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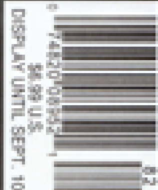
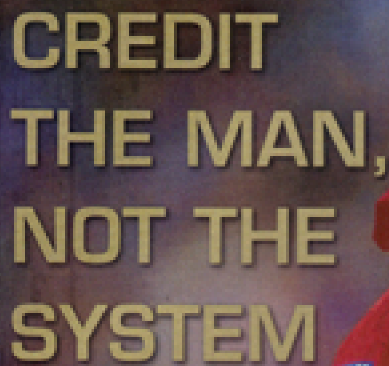




CREDIT THE MAN, NOT THE SYSTEM

Wrongly linked to Bill Walsh's style of football, the West Coast offense has also undersold what made the legendary innovator truly special

By Mike Beacom

If there is a common denominator among football coaches everywhere, it is that they all borrow, or steal, from their peers. Attend a clinic anywhere and this is not only discussed, it's encouraged.

Of all the great coaches to grace an NFL sideline, perhaps none has borrowed more, or been more often borrowed from, than the late Bill Walsh, who transcended the sport with his near-impossible-to-stop San Francisco offenses in the 1980s. Walsh grew under the tutelage of the game's greatest minds and he later mentored a number of coaches who'd go on to distinguished careers in other NFL cities around the league.

But a year after Walsh's death, it can be argued that what his fans and peers admire most about him is some-

thing those closest to him suggest Walsh had no interest in being associated with: a system.

The West Coast Offense, as legend now suggests, was not really Walsh's to begin with, nor was it what made the man the elite coaching mind that he truly was. Made popular in San Francisco, and improperly labeled, that system, which relied heavily on its fullbacks and tight ends to "bail out" the quarterback if primary downfield receivers were not open, was really not so much a system at all, but rather an exercise in Walsh's genius as a puzzle-fitter and as a disciplinarian.

And now, despite being heralded across the NFL landscape, the West Coast Offense can be considered as dead as Latin. What lives on, though, is how Walsh made that system go. And that is what football aficionados need to appreciate about him. But before that, it's important they understand the history of the passing game and learn a bit about where Walsh's boat was before it docked in the San Francisco Bay.

An abbreviated history of the modern-day passing offense shows that much of the forward pass's origins can be tied to Ohio — ironically, the home state of grind-it-out gruffs Woody Hayes and Bo Schembechler.

- Legalized in 1906, evidence suggests the first successful forward pass occurred during a meeting between Saint Louis University and Carroll College that September. Massillon's George Parratt is credited with having thrown the first completed pass in a professional contest.

- In Sandusky, Ohio, in 1913, legend is Gus Dorais and Knute Rockne worked on perfecting the pass play while serving as lifeguards on the shores of Lake Erie.

- Studying as an assistant under Ohio State's Francis Schmidt, former all-conference end Sid Gillman begins what becomes a noteworthy coaching career. In Columbus, Gillman will get to observe Schmidt's relentless and unforgiving offenses, which earn the scowl-faced coach the nickname, "Close the Gates of Mercy Schmidt."

- Schmidt's replacement in 1940 is a local coach doing wonderful things at Massillon Washington High School — Paul Brown. At Ohio State, Brown will win a national championship in 1942, but his innovative approach to the passing game doesn't take flight until he is pulled into the war and asked to coach at the Great Lakes Naval Station, where the country's top athletes are stationed.

Brown's early contribution to the passing game was simple: spread out the attack. By splitting the tight end out wide and moving the halfback stationed opposite him into what would now be called the "Z" spot, or slot, Brown's methods were considered cutting edge. Said Mike Giddings, a former pro and college coach and long-time NFL talent evaluator, "It was radical to see ends split out, even five yards. Not a lot of teams were doing that."

- Like every distinguishable coach of the era (or virtually every coach), Gillman does his tour at Ohio's Miami University before landing in the NFL in 1955 with the pass-happy Los Angeles Rams. Later in life he pays respect to Brown by stating, "I always felt before Paul Brown, coaches just rolled the ball out onto the field." Eventually Gillman will wind up in San Diego coaching Barron Hilton's Chargers' teams of the 1960s, where understudies from all around the country will come to carefully examine his approach to the passing game. One frequent visitor is the San Diego State head coach — a guy named Don Coryell. The Chargers of that era passed every which way they could, but most importantly — they passed.

