

Blurred Lines: Hazing in the NFL

By Joe Flaherty

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Playful hazing of rookies has been a tradition in the NFL for decades. Media outlets such as ESPN have made light of this tradition in the past. There have been feature packages following a rookie's first day at training camp, one of which ended with a rookie getting tied up to the goal post.

He and his teammates shared a laugh, and the head coach looked on with a smirk as if to say, "welcome to the NFL, rook."

At that degree, hazing is rite of passage: Display some thick skin, pay your dues and you'll be accepted into the fraternity. But in the NFL, a league of extremes, it's easy to imagine how the line between acceptable and unacceptable hazing can be pushed to an uncomfortable level.

That line may not be drawn as clearly as it would be in an average workplace, but that doesn't mean it can't be crossed.

Richie Incognito, a former lineman for the Miami Dolphins, has been suspended indefinitely for his role in rookie Jonathan Martin's unannounced departure from the team. A voicemail on Martin's phone revealed Incognito's use of a racial slur, a threat of violence toward Martin's mother and a direct threat on Martin's life.

Incognito is trying to pass his comments off as crude jokes, as if they are the norm within the Dolphins locker room. In a recent interview with FOX Sports he said, "it speaks to the culture of our closeness, it speaks to the culture of our brotherhood."

Many veteran teammates have offered their support for Incognito and paint him as the victim in this situation instead of Martin, as if the rookie broke one of the NFL's unwritten locker room rules by "snitching" on his teammate.

This is a professional sports league, not grade school.

It seems like the best defenses Incognito and the rest of the Dolphins can offer up are "boys will be boys" and "nobody like a tattletale."

It doesn't matter what context they're in or what kind of culture has been fostered in the NFL, there is absolutely no room for comments like Incognito's to be made.

There are no signs that Dolphin's management tried to step in and prevent this situation before it reached its boiling point. In a recent column on ESPN.com, Dolphins beat reporter James Walker said, "I've been at virtually every Dolphins practice and media availability since the start of training camp and cannot recall seeing [general manager Jeff] Ireland or [head coach Joe] Philbin step into the locker room. Not once."

These men who were hired to lead this team and keep a pulse on the organization were either ignorant of what was going on or indifferent to it. Either situation reflects a direct failure at their jobs and shows that these men can't be trusted to make the distinction between what's acceptable and what isn't.

There is no denying that the line of work in the NFL is unique, but that doesn't exempt the players from being human. At a normal job, you can sue your employer for allowing a hostile workplace to exist. In the NFL, you're deemed "soft" if you can't hang with the uncomfortable environment your teammates create, so you're encouraged to keep your mouth shut to save face.

The NFL shouldn't allow this to become another example of qualified privilege for athletes. There's no reason to believe that an NFL team can't succeed without this skewed, shattered concept of culture and humor. No rule currently exists to moderate locker room conduct, but there ought to be one after this fiasco.