



Reflections of a River Rat:

Keep the conspiracy theories out of sports

By Jim Holleran

Charles Barkley plays the bonehead in TV ads during the NCAA men's basketball tournament. He drives to Annapolis rather than Indianapolis. He wears ridiculous get-ups. He arranges transportation to the Final Four in Atlanta on "The Midnight Train to Georgia."



Despite all his March Madness, Sir Charles can be insightful about teams and situations when critiquing games as a studio analyst. He issued one of his best shots on the Covid-19 vaccination debate last week.

"Everybody should be vaccinated. Period," he said. "The only people who are not vaccinated are just a--holes."

Crass but true.

That brings us to Buffalo Bills wide receiver Cole Beasley, who has been conducting an anti-vaccine crusade since the spring. In his latest salvo against vaccines, Beasley claimed that the National Football League is withholding information from players "in order for a player to be swayed in a direction he may not be comfortable with."

That's just what sports needs – a conspiracy theorist. We've endured all the bogus claims of election fraud perpetrated by a defeated narcissist-in-chief and his political allies who were laughed out of courts. We've listened incredulously as Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene suggested that Jewish space lasers initiated the California wildfires. Last week, we guffawed when North Country congresswoman Elise Stefanik told her whopper. She falsely claimed that Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi was responsible for the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol, saying she was in charge of security. Blatantly false.

This is the age of the conspiracy when you tailor any message to fit your outlandish claims, then pronounce it is your individual right. Forget the community at large. This about myself and my sense of entitlement. It's the fancy way of hiding selfishness and self-righteousness.



Beasley's stance is parked at the intersection of life and sports. He has a wife and three children. In his heart of hearts, he decided the vaccine is unproven and might be harmful. He even threatened to retire if forced to be vaccinated. Parked next to him are science and 52 other players on the Bills roster. It's a choice between his family and his job.

When Beasley focuses the non-sensical conspiracy talk on the NFL, fans don't want to hear it. They want to play their football parlays, manage their fantasy football rosters and watch their team on Sunday.

Most Bills fans are doubly vexed. They recall the glorious run of four consecutive Super Bowl appearances from 1990-93, but they bear the bad memories of the four losses. They carry the bruised psyches from bad quarterbacks like Nathan Peterman and the incompetent leadership of Doug Whaley and Rex Ryan. Four years ago, their hope was restored with the management team of general

manager Brandon Beane and coach Sean McDermott. Last season, fans were rewarded with a trip to the AFC championship last season and they can taste another Super Bowl, but Beasley leaves them scratching their heads.

His behavior has been puzzling ever since he engaged in a silly, meaningless



Bills QB Josh Allen confers with Beasley.

tweetstorm debate over vaccines last spring with Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, himself a little off the rails. Beasley performed an encore with teammate and defensive end Jerry Hughes before training camp opened last week. Then the NFL informed teams there would be no

extensive juggling of games this season to compensate for Covid outbreaks. If a game was missed, players would not be paid.

You can bet that McDermott, silent so far, is irritated. He must balance team unity, a feud between his stars, the NFL edict and Super Bowl aspirations. When he it comes time to choose his seven or so receivers, he must decide if Beasley is worth the aggravation.

In his anti-vaccine crusade, Beasley made himself out to be the protector of the young and downtrodden. But it all came off as hearsay and sounded like it was written by an agent or a PR firm:

“Some people may think that I’m being selfish in making this a me thing. It is all about the young players who don’t have a voice and are reaching out to me every day because they’re being told if they don’t get vaxxed they’ll be cut. Agents are being told by teams that if they have unvaccinated guys they will not be given opportunities now to be seen in workouts. So once unvaxxed players get cut

they're losing a dream they have worked their whole lives over a vaccine that has proven to not keep people from contracting COVID, as we've seen."

"When dealing with a player's health and safety, there should be complete Without having all the proper information, a player can feel misguided and unsure about a personal choice. It makes a player feel unprotected and gives concerns about future topics regarding health and our ability to make educated decisions. With regard to our overall safety, we have to know we are armed with full knowledge and understand that those in a position to help us will always do that based on our individual situation."

Huh?

The bottom line is that the NFL, like the NBA or MLB, wants its games to continue for fans, wants to maintain its revenue streams and enrich owners, and wants to keep its stranglehold on the sports nation's consciousness. The NFL doesn't want a renegade faction of players turning their individual preferences into a misguided conspiracy movement.

Forget that NFL players earn millions of dollars – they deserve every penny they can muster during pro careers that average only 3.3 years. Forget they are playing a game – they are professionals in a wildly successful business whose contracts, stadiums and TV ratings impact thousands of employees, not just the 53 on the field. Forget about your individual rights – you are beholden to your teammates, just as the rest of us are beholden to our co-workers, neighbors, family and friends during a pandemic.

Back to Sir Charles: "So every workplace has rules and I think one of the rules [should be] that guys have to be vaccinated."

Vaccinations are 95 percent effective. Vaccines significantly reduce the spread of Covid-19. It just doesn't make sense to maximize your risk by not taking the shot. Join the 158 million Americans who are fully vaccinated or the 67 percent of Americans who have had at least one shot.

Sports are a reflection of society. There are going to be disbelievers and skeptics with individual rights. But the matter of civic responsibility remains. If you want to place your needs over a group of guys in a tightly-packed lockerroom, perhaps it's time to look for a another profession.

With more than 600,000 deaths and a fourth wave sweeping mostly unvaccinated folks, it's time to think of the greater good.

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