

An Interview With:

DON SHULA

Pro Football Hall of Fame Coach

DON SHULA: This is about the time of the year that I get a lot of questions, and the Colts are doing things that no other team has ever done, and they just look tremendous doing it. So I'd be glad to answer any questions you might have.

Q. Do you remember your feelings the first time the '72 Dolphins' record was challenged, and is that the same feeling that you feel today?

DON SHULA: Yeah, every year when people get 6-0, 7-0, 8-0, 9-0, they start resurrecting the '72 Dolphins, and that's always nice to be resurrected and talked about. I think a few years ago with Denver it went to 13-0, and then got beat on successive Sundays. And now this year with the Colts 10-0 and looking as strong as they are, it brings a lot of excitement back to the game and to our record and what the Colts are trying to accomplish.

Note: 1998 Denver Broncos began season 13-0.

Q. How much connection is there amongst you and your old players? Are you phoning each other? Are you talking about this?

DON SHULA: That's probably the most talked-about thing. It just doesn't happen. We've got players gathered all over the country, and occasionally we see each other at reunions. We've got a few players that live close to each other, **Nick Buoniconti**, **Dick Anderson** and **Bob Griese** all live in the Coral Gables area, and they have been accused when that final undefeated team gets beat, they go out into the parking lot and pop open a bottle of champagne. The truth is, that maybe does happen with those three, but they are too cheap to invite the rest of us down there.

Q. But there really never has been, a gathering to celebrate the team of '72?

DON SHULA: No. We've never gotten together and have had a team celebration. There's just a few players that live in the near proximity of each other.

Q. What chances, realistically, what odds do you give the Colts of running the table?

DON SHULA: I just think that they are so strong, they are just a complete football team. You know, right from ownership on down – (Bill) Polian hired (Tony) Dungy, and Dungy has put together a great group of players. Tom Moore, their offensive coordinator, and **Peyton Manning** have been together now since Peyton has been a rookie.

And **Peyton Manning** is doing things that I think no other quarterback in the history of the **National Football League** has done at the line of scrimmage. He just is controlling so many things, and he's doing it brilliantly and he's worked together with his weapons offensively. They have got **Edgerrin James**, the running back, and **Dallas Clark** and **Reggie Wayne** and **Marvin Harrison** and **(Brandon) Stokley**. And their offensive line is a good offensive line.

And defensively, they have gotten better. I just think that they are a team right now that's got a real chance of running the table, and the key is to stay healthy – and they have been healthy. **Peyton Manning** has been healthy his entire career.

Q. Have you looked at the Colts' schedule and do you see anything that might trip them up at all? They have Pittsburgh at home, they go to Jacksonville, and then they have Seattle and San Diego in December. And was your '72 team far and way better than any other you coached, because the next year they lost two close games and you had that great year in Baltimore in '68.

DON SHULA: Yeah, you know, their schedule the rest of the way, they have got some tough football teams. And Cincinnati was a great game the other night. That just shows you how tremendous the Colts' offense is. You say that defensively they gave up a lot of points, but that Cincinnati offense, **Carson Palmer**, is a pretty potent offense.

So they still did what they had to do to win. They have got some tough games down the road, and so I think that they are in a position, as long as they stay healthy, I think they have got a real run at it.

Q. What about your team from '72, was

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that definitely your greatest team by far?

DON SHULA: Well, there's no question about it. The way you evaluate – and I've always said this – is by looking at the record. That's why you keep score, to see how many games that you've won, and the team that obviously has won the most games is the best team.

When you do the things that we did in '72, that shows you that no other team has ever done it, and so that should put that team in a special category. To come back and go 15-2 the next year and then lose only four games; we only lost six games in a three-year period, so that pretty much speaks for itself as to the strength of that – basically the same, football team.

Q. Do you think at some point Coach Dungy will have to consider resting his regular starters?

DON SHULA: You know, it's hard to say – he could conceivably do that.

But also, you know, knowing that they have got a chance to do something that only one other team has ever done and they could even surpass that by going 19-0, as opposed to our 17-0, that might be something that he would want to do, give them the opportunity to do. They have earned it.

Q. Peyton Manning has been compared with Dan Marino because both of them are record-breakers, but do you think that Peyton will win a Super Bowl?

DON SHULA: *Dan Marino*, his legacy is the best drop-back passer that has ever played the game. He's got all of the passing records and he just was recognized as being inducted into the Hall of Fame.

Peyton Manning, he broke Marino's touchdown record, passing last year, 49, to Dan's 48, and he has been healthy throughout his career. I don't think he's missed any time at all because of injury. If he can stay healthy and continue to do the things that he's done thus far in his career, he's going to have all of the passing records when it's over with. He does everything, he does play calling at the line of scrimmage, the play action, the drop-back passing and he's just a great, great leader.

