

Carlos Herrera's Dream

The media room of Miami's Pro Player Stadium was packed. Reporters from every sports outlet this side of Tel Aviv milled about, speculating on the various rumors that had been floating around the NFL beat for about 72 hours.

ESPN initially had reported that the Dolphins might be sold to a consortium spear-headed by the aging Hall of Fame quarterback himself, Dan Marino. Then they began to change the story when someone seemed to have leaked the possibility that Jimmy Johnson, the fiery coach and general manager, was going to hire Barry Switzer as a general assistant just to affront Jerry Jones, the Dallas Cowboys' flamboyant owner, (because he'd basically fired them both from the position of head coach in a clash of egos the size of Texas).

Now, as the news conference was approaching, there seemed that there actually might be another bomb dropped. "The Fabulous Sports Babe" was reporting on her national sports show that her sources told her that Carlos Herrera, the 27-year-old all-pro linebacker and three-time "Defensive Player of the Year", was retiring from football. Several other outlets were picking up the same rumors out of the Dolphin camp. If this story was true it would be one of the major sports stories of the year.

Carlos Herrera was one of the major stars of the NFL. Not only was he absolutely dominating on the field but he was a media darling off the field. He was articulate, approachable, bright, and a very easy interview. The only frustration that reporters had in dealing with Carlos was that he often seemed to subtly control the discussion. They would want to focus on the last game or the next opponent or the current run of inept play by the Dolphins' offense or even the quality of officiating at games but Carlos had a way of bringing up larger issues of life. He wanted to discuss the need for greater understanding between the Miami police and

the citizens of the city or how he felt it was absolutely incumbent upon those who had been blessed with resources and athletic skills to remain absolutely above question in their private lives.

He was colorful, but he was frustrating. They loved his quotes, they loved his spontaneity but sometimes they wished he was just a dumb jock.

As the reporters milled around some were already comparing notes on the great accomplishments of a young career that appeared to be ending all too soon. Speculation throughout the room as to why Carlos might retire covered every end of the spectrum... "I think he probably has grown tired of the shallowness and brutality of this sport, he's much too intellectual to be able to balance his own personal priorities with the schoolyard nature of football players," one said. Another hypothesized, "Last year was just horrendous for him and it probably took its toll. We saw this with Michael Jordan after his father was murdered. I think that Carlos' son's death was more than he could handle and even though he dedicated last season to his son's memory (and played as a man possessed, I might add) another season is probably more than he can bear. After all, you don't dedicate a second season to your dead child, do you?"

Some wondered if there was a hidden injury. Others felt that Carlos probably wanted to give himself full time to his charity work in the community. One reporter even floated the idea the Carlos was going back to his boyhood home in Lubbock to fill the vacant Athletic Director's position at Texas Tech. He'd often spoken of his dream of helping other underprivileged Hispanic youth and their aspirations of becoming someone. One time he'd even verbalized this vision to Chris Berman on ESPN's *UP CLOSE* program.

"If I ever would become a college coach or athletic director," Carlos had revealed, "my goal would be to benefit the student body at large and not just the kids who could run fast and jump high. I'd use my resources in

that position to touch more lives than just the one in a hundred who has the hand-eye coordination and stamina to be an athlete."

Carlos Herrera was, Indeed, an anomaly. He had the body of a giant and the soul of a poet. He was, for all of the NFL, the spiritual father.

Even when he was a rookie, fresh out of Jackie Sherrill's program at Texas A&M, he immediately picked up that role by his kindness and consideration of everyone affiliated with the NFL. If anyone in the league got in trouble in any way Carlos was available to help and encourage. It didn't matter if it was a Miami Dolphin or a Seattle Seahawk or a field judge from an officiating crew, Carlos was there. If someone lost a parent, Carlos would call and send flowers to the funeral. If there was a divorce Carlos would encourage and offer support to both parties. The recipients of his kindness weren't just players, they were equipment managers and team trainers and office secretaries.

In fact, this man was so focused on the concerns of others that he even chose to live in one of the most impoverished areas of Miami so that he could "be near the people". No one in the organization could believe that he would choose to put himself at such personal risk and though team officials had often implored him to move to a more protected location he just wouldn't do it.

Some of their concern was for him as a person but they also had to be realists. Football is big business and Carlos Herrera was an extremely valuable commodity on the field every Sunday. They couldn't afford to have him injured by some drunk or some junkie.

