

MIAMI DOLPHINS NOVEMBER 3, 2015

Sports psychologists aim to help Miami Dolphins win mind games

HIGHLIGHTS

Mental health professionals a fixture in Dolphins headquarters

Team captains meet weekly with Oklahoma-based team of counselors

The reviews among players have been positive — for the most part



BY ADAM H. BEASLEY

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After practice Monday, Mike Pouncey went through his normal routine.

He showered, dressed, spoke to the media and then left the locker room for a meeting.

The catch: His appointment wasn't with the Dolphins' line coach or his offensive coordinator.

It was with the team of health professionals employed by the franchise to get the most out of its players — mentally as well as physically.

Stephen Ross has directed his organization to find non-traditional ways to improve the team's performance, and mental health — once a taboo subject around the league — is part of the initiative.

The Dolphins have contracted the work out to Mastery Technologies, an Oklahoma-based outfit led by Curt Cronin, a former Navy Seal, and Dr. Jay Ferraro — a partnership packaged as “the Seal and the Shrink.”

Several times a week, representatives from the firm fly to South Florida to counsel Dolphins players and coaches, both on an individual basis and in groups.

In Dolphins headquarters, the mental health professionals are called “peak performance coaches.” Sports psychology is a part of what they do, but the counseling goes well beyond sitting a player down on the couch after a bad loss.

“I think those guys are good for our football team,” Pouncey said. “They keep everything whole, especially when there's problems. Guys have real issues outside of football sometimes, so it's good to have someone to talk to that's on-base.”

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John Denney, Dolphins long snapper

As a captain, Pouncey has a weekly meeting with teammates, interim coach Dan Campbell and members of Mastery Technologies' staff.

Leadership building is a big part of what they do. So is helping along the maturation process for Miami's rookies.

But the details of exactly how it all works is a bit of a mystery — probably by design.

“It's not foreign for professional athletes to seek professional, psychological help,” said Dolphins long snapper John Denney, who has met with members of Cronin's staff. “There are sports psychologists all over the place. The Dolphins facilitated that process. Instead of having to go out and find your own, they offer it for everyone.”

In addition to one-on-one counseling, Mastery Technologies holds seminars intended to help players sharpen their mental edge, as well as recognize their bodies' strengths and weaknesses.

They've also had Dolphins players monitor their vitals on their smartphones in an effort to train them to stay calm and move on to the next play when things inevitably go awry.

A big part of sports psychology is teaching athletes how to block out external noise that clutter the mind, and Mastery Technologies' program is no different.

“Your whole life, you've prepared,” Denney said. “You've been training, you've been doing this work. Your body has this muscle memory that you've created, not allowing your mind to overtake those things, but to rely on your preparation, not to become a mental midget.”

Has it made the difference in terms of wins or losses? Hard to say. Certainly, the team hasn't played up to Ross' expectations through seven games, costing Joe Philbin his job.

But the Dolphins believe there's a long-term benefit to their investment. They've paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to Mastery Technologies over the past two seasons, and given Ross' ownership philosophy, it's hard to think sports psychology will go away any time soon.

Plus, the Dolphins believe the sessions have helped foster the type of environment that they want in the building.

And it has this added benefit: Many players like it, Pouncey and Denney included.

Many — but not all.

The firm's best-known initiative — they had the Dolphins cancel the last day of spring minicamps and instead train with Navy Seals — was panned privately by at least one prominent player.

Furthermore, veterans Olivier Vernon and Lamar Miller both said that they have never met with the counselors; Vernon added with a grin: “I haven't spoken to the sports shrink.”

But Bobby McCain, a rookie defensive back whose on-field role has increased in recent weeks, is a fan.

“They don't make it mandatory, but we don't mind going in, because it helps,” McCain said. “They do a great job, if you're down and out, just giving you ways to boost yourself up. And if you're up and if you're on and if you're doing well, they give you ways that you can just keep doing what you're doing.”

- As expected, the Dolphins made no deals ahead of Tuesday's NFL trade deadline.
- Five more players were added to the Dolphins' 50th anniversary team: Bob Baumhower, Sam Madison, Dwight Stephenson, Zach Thomas, Garo Yepremian.

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