

Steve Sabol, President of NFL Films, on the Code

“Yes, there is a code in football, and it is significant. The game has changed over the years though. It really has, and so has the code. In the early days, so many things were legal: the crack-back, the head-slap, spearing, you name it. If the rules of today were in effect in the 1960s, half of the players in the Hall of Fame would have been fined more than what they ever earned. The hits are bigger today, but the game is much more sanitized than it was in those days. Television has changed everything. Nothing escapes the CAT-scan scrutiny of TV. Nothing. All of those dirty little tricks are now caught and dealt with immediately. Everything is exposed nowadays. When we started, we had an end-zone camera and a top camera. We didn’t even have field cameras. Now we have isolated cameras on every player. It is amazing. So to a great extent, it is the advent of television that has cleaned up the game. Players know that they can’t get away with stuff anymore, which I believe is great for the game. Retaliation used to be a huge part of the game. Back in the ’50s and ’60s, if a player did something dirty or illegal to your teammate, the players would all gather in the huddle and call a ‘booty play’ where they would all go after that guy. They would basically sacrifice a play just to get that one guy. It was crazy stuff. Now because of TV, we don’t see that type of thing anymore. Guys know that they will be penalized, fined, and suspended, so it has essentially been eliminated.

“I remember one time back in the ’70s when we at NFL Films put out a tape about the ‘Greatest Hits.’ There was some concern that the game was becoming too violent, and people were worried about us glorifying and celebrating all of this gratuitous violence. Well, George Halas came right out, and his exact words were, ‘This game is built on the premise that a good player becomes less good when he is hit so hard that he doesn’t want to be hit again.’ That was powerful. We had Halas miked for a game one time between his Bears and the Lions. His favorite expression by far was, ‘Lay the bastard out!’ He must have said it 10 times throughout the course of that game. He didn’t mean to cheap-shot anybody. He just wanted his guys to hit the Lions as hard as they could.

“Big hits are one of the biggest premises of this game. I mean this is a tough, violent, fierce, physical sport. And that is okay. In fact, that is a big part of the appeal. Now that does not mean being dirty. Yes, there is an unspoken code that exists in this game, and it is all about respect. Sure the players want to knock the shit out of each other, but they will do so cleanly and honestly. I don’t know of any player in all my years of doing this where he has said he wanted to intentionally hurt someone. These are men who are trying to make a living. Nobody wants to deprive another man of the opportunity to make a living by doing something dishonest or illegal.”

Bill Romanowski, 16-Year Linebacker, on Intimidation

“When you play linebacker in the NFL, your job is to be violent, to strike people as hard as you possibly can. To do that, there is a level of intimidation that is necessary to do your job. Can you knock someone out of a game? Do you gang-tackle? Do you go after the quarterback on an interception? That is just the way it is. If guys know what you are capable of, they will either fear you or respect you. Either way, you had to do your job out there. I hope that I was an intimidating force out there. I certainly tried to be. That was my game. I wanted players to know that if they ran by me, I was going to do whatever it took to take them down, hard. That was my job.

“Being a hard hitter was really intimidating, in my eyes. One of the best hits I ever had was back in 1997, when I shattered Kerry Collins’ jaw in a pre-season game in about 10 different places. Hits like that are what fired up your teammates. That is why I got paid as much as I did to play football. I would get raises, more money, [and] new contracts when I did that type of thing. So I kept doing that type of thing, hitting players as hard as I could. That was my job. Everybody said it was a dirty hit, but I never got called for a penalty on it. I did get fined after the fact because he got hurt. If he didn’t get hurt, it wouldn’t have been an issue. Whatever.

“I remember one time in a playoff game against the Jets, I leveled their tight end, Anthony Becht. He was out on the flat, behind the play, and I just knocked the crap out of him. He got so upset that he came after me during the game. In the process, he went offside three times and got a holding penalty. Needless to say, we won the game. I enjoyed being an agitator out there. That was my role.

“I want to be clear about injuries, though. There was never a part of me that wanted to hurt someone badly enough to where they would struggle in any way or so that they couldn’t play the game. That was never my mindset. But I would *happily* love to hit a quarterback or running back or wide receiver so hard that they had to be carried off the field. As long as they were able to return the following week and not be injured, that was the best scenario. Again, that was my job—to knock people out of football games.”

they were going to take me out. It is a motivating factor for those guys, and it is something that can get in your head because you never know if one of them will hit you late or roll up on your leg or something. You try not to let that stuff affect you, but it can be pretty intimidating.”

