

49er coach Jim Harbaugh's unique mind-set

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Jim Harbaugh still looks like a football player. He carries himself with an unmistakable swagger, his square jaw perpetually jutting out and his face radiating intensity.

It's not entirely surprising for Harbaugh to project this image. He spent 14 years as an NFL quarterback. He revitalized Stanford during his time as the school's head coach and then instantly resurrected the 49ers.

But here's the key for the 49ers and their fans: Harbaugh routinely behaves as if he's accomplished nothing.

This week's hiring of former NFL head coach Eric Mangini, in a newly created position of "senior offensive consultant," speaks volumes about Harbaugh. For all his swagger and self-assuredness, for all his success as a quarterback and coach, Harbaugh still goes out of his way to seek guidance.

As much as anything else - right there with Colin Kaepernick's crazy athleticism and the Patrick Willis-led defense - this is why the 49ers have a great chance to remain an elite team for years to come.

Harbaugh once sought out a small-college and high-school coach to learn about the fly sweep. During his time at Stanford, he sent offensive coordinator Greg Roman to Reno to find out more about the Pistol offense from Chris Ault, then the coach at Nevada.

And now Mangini.

Even after a 24-7-1 start to his NFL coaching career - plus two trips to the NFC Championship Game and one to the Super Bowl - Harbaugh doesn't pretend to have all the answers. It sometimes seems like he thinks he has all the answers, but then why would he keep soliciting ideas from unlikely sources?

Much like his brother John (head coach of the Ravens) and brother-in-law Tom Crean (Indiana basketball coach), this Harbaugh's actions suggest a coach filled with self-confidence but also comfortable enough to acknowledge what he doesn't know.

Just ask his dad, the original coach in the family.

"Jim, John and Tom all share that quality - they surround themselves with the best possible people," Jack Harbaugh said in a phone interview Friday. "They're not shy or intimidated in having the very best and brightest around them.

"I remember reading a book once about filling the bus with the best people you can, and then finding seats for those people. That's a formula for success."

This habit traces, in part, to the way Jack Harbaugh operated during his long career as a college coach. Still, he didn't actively seek information from a wide variety of sources to the extent Jim and John have as NFL head coaches.

Jack Harbaugh offered one non-sports example. At age 8 or 9, living in Ann Arbor, Mich., Jim was friends with a kid named Jim Minick. He's now Marine Col. Jim Minick, with tours of duty in Iraq and a reservoir of knowledge on leadership.

Harbaugh figures some of those lessons and principles can translate to leading a football team. He and Minick talk often, with each running things by the other.

"He gets insight from that," Jack Harbaugh said of his son.

Jim Harbaugh also hopes to glean insight from Mangini, whose history rests on defense but who will spend his time helping the 49ers on offense. This is a bit unconventional, tracking down a former head coach to hop aboard in a nebulous role.

It's reasonable to wonder how Mangini will fit in with offensive coordinator Greg Roman and the other assistants. Will Roman feel threatened? Will Mangini really help? How will Harbaugh handle an extra voice - one with instant credibility, given his head-coaching background - in game-planning sessions?

Those are logical questions, but Harbaugh is willing to take the chance in an effort to upgrade his team. Dare we suggest, he's even willing to set aside his ego.

"The great thing I've found with Jim and Greg and all the guys here is, it's ego-less," Mangini said. "That's really appealing. Everybody just wants to get to the right answer. Input seems to be really encouraged."

Don't get the wrong idea: Harbaugh is hardly the first or only head coach yearning to learn and actively seeking guidance. Bill Walsh, for all his wisdom and innovation, leaned heavily on his assistants, notably relying on their expertise in making draft choices.

Walsh also hired sociologist Harry Edwards as a consultant in the 1980s, acknowledging the importance of locker-room dynamics. That was beyond unconventional - and Edwards is still a commanding presence at 49ers headquarters 30 years later.

Harbaugh talked often to Walsh when they were both at Stanford, so maybe this parallel is no coincidence.

"If you're doing things exactly like Bill Walsh, then you're doing everything right," Harbaugh said. "None of us can do that, because we're not as good as he was. So we try to do as many things similarly (as possible)."

Harbaugh downplayed his history of traveling offbeat paths in search of ideas. He explained the Mangini hiring by reciting his familiar mantra, the desire to get a little better every day.

The 49ers might become only marginally better with the addition of Mangini, or maybe they won't improve at all. But his hiring reflects a larger, more important personality trait in Harbaugh, one that bodes well for the 49ers' future.

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