

The Jets' Technician of the Trenches



David Drapkin/Associated Press

Having worked as a coordinator and a head coach at the pro and college levels, Bill Callahan, center, believes he can better appreciate the simplicity of coaching one position.

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FLORHAM PARK, N.J. — The Jets' offensive linemen laugh at the way Bill Callahan approaches football. They find his methods endearing, unusual and effective.

For most of his coaching life, Callahan has focused on offensive linemen, the game's anonymous, unruly brutes. But what may seem simple on the surface — large offensive players shoving large defensive players backward — Callahan sees through the exacting lens of a football scientist.

This, combined with his propensity for wearing preppy sweaters, earned him the nickname By the Book Bill. But more than that, after being fired by the Oakland Raiders and the University of Nebraska, those methods have guided Callahan's career rebuilding.

"This is the most content I've been," Callahan said Thursday. "Going back into the dungeon, the laboratory, has been great for me. I have a new lease on life."

The Jets sometimes wonder how Callahan ended up here. They ask how a man who played quarterback at Illinois Benedictine College (he was a National Association of Intercollegiate

Athletics honorable mention all-American in 1976 and 1977) became immersed in all things protection, a guru of the grunts.

Offensive tackle Matt Slauson has a theory: he thinks Callahan played behind an offensive line so porous that he spent seasons running for his life. "I mean, you look at him, and you're like, no way he's an offensive line coach," Slauson said. "He must have been hit a ton and vowed to protect quarterbacks forever."

Instead, Callahan took a more serendipitous route into the trenches. He wanted to coach quarterbacks at Illinois, but his mentor, Coach Mike White, firmly believed young assistants needed to learn the essence of line play as a knowledge base.

At 25 years old, Callahan found himself standing in front of 26 offensive linemen, never the prettiest group to look at. Right then, he asked himself a simple question: What am I going to do now?

He became what he had always envisioned, only instead of teaching history, he taught linemen. He loved the "schematics" involved, the "variables," the way pure strength hinged on leverage and angles. He likened it to solving a crossword puzzle and he called himself a fundamentalist, in the football sense.

His current players describe him as a technician, concerned with the tiniest details, from precisely where a foot should land to the degree it should be turned.

Offensive tackle D'Brickshaw Ferguson said his first conversation with Callahan two years ago centered on hand placement. Ferguson largely credits Callahan with his rise to this season's Pro Bowl, and that started with the details, with not only understanding information but knowing how to mine and apply it.

If Callahan went any deeper, center Nick Mangold said, the linemen would be discussing big toe placement.

"That's why I'm proud to call him my O line coach," Mangold said. "He's at such an advanced level in knowledge of the game, but he has an uncanny ability to translate it down to us normal people."

Of course, line play at its most basic level still comes down to large, physical men imposing their collective will on defenders. What happens beyond that is where Callahan believes the Jets have an advantage. His linemen approach their craft from a technical standpoint, and that allows them to play faster and with more confidence.

The result: three made the Pro Bowl. The running game, coordinated by Callahan, who is also an assistant head coach, ranked No. 1 in the N.F.L.

Slowly, Callahan has moved away from the two tenures that have largely defined him, become known as more than just a head coach who was fired in both college and the pros.

In Oakland, Callahan took the Raiders to the Super Bowl in his first season (2002) and was fired after his second. At Nebraska, he coached the team that snapped the program's streak of 35 consecutive bowl appearances in 2004. His tenure there helped lead to the fall of a once-proud program. It was marked by an unsuccessful switch to the more complicated, pro-style West Coast offense; by what former players considered his disregard for the college's tradition; and by the faith he put in his defensive coordinator, his good friend Kevin Cosgrove, despite the continued failings of the defense.

When Callahan looks back, which is rarely, he sees positives mixed with disappointments. He said he would have done things differently, in philosophy and regimen, but declined to elaborate.

He said he learned what not to say, like when he called the Raiders the "dumbest team in America." He said he coaches with fewer emotions now.

Mostly, Callahan reiterated that he has moved on. Slauson is a testament to that. He played for Callahan at Nebraska, but with the Jets, their relationship has changed. Slauson said he learned more from Callahan in the past six months than he had ever learned, in anything, including in his four years at Nebraska.

Slauson also said Callahan appeared more contented and more relaxed. He described a coach who works on scouting reports until 3 a.m. yet smiles the next morning, a smile that seemed banished at Nebraska.

Callahan can focus on his linemen. He instructs Mangold on the finer points of wine consumption. He attends their dinners, and this means something because offensive linemen tend to deny outsiders. Callahan is one of them. He speaks their language.

"It's a world unto itself," Callahan said. "We thrive in that world."

The teacher is back teaching, but now, Callahan is equipped with the lessons he learned as a head coach. He learned that football teams are imperfect experiments, that with losing comes scrutiny and with firings come grand shifts in perception.

Having worked as a coordinator and a head coach at the pro and college levels, Callahan believes he can better appreciate the simplicity of coaching one position. Asked if he one day wanted to return to those jobs, Callahan did not answer directly. He said he wanted to savor the years ahead, enjoy the players.

"At his core, he loves being an offensive line coach," Mangold said.