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Sparano laughed and said: "Good, you got the message." That's another thing about Sparano. He's already shown more of a sense of humor than Saban did in two full seasons or Cameron did all of last year.

It seems not a day goes by now where Sparano doesn't throw out a line that has the media laughing. Clearly, he is comfortable in his new role.

And based on what we've seen, it's not unreasonable to think that Sparano will be in that role for a while. Certainly longer than either Saban or Cameron, and maybe longer than Dave Wannstedt (four-plus seasons) and Jimmy Johnson (four seasons, too).

Unlike Saban, he can relate to NFL players. Unlike Cameron, he can command respect. Unlike Wannstedt, he appears to have the make-up of a head coach. And unlike Johnson, he didn't come into this job at the end of his career.

No, for Sparano, this is the start of something. He and the Dolphins are hoping it's something big.

"I never came into this league to be a position coach," said Sparano, who was an assistant for eight seasons with Cleveland, Washington, Jacksonville and Dallas prior to joining the Dolphins on Jan. 16. "I came into this league to be a head coach. I have an opportunity right now and I'm not stupid. I know that this is just an opportunity. I'm going to work my tail off to try to do the best that we can do here for the Miami Dolphins."

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Digest Photo/RICHARD C. LEWIS



Different perspective from Jeanette Sparano

By ANDY COHEN
Editor

To really know Tony Sparano, you have to know his family. You have to understand the sacrifices his wife Jeanette makes in helping raise two sons and a daughter. You have to feel the bond that they share, and how proud they all are that her husband and their father is getting to live out a dream.

"A lot of people work their whole life to get a position they really want, and don't get there," said Jeanette. "Tony realizes every day that he did get there and he's going to do everything in his power to embrace it and make it a success."

Jeanette and Tony Sparano have been married for 23 years. They met in high school. And she has been at his side ever since, clearly the Most Valuable Player of the most important team in his life.

"Tony just isn't a stick-your-toe-in-the-water type of guy," Jeanette says. "He just dives in head first. Even if he didn't know how to swim, he'd find a way to make it work and by the end of the day he'd probably win a gold medal. He just will work until it's right."

Talk to Jeanette and she can give you a unique perspective into the man who is coaching the Miami Dolphins, how he is a wonderful father even if he can't be there for his children on a regular basis, how he tries to separate football from home life,

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even though he replays every down in his mind hours after the game is over.

"I'll tell him to try to take a break for an hour, to recharge a little bit," Jeanette says. "But it's never really out of his mind. It just means so much to him."

Tony Sparano isn't looking for pats on the back or special tributes. On a recent Friday night, the mayor of West Haven, Conn., flew to South Florida with about 35 other people to present Sparano with the key to the city. They had a dinner in his honor. Sparano apologized that he could only stay an hour or so. There was a game two days later and players to get ready.

Jeanette recalled: "He said to me, 'Honey, why are they doing this for me? I don't deserve it.' He needs to understand people are really proud of him."

Then there is Tony Sparano, the father. His two sons are playing football at the University at Albany.

Tony, a redshirt senior, is a defensive end. Andy, a sophomore, is a center. His daughter, Ryan, is a junior at Archbishop McCarthy, a few miles from training camp. She plays softball there.

It absolutely drives Sparano bonkers that he can't watch his two sons play football. "Some of that," Jeanette says, "is because his father was always there for him. He was his Pop Warner coach."

Sparano did fly to Delaware on the Dolphins' bye week in September to see his sons play. He also got to see them play twice last year when he was offensive line coach with the Dallas Cowboys. But that can't fill the void. So while Jeanette attends most of their games by herself, Tony sits at home with his laptop computer, listening as best he can to the Internet broadcast.

"Three times this year the games were webcast," Jeanette said. "That was a treat for Tony."

Jeanette and the three children understand what this job means to Tony, and when he talks of "loving it" they feel that passion whenever they are around him. When you get to do something you have waited for your entire life, it is your family who often can appreciate it most.

"It just means so much to him," Jeanette says. "He wants so much to help these players, these coaches, the entire organization. I couldn't be happier that Tony has reached a great place in his life."