

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

1. But because it was singularly dangerous, it fed egos, and swollen egos detracted from the essence of football, which was the idea of the team.
2. Thus, a great deal of time and energy in the world of the New England Patriots went into selecting players who were at least partially immune to displays of ego and self.
3. You could fall from celebrity in contemporary America almost as quickly as you achieved it.
4. He wanted to bring his players to the highest level of preparedness, hand them an edge in a world where everyone was so evenly matched that any edge might determine the outcome.
5. His personal challenge, each week, was to see if he could do it all one more time: study the opposition like a pathologist using a powerful microscope and pick up on the one or two little telltale signs that would give his team the one or two extra bits of information that represented the fateful edge.
6. In a world where attention to detail was probably as important as sheer brilliance, where the people who took care of the tiniest details tended to be rewarded for it.
7. He was the king of Post-it notes.
8. And so all week the scout team lined up and ran Rams plays, and a player would imitate Faulk, and there would be Belichick standing behind his defense and yelling out, "Where is he? Where is he?" It was that way all week long, with that constant yell before every practice play, "Where is he?"
9. But the Patriot secondary had to be prepared for that speed, for the fact that it all happened a lot more quickly than it did in most games, and so Belichick lined the scout-team receivers about three yards ahead of the normal line of scrimmage, effectively in Patriot territory, just to give his defensive backs a sense of how quickly it all happened. And, just to make sure his offensive line also understood the speed of the Rams, even when they were on defense, he had the scout team defensive players line up offside, on the Patriot side of the ball.
10. Into this new world by excelling in every way – listening more carefully, working harder, knowing more about what was going on than anyone else. In effect, became almost like an assistant coach.
11. But she sensed there were other things to admire about him: a drive that was unusual and a special kind of honor that she considered more important than looks.
12. Not coach through the fear and intimidation, but through a certain optimism. He would tell his players what they needed to do and add that they could do it, that all they had to do was remember what they had been taught.

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

13. Man of exceptional intelligence, commitment, and knowledge.
14. Each player, he felt, should go into a game feeling he had a distinct advantage over the player he was matched up against.
15. Burden of the discrepancy between an optimistic hope for a winning record and the reality of the admission policies on the coaches.
16. Because there was such a rare intersection of values between those the Academy demanded of its young men, and those any football coach demanded of his players.
17. Of the greatest things you can learn about yourself is your own limitations – how much you can eat at any given meal.
18. Years later Bill Belichick would understand what made his father so good a scout: dedication to his craft, the belief that it was important, and the fact that so many people – the people who paid his salary, his colleagues, and the young men who played for him – were depending on him.
19. Bounded by sense of common purpose.
20. Was saying that most scouts looked at other teams and thought that was the most important thing was to find out what their weakness was, but the right way to do it was search for their strengths and try to take that away from them, and make them do what they don't want to do.
21. He had the talent for it, Adams thought; he had a great eye for the game, and a great sense of its tempo. But he also, Adams added, was willing to work harder than anyone else. "He had the gift for it," Adams said, "and he had the discipline, and he understood from the beginning the one great truth about film, that the more you ran it, the more you saw."
22. "He was like a sponge, taking it all in, listening to everything," said Maxie Baughan. "He didn't say very much, but he didn't miss very much either."
23. He wanted the grunt work. He understood that the key to success, the secret to it, was the mastery of the grunt work, all the little details.
24. By spending fifty to eighty hours each week studying the opponent.
25. Yet he could not succeed unless he gained their respect and could impose his authority on them. Before he set foot on the field on the first day of practice, he had been somewhat apprehensive about this, more than a little anxious about any potential resistance to him. Could he, who had not been to a big-time football school, coach in a place as macho as the NFL? That was, he sensed, going to be the first big test. But he did not know the world of football.
26. But knowledge.

