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Winning Formula, Man Management and the Inner Game:  
Commonalities of Success in the Ryder Cup and Super Bowl:

Commentary Piece:  
Bill Belichick and Pete Carroll:  
Learning From Failure and Doing Things Differently

**David Turner**

University of Hertfordshire, School of Life and Medical Sciences, College Lane Campus,  
Hatfield, Herts, AL10 9AB. Email: [d.j.2.turner@herts.ac.uk](mailto:d.j.2.turner@herts.ac.uk)

## INTRODUCTION

I read Simon Jenkins' piece with great interest, particularly because I recently delivered (December, 2014) a public presentation on Bill Belichick and Pete Carroll, as part of my *Learning From Legendary Coaches* series, focusing upon the intertwined story of how these contemporary American football coaches not only overcame adversity in their developmental journeys, but used it as a resource in order to do things differently in the pursuit of competitive success. Little was I then to know that their respective teams would face off in the 2015 Superbowl. One of the aims of this session was to stimulate thought about who we are as sports coaches, and how and why we operate as we do; and this seems to resonate well with ideas in the article around self-awareness, personal growth, and authenticity. Furthermore, the rare status of both of these coaches as simultaneously Head Coaches and General Managers of their organisations offers us the opportunity to explore further issues raised in respect of the relationship between leadership and management.

## NADIR

*“The man who is afraid to risk failure seldom has to face success.”*

John Wooden [1, p. 198]

*“Adversity is the state in which man mostly easily becomes acquainted with himself, being especially free of admirers then.”*

Samuel Johnson [2]

Bill Belichick had been an NFL assistant coach for 16 years, and was already recognised as a prodigious talent, when he became Head Coach of the Cleveland Browns in 1991 [3]. In a remarkably poor showing for a coach now on a 66% win percentage, Belichick achieved a 36-44 record over 5 seasons [3]. Nonetheless, the Browns made the play-offs in his only winning season, with what seemed to be developmental momentum; only for the financially compromised owner to announce the next season that the franchise would be moving to Baltimore post season (Belichick learned about it in the papers [4]), triggering fan unrest, and a slump in form [5]. Notwithstanding assurances that he would continue as coach, Belichick was sacked, by phone, after winning only 1 of the last 8 games [4].

It was a sorry ending given that Belichick started with a clear plan to establish a winning formula, and had brought in his own assistants to counter a lack of organisational identity at Cleveland, typified by the college and pro scouts not even working to the same criteria for spotting talent [6]. At the outset he played tough with the media, shutting down their access, and trying to be like Bill Parcells, who he had assisted for years, when dealing with them, without having either Parcells' acid wit or winning record [3]. Again, like Parcells, he allowed veteran players to bend the rules, but, in contrast, received little in return [3]. And when Belichick brutally cut the quarterback, a popular local boy made good, because he sensed diminishing physical prowess, there was uproar from the fans, who called for Belichick to go [6]. While he survived all this, when that penultimate season showed signs of improvement, the press and fans quickly turned against him when things went downhill [3]. Belichick received death threats [5], and was later portrayed on a Browns fan site as Hitler (now withdrawn but picture can be seen at [7]).

After 10 years coaching at collegiate level, and 10 in the NFL, Pete Carroll became Head Coach of the New York Jets, following 4 years there as an assistant, in 1994 [8]. He was fired after only one season (6-10), when initial confidence evaporated following one particular last minute defeat, with every game thereafter lost [8]. Carroll had excitedly started the year with an address to the organisation outlining his ideas about a positive approach and a fun ethos towards competition, and he felt that the players and coaching staff, who already knew his style and had previously generally accepted him, bought into the message [8]. However, the owner remained tight lipped, and Carroll suspected that he did not conform well to his conception of an NFL Head Coach [8]. Nonetheless, Carroll was more concerned with his own authenticity in the role.

*“...when you're a head coach everything changes, and I think everyone was wondering how different I would be from the Pete they had worked with in the past. I wanted to show them that they were going to get the same coach they had had the past four seasons... The last thing in the world I wanted to do was throw away the things I had learned over the course of my career and pretend to be someone I wasn't. Walking into the meeting, I was determined that I was not going to transform into an unapproachable head coach. I was going to be me, no matter what.” [8, p. 41].*

However, Carroll never spoke to the owner again until the fateful end of the season, and was left rueing that he had not communicated his ideas more effectively to the wider organisational audience [8]. He subsequently spent 2 seasons as the Defensive Coordinator for the San Francisco 49ers, before being appointed Head Coach of the New England Patriots, replacing the hardnosed sharp tongued Bill Parcells [8]. He made a promising start, winning the AFC East Division (10-6). In fact he had no losing season at NEP, and made the playoffs twice, but his record gradually declined to 55% overall [8]. He was living on borrowed time after being thought to be outcoached by Parcells (ironically coaching the New York Jets), after which the media started calling for his head [8]. He was sacked after 3 seasons, when the Patriots did not make the playoffs in 1999 [8].

