

NFL gets tougher on steroids users

Positive test could mean loss of signing bonus

By DAVE GOLDBERG
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK

The NFL is going deeper into the wallets of players who get caught using steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs.

After four months of sometimes intense negotiations, the league and union announced Wednesday more extensive testing for performance-enhancing drugs and the addition of the blood-boosting sub-

stance EPO to its list of banned substances.

The union also agreed that players suspended after testing positive will, for the first time, forfeit a portion of their signing bonuses in addition to the salary they will lose during their time away.

That is significant because the signing bonuses often are the only guaranteed portion of a player's salary and can be larger than salaries, which sometimes are kept artificially low to keep the team under the salary cap.

"It is important that the NFL and its players continue to be leaders on the issue of illegal and dangerous performance-enhancing drugs in sports," NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said. "These latest improvements will help ensure that we continue to have a strong and effective

program. As we have done in the past, we will review and modify the policy on an ongoing basis."

In addition to the new test for EPO, the agreement includes an increase from seven to 10 of the number of players on each team randomly tested each week during the season for steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs. That means there will be 12,000 tests each season, up from 10,000.

The new policy will make the NFL the only North American sports league to regularly test for EPO. Urine will be tested, not blood, for EPO. Baseball did a round of urine testing for EPO in 2005. Rob Manfred, MLB's executive vice president for labor relations, said Wednesday there were no positives among the 500 samples tested.

Baseball conducts urine tests of

major- and minor-league players for performance-enhancing drugs and stimulants, with each player tested at least twice randomly per year. Baseball does not conduct blood tests and does not test for EPO or human growth hormone. Baseball and its players union have agreed they will test for HGH if a urine test for that drug is validated.

A baseball player who tests positive for steroids is banned for 50 games for a first violation. A player who tests positive for stimulants is required to undergo counseling for a first violation and is subject to at least six additional tests during the next year.

The NBA randomly tests players four times a season. Players who test positive for steroids or performance-enhancing drugs get a 10-game suspension for a first offense,

a 25-game ban for a second offense, a one-year suspension for a third offense and disqualification if they're caught a fourth time.

In the NHL, every player is subject to up to two random tests a year. A first-time offender gets a 20-game suspension without pay and mandatory referral to the league's substance abuse program. A second positive test carries a 60-game suspension.

The NFL policy mandates a four-game suspension for a player's first steroids offense and a year for a second.

Unlike its policy for street drugs such as marijuana or cocaine, for which there is no suspension until a second violation, a player who tests positive for steroids or a supplement is suspended for the first positive test.

"It is important that the NFL and its players continue to be leaders on the issue of illegal and dangerous performance-enhancing drugs in sports."

Roger Goodell
NFL commissioner
on league's new policy for testing players to catch those using performance-enhancing substances

• Hype

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end," said Vinatieri, who played in three Super Bowls with three-time champion New England. "You try not to get caught up in all the hoopla that starts beforehand, because we're only there for the game.

"It's a business trip for us."

And from this point on, it's all business for the Colts.

Indianapolis got down to the serious business of preparing for the Feb. 4 Super Bowl on Wednesday, three days after beating the Patriots 38-34 in the AFC Championship Game.

Players had Monday and Tuesday off and had all celebrating out of their systems when they reported back to Colts headquarters for meetings and practice.

"It's really good to get back to work," Dungy said. "(Wednesday was) our first chance to get with the team and really start looking at the Bears, working on things that we're going to do, and that's exciting.

"I think the players are enjoying it."

For players, gearing up for the NFC champion Bears (15-3) is only part of the challenge. Not getting caught up in the notorious Super Bowl hype is another critical part.

That was the collective message delivered by McFarland, Vinatieri and wide receiver Ricky Proehl. All three have been part of Super Bowl champions. And all three talked to the Colts at Dungy's request.

McFarland made the point most bluntly.

"Ultimately, people say that winning is not everything," he said. "Well, in the Super Bowl, winning is the only thing, because nobody ever hardly remembers who loses."

For quarterback Peyton Manning, the key to winning is to make the most of the two-week break between the conference championship and the Super Bowl.

Manning, who is coming off one of the most memorable performances in playoffs history, equates the hiatus to a bye week. And it can work one of two ways.

Last year, in his view, it worked against the Colts when they lost to Pittsburgh in the divisional playoffs after earning a first-round bye.

"The main thing in these next two weeks is to get better as a football team," Manning said. "My philosophy is you either get better or you get worse. You don't stay the same, especially during somewhat of a bye week. And I'm not sure that's what happened to us last year during that bye week in the playoffs.

"I'm not sure if I truly got better during that week, and so it's a real opportunity to get better as a team, to get better as a football player in the next two weeks and hopefully go down there and play a good ball game."

