



The (not so) Perfect Season

by Doug Stout

If you are a fan of professional football, you probably know the legend of the 1972 Miami Dolphins football team. They were the only team in the modern era of football to have an undefeated season. They compiled a perfect 14 wins and zero losses during the regular season and went on from there to win two playoff games and the Super Bowl to become national champions and to end the season at 17-0. For this achievement, they are a legend among fans of the game. Every year the veterans from that team get together and drink a toast when the last undefeated National Football League team each year loses a game and insures that their perfect season will remain unique. On this basis alone, many consider the 1972 Dolphins to be the greatest team in NFL history.

I always believed that winning was not the primary motivation for the athlete, but the elusive desire for perfection, to be the best that you can be. On December 28, 2009, while leading the New York Jets by a score of 15-10 in the 3rd quarter, the Indianapolis Colts pulled most of their starting players out of the game, including future Hall of Fame quarterback, Peyton Manning, and replaced them with reserve players. The quarterback was a rookie who had never started an NFL game in his life. Not surprisingly, the New York Jets came back to win the game by a score of 29-15. As a result of that win, the New York Jets ended up advancing to the playoffs and other teams were eliminated from consideration. The reason for the Colts' decision was that they wanted to avoid the risk of injury to their starting players because the team had already qualified for the playoffs...and the game was not important to them. This is a practice which I find unacceptable in a regular season game, but one that has occurred several times in the past. What is unique about the situation is that at the time of the game, the Indianapolis Colts had a record of 14 wins and 0 losses, with a lead in the 15th game, of the 16 games that are now played in the regular season. They were one quarter and four more wins away from football immortality, the elusive goal of every athlete -- perfection -- a 19-0 season, capped with a world championship. A record that would stand alone, and unless the length of the season is extended again in the future, a record that could never be broken, and they gave it away. The home crowd booed the decision loudly and as the loss became apparent, many left the stadium in disgust.¹ Some argue that if the Colts reach and win the Super Bowl...all will be forgiven, but I wonder about that. Won't that just be a reminder of what might have been...the perfect season...the legend of the 2009 Indianapolis Colts...that was thrown away?

Some of you may believe that this is trivial, with all of the serious problems facing our nation, why am I even talking about professional sports? It depends on how you feel about sports as a diversion from the troubles of our lives. Although it was controversial, Commissioner Pete Rozelle decided to play the National Football League games only days after the assassination of President Kennedy. There is evidence that the Kennedy family was supportive of the decision.² Following the attack on Pearl Harbor which brought the United States into World War II, Major League Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis sent a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt asking whether the upcoming baseball season should be played with the nation at war and its very survival at stake. Although many great baseball stars interrupted their careers and served bravely in our armed services (including Iowan Bob Feller), Major League Baseball continued to be played throughout the war. I agree with the sentiments expressed at the time by President Roosevelt, who encouraged the season to go on. The President said: "I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before."³

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Professional sports are intended to be entertainment, and the purpose of entertainment is to relax the audience and to take their minds away from the very real problems they face...and those which face our nation every day. We need a diversion from the obstacles we face in our daily lives. It is not because sports is “that important,” it is precisely because it is not important in the scheme of life, that it can become such an effective diversion. When our professional sports add to our aggravation rather than relieving our stress, they are not doing justice to the customers who support the business, or to their traditional role in American society.

What stories get the most coverage in our sports world today? Tiger Woods and his apparent string of marital indiscretions, Mark McGwire and the abuse of steroids in Major League baseball...apparently very common among the league’s biggest stars...meanwhile National Basketball Association players are being disciplined for “drawing down” on each other with guns in the locker room? I wonder if President Roosevelt would still make the same comment if he could see what our sports environment has become today. Professional sports have become a reflection on our society. When famous New York Yankee Lou Gehrig found out he was dying from a disease that was later given his name, he stood in the middle of Yankee field and said... “today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth. I have been in ballparks for 17 years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn’t consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day?”⁴ We have now created a privileged class of athletes in America, most of who do not see themselves as public servants, or lucky to be where they are, or as role models for society.

Some commentators viewed the game the Colts threw away as being “meaningless” even with an undefeated historical season riding on the line, if that is so; exactly what games are “meaningful”? More importantly, maybe we should be asking “meaningful” to whom? I think it was probably meaningful to a lot of fans that paid hundreds of dollars for a Sunday afternoon away from the realities of life, to cheer on their undefeated Colts. I know that it was meaningful to a lot of eight-year-old kids, wearing a Peyton Manning jersey at home and cheering for “their” Colts to win the game. Do we really want to send the lesson that any game that does not lead you toward a Super Bowl is “meaningless?” Should the Detroit Lions, who have not been in the playoffs for decades refund all the money spent by fans over the last few decades when they, by that definition, have never played a “meaningful game?” As soon as a team loses eight games in a season, pretty much guaranteeing they can’t reach the Super Bowl, should they forfeit the rest of their “meaningless games” and go home?

At every level of sports we have to get back to the basic axiom: “It is not whether you won or lost, but how you played the game that counts.”⁵ If that is not the lesson we are teaching our children, and if that is not the lesson we demand of the college and professional sports teams we give our support to...then we should probably call the whole thing off, because all of the games are meaningless in every sense of the word.

Is it any wonder that our political system has devolved into a game of “winning and losing” with no regard for the merits of the cause, or respect for the real people with whom we are competing? Because, isn’t the lesson we are learning from a very young age...that after all, it is a meaningless game, unless you win it all...right? Just ask any eight-year-old Indianapolis Colt fan the question...

(Endnotes)

¹Gary Mihoces, “Manning watches end of Colts’ perfect run,” *USA Today*, December 28, 2009.

²Vito Stellino, “Playing after assassination was regrettable,” *The Baltimore Sun*, November 21, 1993, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1993-11-21/sports/1993325149_1_modell-rozelle-cowboys (January 14, 2010).

³President Franklin Roosevelt in letter dated January 15, 1942, *Letters of Note. Com*, September 14, 2009, <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2009/09/it-would-be-best-for-country-to-keep.html> (January 14, 2010).

⁴Lou Gehrig, delivered July 4, 1939, “Lou Gehrig’s famous speech”, *Major League Baseball.com*, June 18, 2003, http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20030618&content_id=381132&vkey=lou_gehrig&fext=.jsp&c_id=null (January 14, 2010).

⁵Grantland Rice, American Sports Writer, *Thinkexist.com*, “For when the One Great Scorer comes, / To write against your name, / He marks - not that you won or lost - / But how you played the Game.” http://thinkexist.com/quotation/depend_upon_yourself-make_your_judgement/207243.html (January 14, 2010).

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