



Jim Harbaugh

This article was written by David Hegler.

The NFL is full of talented players who made something of themselves by working hard. However, the list is endless of those who maximized their talents yet still end up largely as role players. Ironically, many of those mediocre players end up as excellent coaches because they spent so much time refining their limited skills. Jim Harbaugh was one of those players. While he never lived up to the hype in Chicago, he maximized his potential in Indianapolis and sparked a resurgence in various colleges and in San Francisco as a coach.

He was born a coach's son in Toledo, Ohio just before Christmas 1963 and football quickly encompassed every aspect of his life. His was an idyllic childhood, albeit surrounded by numerous moves. While his father moved the family from city to city, young Jim and his brother John grew as fans of the game while living competitive lives. This would ultimately become the central component of Jim Harbaugh's life: competition is everything.

As young Jim grew in stature and wisdom, his father constantly brought home the simple message "Who's got it better than us? Nobody!" It would be a saying that each of his children would live out as they grew up knowing that they would make the best of any situation.

Jim Harbaugh would go on to prominence as a prep star in both Michigan and California, finishing his high school career at Palo Alto High School and earning a scholarship to the University of Michigan where his hero was the head coach, Bo Schembechler. His father had been an assistant under the legendary coach and both Jim and his brother had grown up idolizing him.

Jim earned the starting job as a sophomore in 1984 and won his first game, beating #1 ranked Miami 22-14. Unfortunately, the good times didn't last that year as he soon broke his arm and lost the rest of what once was a promising season. Jim returned better than ever in 1985, leading the Wolverines to a 10-1-1 record, a top two finish in the nation and a defeat of Nebraska in the Fiesta Bowl.

The following year was the stuff of legend. The Wolverines, after starting the season with seven consecutive victories including wins over Notre Dame, Florida State and No. 8 ranked Iowa, Michigan lost its first game of the year to Minnesota in a 20-17 heartbreaker. Harbaugh was fuming, knowing that the coming week was his last chance at defeating the hated Ohio State Buckeyes. He guaranteed to the media a victory over his



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nemesis, instantly calling to mind a similar guarantee made by New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath just 18 years earlier. True to his word, Harbaugh made good on his promise, beating the Buckeyes by two points in Columbus, Ohio, 26-24.

Seeing his moxie and poise, Bears coach Mike Ditka liked what he saw and drafted Harbaugh in the first round of the 1987 NFL Draft, thinking that he would be a worthy successor for Chicago's current quarterback Jim McMahon. In his four years as a starter, succeeding McMahon, Harbaugh won 35 and lost 30 with his best season arguably being 1991 when he threw for 3,121 yards and 15 touchdowns against 16 interceptions. With Ditka's firing in 1992 and a whole new roster surrounding him, Harbaugh saw the writing on Soldier Field's historic walls and signed with the Colts in 1994.

That first year was decidedly uneventful and not much was expected of the Colts entering 1995. But like his college days, Harbaugh set out to prove to the NFL world just how wrong the prognosticators were.

If the 1995 season was a tidal wave, then it began to rise for Harbaugh when he zipped a 15-yard touchdown pass to Sean Dawkins with the team down by 11 points in the fourth quarter against the Jets in Week Two. He then lofted a 14-yard touchdown strike to running back Marshall Faulk late in regulation to tie the game, the Colts knew that they had found a man that could lead them to victory. The fact that they ultimately won the game on a field goal in overtime was almost a non-factor. The attitude in the locker room had changed and the Tidal Wave of Victory was beginning to rise.

Four weeks later, the Colts faced an even more daunting task, down by 21 against the Dan Marino-led Dolphins. What followed blew the naysayers away, as Harbaugh led the Colts to 21 unanswered points in the second half and once again, Indianapolis won in overtime. He was becoming known as "Captain Comeback."

