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N.F.L. FAST FORWARD

Collapse of Dallas Practice Bubble Spurs Safety Questions

By **[JUDY BATTISTA](#)**

The collapse of the Dallas Cowboys' practice facility during a severe storm Saturday — which left a 33-year-old scouting assistant paralyzed from the waist down and two other staff members hospitalized — [was under investigation](#) by government inspectors from the United States [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) on Monday. It has also prompted questions about the safety of the indoor practice facilities that many [N.F.L.](#) teams use in bad weather.

The Cowboys' facility, built in 2003 for \$4 million, according to The Associated Press, was essentially a huge tent with yards and yards of fabric covering the steel frame — think of a wedding tent stretched to the length of a football field and rising 85 feet in the air.

Based on a survey of the damage, radar imagery and eyewitness reports, the [National Weather Service](#) in Fort Worth issued a report that indicated a microburst hit the Irving, Tex., area, causing winds of nearly 70 miles per hour near the ground, although the wind speeds closest to the ground — meaning those affecting the upper parts of the practice facility — might have been even higher. Video of the collapse [shows light fixtures swaying violently](#) from the roof as the sides of the structure began to buckle. The Dallas Morning News reported Monday morning that the Cowboys [had not had roof work performed last year inspected](#) by the city, as was required.

The [New England Patriots](#) have a similar structure; the [Philadelphia Eagles'](#) facility has a cinder-block base that is about 10 feet high with a roof supported by steel. The [Jets'](#) [new practice center](#) in Florham Park, N.J., is a bricks-and-mortar building. When they trained at Hofstra, they used an air-supported bubble — no steel — the same kind the [Giants](#) practice in now next to Giants Stadium. (The Giants' new facility will be bricks and mortar, too.) Air-supported bubbles deflate when there is a breach, making them safer in major storms, others involved in the industry say.

“When you have a disaster like this, you have tons of steel come crashing down,” said Jan Ligas, the president of [Arizon Structures](#), which builds air-supported bubbles and frame-supported structures. “When air-supported comes down, you have fabric.”

Northern teams must worry about the weight of snow. According to the Web site of [Summit Structures](#) — the makers of the Patriots’ and the Cowboys’ facilities — the Patriots’ 80,000-square-foot facility has a steel-truss frame that can support a heavy snow load, a greater concern in Massachusetts than high winds. A [note on the Summit Web site](#) quoted a satisfied Patriots official after the structure withstood a snowfall of nearly three feet in less than 36 hours.

The [Miami Dolphins have an air-supported bubble](#) in Davie, Fla. (like the Giants’ current bubble), and it is built to withstand hurricane-force winds, a team spokesman, Harvey Greene, said. Those start at 75 m.p.h. and can rise to more than 100 m.p.h.

Of course, Greene said, the team would have plenty of notice when a hurricane approached and nobody would be near the bubble in the hurricane. But considering how frequently hurricanes threaten South Florida, the Dolphins did not want to have to rebuild a bubble each year, Greene said.

When [Hurricane Ike](#) approached Houston last year, the [Houston Texans’](#) air-supported practice bubble was deflated ahead of time and was not damaged. (Reliant Stadium lost several panels from its retractable roof.)

The Cowboys chose to practice indoors precisely because storms were expected, but in an interview with [Bob Costas](#) during [NBC’s](#) coverage of the [Kentucky Derby](#) on Saturday afternoon, the Cowboys’ owner, [Jerry Jones](#), said the staff “did not get good warning.” [The Dallas Morning News reported](#) that Levi McCathern, a Cowboys lawyer, specializes in catastrophic damage litigation.

Ligas said he had worked on several air-supported practice bubbles, including the Giants’ bubble, and he is a proponent of air-supported practice facilities in part because they are safer even in perfect conditions: there are no steel poles or columns to run into during practice.

He has never been inside the Dallas facility, but said that he had been inside similar ones, and that he was upset by what he thought was a misconception that the Dallas facility was air-supported. In 29 years in the business, Ligas said, he had never seen anything like the Dallas collapse.

“It is a tragedy,” he said. “We’re going to have to fight real hard to gain back our reputation as an industry. I think it shook everybody up. This thing looked like it came down like dominos.”

Favre to Unretire, Again?

Is anyone surprised [Brett Favre](#) — twice retired and apparently twice with second thoughts — plans to talk to Minnesota Coach Brad Childress about the possibility of playing for the [Vikings](#) this season? [ESPN](#) reported the meeting Tuesday night.

Many fans may have seen this coming when the Jets granted Favre’s request to release him from the retired list, Favre’s insistence that he did not plan to play again notwithstanding. It was a generous act by the Jets. They apparently believed Favre when he said he wasn’t going to play again and will receive no compensation if he does. But they would also dodge the circus that engulfed the [Packers](#) when Favre forced his way out of Green Bay a year ago.

Minnesota was always Favre’s preferred destination. He has friends on the coaching staff, it is a [Super Bowl](#)-caliber team lacking only a solid quarterback, and he has two opportunities each season to stick it to the Packers, which is why Green Bay smartly blocked the Jets from trading Favre to the Vikings last year.

One problem: Favre never had surgery on the torn bicep that sent his play into a tailspin late last season. If Favre joins Childress and his play is not much better than it was for the Jets, he could be responsible for two coaches losing their jobs in two years.

The Vikings open the 2009 season on the road against Cleveland and Coach [Eric Mangini](#).

Super Bowl Talk in England

The Super Bowl-in-London chatter will not quiet down. The [Telegraph of London](#) reported over the weekend that an announcement was expected in the next 12 months that a Super Bowl would be played at Wembley Stadium, perhaps as soon as 2014.

The N.F.L., which stages a regular-season game at Wembley to raise the league’s profile internationally (this year it’s the Patriots versus the [Tampa Bay Buccaneers](#)), insists there is nothing to the reports, other than that London organizers have asked for information about what it takes to host a Super Bowl. In 2007, Commissioner [Roger Goodell](#) first floated the idea of putting the game in London.

More likely is that the N.F.L. will return to New Orleans when owners award the 2013 game at meetings later this month. With the [Saints](#) forging a deal last week to stay at the

Superdome, team owners could award the next available game to New Orleans, a favorite Super Bowl site. The next three Super Bowls will be played in South Florida (2010), Dallas (2011) and Indianapolis (2012).

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