

INTERIM COACHES :

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By Mark Speck

While coaching styles and philosophies have changed over the years, one thing about head coaches has remained a constant.

You're hired to be fired.

Every coach knows this to be true

Every coach has been fired at one time or another. After a couple losing seasons, or a few playoff failures. Sometimes after a winning season that doesn't meet the owners expectations. And sometimes, a coach may be fired during the season, after a couple bad games. That's where the interim coach comes in.

The interim coach is a top assistant, a front office person, or even an unemployed head coach who has the unenviable task of taking over a team in mid-season. His job: to somehow rally the troops, right a sinking ship, turn around a losing season, and if he's lucky get retained as the head coach for next season.

Interim head coaches have met with varying degrees of success in the long history of pro football. Some men have handled it well, and some, not so well. There have been good ones, bad ones and some downright ugly ones.

There have been some who at first glance looked bad, but turned out to be a good choice. Two cases in point would be Sid Gillman and Marv Levy.

Gillman replaced Bill Peterson as head coach of the Oilers in 1973. Houston had lost all five of their games, and under the aged General Manager and former coach, the Oilers didn't improve much, finishing the season 1-13. Although it looked as if the 63 year old coach was past it, Gillman stayed on in 1974, hired an unknown named Bum Phillips as his defensive coordinator and traded for nose tackle Currely Culp. The Oilers were much better in '74 under Sid, going 7-7 as they won 6 of their last 8 games. Sid stepped down and handed the reins to Phillips, and Houston was a force in the AFC Central Division for the rest of the decade.

In 1986, the Buffalo Bills opened the season 2-7 under head coach Hank Bullough. Since the Bills had signed quarterback Jim Kelly from the USFL, expectations for Buffalo had been high. A lot higher than 2-7 anyway. So Bullough was canned and replaced by Marv Levy, who himself was a USFL refugee. It didn't look like a good hire as the Bills stumbled to a 2-5 record under Levy to finish 4-12. Levy had not had much success earlier in the decade with the Chiefs, going 31-42 without so much as a whiff of the playoffs. So Bills fans were skeptical. But after a building year in '87, the rest was history, as Levy guided the Bills to a 112-70 record in 11 years and an NFL-record 4-straight Super Bowl appearances. Marv's now in the Hall of Fame, a good choice that may not have started out that way.

Then there were the seemingly good choices that went sour. In 1971, the Eagles started 0-3 under Jerry Williams. He was canned in favor of defensive coach Ed Khayat., who installed a series of rules and ordered players to get haircuts and shave off their facial hair. Although the players complained, Philadelphia went 6-4-1 under Khayat, and it looked as if Khayat was the answer. He wasn't. Khayat got rid of one of his loudest critics, Tim Rossoovich, who unfortunately was his best defender. Injuries and other problems combined to help fashion a dismal 2-11-1 mark in '72 and Ed was history.

Then there was Bruce Coslet. Hired to replace David Shula as head man of the 1-6 Bengals in 1996, Coslet proceeded to turn the Bengals from tabbies to tigers. He led them on a 7-2 surge and their first .500 record since 1990. He looked like the next big thing. He wasn't. Over the next three years, Coslet's Bengals were 14-34, finishing last twice.

But there have been some interim head coaches who were good—and in some cases---great choices for the job.

THE GOOD

1942---Chicago Bears Hunk Anderson and Luke Johnsos (co-coaches)

This is a special case, as the outgoing head man, George Halas, wasn't fired, but instead was drafted into the Navy. With the Bears 5-0 on November 1st, Halas left to join the Navy and fight in World War II. He left his two most trusted lieutenants, Hunk Anderson and Luke Johnsos, in charge. They guided the Bears to wins in their last 6 games to finish 11-0, but lost the title game to the Redskins. A year later, the co-coaches

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led Chicago to an 8-1-1 mark and this time they won the NFL title. In 1946, Halas returned, happy that his two assistants had compiled a 23-11-2 record in his stead.

1949--- Chicago Cardinals Buddy Parker

This situation was handled with all the grace of a hot potato. The Cards had won the NFL title in '47 and gone to the title game in '48, but the team was breaking up and getting old and then head coach Jimmy Conzelman quit. The Cards owners couldn't decide on a coach, so they made Phil Handler and Buddy Parker co-coaches. This chaotic arrangement lasted until the team was 2-4, at which time Handler moved upstairs and Parker took over. Buddy guided the Cards to a 4-1-1 record the rest of the way, and conventional wisdom said that Parker should be re-signed. But the Cards never did things conventionally. They let Parker walk, and he beat a path to Detroit where he turned the Lions into a powerhouse. The Cards meanwhile stumbled on thru a parade of coaches. A good choice that could have been so much better.

