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With Belichick, the cover-up is most revealing

By Bob Ryan, Globe Columnist | May 18, 2008

Here is what Bill Belichick has done: He has placed Patriots fans on the defensive for the rest of their lives.

He has been exposed as being monumentally disingenuous at best and utterly duplicitous at worst. There can no longer be any doubt that he engaged in a practice he knew was against the rules.

The big question we cannot answer is how important it all was, really. Did his illegal practice of taping opponents' defensive signals aid his team's chances of victory in certain games by 20 percent? Ten percent? Three percent? One-10th of 1 percent? Not at all? No one will ever know.

Right now, it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter, because the only thing that does matter now is the image of the New England Patriots. The sports community now associates the Patriots with cheating. The three Super Bowl championships are, and forever will be, under suspicion. The thought will never go away.

Let Mike Martz, coach of the vanquished Rams in the 2002 Super Bowl, absolve the Patriots all he wants. A year from now, five years from now, 50 years from now, who will know or remember what Mike Martz said? The Patriots have been irrevocably stained. They will be, in the eyes of many, the reverse Black Sox. They will be the team that broke the rules. Their three Super Bowls will be regarded as ill-gotten gain.

And Bill Belichick still hasn't fessed up.

Bob Kraft should be livid.

How could anyone not feel sorry for Bob Kraft? He hired a man he believed to be a superior coach, and his judgment appeared to be vindicated with three Super Bowls in four years. Kraft had presided over a phenomenal transformation, assuming control of the team when it was a distant fourth in the affections of local professional sports fans and seeing it grow to a point where his team was a strong 1-A to the mighty Boston Red Sox.

He had inherited Bill Parcells, and he made a mistake by hiring Pete Carroll, but he hit the lottery by hiring the dour defensive genius, ignoring those who said there was no reason Belichick would be any

more successful as a head coach in Foxborough than he'd been in Cleveland, where he had alienated players, media, and the entire constituency.

His was said to be a model organization, where the owner owned, the personnel people found the right players, and the dour defensive genius coached 'em right up to championships, or close to 'em.

And now?

And now he has to live with the reality that he presides over the most despised and reviled franchise in all of contemporary American sport, and all because the coach he trusted has betrayed him.

Remember that glorious evening in New Orleans when the Patriots captivated the nation by taking the field en masse rather than individually? Remember those clutch drives orchestrated by Tom Brady, those game-winning kicks by Adam Vinatieri, and all the other snapshot moments in the three Super Bowls?

Tainted, all of it.

Not here, of course. We in New England will make an attempt to separate fact from fiction and real life from fantasy. With so much at stake, we will think it all out, knowing intellectually that what Belichick did, in all likelihood, did not materially affect the biggest games. We know there was no taping of that infamous Rams 2002 walkthrough. We know that the issue in Super Bowl XXXVI was the way Martz went away from Marshall Faulk; that the issue in Super Bowl XXXVIII was, well, nothing, really; and the issue in Super Bowl XXXIX was Andy Reid's horrendous clock management.

We know all this. The problem now is that the rest of the world no longer cares. The rest of the world only knows that Bill Belichick thought he was above the law.

What we have here is a football version of Watergate.

Bill Belichick is Richard Nixon. Brilliant. Tormented. Paranoid. Controlling. Highly suspicious of the media.

Watergate was overkill. There was no need for it. Like, was Richard Nixon ever really in danger of losing the 1972 election to George McGovern? Spycgate was likewise unnecessary. Belichick was, and is, a great football coach. Why did he not trust his own genius to win games honestly, especially after winning his first Super Bowl? Was he that obsessed with victory? Weren't all those hours staring at tapes enough? Did he think he had a divine right to victory? Clearly, something was churning inside that head.

He has turned out to be far more complex than we ever dreamed, hasn't he? Whoever would have believed Bill Belichick would have had such a tangled personal life? Who really knows this man?

Whatever his motivation, it wound up manifesting itself in colossal arrogance. For after being warned about continuing his illegal practice in a 2006 game at Green Bay, he did it again in, of all places, Giants Stadium the very first game in 2007. What kind of a statement was that? Was he saying "(naughty word)

you" to Eric Mangini, a former ally who was now The Enemy?

Remember the ultimate moral of Watergate: The cover-up is worse than the crime.

Now we know that Bill Belichick covered up, and may still be covering up. Matt Walsh says he was told to prepare a cover story for his activities, even as Bill Belichick continues to insist that he had "misinterpreted" the rule in question. He alone of the 32 coaches was confused. Amazing. The commissioner didn't buy it, and neither should anyone else.

The cover-up is what matters now. Bill Belichick has yet to seek mercy from the National Court of Public Opinion. He has his story, and he's sticking to it. He's going to stonewall it, just as he stonewalls a routine injury inquiry. It's just his nature, apparently.

The sad truth is that he is the best coach. All reasonable people know that the 2007 season was 100 percent legitimate. No team in NFL history was ever under more scrutiny than the Patriots from Games 2 through 16 in the regular season, plus their entire postseason. Under this microscope, they won their first 18 games and came within 35 seconds of winning the last one, and it took two improbable plays on one down (an unprecedented Eli Manning escape and a phenomenal catch by David Tyree) to beat them.

The Patriots could easily win again next year. Bill Belichick could do it by choosing to play 10-on-11 all season long, just to show how competent he is, but it wouldn't matter. The damage has been done.

There is no way out. As long as Bill Belichick is the coach of the New England Patriots, America will despise this team. But a resignation or a dismissal would only lend legitimacy to the entire concept of wrongdoing.

This is not what Bob Kraft had in mind.

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