

from the EDITOR **Andy Cohen**



# On their way, just not there yet

Pennington remains the most prominent positive; the secondary is still the biggest concern

Hope and reality.

It has become the storyline of this season for the Miami Dolphins.

We saw hope in four straight victories. We saw a harsh reality as that streak came to an end against the New England Patriots.

The hope is that this franchise is now heading in the right direction, that it has a quarterback in Chad Pennington who will lead this team to some impressive victories, that it has a group of young players who form an impressive nucleus.

That's hope.

The reality is that this is still a terribly flawed team, that the upside can only be so great for a team that was on its way to 1-15 just a Thanksgiving ago. The reality is that the secondary still has major concerns, that wide receiver still lacks an impact player and that the special teams need continued attention.

That's reality.

When hope and reality intersected against the Patriots, you had a packed house for the first time this season, you had a surge of electricity that we last felt about five years ago, you had a game that got the attention of the rest of the league and, sadly, you also had an ending that was saturated with disappointment.

The Dolphins are on their way. Don't lose sight of that.

The Dolphins aren't there yet. Don't lose sight of that, either.

The fact that there was such disappointment after that 20-point loss to the Patriots only tells you how far things have come. A season ago, this type of loss would have been greeted with a long, drawn-out yawn and a shrug. But now there is anger, and that's good. There is anger that the Dolphins could have been 7-4 and could have been a game out of first place in the AFC East.

Yes, even after this loss, the Dolphins still mattered and that is so encouraging to see. They mattered because there is no remaining opponent that the Dolphins can't beat, that when things fall just right they are capable of impressive things, that with five games left, as Tony Sparano put it, "We can still get to where we want to be."

Credit for this starts with Bill Parcells, Jeff Ireland and Sparano and quickly spreads into the lap of Pennington. It can't be overstated what the arrival of a legitimate quarterback means to this franchise. Even in the loss to the Patriots, the Dolphins were still within striking distance early in the fourth quarter and that's because Pennington carried this offense on his shoulders.

Talk of Chad Henne getting his shot needs to be shelved. Sure, he'll get his shot. Any number of events can dictate that. But Pennington is 32 years old and he's



Chad Pennington had a big day throwing the ball against New England, but he also showed some running ability on this 7-yard scramble for a touchdown.

Digest Photo/MICKI LEWIS

not going anywhere. It is so refreshing to watch him play. The accuracy. The emotion. The leadership. He has been what the Dolphins have been waiting for since Dan Marino was in his prime and his skills will not erode for several more seasons.

Get Pennington an impact receiver to take some of the burden off Ted Ginn Jr. and Greg Camarillo, and suddenly you'll have a first-rate group to go with an up-and-coming offensive line.

That's all about hope.

But the reality is the defense remains far behind, that hidden beneath those four straight victories was the fact that none of those teams were blessed with quality quarterback play, that the Dolphins were able to hide their own weaknesses because the talent on the other side just wasn't that formidable.

They weren't as fortunate against the Patriots. Matt Cassel has quickly matured into a top-tier quarterback. Couple that with the fact that Bill Belichick was smart enough to see these limitations on the Dolphins defense, specifically in a secondary that is short in both depth and playmakers. When Belichick sees a weakness, he attacks like a shark in a feeding frenzy. Once it became clear that the Dolphins couldn't apply consistent pressure on Cassel like they did in their first meeting, then it was only a matter of time.

You can only disguise your limitations for so long. The Dolphins need some major changes in the secondary. When nickel back Jason Allen is isolated on Randy Moss, bad things are going to happen. Tackles are going

to be missed. Big plays are going to occur. That Cassel rang up more than 400 yards through the air was certainly disheartening. But if you really look closely, could it have been that surprising?

Who do you blame for this deficiency in the secondary? Nobody, really.

It is impossible to fill as many leaks as the Dolphins had when last season came to an end. Certainly not in one offseason. Just about the entire team needed an overhaul. Parcells and Ireland had to pick their spots. It was determined that the priorities needed to be on the offensive and defensive lines.

You can't dispute that thinking. Good teams are built from the front to the back. Parcells has made a career doing just that. They got lucky with Pennington and they were fortunate to trade for a couple of starters in tight end Anthony Fasano and linebacker Akin Ayodele.

The secondary had to wait. For another draft. Another free agency.

Other things had to wait as well. A young nose tackle. Another linebacker. That big-play receiver. So there is your list of priorities for the offseason.

But that is still a long way off. These Dolphins will win more games this season. Even with four of the last five on the road, they will make things interesting and, who knows, can still realistically challenge for a spot in the playoffs.

That is the hope that this team has rightfully earned. Now, if they can only figure out a way to limit those doses of reality.