1952--- Los Angeles Rams Hampton Pool

The Rams, the defending NFL champions, looked like odds on favorites to repeat, but a serious rift had developed between head coach Joe Stydahar and his top assistant, Hampton Pool. When the Browns destroyed the Rams, 37-7 on the opening Sunday, Stydahar resigned and Pool took over. Hampton guided the Rams to a 9-2 record the rest of the way, and they wound up tied with the Lions for first place. A 31-21 loss in the playoff ended the season, but Pool stayed around until 1954, compiling a 23-11-2 record.

1961--- Houston Oilers Wally Lemm

Like the Rams in 1952, the Oilers were defending league champs, and were favored to repeat. But after training in Hawaii, the sluggish Oilers opened the season at 1-3-1. Owner Bud Adams dumped head coach Lou Rymkus and rehired former assistant Lemm, who had resigned before the season. Houston caught fire and went 10-0 the rest of the way, becoming the first team ever to score 500 points in a season. The Oilers stopped the Chargers 10-3 to win the AFL title, and after the season Lemm resigned again. He would return later in the decade and guide the Oilers to two more playoff appearances.

1961--- Boston Patriots Mike Holovak

While Lemm was leading a renaissance in Houston, Mike Holovak was turning around the fortunes of the Patriots. The team had opened the season 2-3 and fan interest was waning in Beantown. Boston owner Billy Sullivan fired head coach Lou Saban and named Holovak head coach on October 19. The players responded to Holovak's guiding hand, and went 7-1-1 the rest of the way, finishing just a game behind the Oilers in the AFL East. Holovak was retained and the Pats became a solid contender in the East, going 9-4-1 again in '62 and winning the division crown in '63. In '64 the team finished 10-3-1, and Holovak became a legend in Boston.

1978--- San Diego Chargers Don Coryell

Favored to challenge in the AFC West and loaded with top-flight talent, the Chargers got off to a 1-3 start. Head Coach Tommy Prothro resigned, and on September 25, Don Coryell was named to replace him. It was the best choice the Chargers could have made. Coryell unleashed the Charger offense and the team went 8-4 under him to finish 9-7. But they were just getting started. Coryell built San Diego into a powerhouse and from 1979-82 the team won 39, lost 18, won three division titles and twice played for the AFC championship.

1984--- New England Patriots Raymond Berry Cleveland Browns Marty Schottenheimer

Two men who had never been head coaches before turned around the fortunes of two floundering franchises in '84. In Cleveland, the Browns had slipped into a funk after their glorious 1980 season, going just 18-23 from '81 to '83. When the club's record reached 1-7 in 1984, owner Art Modell canned head coach Sam Rutigliano and replaced him with defensive coordinator Marty Schottenheimer. That same week, in Foxboro, Pats owner Billy Sullivan was firing Ron Meyer. Although the team was 5-3, Sullivan had not appreciated Meyer firing defensive coordinator Rod Rust after a 44-24 loss to Miami earlier in the season. Sullivan named Hall of Fame receiver Raymond Berry as his new coach, who immediately rehired Rust.

Both of the new coaches went 4-4 the rest of the season but were destined for bigger things. Schottenheimer coached the Browns to a 40-23 record over the next four years and made the playoffs each season. Berry coaxed the Pats to their first Super Bowl in '85 and led New England to back to back 11-5 seasons.

*An Honorable Mention in this category goes to Mike Palm, a name pretty much forgotten in the annals of pro football. Palm served as interim head coach for the Cincinnati franchise in both 1933 and 1934. In '33, he relieved Al Jolley after three losses and guided the Reds to a 3-3-1 record over the rest of the season. A year

later, Algy Clark's Reds were 0-8 when he was replaced by Palm. The team moved to St. Louis and in Palm's first game the re-christened Gunners stopped Pittsburgh 6-0 for their first—and only— win. Two weeks later the raggedy Gunners just barely lost to the Packers 21-14.

A 4-5-1 record may not equal some of the other marks in this category, but anyone who could coax four wins and a tie out of that sorry bunch deserves a mention of some kind.

Then there are those interim coaches who are not so good.

THE BAD

1961-62---Oakland Raiders Marty Feldman, Red Conkright

The Raiders may have set some sort of record by making two straight bad choices for interim head coaches. After the Raiders lost their first two games in '61 by scores of 55-0 and 44-0, head coach Eddie Erdelatz was canned and replaced by Marty Feldman. No, not the actor who played in Mel Brooks movies in the 70s, but under Feldman the Raiders were sure comical. They scored the fewest points in the league, gave up the most points and couldn't outdraw a backyard barbeque in Oakland. The Raiders went 2-10 under Feldman, but re-hired him for '62. Predictably, Oakland lost their first five games, and Feldman was shown the door. Into the breach stepped Red Conkright, who guided the Raiders to another eight losses in a row. Finally, on the last Sunday of the season, the pathetic Raiders tasted victory, beating Boston 20-0. But under Feldman and Conkright, the Raiders had won 3 and lost 23 games, including 19 in a row.