Mere weeks later, the Colts stunned the NFL by defeating the defending Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49ers in a nail-biting 18-17 contest. To make the victory even sweeter, it had come in front of his home crowd. From that moment on, the Colts' fans were enthralled with their quarterback. Harbaugh followed that monumental win with another spectacular showing against Marino and the Dolphins, completing 12 of 18 passes for 180 yards and three touchdowns in a 36-28 shootout.

While these performances were inspiring, they were mere precursors for the playoffs. In their first playoff game, the Colts were matched up against the defending AFC champion Chargers. The two teams had clashed earlier in the year, resulting in an Indianapolis defeat. While the Chargers boasted one of the better defenses in the league, on this day, they proved to be no match against Harbaugh. Though the game was tight throughout, the



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Colts took the lead for good when Harbaugh connected with Sean Dawkins for a 42-yard touchdown late in the third quarter. When it was all said and done, Harbaugh had finished the 35-20 victory by completing 16 passes out of 27 attempts for 175 yards and two touchdowns.

The following week, the Colts somehow found a way to defeat the top team in the AFC, the Kansas City Chiefs. It was a low-scoring affair, but Harbaugh led his team to a 10-7 upset in Kansas City by throwing a critical touchdown pass. The Colts were really riding the Tidal Wave of Victory now and entered Three Rivers Stadium brimming with confidence. But the Steelers were different, tougher than the other teams in the AFC playoffs. Despite a valiant effort, Harbaugh couldn't muster one last comeback, instead watching his last-ditch Hail Mary pass flutter harmlessly to the ground amidst a sea of hands.

Due to his surprisingly impressive season, Harbaugh was named the NFL's Comeback Player of the Year and was invited to the only Pro Bowl of his career. He finished the 1995 season passing for 2,575 yards while leading the league with a 100.7 passer rating and throwing 17 touchdowns against just five interceptions. While the rest of his playing career was relatively quiet, Harbaugh began preparing for the next chapter of his life: coaching.

Jim first got his feet wet in the coaching ranks while still a player, serving as an offensive consultant for his father at Western Kentucky, roaming America searching for recruitable players. By the time he retired in 2001, he knew what path he was meant to follow. Jim was immediately hired as the Oakland Raiders quarterbacks coach in 2002 and instantly saw positive results as his pupil, Rich Gannon, won the league MVP that year while leading the team to the Super Bowl. Alas, the Raiders were not meant to win the Super Bowl that year, beginning a theme that would play throughout Harbaugh's coaching career: never able to win the big one.

He was only in Oakland for two years and left just when the organization fell flat on its face, joining San Diego State as its head coach in 2004. In his three years with the Aztecs, Harbaugh won two Pioneer League titles while developing a young quarterback named Josh Johnson and finished with an overall 29-6 record.

In 2007, Harbaugh was hired away to coach Stanford University, a team that had just finished 1-11 the year before. In what may be his greatest accomplishment, Harbaugh built the program in his image, recruiting very good players with an underdog's mentality. One of those players was quarterback Andrew Luck. Together, the two men changed the culture of the Stanford Cardinal. In 2009, Harbaugh and Luck led the program to its first bowl game in years and in 2010, Luck took the nation by storm and



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nearly won the Heisman Trophy. With the Cardinal winning the Orange Bowl and finishing in the top five, Harbaugh was a hot topic in NFL circles. Teams needing structure wanted him. Just days after winning the Orange Bowl, Harbaugh was named the head coach of the San Francisco 49ers.

The 49ers had struggled for the previous eight years. While their roster was stacked with first rounders, they lacked structure and an identity. Early in training camp, Harbaugh gave each player a blue workers shirt with a name tag. His players were no longer entitled multi-millionaire athletes, instead they were blue collar workers who had to earn their jobs. The mentality stuck and as the weeks went by, San Francisco did something that they hadn't done in eight years, win. After every victory, Harbaugh ended each locker room speech with a familiar saying: "Who's got it better than us? Nobody!" That blast from the past became a rallying cry for the entire 49ers organization as they continued to surprise the NFL week after week.