No one would have blamed him if he had put himself in the safety of a gated, restrictive community but this giant of a man just would not do it.

Carlos Herrera should have played for New Orleans for if the league had a saint it was this man. And that's what didn't make sense to the reporters who waited for the official announcement.

Granted, the loss of his son to the random gang violence was a terrible tragedy and the gathered reporters all agreed that they couldn't comprehend the sense of loss that Carlos must have felt, but if he were to quit football in his prime he would be basically diminishing the sphere of sizable influence that he had. Quitting now would make him front page news for about two days and the world would move on.

If Carlos were to continue with his magnificent career he would keep himself in the limelight for years to come and that would also enhance his ability to invest himself into the causes that he cared so very deeply about. Carlos Herrera's retirement just did not make sense.

Suddenly the side door to the room opened and Dolphin officials began to step up toward the rostrum. Jimmy Johnson came in and waved at the cameras but refused to acknowledge any questions. Wayne Huizenga, the owner of the team, walked into the room but his face didn't betray any emotion at all. Finally, Dan Marino stepped through the door with his arm around Carlos. Together they gathered near the mass of microphones attached to the podium.

When the reporters sat down and the room grew a bit quiet the team owner nodded toward his coach and general manager. Jimmy Johnson stepped forward and said, "Well, you're all dying to know what the big secret is and I can tell you right now I've never heard such rampant garbage being bantered about in all my years in football. Sometimes I wonder where you folks get your information!" Jimmy flashed his big grin and everyone in the room sensed that with a beginning like that there was not going to be a somber announcement following.

"I suppose there's no need to keep you in suspense, although the longer I stall the more I get to stand in front of the camera and you all know how I love that," he said sarcastically, for everyone in the room knew that Jimmy really *did* thrive on the limelight but never wanted anyone to believe that he did.

After the laughter died down the coach continued, "It seems that some of you expected to see Carlos here today wearing a Red Raider jacket. Well, the day may come when that's true but it won't be for the next four years. I'm pleased to announce that the Miami Dolphins have worked with Mr. Herrera to restructure his contract and that he will continue to be the dominant defensive force of the NFL and he will continue to do it in a Dolphin uniform. I'll ask Carlos to come up and share whatever he'd like with you and then we can answer some questions. Carlos..."

"Thank you, coach, and thank you all for being here today," the gentle giant said. "I'm honored to be able to say that I will remain with this franchise and I'm so grateful for the trust they've put in me for the next four years."

Carlos always spoke with a very distinct and measured pattern, as though he wanted to express exactly what he was feeling. "I'm grateful to Mr. Huizenga, to Coach Johnson, to my friend Dan here, and to everyone affiliated with this great organization. I'm thankful that I will be able to continue to contribute to this community and hope that I can return to this town just a bit of the love that I have received from Miami and her wonderful citizens.

"It will be a privilege for me to keep doing what I can to help the Dolphin organization and Miami. I pray every day that I don't fail any of you in the trust that you have put in me. That would be the least I could do no matter what I was paid. Thank you. "

"Wayne, Wayne..." the reporters began to shout, "Can you tell us about the contract?"

The team owner stepped to the podium and began to respond. "As you all know, it's not the policy of the Dolphins to reveal publicly the parameters of any contract. We feel that's a matter between the organization and an individual who has a right to his privacy.

"I can tell you this though, it is without apology that we have, today, signed a contract with this fine man that will make him, far and away, one of the highest paid players in the league and rightfully so. There isn't another man in this business who deserves this type of remuneration for what he gives this team both on the field and off of it."

At that moment Dan Marino stepped forward and said, "If I may, I'd like to say something here. Some of you may get the idea that there would be some jealousy from the rest of the team over this contract. I can assure you that, to a man, this is absolutely not so. Every member of this team knows what we'd be without Carlos. Every one of us knows that he is worth every penny that anyone would ever pay him for hell give more in return than any investment that is put into him."

"Carlos," one of the reporters shouted, "does this mean that you intend to play for at least four more years?"

"Of course," he looked a bit incredulous, "I signed a contract."

"But doesn't this mean that you'll delay doing some of the other things that you've spoken of wanting to try?"

"Yes, I suppose it does. But this also gives me a forum to do some things that I'd never get to do if I left the game at this point. I still have a lot of dreams for Miami."