Q. As you know from your career, until a coach wins the big game, there are unkind things suggested about him; do you empathize with Tony Dungy at all?

DON SHULA: Yeah, you do. Tony has got a great record. You know, they are going to

say that he didn't win the big one a few years ago at Tampa.

Now at Indianapolis, he's got a chance with a group that he's put together to win the whole thing. And until you do it, there's always going to be those that say that and I know that from firsthand experience.

Q. I assume back in '72, you didn't have a conference call like this. How do you think the pressure mounts nowadays with all of the coverage, what kind of pressure is the team and the players under?

DON SHULA: Well, I think there's a lot of pressure, but by the same token, when you're playing and when you're coaching, you want this pressure. This is what you work for to have the kind of record that they have and that they earn the respect of everybody and the anticipation of what they are capable of doing. That's what you live for. You'd rather have that than not have it and be out of the hunt.

Q. How much hype was there back in '72 when you were going through this?

DON SHULA: Oh, there was a lot of hype. It just built as we moved through the schedule, and then in '72, when we got in the playoffs, I think we were 15-0, and we had to travel to play at Pittsburgh in the AFC Championship Game because at that time they alternated home field.

So even though we were undefeated, we still had to travel and beat Pittsburgh at Pittsburgh to get to the Super Bowl.

Q. You beat the Bills at home by a point and the Jets at home by four points. Were those games really down to the wire?

DON SHULA: Yeah, I think we had a lead against the Bills and they came back and made it close. One of the closest games that we had that year was against Minnesota and in that ballgame – that was the third game of the season – we ended up winning the game 16-14, but we trailed 14-6 in the fourth quarter. I know that we needed ten points and I went for the field goal first and then we got the ball back and got the touchdown to win the game.

Then, of course, the one-point game at Buffalo, those were the closest games that we had.

Q. Was the '72 season your proudest season in sports and do you have a memento?

DON SHULA: From that perfect season?

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Q. Correct.

DON SHULA: I think it was just pretty much the players that I coached were just a great group of guys. They were all very intelligent. We didn't make any mental errors. We were the least-penalized team. We just didn't beat ourselves.

Offensively, we just controlled the clock and time of possession was always in our favor. Then defensively, when we got in on defense, we didn't give up the big plays or the cheap touchdown.

Q. Do you have a favorite memento or anything you saved from that season?

DON SHULA: I don't know if there was one favorite thing. You know, the players at one time thought that I was too uptight after a win, and I was treating it, talking about the game the previous Sunday as if we had lost it. And (Larry) Csonka said, you know, doesn't he realize, when you have more points, you win, the coach should be happy. He thought that I wasn't handling it very well.

Q. You talked about how the Colts have to stay healthy, but you look at your lineup that year, of course you had to change the quarterback. How did that not throw you guys off?

DON SHULA: We had **Earl Morrall** as our backup, our insurance quarterback. I had him when I was in Baltimore and we got to be in the Super Bowl against the Jets, Super Bowl III. Then when I had a chance to pick him up in Miami, I didn't hesitate to do so. Although, (Joe) Robbie had to approve the contract, Earl was making \$90,000 at the time, and **Joe Robbie** reluctantly agreed to pick up that salary as a backup quarterback.

Then when Griese went down in the fifth game, Earl came on and was just tremendous and got us to the Championship Game, and then Griese was then healthy and came back to help us win it.

Q. As much confidence as you had and your players didn't really know him, how much of a crisis was it when Griese went down?

DON SHULA: The fact that we had Earl made me feel a lot better because of what he had done for me in Baltimore. He was just that type of influence on our football team. They all realized that Griese was our quarterback, our starting quarterback and the quarterback of the future. But

they all knew that Earl was capable of being a great backup and he proved that to everybody.

Q. How much would you like to see the Colts do this, run the table, and how much would you like to see the Dolphins be the only one?

DON SHULA: We've been accused of being angry old men and just hoping and praying that the last team would lose and that's not true. If the Colts do it, I'd be the first guy to call Dungy and congratulate him, and I'm sure our players would congratulate their players.

It just shows you how tough it is to do when nobody has done it before us and nobody has done it since us. The Colts, are a team that's really capable of doing it. They have still got some tough games to play, but if and when they do it, it's just going to prove that they, too, will be a great football team.

Q. How much did the loss of Super Bowl VI to the Cowboys spur your team week-to-week in '72?

DON SHULA: That was pretty much our theme going into the '72 season. The year before, we had a great year, we got to the Super Bowl and then played poorly and the Cowboys dominated. The feeling after the game was that we had not accomplished anything; that although we were in the Super Bowl, you walk away a loser and that was a feeling that we didn't want to have again.

Q. How remarkable is it considering the salary cap era for any team, it doesn't matter if they go 10-0, or 16-0, how remarkable is it that the Colts are achieving this in the salary cap era, when players turnover so much more quickly than they did in the past?