Along the way, Harbaugh instilled confidence in Alex Smith, the 49ers' much maligned quarterback who had battled through injuries and benching's for this very opportunity. At a glance, it didn't take one long to recall a time when Harbaugh was in his pupil's shoes.

The 49ers' remarkable season of resurgence (13-3 record) climaxed in the Divisional Round of the playoffs when they defeated the Saints in a shootout. As the residents of Candlestick Park roared their approval, a new era of 49er football began to blossom. Just days after Vernon Davis caught the winning touchdown with seconds on the clock remaining to defeat New Orleans, the city of Santa Clara voted to allow the 49ers to build a new stadium. Despite their loss in the NFC Championship game to the eventual Super Bowl champion New York Giants, everyone in the Bay Area knew that this era would bring prosperity.

The next two years were fruitful, albeit chaotic. When Smith went down with a concussion in the middle of the season, Harbaugh was forced to turn to backup Colin Kaepernick. At the time, Kaepernick was an anomaly but he quickly proved his worth by leading the team to victory in his first two starts. Compared to Harbaugh's previous quarterbacks, Kaepernick was unusual. While he had a cannon for an arm, his most reliable asset were his legs. Seeing his unique abilities, Harbaugh and offensive coordinator Greg Roman implemented much more read options and pistol formations in their offense.

The strategy worked as Kaepernick eviscerated the Packers in the first round of the playoffs, running for a league record 181 yards in the 49ers 45-31 victory. While his legs were shut down for much of the next round, he still led the team to a 28-24 victory over Atlanta in the NFC Championship Game.



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Two weeks later, Jim faced off against his older brother John in the Super Bowl. After all of those years, the two were now facing each other as opposing coaches on the sport's biggest stage. The first brothers to ever coach against each other in football's biggest game. The 49ers quickly fell behind but sparked a furious comeback late in the game. Alas, San Francisco's dream run to the Super Bowl ended in defeat as Kaepernick's last pass attempt floated hopelessly to the corner of the endzone in the final seconds with the 49ers trailing 34-31. Once again, Jim Harbaugh's luck in the Super Bowl ended with slumped shoulders rather than raised bottles of champagne.

A Super Bowl loss is never light on a coach's career. No matter how many titles he wins, that one loss will weigh heavily on his legacy forever. Despite his rapid success in a very short time in the NFL, the noose was quickly tightening around Harbaugh's neck. The 49ers did well in 2013, but lost in the NFC Championship game to the rival Seahawks, again with Kaepernick's ill-advised fade route being nullified by the defense in the waning seconds of the gut-wrenching 23-17 contest.

With three straight seasons ending in heart breaking postseason defeat, the clock was ticking on Harbaugh's time in San Francisco. His abrasive personality was beginning to take its toll. After an 8-8 campaign in 2014, he and the 49er brass decided to "mutually part ways." Harbaugh wasn't unemployed for long as several programs in college and franchises in the NFL expressed interest late in his last, forgettable season in the Bay Area. One of those programs was his beloved Michigan. When the Wolverines called, they hardly needed to gather much of an offer. After all those years of finding his stride as a player in the NFL and his voice as a coach in both the professional and collegiate ranks, Harbaugh knew where he belonged: in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Despite having slumped to mediocrity, Michigan was no 2006 Stanford. They still boasted a tremendous tradition of excellence, all they needed was a spark. Harbaugh wasted no time forging a winner in Ann Arbor, making the postseason every year but one (2020) as Michigan's coach. Recently, he's even found a way to defeat arch-nemesis Ohio State, a program that had plagued his every waking thought for years. But once he found a way to exorcise those Buckeye-sized demons in 2021, his career had come full circle. Once the player that guaranteed victory over the Buckeyes, now the coach guiding his men to victory over Ohio State. Now his next challenge is to do something that Bo Schembechler never did and the University of Michigan has failed to do since 1997, win the National Championship.



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