



The Genius: How Bill Walsh Reinvented Football and Created an NFL Dynasty

David Harris

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The Genius is the gripping and definitive account of Bill Walsh's career and how he built a football dynasty from the rubble of a fallen franchise. David Harris gives a stellar account of the silver-haired sophisticate from humble working-class roots who was hired as head coach and general manager of the San Francisco Forty Niners in January 1979 and became the architect of what is arguably the greatest ten-year run in NFL history.

With unmatched access to players, fellow coaches, executives, the reporters who covered the Niners' heyday, and Walsh himself, Harris recounts how Walsh, through tactical and organizational genius, created a football juggernaut. There were also the demons that pushed and haunted Walsh throughout his career: his clash with his former mentor, Paul Brown, who denied Walsh his first pro head-coaching job with the Cincinnati Bengals; Walsh's struggle with self-doubt and criticism; the toll his single-minded devotion to football exacted on his family; and his complex relationship with the Forty Niners' owner, Edward DeBartolo, Jr.

Walsh's pre-Niners coaching odyssey was arduous—a longtime assistant coach, he developed his legendary and now-standard pass-oriented West Coast offense during stops at all levels of the game. Despite never having run a team's draft before, Walsh, along with his right-hand man John McVay, quickly built the foundation for a dynasty by drafting or trading for a durable core of stars, including Joe Montana, Fred Dean, Hacksaw Reynolds, Dwight Clark, and Ronnie Lott. (Walsh would later restock the team with such players as Jerry Rice, Steve Young, and Charles Haley.) The key to Walsh's genius perhaps lay in his keen understanding of his athletes' psyches—he knew what brought out the best in each of them. But the scope of Walsh's impact on the game extended well beyond the field and locker room. The Forty Niners' life-skills counseling program, which Walsh spearheaded with the sports sociologist and activist Dr. Harry Edwards, and the internship program Walsh devised to bring minority coaches into the game have since been adopted by the NFL for all league franchises.

In the annals of sport, few individuals have had as great an impact on their game—or on its relevance to life outside the lines—as Bill Walsh. With knowledge, skill, passion, and a critical eye, David Harris reveals the brilliant man behind the coaching legend.

The vision Bill Walsh brought to all his pioneering efforts was a function of his perception of himself as someone who was far more than a football coach. He cherished his standing and participation in the larger world outside the NFL and nurtured them at every opportunity.

“Knowing Bill Walsh was kind of like the blind man describing an elephant,” one of the sportswriters who covered him observed. “We all knew just one little piece of him. But he had all these other areas we knew nothing about. He dealt with lots of people outside of football, outside of our scope entirely. He was able to deal with politicians, people who were intellects in other areas. They were impressed by him.”

—from *The Genius*

From the Hardcover edition.

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Spiros says

I don't actually give a shit about football: I am pretty sure the last book I read about football was BRIAN'S SONG, back when I was in elementary school. I find that I lack the attention span for the NFL, as it is currently constituted; it lacks a narrative arc. Every year, your team plays 16 games, then tries to figure out who it can resign, who it has to cut, which superstar to overpay, which unproven free-agents to sign to fill the gaps in its roster. For the ultimate team sport, this is extremely ill-conceived; somebody wake me when every team finishes the season 8-8. I realize that there is probably a degree of old-fogeyism in this attitude, but only to a small extent.

At one time, I cared very much about football: it was what was happening when Baseball wasn't happening. I lived and died every Sunday with my Niners, and died a lot. To this day, I have a far better sense of players such as John Brodie, Cedric Hardman, Jimmie Johnson, Ted Kwalik, Tommy Hart, Milt Willcox, Cleveland Elam, and Ray Rhodes, then for anybody on the current roster. I guess old-fogeyism.

The advent of Bill Walsh obviously did nothing to diminish my enthusiasm for my team, and this book does an excellent job of evoking the thrills and despairs of that glorious time in Niners' history. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and feel that I have been given insight into the agon of "the Genius" who made it all possible.