For many players, intimidation is not just what they do or say. It is who they are. Their whole persona reflects their style of play, right down to how they dress and how they act—both on and off the field.

to prove his point, he even had an assistant run over to the opposing locker room and confiscate one of the player's shoes. Sure enough, they were three-quarter-inch cleats. Cooper demanded an explanation, to which the Vols said that the shoe company incorrectly shipped them the wrong cleats. The ones they got were supposed to go to a soccer team somewhere else but miraculously wound up in Knoxville instead. (One can only assume that the "phantom" soccer team in need of 20 pairs of size 16 cleats probably wasn't winning a whole lot of games.) Needless to say, the next year the NCAA instituted the Tennessee Rule, which states that any player wearing illegal cleats will serve a one-game suspension. Case closed.

While there are some gray areas when it comes to cheating, other areas are pretty black and white.

"I once knew of an assistant coach at the collegiate level who would go through the other team's locker room in search of playbooks," revealed longtime coach Tom Olivadotti. "He would then run off copies of whatever he could find and return it before anyone knew it was gone. Amazing. That is beyond cheating and just plain stealing in my eyes."

The Home-Field Advantage

Teams have long used the "home field" moniker to their advantage over the years. One of the most common forms of home cooking are deals with groundskeepers.

"I remember whenever we would play the Raiders, they were notorious for doing all sorts of shady stuff to get an advantage," said former Chiefs linebacker Bobby Bell. "We had a really fast team that year with a lot of quick players. One time we went out there to play and it hadn't rained in like six months, yet the field was soaking wet. I mean there was standing water out there. It was crazy. And they hadn't cut the grass in weeks, either. They wanted to slow us down and were going to do whatever little tricks that they could to do so."

One time in 2004 when the Patriots played host to the Colts and their high-octane offense in the AFC playoffs, the field at Gillette Stadium was left uncovered the week before the game, exposing it to the sleet and rain. The wet and icy field was perfect for New England's ground-attack game plan that day, and the Patriots beat the Colts, 20-3. When asked about why the stadium was left open to the elements after the game, Patriots coach Bill Belichick simply said, "My job is not to pull weeds."

Perhaps the most infamous story involving a member of the grounds crew took place on December 12, 1982, when Patriots coach Ron Meyer sent out Mark Henderson, an inmate on furlough, to start up a plow and clean off a spot in the middle of a snowy field so that their kicker, John Smith, could kick a game-winning field goal. Smith made the kick for a 3-0 Pats win, infuriating Miami coach Don Shula. "That guy [Henderson] was out on the field and finished before I knew what had happened," Shula said. "I talked with the official on our side of the field, and he said the same thing happened to him. The guy was on the field before they knew what he was doing. The Patriots will have to live with doing something like that."

Teams have used the weather to their advantage for years. For instance, the Raiders swore that the Steelers cut the edges off the Three Rivers Stadium tarp to leave the outside part of the field exposed to the rain in order to make the turf more slippery for the Raider receivers.

"George Allen had a system in RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., where whenever the visiting team was about to try a field goal, he would have the doors open at the far end of the stadium, which would in turn let in a huge draft," recalled Steve Sabol, President of NFL Films. "We got that one when we had Marv Levy miked up for a game one time when he was coaching the Bills and they were playing the Redskins at RFK. He was reminiscing about being an assistant under Allen and laughing about how they would open those doors to get the wind stirring up in there. It was pretty hilarious."

Even today, teams in domed stadiums have been suspected of opening doors to let in sudden gusts of air that have affected kicks. Not to mention the fact that they pipe in artificial fan noise to make it harder for the visiting team to hear the play calls. To counter that, it was alleged that the 49ers used to have microphones in their offensive linemen's helmets for road games in domed stadiums so that they could hear the quarterback's snap count. It is an urban myth, of course.

Any time the home team can make the visitors uncomfortable, they will do so. Former Cleveland Browns owner Art Modell and Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis didn't much care for each other. When their teams met in a 1980 AFC divisional playoff game, Modell "forgot" to provide heated benches on the sidelines for the Raiders in frigid Municipal Stadium. Once Davis heard what was going on, he called his buddy Wellington Mara,

the owner of the New York Giants, who loaned him some of his extras. Incidentally, Davis' Raiders won the game, 14–12.