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

27. Respected coaches who could help them play better and who knew things that they didn't know. That, more than anything else, he believed, defined successful player-coach relationships.
28. The other thing that gave him was that he was sure he knew more football than they did.
29. The fact that they had superior physical abilities was no longer going to be enough, because in the pros everyone had superior physical abilities. Yet he knew that in film there was power, and he was the man working the film, and he knew he was good at it.
30. Allen because Allen always had so much information; he always wanted to know more than anyone else about what the other team might do.
31. "He always wanted to know not just if you knew what he had been talking about, but also if you *understood* what he had been talking about."
32. What I didn't know, I could learn – one of the things I had working for me was that I knew how to learn.
33. But Belichick was ever more confident now that the only limits he faced in coaching were those he set himself. He was beginning a process typical of many talented young coaches: studying other programs, creating his own vision of the game, borrowing a piece here and a piece there, and talking football, or perhaps more accurately, talking coaching all the time. The impression he made on his colleagues was almost universally favorable – open-minded, incredibly hardworking, absolutely committed to being a little better every day, and knowing a lot more than many other young coaches, a master at using film.
34. What struck Rese then and later was the discipline and the eagerness to learn. Belichick just worked harder than everyone else.
35. You're hear to coach them, and that often means telling them things they don't want to hear about doing things they don't want to do.
36. And authority is the only thing you have.
37. But there were important things that McCabe told Belichick about the Davis system that would one day serve Belichick well. The first thing was that Oakland looked only for size and speed. Their players had to be big and fast. That was a rule. If you weren't big and fast, Oakland wasn't interested. The other thing was the constancy of player evaluation. Most coaches stopped serious evaluation of their personnel on draft day – they chose their people, and that was that. But Davis never stopped evaluating his people – what they could do, what you could teach them, and what you couldn't teach them. He made his coaches rate the players ever day. Were they improving? Were they slipping? Who had practiced well? Who had gone ahead of whom in practice?

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

38. Football was not about being a big star; it was about fulfilling your assigned role. You were supposed to do the things you were assigned even if you did not get the glory.
39. McCabe understood that the little things were not little things, because it was the accumulation of little things that made big things happen.
40. It was in being organized; the more organized you were at all times, the more you knew at every minute what you were doing and why you were doing it, the less time you wasted and the better a coach you were.
41. The first thing you had to do was change the attitude, which is very hard to do. You have to find out what the source of it is, get ride of the players who cause the defeatist undertow, get a lot of new players, and get them to put out their best.
42. We got there, there were a handful of players who were leading in the wrong direction and you had to put a stop to that. And do it quickly.
43. Formidable, strong football players had landed at a franchise where the traditional sense of purpose, of winning, had long ago been lost, and in the struggle that ensued, the players had somehow taken the power, not because they wanted to do anything with it, but because it was there and because it was easier to do things their way and to be in charge, rather than do the difficult things a series of coaches asked them to do. "If you couldn't deal with a school bully."
44. A talented player, Jeter was also an underachiever and a locker room dissident, a man who helped drive what the coaches considered to be the negative undertow of the team.
45. "Hey, Jeter," he said, "One of the reasons you fucking guys were 5-11 last year was because your special teams stunk, and so if you want to laugh about it, and you think it's a joke, you can get the hell out of here. SO shut the hell up or get the hell out of the room, right now!"
46. That he could use his emotions as an instrument of coaching.
47. He knew the game and had a very good feel for the game and for the mood of his team, but he was never X's and O's man, like his junior partner.
48. He was much less skilled than Parcels at teaching his players emotionally and thereby challenging them to do more. This never came naturally to him; it was not who he was. In addition he thought it was the wrong way to go, that it was too short-range, and that in the end you could only go to that emotional well so often, and then it went dry. What did fit his personality was the sum of his knowledge, being the best-prepared coach on the field.
49. Surrounding himself with players who wanted to learn his system, who would buy in because his skills always prepared them so superbly.

