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Climbing the ladder: Four coaches finally get a chance

By Jeff Zillgitt, USA TODAY

Jim Zorn synchronized the clocks. John Harbaugh rearranged the locker room. Tony Sparano became a billboard. Mike Smith couldn't find a dinner companion on his own coaching staff.

Such are the privileges, surprises and hazards of becoming an NFL head coach.

Procuring one of the 32 jobs isn't easy, and none of these men had been able to do so until this past offseason. Young hotshots they are not. They are longtime assistants averaging 49 years of age and more than 23 years of pro or college coaching experience.

They wondered if this chance would arrive. Now that it has, they're solving problems they've never encountered.

"There's a new challenge every single day, whether it's an X-and-O challenge or a personnel challenge or a relationship challenge with the players," Harbaugh says. "You've got to be able to come up with an answer. And you've got to be able to do it fast."

Zorn, 55, replaces Joe Gibbs, a Hall of Fame coach who led the Washington Redskins to the playoffs in 2007. Harbaugh, 45, takes over the Baltimore Ravens from Brian Billick, a Super Bowl winner who made the Ravens a respected team.

The Atlanta Falcons' Smith, 49, and the Miami Dolphins' Sparano, 46, have longer roads ahead of them. Their new teams had serious issues last season.

In Atlanta, the aftertaste of the [Michael Vick](#) dogfighting incident lingered. Then Bobby Petrino unceremoniously quit as the Falcons' coach with three games left in the season.

Smith and Sparano evoke similar language when they talk about trying to shake their franchises from the mind-set of losing.

"When you change the culture, you have to change people's behaviors," Smith says. "And when you change behaviors, you change their habits."

Some might view team vice president Bill Parcells as the new face of the Dolphins franchise, but it was Sparano's mug looking down from a billboard that nearly caused the new coach to run off the road.

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The Dolphins were 1-15, coming dangerously close to a winless finish in what became their only season under Cam Cameron. That one victory didn't come until Week 15.

"Everybody in this building — administrators, everybody — we've told about changing the culture," says Sparano, who was the Dallas Cowboys' assistant head coach last season. "It can get easy to get comfortable losing and easy to say, 'It's not my fault.'

"When I look at it and see the team starting to come together and starting to form a personality and maybe the personality it's taking on is a little bit of the head coach, I start to say, 'Hey, we really are doing this.' "

The message has been received. "I think you either live up to it or you'll be shipped out. That's kind of the way it's going to be," Dolphins cornerback [Will Allen](#) says.

Of the four new head coaches, only Smith has been a defensive or offensive coordinator in the NFL (from 2003-07 with the Jacksonville Jaguars) and only Sparano has been a head coach at any level (from 1994-98 at the University of New Haven). Will they find success? They are establishing philosophies and implementing systems they believe will make them winners in the NFL.

Greater demands

It starts with the head coach. And that's why Smith's assistant coaches kept declining dinner invitations from him.

"I was getting an inferiority complex about it," Smith says.

Eventually, Smith solved the case. He overheard one of his assistants mention a penalty for going to dinner with him.

"They didn't want it to look like they were sucking up to the boss," Smith says. "They were fining each other for going to dinner with me. Once I got wind of it, I told them I was paying all their fines. Then I had guys going to dinner with me all the time."

Smith realized there would be demands on his time, demands an assistant coach doesn't have. It was more than daily interviews with reporters. As a defensive coach with Jacksonville and Baltimore, Smith kept notes during practice and afterward could hustle without interruption to his office to watch video from that day's practice.

Now he meets regularly with reporters. Support staffers are looking for answers to questions that never crossed his mind as an assistant.

Which hotel do you want to stay at on the road? What kind of pregame meal do you want?

"We're putting in new verbiage for the offense and defense. I'm still trying to figure out who's on our roster," Smith says. "It's important to our support staff, but it's the last thing on my mind."

Time management

Zorn agreed with Smith about time commitments. While both enjoy the give-and-take with reporters (for now anyway), Zorn really embraces the interaction. He likes to tell stories that embody his philosophy.

There's the one about the clocks at the team's training facility. Shortly after joining the Redskins following seven seasons under Mike Holmgren with the Seattle Seahawks, Zorn saw the clocks at Redskins Park ticking and tocking but not tick-tocking in unison.

"There were clocks everywhere, and each clock seemingly had a little bit different time," he says. "Not much. A minute, two minutes, before, after, whatever."

