

REMEMBERING SHULA

COMMENTARY

A benevolent coach

Don Shula and me — odd, awkward, fiery, but oh-so-rewarding



Dave Hyde

He once pulled the historic wristband Colts quarterback Tom Matte wore in 1965 from his desk drawer and showed it to me, saying, "There's still some mud on it."

Another time he pointed to the chair in his office I sat in and said, "That's where Mercury Morris or Jim Kiick sat complaining, depending on who didn't get the ball that game."

And he'd also listen to one of my questions after a practice and answer with that laser tone that melted players and reporters alike: "That's a horse s— question."

Don Shula and me.

It was never boring.

Odd. Fascinating. Rewarding as the years passed. But it was awkward at the start, way back when, as a young columnist flexed new opinions and a coaching legend navigated the last stretch of his career.

The past couple of days since his death have become an archival run through those forgotten years and stories, interviews of how that world looked, headlines that once ruled the South Florida news cycle and, suddenly, a question never really considered:

What it was like to cover Don Shula?

Every radio interviewer wants to hear of a Shula thunderstorm on me. Look, anyone who covered Shula, or most football coaches of a bygone time, was the target of one.

I had a reputation for being critical of his final years. One of my first Sun Sentinel columns in 1990 started with the classic quote about Shula by Houston coach Bum Phillips: "He can take your'n and beat his'n, and he can take his'n and beat your'n."

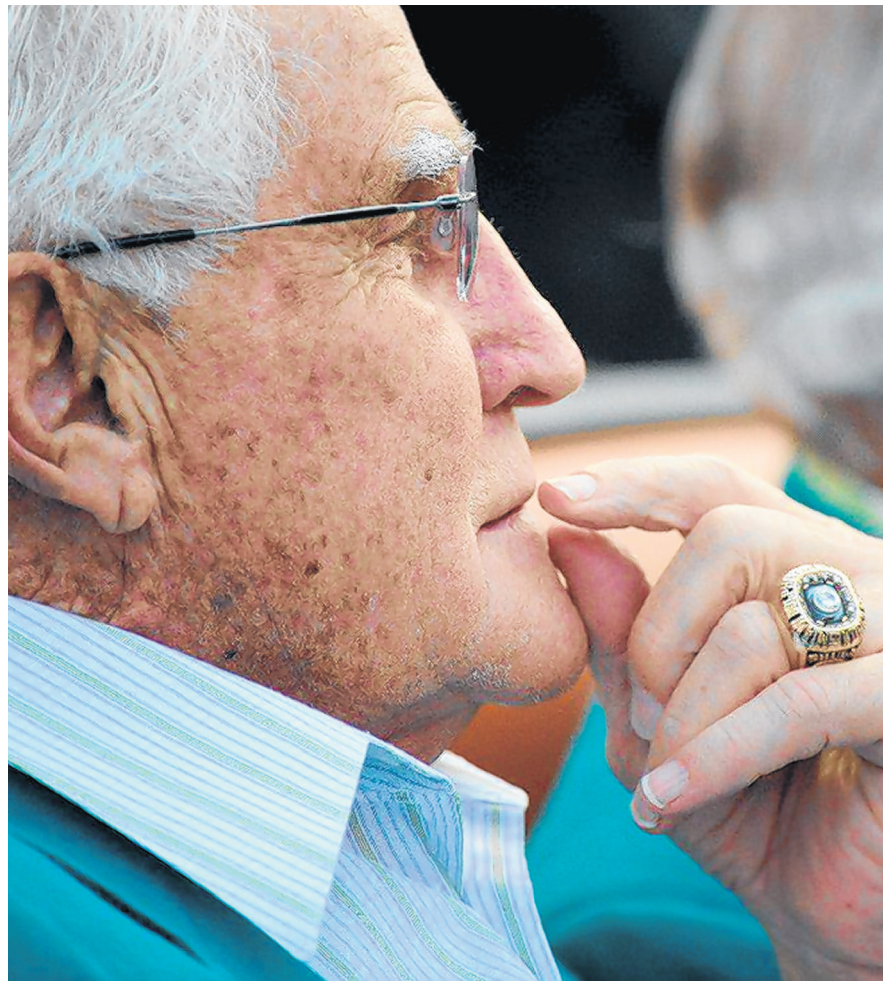
"They once talked of Don Shula like that," the column began.