Dungy is confident the Colts will. He wants them to enjoy the moment but seize it at the same time.

"We've really stressed that it's a business trip," Dungy said. "We want to go down there and enjoy our families and enjoy the moment and not totally disassociate ourselves with the hype and the hoopla, but it's got to be a business trip.

"We're going to go down there to win the ball game."

Players acknowledge that Sunday's dramatic win against New England was cathartic and a confidence-builder. The Colts rallied from a 21-3 first-half deficit to dispatch a team that had bounced them from the playoffs three of the previous four years.

But with that achievement in their wake, the Colts aren't thinking about the Patriots. Their undivided attention is on the Super Bowl.

Specifically, the game.

"It's pretty simple for us," McFarland said. "We've got a Chicago Bears team that, if I'm not mistaken, is 15-3. If that doesn't get your attention, nothing will. (New England) was a good win. We had a couple of days to celebrate it, but now it's over.

"It's another one-game season. It's the biggest game of most guys' careers, and to get an opportunity to win it all, if that doesn't get your attention, nothing will."

Falcons need troubled QB



AP PHOTO

Several recent off-field incidents and back-to-back difficult seasons for the Falcons have made quarterback Michael Vick unpopular among some vocal fans in Atlanta.

Vick wins, helps put fans in seats

By PAUL NEWBERRY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

So it turns out Michael Vick was not carrying a water bottle laced with marijuana on his way through the Miami airport.

Case closed, right?

Hardly. Even though Vick was cleared of possible drug charges following his WaterBottleGate encounter with the Transportation Safety Administration, there's still a vocal segment of the football-watching audience in Atlanta that believes it's time for the Falcons to get rid of their quarterback.

Never mind that he's the face of the franchise. Never mind that he's the primary reason the Georgia Dome has been sold out for every game since No. 7 took over as the starter. Never mind that he's only 26. Never mind that he still has a winning record when taking the snaps, despite dismal finishes to the past two seasons.

It's become apparent that Vick can never do enough to satisfy some people.

Granted, he's unlikely to ever grace the top of the league's passing statistics, but he did have a hand (and legs) in more than 3,500 yards this season; only eight quarterbacks did better. For those who might have forgotten, he threw a career-high 20 touchdown passes and became the first QB ever to rush for 1,000 yards in a season.

In light of Atlanta's mediocre group of receivers and a West Coast-style offensive scheme that never seemed to mesh with Vick's freewheeling style, it's hard to blame the quarterback for a 7-9 finish that led to the firing of coach Jim Mora.

Still, Vick has become a lightning rod for all that ails the Falcons. And the incident at Miami International Airport last week only fueled Internet and talk-show chatter about what should happen next.

How much of this was legitimate criti-

cism, the product of playing a position that always gets too much credit when things go right and too much blame when things go wrong?

How much of this was lingering resistance to a quarterback who doesn't just sit in the pocket and throw the football?

How much of this was full-fledged racism, spurred on by those who don't want their team being led by a black man with cornrows and diamonds earrings?

Even the Falcons' hierarchy seemed quick to blame Vick when police said he was reluctant to give up a bottle that smelled of marijuana and had a secret compartment. The quarterback was quickly summoned to a meeting at team headquarters with owner Arthur Blank, general manager Rich McKay and new coach Bobby Petrino.

When compared to the off-the-field pursuits of other NFL players — fights, police chases, killings — this was pretty minor stuff. Vick wasn't arrested at the airport. As it turned out, he wasn't even charged with a crime. Still, the team came down hard on No. 7.

Of course, the whole episode does raise some questions about Vick's judgment.

If he wasn't carrying anything illegal, why did he balk at turning over the water bottle in Miami, as officials said? When he got back to Atlanta, why didn't he have a news conference to strongly proclaim his innocence? Not surprisingly, there already have been whispers of a cover-up.

An image-conscious owner such as Blank could decide that his team would be better off with a more traditional quarterback.

But before Atlanta pursues a trade, here's a few things to consider:

Vick puts people in the seats. Vick wins games. Vick does things that no other quarterback can do.

A guy like that might be worth keeping around.

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COLUMN

• Fans

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and '70s, like the Green Bay Packers, Pittsburgh Steelers and "America's Team," the Dallas Cowboys.

But the Bears, especially in the buildup and aftermath of their 1985 Super Bowl championship, tend to be the choice of most Hoosiers who aren't Colts fans.

A sports purist, Manning would never ask any Bears faithful to switch allegiance. He doesn't have much regard for fans who do.

"As long as you have a team that you like and you support them all the way, as long you're consistent," Manning said. "I don't like guys that (say), 'Well, I was a Lions fans last week, but now I'm a Colts fan.'"