1975---New Orleans Saints Ernie Hefferle

A prime example that pulling someone out of the front office to coach an NFL team is a bad idea. Hefferle was the Saints director of pro personnel when he was yanked out of his cushy office on October 25 and propped up on the Saints sideline. He couldn't prop up this sorry team, however, and New Orleans went 1-7 under his---umm—direction. Losses of 48-10 to Oakland, 20-7 to Minnesota, 28-14 to the Giants and 42-17 to the Bears helped make the Saints one of the worst teams in the league. And Hefferle a bad choice for interim head coach.

1976---Atlanta Falcons Pat Pepler

While his record (3-6) may not be as bad as some on this list, the Falcons lost to the expansion Seahawks and were annihilated by the Rams, 59-0, a game in which L.A. totalled 30 first downs, 569 yards in offense and a record 8 touchdowns rushing.

1989---Phoenix Cardinals Hank Kuhlmann

Basically using spit and chicken wire, head coach Gene Stallings had the woeful Cards at 5-6 despite a rash of injuries and off-the-field problems. But when Stallings announced that he would not seek a contract extension, the Cards dumped him. Hank Kuhlmann was hired as interim head coach, and the Cards lost their last five games with hardly a whimper.

1990---Cleveland Browns Jim Shofner

With the Browns 2-7 and in the midst of their worst season ever, head coach Bud Carson was canned and replaced by Jim Shofner. Cleveland showed little improvement under their interim boss. The Browns beat the equally inept Atlanta Falcons under Shofner, but lost their other six games by scores like 35-23, 30-13, 58-14 and 35-0. Ugh !

Then there are some interim head coaches whose results with their team have been downright ugly !

THE UGLY

1941---Pittsburgh Steelers Aldo (Buff) Donelli

Donelli is not on this list just because of the poor record (0-5) he compiled with the Steelers. It's the fact that the Steelers thought Donelli could coach BOTH Pittsburgh and Duquesne AT THE SAME TIME !! Needless to say, the results of this were ugly indeed. Under Donelli, the Steelers lost all five of their games while being outscored 146-47. Finally, Commissioner Elmer Layden stepped in and ordered Donelli replaced, declaring his dual coaching roles « inappropriate ». Not to mention stupid and very, very ugly.

1942---Detroit Lions John (Bull) Karcis

A year later, the toothless Lions may have been even uglier. After three losses, head coach Bill Edwards quit, and was replaced by John Karcis. The former fullback probably considered suiting up himself when he saw the Lions' feeble offense. Detroit lost all eight games under Karcis, scoring only 31 points. Needless to say, after this, Karcis never coached in the NFL again.

1968, 1971---Buffalo Bills Harvey Johnson

Poor Harvey Johnson. He was not only ugly once, he had the misfortune of being ugly twice. When Joe Collier was axed two games into the 1968 season, Johnson was pulled out of his Personnel Director's office on his 23rd wedding anniversary to coach the team. What a present. The injury-depleted Bills were a far cry from their glory days of the mid-60s, and went 1-10-1 under Johnson. After the season, Harvey said he didn't want to return as head coach. « I feel that I am a good personnel man. I do not think I am that good a coach. » No one would argue with him, but that didn't stop the Bills from bringing Johnson to coach again in '71 when John Rauch quit in training camp. To be sure the Bills were put in a bind by Rauch's departure, but what did they do, call the team offices and Johnson was the only one who answered his phone? In any event, Harvey was in and Buffalo may have been worse this time around. The Bills were 1-13, setting team records in fewest points scored and most points allowed in a season. Along the way, they lost 43-0 to the Colts, 34-0 to the Dolphins, and 24-0 to the Colts again.

1991---Indianapolis Colts Rick Venturi

1996---New Orleans Saints Rick Venturi

No that is not a misprint. Like Johnson, Rick Venturi had the bad luck of taking over bad teams not once, but twice. And like Johnson, in both cases, the results he achieved were ugly indeed. After five games in '91 he replaced Ron Meyer as coach of the Colts. Indianapolis set the record for fewest points scored in a 16-game season (143), and were clobbered by the Bills twice, 42-6 and 35-7, and by Cleveland 31-0. Under Venturi, the Colts won one game and lost 10. Five years later, he was an assistant under Jim Mora with the Saints. That was the season New Orleans started 2-6 and Mora called his team « diddly-poo » in the now-famous post-game interview. Mora was correct in his analysis, and he was out the door, and who stepped in but---Rick Venturi. Poor Rick took over the sorry Saints and won only one game in eight tries. His two year interim record in the NFL---2 and 17. Ugly indeed.

The task of an interim head coach in the NFL is a difficult one indeed. Unlike other sports who have long drawn out seasons, the NFL calendar lasts 16 weeks. It can be impossible to turn around the fortunes of a bad team in a short period of time. But some have done the trick. Some interim head coaches have inspired their charges, making the most of a bad situation, and have done a good job. Others, as we have seen, have not. And some, well some of them, have been downright ugly.