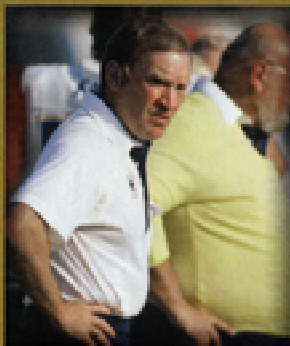
"The main thing that Gillman probably brought to the game was the idea that passing was not a bad thing," said Giddings. The Chargers' receivers coach during Gillman's first three seasons is a rather ambitious youngster named Al Davis.

- Having left Gillman, Davis employs his own passing philosophies as the Oakland Raiders' coach. The difference? "Sid employed two halfbacks and used a lot of draws," said Giddings. "Al changed that to more of a power running game when he got to Oakland. The deep pass was the same, but how they got to it was different."

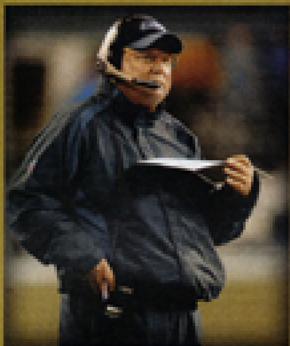
The objective to both passing philosophies was simple: employ fast wide receivers who can win a one-on-one foot race against an out-matched cornerback. By emphasizing the run early, whether with finesse or power, the safeties are brought toward the line of scrimmage, and later that can be exploited with long passes. Said Giddings, "The idea was, if you throw deep eight or nine times a game you're going to complete two of those throws, or if anything, draw pass interference. And to buy time they used seven-step drops because the pass rushers had to respect the run first."

- After having spent many years in Cleveland, Brown takes over control of the Cincinnati Bengals in 1968. His early years involve a lot of downfield passing, similar to what Davis has done with success in Oakland.

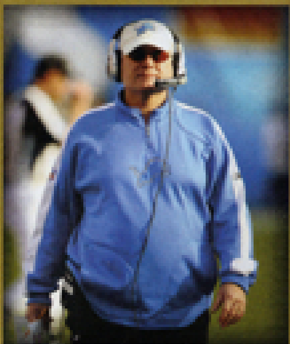
- After five seasons with the NFL's St. Louis Cardinals, Coryell lands in San Diego, where he'll build his own style of offense.



Head Coach Don Coryell of the San Diego Chargers stands on the sidelines during a game in December of 1983.



Seattle Seahawks coach Mike Holmgren watches from the sidelines during 16-0 victory over the Oakland Raiders on November 6, 2006.



Offensive coordinator Mike Martz of the Detroit Lions watches play from the sidelines during the game against the San Diego Chargers on December 16, 2007 in San Diego.

"He built those passing teams with guards and a center made of rock. You couldn't budge those guys," said Giddings. Truth be told, Coryell had no choice: his quarterback, Dan Fouts, had cement feet. Coryell kept the pressure off of his talented passer, who could throw deep, but the Chargers' offense also featured the bigger catch-and-run receivers that would later define Walsh's offenses. Another of Coryell's disciples, Joe Gibbs, will borrow many of his mentor's philosophies and meld them with Davis' power approach when he accepts the head coaching job in Washington.

- The 1978 49ers finish the year 2-14 and decide they need to make a coaching change. The team chooses Stanford coach Bill Walsh, who incorporates all he had learned into what later becomes known as the West Coast Offense.

Said Walsh's longtime friend, and former coaching associate Mike White, "You have to examine two things: his play selection over the years, and the unbelievable ability he had of calling plays that utilized the talents of the players he had. When people try to copy him, or they're from the Bill Walsh tree or something, people assume that makes it a West Coast offense. No one has ever made it as successful as he did."

To be fair, Walsh's philosophies on passing the football probably should not have been called the West Coast Offense to begin with, and the story behind it is now football fodder. During a conversation with Bernie Kosar, longtime football scribe Paul Zimmerman asked about his offensive system. Kosar, a student of the game, associated what he was working with as having ties to what he called the West Coast Offense. Only Kosar was speaking of the down-the-field system featured by Gillman and Davis in the AFL. Unlike Walsh's high-percentage short passing attack, that system was more aggressive and far less complex. Or, as Davis disciple and eventual Green Bay Packers general manager Ron Wolf explained it, " … deep routes, outs, hooks, comebacks — the ball went deep. Then you'd get that middle empty and you could throw to the tight end deep down the middle of the field."

