

# More Than Just Football



By Cheryl Vassiliadis ♦ Photos by Pam Lackey

**W**hen the Fin Fans of Flagler converge for game day at High Jacker's Restaurant in Bunnell, hundreds of Miami Dolphins' faithful sport the prerequisite colors of teal and orange. Mike Brazier and his gang consult the team playbook and discuss strategies for the game.

Anthony DiBartolomeo and his 12-year-old son Thomas stake out a seat with a view of the action. The duo has been driving to the weekly football fest from their home in Port Orange since the fan club debuted in 2001. "We come up and have lunch, watch the game and get involved in the trivia contests," says DiBartolomeo, who high-fives his son after a Dolphin first down. Thomas is even working another angle by bringing his girlfriend Sarah Smith, age 10, along for the day. "She's a rookie," he says. The new football fan is a quick study, answering one of the trivia questions to win a football.

Rusty Place, team leader of the Fin Fans, stands close to the action on the big screen in the bar room calling out questions to members of the

group. At half-time, tickets are raffled off for autographed Dolphins' memorabilia, with the monies collected going to one of several local causes sponsored by the club.

"The Fin Fans is about a lot more than getting together to watch TV and drink beer," Place says. "We are a family-oriented club that meets to watch the games and have fun, but we also are very involved in doing things for the community."

Place and his group raised money for organizations and individuals throughout the county including Habitat for Humanity, Hospice of Flagler County and the Flagler Beach Fire Department. When the group learned the Flagler Beach Junior Lifeguard Program lost funding, the Fin Fans raised almost \$10,000 in just three days to keep the program alive.

"This past summer our Junior Lifeguard Program was a huge success due to the money donated from the community through the efforts of the Fin Fans," says Tom Gillan, director of Beach Services for Flagler Beach. "All of the





money donated goes directly back into the program to purchase supplies and equipment and give scholarships to families with financial difficulties."

The Fin Fans of Flagler is an officially sanctioned fan club of the Miami Dolphins and as such the group is invited to a special pre-season barbecue and meet-and-greet with players and coaches every August. At this year's event Dante Culpepper, who hails from Central Florida, signed autographs and posed for pictures wearing one of the Fin Fans specially designed caps. The Fin Fans of Flagler is the only club that can officially use that logo.

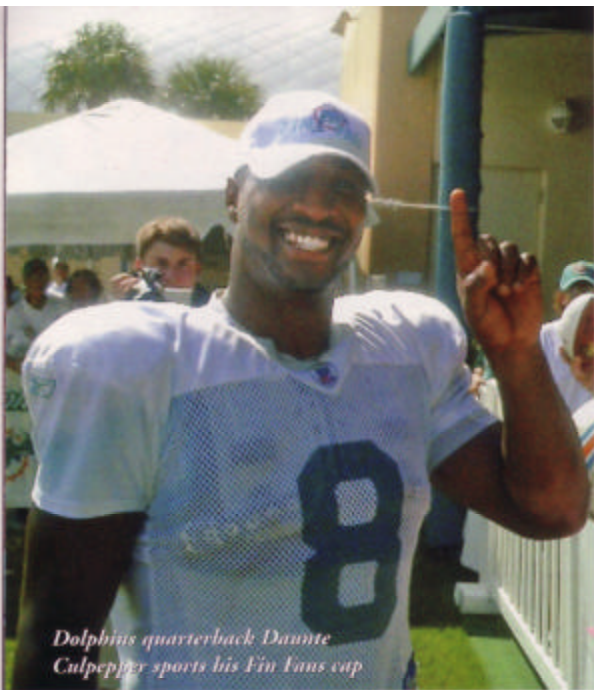
Ted Bancroft, who owns High Jacker's Restaurant with partner Gail Holt, agreed to let the football club hold one of the meetings at their location, taking a wait-and-see attitude before agreeing to a long-term relationship. That was five years ago. After seeing the huge response the club garnered from day one, the game days are now a permanent fixture on their calendar.

As there are no dues or fees for being a member, funding for the fan club comes from area sponsors including Jeff Sawyer with Better Buy Realty of Palm Coast. He was one of the groups' first sponsors, helping the club to get up and running. Other sponsors make donations of gifts and services the club can raffle off or give to deserving causes. "Rusty knows how to help the community and he also makes you feel good about your contribution," says Dudley Shaw a physician's assistant at Medi Quick Family Practice in Flagler Beach. "He calls and thanks you so you don't mind giving to the group. Plus he follows through and lets you know where the contributions are going."

Bug Mahoney, who owns Market Square Meats and Deli in Flagler Beach, took an active role with the group because of their devotion to the community. "We got involved with the club because of what the club is doing for others," he says. "And this is coming from a Viking's fan," he adds.

The Miami Dolphins organization provides promotional items including decorative pennants, posters, stickers and autographed memorabilia for fund raising to the club as thanks for their support. "I was introduced to Rusty through the fan club when I was doing customer service for the Dolphins organization," says Frank Losito, now operations manager of the Miami Dolphins. "He keeps us





Dolphins quarterback Danie Culpepper sports his Fin Fans cap

informed on what's going on up in his area," he adds. "Their club goes above and beyond any of the others."

Judith Stetson, executive director of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program and Flagler Volunteer Services, Inc. agreed that the Fin Fans step up to the plate whenever asked. "After Hurricane Katrina we were helping about 200 families in the Flagler area. In the beginning stages we were helping them one at a time, so we were looking for a group to sponsor a family," she says. "We heard about the Fin Fans group and they adopted a family in need. People were incredibly generous. It's just an awesome organization that has done so much for the community."



**Join the Fin Fans of Flagler at High Jacker's Restaurant, 202 Airport Road in Bunnell on days when the Miami Dolphins have a regular season game. Check out [www.finfansofflagler.com](http://www.finfansofflagler.com) or call Rusty Place (386) 439-9631 for details.**

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