

Mike McDaniel Is Resurrecting The Miami Dolphins -- And Revolutionizing The Workplace

 huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/miami-dolphins-mike-mcdaniel-coaching-workplace_n_63a465bce4b0aae8bcb50f79

Jonathan Cohn

24 December 2022

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Miami Dolphins head coach Mike McDaniel made his way across the field during a recent Wednesday practice, strutting to a Drake song playing over the loudspeakers.

It was a curiously upbeat display, given that the Dolphins were fresh off a 10-day West Coast trip in which they dropped a pair of games to teams that had not just overpowered them but seemed to be outsmarting them, too. The Dolphins had been in first place before those losses, with commentators heaping praise on McDaniel, a 39-year-old Yale graduate and former NFL assistant with a reputation for innovative game planning. Now the pundits were wondering whether the Dolphins would even make the playoffs and starting to question McDaniel, who had never been a head coach before taking the Miami position in February.

But out there on the practice field was the swaggering McDaniel, with an impish grin as he made his way in and around players going through stretches. He was wearing bright white sneakers, dark gray sweatpants rolled halfway up his shins, and a T-shirt with the words “I wish it were colder” — a message about the team’s upcoming game in New York against the Buffalo Bills.

With his thick-framed glasses and skinny, 5-foot-9 frame, it would be fair to say McDaniel looked more like a fanboy than a field general of the gridiron. And from where I was standing in the press area, he seemed to be acting more like one too.

Instead of barking at the players like legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi might have once upon a time, or scowling at them as New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick would today, McDaniel was chatting up the athletes — commenting on a wide receiver’s new orange cleats, rearing his head in laughter at another’s joke and bending over so he could talk to one of the defensive linemen face to face while he was in the middle of a stretch.

Eventually McDaniel made his way over to Tua Tagovailoa, the third-year starting quarterback who for the first time has been playing like the star that Miami and its fans always hoped he would be. The two spoke for about 90 seconds while Tagovailoa warmed up with a short game of catch. It was impossible to hear their conversation from up in the press area, but whatever McDaniel said left Tagovailoa with a broad grin on his face.

McDaniel’s behavior was hardly out of character. The banter, the positivity, the obvious affection for his players — all have been hallmarks of his tenure with the Dolphins. They also seem tied to his own life experiences. He talks frequently about trying to embody the

kind of positive male role model he didn't always have growing up, and says he wants to help players become better human beings rather than just better athletes.

Listening to McDaniel ruminate on life and leadership — which is something he likes to do, at considerable length, even when reporters ask him about schemes for attacking a Cover-2 defense — it's easy to see why he and the Dolphins have become one of this year's most intriguing football narratives. But their story may have a relevance beyond the world of sports.

McDaniel's approach to coaching is consistent with what management and psychology researchers have long said is the most effective way to run an organization: by leaning more on praise and encouragement than criticism and discipline, and empowering employees rather than enforcing rigid hierarchies. It's also the way younger generations believe they should be treated, according to surveys. But workplaces in America frequently don't operate like this, in part because the people in charge don't buy into the approach.

McDaniel could help change their minds, by showing that his style of management works even in the cutthroat, high-pressure world of professional sports. But doing so might require turning the Dolphins into a truly championship-caliber squad. And it hasn't been one of those for decades.



Mike McDaniel (right), the head coach of the Miami Dolphins, stretches with quarterback Tua Tagovailoa during training on July 27 in Miami Gardens, Florida.
Michael Reaves via Getty Images

The Dolphins first became a franchise during the 1960s, when Miami was still something of a backwater for tourists and retirees. In the early 1970s, they played in three consecutive Super Bowls and won two of them, in one case capping off what remains the only undefeated full season in NFL history. The team went to two more Super Bowls after that and, up through the late 1990s, was widely considered a model sports organization.

I know this history because I saw a chunk of it firsthand as a kid growing up in Fort Lauderdale. I was there in the old Orange Bowl stadium when one Hall of Fame quarterback, Bob Griese, finished his career and another, Dan Marino, started his. I don't live in Florida anymore, and it's been a few years since I've seen a game in person. But a signed Marino jersey hangs on my office wall, and I still follow the team religiously.