At NEP Carroll was initially hired to bring in organisational change based on the renowned SF philosophy, but it quickly became apparent that he would not have the freedom to run the programme the way he wanted to, or to be the Head Coach he wanted to be [9]. Carroll's positive open communication approach and laid back coaching style was a big contrast following Parcells's closed communication aggressive style that had made the owner wary of sharing power [9]. Carroll may have suffered disempowerment as a reaction against the abuse of power by the previous coach (who had sabotaged NEP's 1996 Superbowl chances by playing politics out in the open during the run up regards a forthcoming potential move to manage another side [4]).

## **NEXT TIME WOULD HAVE TO BE DIFFERENT**

Belichick was in danger of being labelled the dour perennial assistant (always the bridesmaid, never the blushing bride); a football nerd who lacked charisma, and the human touch [3]. Back at NEP, once again assisting Parcells, Belichick correctly made a call that opposed the Head Coach's, and Parcells let rip:

*“Yeah, you're a genius, everyone knows it, a goddamn genius, but that's why you failed as a head coach – that's why you'll never be a head coach – some genius!”*  
[3, p. 202].

Carroll was in danger of being labelled a rah-rah positive thinking players' coach; lacking a suitably tough or serious approach for anything but collegiate level [8]. While at NEP Carroll was caricatured in the press with a surfboard, sushi, and wine; while Parcells was portrayed with smoking handguns [9].

## **BEGINNINGS AND INFLUENCES**

Belichick came from a family of Croatian immigrants who settled in the harsh coal and steel mining belts of the US; poor, hard workers, who helped each other, and wasted nothing [3]. Belichick's father was a tough smart coach, an exceptional teacher, and the foremost scout of his era, who had Bill breaking down game footage by age 9 [3]. Bill also accompanied his Dad on scouting trips, and undertook the analysis of upcoming opponents; early on he developing a coaching eye; particularly for spoiling [3]. Belichick was too small and slow to be a player, although he played centre where he could use his intelligence, and read the game well [3]. He always planned to coach, and went straight into poorly paid modest assistant roles, after graduating with a degree in economics [3].

So, Belichick's greatest influences were his father, and his existing network of contacts; and the cultural memes from his Croatian ancestry – working hard, sticking together, and taking opportunities - although his intellect was also sharpened by a demanding elite private school [3]. He went on to do the hard yards as an assistant at 4 NFL teams, observing at close quarters a variety of head coaching styles, and working with great players [3]. He was industrious, and always hungry for work on the small details; having to prove himself and gain respect as a very young coach, which he did by getting inside the head of opposing

coaches, spotting crucial tendencies, and preparing the team well by masterfully using film footage [3].

In contrast, Carroll was raised in California, excelling in several sports, but frustrated by a lack of sufficient physical growth [8]. His parents were supportive, and did not make him feel pressured, or afraid of failing [8]. His mother encouraged optimism and openness, his father modelled competitiveness [8]. Carroll achieved a degree in Business Administration, and tried out (unsuccessfully) for Hawaii in the World Football League, finding it difficult to accept that he did not make it as a player [8]. At this point his former coach offered him a graduate assistant post at University of Pacific, where he took a Masters in Physical Education, and became immersed in the study of psychology; before taking up assistant coaching roles at collegiate and NFL levels, with some success [8].

Carroll was particularly influenced by Maslow's positive humanistic psychology, Gallwey's inner game, and Michael Murphy's work on combining Western psychology with Eastern philosophy to explore the transformational possibilities of sport, and flow experiences [8]. Furthermore, he was able to apply and experiment with these ideas in practice, and started to develop his unique approach to coaching, founded upon striving to be the best you can be, and playing with a quieted mind, and supreme confidence [8]. As indicated in Simon Jenkins' article he also established a powerful network of legendary coaches as mentors [8].

### **WHAT DID THEY LEARN FROM FAILURE?**

Belichick learned that dealing with issues around the game is as important as preparing for the game itself [4]. Cleveland instructed him that you need an intimate familiarity with the whole business – dealing with the public, the press, the owners. Nowadays, Belichick has a press officer who advises on all Patriots media coverage, and he typically reviews the most significant coverage while working out on a treadmill [10]. However, Belichick does not just play a fake role of the coach as a result, instead, he remains the coach that he is – serious and protective. He is now more aware of the press, and a bit better practiced with them, but remains a grim colourless character [3].

Belichick also discovered that he needed to be his own man, and step out of the shadows. To that end he resigned as New York Jets Head Coach after only one day, after Parcells moved upstairs as General Manager [11]. Instead he became HC and GM when appointed at NEP, and developed an attuned relationship with the owner [4].

Nonetheless, Belichick recognised the need to be true to his core values and principles in remaining harsh and unsentimental in his decision making, tolerating no complacency nor entitlement culture (for example, cutting quarterback Bledsoe for Brady), although also blending uncelebrated veterans alongside youth [4].

