

David Shaw fulfills father's dream

By Ivan Maisel
ESPN.com

STANFORD, Calif. -- David Shaw recalls not being able to look to his left. He sat at a table in January alongside Stanford athletic director Bob Bowlsby, who introduced Shaw as the new head coach of the Cardinal. Shaw wore a dark suit, white shirt, cardinal tie and a 200-watt grin.

[+] EnlargeDavid Shaw

AP Photo/Paul SakumaDavid Shaw's introductory news conference was the fulfillment of both his and his father's dreams.

Before him were gathered the local media, as well as friends and colleagues dating to Shaw's days as an undergraduate. Shaw, 39, played football and basketball and ran track on the Farm. He played wide receiver in the early 1990s for Dennis Green and, when Green left to become a head coach in the NFL, the legendary Bill Walsh.

Nearly 20 years later, the reverberations of Walsh's return to Stanford have quieted. Walsh left the Farm in 1978 after two successful seasons to take on the task of rebuilding the San Francisco 49ers. Walsh won three Super Bowls in 10 seasons and revolutionized offensive football with the West Coast offense. He retired in 1988, emotionally and physically spent. Three years later, unsatisfied by television work, Walsh seized upon the opening that Green had left.

Quoting the American academic and mythologist Joseph Campbell, Walsh said of returning to Stanford, "This is my bliss."

One man's bliss is another man's misery. By the time that Walsh expressed interest in returning to Stanford, the search to replace Green had reached its 11th hour. Stanford athletic director Ted Leland had narrowed the field to two inside candidates: the offensive coordinator, Ron Turner, and the defensive coordinator, Willie Shaw.

That explains why, almost 19 years to the day after the news conference introducing Walsh, David Shaw could not look to his left. There sat his sister Tawnya, and his parents, Gay and Willie Shaw. On the day that he had dreamt of his entire adult life, David Shaw fulfilled the dreams of his father, too.

"If I looked over to my left, I was going to cry," David Shaw said. "There's just no way I was going to keep that in. I glanced over there and I saw the pride in my dad's eyes."

It is the bedrock of the American canon, a belief that transcends ethnicity and era. The father knocks on opportunity's door; the son bursts through it. One of the great sources of unease in the current body politic is the feeling that the next generation may not have it better than the one before. There is a feeling that a social contract has been broken.

Outwardly, the son and the father couldn't be more different. Willie Shaw, even at 67 and nearing a decade in retirement, remains coiled. He is all angles, sharp-edged and as direct in manner and speech as you would expect a former Air Force sergeant to be.

David Shaw examines an issue from every angle before he speaks. He exudes calm, so much so that it can be mistaken for placidity. The biggest hurdle Shaw had to overcome in winning the Stanford head-coaching job regarded the fire in his belly, especially when replacing the blast furnace that is Jim Harbaugh.

But the father and the son share two traits that explain why David Shaw is the Stanford head coach. One is an intelligence for the game. The other is a passion for Stanford.

"We want to fill that locker room with guys that are tough, that are smart, that are motivated, that have goals and aspirations beyond football," David Shaw told a breakfast gathering of Stanford alumni in New York in June, "because there's an energy that builds. The people that you associate with every single day; they have high aspirations. We've all been hearing the same thing since we were kids, right? You are who you associate with. Why wouldn't you want to associate with a bunch of Stanford people? A bunch of smart, bright, motivated people from all over the world, every walk of life, that come to our nice little oasis in Palo Alto."

Willie Shaw served as an assistant coach on 14 teams in a 33-year career almost evenly split between college football and the NFL. On this summer day, he sat in the coaches' meeting room at Stanford.

"Late in my career in the NFL," Willie said, "I had this reporter ask me, 'What was your favorite team?'"

"Stanford.

"No, no, I meant the NFL."

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"You didn't ask me about the NFL. You said, 'What was my favorite place to coach?'"

"I said Stanford University. And meant it," he continued. "This is where I started. I learned a lot about coaching."

Willie Shaw enlisted in the Air Force out of high school and served in Vietnam. He rose to the rank of sergeant before he enrolled in college. Willie played defensive back at New Mexico and became a junior high school math and science teacher back home in San Diego. He coached, too.

