (Marcus) playing a playoff game," Giles said. "As I sat there, I thought, now I know why people yell at me. This game looks easy from a chair or a seat in the stands. Your couch isn't moving at game speed."

Anymore, however, the sofa is armed and dangerous. Clearly, there are those who sit in front of their wide-screen televisions with one hand on the remote control and another on the cell phone or computer keyboard. They're ready to aim and fire at will with high-tech criticisms of what they're seeing in high-def.

E-mails. Text messages. Blogs. Call-in radio on cellular speed dial. Even videos on YouTube.

Moreover, the immediacy of fan reaction also seems to have intensified the emotion being expressed, especially when it's negative. Left unchecked by reason or patience or actual insight, angst quickly turns to anger, frustration to outrage, disappointment to a sense of betrayal, criticism to character assassination.

Such decidedly has been the case recently in San Diego, where the most beloved, accomplished and iconic of local sports superstars has been excoriated since the Chargers' loss to the New England Patriots in the AFC Championship Game. In the immediate aftermath, to be sure, "LT" could have stood for "Lightning Tower."

A vast majority of fans - and facts - supported and defended LaDainian Tomlinson against accusations that he dogged it by not returning to play with his knee injury. Those aspersions were cast not merely by the usual culprits - talk-show hosts and "expert" media commentators - but by chatters and writers to fan forums in various other "new" media.

Even in the warp-speed of Ether World, it was remarkable how quickly some folks went from riding Tomlinson the charger horse to deriding him.

Likewise, while ultrapopular Padres closer Trevor Hoffman recently told The San Diego Union-Tribune that the overwhelming kindness of fans helped him get through the painful aftermath of his critical blown saves at the end of last season, he also got pounded pretty good on the Internet and call-in shows by vitriolic fans. Much of the criticism felt personal, too.

"Sports fans construct their identity through their teams," e-mailed Michael Roberts, a San Diego State sociology professor. "And as fans, we develop such a strong attachment to our teams that the dividing line between ourselves as fans and the players becomes blurred to some extent. What this means is that fans feel entitled to intervene in the personal lives of the players and to pass judgment on their actions on the field and off the field.

"This might be what is happening with LT. Fans may lose their ability to see the choices LT made as rational choices because of the over-attachment fans develop with their teams, which is, ultimately irrational.

"I'm a sports fan myself, so I'm not saying it is a bad thing to make these attachments. Rather, it's important for sports fans to reflect on how they become attached to their teams in order to remain objective in their assessments of how athletes make choices and behave."

At the same time, continued Roberts, "perhaps Chargers fans have a bit of a chip on their shoulders because we haven't yet won a championship, so there must be a scapegoat for us so we can displace our frustrations onto them."

Without hesitation. Therein was the truly shocking part about the treatment of Tomlinson, the quickness with which some people tried to yank him off the pedestal. Since joining the Chargers in 2001, Tomlinson's devotion to duty, the team and the city has been unquestioned, exemplary. Heck, half the population of San Diego must have a Chargers jersey with his name and/or number on it.

Yet, when viewers saw him sitting out the game on the sideline at Gillette Stadium while quarterback Philip Rivers and tight end Antonio Gates played through their injuries, the forums of various Web sites were hit hard with cries that Tomlinson was "brooding" and "a coward." And those were some of the gentler words.

At their most strident, amputation was the only excuse some fans wanted to hear for Tomlinson's absence from the lineup, no matter how fervently his coaches and teammates and mainstream media stood up for him. Most damaging was the perception that Tomlinson was being selfish, putting his career ahead of the Chargers' best shot at a Super Bowl in 13 years.

"It's one of those things where people perceive things from the outside looking in," Giles said. "As a professional athlete, you're always open for criticism, and you can't worry about perception. You can't worry about that, because they don't know what's going on. They don't know what you're feeling. That's why it's so special to play professional sports.

"I know (Tomlinson) a little bit. I know a lot of the guys who block for him. I know he's a gamer."

Giles also knows that, because he is a big-league player of a certain stratum, his own perspective might easily be dismissed. He is subject to the same sort of boo-first, think-later mind-set from spectators. Comes with the eight-figure paycheck. Pros get the benefits, but not always the benefit of the doubt.

"Many sports fans also harbor some resentment having to do with the fact that professional athletes are paid very well," wrote Roberts. "In other words, as much as fans love their teams and the players, there is also the feeling that if athletes are paid the big bucks, then they are obligated to lay it all on the line, especially in big-game situations."

Roberts' colleagues in the SDSU School of Journalism/Media Studies were struck, but not surprised, by the many different vehicles that fans used to assail Tomlinson. Indeed, the information superhighway has gotten so fast, the AFC Championship Game wasn't half over before fans were typing or texting their thoughts on Tomlinson's unavailability in Foxborough.

In the first five days after the game, more than 30 threads about Tomlinson had been started in the Chargers forum on the SignOnSanDiego Web site and more than 1,500 comments were posted. (Not including, mind you, the one thread calling for a boycott of Tomlinson threads.) Several actually were started during Sunday's game.

"The new generation is being enÂ•couraged to have opinions, and to express them, and certainly there are many outlets that allow people to get their opinion out," said Tim Wulfemeyer, coordinator of the journalism degree program at San Diego State. "The media is now engaging people. Your own newspaper is engaging its readership, driving people to its Web site, seeking their responses.

"Look at the whole 'American Idol' phenomenon, the shows where they tell you your opinion matters. ... The (television networks) are equipping people at games with the ability to call out their favorite camera shots. People now just feel entitled to criticize."

And everybody's a critic. The day after the most important Chargers game since 1995, the media in San Diego were consumed less with postmortems on the game or the extraordinary season than the rumblings about Tomlinson, although much of the furor stemmed from a slam of the running back by NFL Network analyst Deion Sanders.

"You're a big-time player," said Sanders, a former NFL cornerback, "and big-time players must play big-time games."

Perhaps considering the source, that's the one opinion that really put Tomlinson on the defensive. No pun intended, but fanning the flames was San Diego radio talk-show host Bill Werndl, who said he "wondered aloud" on the air about whether Tomlinson was jaking it. Werndl now is apologetic.

"Maybe I spoke too quickly," Werndl said. "It was like a knee-jerk reaction, you know. ... About 10-15 percent of callers felt the same way I felt initially. The majority felt LT was being disrespected. They were coming at me from all angles. I said, 'Hey, after reviewing it, I think I was out of bounds.'

"It was an emotional comment I made. I believe I acted irrationally at the outset. That's because I was a fan. I want the Chargers and all San Diego teams to do well."

One person was fan enough to have purchased a pink Chargers jersey adorned with Tomlinson's numeral. In a video posted on YouTube on Jan. 20 - the day of the conference title game - the jersey is shown being torched in a fireplace. The video's titles facetiously thank Tomlinson for not running against the Patriots.

"According to the law, there's no such thing as a false opinion," said Wulfemeyer, the SDSU journalism professor. "People saw LT go sit down and read into it what they wanted. It's stupid when you fully think about it. LT never missed a game in his life.

"Sadly, athletes have to take it, just like celebrities. I would just hope that people would stop a bit before forming their opinions."

Stop? At these breakneck speeds?

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