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Dick Vermeil

The Eagle Has Landed... Back in Pennsylvania

An Interview with

Dick Vermeil

William C. Kashatus

When Dick Vermeil signed a five-year contract to coach the Philadelphia Eagles on February 8, 1976, he became at age 39 the youngest head coach in the National Football League. He also inherited a football team that had not posted a winning season in nine years.

Just three seasons later, Vermeil led the Eagles to their first playoff appearance in 18 years. He drove his players harder than any coach in the NFL, but he also treated them with respect and affection. He wasn't afraid to express his pride in a player by giving him a hug or to shed tears when he was moved by an inspirational performance. Nor did he shy away from working 18-hour days, seven days a week.

Three more playoff berths followed for the Eagles, highlighted by the 1980 season when Vermeil guided the Birds to a 12-4 record and to their first ever Super Bowl appearance. Unfortunately, Philadelphia lost Super Bowl XV to the Oakland Raiders, 27-10.

During the next two years, the combination of long hours and mounting pressure began to take their toll. The Eagles slipped to 10-6 in 1981 and then to 3-6 during the strike-shortened 1982 campaign. Vermeil knew it was time to move on with his life.

In an emotional farewell speech on January 10, 1983, the California native announced that he was retiring from the NFL coaching ranks. It appeared as if the never-ending demands of the job had drained a once-promising head coach of his passion for football.

For the next 14 years, Vermeil did a lot of soul-searching. He took a job in television broadcasting as a college and NFL analyst for CBS and ABC. Although several NFL teams contacted him, trying to coax him back to the sidelines, he listened to his heart. He discovered that what he missed most about football was the opportunity to change the lives of his players by engaging their souls, the place where intellect, emotion and spirit come together to define the character of a person. That's what he had done best throughout his head coaching career, first at Hillsdale High School, in San Mateo, California, then at Napa Junior College, then at UCLA, and finally as a head coach in the NFL.

In 1997 a reenergized Vermeil became the head coach and president of football operations for the St. Louis Rams, an organization that had lost more games in the 1990s than any other team in the NFL. In just three years he led the Rams to Super Bowl XXXIV and a 23-16 victory over the Tennessee Titans. At age 63 Vermeil became the oldest coach to win a Super Bowl.



After another hiatus from the coaching ranks, Vermeil returned to the NFL in 2001 for a final five-year stint as head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs. When the Chiefs captured the American Football Conference's Western Division title in 2003, Vermeil became one of five coaches (with Chuck Knox, Dan Reeves, Bill Parcells and Marty Schottenheimer) in NFL history to guide three different teams to the playoffs.

When Vermeil retired from pro football for good on January 1, 2006, he had compiled an overall record of 126-114 and was voted NFC Coach of the Year three times (1978, 1979 and 1999) and NFL Coach of the Year two times (1979 and 1999) by the national sportswriters during a 15-year head coaching career in the NFL. In addition, the Philadelphia Eagles and the St. Louis Rams inducted him into their halls of fame. Although his contributions to the game are considerable, Vermeil has yet to be inducted into the National Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

Today, Dick Vermeil still holds a special place in his heart for the 1980 Philadelphia Eagles, a team he claims "did everything his 1999 St. Louis Rams did to get to the Super Bowl, but weren't able to win it." He also makes his home in the western suburbs of Philadelphia, where two of his three children and seven of his eleven grandchildren also reside.

Who inspired you to become a teacher-coach in San Mateo back in 1959?

My dad was the first person responsible for developing my love of football. Football was always a topic of conversation in our household and the values he learned from the sport. Later, Bill Wood, my football coach at Calistoga High School, inspired me. I had planned to go to work in my father's garage after high school. But Bill saw that I loved football and he thought I had the ability to play in college. He also

Dick Vermeil confers with Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski during a 1980 game. Jaworski led the Eagles to the playoffs four straight years and to Super Bowl XV.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

suggested that I consider becoming a high school coach. I went off to college with that goal in mind. Then, at San Jose State, Bob Bronzan was my coach and he raised my level of expectation. He saw things in me that I didn't see in myself. That was inspiring.

What is it about football that inspires you?

What I love most about the sport are the close relationships that develop among players and between coaches and players. Football, by nature, draws people together because it's so combative and so competitive. I coupled the passion I've always had for football with a compassion for people and made a lifetime career.

You're the only teacher-coach who's been named Coach of the Year at four different levels: high school, junior college, NCAA Division I and NFL. Others have said that two of the keys to your success are your organizational skills and an exceptional ability to motivate your players. Would you agree?

Yes, I'd agree with that. I also think that honest, hard work is another key. I learned that by watching my dad. He worked in a car garage seven days a week, year round. He took one vacation his entire life. We never had a family vacation. Never. His example defined hard work for me. Football was never work. It was like being a kid, because I was involved in a game. It was fun. Sure, coaching was intense and, for me, emotional. But I loved it so much that I wouldn't want to go home at the end of the day. I'd stick around all night.

What is your philosophy of teaching/coaching?

I always felt it was my responsibility to help somebody become all he could be, whether it meant becoming the best

second-stringer, or the best All-American, or the best All-Pro. At the same time, I wanted to help him become the best person he can be. My philosophy has always been that I don't coach football, I coach people to play the game. In order to help people become the best they can be, they have to trust you, and that takes time. People have an unbelievable tolerance for appreciation and praise. If you coach from a positive standpoint and you show that you care, you can sometimes get a person to achieve beyond their potential. There's also an issue of loyalty. Players don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. I think that it really doesn't matter what level or what age group. That philosophy cuts across all levels.