Mankey says

"The Genius" is a decent enough book, but it felt a bit incomplete. The sole focus of the book is really Walsh's time with the 49'ers, everything else is glossed over. After Walsh leaves the 49'ers you go straight to the chapter detailing his funeral, interspersed with bits of his post Niners career. While the book does spend some time chronicling the things that made Walsh "different" as a football coach, it's not an X's and O's book. There's no real history on the evolution of Walsh's "West Coast Offense," one of the most innovative changes to the game since the forward pass, and that's a shame. Harris does a nice job of capturing Walsh's angst after losing a game, but he doesn't capture everything that made Walsh worthy of the name Genius.

As a very big football fan I enjoyed the book, but wish it had contained more substance. In my mind Walsh is the greatest coach in the history of the modern NFL, and I think the definitive book on his life and influence on football has yet to be written.

Tom Gase says

A pretty good read and a must read for all 49er fans. This book is about Bill Walsh, aka the Genius. In the 1980s Walsh guided the 49ers back from a horrible team to one of the best in the league as he won Super Bowls for the 1981, 84 and 88 seasons. This book guides the reader through all those seasons as well as the ones in between including the 1983 championship game loss to that team from Washington and in 1988 (for the 1987 season) when they lost unexpectedly to the Vikings and created a QB controversy with Joe Montana and Steve Young.

This book only focuses on Walsh's years with the team so you won't read anything about the 1989 team or the 1994 team in here. Still, if you want to go down memory lane in the 1980s with one of the best football teams of all time than this is the book for you. Made me bust out some NFL films DVDs while reading this. Walsh coached at a time where there were four great coaches in the NFC-- Walsh, Joe Gibbs, Mike Dikta and Bill Parcells.

The problem I had with this book was not the research, but the executing of it, if that makes sense. A bunch of times David Harris, the author, would have a sentence that said something like, "Montana was then intercepted by a New York Giants linebacker." Look, even I know that is Lawrence Taylor, so write it!! You did the research to find out what happened on the play but didn't have the details in the book. Why? Why go through the trouble of finding out what happened and then not include it? Another time there was a sentence that said, "The 49ers had trouble with the Bear quarterback." Who was the quarterback? McMahon? Tomazak? Someone else? Why not write that? I don't understand. If that player had been mentioned earlier in the graph or on the page then, yeah, it's okay to do that. But when it's not, it leaves the reader wondering. Other than that, a solid read.

Matthew J says

Insightful read but I wish the author would have mentioned opposing players by their actual names.

Brayden says

I've been a 49ers fan since the 1984 championship season and so I'm predisposed to like this book, but I was happily surprised that it was actually an engaging, interesting account of the coach that brought the 49ers to prominence in the 80s and established their dynasty. Harris spent a lot of time with Walsh before his death, getting, in a sense, his death bed confessions, and so the book gives glimpses into Walsh's private life to which most biographers would have lacked access. I was surprised by how personally pained Walsh was despite his apparent success. I always saw Walsh as having a gentle, sublime persona, but behind the scenes his natural controlling personality and perfectionism caused him to endure anguish every time the 49ers suffered a major loss. Over time this anguish debilitated his confidence and ability to lead the team.

Interpersonally his relationships with his players turned sour, and for a long while he became estranged from his wife and children. Still, he managed to do things with the 49ers that inspired awe and loyalty among fans like me. He installed a level of professionalism that hasn't been seen in teams since, and his team won 3 Super Bowls under him (two more after he retired with a team that he largely built).

The book was quite an emotional read for me, bringing back childhood memories and making me remember why the 49ers were my first sports love. This book probably won't get 4 stars from most of you, but for me it was a nostalgic visit to the team I grew up with.

r says

Decent biography but one which I wish had spanned more time and gone into much greater detail. Over 350 pages or so, Harris summarizes the years Walsh spent as the 49ers head coach/president between '79 and '88. If you're as unaware of Bill Walsh as I was, then this is a great start. Every 49ers season in his head coaching career is retold and some major games are described at length, with insights from Walsh, the players and

excerpts from the press.