When I started to ask a question the next time at Dolphins camp, he said, "You're asking that after the bulls— you wrote?"

But here's the thing about covering Shula: He tested you. You had to push back if you wanted his professional respect. So when I asked what he was talking about, he said, "You don't remember what you wrote?"

"I've written a few columns since I last saw you — which one are you talking about?" I said.

He chuckled. Test passed. The storm came and went, as they always did. That's the real story about Shula's grand temper: There were no grudges



JIM RASSOL/SUN SENTINEL

Don Shula's respect for fairness involved his working with the media — unless he disliked your question.

Here's the thing about covering Shula: He tested you. You had to push back if you wanted his professional respect. ... The storm came and went, as they always did. That's the real story about Shula's grand temper: There were no grudges from him, no carryover. He had his say to you, just like you had your say about him, and that was that. Everyone carried on like a pro.

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Well, no, he carried himself like a king — a benevolent king for the most part, and his inherent sense of fairness and decency extended to the media. No football coach, for instance, was more accessible. None.

Everyone had his home number — and he didn't just think you'd call late at night if needed. He demanded it. He wanted his voice to shape a story. He grew upset if he wasn't called.

Nowadays, it's an increasingly rare occasion for reporters to get into a coach's office during interviews. It's considered noteworthy to get a minute or two alone.

Shula, after eating lunch at a coach's table at St. Thomas University, would walk to the media table, maybe a lemonade in hand, and answer questions for 10, maybe 15 minutes, or until the questions ran out. If needed, a reporter could get a few moments alone for a story by walking with him from the cafeteria and across the parking lot to his office. Sometimes, if he had time, he'd invite you into his minimalist office that had a couch, chair, desk and

small shower, where the '72 team left him a live alligator one day.

"Go ahead, have a look at it," he said. He also had a bookcase behind the desk filled with football books.

"You read all of those?" I once asked. He looked back, as if seeing them for the first time. "Not one," he said.

And for all the times a question could ignite him, there was another side too. Once, before an event in the Dolphins offseason, he asked to see me. I braced for some battle, but we hadn't seen each other since the death of his first wife, Dorothy. I'd written a column about her.

"Thank you for writing that," he said, followed by a tap on my butt, like a coach to a player. "Good job."

No, as the seasons went, my cynicism didn't stop in the column. Unfortunately, I arrived in his great career just after the last Super Bowl trip in 1985, just as the elevator started slowly going down. There's no sugarcoating that; it's part of the story. By 1995, for better or worse, I was writing for Jimmy Johnson to take over.

Shula wasn't happy with that, but his internal compass and the passing of time healed our issues. In 2002, I wrote a book on the Perfect Season. Shula not only was a central interview but wrote the foreword. We talked a few times a year, often at Dolphins events, sometimes at his home in Indian Creek.

He read a stack of cards he got for his 75th birthday ("This one's from my high school coach ..."), and on his 85th he told of singing "Sentimental Journeys" to his family. He talked of his aging body another time ("Don't time me in the 40"). A couple years back, he invited me to Gulfstream Park, where he made \$5 bets and traded insults with his good friend and former quarterback, Bob Griese.

But Shula never lost his sense of self, even as he aged. He knew our relationship. I valued it. Him?

"You still owe me a good column," he'd often say when an interview ended. "Maybe two."

He could still deliver a line too.

When I was inducted into the Broward Sports Hall of Fame a couple of years ago, Sun Sentinel sports editor Kathy Laughlin asked Shula for a comment to read at the ceremony. He offered congratulations, and then a zinger:

"I'm glad he got it right a high percentage of the time to make up for the times when he had no idea what was going on."

I told Shula it was too good a line for him to have thought up. He laughed. Then, with his inherent sense of self I've thought about since he died, he dropped another line, coach to columnist:

"I exaggerated about you getting it right a high percentage of times."



ANNE RYAN/SUN SENTINEL

Don Shula walks on the field after talking to reporters on opening day of Dolphins camp at St. Thomas University on July 17, 1989.