

Patience and a Sense of Urgency

An Interview with Bill Walsh

Source: Momentum Summer 2005 Issue by the Positive Coaching Alliance

Jim Thompson caught up with Bill Walsh recently, and one of the greatest coaches of all time (and a new member of PCA's National Advisory Board) talked about coaching and teambuilding.

Jim Thompson: Talk about building team culture with the 49ers.

Bill Walsh: I felt that as soon as players put the 49er uniform on, they were a 49er until the day they took it off. That might have been a player who would only last forty-eight hours with us in training camp; it also could include a fifteen-year veteran at the end of his career, but everyone was treated with the same respect to build their own inner confidence in their own performances. It was really important that a 49er uniform meant something. We demonstrated due respect for everyone, and we continually strove to convince everyone that you could win or lose for us –that everyone would have an impact in some way on the outcome of games. Whether it be the equipment man or the receptionist or the personnel people, they could have an impact on the games by the kind of work they do, their work ethic, their interaction with other people, their communicative abilities – all of these things were important, so they were stressed continually and not just in one single lecture or our manual of operations.

JT: A big league locker room where people are fighting for their professional life can be a pretty cutthroat place sometimes – hazing of rookies and the like.

Walsh: We didn't allow it. We didn't allow any hazing whatsoever. Players should be able to focus totally on their performance and their effort to make the team. They shouldn't be distracted or maligned. And it really worked out because there were men who came in and started as rookies and were included on the team the minute they arrived. And guys like Billy Ring and Milt McColl who came to us as free agents. They were allowed to compete for a job rather than be distracted and embarrassed through hazing.

JT: It seems like once you get the ball rolling and you have some really strong leaders like Joe Montana and Ronnie Lott (PCA National Advisory Board member), it seems like it gets easier. Does it?

Walsh: Oh, yes, our great players bought into it without any problem. It's always someone who's probably not as bright, who would mistreat other people, embarrass other people and, consequently, affect their game. When I'd see that, we'd have to make a change on our roster. We just couldn't have people like that on the 49ers.

JT: It seemed to pay off with a lot of players wanting to play for the 49ers....

Walsh: Well, at one point, we were the team that everyone would like to have been with, and we won our first Super Bowl with the lowest salary schedule in the league. So it wasn't the money. It was the approach we took, the reputation we developed, and the attitude of the team.

JT: One of the ways that professional coaches on TV are harmful to youth coaches is screaming at players because they made a mistake. And then a youth coach feels like, well, if I'm going to be a real coach, I've got to do that too.

Walsh: That is the easy way out because it's easy to demean and criticize, and you have ultimate power over the destiny of the athletes. Now, the athletes are going to play whether you're the coach or not. They love to play football, and one of the reasons they want to play football is to associate with their teammates – the fraternal part of the game where they bond together. So, a coach can be awful, and the players will overcome it, and so coaches, sometimes overrate themselves, disastrously.

JT: So, players can win in spite of the coach....

Walsh: *In spite of the coach*, and that is not uncommon. Coaches should be facilitators to bring the players together to communicate and teach them the skills and then be strong enough and forceful enough in practice to have high expectations and high standards.

JT: Part of PCA's Double-Goal Coach™ model is Filling Players' Emotional Tanks.

Walsh: There were very few players I didn't build up through positive reinforcement, in fact, every one of them, by being very positive about what they can do to help the team win, about their progress and their development of skills, about their ability to interact with the other athletes. There are times you criticize, but I did not personalize the criticism because people are committing themselves, they're sacrificing, and their feelings are right on the surface. You can really embarrass the athlete, but in reality you're embarrassing yourself as a coach when you do that. You correct the player and have him repeat whatever drill he's in, and you tell him he needs further work on it, and you are supportive of that, but to just rip into an athlete who's out there playing because he loves the game not because of the coach, is sort of an indulging kind of fantasy the coach is playing out. Let's just say a player doesn't really hit hard enough in football, he doesn't commit himself, coaches will write that off as cowardice when, in reality, if the coach can talk to the player about it, privately to tell him he's just not meeting the standard you have to have to play the game of football, in the next practice, you've got to see that from him, you can save a lot of players.

JT: They'll actually ratchet it up...

Walsh: They are capable of ratcheting it up. Especially in a private circumstance where the coach tells the player he's not living up to the expectations of the team or himself or

the coach, and he's going to have to change the way he's playing and he's going to have to see it the next practice, and you can remind him and remind him until he becomes a much more intense performer.

