

Hot Dogging It

An innocent sideline snack offers a valuable lesson on playing through adversity

Much ado was made about New York Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez eating a hot dog during a television timeout in the Jets' game against the Oakland Raiders on October 25, a game that the Jets won handily. Sanchez wasn't the first ballplayer to be seen eating something less than nutritious during an NFL game, nor is he the first athlete to be seen eating a hot dog in uniform. The expansive Dallas Cowboys tackle Nate Newton was once spotted devouring a Snickers bar on the sidelines. And major league pitcher Terry Forster, whom David Letterman referred to as a "fat tub of goo," occasionally had a hot dog in the bullpen during a baseball game. Forster, as self-effacing a guy as there ever was, ended up revealing in his own caricature, even appearing on Letterman's show.

It would be tempting to paint *l'affaire* Sanchez in a cartoonish way and simply let it serve as fodder for late-night TV comedians. However, as President Obama might say, I think there is a "teachable moment" in this episode. In fact, Sanchez's candid and apologetic comments after the game helped to underscore a lesson that I think is one of the most important discoveries a child can make through participation in youth sports.

What Sanchez explained, still in uniform on the field, was that he had been feeling queasy during the week, had a terrible stomachache before the game, couldn't eat much and felt that he needed to get something into his stomach during the game. (As an aside, why there were no energy bars or other more suitable nutrition on the sidelines remains a mystery.) Nevertheless, Sanchez performed admirably in the game even before eating his mustard-laden hot dog.

This was undoubtedly not the first time that Sanchez did not feel 100 percent ready for a game, yet it probably

By Bob Latham

was the first time he had to make a public explanation that revealed his condition. Therein lies the teachable moment. It is tempting to look at pro athletes and see them in world-class condition and not realize that they have to struggle with the same things that everyone else struggles with in

In sports, you learn how to produce your "A" game even though you have a headache or a sore throat.

day-to-day life—a cold or the flu, a sleepless night, a noisy neighbor, emotional upset and the like. Generally, when these things happen in children's lives, they are "excused." If they are sick on the day of the history test, they can make up the test. A note from the doctor or from a concerned mother, and that headache will get them out of PE class.

So how does a child learn that you're not entitled to always feel good when you have to do something of consequence? The answer is through participation in sports. To be sure, other events might allow you a limited time to perform—that school play is happening on only two days, and those might be the two days after you've suffered food poisoning. But no endeavor in a child's life matches sports for consistently teaching the lesson that the event will go on without them, no matter how they are feeling. And so rather than looking for reasons to get out of that event, they learn how to deal with it.

Sanchez helped reveal that those sorts of moments happen more often than we know in pro sports. Athletes overcoming sickness are part of sports mythology. Perhaps the most legendary of "flu games" was Game 5 of

the 1997 NBA finals in which Michael Jordan could barely get out of bed with dehydration, fever and sweating. The series between the Chicago Bulls and the Utah Jazz was tied 2-2, and Jordan rallied from his sickbed to score 38 points and lead the Bulls to a tight victory, before he virtually collapsed into Scottie Pippen's arms. But that was a one-off game that was dramatized to the point of not being translatable to the mere mortal.

Sanchez's situation was much more accessible—and as a result it becomes a much more teachable moment.

The sign of a professional is being able to do something well even if you don't feel

like it. There is no asterisk by anyone's name when the results of the Masters are published saying: "Would have finished higher if his sinus condition hadn't been aggravated in Augusta." In sports, you learn how to produce your "A" game even though you have a headache or sore throat.

If you've been through enough sporting events where you weren't feeling up to snuff physically or emotionally, but soldiered on and got the job done, that will serve you well on the day of the SAT test when your biorhythms are down. And it will serve you well in adulthood when that presentation you have to make to close a critical sale takes place after a stomach virus has hit in the middle of the night.

Thus, rather than stand as the brunt of many jokes, let's let Mark Sanchez and his hot dog symbolize a guy going out and doing a hard job and doing it well on a day when he really didn't feel like it. And unlike with most would-be scandalous behavior in sports, let's hope that the kids were watching. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the Texas-based law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and is a former chairman of USA Rugby. He can be reached at blatham@jw.com.