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The security center at Dolphins stadium receives more than 100 messages per game from fans. Officials respond to complaints about bad behavior from there. "If there's someone around you that's just really ruining your day, now you don't have to sit there in silence," says Jeffrey Miller, the NFL's director of strategic security.

By Andrew Innerarity for USA TODAY

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Enlarge By Andrew Innerarity for USA TODAY

The NFL publicizes contact information for security hotlines on video boards during games. "This is about empowering the fans," NFL security chief Milt Aherlich says. "And getting them to help us, and help security, do their jobs."

A security tool or the 'rat line'? NFL targeting the unruly fan

By Michael McCarthy, USA TODAY

Count Washington Redskins season-ticket holder Rick Cable as a big supporter of the NFL's new Fan Code of Conduct.

During the Redskins' 23-6 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers on Nov. 3 at FedEx Field just outside Washington, Cable says, an obnoxious Steelers fan kept waving a "Terrible Towel" in the 47-year-old Cable's face and screaming "Redskins suck!" Rather than escalate the confrontation, the Lusby, Md., resident quietly sent a text message to the stadium's security command center. Security people responded quickly. When the Steelers fan gave *them* a hard time, he was ejected.

"It worked great," Cable says.

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It also reflected how fans are embracing new text-messaging systems that allow fans in NFL stadiums to inconspicuously report drunk or disorderly neighbors without confronting them, a provocative tactic many of the league's 32 teams are using to enforce the conduct code announced by NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on Aug. 5.

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Goodell's rules — the result of rising concern that fan misconduct was driving some people from games — say that patrons who are drunk or disruptive, who use foul language or make obscene gestures or who verbally or physically harass other fans can be refused admission to games, or kicked out of them without refunds. Such fans also can be stripped of their season tickets.

The sweeping attempt to decrease misbehavior in stadiums and parking lots is a "work in progress," says Milt Aherlich, the NFL's vice president of security. But the initiative, he says, "absolutely is working."

As part of the program, teams are asking the 22.2 million patrons they predict will attend 333 preseason, regular season and playoff

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VIOLATORS CAN LOSE TICKETS

The NFL introduced its first league-wide "Fan Code of Conduct" this season. Violators can be kicked out of games without a refund and lose their season tickets. Ticket holders are accountable for the behavior of anyone in their seats. So if you sell your tickets to a friend and he gets in trouble, you take the fall. What's banned under the code:

- Behavior that is unruly, disruptive or illegal in nature.
- Intoxication or other signs of alcohol impairment that results in irresponsible behavior.
- Foul or abusive language or obscene gestures.
- Interference with the progress of the game (including throwing objects onto the field).
- Failing to follow instructions of stadium personnel.
- Verbal or physical harassment of opposing team fans.

Source: NFL

WHAT FANS ARE SAYING

USA TODAY asked readers to sound off on the NFL's first league-wide "Fan Code of Conduct" and new text-messaging systems that allow spectators to inconspicuously report unruly fans without leaving their seats. Some of their e-mailed responses:

- Absolutely for it. -- Carl Boothby, St. Louis, Mo.
- I've heard of the recent measures and I believe this is a great, anonymous, way to handle the situation. I could understand past reluctance to report a situation because it becomes difficult to disguise the reporting action unless you're getting up at halftime or when the game is over. -- John Power, Baltimore
- As long as the fans are not physically injuring someone, they should be allowed to yell whatever they want. They paid to get into the game and should enjoy at least the freedom of speech. This is getting way out of control. Who does the NFL think it is? They are going to lose their most diehard loyal fans if they try to implement this. If you don't want you kids to hear a bunch of drunks cursing ... then don't bring them to the game, or better yet designate a few sections as family sections where more strict rules apply to cursing and making fun of others. Same goes for fans from opposing teams. If you don't want to be yelled at and ridiculed, then stay home. That is part of home-field advantage. -- Christopher Pandolfo, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- In some NFL venues, it's actually dangerous to wear a rival (team's) jersey. This is not how professional sports in this country should be. The NFL has taken the first steps necessary to

games this season to help identify bad apples in the stands.

