

A game plan for Andy Reid

By William C. Kashatus

Andy Reid, who's been with the Philadelphia Eagles for 13 seasons, enjoys the longest tenure of any head coach among the city's professional sports teams. But his inability to win a Super Bowl, an antagonistic relationship with the local media, and the growing disenchantment of Eagles fans suggest that his days are numbered.

Whether he can extend his career beyond 2013, when his contract expires, remains to be seen. Still, Reid could learn a few lessons from two legendary coaches, Connie Mack and Joe Paterno.

Mack, who managed the Philadelphia Athletics for 50 years, captured nine American League pennants and five world championships. Similarly, Paterno, who died last month, was head football coach at Penn State for 46 years, long enough to become the winningest coach in Division I history, with 409 victories, including five undefeated seasons, three Big Ten titles, and two national championships.

Both coaches' longevity was due to a flexible approach. They learned to adjust their styles to the realities of their sport.

Mack started managing in the "dead ball" era at the turn of the 19th century, when games were won on pitching and an "inside-the-park" offense that manufactured runs on base hits, bunts, and the hit-and-run. By the 1920s, with the introduction of the "lively ball," that strategy had run its course. Mack

had to rebuild his team with power hitters as the home run became the decisive factor in winning games.

Paterno also had to make adjustments. When he first took the helm of the Nittany Lions in 1966, Penn State won games with blitzing linebackers and a stifling defense. The offense was dominated by the rush. As Division I became more competitive, Paterno went to a more balanced offensive attack, using the run to set up the pass.

Reid has not been that flexible. While his preparation is impeccable, he has difficulty adjusting during the game when his plan isn't working. He's wedded to the pass, when the NFL demands a more balanced offense. Reid also continues to draft undersized linebackers.

It's not that Reid hasn't been successful; his teams have captured six division titles and an NFC championship. But unless he learns to be more flexible with play-calling on both ends of the ball, and to make wiser draft picks, he'll never win a Super Bowl.

Another factor that secured longevity for Mack and Paterno was their understanding of and respect for the local media as an important link to the fans. Mack, ever the Victorian gentleman, treated the sportswriters cordially and provided insightful commentary for their readers. In return, the media and the fans gave him their loyalty, even in the lean years when his teams finished poorly.

Paterno was most accessible to the local press in his early years as head coach, but he still gave

thoughtful consideration to their questions at the end of his career. And he was so beloved by the fans that the writers have been careful to balance their criticism of Paterno's complicity in the Sandusky scandal with admiration for his accomplishments.

Reid, on the other hand, appears to have alienated himself from everyone but his coaches and players. He may enjoy their loyalty because he protects them from media criticism. But the local writers and fans consider him arrogant for refusing to provide any critical insight into the performance of the team.

Finally, Mack and Paterno lasted as long as they did because of their absolute authority over their teams. Mack was not only the manager of the A's but a major shareholder until 1936, when he became full owner. No one could fire the owner — even in his last years, when Mack struggled with senility and was forced to hire player-managers.

Similarly, the name Paterno became synonymous with Penn State because of the field and financial success of the football program. The Nittany Lions generated an average profit of \$53 million a year for the university. That's in addition to the \$24 million the program earned from general merchandise sales and sponsorships. At a time when higher education is struggling to meet expenses, no one — not the university president nor even the trustees — could force Paterno out of his job. Only a scandal could do that.

Reid doesn't enjoy that kind of job security. He may wield significant influence because of his dual responsibilities as head coach and executive vice president of football operations, but the patience of owner Jeffrey Lurie must be running thin with each season that passes without a coveted Super Bowl title.

Andy Reid has the potential to be a legendary coach in Philadelphia. He's likable when he lets down his guard, and he certainly has the background and knowledge to succeed in the NFL. But if he continues to ignore the lessons of men like Mack and Paterno, he'll have only himself to blame for his own demise.

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