The person most identified with the Dolphins' 20th-century success was the man who coached them for the bulk of those years, Don Shula. He too was once a wunderkind, becoming head coach of the Baltimore Colts when he was just 33 and then taking the Dolphins job when he was 40. Over the course of his career, Shula won more games than any coach in history, turning him into an NFL legend and community icon.

Shula's greatest skill was his ability to make the most of his talent, even if that meant adapting the style of play, which is why the Dolphins pounded opponents on the ground during the Griese years but attacked through the air with the arrival of Marino, who is still considered by some the greatest pure passer of his era. But one constant in Shula's tenure was his discipline-heavy, frequently intimidating management style, which could mean calling out players in the locker room because they had failed to meet their weight goals or berating one on the sidelines for poor play.



Don Shula (right), then the head coach of the Miami Dolphins, watches a game from the sidelines in the early 1970s in Miami, Florida.

Focus On Sport via Getty Images

Shula's methods were far from unusual, in sports or beyond. At the time, managers in all kinds of industries believed that the way to get the most out of workers was to establish firm lines of authority, to issue clear orders and to be tough on employees. But over the past few decades, a growing chorus of psychologists, neuroscientists and management experts have argued that a better approach is to focus on rewards rather than punishments, in the hopes of instilling hope rather than fear, because research has shown people learn and ultimately perform better that way.

One example of that research is a 2012 study in which people were placed in a room with a button. Participants in one group were promised a dollar if they pressed the button, while those in another were told they'd lose a dollar if they didn't. In other words, the first group had an opportunity to reap a reward, while the second had a chance to avoid punishment. The first group turned out to be more responsive.

"When we expect something good, then there's a 'go' response deep in our brain. And it goes all the way to our motor cortex, and it makes action more likely," Tali Sharot, a University College London neuroscientist who worked on that study, told me. "When we expect something bad, when we're kind of in a fear state, it actually is a no-go signal. ... And this inhibits action, so we're less likely to act."

Researchers studying early childhood development and education have found similar patterns, according to Daniel Southwick, who is a doctoral student in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. “In the parenting literature and in the organizational literature, and in some other areas too, there’s a lot of support for learning from positive things as opposed to maybe just only learning from our failures,” he said.

Southwick is in a unique position to understand the relevance this research has for sports: He was a collegiate and then a professional quarterback, and he’s been on the receiving end of screams from coaches angry over interceptions. He said those barrages can be counterproductive because quarterbacks playing in fear of failure might opt for short, safe throws — “checking it down,” to use the football parlance — rather than taking chances on the riskier, longer passes essential to success in the modern game.

Sage Rosenfels, who was an NFL quarterback for 11 years, agrees — and said he saw that kind of coaching as early as his high school basketball team. “You played in fear that you were going to screw up, and it just froze you,” he said.

None of this is to say discipline and fear have no place in sports, or any other kind of management. The utility of any management strategy inevitably depends a lot on the individuals involved; some workers truly do respond more to negative motivation than positive.

But managing with an emphasis on criticism, discipline and threats has its limits, with diminishing returns over time as workers and even fellow managers tire of the negativity, according to Adam Galinsky, a professor and management expert at Columbia Business School.

“With what you might call those harsher methods of motivation, you can get people to do the things you want — you can get good or even great short-term results — but it’s not sustainable over the long term,” Galinsky said.

More successful managers, he added, tend to focus on positive reinforcement — delivering criticism when necessary, but doing so in the context of encouraging better results and making sure workers believe they can achieve them. Scholars like Galinsky refer to this as focusing on “commitment” rather than “compliance,” and according to Southwick, it makes a difference on the football field.

“I’ve seen and tried both approaches — the approach of going out there and trying to be great as opposed to going out there and trying to avoid sucking,” Southwick said. “I don’t think many quarterbacks would disagree that it’s better to have the former than the latter.”

“With what you might call those harsher methods of motivation, you can get people to do the things you want — you can get good or even great short-term results — but it’s not sustainable over the long term.”