Said Giddings, "In Al or Sid's offense, they liked to throw the ball downfield, and running after the catch wasn't nearly as important. On the stop, or comeback, the defender's going to tackle you. Bill felt it was more effective to throw short and have your long gains come after the catch."

As legend would have it, Zimmerman's piece was picked up by a wire-service guy who wrongly tied the term, West Coast Offense, to what Walsh had built in San Francisco. "Walsh called me up pissed off," recalled Zimmerman, "said that wasn't his offense."

Oh, but it could have been Walsh's philosophy … and it almost was. As fate would have

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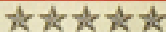

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it. Walsh's journey often intersected at points where the passing game was evolving.

Having left San Jose State in 1956, Walsh spent three years coaching at the high-school level before accepting the defensive coordinator job at Cal. There he met White, who he'd work with at Stanford while Walsh served as its defensive backs coach. "He had written his thesis on defensive football when he got his doctorate," laughed White, who spoke at the coach's memorial service last summer.

But in 1966, Walsh switched to the offensive side of the football when he accepted a post as the Oakland Raiders' offensive backs coach. If ever the fate of how the football would be flung downfield, it was then. Typical of Oakland teams from the era, and of Davis' endorsement of vertical passing, the Raiders led the AFL in yards per completion that season — Walsh there as an observer more than as someone of great import. In fact, said Wolf, an Oakland scout at the time, "I don't really recall much of him. If you're asking how much of an influence he had on the Raiders' passing attack, my answer would be 'not much.'"

Two years later when he accepted Brown's offer to serve as the offensive coordinator of the expansion Cincinnati Bengals, Walsh had a blank canvas with which to work — sort of. It's well-documented that Walsh's early years in Cincinnati offered the type of passing success more closely resembling the downfield attack than what later would become identified with Walsh's style of football. The 1969 Bengals, in fact, boasted three receivers with double-digit catch totals who averaged better than 20 yards per reception, and the receiving corps averaged 16.7 yards per catch — higher than every other AFL club, and almost a full two yards more than Oakland's average that season. The team's quarterback, Greg Cook, was one of the game's brightest young prospects, and, as Zimmerman put it, "could throw it a million miles with touch. This was going to be an offense that was going to wipe out all the records."

Fate in the form of injury stepped in, and what would be was not to be at all. A series of injuries ruined Cook's career, and all of those downfield yards were short-lived. The following year the team was forced to turn to Virgil Carter to assist while Cook recovered from a shoulder injury, and Walsh was forced to help re-make the Bengals attack. But, while historians insist this transition signifies the origin of Walsh's ingenuity — claiming Carter's insertion forced Walsh to reinvent his philosophy on the passing game — it in many ways undersells Walsh's innumerable contributions to the game of football.

While it is true that the 1970 Cincinnati Bengals did average below the league average in yards per catch, and that the team's quarterbacks registered the second fewest interceptions — both suggesting a more controlled, higher-percentage approach to passing — it also can be said that what was really born in that season was what fans fail to identify or appreciate about Walsh's legacy — his ability to adapt.

Sam Wyche, who backed up both Cook in 1969 and Carter in 1970, claims Walsh deserved as much responsibility for the team's downfield success in the franchise's first two years, as for its modest success amidst chaos during the changes made in 1970. Forced to relieve an injured Cook for a large portion of the 1969 campaign, Wyche produced the best numbers of his career. Recalled Wyche that at one point that season, "I moved to the No. 1 passer in the AFL. I still have the clipping where it says, 'Wyche, Cincinnati,' then (Joe) Namath, then (Daryle) Lamonica, then (Ken) Stabler, then (Len) Dawson ... boy, how proud I was until I walked into the training camp facility that Monday morning after I got through reading the morning paper and Paul Brown said to me, 'Well, Greg Cook's healthy again, he'll be starting this week.' It was the system that made that offense go, because I wasn't anywhere near close to the quarterback that Greg Cook was."

