

BILL WALSH

By Don Smith

For many years in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Bill Walsh was recognized as one of the premier offensive coaches in pro football. But he was seemingly mired in the role of an assistant coach, first with the Oakland Raiders, then the Cincinnati Bengals and finally the San Diego Chargers. When NFL head coaching jobs became available, Walsh was often a candidate but never the eventual winner.

In 1977, he reluctantly decided that his long-standing ambition to be an NFL head coach probably wasn't going to be realized. So he abandoned the pro ranks to take the head coaching job at Stanford University.

Then, on January 9, 1979, Walsh's big moment came with his appointment, at the age of 47, as the San Francisco 49ers head coach. He brought with him a dossier that included three years of high school coaching, six years as a college assistant, 10 years as an NFL assistant and his two years as the head man at Stanford. The challenge that Walsh accepted was ominous -- the 49ers had finished 2-14 the previous season. It seemingly would take a genius to turn things around.

Walsh proved to be just that. In just three years, the 49ers defeated the Bengals 26-21 to win Super Bowl XVI. It was San Francisco's first NFL championship. In ten years at the 49ers helm, he won three Super Bowls and six NFC Western division titles. His teams won 102 games, lost 63 and tied one for a .617 winning percentage.

When the 8-24 record of his first two 49ers teams is taken into consideration, Walsh's record was remarkable, so remarkable in fact that in 1993, he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame as official recognition that he has made his indelible mark on history.

What Walsh inherited in his first pro head coaching assignment wasn't pretty. With the exception of a better-than-average offensive line, the entire team had to be rebuilt.

Walsh had worked under several of the game's greatest coaches and had studied the traits of many other coaching legends. From eight seasons under Paul Brown with the Cincinnati Bengals and one season with Al Davis in Oakland, he had learned the techniques of running a successful draft. The key was to listen to several opinions but, when it came to decision time, only one man -- in this case, Walsh -- could make the choice.

Unlike some teams that have the philosophy of selecting the best available players, regardless of the positions they play, the 49ers under Walsh targeted players he wanted and then, if necessary, maneuvered with trades to be in position to take them. Walsh believed if he saw a college player display tremendous athleticism on one play, he and his staff could get that level of output from him consistently in the pros. Walsh liked consistency but inconsistency, per se, didn't scare him.

"I didn't have to see Joe Montana play 10 games at Notre Dame in 1978 to know that I wanted him," Walsh said. "The argument against Montana was he was inconsistent. Maybe it was my impetuous ego, but I felt if I saw him succeed once, he could do it again."

Montana was Walsh's third-round pick in the 1979 draft and undoubtedly the most important player acquisition he ever made. But he used the draft judiciously every year and the list of Walsh blue-chip draftees includes such stars as Dwight Clark, also in 1979, Ronnie Lott, Eric Wright and Carlton Williamson in 1981, Bubba Paris in 1982, Roger Craig in 1983, Jerry Rice in 1985 and Tom Rathman, John Taylor and Charles Haley in 1986.

Walsh also was willing to accept veteran players from other teams. While he signed some free agents, he was particularly active trading draft choices. In 1985 for example, Walsh gave away eight draft

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choices but received two in return, one of which he used to select Rice. Other major trade acquisitions included defensive end Fred Dean in a 1981 trade with San Diego and running back Wendell Tyler from the Los Angeles Rams in 1983.

The 49ers left no stone unturned in their building program -- Walsh even took chances on players who didn't play football in college, such as wide receiver Renaldo Nehemiah and defensive end Jeff Stover. After every Super Bowl championship, he continued to bring new blood onto the squad.

As a result, the NFL dynasty team of the 1980s, the 49ers, differed from the dominant team of the 1970s, the Pittsburgh Steelers, in that all four of the Steelers' Super Bowl victories were achieved with basically the same cast of superstars.

The continually changing 49ers had only seven team members who played in all three Super Bowl victories. In essence, they won their three world championships with three different teams.

Walsh did not hide the fact that he patterned many of his techniques from coaches with whom he had worked. He learned many of his organizational procedures from Brown and much of his offensive approach from Sid Gillman. On occasion, he even adopted a technique or two that had been first employed by the fabled George Halas.

"Some of the most effective plays utilized in the NFL today are plays that originated in the 1950s," Walsh said. "The old Packers sweep, for example, is a basic 49ers play today. So much of what I know today, I learned in the 1950s and 1960s."

In 1981, the year that the 49ers won their first Super Bowl, the 49ers didn't have a meal-ticket running back. To keep the defenses guessing, Walsh turned to a strategy often used by Gillman. He adapted the short passing game by turning the running backs into receivers. His running game, in effect, became off-tackle passes.

Walsh espoused another Gillman offensive practice, stretching the defenses by spreading receivers all over the field. But the 49ers in 1984, their second Super Bowl season, didn't have enough speedy receivers to make the attack successful. So Walsh concentrated on developing perfect timing on the 49ers passing routes. As a result, a sharpshooting quarterback such as Montana was able to connect with his receivers before the zone defenses that most teams used at that time could react.