Fans still are urged to complain to an usher or call a security hotline in the stadium to report unruly behavior. But text-messaging lines — typically advertised on stadium scoreboards and on signs where fans gather — are aimed at allowing tipsters to surreptitiously alert security personnel via cellphone without getting involved with rowdies or missing part of a game.

As of this week, 29 of the NFL's 32 teams had installed a text-message line or telephone hotline. Three clubs have neither: the New Orleans Saints, St. Louis Rams and Tennessee Titans. Ahlerich says he will "strongly urge" all clubs to have text lines in place for the 2009 season. A text line will be available at the Super Bowl for the first time when this season's championship game is played at Tampa's Raymond James Stadium on Feb. 1.

"If there's someone around you that's just really ruining your day, now you don't have to sit there in silence," says Jeffrey Miller, the NFL's director of strategic security. "You can do this. It's very easy. It's quick. And you get an immediate response."

Since the start of the 2008 season, fans have sent more than 1,000 text messages complaining about others, Miller says. A few have even texted in photos of misbehaving fans. Some have shot back "Thank You" messages after security intervened with a fan causing problems.

"This is about empowering the fans," Ahlerich says. "And getting them to help us, and help security, do their jobs."

Miller, formerly commissioner of the Pennsylvania State Police who joined the NFL in July, is impressed by the Joe Friday-like accuracy of some text messages that describe misbehaving fans.

"Isn't technology great?" Miller asks.

Not so much, critics of the text-messaging systems say. Some angry ticket holders who've been turned in by other fans have coined a nickname for the systems they see as Big Brother run amok: "The Rat Line."

Trying to control normal, rowdy behavior at football games only reinforces criticism of the NFL as the "No Fun League," says Sean Martin, 43, an Oakland Raiders fan from Albany, N.Y.

"It's too much like Big Brother," he says. "It's just another step in the NFL taking the personality away from the game."

Nick Gillespie, editor of the libertarian video site Reason.TV, is "worried about overzealous enforcement on the part of security." Fans snitching on each other only adds to the "surveillance state that's America," he says.

Some fans say they are worried they'll be targets of false or prank messages — and ejected unfairly. Fans are innocent until proven guilty, says Miller. Stadium security managers try to "corroborate" complaints by sending staffers out to talk to fans involved and by scanning their seats with binoculars or closed-circuit cameras, he says.

System has drawbacks

Security officials say prank text messages — along with those berating team management about everything from play-calling to long lines at concession stands — represent the downside of the new alert system.

What's to prevent somebody from sending a prank or unjustified message? Not much. But team officials say they're tracking the numbers from which text messages are sent to them from inside and outside the stadium. They're building databases of the complaints and how they were resolved, and tracking areas in the stadium where complaints are frequent.

The text line at Dolphin Stadium, for example, is used for Miami Dolphins and University of Miami football games, plus Florida Marlins baseball games. The more familiar fans have become with it, the fewer prank messages there have been, says Dolphins team president Bryan Wiedmeier. The percentage of prank text messages has dropped to 5% from 15%, he says.

Pranksters can be blocked, says Ahlerich. The benefits of having instant communication with frustrated customers outweigh the hassles.

"If you get 50 text messages and three or four of them are from idiots who are misusing the system, is that a reason not to help the other 47 out?" he asks. "You can send a curt message back to the

solve a problem that has become out of control. Hopefully, the NFL will police their stadiums with an iron fist. -- Nicholas Moline, Indianapolis

- I do not feel that a league-wide code of conduct is necessary. ... This is one item I think is better left to each team, and it seems to me that most teams were doing a good enough job already. -- Chris Stokdyk, Williamston, Mich.