- Adam Galinsky, Columbia Business School professor

The 25 years after Shula's retirement looked nothing like the 25 years before. The Dolphins churned through coaches and players, mired in a stretch of mediocrity — including one season when the team managed to win just a single game. In 2019, the front office stripped the roster bare, trading away what stars it had in the hopes of accumulating high draft picks it could turn into the foundation of future success.

At the top of the team's wish list was Tagovailoa, a University of Alabama star whom it selected with the fifth pick of the 2020 draft. But Tagovailoa struggled, and by nearly all accounts, among those in the Dolphins organization questioning his abilities was then-head coach Brian Flores.

Last year, the Dolphins explored replacing Tagovailoa with two more proven quarterbacks: Tom Brady, whose team hadn't given the Dolphins permission to pursue him, and DeShaun Watson, who was available because he faced multiple sexual misconduct accusations. (Watson denied the allegations and ended up settling lawsuits with most of his accusers, with two cases remaining; the NFL fined and suspended him for violating its conduct policy.)

Reports of the Watson discussions leaked to the press, forcing Tagovailoa to answer uncomfortable questions about his future. When asked at a press conference if he felt the Dolphins didn't want him as quarterback, Tagovailoa responded, "I don't not feel wanted." In private, he later told CBS reporter Aditi Kinkhabwala, he would stand in front of a mirror and wonder, "Do I suck?"

Team owner Stephen Ross eventually fired Flores, reportedly for a variety of reasons. Flores, who is Black, responded by filing a (still pending) lawsuit against the Dolphins, several other teams and the NFL alleging racial discrimination. The league, for its part, temporarily suspended Ross' ownership privileges and took away one of the team's future first-round draft picks as a penalty for trying to lure Brady while he was still under contract with another team.

Off the field, the Dolphins had become the league's biggest embarrassment. On the field, they had no coach and a quarterback with no confidence.

That's when they turned to McDaniel.

HC Mike McDaniel on FaceTime with his new QB Tua Tagovailoa. Seems like Miami is in for something special. #FinsUp pic.twitter.com/Nolwqbj52G

— Mace (@realmaceblack) February 8, 2022

One reason McDaniel is so introspective in public may be that he's used to asking a lot of questions about life — and himself. He is biracial, and in an interview with Dave Hyde of the Sun Sentinel, he described a seminal moment from when he was 5, staring at family photos in his great-grandmother's house. "Wow, this is odd," McDaniel remembered thinking. "I look different than everyone else."

Childhood was not always an easy time, McDaniel went on to explain, describing a period when he felt his mother's white family wasn't fully accepting of him. His parents divorced when he was 3, and the relationship with his father frayed. McDaniel said the two haven't spoken in 20 years.

One place he found refuge was the world of football. As a kid growing up in Colorado, McDaniel would bike to the nearby Denver Broncos facility, becoming a fixture at open practices and, eventually, a ball boy.

He developed a particular interest in strategy, which perhaps wasn't surprising given that he also was something of a brainiac, with grades and scores good enough to get him into Yale. And although he wasn't an athletic recruit, he earned a place on the school's roster as a walk-on wide receiver and appeared in some games, though without registering major statistics.

After graduation, McDaniel went back to the Broncos and got a job as a low-level assistant — the first of several such posts he would have over the next decade and a half. In all of those positions, he'd be working with or for disciples of former Broncos coach Mike Shanahan, as part of a legendary "coaching tree" whose branches now reach across the NFL.

McDaniel was working for Kyle Shanahan, Mike's son and head coach of the San Francisco 49ers, when Ross and the Dolphins' front office hired him back in February. One of the first things he did was reach out to Tagovailoa, FaceTiming him while flying to Miami on Ross' private jet. "This is an awesome day for me, and I'm damn sure going to make sure that when you look back on this day you're going to be like, 'Damn, that was one of the best days of my career, too,'" McDaniel said.

"You have the ambition to be great. My job is to coach you, to get all of that greatness out of you," he told Tagovailoa.

McDaniel then had the team staff put together a video of 700 throws Tagovailoa had made over his career, just to make clear that the quarterback was indeed capable of greatness.

The focus on what Tagovailoa had done right rather than what he done wrong, and all the ways he could succeed rather than how he could fail, left an impression on the young quarterback. "This is my first time experiencing that kind of relationship with someone that is the head coach of an organization — just love that guy," Tagovailoa said in the interview with Kinkhabwala.

