

Shaw is comfortable with high expectations

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David Shaw has been in command of the Stanford football program for seven months, but he fields as many questions about his predecessor as about his top-10 team or star quarterback.

Shaw doesn't mind talking about Jim Harbaugh. Quite the opposite, actually.

"I like it when people ask me about Jim," Shaw said. "I owe a lot to him. He fought a lot of battles here that I don't have to fight."

Harbaugh's astounding success -- he turned a 1-11 team into a 12-1 Orange Bowl champion in four years -- has placed Shaw in a position that is both desirable and precarious entering his first season as a head coach.

With a veteran roster led by quarterback Andrew Luck, Stanford has legitimate designs on the Pac-12 championship and the national title. But that's about the only way the Cardinal could improve on last season, the only way Shaw could one-up Harbaugh.

Who could have ever imagined that 11-2 would be considered a step backward at Stanford?

Shaw seems as comfortable with the unprecedented expectations -- Stanford's No. 6 ranking in the coaches' preseason poll is its highest ever -- as he is with questions about Harbaugh.

"We like high expectations," Shaw said. "The preseason hoopla is what it is. Our goals are the postseason, the Pac-12 championship."

Shaw, 39, worked for Harbaugh for one year at the University of San Diego and four at Stanford, but they have very different personalities. Harbaugh is edgy, even

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confrontational, off-the-charts intense. Shaw is reserved and methodical, with a smile as easy as Luck's passing motion.

"Both have a fire from within, but it's expressed in different ways," said assistant Lance Anderson, who coached with Shaw and Harbaugh for five years at USD and Stanford.

Harbaugh is famously competitive. Shaw, by all accounts, is cut from a similar cloth -- challenging his players in every workout and his coaches in every meeting. He lives by the Harbaugh mantra: You compete every minute of the day.

"It's the same message, just a different messenger," Cardinal safety Michael Thomas said.

When it comes to coaching philosophy, the messengers are essentially the same: Both Harbaugh and Shaw favor an old-school power running game.

Harbaugh has been a true believer since his playing days at Michigan under coach Bo Schembechler.

Shaw's indoctrination came while playing wide receiver at Stanford for Denny Green. In Shaw's freshman season (1991), the Cardinal won eight games, and bruising running back Tommy Vardell rushed for 1,084 yards and 20 touchdowns.

"He talks about the success they had because they were more physical," Anderson said of Shaw. "Jim and David are very similar in terms of tactics and approach. They believe you win by being physically dominant.

"A lot of people say to me, 'I bet it's different.' But it's not. The offense is the same. The defense is the same. The overall approach is the same."

It is difficult to imagine any coach being better prepared than Shaw to take over Stanford at this point in its trajectory. He has a passion for the school and understands its DNA. He is comfortable following in Harbaugh's footsteps, and he counts three other former Cardinal coaches as mentors (Green, Bill Walsh and Tyrone Willingham).

When Shaw needs advice on X's and O's, however, he dials up Jon Gruden, who was the Raiders' head coach when Shaw worked there as an assistant.

"Periodically, I'll ask him questions about formations, shifts and progressions," Shaw said. "I'm sure there will be times this season when I'll need to bend his ear for 10 minutes."

But the most influential coach in Shaw's life is his father, Willie, a longtime NFL assistant who coached at Stanford while Shaw was a player.

Among the morsels of advice handed down from father to son was how to communicate with players -- that honesty is important, but it is

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more effective when packaged with specifics.

Luck has seen that approach since his freshman year, when Shaw was the offensive coordinator.

"It always seemed like it would be Coach Shaw who would take me aside every now and then," Luck said. "He'd say, 'Remember, you're preparing yourself to play. Don't take these scout team reps like they're nothing.'"

"Obviously, he wasn't coaching the quarterbacks, per se, at that point. But he's been instrumental in teaching me the West Coast system and everything within this offense."