

All's well with AFC team before Pro Bowl

By GREG BEACHAM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KAPOLEI, Hawaii

LaDainian Tomlinson now thinks Bill Belichick has nothing but class, and Belichick says the feeling is mutual.

Meanwhile, Jason Taylor has no problem starting alongside Shawne Merriman at the Pro Bowl. But it's still unclear whether Merriman is less than thrilled to play with the Miami star who said the steroid-tainted San Diego linebacker shouldn't be allowed to play in Hawaii.

Though Peyton Manning and his four offensive teammates from the champion Indianapolis Colts hadn't yet arrived, the star-studded AFC squad enjoyed the first day of workouts Tuesday on Oahu's gorgeous west shore.

While league MVP Tomlinson no longer has any bad feelings toward the New England Patriots' three-time Super Bowl-winning coach after their playoff meeting, another San Diego player's feud still might be simmering.

Merriman pointedly refused to speak to reporters after working out alongside



AP PHOTO

AFC players run during the team's practice for the Pro Bowl in Kapolei, Hawaii, on Tuesday. The AFC faces the NFC on Saturday.

Taylor, Miami's NFL defensive player of the year.

In late December, Taylor spoke out strongly against players who test positive for performance-enhancing substances. Though only some of his comments were addressed directly to Merriman, Taylor said players who use banned substances shouldn't be allowed to receive postseason honors or even play in the league.

Taylor and Merriman didn't speak during Monday evening meetings or

Tuesday's practice, but Taylor said he believes the situation is workable.

"We'll talk," said Taylor, who beat out Merriman for the defensive player award. "Shawne and I are on the same team, and I don't think it's going to be a problem for any of us. It's not a big deal."

"I never said it was anything special about Shawne. I just felt like it's something that it's time for the league to address."

Indianapolis' Dwight Freeney directed even more pointed comments at Merriman last week, echoing Taylor's viewpoint. The NFL reportedly is considering a Pro Bowl ban as a consequence of a positive test.

"I'm glad the league has done something about it and is looking at it," Taylor said. "Sometimes it takes somebody with enough guts to stand up and say something. I'm not a pioneer or anything. I just think it's good they're doing something."

While Merriman had nothing to say, his teammates stuck by his side. Chargers fullback Lorenzo Neal also said he supports more stringent drug-testing,

and he thinks Merriman would agree.

"It's not Shawne that's in question," Neal said. "He shouldn't be slammed because of one bad mistake he made. He knows he was taking something he shouldn't have been taking, but it wasn't the way people are making it out to be."

"He didn't read the labels (on a legal supplement). He made his choice, he paid his dues, and I think people need to let it go now."

Tomlinson's now-squashed problems with Belichick occupied much less time before practice.

New England cornerback Ellis Hobbs added an insult to the Patriots' road playoff victory against San Diego last month when he danced on the Chargers' mid-field logo with some of his teammates. Moments later, Tomlinson said the Patriots "showed no class, and maybe that comes from the head coach."

After having nearly a month to cool down, Tomlinson no longer blames Belichick. Tomlinson said both the coach and the running back talked Monday.

"He was joking around, having a good time with all the guys," Tomlinson said.

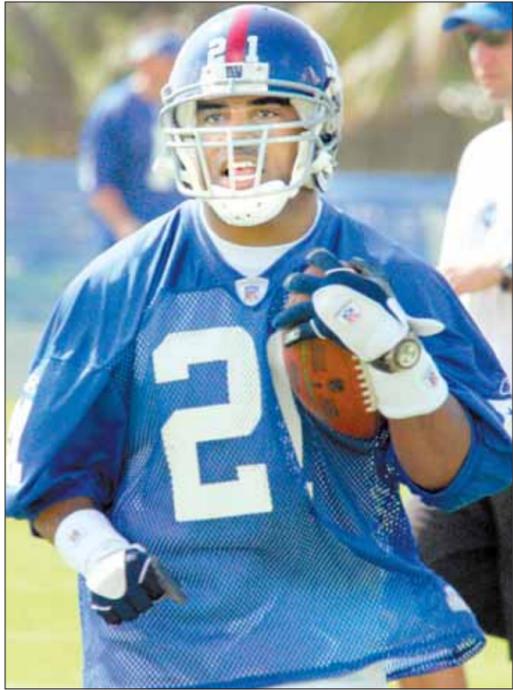
"We even joked about the (playoff) game. I told him that I said some things that maybe I shouldn't have said, and in return, Bill said he didn't even see Hobbs doing it, but after the game, he definitely said something to him about handling the situation better."

Tomlinson now wishes he hadn't invoked Belichick's name, and he's excited to see how New England's coaching staff will use him in the Pro Bowl along with Manning, Marvin Harrison and the rest of the offensive talent.

"We talked," Belichick said. "I have all the respect in the world for LaDainian as a person, as a player, and it's fun to be out here working with all of those guys from the Chargers."

Belichick had less to say about retired Patriots linebacker Ted Johnson, who claims Belichick forced him to participate in full-strength practices shortly after suffering a concussion.

"I wish Ted well," Belichick said. "I know he's going through some things, and I hope it works out well for him. ... I really don't want to go into the past. I just hope things work out well for Ted."



AP PHOTO

New York Giants running back Tiki Barber carries the ball during the NFC team's practice for the Pro Bowl in Kapolei, Hawaii, on Tuesday.

Barber pleased to get 'vacation' in Hawaii as part of final game

By JAYMES SONG
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HONOLULU

Tiki Barber will end his football career much like it began when he was 8 years old, with a wide grin and as teammates with his twin brother.