And it didn't take long to see a difference on the field. The Dolphins started scoring passing touchdowns seemingly at will; Tagovailoa, who was suddenly making big throws instead of checking down all the time, became one of the league's top-rated quarterbacks.

Analysts are quick to note that Miami's success through the air has a lot to do with the offseason acquisition of Tyreek Hill, considered the league's fastest wide receiver, as well as McDaniel's creative playbook. But the change in Tagovailoa's psyche is obvious, as is the playful relationship the coach and quarterback have developed. (Sideline microphones recently caught McDaniel teasing Tagovailoa about Alabama's subpar year in football and, separately, complimenting the quarterback on his "swag.")

"After the Dolphins' well-publicized flirting with DeShaun Watson and Tom Brady, this was huge for Tua, who finally could feel his head coach totally had his back," said Alain Poupart, who has been writing about the Dolphins since the 1980s and is now the publisher of All Dolphins for Sports Illustrated's FanNation network. "There's little doubt that belief from McDaniel boosted Tua's confidence big-time."

"Do I suck?"

It's a question that Tua Tagovailoa consistently asked himself last season.

An incredible report from @AKinkhabwala on Sunday. pic.twitter.com/v2U1TeNpWv

— NFL on CBS 🏈 (@NFLonCBS) November 28, 2022

After the Dolphins dropped those two games on the West Coast, some pundits said McDaniel needed to get tougher. In other words, he needed to find his inner Lombardi and stop channeling Ted Lasso. One ESPN analyst advised McDaniel to "put his foot up the rear of his offensive line" because it was blocking so poorly.

I asked McDaniel about that comment at a press conference earlier this month. He said that he is tougher than outsiders realize, and that he demands accountability and has no patience for players who aren't putting in the effort to prepare or practice. But he went on to question whether hollering at offensive linemen would do much good, in words that echoed what all of those management and psychologists had told me.

"Maybe it makes you feel better if you scream at somebody, but I want to have something that will help somebody," McDaniel said. "And it's not because I'm trying to be nice to them. It's because I'm trying to coach them."

The next day, I asked McDaniel a follow-up of sorts about why he coaches the way he does. He talked about his love of football and his desire to "do things the right way," and he mentioned the lack of a male role model in his youth.

"I just try to do things for the right reasons. Sometimes that works out. Sometimes it doesn't," he said. "People are counting on you to try to make them better. So that's all I really worry about."

McDaniel is open about challenges he's faced, including some personal ones: a diagnosis of depression and a battle with alcoholism that eventually sent him to a rehabilitation program. That program, he later told USA Today, was the first time he "had men stand

behind me and say, ‘Hey, you’re not alone, dude.’”

It sounds like the kind of atmosphere he’s created in the Dolphins locker room, which players say they appreciate.

“He says there’s adversity in life, and that’s what he tries to preach to us,” Trent Sherfield, a receiver who got to know McDaniel when they were both with the 49ers, told me. “When you have a coach who is open to having those conversations and is a players coach, I think that it does make you want to push harder, because you understand what he’s been through. He’s not closed off. He shares. He’s vulnerable.”

“The coolest part,” fullback Alec Ingold said, “is to have a coach that’s just 100 percent himself. I’ll go to bat for that, because you have so much respect — how much courage it takes to get up in front of 100 alpha men in a room and be completely vulnerable, be yourself from the jump, from day one, and follow it up every single day.”

Two days later, the Dolphins were in Buffalo for their showdown with the Bills. They lost. But it was a close game decided on the final snap, played in the snow and against what may be the best team in football this year, with Tagovailoa looking again like a franchise quarterback. The Dolphins have three games left, starting with a home game Sunday against the Packers, and they still have a good chance to make the playoffs.

What happens if they do, and what happens in future years, will inevitably depend heavily on talent and scheming — and, of course, football luck. That is just one reason why the success or failure of the Dolphins under McDaniel can’t serve as a scientific test case for his style of management. But given the visibility that football has in America, maybe McDaniel can get more owners and managers in other industries questioning their assumptions about how their workplaces should operate — and what it takes to succeed.