

# These days, Don Shula excels at winning over fans

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NOVEMBER 18, 2014, 5:50 PM

**K**ISSIMMEE — The line to meet the great coach snaked outside the door of the burger joint near Kissimmee and around the side of the building.

"Can you believe it?" Don Shula said, when asked about his endearing popularity. "They must think we're giving away free food."

The man who never had much time for levity or anything else outside of football during his days with the Miami Dolphins laughed off his legendary status. Time and age has long softened Shula. He turns 85 in January but will be forever remembered for the numbers 17-0 and 347.

On Tuesday, he sat at a table inside Shula Burger celebrating the place's one-year anniversary — also his 25th in the restaurant business — and regaling the lunch crowd.

The other side of Shula — a side many never witnessed publicly — was on display.

He gave that grandfatherly goochy-goochy-goo wave at toddlers propped up on the hips of parents as they all squeezed in for iPhone photos. He was genuinely interested in the customers who handed him stuff to sign, from a helmet to a flattened football to a paper doll.

Maybe another icon might have passed on coming to a strip-mall burger spot. Shula not only appeared, but he also "will sit for three hours" with fans at other restaurant functions, says his wife, Mary Anne.

Thomas Bailey of Altamonte Springs grew up a Dolphins fan and took off from work so he could see Shula. He found a 43-year-old album titled "the dynamic young Dolphins" — a documentary of the 1971 team's highlights on vinyl — at an antique store. Even Shula seemed surprised as he signed the record cover for Bailey, 31.

"It's awesome seeing Coach Shula ... you don't know how much more time you have," Bailey said.

Worth an estimated \$30 million, Shula was in good spirits. His health is decent, aside from having difficulty walking without the aid of a scooter or walker. "A back injury from his days of playing football," said Mary Anne. "Never has complained. He's tough, you know."

Mary Anne says Don can get from one end of the house to the other in no time. Sundays, she said, are still NFL

Sundays. When the Dolphins are in town, they are watching from a stadium suite. When they are on the road, Shula will be watching NFL action on four TVs – one following Miami and the other the Carolina Panthers, where his son, Mike, is offensive coordinator.

So laser focused on football, winning games was once Shula's world. Not that he really knew another world even existed. Actor Don Johnson once introduced himself to him as "Don Johnson, Miami Vice." And – as the story goes – Shula thanked him for his service to the city. Shula had no clue who Bruce Springsteen was.

"He's really mellowed," Mary Ann said, adding they recently took back-to-back cruises, seeing Vietnam and Rome.

Shula doesn't mind talking about the good old days. Hey, 17-0 and 347 wins travel well.

Asked if any coach will ever break his record of 347 all-time victories – Bill Belichick has 246 and counting – Shula smiles wryly, "Well, you never say never. But you have to win early and often."

Shula says The Perfect Season is "my fondest memory." There was no suspense this season, with no club threatening his 1972 team and its place in history.

"We get accused of being a bunch of angry old men when anybody gets close to the record," Shula chuckled. "One year, Bob Griese and Dick Anderson took a champagne bottle and had their own party in the street. And they didn't even invite us!"

Don Shula enjoys being Don Shula these days.

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