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NFL

The NFL's CEO Coaches Are Profiting

Three of the four remaining coaches found success by relinquishing the play-calling—which got them hired in first place; akin to an ‘identity crisis’



Atlanta Falcons head coach Dan Quinn greets Atlanta Falcons defensive tackle Grady Jarrett after forcing the Seattle Seahawks to kick a field goal during the second half of the NFC divisional playoff game. *PHOTO: ERIK S. LESSER/EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY*

By MICHAEL SALFINO and JIM CHAIRUSMI

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When Bill Parcells was promoted from defensive coordinator to head coach by the New York Giants in 1983, he decided to continue calling the plays for a defensive unit he had shaped into one of the league’s best. The Giants finished 3-12-1.

“I knew eventually I had to become the head coach of the whole team,” Parcells said. “I didn’t do a very good job in either phase my first year.” By his third season, he relinquished play-calling duties to his 33-year-old linebackers coach: Bill Belichick. In season four, the Giants won the Super Bowl.

Coaches rise through the NFL ranks by engineering high-scoring offenses or stifling defenses. When they become head coaches, they face a choice: stay deeply involved in their specialty areas or surrender control and preside over the whole squad more broadly, like a top chief executive from the business world.

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This weekend’s conference championships suggest that the CEO coach model is prevailing in today’s league. On Sunday, Belichick, now a legend in his own right, will coach the New England Patriots in his sixth consecutive AFC Championship game, using a similar management style to his old boss, Parcells. Pittsburgh’s Mike Tomlin, New England’s opponent in Sunday’s conference title game, does the same.

In the NFC, Atlanta’s Dan Quinn—who got the job based on the tough defensive unit he ran in Seattle—has resisted the temptation to micromanage the Falcons defense despite



Bill Belichick head coach of the New England Patriots looks on in the first half against the Houston Texans. PHOTO: JIM ROGASH/GETTY IMAGES

the team surrendering more than 400 points this year.

Only Green Bay's Mike McCarthy retains the headset for calling plays—and he's wavering. McCarthy has already flip-flopped between the two approaches in the past two seasons.

It's a winning model. Since 2000, 75% of the teams that have made it to conference title games have been led by coaches that take this approach, with 12 of the past 16 Super Bowl winners falling into this category.

Yet some of the league's newest coaches still want to do it the other way. The Rams recently hired the youngest head coach in modern NFL history, 30-year-old Sean McVay, who immediately announced that he will call the offensive plays next season.

Such a decision can backfire. In 2015, six of the seven new head coaches—all offensive specialists—retained their play-calling responsibilities. All six saw the performance of their offenses decline in yardage compared with the year before. The one who took a broader approach, Mike Mularkey (Titans), saw his offense climb eight spots in the rankings.



Mike McCarthy of the Green Bay Packers calls a play in the first half during the NFC Divisional Playoff Game against the Dallas Cowboys. PHOTO: JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES

Top business leaders have long recognized that they need to get out of the weeds to lead their organizations forward.

"Very often you've got people that are very good at one aspect of the business, but if you don't have an overall perspective, you won't be as good of a leader," said Harry Kraemer, the former chairman and chief executive officer of health-care firm Baxter International. "I had been a CFO. When I became CEO, the first thing I did was put a good CFO there. We had a discussion, 'If I start acting like the CFO, stop me.'"

Letting go isn't easy. Former Ravens head coach Brian Billick says it's akin to an identity crisis.

"I call it the 3 a.m. rule," he said. "What's waking you up? If it's whether you should put the fullback out in the flat then you're really an offensive coordinator. If it's the roster

that week, the practice structure and issues with the defense, then you're the head coach."

Billick said that being a play-caller and head coach is like having two 24/7 jobs. Parcells added that relieving himself of play-calling on defense allowed him to oversee the offense on gameday, too. "I'd say, 'Run it.' And I knew I was going to get the best run (the play-caller) had. I didn't have to call the play."

The choices faced by Quinn in Atlanta demonstrate how excruciating the decision can be. The high-flying Falcons offense has been virtually unstoppable this season—they scored the seventh-most points scored in NFL history. It's been a different story on the defensive side of the ball, where Atlanta's defense gave up the sixth-most points in the league during the regular season.

Despite his background as a defensive guru, Quinn has made an effort to spend time in meetings with both the offense and defense.



Pittsburgh Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin reacts on the sideline during the first half of an AFC wild card. *PHOTO: FRED VUICH/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

"Dan knows a lot of ball," Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan recently told reporters. "We talk a lot during the week about ways to attack defenses we're going against. He's excellent on that."

"Dan's a good coach and knows that it's not the X's and O's, it's the Jimmys and Joes," Billick said. "He just doesn't have (the players) on defense."

Some of the game's top names still have a hard time getting their arms around the idea, though.

"I've had long talks with many coaches about this—[former 49ers coach and Hall of Famer] Bill Walsh and [former Raiders owner and head coach] Al Davis," Parcells said. "And to a man they said you can't be a head coach and watch some assistant completely run the game for you."

"But before we can have the entire team behave the way we want it to, we first have to hire good coaches," he said. "And then you have to let them coach."

Write to Jim Chairusmi at jim.chairusmi@wsj.com

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