And, after Cook's career had shriveled, and Carter was no longer welcomed, Walsh and the Bengals reverted back to a Mad Bomber-like approach (tight end Bruce Coslet averaged 17 yards per reception in 1971, while Charlie Joiner and Isaac Curtis were used to stretch defenses in Walsh's final few seasons in Cincinnati). All of this suggests Walsh didn't subscribe to any one theory, or even have a change of philosophy, but rather that he made the most of what he had to work with — a common theme throughout the remainder of his coaching career.

Feeling spurned by Brown in 1975 when the coach hung up his hat and named Bill Johnson his successor, Walsh spent a year with Coryell before landing a head coaching job at Stanford. By the time he arrived in San Francisco in 1979, Walsh was ready to incorporate all that he had learned. Only the timing wasn't right.

"He didn't waltz in there with some magical system called the West Coast Offense," said White, who served as the team's offensive line coach from 1978-79. "We didn't have the pieces at the time."

But what Walsh did offer immediately was the foundation for what would become that system. For Wyche, who was hired in 1979 to direct the 49ers' passing game, the terminology was similar to what he had learned as a young quarterback a decade before.

"I'll tell you how close it was. One of the basic plays we had was a five-step drop where the flanker ran a 10- to 12-yard pivot, the fullback ran a wide flair to the outside, and the tight end walled off the inside linebacker and ran a little hook over the ball. We called it '22 Z in' in Cincinnati and when we got to San Francisco it was called '82 Z in.' So the terminology was that close, and the play was exactly the same," said Wyche.

Under Walsh the team duplicated its 2-14 mark from the year before. But in 1980, things changed. This, according to White and others, is when Walsh's innovative approach to the passing game began to show.

With a revamped staff and personnel, Walsh got a fresh start and began to incorporate the principles that would make his system of Xs and Os work on Sundays.

One of Walsh's early assistants, Billy

San Francisco 49ers Hall of Fame head coach Bill Walsh has a conference with backup quarterback Matt Cavanaugh (6) and Hall of Fame quarterback Joe Montana (16) during the 1984 NFC Championship Game, a 23-0 victory over the Chicago Bears on January 6, 1985, at Candlestick Park in San Francisco.

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Wilson, worked with the team's receivers during the preseason, and scouted prospects for the 49ers the rest of the year. When Wilson retired from the game in 1960 he was considered one of its all-time great receivers, having caught 407 passes during his 10 years in San Francisco.

"In 1951, when I was with Buck Shaw we had a little notebook. We just had to get open on our own, we didn't have a system to get us open," said Wilson. "As a receiver it would have been a dream come to true to have been a part of (Walsh's offense). It didn't matter what down it was, he would throw on first or second down and there was always something there. In the era in which I played, they usually didn't throw until they had to, and that made it tougher to get open."

Walsh helped to change all of that, in large part due to his work in Cincinnati in analyzing how quarterbacks read through progressions on passing plays.

Said Wyche, "The quarterback memorized the progression of the receivers. For example, if he had an X, Y, X play, when he took his first step away from center, he was looking at a 'key' player on defense. If that player blitzed he'd throw to the hot receiver. If that defender did not blitz, the quarterback went to the No. 1 receiver. If he was covered, he would go to the No. 2 receiver who should be open. If for some reason No. 2 was covered, he would go to No. 3. And, if for whatever reason that player was covered, you always had a guarantee — 1, 2, 3, guarantee, or, what I call 'save a sack guy.'

"It was a memorized progression. That was the origin of the West Coast Offense, or, as far as I'm concerned it was."

Before then quarterbacks read coverages and found open targets. Walsh encouraged a more disciplined approach that limited how well defenses could mask coverages. And, as Wyche pointed out, even though the fullback or tight end caught a lot of passes in the Walsh system, that player usually was the second or third read.

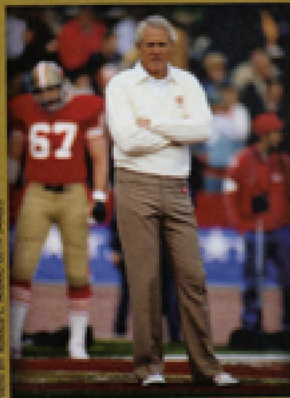
"If you think about Joe Montana's career, how many times he would hit Dwight Clark running a shallow cross, well many times (Clark) wasn't the primary receiver, he was the No. 2 guy," said Wyche. "Montana was trying to throw the ball down the field."

