

Stanford's David Shaw looks to build on success

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

David Shaw, the son of a coach, played for Bill Walsh and worked for Jon Gruden and Jim Harbaugh.

His predecessor chided his own alma mater, Michigan, on its admissions policies for players; tried to run up the score on USC; flopped on his back on the sideline to show an official how an opposing punt returner tried to induce a penalty; and wrestled with family dogs when visiting recruits at their homes.

It's hard to imagine David Shaw doing any of those things. The next indiscreet remark he makes to the media will be his first. He's every bit as competitive as Jim Harbaugh, but he's more low-key. More, well, dignified. That doesn't mean Shaw won't react strongly when things don't go right.

"Seeing him angry is not a fun thing," quarterback Andrew Luck said. "As he'll say himself, he's slow to anger, but once he gets upset, you know you've seriously messed up."

ESPN NFL analyst Jon Gruden, Shaw's mentor on the Philadelphia Eagles' staff for a year and then for four years with the Raiders, put it a little differently. Gruden, who was called "Chucky" because his intense face took on the look of the Chucky doll from the old horror movies, said, "He's got a little Chucky in him, too."

In one sense, Shaw's job is easier than Harbaugh's was when he took over the Cardinal. Before moving to the 49ers, Harbaugh was more successful than any Stanford head coach in many years. He obliterated the idea that a school with rigorous academic requirements couldn't win, and win big, on the football field. Shaw doesn't have to overcome that hurdle, either with his current players or recruits. Balanced offense

In style, the Cardinal won't be much different from what they were under Harbaugh, for whom Shaw served as offensive coordinator. They'll still try to run the ball down people's throats to open up things for Luck's play-action passes. They'll still use as many as seven offensive linemen at a time. They'll still try to attack on defense.

"We came here (with Harbaugh in 2007) with the attitude of being a balanced football team," Shaw said. "It didn't change when we had Toby Gerhart. We ran the ball a little more, but when you look at the numbers, we were pretty balanced."

That won't change even though Luck is perfectly capable of passing repeatedly, Shaw said. Luck "doesn't want to throw the ball 60 times a game. That's not his mentality. He's not looking for stats."

A pass-first offense puts the defense in a bad position too often, Shaw said. "We want to control the clock. We want to run on third down. We want to be great on first down. We want to line up and have teams not know if we're running or throwing."

The only thing he wants Luck to do differently is slide more on open-field runs. "He tends not to shy away from contact," Shaw said. "I understand. He's that competitive; he can't help himself. ... I can't take his competitiveness away from him."

Stanford's defense under new co-coordinators Derek Mason and Jason Tarver will be "physical and attacking," Shaw promised.

Shaw's training camp is just as fast-paced and demanding as Harbaugh's. "Mistakes are not going to be tolerated," he said. "Great athletes who make mistakes won't play."

In Shaw, Gruden says, Stanford "got a coach who is prepared, who will motivate people and who is creative." Although Harbaugh was a masterful recruiter, Gruden said Shaw will do just fine on that end, too.

"Players want to go to teams that will be successful," he said. "Going to the Orange Bowl and winning it last year will help them win a lot of recruits."

According to Shaw, his years with Gruden "helped shape me. We're still doing a lot of things he taught me in Oakland." He called Stanford's offensive style "Bill Walsh's baby, but it's been augmented along the Jon Gruden strain of the West Coast offense."

He described that strain as incorporating a physical running attack with high-percentage passes. With Gruden, he said, "Every play was fundamentally sound and had a purpose. They were attacking something specific." Steeped in X's and O's

Another mentor, of course, was Shaw's father, a former Stanford and longtime NFL assistant coach. Thanks to his dad's work, David went to Stanford and NFL practices for years as a kid, staying in the team dorms at training camps and shagging balls in practice.

"He taught me to talk (to players) in specifics, not generalities," David said.

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A wide receiver for Dennis Green and Walsh at Stanford in the early 1990s, he was called "Coach Shaw" by his younger teammates. "I was the annoying guy who was correcting them before the coaches did," he said.

A fine all-around athlete, he also competed in a track meet and even joined coach Mike Montgomery's basketball team for a stretch. Shaw was mainly a practice player until he got a chance to play a couple of minutes in a one-sided win over Oregon State. As the students chanted his name, he got on the stats sheet by grabbing a rebound.

Finding his calling

At his first news conference as Stanford head coach, he said he hadn't planned on becoming a football coach after college. He said he was headed for the financial world until he was offered an aide's job by Western Washington.

That's the only part of the Shaw narrative that his father tells differently. He thinks his son was headed to coaching all along.

"You don't live with somebody for 18 years and not know him," Willie said. "You have a feeling of what he wanted."

David didn't realize taking the Western job was the right move until the first day of practice, he insisted. "I had this itch," he said. "Once we start (coaching), we can't do anything else. We dive into it. We sleep in our offices and work insane hours. Our passion for the game and for the guys we coach - it comes to a point where you can't hide it."