- Do not mention race or religion in name-calling ... or throw anything at (the players). Other than that, these overpaid guys are fair game for any and all verbal abuse. Most of them make more in one game than the Average Joe does in a week. Hey, if they can't handle the heat, let them go out and search for a "real" job. I'm a teacher, and I'd love to see any of these prima donna millionaires walk a mile in my shoes! -- Rob Nowell, Palmdale, Ca.

- I cheer my team but never disrespect another. -- Rick Cable, Lusby, Md.

- About two years ago I traded Bears tickets with another ticket holder (a total stranger from a message board). We did it so we'd each have four tickets to one game rather than two tickets to two games. He then gave my seats to a buddy of his who got caught smoking, and we got a letter from the Bears about it. ... That really ticked me off. Completely changed my mind about what to do in the future with any unused tickets. The Bears encourage you to sell them on StubHub, but ... you could easily be out your season ticket privileges if they act up. -- Karen Berger, Chicago

- I don't think they are enforcing the rules. -- Steve Stas, Columbus, Ohio

- The common "standard of behavior" is a free for all. I've taken multiple fans from different areas to (the Washington Redskins' FedEx Field) and they've all commented how it seemed that every fan in the stadium was drunk. I love attending games with clients, friends, etc. The Redskins do an awesome job at corporate hospitality, but I would never take my two daughters or son to an NFL game. -- Donnie Downs, Bowie, Md.

- Stripping fans of their tickets may be taking the process a step too far. ... Who's to determine what behavior is unruly, disruptive, or illegal in nature? ... I think this power will be abused by security officials, and will result in people being thrown out unfairly. -- Shep Hayes, Bridgton, Maine

- I think the NFL has bigger things to worry about (steroids, its own Player Code of Conduct, etc.) than to focus on a Fan Code. That area should be left to the stadium security personnel to deal with. -- Sean Martin, Albany, N.Y.

- Not sure that I'll ever be able to take my daughter to a game unless this policy gets some real teeth to it very soon. -- Adam Myrick, Lexington, S.C.

- There were a few incidents last year. At the time, we were unaware of this text/phone call possibility and sure could have used this info. -- Mel Moyer, Columbus, Ohio

- Unfortunately, drunk and abusive fans are everywhere. We have never reported anyone. Troublesome fans usually tend to get themselves in trouble with their own actions. -- Suzanne Verdoliva and Paul Weber, La Crosse, Wis.

- Taking someone's season tickets should not be allowed unless there are at least two poor-behavior episodes. But I don't like fans throwing things or being abusive to people rooting for the opponent. We all love our home teams. But it's still just a game. There are more important things in life. Those abusive people need to go. -- Joe Borowy, Baltimore

prankster saying, "This is an official line, don't abuse it — or you may be abusing *your* situation at the stadium." "

The league office is compiling and analyzing data from teams on the number of fans arrested, ejected or stripped of season tickets. The study won't be completed until the offseason, Miller says, but he, Ahlerich and other league officials provided some examples of how they say the Fan Code is making an impact — and not just on conduct:

- The number of fans ejected this season varies widely by club. Some may eject 60-80 fans in a single game, Miller says. Others may eject four to six. He declines to comment on which team kicks out the most fans. Some clubs are using creative ways to warn fans they're crossing the line; one issues small warning cards to fans getting unruly, Ahlerich says.

- The Redskins have rescinded the season tickets of a "small number" of fans, team spokesman Zack Bolno says. Another club told Ahlerich it also had canceled several personal seat licenses — money fans had paid for the opportunity to buy season tickets — because of fan misconduct. Such licenses typically cost thousands of dollars, and season tickets can't be purchased without them.

"Now *that's* a financial hit" for the teams, Ahlerich says. "I know other stadiums that have done it too. That really puts teeth in the system."

- The Dolphins get the most text messages of any NFL team — typically more than 100 per game. That's because Dolphin Stadium has fixed signs visible from the seats that show the number to which fans can send a text, Wiedmeier says. Other teams flash video messages or make announcements about the text-messaging system. Miller is urging all clubs to post fixed signs next season.