Yet, long the perception of Walsh's offense has been that it made short or intermediate routes the emphasis, not the fall-back option.

Walsh's approach was also effective in disrupting the defense's most effective weapon. "In terms of defense, the position that correlates most to winning is the linebacker because they play the run and the pass," said Giddings. "What happened in the Walsh system was that the backs could get out to catch so fast, and the paths they were taking were similar to the paths they were taking to block. The linebackers couldn't tell what they were going to do." Because of this, linebackers needed to read the offensive tackles in order to determine whether a pass or run was coming their way.

Another misperception was that Walsh preferred the pass over the run. Not true, said White. "Most of his games he was just like everyone else: he finished the game running the ball. He'd get teams adjusting and moving ... he'd window dress with (the skill position) guys and then when the game was on the line he'd run the ball and win with defense."

His success at San Francisco, of course, brought three championships in 10 years, beginning in his third season. When he left the NFL following the 1988 season, Walsh's teams had won 68 of their last 95 games,



and his passing game had been operating at such a level of efficiency that opponents deemed it near impossible to contain.

Now, a year since Walsh's passing, he is still revered for changing the modern-day passing game. His name is tied to the West Coast Offense, and he is associated with short and horizontal throws.

For White, it was the man who made the system what it was, and not a simple philosophy or a series of Xs and Os that can be duplicated in every corner of the country. "I get a kick out of people who are putting in the West Coast Offense. Well, what are they doing? Someone saying, 'This is the rudiments of the West Coast Offense. I just got it out of this book.' Well, I'm, saying that it's a hell of a lot deeper than that, and it's a hell of a lot more complex than that ... Anyone can grab a West Coast playbook. To me, Bill Walsh stood alone in the ability to adapt that playbook."

Wyche, one of Walsh's many disciples, explained that what people recognize about Walsh's system was the heightened roles taken on by the fullback and tight end — two positions that had been used quite differently in the passing systems that proceeded Walsh's revolutionary thinking.

"The true offense involved a fullback that could catch and run, and be a pass protector," said Wyche, who left the San Francisco staff in 1983 to take the head coaching job at the University of Indiana. "The one thing about that offense was that it was very flexible, and if you didn't have a fullback that could do something you could run the same play from a different formation and save him from something he wasn't good at. The tight end was crucial, and if you didn't have a good one you put a receiver in the game at that spot."

Walsh's coaching tree is well-documented, and in the early 1990s it was viewed as the spreading of the West Coast Offense, even though most of his disciples employed variations that strayed from Walsh's preferences.

Said Wolf, who served as the Packers' general manager from 1991 to 2001, "When Mike Holmgren came to Green Bay, he himself made an awful lot of changes to that offense."

According to White, coaches could not, and did not mimic Walsh; instead, what they took was his offensive language and boilerplate principles.

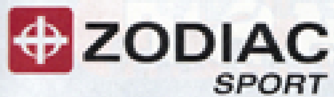
"You don't duplicate Vince Lombardi. A lot of his assistants weren't successful because they didn't have his temperament," said White. "Well, in Bill's case, it was his creativity and uncanny ability to get the most out of people that got the playbook to come alive.

"There is no parallel to how he made his system work. There's Mike Shanahan and Mike Holmgren and guys all over who are his disciples who've captured what Bill stood for and have taken the system and made it work for them, in their own particular situations. But those who have been tremendously successful learned from Bill how to practice and how to make the offense ready for game-like situations."

Still, it's easy today for fans and football historians to classify Walsh as the originator of the West Coast Offense, even though it does not encompass all of Walsh's ingenuities or fully define his contribution to the coaching profession, most notably to the passing game.

Said White, "His system was bigger than those three words. It's not something you just read in a book and then here comes the end product. Doesn't work that way. His management skills and personnel decisions and ability to add or subtract players is what made it go. The system on the field was his, and I think maybe that's why he was sensitive to it being a word as if it were something you could market or go out and sell.

"The West Coast offense was probably a myth. What Bill Walsh was, and certainly what he accomplished, was not." ■



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