

Some athletes today seem to be (victory) dancing all over the unwritten rules of sports etiquette

by Chris Jenkins

His name was Walker D. Russell. Still is. No matter what anybody says.

Destined for a six-year career in the NBA, Russell might have been the best basketball player ever at Western Michigan University, where Steve Fisher happened to be an assistant coach from 1979-82.

"Our place was so small we showered in the same facilities as the other team," said Fisher, now coach at San Diego State. "The walls between the locker rooms were paper-thin. After one loss, we could hear the other team yelling, 'Walker D.! Walker D.! Walker No D!'"

OK, so there's nothing new about players coming into somebody else's arena, knocking off the home team and breaking into a farewell taunt. "Rubbing it in," as the age-old expression goes, likely has been a practice since Athens vs. Sparta.

Invariably, the vanquished players are told to shush, to live with their loss, to pay that extra price of defeat, bite their tongues and fight a better fight when next they meet. Then again, winners forever have been told to win with grace and respect for the opposition. And so it is unwritten on the ancient tablets of athletics: Thou shalt not whine. Thou shalt not gloat.

Today, however, the nature of the postgame seems to have changed as much as the game itself. Regardless of how big the contest just concluded.

NFL games don't come much bigger than the New England Patriots' defeat of the San Diego Chargers two Sundays ago, a wild and dramatic playoff affair at Qualcomm Stadium. It ended with the winners aggressively mocking the losers - and one flamboyant Chargers linebacker in particular - and several Pats taunting roughly 68,000 San Diego fans in attendance.

You knew a line had been seriously crossed when the soft-spoken LaDainian Tomlinson took umbrage at the Patriots' on-field antics, started going after a dancing, over-amped New England player and was still decrying the Pats' excessive prancing in a next-day news conference.

Clearly, nobody had read the "Emily Post-Game Guide to Etiquette," which may be out of print and out of date.

"It's not enough to win anymore, not enough to just beat the other team's brains in," said Richard Lustberg, a New York psychologist who works with professional and amateur athletes on mental approach. "Now people need adulation, too."

Almost as much as they need the win, evidently. Last Sunday, New Orleans Saints running back Reggie Bush had 15 yards of clear sailing left on an 88-yard touchdown reception when he actually slowed his gallop, turned and wagged a derisive finger at the pursuit of Chicago Bears linebacker Brian Urlacher. In case anybody missed his flying somersault over the goal line, too, Bush performed a little dance in the end zone.

Bush's look-at-me actions were widely rebuked because at the time he busted the moves his team still trailed 16-13 in the NFC Championship Game. Indeed, some of the Bears later credited Bush's insulting theatrics for spurring them to 23 straight points, a 39-14 victory and a berth in Super Bowl XLI.

For the record, no fines were issued after the postgame hostilities at Qualcomm. Nor was an unsportsmanlike-conduct penalty called on young master Bush.

"Not one flag," said Tom Jackson, a longtime ESPN pro football analyst who also was an All-Pro linebacker. "That tells me the referee thought it to be normal behavior in a playoff game. And maybe that's the scariest part of all."

Football can be a scary game, period, with its violence and its intensity, with bodies flying everywhere and crowds that sometimes seem to think they paid to see something out of ancient Rome, the armored gladiators and the blood and maybe even a hungry lion or two.

Yet, by no means is the NFL or even football the only place where you'll find an apparent disregard, if not outright disdain, for the traditional notion of letting the scoreboard do all the talking. In many sports, self-aggrandizement appears to be winning the Smackdown over selflessness.

Long before St. Louis Cardinals slugger Albert Pujols began flipping his bat to instigate his home run trot, and right about the same time Sammy Sosa celebrated his homers with a balletic grand jete out of the batter's box, Barry Bonds developed his ritual of standing almost motionless at the plate while admiring the flight of his latest long ball.

"Things have changed a little," said San Diego Padres veteran Geoff Blum, who won a World Series game for the Chicago White Sox with his extra-inning homer two years ago and simply ran the bases. "I grew up watching Dodgers-Padres games in the '80s with my dad, who was a traditionalist. I learned from him that baseball's a gentleman's game. There was no flinging of the bat, no pointing at the sky, no fist-pumping."

Blum had to reach the so-called Show for that. That he saw it first from a Montreal Expos teammate made it even more of an eye-opener.

"Coming up in the minors, you didn't see any fist-pumping," Blum said. "I was in my second year in the bigs, up with the Expos, and we were not very good. We had Ugueth Urbina as our closer, though, and Ugie was having a pretty good year. I'd never seen a closer for a last-place team shut down a perennial champion like the Atlanta Braves and fist-pump 'em.

"Nothing happened, but you could see some eyeballing from the Braves dugout. Much of this game is about respect."

Alas, sports has become more about disrespect, whether real or perceived. The Diss.

The NBA went from the style and substance of Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan to the emphasis on showmanship, which grew into showboating, the Air Wannabes screaming as they hung from the rim. Then it moved on to menacing looks and guerrilla warfare to open combat between not only players, but players and fans.

