

Will third time be charm for Turner?

by Jim Trotter

Norv Turner has been around the NFL long enough to know that the best way to disarm people is with humor.

NORV TURNER -- Lauded offensive coordinator Norv Turner had a mediocre record as head coach in Washington and Oakland before coming here. CNS Photo by Sean M. Haffey. So, it wasn't surprising that he made like a poor man's Leno on the opening day of training camp when someone asked him about the pressures of inheriting a Chargers team that won 14 games last season.

"I've never been anywhere where they expect you to go lose your opening game - or expect you to lose any of your games," Turner said, smiling.

Everyone chuckled and the moment passed. But the reality remains that Turner is under tremendous pressure. He is coaching not only for his legacy, but also his future.

The perception of him around the NFL is that he's a nice guy and terrific offensive coordinator, but the tenor changes when the subject is his ability as a head coach. That's when his approval rating drops low enough to make Congress gasp.

For understandable reasons.

In eight full seasons with Washington and Oakland, his squads managed only three winning seasons and one trip to the playoffs. They failed to record more than 10 wins in any season and produced a total of only 16 victories in his final three years.

Turner did win two Super Bowls as coordinator of the Dallas Cowboys, but it would be naive to the point of foolish to argue that he was the only assistant who could have succeeded with Troy Aikman at quarterback, Emmitt Smith at running back, Michael Irvin at wide receiver, Jay Novacek at tight end and a line that was bigger than some office complexes.

At this point, we have no way of knowing whether Turner was the right call for the Chargers. General Manager A.J. Smith selected Turner in part because he wanted to maintain continuity because he believes the team is capable of making a Super Bowl run. He also says he respects Turner as a strategist.

However when asked recently if Turner would have been a candidate for the job if it had opened in early January instead of mid-February, Smith refused to answer.

"I really don't have any comment on that," he said. "Everyone has speculated on what my list would be, but I would never give you my list of candidates."

If the difference between good coaches and bad ones is the ability to do more with less, Turner has earned his lowly stature. He could not convert Washington or Oakland into consistent winners, for various reasons, some of them his own.

With the Chargers, he takes over a club that arguably has the top talent in the league. Fox broadcaster Curt Menefee spoke for a lot of people when he recently wrote on the network's Web site: "With the weapons they have on both sides of the ball, Gerry Faust probably could coach the San Diego Chargers to 10 wins."

Turner will get 10 wins, if not more, barring a series of devastating injuries to players. He has stepped into a situation that couldn't have been more tailor-made for him, and not just because of the talent level.

The Chargers' internal leadership is so strong that the players have the ability to police themselves. They do a lot of the dirty work that normally falls on the head coach, which cannot be overstated in this instance.

One of the "knocks" on Turner in Oakland was that he treated the players like men and expected them to act accordingly. Some of the players didn't, of course, and when it was time to crack down, Turner didn't always do it.

"Norv was more laid-back," Raiders middle linebacker Kirk Morrison said last year after Art Shell replaced Turner. "We respected him, but a lot of times when things went bad he was just like: 'Keep on moving, let's keep moving.'"

An assistant coach who has worked with Turner in the past said during the week that he was unsure whether Turner would succeed as a head coach, adding: "I don't know if he's got all it takes. He's got a nice easy side to him, but he can raise his voice, he can get volatile. The thing I'm not sure about is how he'll handle the expectations. Everybody says, 'You got a loaded gun now.' The question is, does he shoot himself in the foot with it?"

One positive for Turner is that he appears to have strong support from Smith, who believes Turner will show himself to be a superior decision-maker to Schottenheimer within games. Turner may prove to be in the regular season, but he ultimately will be judged just like Schottenheimer, on what the team does in the postseason.

For all we know now, Turner could be the second coming of Vince Lombardi or Bill Belichick. Or, he could just as easily be Kevin Gilbride reincarnated.

The only certainty is that if he fails, he will cement his legacy as a talented coordinator who couldn't cut it as a head coach, and the chances of him ever running another team will vanish for good. Even Leno wouldn't laugh at that.

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