But if you're more interested in how Walsh managed all of this, Harris is frustratingly spare with details. Walsh is successful in the NFL Draft, but his approach to scouting players only covers a couple of paragraphs. His revolutionary coaching methods span only two pages and a few pages of general theories. He devises a program to increase minority coaching roles, then hires Harry Edwards ("The Revolt of the Black Athlete") to help with player relations in an increasingly black NFL, but again this is barely touched upon.

Other details aren't covered well enough, either. Especially those that cover Walsh's personality, which, to me, would make the book entirely more interesting. This is a coach who took every loss by his team as a personal humiliation, refusing to eat or speak for days afterward. He was also a lousy, absent father and a cheating husband, who gloated to the press after every win and demanded complete control of an entire organization - from janitors to players - in order to feel comfortable. There's barely any analysis of these facets of Walsh, just small snippets here and there.

Near the end of the book Harris says (I'm paraphrasing) that it is/was impossible to know Bill Walsh entirely, and there lies my exasperation with the author. If that's what you think, are you sure you're the right person to write about him?

Bill Johnson says

Bill Walsh was an icon of the 1980's. Basically that is the meat of the book, but it also describes a little about Walsh's life before the 49ers; as a high school coach, player at San Jose State (and boxer), and some of the other coaching jobs he had building up to his selection as the coach of the "Dynasty". Throughout the book Walsh's genius is balanced with his shortcomings and closet skeletons. In the end I find I have even more respect and admiration for the coach partly because I saw his "Genius" was a drive for success and a paranoid fear of failure. Surely, no one took losses harder than Bill Walsh. As a coach myself, I have seen how the drive for success in coaching manifests itself in compulsion to "put in more time than the other guy". It becomes an obsession and at stake is the coaches family friends and any other "normal" part of life. One of Bill Walsh's Hall of Fame players was Jerry Rice, who in addition to having unbelievable talent, also had the hardest work ethic in pro sports. Walsh was to coaching what Rice was to playing the game--Genius plus the hardest work ethic in his pursuit of success. It jeopardized his marriage, and he lost the relationships with his children.

My only criticism of the book was a constant failure to include names of players or coaches that played minor roles in Walsh's successes. I coached Carl Monroe and although he scored the first touchdown in the 49ers second super bowl, his name is not mentioned. Brent Jones who was a stalwart tight end just appears toward the end of the 80's.

In summary, for me a wonderful read full of nostalgia and a description of a regular man that became one of the most successful coaches in the history of football. At one time my inspiration to become a football coach as well.

Patdmac7 says

...the entire Forty Niners' approach was based on self-respect and self-esteem ... Performance enhancement was the theme of everything we did. ... first, appropriate behavior is described. ... The behavior (skill) is then performed under the coach's watchful eye. the behavior is critiqued by the coach in very specific terms. All appropriate behavior is reinforced. If the the skill was not performed correctly, the appropriate movements were described again by the coach to the player. ... The coaching staff consistently described appropriate behaviors and gave specific feedback [in a way that was:] orderly, planned, and positive." p80

Steve Young: Bill was blessed with one of the greatest gifts you can have which is the ability to see the future potential of another human being. ... He saw in me much more than I ever saw in myself well before I ever had a chance to understand it. That is the ultimate compliment to the word coach. There's nothing more a coach should be than to see the full potential of a player unfolded. p353

M says

The title of the book implies that this is a feel-good happy story of Bill Walsh and the 49ers -- but that's almost exactly what this book is NOT. The book doesn't focus on X's and O's of football plays (probably want to see the appendix of Walsh's "Building a Champion" for a few), the technical aspects of coaching (see Walsh's "Finding the Winning Edge"), or even a game-by-game recount of the 49ers games (though this book does come close on this last mark).