Shaw came of age in a profession that didn't quite know what to do with young black assistant coaches. It didn't occur to anyone to hire black coaches until locker rooms began to fill with black players. When Stanford coach Jack Christiansen hired Shaw away from San Diego City College in 1974, Shaw said an unofficial quota system existed.

"We all knew how it worked," Willie recalled. "A head coach gets hired. If he knew a black coach, or knew a black ex-player of his, and he knew him really well, he was the first one he hired. Then he hired the rest of his staff. He had to have that black coach. If he didn't know one, you know what he did? He hired his whole staff, and they sat in a room like this, and the first topic was, 'Who knows a black coach that we can hire? Do you know enough about him that he won't hurt us?'"

"That was my era that I came out of. That's just the way it was."

Stanford fired Christiansen in 1976. As Shaw packed up his office, another young African-American coach bounded up the stairs of the old Stanford athletic building. Dennis Green had been hired by the new head coach, an NFL assistant named Bill Walsh.

Green asked Shaw about coaching on the Farm. Shaw told him to ignore the conventional wisdom that Stanford couldn't attract players good enough to play the USCs and UCLAs.

"The most competitive athletes I've ever been around are here," Shaw said. "You know why? You got to be pretty competitive to go in those classrooms over there and compete for an A."

In 1989, Stanford hired Green as its head coach. He brought Willie Shaw, by then a defensive backs coach with the Detroit Lions, back to Stanford with him. A year later, Green offered David Shaw a scholarship.

"My son [David] was 2 years old when we first came here," Willie said. "So we were here three years. He was 5 or 6 when we left. I got pictures of him and my daughter climbing all over Jack Christiansen on the practice field with their Stanford gear on."

"He asked me when he was in eighth grade: 'How do you get to Stanford?' So we sat down and we talked about it," Willie Shaw said.

Like most coaches' kids, David Shaw played his high school sports career without his dad watching from the stands. By coming to Stanford, his dad would see him -- every day.

"I always had it in the back of my mind, I wasn't going to be overt about it, but I did want to make sure that people knew I could play and I wasn't just there because my dad was there," David said. "I took a lot of pride in competing and showing that I truly belonged."

"I think the biggest thing, my dad's got such a presence," David said. "I think he's always extremely respected, well respected. The fact [is] that a lot of those guys truly respected him. Not that that respect ever transferred over to me, but at the same time there was a line they didn't cross. He had been there for a year, all right, I had been in high school. So he had kind of established himself and what he was about and the players loved him. So I got there, it was, 'Hey, you know what? I love your dad, man. He's awesome.'"

A couple of David's friends on offense began playing for his dad. Willie Shaw recognized defensive talent on the offensive depth chart and coaxed Green into giving him the players. Darrien Gordon, a receiver who had trouble hanging onto the ball, became a defensive back and kick returner and played 10 years in the NFL. A junior backup quarterback who couldn't win the starting job became a safety.

"I had to get John Lynch in here and talk to his dad for three hours because his dad wanted him to be a quarterback," Willie said. "His dad knew I had been in the NFL. He said, 'Can you promise me that my son will be able to play safety in the NFL?' I promised him" -- Willie began to laugh -- "but I didn't know if he could or not. I needed a safety."

Willie Shaw benched Lynch after two starts. Lynch, who had signed a minor league baseball contract with the Florida Marlins, thought about ditching the sport. He went on to make nine Pro Bowls before retiring from the NFL in 2008. Lynch, now an NFL analyst for Fox, said he was always angry with Willie. But he couldn't help liking him, too.

"He was always a mad scientist," Lynch said. "He'd get up on the board and his pen would start going crazy. He and David both have great football minds."

Yale head coach Tom Williams, who played linebacker on those Stanford teams, recalled how much Willie Shaw expected from his

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players.

"There wasn't much gray," Williams said. "He was that way not only with us but the other defensive coaches. ... It wasn't quiet. He wasn't pulling a guy over to the side to have a conversation. He was right in your face. He got after me a few times."

Williams and Lynch echoed one another discussing how much football they learned from Willie Shaw.

"I've taken it everywhere I've coached," said Williams, an assistant at Stanford and several other schools and in the NFL before coming to Yale in 2009.

Green took a down-and-out Stanford program and built it into a winner. The 1991 team went 8-4, and 10 starters would return on Willie Shaw's defense. When Green announced on Friday, Jan. 10, that he had accepted an offer to become the head coach of the Minnesota Vikings, Leland, the Stanford athletic director, quickly narrowed the candidates to his coordinators, Shaw and Turner.

