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Sparano encouraged by Dolphins' progress

By Alex Marvez

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Updated: June 13, 2008, 10:56 AM EST

Tony Sparano's office is dim because of an aversion to light, not the giant shadow cast by his boss.

When Bill Parcells accepted the Miami Dolphins' offer to become its top football executive, Sparano was his head-coaching choice to help lead the Dolphins from the darkness.

The initial reaction from Dolphins fans: Did we just hire the guy from "The Sopranos?"

No new head coach in the Dolphins' 43-year history received such little fanfare. Sparano didn't have the glossy profile of predecessors like Nick Saban and Jimmy Johnson let alone lesser names like Cam Cameron and Dave Wannstedt. Even the banner advertisement on the team's web site touting "A New Beginning" gives Sparano third billing behind Parcells and new general manager Jeff Ireland.

Not that Sparano is complaining. The former Dallas Cowboys offensive line coach actually enjoyed his initial anonymity outside of Dolphins headquarters.

"As of late, it's been a little bit harder," Sparano admits.

The Jason Taylor situation has made it that way. Sparano's first major splash on the South Florida sports landscape came last month when he lambasted the star defensive end. Sparano was furious Taylor chose to spend his off-season on Dancing With the Stars rather than boogying in the team's off-season workout program.

Such harsh comments harkened memories of Parcells, who had Sparano on his Dallas coaching staff for four years (2003 to 2006).

Taylor wants a trade and still hasn't reported for off-season work. But both sides are now in regular contact, which seemingly increases the odds that Taylor will return for training camp.

Asked how he sees the Taylor situation being ultimately resolved, Sparano said, "The ball is in Jason's court. Jason knows exactly how I feel about him, and I think right now he knows how Bill and Jeff feel about him. We want him back."

Because of his background and low profile with the media this offseason, Sparano's blunt comments toward Taylor may have surprised some Dolphins faithful. But they didn't shock those partaking in Sparano's attempts to resurrect the NFL's worst team in 2007.

Unlike Cameron in his lone season as Miami's head coach, Sparano has impressed players with his frankness and approachability.

"You like to know where you stand all the time," said tight end Anthony Fassano, one of five Cowboys players who followed Sparano to Miami. "It's good for the team not to have any doubts or wonder how he's feeling. You might need some tough skin now and again, but in the long run it's good for you."

Defensive end Vonnie Holliday thought his first meeting with Sparano would last five minutes. Instead, it went for more

than a half hour. Holliday, one of Miami's team leaders, has met extensively with Sparano since.

"He wants to know you as a person and that's important," Holliday said. "It's not a facade. He wants guys who can play ball, are good guys and not a problem. I think you can see that in terms of some of the guys he's gotten rid of around here."

No club has experienced a more tumultuous decade than the Dolphins. Miami has burnt through four other head coaches, four personnel chiefs, seven offensive coordinators and an NFL-high 13 starting quarterbacks.

The changes continued this offseason when Sparano only kept two assistants from last year's coaching staff. A roster shake-up soon followed. The Dolphins have 47 new players and, by having first dibs on any waiver claims because of last year's record, probably aren't done tinkering.

"I've been part of these building processes," said Sparano, whose first three NFL teams finished with a combined 19-45 record. "If you're 1-15 or 5-11, you didn't win. You've got to fix it."

Sparano saw first-hand how Parcells rebuilt the Cowboys and describes the ability to lean on his mentor for advice as a "comforting thing." Having the backing of an imposing figure like Parcells, who was not made available for this story, also resonates through the Dolphins locker room.

"Expectations are high," said Holliday, one of only 10 Dolphins remaining from four seasons ago. "Everybody knows (Parcells') reputation speaks for itself. If you don't meet those expectations, you won't be here."

The Dolphins have too many question marks — especially at quarterback — to garner consideration as a serious playoff contender. There is also uncertainty as to how Sparano will fare on game days as a head coach, a position he hasn't held since 1998 at a Division II college program (the University of New Haven).

Still, there were encouraging signs of a turnaround as the Dolphins concluded their offseason practice schedule Thursday. Running back Ronnie Brown, who was en route to a breakthrough 2007 campaign before injuring a knee, worked with the starting offense for the first time since getting hurt. Jake Long, the draft's top overall pick, is already under contract and entrenched at left tackle. Sparano said he was "pleasantly surprised" with the team's secondary and happy with the improvement shown by the team's defensive front. Overall team fitness has greatly improved under a much more stringent strength and conditioning program.

Sparano also will benefit from having a team coming off what he and Parcells clearly won't accept going forward: A 1-15 season.

Like Holliday says, "There's nowhere to go but up."

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