- The Indianapolis Colts are encouraging fans to use the text-message line at their Lucas Oil Stadium as a broader customer-service tool for everything from spilled sodas to medical emergencies, says Larry Hall, vice president of ticket services.

"It's a bigger tool than just fan conduct," Hall says.

Most fans contacted by USA TODAY about the Fan Code and text-message lines support the league's approach.

Jacksonville Jaguars fan Cameron Norris, 21, a senior at Florida State University, says he was punched repeatedly in the back by a New England Patriots fan at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass., during the Patriots' 31-20 divisional playoff win over the Jaguars on Jan. 12.

Had there been a stadium text-messaging line, Norris says, he "definitely" would have used it. "College students are always text-messaging anyway," he says. "It's safer than going to a security guard and pointing out the guy. Especially during a road game."

Is the code really working?

Despite the league's attempts to raise awareness, about bad behavior, some fans don't see any improvement at games this year.

Eugene Collins, 46, a Chicago Bears fan from Park Forest, Ill., says he nearly brawled with other Bears fans at Chicago's Soldier Field who were harassing a woman in a Tennessee Titans jersey during the Titans' 21-14 victory over the Bears on Nov. 9.

The Bears, Collins adds, have done a "good job" educating fans about the Fan Code and text-message line. "I just don't think people use it," he says. "I don't see any difference, I really don't."

Redskins fan Adam Myrick of Lexington, S.C., predicts unruly fans won't take the new rules seriously until clubs revoke their season tickets, then publicize it.

Myrick, 33, says he hasn't attended an NFL game this year because of fans' drunkenness and rude behavior. He'd like to take his 4-year-old daughter to a game, but doesn't think NFL games are safe for families.

"I went to a 1 p.m. game last season and I swore it off," he says. "Forget about a Sunday night or Monday night game. Things won't change unless (the Fan Code) has some real teeth. Until then, it's (merely) a great PR stance for the league to take."

HOW TO CONTACT TEAMS

Fans can send a text to the following numbers. When applicable, fans should enter the designated code (ex. DOME), followed by a message (their location and issue). For certain teams, there is a hotline option (indicated below). Note: Teams are able to track the origin of the calls.

| TEAM | TEXT | HOTLINE |
|----------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ARIZONA CARDINALS | 602-396-9888 | |
| ATLANTA FALCONS | 78247 -- DOME + message | 404-223-8850 |
| BALTIMORE RAVENS | 78247 -- RAVENS + message | |
| BUFFALO BILLS | 78247 -- BILLS + message | 716-312-8933 |
| CAROLINA PANTHERS | 704-301-3867 | |
| CHICAGO BEARS | 312-909-HELP (4357) | 312-235-7999 |
| CINCINNATI BENGALS | 513-381-JERK (5375) | 513-381-JERK (5375) |
| CLEVELAND BROWNS | 78247 -- BROWNS + message | |
| DALLAS COWBOYS | 78247 -- TSC + message | 972-785-HELP (4357) |
| DENVER BRONCOS | 303-910-1867 | |
| DETROIT LIONS | 78247 -- LIONS + message | |
| GREEN BAY PACKERS | | 920-569-7400 |
| HOUSTON TEXANS | 832-655-0785 | |
| INDIANAPOLIS COLTS | 78247 -- INDY + message | |
| JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS | 58154 -- ASSIST + message | |
| KANSAS CITY CHIEFS | 816-679-7555 | |
| MIAMI DOLPHINS | 41513 -- FAN + message | |
| MINNESOTA VIKINGS | 612-741-7720 | |
| NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS | 78247 -- CONDUCT + message | 508-543-8200 |
| NEW YORK GIANTS | 78247 -- NJSEA + message | |
| NEW YORK JETS | 78247 -- NJSEA + message | |
| OAKLAND RAIDERS | 78247 -- OAK + message | |
| PHILADELPHIA EAGLES | 78247 -- ASSIST + message | |
| PITTSBURGH STEELERS | 78247 -- PITT33 + message | |
| SAN DIEGO CHARGERS | gtrw@boltsfan.com | |
| SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS | badfan@niners.nfl.com | |
| SEATTLE SEAHAWKS | HAWK12 (429512) | 888-MY-HAWKS (888-694-2957) |
| TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS | 813-277-6501 | |
| WASHINGTON REDSKINS | 78247 -- SKINS + message | |

The New Orleans Saints, St. Louis Rams and Tennessee Titans do not offer these services.