Here the story turns into something out of "Rashomon." Willie Shaw has remained adamant through the years that he had a handshake deal with Leland and former Stanford president Donald Kennedy on Tuesday, Jan. 14.

"I had lunch with the president on Tuesday," Shaw said. "He offered me the job on Tuesday. We were going to make the announcement the next day."

"I don't have a very clear recollection of it," Kennedy said. "I may have congratulated him. I just can't remember the exact context of that conversation. It was becoming obvious that he was the inside candidate. Everybody was pretty excited about Willie. It would have been the director's job to make the formal offer."

"We put them through a series of interviews," said Leland, now vice president of external relations and athletic director at Pacific. "We were down to the point where it looked like we were going to look at one of those two guys, and then Bill appeared on the scene."

A few days before, the San Francisco Chronicle had broken a story that Walsh would return to the 49ers in an unspecified capacity in the team's front office. The local media mocked the notion that he would return instead to Stanford.

"Leland wouldn't comment on the hilarious rumor that Bill Walsh wanted to return to Stanford," the Chronicle reported on Jan. 14.

A local sports anchor promised on the air that if Walsh returned to Stanford, he and the news anchor would "come to your house and sing all the Judds' hits."

But Walsh had expressed an interest in returning. He reached out to a couple of influential alumni, who got him together with Leland. They made a deal Tuesday night.

Leland will not publicly discuss the search beyond saying, "Coach Shaw had a great deal of support from the players and would have done a great job. I'm not sure I remember the drama playing out the same way he does, but we had very serious discussions."

On Wednesday morning, Willie Shaw recalled, "I was supposed to go meet with the athletic director at 9 a.m. in his office. I walked down there at 9 a.m. and he wasn't in his office. I went back up to my office, figured he might be a little late. I came back down 25 minutes later and he still wasn't there. So I knew then."

Shaw expressed his anger and disappointment. But, as David observed, "He's a military man -- very factual." Willie Shaw also made one of the most gracious comments an unhired candidate has ever made.

"What I said was, and I was very sincere, if I had a choice between me and Bill Walsh for the job, I'd choose Bill, too. It was obvious!" Willie said. "The guy had won a couple of Super Bowls and had done a great job when he was here before. I didn't think it was much of a choice."

The son he left behind did what he always does. He examined the issue from all angles. As a son who might have played for his father, the missed opportunity stung. As a wide receiver who had hung posters in his bedroom of Jerry Rice, who under Walsh became the greatest wide receiver in the history of the game, his pulse and his mind raced.

"Gosh, he was great to be around," David said. "At times, he was almost magical. He was always a step ahead. He would be funny, then flip around and be serious, you know, be very conversational, and at the same time he was telling you something. He had such high expectations and such high standards, you didn't want to be the guy that let him down."

Walsh carried an emotional sensitivity unusual in a football coach, about both his own emotions and those around him. David may not have known what to think. But Walsh recognized the potential awkwardness of coaching the son of a coach whom he shoved out of the way to return to Stanford. He pulled David aside.

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"We had one, probably 45-second conversation. It was less than a minute," David said. "And it was sincere and it was basically along the lines of, 'I have all the respect in the world for your dad. You know, it would have been great for him to stay. He did an unbelievable job with the defense. You're judged on your own merit. Don't think twice about any favoritism or the exact opposite, because that's not going to happen.' That was pretty much it."

Willie Shaw never came back to college football. He spent the next 11 seasons in the NFL, six of them as either a defensive coordinator or assistant head coach. He played an important role in the NFL's groundbreaking efforts to open its coaching offices to African-Americans.

David Shaw had been an NFL assistant for nine seasons when he went to the University of San Diego with Harbaugh in 2006. A year later, Harbaugh took over a 1-11 Stanford team. David said that Harbaugh considered bringing Willie Shaw out of retirement but finally decided on someone else.

Instead, Harbaugh chose to express his regard for Willie Shaw in a different way. On the wall facing the entrance to the Stanford football office, there is a large photo collage entitled "Coaching Legacy: Then & Now." It includes some very recognizable faces in a long, storied tradition. At the top, right next to Green, is a smiling Willie Shaw.