Outside of prime time, hit the clicker on your remote control and watch people engage in such competitions as poker and darts and paintball. Not long ago, the common expression for such stuff was "trash sports." Now they're all trash-talkin' sports.

"It's crazy, seeing those guys playing Madden (the video game), getting right in each other's face," said San Diego State star guard Brandon Heath. "You can trash-talk anything. Cards. Monopoly. Anything, man."

Heath, the reigning Mountain West Conference player of the year, already has earned his college degree in sociology. His education in the sociology of sports - and the psychological games played within the games - has been a lifelong study.

"In the (Los Angeles) neighborhood where I grew up, there was definitely a lot of trash-talking," said Heath. "It starts at (age) 6, 8, 9, 10, when you're playing in the back yard and you hit a shot on somebody. Some guys can't play without it.

"At some level, though, it has to stop. You're not in the back yard anymore."

To the contrary. You'd think today's scorekeepers were giving extra points - or Oscars - for the kind of theatrics on display at stadiums, arenas and ballparks.

"This generation has come up with almost no sense of sportsmanship," Lustberg said. "They weren't raised with your father's Oldsmobile. They've been brought up with histrionics. They've seen it as kids, seen how (professional) players act, seen how some parents act on the sidelines. For them, it's become the norm."

Perhaps the telltale word in Lustberg's analysis is "seen." Between cable television and the "new media," an athlete or coach can barely wake up in the morning without a camera in his or her face.

"When I grew up playing ball, fights were always breaking out in practices, but nobody outside knew about them and it was no big deal," Fisher said. "When a fight breaks out now, it's on the Internet before the blood dries."

Whereas baby boomers found it convenient to blame the decline of Western Civilization on MTV, the video medium has gone stratospheric, and in high-def. Not only do so much of sports seem designed for replays on ESPN - the high-flying dunks, the home run trots, the sack dances - but more and more are being perpetuated and glorified by the phenomenon that is YouTube.

Still wondering why the Pats were quite so vitriolic toward Chargers linebacker Shawne Merriman? Go to that Web site, keyword his name and scroll down to a grainy video of "Lights Out's" incendiary appearance at a San Diego rally a few days before the Patriots game. After taking the microphone to tell the crowd of his intent to hit Pats quarterback Tom Brady "right in the mouth," Merriman helps orchestrate a chant of "Brady (stinks)!" All for posterity.

In fairness, The San Diego Union-Tribune ran several pictures of Merriman in mid-dance, blowing one up to full-page size for commemoration. That was the postgame dance a few of the Pats were doing on the Chargers' logo, the act that incensed Tomlinson and his teammates.

"It doesn't help me teach my daughters about sportsmanship," said Jackson, admitting that his own meganetwork is driven by ratings that often are driven by controversy and showboating athletes. "When the New England Patriots were on their way to winning their first Super Bowl, I was so impressed with them. They were all about team, didn't want to be introduced individually. There was no bravado, no taunting, no goading.

"I loved that team. But they've become a team of a different mentality since that '01 season. And when they lost to the (Indianapolis) Colts (last Sunday), the Patriots were the ones who looked like sore losers."

Jackson, one of the game's pre-eminent sack artists over his 14-year career with the Denver Broncos, did not lack for flair when he played. Nor, to his chagrin, can he say he never lost his tongue. But he'd also like to think there was some context, and humor, to his semi-historic taunt of John Madden on Oct. 16, 1977.

The Broncos hadn't won at Oakland in 15 years, losing 14 straight to the Raiders at one point and 20 of 24. Recovering a fumble near the Raiders sideline in the course of a 30-7 rout at Oakland, Jackson looked straight at the opposing head coach and yelled, "It's over, fat man!"

The words became almost a motto that first Super Bowl season for Denver.

"If I had it to do all over again, I'd take it back," Jackson said. "I never meant that to be a derogatory statement about John Madden, a very demonstrative guy on the sideline, but it was intended to be more a statement that we were through getting our heads knocked in by the Raiders. ...

"I think there's a difference now. The things that are being said on the field these days are intended to be hurtful."

Not just the things being said on the field, either, to say the least. Some of those who'd criticize a player for acting like a madman should go to the stadium restroom and look in the mirror.

However critics will decry the attention-grabbing efforts of Terrell Owens and Chad Johnson, regardless of how off-putting it is to see Chargers receiver Vincent Jackson spin a ball to the ground and make the first-down sign while the play was still alive, nothing players do is chasing people away from the game. Empty seats are a rarity around the league, television blackouts almost nonexistent, and the crowd atmosphere at games has grown markedly more manic and abusive.

In the immediate aftermath of Indianapolis' first-round playoff victory at Baltimore, the first thing noted by Colts quarterback Peyton Manning was that he'd never seen so many middle fingers in one place. Ravens fans are whipped to a frenzy by the pregame ritual of linebacker Ray Lewis' herky-jerky dance, just as Merriman now riles up Qualcomm with his trademark romp.

Undeterred even when fines are levied, players think they can get away with anything, but the person who shelled out \$200 for a seat thinks he's even more entitled to unruly behavior and taunting.

