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Ice Driving in Atlanta - Don Shula Retires

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Last Wednesday I left for Atlanta to attend the American Historical Society convention and interview candidates for a new faculty position. The weekend was a blur and I was generally out of touch with Sportsworld, although I was slightly aware of the events moving across the stage. I had little time to reflect on any of it.

The snowfall on Saturday night and Sunday morning tended to enhance the disorientation, and on Sunday morning I got to try out my skills in the traditional Minnesota sport of ice driving. Needless to say after 25 years in Florida my skills are a little rusty, but it was a vivid and nostalgic experience. The real thrill of this sport comes when you are moving along at 40 or 50 miles an hour and suddenly you cross a patch of ice. You must hold your breath, resist the urge to hit your breaks, and hold the car steady. Luck is equally important. It keeps you safe from sliding cars and sliding trucks that move before you in what looks like slow motion. Many along I-75 in the Atlanta area were not so lucky, and were taken out by both the foolish and the reckless.

Of course, this was not the big sports story of the week. Nor were the NFL playoffs which I saw in slight glances at a television and heard on the car radio on Sunday. The surprises came in the form of the dominating Green Bay Packers devastating the San Francisco Forty-Niners, and the Colts outplaying the Chiefs and having the good fortune to watch the Chiefs kicker miss three field goals.

In fact the big story came out of Miami at the beginning of the weekend when Don Shula announced his retirement, if that's what you want to call it. It was apparent to even the most dense that Don Shula was not moving out the door under his own power. The strong arms of Wayne Blockbuster were pushing him in the back. Shula ended his career in Miami being chased by the angry Dolphin fans who waited in vain over the past several years for the "fish" to return to the glory days. The great promise of this year's team went up in smoke, and Shula would not have a final Super Bowl Victory on which to end his career.

It is no coincidence that Dan Marino will not see a Super Bowl Victory either. For all of the greatness of Dan Marino and Don Shula it is now apparent that this duo is not enough. It may also be that Marino's greatness as a passer may so skewer the thinking of a team and a coach, that they can no longer

recognize that great teams are built on defense and a strong running game, with passing flowing from that. It is a simple game, said Mr. Lombardi. It is a game of blocking and tackling. The team that does these two things best will win. The Miami Dolphins of Don Shula and Dan Marino did neither of these things well, and in fact they did the latter poorly.

Don Shula's earlier teams in Miami, and his best teams in Baltimore, did both very well. Recall the 17-0 Miami Dolphins of 1972, the team of perfection, it was the blocking for Csonka and Kiick, and the tackling of the no-name defense that was the secret of their success. Bob Griese, or Earl Morrall for that matter, was no Dan Marino, but both were Bart Starr types employing precision passing and the occasional bomb, with both built on the play-action pass.

Over the past few years the Dolphins and Don Shula could not repeat their glory. Shula apparently was losing his edge. Some said the game was passing him by, and this year he seemed to lose control of the team. Was he too old? Well he was not as old as his recent nemesis, Marv Levy, but then Levy has a Master's Degree in History.

Had he become a softie? Al Levine who now writes for the Atlanta Constitution covered the Dolphins of the early seventies, and happened to be in Lauderdale at the retirement press conference. He wrote of both for the Atlanta paper and noted that Shula hadn't changed a bit, at least in his dealings with the press.

Last Friday near the end of the press conference a reporter asked how the game had changed since Shula started coaching. Shula shot back "Are you just thinking of things to say?" Levine was reminded at that moment of the way in which Shula dealt with dumb questions, how he loved to embarrass and intimidate young reporters, and how he would call reporters at home to rip into them about a story he didn't like.

Has Shula softened? Levine doesn't think so. He just couldn't repeat the Magic of the Seventies, and then got mesmerized by the passing of Marino. He hadn't had a great team in some time. He once did. But that was too long ago. He will remain the winningest coach in the NFL for a long time to come, and probably no one will ever again lead a team to an undefeated season. His legacy is assured.

Now it's Jimmy's turn to try to replace a coaching legend for the third time in his career. Bring on the hair spray.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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