Another owner who loved to rub it in was the Bears Papa Bear Halas, who once sold tickets to the visitor's benches at Wrigley Field. When the Vikings showed up for their game with the Bears, they found fans sitting on their team bench. Unwilling to move because they had paid good money to sit there, the Vikings players had to sit on the grass or on their helmets. The Bears were fined by the league, but Halas figured it was money well spent.

The Seahawks used to put the visitor's benches at Qwest Field on the east side of the stadium, right in the path of the wind and rain that often came off of Elliott Bay. Meanwhile the Seahawks players stayed warm and dry under a giant roof on the west side of the stadium.

Other teams were notorious for shutting off the hot water in the visitor's locker room showers. "I remember whenever we would play in Cleveland in that old raggedy Municipal Stadium, they would get back at us by turning off all the hot water," recalled wide receiver Ahmad Rashad. "It was brutal. We would play there, and immediately after the game guys would sprint to the locker room to get in the showers and get whatever hot water that was left in the pipes. It was nuts."

"If we were playing somewhere cold, like in Cincinnati, I would shut the heat off in our locker room and open all of the windows," admitted longtime coach Jerry Glanville. "That way, at halftime, the locker room would be nice and cold. You see, if the players came in at halftime and it was nice and warm, then there was no way in hell that they would want to go back out for the second half. As a result, they couldn't wait to get back out on the field where they could run around and warm up."

Maybe the best home-field advantage story of them all comes from legendary Colts defensive tackle Art Donovan. "We played the Giants in an exhibition game in Louisville one time back in 1954," Donovan recalled. "They had just built a brand-new stadium, and the first thing they had in there was a circus. Well, every time you took a step out there, you would wind up in a big pile of elephant crap. Even when you had to go down into your stance, it was everywhere. So we had some fun with it. As soon as the Giants offensive linemen got set and couldn't move, we'd throw globs of that stuff at them. It was hilarious."

Theisman's Last Stand: The Hit That No One Who Saw It Can Ever Forget

Washington Redskins quarterback Joe Theisman's career ended during a *Monday Night Football* game on November 18, 1985, when he suffered a gruesome compound fracture of his leg while being sacked by New York Giants linebacker Lawrence Taylor. The tackle was even dubbed, "The Hit That No One Who Saw It Can Ever Forget" by *The Washington Post*.

Theisman had been attempting to run a flea-flicker and was standing in the pocket. Taylor blitzed, however, and sandwiched Theisman into Harry Carson, inadvertently landing on Theisman's lower right leg, fracturing both the tibia and fibula. As Theisman lay on the field, writhing in obvious pain, a horrified Taylor frantically screamed and waved for the medical trainers to rush out onto the field. When the instant replay of the hit was shown on TV, a collective gasp could be heard across the football world. The image of his leg bending and snapping in half has become one of the most infamous football injury images of all time.

"I remember handing the ball to John [Riggins], getting it back and then looking downfield," Theisman recalled. "I couldn't find Art [Monk] deep, and then I looked to my right for [tight end] Donnie Warren. At that point, I was feeling some pressure, and the next thing I knew, I heard what sounded like a shotgun going off—Pow! Pow!—and felt this excruciating pain. Then I was on the ground. It was at that point I also found out what a magnificent machine the human body is. Almost immediately, from the knee down, all the feeling was gone in my right leg. The endorphins had kicked in, and I was not in pain. I remember looking up and seeing Redskins trainer Bubba Tyer on my left side. I looked at him and said, 'Please call my mom and tell her I'm okay.' Joe [Gibbs, the head coach] was kneeling on my right side. He was looking at me and he said, 'You mean so much to this club, and now you've left me in one heck of a mess.'"

fourth quarter. It was an amazing feeling, and my teammates definitely appreciated what I did. The bad part about it though was that I did some damage to it. The doctors told me I would be out up to eight weeks, but I came back after just four weeks—which earned me even more respect from my teammates. But because I came back early, I wound up breaking it again shortly thereafter, which really sucked. I wound up getting four screws in my ankle, and it affected my mobility for my entire career. So you never know. Sometimes you think about the old adage, 'Lose the battle but win the war.' But in the heat of battle, you just want to get back out there and do anything you can to help your team win. That was my