"Fans these days say horrific things to players," Lustberg said. "Fans think they can say anything now. These (athletes) are human. I try to get them not to react to it, but the crowd attracted to football has that personality. Even tennis is getting more boisterous. There's been a general deterioration in the way people treat other people.

"People now bring their anger to the arena. Look at the popularity of Ultimate Fighting. If you go to see that, there's something about it that speaks to you."

As he spoke, Lustberg reached for that morning's edition of a New York newspaper. Given most prominent display was a photograph of Washington Wizards basketball player Caron Butler standing on the scorer's table and preening for the crowd. The picture also could be found online.

"See the faces of the people in the crowd?" Lustberg asked. "They're looking up at him like he's a god standing atop Mount Olympus. Some are pumping their fists in the air. There's a blonde looking up at him as if he were Adonis. That picture says it all."

True. And there's no D for that.

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NFL CELEBRATIONS THROUGH THE YEARS

For more than 45 years, players in the NFL have been celebrating touchdowns and big plays. Some celebrations have been more tasteful and creative than others - and some have prompted rules changes. A look at some of the more memorable celebrations:

McCelebration

1960: Following a touchdown pass from Philadelphia quarterback Norm Van Brocklin to wide receiver Tommy McDonald, McDonald heaves the ball into the stands for what is considered the first incidence of a post-touchdown celebration.

The spike

1965: New York Giants wide receiver Homer Jones becomes the first player to fire the ball into the turf - the spike - after scoring a TD.

Improvising

1973: Wide receiver Isaac Curtis, in first year with the Bengals, puts a wrinkle on the spike, with a backward, over-the-shoulder throw-down as he crosses the goal line.

The first dance

1973: Elmo Wright, a wide receiver with the Chiefs, breaks out the first end-zone celebration dance after scoring, a running-in-place, high-stepping number punctuated by a spike.

"Funky Chicken"

1974: Rookie Billy "White Shoes" Johnson of the Houston Oilers celebrates his TDs with his wobbly-kneed "Funky Chicken" dance.

"California Quake"

1970s-'80s: Cowboys wide receiver Butch Johnson gets pub for his clutch catches and his "California Quake"

routine.

Retribution

1981-83: Jets defensive end Mark Gastineau does his sack dance (often) after getting to the quarterback, but spurs an unsportsmanlike taunting rule by the NFL in 1984 after a 1983 incident in which he celebrates a sack against the Rams, and is pushed to the ground by irritated L.A. tackle Jackie Slater.

A fun bunch

1984: Washington Redskins players - aka "The Fun Bunch" - gather for choreographed group high-fives after scores. After the season, NFL institutes a rule against such "excessive celebration" by groups.

Dancing cat

1988: Bengals rookie Ikey Woods does "The Ikey Shuffle" after his 15 regular-season TDs and three more in the playoffs en route to the Super Bowl.

Leaping for joy

1993: Packers cornerback LeRoy Butler returns a fumble for a TD, then leaps into the waiting arms of Green Bay fans in the end-zone stands, starting the "Lambeau Leap," which becomes a team tradition.

Dirty birds

1998: Atlanta's run to the Super Bowl gets some wings thanks to running back Jamal Anderson's "Dirty Bird" dance after TDs. Other teammates pick up the dance, too.

Salute him

1997: Terrell Davis begins snapping off "Mile High Salutes" while standing at attention after each of his 15 touchdowns for the Broncos.

A fun bunch II

2000: After St. Louis Rams players start doing regular group celebrations of TDs - crouching together and weaving from side to side (called the "Bob and Weave") the NFL declares that celebrations involving groups of players are illegal, and begins issuing fines.

Star stomping

2000: After his 49ers beat the Cowboys, Terrell Owens goes to the star logo at midfield of the Cowboys field and does a victory dance. He is suspended a game by his coach. Then, in a 2002 Monday night game, he pulls a pen out of his sock after scoring, signs the football and hands it to his financial adviser sitting in the stands.

Calling mother

2003: Saints wide receiver Joe Horn scores a TD vs. the Giants, pulls a hidden cell phone out of the padding on the uprights and calls his mother, drawing a \$30,000 fine from the league.

Moon man

2004: Vikings wide receiver Randy Moss pretends to pull down his pants and moon Packers fans after scoring a TD. He's fined \$10,000.

Bengals follies

2005: Receiver Chad Johnson of Cincinnati does a series of prearranged celebrations after scores, involving props, cheerleaders and dance moves, and prompts several fines for excessive celebrations, including one when he scores and holds up a sign saying "Dear NFL, please don't fine me again!!!"

Recent NFL rules changes

1997 - Players may not remove their helmets on the field, to reduce taunting and overexuberant celebrations.

2000 - Celebrations are limited to one player; fines assessed for celebrations involving two or more players.

2004 - "Flamboyant" celebrations may be penalized 15 yards.

2006 - End zone celebrations restricted. Props are outlawed, and players are prohibited from going to the ground to celebrate. Players may still dunk the ball over the goal posts, spike it or spin it as long as it is not a prolonged or group demonstration.

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