The Best Report on Bullying I’ve Ever Read

The NFL’s amazing investigation of the Miami Dolphins locker room.

By [Emily Bazelon](http://www.slate.com/authors.emily_bazelon.html)

http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports\_nut/2014/02/wells\_report\_richie\_incognito\_the\_nfl\_s\_investigation\_of\_the\_miami\_dolphins.2.html

[Ted Wells’ independent investigation](http://deadspin.com/investigation-finds-pattern-of-harassment-in-miami-1522833437) of the Miami Dolphins and the culture of their offensive line is the opposite of a whitewash. The investigators’ 140-plus page report on the events leading up to Jonathan Martin’s departure from the team is judicious, persuasive, and a public service. Carefully sifting through the evidence, it concludes that Richie Incognito and two teammates who acted as his henchmen humiliated and harassed Martin, another unnamed teammate, and an assistant trainer for months in ways that no employee should have to endure. This report should be required reading in management courses and for anyone who wonders how ugly, demeaning, and corrosive treatment can lie beneath a façade of “all in good fun” workplace “teasing.”

The report should also be a watershed moment for the Dolphins and the NFL. Its conclusions will only have real power if it leads to real consequences. Given his record of past infractions, Incognito should not play in the NFL. Not next year, and probably not ever. And the Dolphins should fire offensive line coach Jim Turner, who participated in the bullying.

I’ve often half-joked that to really understand an accusation of bullying, you need a police investigation, with all the tools for rigorously evaluating the credibility of everyone’s account. With more than 100 interviews of Dolphins players, coaches, and managers, as well as thousands of text messages, that’s what this report is. For this we should credit not just the professionalism of the investigative team, but the openness of Jonathan Martin. He gave his permission to air sensitive, private information about his struggles with depression and suicidal thinking. It’s a personal sacrifice that will no doubt expose him to hurt and criticism—and that allows for the kind of honest reckoning that can help other victims of bullying, both adults and kids.

Martin played football for Stanford University before joining the Dolphins two seasons ago. [As every story about him mentions](http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2013/11/richie_incognito_suspended_how_the_nfl_abets_locker_room_bullies.html), he weighs more than 300 pounds. How do you bring a guy like this to his knees? If you’re a team leader like Richie Incognito, *it’s easy*. The genius of this report is how clear that becomes as you read.

“To a great extent, Incognito dictated the culture” of the Dolphins’ locker room and offensive line, Wells and the other three members of his team write. Incognito had two abettors, his fellow offensive linemen John Jerry and Mike Pouncey. The three of them shredded Martin’s sense of self-worth in all the ways that bullies have perfected. It’s textbook. They figured out how to get to Martin, and then they kept at it, from his first season to his second last fall.

Incognito and his cronies hurled an unending series of disgusting sexual insults at Martin’s sister and mother. (Former assistant offensive line coach Chris Mosley remembered this going on constantly for a period of two weeks. More about the amazing lapses by him and Turner later.) They tricked Martin into paying $10,000 for missing a group trip to Las Vegas. (Another player, similarly fined, said, “F--- no,” never paid, and knew there would be no fallout.) They called Martin racist slurs—“n---ger” and also “liberal mulatto b--ch,” “stinky Pakistani,” “shine box,” and “darkness.” (Jerry is black and Pouncey is biracial, which was supposed to make all of this OK, but didn’t.) Incognito also called Martin “my b--ch” or “the O-line’s b--ch”—once, after he’d come to Martin’s defense in a fight on the field during a scrimmage. How better to send the message that Martin was in fact his b--ch—a weak-willed “half-n--ger piece of s--t” who had no choice but to take all of this abuse.

