

Denver linemen choose to talk rather than pay hefty fines

For the first time in two years, the Bronco linemen broke their silence on Media Day

By John Mossman
The Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Given an ultimatum to speak up or shell out, the Denver Broncos' offensive line opened their mouths on Tuesday, and out spilled two years' worth of observations, witticisms and confessions.

Faced with fines from the NFL if they didn't break their two-year, self-imposed code of silence, the linemen decided to talk, suspending their own system of fines for any members who violated the code.

On Media Day, the first and biggest of three scheduled interview sessions, tackle Gary Zimmerman quickly was encircled by a pack of voracious reporters on the field at Qualcomm Stadium. He freely admitted how uncomfortable he felt not only answering questions, but being around a lot of people. On Zimmerman's 40-acre spread in the woods near Bend, his nearest neighbor lives two miles away.

"I'm out of my element," said Zimmerman, frequently clearing his throat. "I don't like to be around people that much.

"The league kind of told us we had to talk. We hope this won't be bad luck. Most of the time the media wants to talk to the offensive line, it's something bad. So it's better just to be quiet and anonymous. That's the life of a lineman."

Guard Mark Schlereth was amused at the cluster of journalists surrounding each lineman, who normally attract only limited attention at such sessions.

"It's not like we're a bunch of ogres who don't know how to speak," he said. "But if we did talk all season, nobody would want to talk to us now."

The media moratorium began as a bonding experience for the linemen, with the encouragement of line coach Alex Gibbs. Besides penalties for talking with the media, the linemen were fined for penalties during games and being late for meetings. Most of the slush fund was spent on an elaborate dinner here Monday night.

While Zimmerman's reticence is a result mainly of shyness, Gibbs admitted to an anti-media mindset.

Answering questions patiently from a seat in the stands, Gibbs was brutally frank and characterized media day as a "confronta-

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Denver Tackle

tion."

"When those players cross that white line, that's their world," he said. "I don't like that interrupted. I don't like that focus messed with. In my opinion, this [interviews] keeps that out of sync. I don't think anything good comes out of this. I know it's good for your business. But for every one good story, we get three bad stories. Then somebody gets offended and gets out of focus. It's just easier not to talk about it.

"This is not what my job is. They don't hire me or pay me to deal with you folks, and I don't particularly enjoy it. I've got problems blocking Gilbert Brown and Reggie White, and this interview isn't solving any of those problems. I'm not scoring any points, I'm not making any first downs right here."

Gibbs, a veteran of 14 years of NFL coaching, called this year's line "my best group, by far." The

unit drew a rare honor after a playoff win over Jacksonville, being named the NFL offensive "player" of the week. Gibbs said that honor "made me proud, but I didn't like the notoriety of it. I'd rather our players not have those kinds of awards. I just don't think those honey words of praise really work to your advantage in football."

Despite his discomfort, Gibbs endured the entire one-hour session, even though some of his players speculated earlier he might skip the interviews and pay the fines.

"I've seen him run away from reporters," center Tom Nalen said. "I know he's squirming today."

Tackle Tony Jones said he and his fellow linemen decided it would be wiser to talk.

"The no-talking thing has helped us stay focused," he said. "But we didn't want to pay a stiff fine. If it had been about \$5,000,

we might have taken it. But if it's 30 grand, my wife wouldn't have been too happy with that."

Speculating on the amount of the fine, guard Brian Habib said, "We didn't want to be \$10,000 lighter in the wallet." Referring to himself and two others who were disciplined for having Vaseline on their arms after the Kansas City playoff game, he added, "After that \$5,000 fine for the Vaseline, that was more than enough money for me."

Some other disclosures emerged from the linemen's interviews.

Asked if he had a pre-game routine, Nalen disclosed that he vomits before each game, apparently from nervousness.

Nalen joked that centers are "a step away from being fans. If you can't play center, you can't play anything."

Schlereth said continuing to play after undergoing 20 operations, including surgery on a herniated disk in his back in November that sidelined him only five games, "is probably stupidity."

"I just enjoy playing. When I was on the sideline, I would be physically ill watching other guys play. I missed it so much."

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