The Pro Bowl on Saturday will be the final game for Barber, who is retiring after 10 seasons with the New York Giants. His brother Ronde, from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, is a cornerback on the NFC team.

"It's like a family vacation paid for by the NFL," said Barber, who goes out as the NFL's 17th leading rusher with 10,449 yards.

Wearing a floral lei and looking out at the Waikiki skyline, Tiki Barber said he has no second thoughts about his decision to retire.

"It's exciting, really, because I had a great career and it ended on my terms," he said. "I wasn't carried off the field on a stretcher. I didn't sustain a major injury that prevented me from doing what I love to do. Now I get to do something else."

His only regret is not being able to win a Super Bowl.

He played in the game in 2001 when the Giants were beaten by the Baltimore Ravens.

"My fear, which ultimately came true, is I wouldn't get a chance to try again," he said. "That's the NFL and the unpredictable nature of team sports. There's been a lot of greats that never got a chance to even play."

The 31-year-old halfback said he still has some game left in him. He proved it this past season by running for 1,662 yards, his fifth straight 1,000-yard season and the second-highest total of his career.

Barber rushed for 371 yards in the final two games alone, including a team-record 234 yards in a win against Washington that earned the Giants a playoff berth.

"I like the saying, 'Always leave them wanting more. Leave too early rather than too late,'" he said.

This past season, Barber joined Marshall Faulk and Marcus Allen as the only NFL players with 10,000 yards rushing and 5,000 yards receiving.

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• Moves

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

They are the heart and lifeblood. The Colts aren't champions without them.

But Manning and Dungy aren't going anywhere. Neither are Marvin Harrison, Reggie Wayne or Joseph Addai. They're all under contract, and Dungy has all but declared his intention to return.

But Dwight Freeney, Cato June, Dominic Rhodes, Nick Harper, Rob Morris, Ryan Lilja, Jake Scott, Jason David and other notables might be different stories. Their returns are anything but certain.

Tough decisions have to be made. The impact, good or bad, will be felt for years to come.

Dungy was right Monday morning when he said that in order to repeat, the status quo isn't good enough.

The Colts will actually have to be better. The slightest "little slippage" will create a major consequence.

Can the Colts win another Super Bowl in the next five years, which would make them the modern-day equivalent of a dynasty? Are they one-hit wonders? Will they be good enough to contend for the Super Bowl but not quite good enough to win it?

It's pretty much up to Polian now.

He doesn't pass, run, tackle,

kick, block or coach. But he assembles the pieces that do. And so far, you can't quibble with the results.

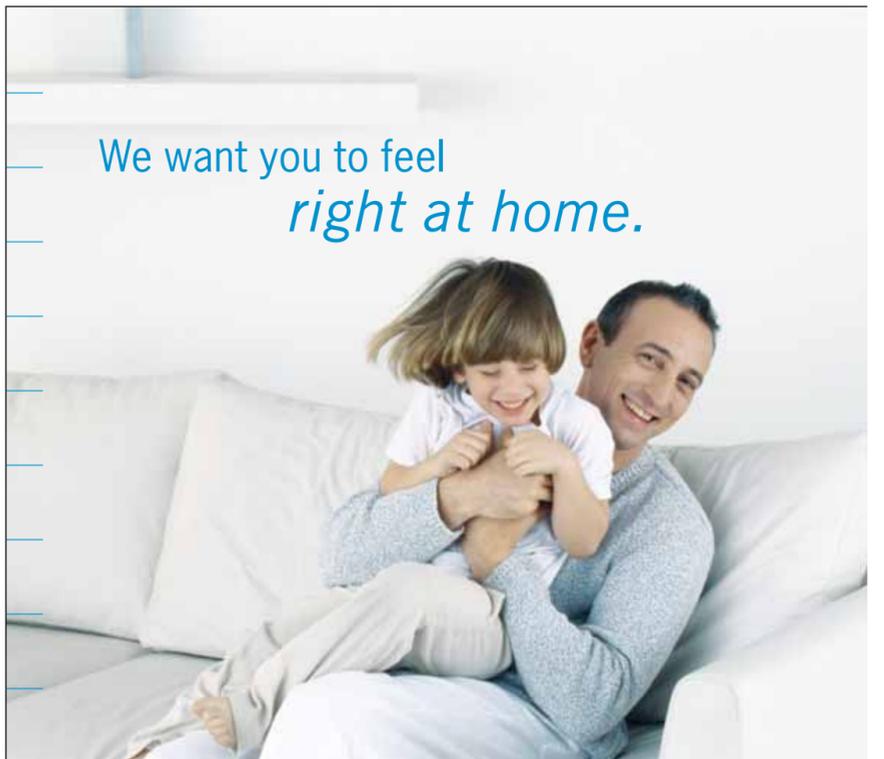
Championships are about as good as it gets.

So whatever happens in free agency, it has to be taken on blind faith that Polian knows what he's doing, which means when the first big name signs elsewhere, one should resist the temptation, no matter how strong, to wonder in panic, "How can they win without that guy?"

They'll find a way.

Love him or hate him, Polian always has.

Rick Morwick is sports editor of the Daily Journal. Send comments to morwick@thejournalnet.com.



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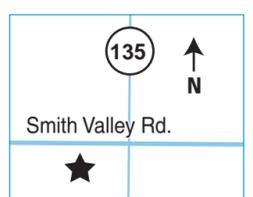
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