

How the Miami Dolphins Fell Apart

[Email](#)
[Print](#)
[Save](#)
[4 Comments](#)

 By [KEVIN CLARK](#) [CONNECT](#)

Updated Nov. 14, 2013 5:33 p.m. ET



Kicker Caleb Sturgis (No. 9) was drafted by the Dolphins to replace five-year starter Dan Carpenter. *The Palm Beach Post/Zuma Press*

In April, in the fifth round of the NFL draft, the Miami Dolphins selected Caleb Sturgis, a kicker from Florida. He signed with the team for an annual salary of \$406,000.

To the larger world, this was a routine and uneventful transaction. But in interviews with current and former NFL players, player agents and team executives familiar with the inner workings of the Dolphins, the news hit team members like a bomb.

The Dolphins already had a kicker, a five-year starter named Dan Carpenter who was well-liked by everyone and good at his job. To NFL insiders, the subtext was clear: Carpenter's \$2.7 million salary was getting expensive for a kicker, and NFL teams don't take kickers in the draft unless they plan to use them.

The writing was on the wall. Carpenter was on his way out.

To Miami's team leaders, who'd grown weary of management's tendency to cast off popular veterans, the decision was a gut punch. They didn't plan to accept the move without making their displeasure known.

Seven months later, the Dolphins are a shambles. After spending a staggering \$146 million on free agents in the off-season—at least \$10 million more than any other NFL

[Enlarge Image](#)

 Dan Carpenter *Getty Images*

team—they have lost starting guard Richie Incognito, who was suspended by the team for disciplinary reasons, and starting tackle Jonathan Martin, who left the team over what he has described as a culture of harassment and bullying.

After being a trendy preseason pick to win the AFC East, the Dolphins are 4-5 and a long shot to make the playoffs. The team is the subject of an NFL investigation, and its locker-room environment is being held up as an example of the dysfunctional culture of the NFL.

Whatever the investigation reveals, people familiar with the Dolphins said these problems reflect a broader mistake of management: a temptation to undersell the importance of leadership.

"When you look at the Miami Dolphins and you look at how they jettisoned their veterans, it was all a recipe for disaster and it's no surprise they are embroiled in this controversy with Richie at the center," said Louis Riddick, the former personnel director for the Philadelphia Eagles and now an analyst with ESPN. "You think veterans are replaceable but then players emerge as leaders that shouldn't because they say 'I might as well do it' and it's not the kind of people you want young players turning to."

Riddick put the blame squarely on Jeff Ireland, the Dolphins' general manager. "Mistakes of character are on the personnel staff exclusively," he said.

Ireland declined to comment. Incognito and Martin also declined to comment. Incognito has defended himself from the most serious allegations, such as sending voice mails and text messages to Martin with racial slurs, saying he isn't a racist and that this is "not an issue of bullying." Martin hasn't commented on the matter.

In the peculiar economy of the NFL, the amount of money a team can spend on salaries is fixed by a salary cap. This season the total is \$123 million per team. As a result, the process of building a roster is essentially a zero-sum game. To bolster one part of a team you have to steal resources from another—and any decision about a player is subject to a brutal cost calculus.

The upside of this system is that with some smarts and a little luck, any team should be able to engineer its way to the playoffs. The downside is that if you replace the wrong players, or too many players, you risk destroying the great intangible asset of a football team: the chemistry and camaraderie inside the locker room.

Over the last 10 seasons, the Dolphins have been the NFL's most transient franchise. They have had five head coaches, two interim head coaches, four personnel decision makers and two owners. Since Ireland joined the team before the 2008 season, Miami has gone through 1,034 players—more than all but a handful of other teams.

Ireland had never had full control of an NFL team until 2010 when he was given the reins by Miami's owner, Stephen Ross. Since then, Ireland and Dawn Aponte, the team's executive vice president of football administration, have earned a reputation for taking a hard line.

According to salary-cap expert and former NFL agent Joel Corry, the Dolphins are known as the toughest negotiators on everything from rookie contracts on down.

The general practice in the NFL is to keep re-signing your core, high-character players to maintain continuity in the locker room. But this off-season, the Dolphins took a different approach. To help speed the transition to the passing scheme and zone-blocking system favored by their second-year coach, Joe Philbin, Ireland let go three of the team's widely acknowledged leaders—running back Reggie Bush, offensive tackle Jake Long and linebacker Karlos Dansby. The money saved was used on high-price free agents who had never played in Miami.

One of the consequences of the move is that all four of the players who had been elected to the team's player-leadership council the season before were cut loose—something NFL experts said they can't remember happening before.

The leadership void created an opening for Incognito, who had landed in Miami in 2010 after a few years in St. Louis. By the time 2013 came around, he was one of the team's longer-tenured players. He was elected by teammates to the leadership council.

Former NFL pro scout Daniel Hatman said the major mistake the Dolphins made is that they "mixed and matched" to build a team, a philosophy that, he said, "leads to new faces, guys trying to learn their roles and guys like Richie getting sway."

The "new" Dolphins, these people said, weren't happy about the departures. And one move Ireland made that galled everyone, they said, was his decision to save money by pushing aside the solid veteran Carpenter for the less-expensive Sturgis.

To add to the problem, Ireland didn't cut Carpenter immediately—a move that would have allowed him to start fresh with another team. (Ireland and the coaching staff said at the time that the kickers were in an open competition.) Instead, Carpenter had to show up at training camp knowing he would eventually be released and sent to find another team just before the season began.

According to people familiar with the situation, the team's veteran special-teams players weren't shy about their opposition to the move, which they considered unnecessarily cruel. Their response, these people say, was to ostracize Sturgis. They barely acknowledged his presence.

A common scene through workouts and training camp, they said, was Sturgis kicking alone into a net in the team's practice bubble while Carpenter, punter Brandon Fields and long snapper John Denney kept a distance.

The silent treatment became the talk of camp among the players, these people said. They said Sturgis never complained and never confronted anyone. The situation continued until Carpenter's release in mid-August.

Sturgis and Carpenter declined to comment. Fields said that as the holder for field goals, he spoke with Sturgis at times. He said he isn't sure how many words Carpenter and Sturgis exchanged, if any, and that the situation was tense. "If someone else is brought in to take your job, there will be uneasiness," he said.

Denney said he also spoke with Sturgis professionally and didn't freeze him out, but said there was a distance between Sturgis and the veterans. "We've all been the new guy and you just don't show up and become best friends with the guys you work with."

Carpenter, now with the Buffalo Bills, has made 90% of his kicks this season, including one with 33 seconds left to beat the Dolphins in October. Sturgis was perfect through his first four games and has made 15 of his 20 attempts as a professional.

Riddick, the former Eagles executive, said players such as Long, Bush and Dansby, whom the Dolphins let go, had displayed "credibility and trustworthiness." All NFL players, he said, "like being around players like that. Young players want to be like them. When you wipe that out you are creating a huge black hole."

Write to Kevin Clark at kevin.clark@wsj.com