Martin tried. He pretended the harassment didn’t bother him. He turned his back. He walked away. He laughed it

off. Once in a while he told Incognito and his henchmen to f--- themselves. But he didn’t land a punch—football player or no, that’s not his way—or convince anyone that he was invulnerable. And he knew it. This reminded me so much of a seventh-grade boy I interviewed a couple of years ago in Lincoln, Neb., who continually struggled with letting other kids get to him. “All the teachers, they tell me to ignore it and walk away,” he said. “I’ve *tried* ignoring it. It’s just, *they know me*. So if I walk away and act like nothing happened, they’ll keep following and bullying because they know how I really feel.”

The most heart-breaking part of the Wells report is the series of messages Martin sent to his parents in April 2013, following his rookie year. He wrote to his mother:

*I figured out a major source of my anxiety. I’m a push over, a people pleaser. I avoid confrontation whenever I can, I always want everyone to like me. I let people talk about me, say anything to my face, and I just take it, laugh it off, even when I know they are intentionally trying to disrespect me. I mostly blame the soft schools I went to, which fostered within me a feeling that I’m a huge p---y.*

She tried to help, acknowledging that the NFL was different from the world he’d grown up in, as the child of two academics. (In the larger world, Martin has more social power than Incognito. In the Dolphins locker room, his upper-middle-class upbringing just made him seem awkward and different.) She also said professional help and “additional serotonin” might be a good idea. Martin wrote back: “A therapist & medication won’t help me gain the respect of my teammates. I really don’t know what to do Mom.”

To his father, who is black, Martin wrote of his self-loathing at failing to stop his teammates: “People call me a N--ger to my face. Happened 2 days ago. And I laughed it off. Because I am too nice of a person. They say terrible things about my sister. I don’t do anything.”

His dad sympathized, too, sharing his own experiences of being attacked with racial insults. But a week later, after feeling shamed by Incognito and Pouncey on a yacht trip, Martin wrote to his mother: “I’m never gonna change. I got punked again today. Like a little b--ch. And I never do anything about it.”

Even as he struggled with these emotions, Martin built a friendship with Incognito. That’s the right word, and the investigators capture how that can be in all its complexity. Both Martin and Incognito called their relationship “bipolar.” One on one, they shared real warmth and even trust. Martin told Incognito about his mental-health struggles; Incognito counseled him to stay away from drugs so he could be a better player. In front of other players, though, the intimacy was grist for Incognito’s mill of cruelty. And because they were friends—the kind who went to strip clubs together—Incognito knew Martin well enough to suss out his weak points. The investigators write that Martin’s efforts to socialize with Incognito are “consistent with the reaction of a person who is trapped in an abusive situation.” This explains how, after Martin left the team and Incognito texted him to ask how he was feeling, Martin wrote, “It’s insane bro but just know I don’t blame you guys at all.” He blamed himself and he was still, emotionally, under Incognito’s thumb, seeing what the bully wanted him to see.

To their credit, the NFL investigators don’t minimize Martin’s troubles with depression, which date to high school. And they don’t make the mistake of assuming that the harassment alone triggered his onset of depression and suicidal thinking last year. They see the two-way street, the way in which mental-health struggles can be a partial cause as well as an effect of bullying. But they also don’t let Incognito off the hook because Martin was likely prey: “Bullies often pick vulnerable victims, but this makes their conduct more, not less, objectionable.”

I’ve recently been thinking a lot about a [point made by Richard Weissbourd and Stephanie M. Jones of the Harvard School of Education](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb14/vol71/num05/Circles-of-Care.aspx): Empathy doesn’t just mean understanding someone else’s feelings. It means *valuing* them. Otherwise, understanding twists into manipulation. That’s the dark place where fellow feeling took Incognito. Since Martin left the team, Incognito has protested that all the joking was mutual and in keeping with standard locker-room banter. He released selective texts between himself and Martin and [tweeted at his former teammate that “the truth is going to bury you.”](http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2014/02/12/incognito-to-martin-the-truth-is-going-to-bury-you/?ocid=Yahoo&partner=ya5nbcs) (To state the obvious: If you have zero impulse control, stay off Twitter.)