This book brings out the darker side of Bill Walsh -- the debilitating anxiety Bill Walsh suffered as a coach, the torment of losing games, the inter-personal relationship challenges with Eddie DeBartolo / Paul Brown / Ronnie Lott and others he eventually pushed to retirement outside of the niners / assistant coaches / local press.

Having grown up as a wide-eyed kid on the sidelines of early 1980s training camps, I never paid much attention to any of that kind of stuff -- so reading about it now from an outside perspective (rather than rationalized or sugar-coated in autobiographies) is actually kind of a surprise. Who knew?

David says

Fairly readable recap of the 49ers dynasty of the 80's from the coach's perspective. Steered clear of what I usually find to be the boring parts ("his grandparents were immigrants who doted on young.....").

I don't think the author regularly writes about sports, or at any rate he does not come across as a football expert. I didn't learn anything about the West Coast offense that I didn't already know, though narrative summaries of individual regular season games from 25 years ago are plentiful here.

What I liked best about the book is that, without being a hatchet job, it shows convincingly that Walsh ("the genius" nickname notwithstanding) was just a guy -- uncommonly devoted to and good at figuring out players' skills and how they could help his team win, to be sure, but not an all-around ultra-person. His family life was a mess; he was a workaholic; he alienated lots of the players; he was emotionally devastated by losses; he had a huge ego ("I won the Super Bowl" etc.), and so on.

To make a sweeping generalization, I think this is the norm -- someone who becomes widely known as

fantastically accomplished in one area is no more likely to have mastered others than anyone else. For this reason, the marketing of successful coaches' insights as though they will help you in business, relationships, life, etc. seems like a hoax -- probably the most tedious example being that endlessly repeated ad a few years ago with Coach K assuring us that "I don't think of myself as a basketball coach. I think of myself as a leader...who happens to coach basketball."

Thankfully, this book, while not riveting, at least sidesteps the temptation to imply that if only you cut people out of your life a year or two before they hit the end of the line, and emphasize "yards after catch" in all your endeavors, you too can be successful like Coach Walsh.

Kevin says

About a month ago, I picked up: "The Genius" by David Harris (2008©). The sub-title is: "How Bill Walsh Reinvented Football and Created an NFL Dynasty".

To be honest, I was expecting another "puff-piece" about how great and good Bill Walsh was. (Walsh passed away 30 July 2007.) The reality is (was) that he was not a particularly nice man – even if he was a great head coach. Walsh is made to seem almost bi-polar and manically depressive in this book. I don't question this impression. I just wonder that twenty years after the fact, so much of this is "new" to me. I bought this book expecting to "re-live" some of the good-old days. The book is a very fast read (which I didn't expect) and was perfect to squeeze in in-between our winning the NFC Conference Championship and going on to the Super Bowl.

If you are looking for a book to advise you how to build a winning football (or sports) program, this one won't be of much use. If you're looking for an in-depth explanation of the "West Coast Offense", sorry, still no joy here. If you're looking for how to evaluate college players for drafting to create a winning team, nope. How to create a game plan or manage an actual game, nope and nope again.

So why is this book "good"? (I highly recommend it!)

Because it reminds of what must be sacrificed in order to reach the top (of any profession) and stay there. It is a cautionary tale of an intelligent, forward looking and forward thinking man who could not separate sports losses from personal failures and suffered terribly / emotionally for it.

Although I enjoyed every Walsh (49er) victory, I also found his personnel actions disloyal and sometimes despicable. This was true "back in the day" (when they were happening) and more so as I read this book. That's not to say Walsh wasn't doing these things for the good of the team. It's just I found them morally objectionable.