Finally, he founded a sort of Belichick University, deliberately recruiting bright young employees with a love for football, who were capable of graduating from low paid unofficial apprenticeships [6]. Hence, surrounding himself with smart staff given licence to disagree if they could support their arguments [6]. In this regard he was attempting to construct a vision

for long term success, by cultivating a comprehensively interconnected coaching, scouting, and administrative organisational system [6].

Carroll realised that he needed to more effectively justify his unconventional approach [8]. That is, he had to fully discover himself and his philosophy, in order to be able to explain it convincingly to other stakeholders; to move past accumulated bits and pieces of advice from mentors, to bringing it all together in a clarity of vision to guide his actions [8]. Or, as Carroll has stated: *“I had to be true to who I was. I didn’t want to pretend to be someone or something I’m not.”* [12, p. 27]

Furthermore, he came to appreciate that success depends on all parts of an organisation working together in unity [8]; implementing his new ideas with great success, first at USC, and later at the Seahawks. Hence, Carroll’s Win Forever philosophy centred around maximising of competitive potential, and cultivating a sense of knowing that you are going to be victorious [13]. Alongside came a sharpened awareness to capture the opportunities within opportunities, such as only recruiting players compatible to the team’s ethos, identifying teachable moments, and Carroll’s own adoption of broader roles beyond coaching football (such as *A Better LA/Seattle* to combat gang culture) [8].

## **CONTRASTING WORLDVIEWS**

One could sum up Carroll by the phrase (from his mother) - *“Something good is just about to happen.”* [8]. He is all about trying to create the fertile ground for athlete flourishing, staying optimistic and having fun, and emphasising just how good his team and players can be [8]. Thus, Carroll is famous for playing jokes on his players, and for his own youthful exuberance on the field; and cultivates a shared mindset of self-belief (collective efficacy) in the face of difficulty, without fear or doubt [8].

Conversely, Belichick might be encapsulated by – *“Something bad is going to happen if we don’t do something about it.”* He is all about meticulous and industrious preparation for situations that the team might encounter, encouraging others to do their jobs unselfishly and accept constructive criticism, and taking opponents away from how they like to play [4]. For example, when Belichick replaced Carroll at NEP he put more pressure on the players, and effectively threatened their jobs [6]. But, importantly, both approaches work. For instance, shared faith in Belichick, his methods, and his system, plus each other, also means good things are liable to happen.

## **ZENITH**

Belichick was voted coach of the decade for the 2000’s [14], has the highest win percentage of any active NFL coach, and no other coach has won more Superbowls [15]. With the NEP Belichick has now had 14 consecutive winning seasons [15], and they are the closest thing to a dynasty in the modern era where the sport is deliberately structured to spread success around [3].

At USC Carroll had an 84% win record over 8 years, won national and conference titles, and produced 3 Heisman Trophy winners [12]. He not only led the Seahawks to their first ever

Superbowl, but they ended up as runaway victors although considered underdogs, and returned to the final again the year after [16].

## **WHAT DO THEY DO DIFFERENTLY?**

Belichick has an extreme emphasis on competing against others, using an acute coaching eye and insight honed over many years from a young age [3]. He has carefully constructed a talented team (in its broadest sense), and a sophisticated talent ID system that does not just recruit the usual suspects; and he clearly defines his expectations of all employees [6]. Belichick is about planning for the long term, so there are no quick fix buys, and no sudden slumps either [4].

Carroll brings an infectious positive energy and optimism to the job, an open communication style, and respect for players as people and learners [12]. In a reversal of an insult that was often thrown at him previously Carroll has become the ultimate players' coach, with a 2014 ESPN poll naming him the coach players would most like to play for [17]. His implementation of ideas from modern psychology and Eastern philosophy is revolutionary, and he has an extreme emphasis on competing against yourself, in the relentless pursuit of a competitive edge [8].

## **CONCLUSION**

In relation to leadership and management these two unique practitioners seem to be heavily involved in both selling the tickets (promoting a working vision of how the game can be approached successfully), *and* driving the bus (impression management, dealing with micropolitics, managing expectations). For me, if you want to truly understand a coach (or a leader/manager) then you need an appreciation of who they are, where they come from, and why they operate as they do. That is, one needs to comprehend the biography of learners in order to apprehend the way that they have come to be in the world [18]. Furthermore, if we are to cultivate and promote our own authenticity, then we need to be critically introspective about the influence of our own developmental experiences, and what we believe as a result. Crucially, encounters with failure can serve as powerful awakening experiences in this regard, which sharpen our self-awareness and self-knowledge [19]. Hence, in respect of that *worst Superbowl call in history*, I loved the tweet that Carroll put out in response to criticism – “*One moment does not define you; the journey does.*” [20].

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David Turner is a Principal Lecturer in Sports Coaching, at University of Hertfordshire. He has been a sports coach and an educationalist for 30 years, and a coach educator for 20 years, and is currently studying for an Educational Doctorate on *The Long Term Developmental Journeys of Expert-Like Sports Coaches*. *Learning From Legendary Coaches* is a series of interactive public engagement lectures delivered by David, with content suitable for students, sports coaches, and business audiences.