



Don Shula, to critics of Miami Dolphins' Adam Gase: 'Give him a chance'

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Don Shula (right) signs a football for Jupiter's William Gogan, the winner of a national "SweepSteaks" drawing for a five-day, all-inclusive trip to Sicily. The Shulas and the Gogans met for lunch Sunday afternoon at the Fort Lauderdale location of Shula Burger. (Hal Habib / The Palm Beach Post)

FORT LAUDERDALE — One Miami Dolphins coach who enjoyed immediate success was reflecting over lunch Sunday afternoon about another Miami Dolphins coach who enjoyed immediate success.

The only difference is that for an encore, the speaker — Don Shula — won a couple of Super Bowls while the second coach — Adam Gase — is left wondering what went wrong.

Dolphins fans are, too. A year ago, they were sure the Dolphins had finally hired the right guy, but today, some aren't so sure about Gase.

“Give him a chance,” Shula said. “The guy proved that he could do it. And you know everybody at one time or another has an off year. Give him a chance to bounce back and utilize his ability.”

Gase met Shula shortly after taking the job in January 2016, and the two have forged a bond before our eyes on many a Sunday afternoon. There would be Shula, 88, in a golf cart, on the Dolphins' sideline during warmups at Hard Rock Stadium. And there would be Gase, making sure he took time to pay respects to Dolphins royalty.

“I enjoyed going to games,” Shula said. “Go down on the field before the game and saying hello to the coach. He's a good guy, Adam. I like him — everything I know or have seen about him. I'm not an expert on him, but I like his mannerisms.”

Shula may not be an “expert” on Gase, but he is on the path traveled by him. Shula was only 40 when he was named Dolphins coach in January 1970. A year later, he had the Dolphins in the playoffs and 23 months later, they were in the Super Bowl.



Don Shula, with Hall of Famers Larry Csonka and Larry Little, is a familiar presence on the pregame sideline at Hard Rock Stadium. (Allen Eyestone / The Palm Beach Post)

Gase was 37 when the Dolphins hired him. One year and one day later, he had the Dolphins in the playoffs. But that's where similarities end. It took Shula seven years before he had one of those off years he referred to; Gase's first losing season was 6-10 this year.

“Good players, good assistants, good organization,” Shula said in explaining how he pulled off two Super Bowl championships within four years of arriving. “All those things have to fit together. You can't do one without the other. So as a coach, you've got to put it together. You've got to know where your strengths and your weaknesses are. You build on your strengths and try to uplift your weaknesses.”

Gase inherited many on the current roster. The assistants are his — or were, since he's taking a sledgehammer to the staff. Shula figures Gase deserves a couple of more years before anyone judges what he can do.

"I think he should be entitled to that," Shula said.

Since he is Don Shula, he got to have lunch Sunday on the house, at a place that put his name in lights. It was at Shula Burger on the 17th Street Causeway in Fort Lauderdale, honoring Jupiter's William Gogan for winning a national "SweepSteaks" drawing for a five-day, all-inclusive trip to Sicily in April.

Over a casual, two-hour meal of burgers, fries, onion rings and beer (Diet Pepsi for The Coach), the Gogans and Shulas mixed talk of football and world travels.



David Shula unveils a mural depicting his Hall of Fame father, Don Shula, at Hard Rock Stadium on Sept. 22, 2016. (Hal Habib / The Palm Beach Post)

Afghanistan? Been there, Shula said, on a trip to honor the military. A rewarding experience? Certainly it was, even though wife Mary Anne explained it was not all smooth sailing. There was a helicopter flight to an outpost in which they had to wear 40-pound bulletproof vests and were surrounded by heavily armed personnel. They didn't question the need for either the moment the chopper came under fire. After the pilot scurried them out of there, pronto, she inquired as to just how much danger they'd been in. Whatever amount it was for them, came the response, it wasn't nearly as much as for the guys firing from down below. That's the kind of defense the Shulas can appreciate. But they arrived at another stop to learn a suicide bomber had struck the area only hours prior.

Diners passed the table, did a double-take and fiddled around to open the camera app on their phones.

"Thirty-five dollars," Shula told each. "Two for \$70." Then, Shula would laugh that grandfatherly laugh that his startled old players only lately discovered had been locked deep down inside for years. He clasped a young boy's hand for one photo, making sure to do so as just the right angle so his diamond ring from the Pro Football Hall of Fame glistened for the lens.

“Who do you like today?” someone asked.

“Anybody but Belichick,” said Shula, who made headlines years ago when he referred to the Patriots’ Bill Belichick as “Beli-cheat.”

Don Shula was a stickler for ethics then; he’s a stickler still. But he does respect New England quarterback Tom Brady, 40 — so much so, the obvious question was how Shula would compare Brady to Dan Marino.

“I think nobody has thrown it or will ever throw it any better than Marino,” Shula said. “He had a lightning-fast release. That ball came out like lightning. Brady is more of a field general.”

Maybe so, but Marino could talk like he had five stars on his shoulders.

“We were in a critical situation one time and it was a timeout,” Shula told Gogan. “And he comes over to the sideline and I was asking everybody what they liked and I get to Dan and I said, ‘Dan, what do you like?’ He said, ‘Throw the (expletive).’

“Fun days.”

Know what else was fun? That Monday night in 1985 when the Dolphins spoiled the Bears’ perfect season 38-24 to protect the legacy of Miami’s 17-0.

“Kicked their ass, big time,” Shula said.

Some players on the ’73 team will tell you it was better than the ’72 team, the key words being “tell you.” Try telling that to Shula.

“You know how you keep track of that?” Shula said. “They have what they call ‘scores.’ ”

However proud he was that day they beat Washington to complete 17-0, he might be even more proud today.

“I would have thought that it could happen again — that if we did it, it wouldn’t be that hard for somebody to do again,” Shula said. “But the fact that they haven’t tells you how tough it was to do.”

It’s tough winning them all in this league. As the current Dolphins coach knows, it’s tough winning even some.

“Hopefully, he’ll make it,” Shula said.



The Gogan family and Shula wrap up following lunch Sunday. (Hal Habib / The Palm Beach Post)