

Teams play 'I Spy' with players

by Jim Trotter

True story: A Pro Bowl player in the NFL's substance-abuse program was cut by one team and claimed off waivers by another. After meeting with the general manager of his new club, the player and his agent went out to celebrate.

The next day, the general manager called the agent into his office and asked: "Is there anything I need to know?" Confused, the agent shook his head, then he asked why.

The club executive quickly recounted where the player and agent had gone the previous night, how much alcohol they had consumed and what type of cigar the player had smoked. Then the GM claimed that such cigars often are used as a substitute for marijuana because they provide a similar buzz when combined with alcohol.

The agent, stunned, reiterated that there was nothing to worry about. Later, he wondered how the executive could be so specific with his information. His conclusion was that he and the player had been followed, possibly by a club employee or a security person hired by the team.

"There was no way for them to know what they knew without following us," the agent said this week.

If this sounds like something from a spy novel, it's not. JaMarcus Russell, the LSU quarterback selected No. 1 overall by the Raiders last month in the NFL draft, claims he was followed for as many as two weeks before the draft. He says he was tipped off by someone working for a pro club and that the information the person had on his whereabouts - which included stops in Louisiana and Alabama, among other places - was too accurate to be guesswork.

Perhaps I'm overreacting, but something about this makes me extremely uneasy. Is this where the NFL is headed in this new age of increased scrutiny on personal conduct? Have we reached the point where players have no private lives? Where they are on the clock 24/7?

It is not illegal for companies to put tails on current or prospective employees in public places. If it were, the paparazzi as we know it might cease to exist.

But just because teams can do it, doesn't mean they should do it. It's one thing if a player provides them with reasonable suspicion that his activities could put the organization in a bad light (see: Adam "Pacman" Jones

and others who have had repeated run-ins with the law). But what about players who are clean, such as Russell?

A players association official said there's nothing in the collective bargaining agreement that prohibits teams from gathering background information on prospective employees. But what about players already in the league? Are we approaching the point where a team opens negotiations with a player who has no arrests but tells him it won't proceed unless he agrees to stop visiting particular places or hanging out with certain individuals who might reflect poorly on the organization?

We keep hearing about the need to protect the integrity of the game, which should not be dismissed casually. But like with so many corporations and businesses, the increased focus on conduct ultimately comes back to money and protecting the cash cow that is the NFL.

Club owners seem prepared to do all they can to eliminate anyone and anything that can have a negative financial impact on their product. If someone's privacy gets trampled in the process, well, that apparently will be the cost of doing business.

Yet I wonder: What if a free agent with strong moral and religious beliefs wanted to make sure the owners seeking his services shared his convictions, so he hired a private investigator to tail them for a week or two? How would that go over?

Perhaps we're not far from finding out.

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