

THE PROS BY JOHN CAIRNS

Teams in professional sport invariably have head coaches. These men either maintain excellent records, or they find themselves confronting immediate unemployment. Failing to satisfy the victory craving of players, fans, and owners, forces them to bear the brunt of everyone's anger. The consequence is a close resemblance between professional coachery and a game of musical chairs.

Why should a talented player blessed with a high salary and a long term contract worry about heeding a less prosperous and more insecure man? When such a performer becomes unhappy or falls into a slump he can usually pin the blame on his mentor. A coach's job can even be jeopardized by a discontented bench warmer who enjoys favor with owners or fans.

Manager Billy Martin's problems with the New York Yankees show that all this applies to even the best of teams. Last season the Yanks were plagued with continuous internal squabbling and occasional inconsistency on the field. The culprits included both stars like Reggie Jackson and Thurman Munson and lesser lights like Lou Pinella and Mike Torrey. The only head put on the block though, was Billy's. After all, the argument went, wasn't he responsible for controlling the players? Wasn't he the most dispensable man involved? Only the team's victory in the World Series saved him. Few coaches have such luck.

Their plight is that try as they may, they fight a losing battle. They acquire grey hair and ulcers, but in the end the slightest setback costs them their jobs. Coach

Riley, formerly of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers, can tell us all about it. He had a reasonably good year in 77. The Bombers were right in the thick of their divisional race and were narrowly defeated in the most exciting game of the playoffs. Almost immediately Riley was fired. Team management declared that he should have won the Grey Cup. Only then could he have remained.

George Allan suffered a similar fate. Though championships eluded him, he was long the successful and respected field boss of the Washington Red Skins. His team did well again last season, but it missed the playoffs by a hair. Doing that makes you a failure, and as a coach you can expect only the worst. As the routine

demand, George was fired.

Hank Stram didn't often direct the New Orleans Saints to victory. Yet he probably could have lasted last season had his team not become the first victims of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The Bucs had nothing in twenty-six N.F.L. games. On December 11, 1977 however, they throttled the Saints 33-14. How did Coach Stram react? "What a nightmare!" he said. "It was the worst experience of my coaching career. We're all ashamed for our people, our fans, our organization." Little did he realize his nightmare was just beginning. Though he didn't know it, he had coached the Saints for the final time. He was fired several days later.

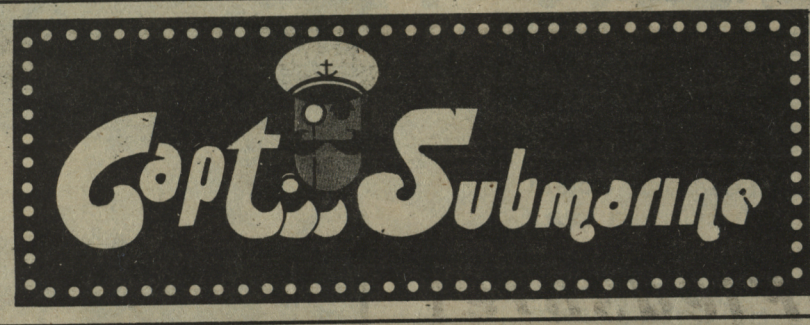
Coaches must often protect their paychecks

by tolerating almost unbearable interference. Owners like Charlie Finley and Ted Turner come to mind as being especially domineering. Finley abused manager after manager while in a farcical effort to end a losing streak. Turner once high-jacked the job for himself. Coaches victimized by such tyrants are caught in a vicious circle on the road to unemployment. If they aren't yes men they will become idle men.

A few even find themselves criticized by their peers. Coach McVie of the Washington Capitals is such a man. Don Cherry, his counterpart in Boston, once lashed out at him, saying that the Caps have a lot of talent and blaming McVie for their pathetic record. Is it possible to succeed when members of your own group knock you? Probably not! Cherry might as well have personally signed McVie's walking papers. The Washington bench commander's job is probably now more endangered than ever.

Philadelphia Flyer coach Fred Shero recently suggested the possibility of a coach's union. He claims to have especially strong support from Scotty Bowman in Montreal and from Bob Pulford in Chicago. It is certainly a much-needed plan, and I wish them well with it. Until such a scheme becomes reality though, coaches remain helpless puppets.

The strength of a franchise is now measured by how rapidly it exploits head coaches. The old saying has truth. "Coaches are hired to be fired". When a team is beaten, we needn't pity the players, the management or the fans. The man who really deserves our sympathy is the coach.




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