

Sports Roundup: Dallas fans will see different 3-4

by Jerry Magee

In the Phillips family, handed down from father to son like a gold watch or a wall hanging reading "Home Sweet Home" was the 3-4 defense. It was Wade Phillips' legacy from his father, Bum.

Bum, why, he used to say he didn't know about anything but cold beer and barbecued ribs, but he was just funnin'. Bum knew about many things, about where the road to the Super Bowl passed (through Pittsburgh), and that a man didn't wear his hat when he was indoors, even if he was coaching. He also knew about the 3-4 defense.

"He had coached it in college," Wade Phillips said. "It's kind of a college defense. It used to be called 'the Oklahoma defense.' Way, way back, Bud Wilkinson used it. That was the 'Okie,' or 'Oklahoma defense.'"

After his father went to San Diego in the 1960s to become one of Sid Gillman's coaching lieutenants with the Chargers, Wade said Bum sought to have the Chargers go to the 3-4.

"I think they played it one game and they did well," Wade said, "but Sid said, 'No, that's not a pro defense.' When Sid hired Bum in Houston (Gillman by then being the general manager of the Oilers), Bum said, 'I'd like to play a 3-4 defense,' and Sid said, 'OK, play whatever you want to play.' That's how it worked out."

With the 3-4, Wade did wondrous things recently during his three seasons as the Chargers' defensive coordinator, the team going 35-13 through this period. As Wade noted in that wry way of his Wednesday while NFC coaches were sharing breakfast with the media, "I don't know of many teams that did a lot better than that."

Now the junior Phillips is in Dallas as head coach of the Cowboys. In Dallas, it seems, Jerry Jones had a choice following Bill Parcells' withdrawal as the team's coach: to deed the position to Norv Turner, with his

insights into a multiple offense, or to turn to Phillips, with his expertise in the 3-4.

The Cowboys also pursued the 3-4 last season under Parcells, but Phillips' 3-4 is different from the one Parcells used. For one thing, Phillips' variation is easy to learn.

"It's player-friendly in that you can learn it quickly," Phillips said. "That's part of my success. We've got it down pretty good so they can do it in a year."

Phillips also does more from his 3-4 than Parcells did from his. Zone blitzes are a big part of Phillips' scheme; they were almost nonexistent last season while the Cowboys were surrendering an average of 322.8 yards and finishing 9-7. The Chargers' average yield was 301.6 yards and they finished 14-2.

The 3-4, meantime, is experiencing something of a renaissance, having been embraced by five or six NFL clubs. When Phillips was coaching in Buffalo from 1998 through 2000, only two teams made the 3-4 their standard front, the Bills and the Pittsburgh Steelers. Before Bum Phillips' coaching run in Houston from 1975 through '80, the NFL did not have a 3-4 team.

Bum dealt (with Kansas City) to obtain Curly Culp, whom he made his nose guard, Wade said. "Elvin Bethea, who went into the Hall of Fame, was a defensive end in that scheme. And he (Bum) did move 'em and stunt 'em in those days and didn't play a two-gap, which has continued to this day."

Phillips does not endorse the thinking that problems in locating linebackers able to perform in the 3-4 make aligning in it difficult. To Phillips, acquiring defenders who can fit into the 4-3 and at the same time be able to pay them is more trying.

"In this day and age when the salary cap is so important, defensive linemen are the highest-paid guys," Phillips said. "Linebackers in reality are a little cheaper and you find more of 'em. You find more guys who are instinctive. They can run. The in-between guys sometimes are good pass rushers as outside 'backers. It seems to fit better as far as the money you have to spend."

As Phillips noted, not everybody knows how to coach the 3-4. "I think it's your background, in some instances," he said. As his father's son, he was perfectly placed.

For Phillips, his weeks since his departure from San Diego have been active ones. He has sold his home in La Jolla and acquired one at Preston Hollow in Dallas. He has pieced together a staff. And he has moved to buttress the Cowboys' offensive line through the acquisition in free agency of Leonard Davis, a 366-pound former Arizona Cardinals property who wears a size-20 shoe.

"He's such a big human being," Phillips said.

Phillips leaving the Chargers after Marty Schottenheimer's severance continued what was a mass exodus from the staff, four other Schottenheimer assistants also departing. Phillips said these defections should not be regarded as an expression of dissatisfaction with the club.

"Two of them became head coaches (himself and Cam Cameron)," Phillips said, "and three became coordinators."

And one is in Dallas as a head coach.

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