Under Walsh's guidance, Montana achieved spectacular success and eventually became recognized in many circles as the greatest quarterback to ever play the game. However, Walsh, also played a major role in the development of two other outstanding quarterbacks, Ken Anderson of the Bengals and the Chargers' Dan Fouts.

Anderson, a product of tiny Augustans College with no major-college experience, was drafted by the Bengals in 1971. Under Walsh's tutelage, he won his first NFL passing championship in his fourth season.

Walsh moved to San Diego in 1976. Fouts had been only an average quarterback in his first three seasons with the Chargers but Walsh soon had him completing up to two-thirds of his passes. A few years later, Fouts was universally acclaimed as one of the NFL's premier passers.

Charlie Joiner, the prolific wide receiver who played for Walsh in both Cincinnati and San Diego, insisted that the coach also was particularly helpful to receivers. "He's a great confidence builder," Joiner said. "He'll tell you over and over that a certain play will work. He tells you so often that when you get to the game, you're convinced the play will go."

Walsh believed that, to be adequate in his job as a head coach, and prior to that as an offensive coordinator, he had to concentrate on three things: (1) supreme confidence in himself, (2) clear thinking and (3) an innovative mind with an artistic feeling for his role.

"You start by knowing that most of what you try to do will fail. A team just doesn't have a big gainer on every play," he pointed out. "You have to be seasoned enough to withstand frustration but when an offensive opportunity presents itself often without warning, you must be ready to lead. New plays just

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don't drop from heaven. They derive from a coach's knowledge of the game and an examination of all the possible approaches that, considering your personnel and the opposition, may be available."

Walsh's many professional moves as an adult more or less paralleled his own unsettled boyhood. He was born on November 30, 1931, in Los Angeles, His father also named Bill, moved up and down the Pacific Coast in a wide variety of jobs, including stints in a brickyard, a railroad yard and an automotive plant.

As an athlete, Walsh played quarterback at Hayward high school and later at the College of San Mateo. He then aspired to play quarterback for San Jose State. The Spartans' coach, Bob Bronzan, offered Walsh a scholarship but moved him to an end position. Injuries cut into his playing time, however, and he played only five games his senior year.

But Bronzan was so impressed with Walsh's football acumen that he offered him a graduate assistantship after he completed his military service. Walsh coached not only the interior linemen but the San Jose junior varsity as well. He also wrote a lengthy master's thesis titled "Defensing the Spread-T Offense," at that time a revolutionary new form of football attack.

Walsh's first full-time coaching job was at Washington Union high school in Fremont, California. He then served three-year terms as an assistant at both the University of California and at Stanford before entering the pros with the Oakland Raiders as an offensive backfield coach in 1967.

Cincinnati was the next -- and longest -- stop for Walsh, starting in 1968. Almost everyone thought he would replace Brown when the legendary coach retired after the 1975 season but Bill Johnson, the offensive line coach, got the job instead. Walsh looked on Brown's decision as a betrayal of loyalty and he moved on to San Diego. Without a doubt, it was the low point of his career.

When Walsh joined the 49ers, he was regarded as a workaholic who wanted to be good at everything, whether it be on a tennis court, a political discussion or creating a dynamic offensive play scheme. But there was also a warm, light-hearted, vulnerable side to Walsh that belied the stone-faced disciplinarian he portrayed on the sidelines.

One of those times came on the bus to the Pontiac Silverdome on Super Bowl XVI game day. Walsh showed up in a bellman's uniform to carry Montana's bags. And there was the team meeting in 1980 after the 49ers had lost eight straight when the coach donned a cabbie's hat and announced: "I'm free-lancing. If anyone needs a ride home, I'm available."

Walsh, who was named the 1981 NFL Coach of the year and the 1984 NFC Coach of the Year following his victories in Super Bowls XVI and XIX, was subject to mood swings throughout his 49ers tenure. In the strike-shortened 1982 season, the world champion 49ers dropped off to a 3-6 record and Walsh seriously considered resigning.

Although the 49ers won the NFC West five times and scored more than 10 victories each of his last six seasons, Walsh continued to ponder the pressures that a modern-day NFL coach had to endure. Aware of Walsh's unrest, Edward J. DeBartolo Jr, the team's owner, relieved him of his duties as team president after the 1987 season.

The next year, the 49ers scored a last-second 20-16 victory over Cincinnati in Super Bowl XXIII but Walsh resigned as head coach only after he had made sure that his hand-picked assistant, George Seifert, would be his replacement. He accepted the title of executive vice-president but six months later left the 49ers to join NBC as an NFL game analyst.

In just 10 years, Walsh almost single-handedly transformed the 49ers from a league doormat into a perennial winner. He also laid the foundation for the 49ers continued success. With many of the coaches and players he brought to the team still active, the Walsh legacy lives on.