"I got all the clocks changed in the building (to a digital system). To really hold the players accountable for a fine or a meeting

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starting at the right time, if the clocks were all different, they can say, 'Well, that clock in there said this.' So I did what they have in Seattle, and all the clocks are synchronized to one time."

Zorn, the Seahawks' starting quarterback from 1976-83, looks a Pacific Northwest outdoors type. He likes to kayak, mountain bike and climb mountains. But he is far from relaxed about details. And not just with players.

"Mediocrity in this league and in our program here can get you beat," he says. "So I like other people noticing details and getting after the detail before I have to jump in."

Case in point, the cake story.

Three days after the Redskins' offensive linemen gave a cake to tackle [Chris Samuels](#) for his birthday July 28, there was still a mess — frosting, cake and jelly filling on the small stage Zorn and players use during interviews.

Approaching the stage after a practice, he looks at the remaining stains and mutters: "Get me a power washer and some degreaser, and I'll get after it."

He isn't kidding.

Later, in a hallway, he explains: "Cake all over the place? No problem. Guys wiped it off."

Discernible pause.

"Some of it off. They took the big chunks," he says. "We can all wallow in the muck a bit, no problem. But for our players to come over there, they're sweating, they want to get out of there. They're sitting in melted cake. I get up there, and my feet are sticking."

So he had the stage cleaned again. And now, a day after that second cleaning — and *three* days after the mess had been made — Zorn still isn't satisfied.

"It was cleaned," he acknowledges. "But not really how I wanted it."

A few days later, black outdoor carpet covered the stage.

"Classy," Zorn said approvingly, "very classy."

Zorn's changes go beyond making pastry cleanup demands. He banned rookie hazing, saying first-year players have enough worries. But he has his way of letting rookies know their place. They can't wear the Redskins' logo on their helmet during practices until they make the team. He wants them to feel like they've earned the job.

Spreading the message

Harbaugh, who spent the past 10 seasons with the Philadelphia Eagles, comes from a strong football background. His dad, Jack, worked for Bo Schembechler at Michigan and was the head coach at Western Michigan. His brother, Jim, a former quarterback at Michigan and in the NFL, is Stanford's head coach. Harbaugh played at Miami (Ohio) University, known as the cradle of coaches with its connections to Woody Hayes, Schembechler, Ara Parseghian and Jim Tressel.

"Those Midwest football values and principles are the foundation of our program," Harbaugh says. "We want to be a rough, tough, clean, disciplined football team. We want to be accountable and committed to winning championships. We want to do it the right way, ultimately to be the standard bearer in the NFL for excellence. Anything less, why are you even doing it?"

To that end, there are summations of his philosophy on signs in the weight room and on the way to the practice field. They bear sets of words that are commands as much as they are reminders: "Attitude, Compete, Fast, Physical, Relentless, Finish" and "Work Hard, Stay Loose, Stay Focused, Be Accountable, Take Care Of One Another."

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"How much we practice third-and-long, how much we practice first-and-10, blitz stuff, that's what I learned from him," Harbaugh says.

When Harbaugh took the Ravens job, he got his team's attention when he rearranged the locker assignments in the team's dressing room. Instead of grouping players by position, as the team had been doing, Harbaugh wanted them distributed regardless of position.

It might not seem like a big deal, but Baltimore's identity under Billick was shaped by a productive defense and a mediocre offense. "The unit cohesiveness is really important, but the team togetherness is more important," he says. "Guys joke, 'How's it going to make us better if I'm next to a guy I don't like?' Maybe if you get to know him, you will like him. Maybe you have a few things in common."

That's just a small decision, one of many small ones Harbaugh has made or will make to put his imprint on the Ravens.

Harbaugh understands and respects the authority the head coach has, but it's a bit of an adjustment. "Generally speaking, when I would make a suggestion or have an idea, it's more like taken as an order," he says.

When Harbaugh talks to a player at practice, "I can tell by the look on their face sometimes as they look at me, it's not the same look I used to get as a special teams coach," he says.

Says cornerback [Samari Rolle](#): "He's stern, but at the same time, there's no talking down to you."

Though the job comes with pressure, there are perks besides a nice paycheck.

Harbaugh is thrilled that his phone calls are returned. It's a lot easier when you are "John Harbaugh, Baltimore Ravens head coach" instead of "John Harbaugh, Philadelphia Eagles special teams coach."

When he needs to reach Tony Dungy, Bill Belichick or Dick Vermeil — coaches Harbaugh admires — it's not a problem.

"That's kind of neat," he says.

Contributing: Tom Pedulla in Davie, Fla.

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