It turns out that Incognito buried himself with the evidence he produced. Incognito and other offensive linemen kept a book of fines, docking players for everything from farting to lateness to wearing ugly shoes. In that book, he fined himself $200 for “breaking Jmart” in the hours after Martin left the team. And then he issued five fines to Martin:

100 p---y
100 p---y
100 p---y
100 p---y
1,000,000.00 p---y

Incognito’s treatment of Martin was part of a pattern. An unnamed assistant trainer got called “Jap,” “Chinaman,” “dirty Communist,” and “North Korean.” Incognito, Jerry, and Pouncey talked to him in a mock Asian accent and gave orders like “give me some water you f---ing chink.” Nobody intervened, including head trainer Kevin O’Neill, who allegedly laughed. No one confronted Incognito or his henchmen. The assistant trainer didn’t want to cooperate with the investigators, saying he didn’t want to lose the trust of the team. But he texted to Martin, after Martin’s departure, “They are relentless sometime. … Some day I wanna do exactly what you did today.” The investigators draw the obvious conclusion: The trainer had no standing to fight back and feared the loss of his job if he protested.

A second unnamed teammate, Player A in the report, was relentlessly taunted for being perceived as gay. Incognito, Jerry, and Pouncey mocked him for “sucking ----” and “p---ing while sitting down” and asked him, “Where’s your boyfriend?” They also touched his buttocks “in a way that simulated anal penetration.” Incognito told the investigators that Player A got it “every day from everybody, high frequency.” Even Martin joined him, perhaps as part of his failed effort to fit in. Turner, the offensive line coach, shows up here for a loathsome turn. “Aware of the running joke that Player A was gay,” he gave him a special stocking stuffer for Christmas 2012. All the other players got inflatable female dolls (misogynist moment). Player A got an inflatable male doll, according to the players. Turner tries to weasel out of this by telling the investigators he doesn’t remember it. That’s low, not to mention not credible.

The harassment endured by Player A fits with the disturbing homophobia [described by former Vikings punter Chris Kluwe](http://deadspin.com/i-was-an-nfl-player-until-i-was-fired-by-two-cowards-an-1493208214), the worst of which allegedly came from a coach. [It makes me fear for Michael Sam](http://www.slate.com/articles/sports/sports_nut/2014/02/michael_sam_gay_by_coming_out_the_missouri_star_will_force_the_nfl_to_confront.html), the star University of Missouri defensive linesman who just came out. It’s well past time for the NFL to join the 21st century. It’s past time for football to change, just as the military has managed to do, now that gay men and women can openly serve. Locker-room camaraderie just can’t depend on bigotry.

It also can’t depend on players living by a rule that dictates putting up with any amount of hazing or harassment and never flinching or telling. Martin never complained about Incognito, and the NFL investigators found that the Dolphins head coach and management didn’t know what was going on. That brings us back to Turner. After Martin left the team, the offensive line coach texted him, repeatedly to come out publicly in defense of Incognito. “DO THE RIGHT THING. NOW,” Turner ordered, as well as, “You’re a grown man,” and “I know you are a man of character. Where is it?”

This is exactly what not to do if you’re a coach, manager, employer, teacher, or administrator and you know what Turner knew. He should lose his job for that failure. That’s the way to ensure that the lessons of this sobering, necessary investigation hit home.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

**Thank you for taking the time to read this somewhat-lengthy Article of the Week. I value your time…as much as I value what you might take from reading this article.**

1. **At one point, the author inserts her own comment in parentheses, saying “misogynist moment” when describing how the offensive line coach gave his players inflatable female dolls for Christmas. Does her small jab take away from the overall message she is trying to get across, or does it help to hammer home that same message? Explain clearly, please. (hint: don’t feel dumb if you have to look up the word “misogynist”!) (Evaluating level)**
2. **Here’s a quote from the article: “Empathy doesn’t just mean understanding someone else’s feelings. It means *valuing* them.” What’s the difference, in your point of view? More importantly, use an example to make your point. (Analyzing/Applying levels)**