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

50. The egos of everyone tended to be suppressed on the ascent – subservient to the great task ahead, when a team begins to win – and much more of a problem once a championship has been attained.
51. Thus, Adams believed, became a kind of Belichick trademark; the ability to adapt his game plan even as the game was being played out, and not to be sucked in by the emotions of it, or to be prisoner of what he had decided to do beforehand.
52. It would not do very much good, Belichick would often say, to do a brilliant analysis on Monday.
53. He was there to know the answers, often before the players had the questions.
54. Great feel for the hinge plays – that is, the players on which the game turned – and he would rise to them.
55. Coaches live in a world where the possibilities for regret, even over just one play, are boundless, and George Seifert thought he had coached poorly not in that game, but for one play, and though he went on a career of continued excellence, that decision on occasion gnawed at him, and sometimes when he was out on his boat fishing, fifteen years after the fact, he thought of the moment, under three minutes on the clock, and how he had failed to make the more conservative call, and they had lost the chance for the only three-peat in Super Bowl history.
56. One of the things they ought to do if at all possible, Belichick told his players, was accidentally kick the ball after the referees took it from the huddle and set it up; they could also disentangle themselves more slowly from piles after the play, just to slow down the Bills.
57. When he showed up for his job interview, Belichick, disciplined and well prepared as ever, had arrived with everything in binders, including a year-by-year plan. It told how they would start with a certain number of players in the three-to-seven year category in terms of experience, players who were right at the Pro Bowl level; from this they would form the core of their team, so that the younger players could learn from them. Everything was laid out step by step, where they would be after the first year, and then the second year, and the third year. There was no doubt that, more than any other candidate, Belichick had thought it out.
58. Cleveland was wounding and disappointing, but it did not change him. He might adapt, but he would not change.
59. In New England the first thing he was determined to do was place his own people in all the critical positions.
60. He had gotten from the film and the playbook, all that hard work, had become so much a part of him that the comparison seemed valid.

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

61. But he had driven himself so hard that superior preparation and superior instincts were now blended together.
62. Belichick's concept of what a real team was like; on a real team, the kind of team he intended to create, the more senior, more certain example, working harder at practice and in the weight room than anyone else.
63. This was what the NFL was all about, that the better you were, the harder you worked.
64. Instead it was a grueling two-day process, and, after the end of the first day, Ferentz felt like he had been beaten up. It was like taking the oral exam for a Ph.D.; they ran film of a drill, and he had to judge how well the drill had gone; they had a clip of a potential draft choice, and he was supposed to evaluate the player, but the player was so bad that even Belichick began to laugh.
65. And Belichick lowballed him on salary – he always lowballed – but Ferentz took it.
66. And tended to support the values that Belichick was trying to instill.
67. The other thing that was happening as they got the kind of players they wanted was that the players themselves were beginning to buy in and to enforce a winning culture.
68. The best players themselves took the lead in creating a winning attitude.
69. They were creating a core group of veteran players with the kind of character that he had hoped for back in.
70. Players who were tough and serious and businesslike, men who not only pushed themselves to the limit in practice but kept on the newer players and the free agents, forcing them to become part of the culture (or get out) and staying on their case if they did not study the film, and did not know the playbook, or seemed to be coasting in practice.
71. The most difficult thing, Johnson said, would be the pressure that would come with winning. When you win, everyone wants more he said. Everything would be different. Every player and every player's agent would perceive the player as being better. The pressure to renegotiate would be immense, even for players with three years left on their contracts.
72. The virus of higher personal expectations Belichick called it.
73. The final thing Johnson mentioned was the danger of going back and trying to do the same things in the same way as before with your players.
74. You've got to keep doing what you're doing, but you've got to find different ways of doing it, and you've got to find ways of making it fun.
75. There was a lack of urgency to it, not quite a lethargy, but a sense that the Patriot players in some cases.

The Education of a Coach by David Halberstram

76. Was so tough-minded. He was, in his coach's phrase, "More or less road game immune – he's so mentally strong that he can shut things out. All of that comes from his inner toughness and focus."
77. What he excelled at was taking his ambition and talent and fusing it into something larger than himself.
78. Demanded, in the end, a totality of knowledge and experience, and the ability to assess human behavior, including your own.