

Teams still rolling dice on players with issues

by Jerry magee

Before the draft last weekend, a prominent NFL coach chuckled when asked if teams would shy away from players with dirty backgrounds.

"That's scar tissue talking," he said, referring to clubs that had been burned by misbehaving players. "Teams say that kind of stuff now - and they actually could think twice about drafting a potential problem guy up high - but there are other teams that won't hesitate to take a chance.

"The farther you're removed from your last incident, the more willing you are to roll the dice."

The coach refused to put his name behind the comment for fear of being fined by Commissioner Roger Goodell, who has made improving player conduct a top priority since replacing Paul Tagliabue last year. Still, the words could not have been more appropriate in the wake of what took place during the two-day event.

From the first round on, it was obvious that play-making abilities were more important than a clean background. If not, New England would have passed on Miami safety Brandon Meriweather in the opening round; Cleveland would have skipped UNLV cornerback Eric Wright in the second round; Denver would have ignored Florida defensive tackle Marcus Thomas in the fourth round; and the Patriots would have saved their energy and their draft pick before trading for Raiders malcontent Randy Moss, who despite quitting on his previous two teams now has a legitimate chance at a Super Bowl title.

None of this should come as a surprise, of course. It's no secret that some general managers and coaches believe the NFL is a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately league, and that if they don't win they'll be fired. Then there are others who genuinely believe that people are capable of change.

Chargers GM A.J. Smith thought as much several years ago when he signed linebacker Steve Foley, even though it was widely known that Foley had issues with alcohol in his background. In doing his due diligence and speaking with the player, Smith believed Foley's demons were in his past - or, at the very least, they could be managed. He was wrong, much like GM Bill Polian, then with Buffalo, was wrong in 1986 when he thought free-agent QB Art Schlichter had beaten his addiction to gambling.

"My own experience tells me that people are capable of change," Polian said this year at the Scouting Combine. "If they're sincere and they're motivated and they've proven that they're capable of change, then . . . certainly you're willing to take a chance. . . ."

"We brought in Art Schlichter and had a real positive experience with him for 90 percent of the time, and then unfortunately there was a relapse. But I don't regret having done it. We felt that based on what people told us, it was a worthwhile choice to make."

Most people agree that everyone deserves a second chance. But Meriweather, Thomas and Moss, among others, have had multiple issues. Meriweather stomped on an opponent's head during an on-field brawl and, in another incident, pulled a gun from his pants and shot at an assailant after bullets were fired at a Meriweather friend. And Thomas was kicked off the Gators team this past season for reportedly failing multiple drug tests. Moss' indiscretions are well-documented.

What's interesting is that the Patriots, while winning three Super Bowls in four seasons, presented themselves as an organization that valued personal character more than playmaking abilities. Before the draft, owner Robert Kraft told The Boston Globe: "I think since we bought the team we've shown the kind of people (we value). We actually cut a player (Christian Peter) a number of years ago who was drafted who didn't fit the profile of what we want. I don't think the general public wants to see overindulged athletes getting a lot of money who don't respect the responsibility and privilege they have."

After the draft, Kraft told the media that he was on board with the personnel moves because coach Bill Belichick and VP Scott Pioli have done a great job of bringing in players who help the team win while staying out of trouble. What's interesting is, Belichick all but swore off headache players after temperamental wideout Andre Rison and others made his life miserable when he was coaching the Browns. He preached character, intelligence and commitment during his Super Bowl run, words that ring hollow after last weekend.

The whisper around the league is that Belichick is willing to take more chances now because he might move on in a season or two. Plus, he has now gone two consecutive years without a title, a first for him since the 2000 season.

He can preach all day that Meriweather and Moss won't be problems, but I choose to remember the words of new Dolphins coach Cam Cameron: "The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior."

GIVING BACK

The nonprofit foundations for Junior Seau and John Lynch are among the most giving in sports, according to 2005 figures obtained by The Wall Street Journal. The newspaper reported this week that the John Lynch Foundation donated 91.01 percent of every dollar it received to charity, while the Junior Seau Foundation sent 88.6 percent of the donations it received to charity. Only the foundations of Peyton Manning (94.86) and Derrick Brooks (91.01) donated a higher percentage.

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