Indianapolis coach Tony Dungy also knows a number of area residents prefer the Bears to the Colts. But he's seen little evidence

of it in and around the city.

"Here in Indianapolis, you can't feel any of that," Dungy said. "It's been so unique, just the atmosphere here. The fact the Bears are in it, I think that's great. We're just looking forward to the game."

So is Manning. And he hopes local Chicago fans are, too.

"If you're a Bears fan and live here in Indianapolis, I admire that," Manning said. "That's your team and you stick with them ... as long as you're consistent."

Manning stays mum on thumb

Dungy says injury isn't a problem

By MICHAEL MAROT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Peyton Manning thumbed his way through questions about his injured throwing hand Wednesday.

"I attended the Bill Belichick school of discussing injuries, so there's my answer," Manning said, drawing laughter.

Belichick, New England's coach, is known for keeping the status of injured players secret, and Manning took advantage of a rare opportunity to do his own impersonation of the three-time Super Bowl winner by giving no update on his right thumb.

Manning, a two-time MVP, kept both hands in his pockets as he walked into a news conference three days after hurting it the AFC Championship Game, and when he gestured at the lectern, Manning carefully used his left hand.

The injury is a rare nick for the league's best-known ironman outside of Green Bay.

In nine pro seasons, Manning has started all 156 career games including playoffs, a streak that ranks second among NFL quarterbacks behind only Brett Favre of the Packers.

But with two weeks between his most recent victory and a Super Bowl date against the Chicago Bears, Manning's right thumb has suddenly become big

news. He was injured against New England when he hit his hand on the helmet of Pro Bowl left tackle Tarik Glenn.

On Monday, coach Tony Dungy said the thumb was discolored and sore and that Manning needed X-rays. Team owner Jim Irsay said later Monday night that the X-rays were negative and Manning was expected to start against Chicago in the Feb. 4 Super Bowl.

That's still the plan. Manning hasn't deviated from his normal routine of studying the opposing defense or breaking down films this week, and Dungy expected Manning to practice Wednesday.

During stretching, the only portion of practice reporters were permitted to view Wednesday, Manning's thumb did not appear discolored or swollen, and he did not wear a wrap.

"He's fine," Dungy said. "I didn't even know about it until the next day. He threw on the sideline, and he was OK. He looked OK in the game."

In fact, Manning showed no apparent signs of injury in the game's final minutes.

He engineered his first postseason fourth-quarter comeback in 12 games by leading the Colts on an 80-yard drive for the winning score in a 38-34 victory against the Patriots, then taking a knee on the game's final play.



AP PHOTO

Chicago Bears president and CEO Ted Phillips listens to a question during a news conference at the Bears' training facility in Lake Forest, Ill., on Wednesday.

Bears want to give coach deal, but after Super Bowl

By RICK GANO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAKE FOREST, ILL.

As the NFL's lowest paid coach, Lovie Smith led the Chicago Bears to the Super Bowl. He's now in line for a contract extension.

Bears president Ted Phillips expects to work out the extension soon. Phillips said Wednesday he's had preliminary discussions with both Smith and general manager Jerry Angelo on new deals, but talks are on hold until after the Super Bowl on Feb. 4 in Miami. That way, there will be no distractions.

"Lovie Smith has indicated to me he wants to be head coach of the Bears for a long time. That's my goal. That's the organization's goal. I know everybody wants to make a big deal out of

the fact that there is not a deal," Phillips said.

"It's not unlike a player negotiation in which sometimes it takes longer than you think."

Smith is in the third year of a four-year contract that pays him \$1.35 million per season. The Atlanta Falcons just signed former Louisville coach Bobby Petrino to a five-year, \$24 million deal.

"I'm not going to tell you what status we're at. I've known Lovie's agent for a long time, and I have no doubt we'll get a deal done," Phillips said.

Phillips said he wasn't embarrassed that the coach of the one of the NFL's pioneer franchises, a man who has led the Bears to back-to-back division titles and to their first Super Bowl in 21 years, is the lowest-paid coach in the league.

• Dungy

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recently called Dungy's coaching job in 2002 one of the best he's ever seen.

Dungy ranks among the active leaders among coaches in victories with a record of 114-62. He's gone 60-20 in five seasons with the Colts, who won their first AFC title during their Indianapolis era

Sunday with a 38-34 victory against New England. It's the first time Dungy has taken a team to the Super Bowl as a head coach.

Before joining the Colts in 2002, Dungy spent six seasons in Tampa Bay. Off the field, however, Dungy has endured trying times.

His mother, Cleomae, died in January 2002, and his father, Wilbur, died in June 2004, and Tony Dungy's oldest son, 18-year-old James, committed suicide at his apartment in Tampa, Fla., in December 2005.