JT: When you first became coach of the 49ers, you said if the goal had been to win the game on Sunday it would have been demoralizing because you didn't have the talent. So your focus was on getting better every week. Similarly PCA promotes the "ELM Tree of Mastery" where E is for Effort, L for Learning and improvement, and M for bouncing back from Mistakes.

Walsh: Well, that pretty much blankets the issue. Football is a game of skill, and the key is for each player to reach his full potential. It's for the coach to develop an environment where the player is improving his skills and performance level each week. If you're concentrating on that, then, naturally, the wins will come. So you're always working to improve your team week in and week out, win or lose. You can live with losing if your team is performing well and executing well. As time passes you cross over into the area of winning consistently. Now, it takes patience on the part of the coach and a sense of urgency. It takes a lot of energy from the coach, intense energy, on the field, working with individual athletes and with the team. So the players see a coach who's demonstrating energy in everything he does, and not just a person who's standing in judgment of them. That creates a captivating environment that you really must have.

JT: One of PCA's sticky messages is the Magic Ratio, five positives for every criticism. Criticism is necessary, but if kids get too much criticism, they get down, so you look for things they're doing right and reinforce that. Any reaction to that?

Walsh: Well, I've never thought of measuring it. All I know is the player needs support, and he needs fortifying...Athletes need to believe in their coach and feel that their coach believes in them. When athletes aren't sure whether the coach believes in them, then their level of confidence is going to wane. Very few athletes are so strong, from the standpoint of their own personal characteristics, that they'll overcome a coach who doesn't believe in them.

JT: So, being recognized by a coach for the positive things you're doing, is a way of that coach communicating that he believes in them?

Walsh: Yes, demonstrating he believes in them, and not once a week before the game. He has to believe in the players. And, to be caustic and judgmental on an ongoing basis, just breaks down the confidence of the player. The coach might feel gratified that he has control of other human beings – one of the features of coaching football is that the coach has total power over the destiny of the athletes even to the point where he can endanger them physically. That sense of power – sometimes the coach can run amok without realizing it. It's the coach's job to develop an environment, an atmosphere, where players begin to believe in each other and believe in what they're doing and sacrifice for each other. Very few players play for their coach, as much as the coach would like to

think that. They play for each other. It boils down just to that group of players, in any sport, that bond together and sacrifice for each other and demand of each other. When the players begin to demand of each other is when you break through. For me, as a coach, when I would hear my players repeating my teachings to each other, then I knew I was an effective coach.

JT: That's lovely. A PCA theme is Honoring the Game – respecting the rules, opponents, officials, teammates and yourself. Any thoughts about that?

Walsh: It's absolutely critical. Players might think they're getting away with something by breaking training rules, but, in reality, as time passes, the other players lose respect for them because they know that player is, in a sense, costing them chances to be successful, and endangering their physical being by not being there. Respecting opponents is part of the game. If you lose your temper in a game, you lose control, probably for about the next three or four minutes, maybe longer. You don't lose it and then get it right back again. You lose your temper, your effectiveness drops way off the next two or three plays, even though you think you're really mad and you're going to do something...

JT: Parents at youth sports events are imitating the way fans behave at professional sporting events, working the officials, for example.

Walsh: That shows tragic lack of maturity and judgment on the part of the parents. Venting for their own feeling of gratification that they get in demeaning someone else, in this case, the official. Twenty percent of the game is chance, and part of that chance is officiating. So, you know there'll be some calls that are erroneous – some will go for you, some against. If they understand that 20% is chance, it might soothe them a little bit into understanding that things happen, and you can't get everything just right.

JT: Any other thoughts about Youth Sports?

Walsh: The young men and women beginning a sport are in a very vulnerable position. As much as they have aspired to participate and waited until they had a chance, the coach can suck the energy right out of them by mistreating them early. The coach who's trying to prove something to himself rather than develop players has got to realize how fragile young people are when suddenly criticism is heaped all over them about something they've been waiting to do for a long time. So, from out of nowhere they're just being ridiculed and criticized, and they're not ready for it. So many young men leave youth football because of that. The coach has to understand he's dealing with very young, fragile minds when it comes to competition. The key is to make the experience positive and for the athlete to feel that he belongs.