Wayne Huizenga stepped forward again and leaned into the microphone. Carlos began to step aside to allow the owner the podium but Mr. Huizenga wouldn't allow him to leave. He reached up around the broad shoulders and held the linebacker near the microphone bank and said, "People, I wish you could understand something about this man. I know I've told you that I won't reveal the monetary details of the contract that we've signed but I want to clarify for you something about the agreement.

"This man is committed to the people of Miami. He doesn't just mouth these words," then he continued very intently, "he really lives them.

"We have contacted the NFL offices in New York and have been assured by the commissioner himself that we have a legitimate contract with Carlos. The stipulations of this contract are absolutely unique in sports.

"Carlos has requested that we pay him on two levels. He has asked that he personally receive only 5% of his contract for his own uses. The other 95% will be invested into a trust fund in honor of the memory of his son, Michael.

"The money in that trust is going to be administered by a select team of business leaders and clergymen, with Carlos approving every expenditure.

"The direct focus of this fund will be to establish counseling and tutoring and recreational centers throughout south Florida. Children from all walks of life will be encouraged to come and receive the benefit of this money by having a safe place to play, be challenged with unique and fascinating educational opportunities, and meet with people who care and listen.

"By Carlos' stipulation every child who enters these facilities will have at least one staff member pray with them every day."

"Five percent?", one of the reporters called out. "Can you really live on that?"

Carlos almost looked perturbed. "Of course I can. I will live as many of the people who pay all of our salaries live, what's the disgrace in that?"

"But Carlos, think of your position in the community."

Carlos looked astounded and retorted, "I am!"

Another reporter chimed in, "Does this mean that you won't be moving into a nicer, safer neighborhood?"

"Why would I do that?", he quickly responded. "Exactly what would make you think that I would have to somehow decided now that I need a fancier home? If that would have been a priority with me I could have done it four years ago when Mr. Huizenga gave me such a generous contract as I came out of A&M."

"Cmon, Carlos," one of the local Miami Herald beat writers cut in, "You know the risks. I would think that anyone who went through the terrible experience that you did a year-and-a-half ago would recognize the necessity of tending to your own safety."

"Look," he said intently, "I don't expect most people to understand. I'm not stupid, I know that there are nicer, easier places to live and that I could have a life that's a lot more focused on my security and comfort. But when I look at the mass of people in our community who don't have those options I feel some obligation toward them."

Carlos leaned his 6'4" 240 pound frame down upon the podium and spoke very distinctly, "When Mikey was killed in that drive-by a lot of me wanted to just leave the city and never come back. But I thought that

would not be much of an honor to his memory. Just because I suffer this loss I abandon the people who make up this town? I couldn't do it."

Suddenly his voiced dropped an his tears began to well up, "You folks think that I've suffered such a terrible tragedy because I'm a celebrity? Well, I'll tell you this, every day in this city there are mothers and fathers who lose their children to violence and addictions and senselessness and no one views them as tragedies because they are the nameless mass. If I were to leave them behind who would care about them. Who is going to tend to the dreams that they have for their children?"

The hulking linebacker's words took the wind out of the sails of the gathering and the press conference quickly came to an end. Reporters began to head out into the hallways and to the parking lot, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Some were thinking about deadlines, others mulled over their perceptions of a man who would live life as Carlos Herrera did. Others only cared to get out before the rush hour swamped the freeway, and most just wanted to find a way to get away from the stadium without having to go through the rough neighborhoods that surrounded the facility.

Keith Maxson, a football columnist for The Orlando Sentinel, was walking across the parking lot when he heard footsteps running behind him. He heard someone call his name, "Mr. Maxson!" The reporter turned to see the large, graceful frame of #54 approaching. He stopped, wondering what this man might wish of him.

"Mr. Maxson, I wonder if you could do me a favor?"

"Sure, Carlos, just name it," the reporter responded. "Anything."

"Hey, I wonder if you could give me a lift home?"

Maxson was thunderstruck. Before he even considered the words he blurted out, "You've been making 2.7 million dollars a year and you don't even own a car?"

Carlos looked down at him curiously and asked, 'Do you have a problem with that?'

And now , O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah,
judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard.

What could have been done more to my vineyard,
that I have not done for it?

- Isaiah 5:3.4