It seems, for the last chapters, that Walsh, after his own retirement, made a concerted effort to try to befriend the players he treated so badly during their careers. I'm happy he was able to convince them there was nothing personal in his intent while he was coaching. It is stated that many former players came to have great affection for him, even a sense of love. I think this a "common" response among people who feel someone tried to get the very best out of them – even more than the person themselves felt they had to offer.

It's a shame that a "truer" genius could not have found a way to be both a great coach and a better person at the same time.

Hal says

It took me a while to get around to this book. And though I have read more than a few sports related I was a bit apprehensive as they can tend to get bogged down in the details of the games. This book offered more of the same but there were some good insights into what Bill Walsh the man was all about also.

I had moved to the Bay Area in 1980 just as Bill had gotten settled into the role of budding genius. It did not look that way from early on. It was truly a magical time to be part of the spirit surrounding the achievements of these 49er teams however.

I was hoping for more on the insights to the character of the man and in some respects got them. Really a tortured soul Coach Walsh was as his many disappointments on the way to ultimate success were relentless. Turning him gradually into a very thin skinned person particularly when it came to dealing with the press and his persecution complex. Eddie D. comes across and a major tormenter or Bill also like a spoiled little boy given the reins of a NFL franchise by daddy. Later he is forced to give up ownership due to his shading dealings involving bribery and gambling concession in New Orleans. He retreats from the scene a billionaire.

I had not been aware of his ongoing live in affair with a female sports reporter that prompted him to leave his wife for some time only to return before his untimely illness of cancer that led to his demise.

A reasonably good portrait of a man that did so much for the game of our true national pastime NFL football and the personal price he paid of his own doing.

Bill says

My one complaint, as a sports fan, about this book is that, when describing different football games, he would hardly ever mention the opposing players' names. A minor pet peeve, I admit. But then I kept finding myself thinking, "Now, who was the Bengals' quarterback in '85." A bit annoying.

Austin says

The Genius by David Harris is a pretty good book as it gives a nice biography about Bill Walsh, one of the greatest coaches in football. A man through his hard times becomes a Super Bowl champion three times and a Pro Football Hall of Famer. This book at times was very interesting, but at times got boring like most books for me. In all this book teaches you a couple of things. One that even the best struggle. Another is that no matter how good you are, you will have your haters and doubters.

Nick Zaveri says

After finishing the book, I'm left wondering if Walsh's nickname comes from a place of derision or from awe. It would appear both.

Walsh's ability to create an intelligent and responsive offense is told in great detail. Unlike the majority of coaches, Walsh obsessed over improvement, and working toward perfection in all facets of the game. The greatness of Joe Montana is the best evidence of this. With any other coach, I don't see Montana becoming the quarterback that he became under Walsh.

Like other legendary figures in football, Walsh's legacy is that the game has changed since he became a part of it, and has never regressed. Walsh's involvement with the 49ers is a watershed moment in the league. Similar to Halas and Lombardi, Walsh transformed a team by being involved in all facets of it. In a modern age where winning is expected immediately it's hard to see someone provided with enough patience and space as Walsh. Like Lombardi and Halas, Walsh was able to have control over the football organization. That level of control allowed Walsh to build a team that was reflective of his personality and philosophy.

The descriptions of the DeBartolos, Montana, Steve Young, Jerry Rice and many other players provides a look into their development as players and staff within the organization. Combining stories of in-game heroics and failures along with behind the scenes conflicts and resolutions, the author provides a great portrait of the many people who helped the 49ers become one of the best organizations and teams in pro sports.

Harris' writing is fast and descriptive. Similar to Halberstamm, you travel through different time periods though the chapters-starting with an anecdote of a player's abilities on the field, to a story about that player or staff person's origins.

While the occasional sports cliche can appear to cheapen the text, Harris' story still comes off as a great biography. Not just of a man, but of a team.

I found myself highlighting portions of the text that focused on management. For anyone in the business world, Walsh's philosophies of coaching are very applicable to boardrooms and offices.