DON SHULA: Well, that's where you have to have good leadership and **Bill Polian** is a great architect. He did it at Buffalo and now he's done it at Indianapolis. He's managed that salary cap and he's been able to keep this team pretty much together. So you've got to give him that credit.

But the thing that you have to realize is that no matter what the rules are, that somebody figures it out. There's still a winner, and Polian and Dungy and the whole organization have figured it out.

Q. For a long time the Colts were criticized for not being an aggressive team. Do you see them as a tougher team today?

DON SHULA: Yeah, I do. I watch that

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with great interest, in the game against Cincinnati and although their defense gave up a lot of points, they were a very aggressive defense. They were all over the field, a hard-hitting defense.

I think that's what Tony has done. He's realized that they have a great offensive football team that is just tough to stop and that they had to get better on the defensive side of the ball. So they drafted defensively in the secondary, and Freeney, the defensive end, is a real outstanding pass rusher. They have tried to upgrade in the area where they felt that they were weak.

Q. Since you guys went 17-0, there have been a couple of teams that have gotten to where Indianapolis is. Which team -- looking back over the last 30-something years -- you thought came the closest in your mind to really catching you guys? Was it the '85 Bears, '91 Redskins, '98 Broncos, anybody really?

DON SHULA: The '85 Bears were a great football team. They only lost one game that year; I can't remember what team beat them. (Laughter). But aside from that game, they played exceptionally well all year long, and especially at the Super Bowl.

Then, of course, I mentioned earlier Denver when they had the string; I think they were 13-0. That was just a tremendous football team and strong in all areas.

Q. Can tell us some recommendations in order to get a perfect season?

DON SHULA: Well, you have to have everything going for you. You have to be strong in all areas: Offense, defense and special teams. And you have to pretty much stay healthy, if you can.

The remarkable thing about our '72 team was that our quarterback got hurt, our starting quarterback got hurt, and our backup quarterback helped us get back into the Championship Game and into the Super Bowl, and then Griese again was healthy for the Super Bowl. Those are all of the things that are important; that your team has enough experience on both sides of the ball and you have a strong kicking game, and you just don't make the mistakes that the teams that you're playing make during the course of the year.

Q. As strong as the Bears looked in '85, did you guys feel that if they got past you, they might pretty much go all the way?

DON SHULA: I don't know how much we thought about it at that time. I just know that that was one of the most exciting games I coached.

I've said many times, it's the best first half of football that I've ever been around. You know, we just in the first half, we had 30-some points against that Bear defense that everybody thought that you couldn't score against.

Just a great job, opening up our offense and making them cover our people and knowing that Marino would have time to get the ball off in the face of their rush, but that was a great Bear football team.

Q. You made it clear that you are not going to toast the end of this thing and get together and watch, but have you had contact with your players and do you talk on the phone?

DON SHULA: No, we really don't do that. If we see each other at a golf tournament, a charity function, a banquet or something, we might talk about it. But there is no -- that I know of -- there's no getting together as a group and cheering for the team to get beat.

I think in the case of what's going on in Indianapolis right now, the level that they are playing and **Peyton Manning** and just watching him do things that are just unbelievable at the line of scrimmage, and he's been healthy his whole career. I don't think he's missed a snap in his whole career. That just says a lot for Peyton and his great ability mentally and physically.

Note: Peyton Manning has not missed a start in his career (122 games). He has taken 7,560 of 7,711 possible snaps through last Sunday's game at Cincinnati.

Q. When you started 14-0, do you remember the extra pressure of: "Now we've got to finish it off in the playoffs, or we'll get skewered?"

DON SHULA: Our goal wasn't to go undefeated. Our goal was to get back into the Super Bowl and win the Super Bowl. When it became apparent that we could do something that no other team had ever done, then it became important to us. You know, 14-0 wasn't it. We just wanted to make sure we won the playoff game and then got into the Super Bowl.

So that was our whole emphasis, to get there, and then along the way, we realized that we could make history.

Q. With everything you said, will you be surprised if the Colts go unbeaten, or they won't go unbeaten?

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DON SHULA: No, I wouldn't be surprised if they go unbeaten. I just think that they are playing at a level right now that is just unbelievable and they are healthy. And **Peyton Manning** is just – he's a real pleasure to watch run that offense and that whole organization has done a great job. I think they have got a real shot at doing it.

Q. Do you think it's inevitable; somebody whether it's the Colts or somebody down the road, will go unbeaten?

DON SHULA: Some day down the road, yeah, I think as I mentioned, I think the Colts this year have got a real chance to do it. Certainly if they don't, somewhere down the road, somebody might have the chance to do it. But I think this is a real legitimate chance of a great football team running the table.

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