

Walsh was a key mentor in Fouts' life

by Jerry Magee

One season was all Dan Fouts and Bill Walsh had together, one season and, later, one day.

The day was in 1993 when Fouts and Walsh were received into the Pro Football Hall of Fame as members of a class that included Larry Little, Chuck Noll and Walter Payton. But for that one season in 1976 when he was the Chargers' quarterback and Walsh was handling the team's passing game, Fouts accepts that he would not have had his bust cast in bronze at Canton.

Said Fouts from his Oregon home: "Bill gave me the first feeling that I was going to have success."

Walsh died this week at 75 after a three-year battle against leukemia.

Until Walsh joined Tommy Prothro's Chargers staff in 1976, Fouts said he felt he had been foundering. "I had had three head coaches in two years and multiple coordinators," he said. "I was really well-coached by John Robinson (at Oregon), but the situation in San Diego was pretty chaotic."

When Walsh arrived in San Diego, his first act was to tick off to Fouts the passing figures he would have at the season's end, Fouts said. Walsh's predictions would be right on, according to the quarterback.

To Fouts, at the source of Walsh's coaching mastery was the physical discipline he taught regarding how the three-, five- and seven-step drops should be made.

"All the things that helped with the timing of the passing game," Fouts said. "He would say, 'This is the way we do it, and we're going to practice it until we get it.' But he said it in a positive way. He was a great teacher. I think that's what you have with all great coaches."

In his first three NFL seasons, beginning in 1973, Fouts had passing ratings of 46.0, 61.4 and 59.3. In those three seasons, he had a total of 16 touchdown passes and 36 interceptions. With Walsh counseling him in 1976, his passing rating spiraled to 75.4.

In 1977, Fouts entered into what was a self-imposed exile, separating himself from the Chargers to express his pique concerning the team's failure to appoint Walsh its head coach. Fouts offers no public critiques of

Prothro, who would remain with the team until he was dismissed after the fourth game of the 1978 season, but Fouts clearly viewed Prothro as lacking in comparison with Walsh.

Through 12 games of that '77 season, Fouts was away from football. When at last he presented himself for the season's final four games, he appeared to have improved in absentia. He was a more poised, more assured quarterback.

"That was the year after I had Bill," Fouts said. "We lost an opportunity to be a great team by not naming him head coach."

In walking away from the Chargers in 1977, Fouts was underscoring a desire to be traded as well as his disappointment that Walsh had not been named to replace Prothro. Only by leaving the Chargers, Fouts announced, would he be able to satisfy his lifelong ambition to play in a Super Bowl.

In his 14-year career, Fouts never did show up in a Super Bowl, but he became more content in San Diego when Don Coryell succeeded Prothro in 1978. "One thing Don did: He asked me what stuff I ran with Bill that I liked," Fouts said. Into the Chargers' offense were written many of the things that Walsh had put into the Cincinnati Bengals' offense for Charlie Joiner, now a Charger.

Between them, Walsh and Coryell are responsible for a major portion of the modern passing game, as Fouts views it. "You have to include Sid Gillman," Fouts said. "Those three believed in throwing the ball, and they were going against the grain."

Anybody imagining what a football coach should look like likely would come up with an image resembling Walsh, with his gray hair and his professorial mien. As somebody said, he looked as if he should be smoking a pipe while he was coaching. He had an intellectual bent; a visitor to his room at UCSD during training camp in 1976 found on his dresser the book, "The Gulag Archipelago." Heavy stuff.

"They had different personalities," Fouts said of Walsh and Coryell, "but their coaching philosophies were the same."

By 1979, Walsh had begun his coaching stewardship in San Francisco. His first 49ers team's fifth game was against the Chargers at Qualcomm Stadium. The hosts having concluded their 31-9 triumph - it was the Niners' fifth consecutive defeat - a reporter found Walsh in an anteroom in the stadium's catacombs, lost in a reverie.

Walsh was asked what he was thinking about. "What an enormous challenge I have set for myself," he answered.

His first 49ers team would go 2-14, his second 6-10. His third went 13-3 and claimed the first of three Super Bowl championships in 10 years.

Fouts, meantime, said he is planning to visit the Pro Football Hall of Fame next week, not for any particular event but because he said he feels he has an obligation to go. Perhaps he will be reminded of when he stood on the steps of the Hall with Noll, Payton, Little and the great coach football this week lost.

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