Source: NFL


Contributing: Thomas Ankner

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sincere123 wrote: <1m ago

I can see this being abused. When security finds themselves running for every little thing they will can this idea.

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sincere123 wrote: 2m ago

New theory, tattle-tale is good..secretly snitch thru text, except for the fact that they will know the origin of the call, your secret is safe with them.

Recommend | Report Abuse



rachjess wrote: 2m ago

I cant stand foul language and obnoxious behavior while watching the most violent game ever played. Please people Im trying to watch a bone jarring hit which could make it on every NFL comercial for the next two years. Try not ruining it by swearing.

Recommend | Report Abuse



billengr99 wrote: 12m ago

User Image

deagleninga wrote: 36m ago

Judging from a lot of posts here we really are becoming a nation of pansies...
If you want to quietly enjoy a game, stay home. Just because you're afraid to have fun doesn't mean you have a right to ruin everyone else's. Losers.

Sorry, but my good time out with my family DOES NOT include your foul mouth and drunken behavior. If you want to curse do it in your own home. You don't have the right to ruin my time at the game with your nasty language especially in front of my kids.

Recommend **2** | Report Abuse



nbkxex8 wrote: 13m ago

Judging from a lot of posts here we really are becoming a nation of pansies...
If you want to quietly enjoy a game, stay home. Just because you're afraid to have fun doesn't mean you have a right to ruin everyone else's. Losers.

It's not about the noise level; I think most people that go to the game understand - and appreciate - the noise. The point is you always have some drunk idiot who gets pissed off when his team is losing and tries to start fights with opposing fans. There's no place for that anywhere. At the end of the day, it's not about freedom of speech as some claim. It's about common decency.

Where do you draw the line? Well, if you would get mad if someone were saying/doing something to your mother, then that should be the line. Do unto others...

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rayrayg wrote: 23m ago

Been to many Cowboys games and the only time i've seen a fight is during a Cowboys-Giants game(but its to be expected in a division game), even the Eagles fans didnt make fools of themselves which was surprising with what you hear about them. Redskins fans dont bring much attention to them either.

Recommend **1** | Report Abuse



2-Catz wrote: 25m ago

OBEY..... OBSERVE INFORM ohhh a fan of the opposing team is showing emotion, I will secretly INFORM the authority.

Los Angeles may not have a team but when we get one I will be waving a towel and yelling support for them.

Fan interaction is a relevant part of the football experience.
If you don't want people yelling that your team sucks, don't be a Redskins fan and stay home in your basement and watch your 50" plasma.

Recommend **2** | Report Abuse



Bigtaco2002 wrote: 32m ago

gtjoe wrote: 6m ago

Bigtaco2002 wrote: 1min

deagleninga wrote: 7m ago

If some wuss ever calls security on me I'll politely appologize so I don't get ejected, then look around for nearby fans of the opposing team, then follow them to their car and kick their a\$\$ there.

I wish I were that "fan" you would follow and 'PLAN' to kick my a\$\$! Man, I would love to remind you of

who and what you are...no threat at all. A true sports fanatic --- armchair QB, too many beers in the hand and gut!

Ready when U R!

Way to go Bigtaco. Hey deagleninga, if you are so tough, why aren't you out on the field? Just as I thought, all mouth.

gtojoe

Any time, podner! I've always been able to take care of myself...this one too, will end up eating pavement one day!

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arjmd2006 wrote: 32m ago

Not a good sign of the times.

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