You were 39 years old when you became the head coach of the Philadelphia Eagles in 1976. You had

just led UCLA to their first Pacific 8 Championship and an upset over number 1-ranked Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. Why did you leave such a successful college program to become head coach of an NFL team that hadn't posted a winning season in 15 years?

I didn't apply for the Eagles job. They called me. In fact, I never applied for any of the coaching jobs I accepted. Someone phoned and offered me the job. Back in 1976 I had no ambition to leave UCLA.



Vermeil's father, Jean Louis Vermeil, owned and operated an automobile garage and inspired his son with his extraordinary work ethic.

COURTESY DICK VERMEIL

Vermeil's first head coaching came at Hillsdale High School in 1960. Here he is carried off the field by his players after Thanksgiving 1962 victory.

COURTESY DICK VERMEIL

Nor did I have any ambition to be a head coach in the NFL. But I was interested in the challenge.

How did Eagles' owner Leonard Tose make the decision easier?

Leonard Tose was one of the most unique individuals I've known. You really had to understand his quality as a person to appreciate him as an owner. By the time I arrived in Philadelphia in 1976, Mr. Tose had been owner for eight years and had fired four head coaches. He was ready to turn the team over to me. If I went to him with a problem, he'd say, "Dick, you solve it. I don't need the aggravation." It's unusual to work for an owner like that.

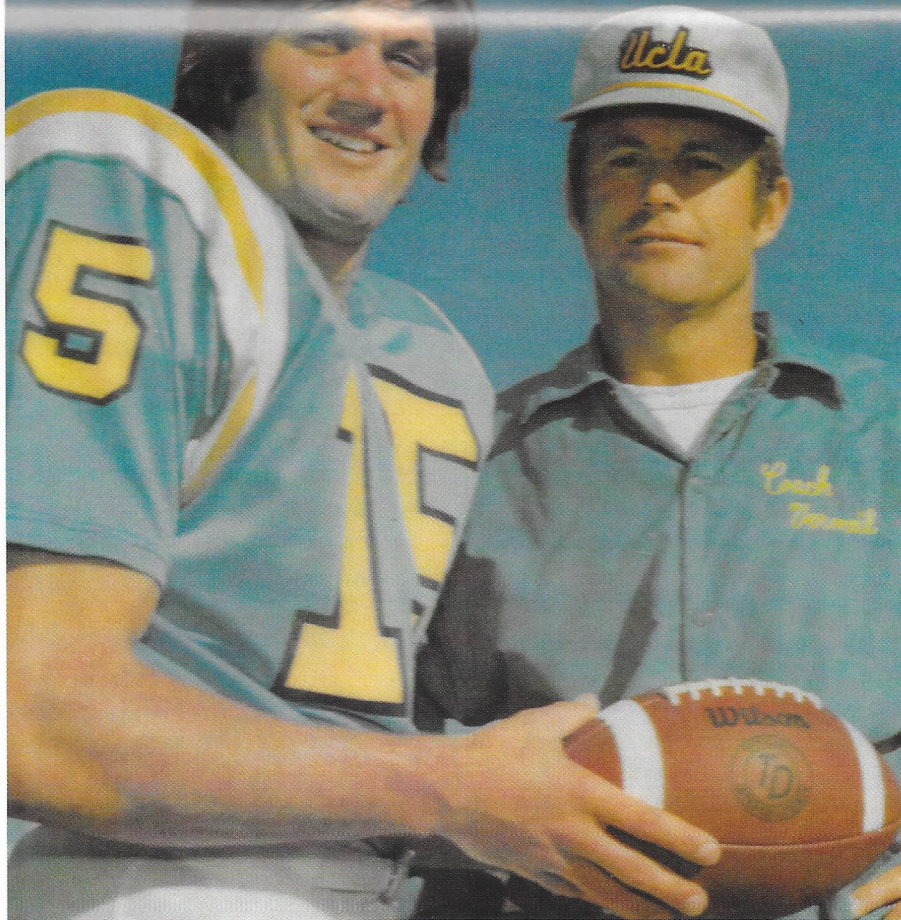
Mr. Tose treated me more than fair, and he treated my family wonderfully. He did anything he could to build a winning team. We became good friends and we remained good friends until he passed away in 2003.

Did you have much difficulty making the transition from college football to the NFL?

I had already been in pro football as an assistant, so I was comfortable in the NFL from the beginning as a head coach. But I had some difficulty delegating responsibilities to my assistants. When I came to Philadelphia I hired Marion Campbell to coordinate the defense. I ran the offense and the quarterbacks. Then in 1979 I hired Sid Gillman as quarterbacks coach. But I still ran the offense, called my own plays, and had full responsibility for the organization.

I probably didn't delegate as much responsibility because of my own inexperience and immaturity. In the past, I had always felt more secure doing things myself. As a high school coach, I had one assistant. As a junior college coach, I had one assistant. We did everything. So I felt secure doing everything.

Once I got to the NFL it was a very different situation. It was a much bigger job with far more visibility. There was much more hanging in the balance in terms of how the team performed. I really should have delegated more responsibility to my



Top, With John Sciarra as quarterback, Vermeil compiled a 15–5–3 record in two seasons (1974–75) at UCLA, including a 9–2–1 record in 1975, when he led the Bruins to their first conference championship in 10 years and a win in the Rose Bowl over an undefeated and number one-ranked Ohio State.

COURTESY DICK VERMEIL

Bottom, On November 28, 1975, Vermeil's UCLA Bruins upset favorite USC, 25–22.

COURTESY DICK VERMEIL

assistants in Philadelphia, but I still tried to do everything myself. I just stayed up longer and addressed various things over a longer period of time—aside from coaching the defense. Marion Campbell did that and I think that no one did it better than he did. It took me a long time before I felt comfortable delegating responsibilities as a good leader of an organization does.

Why hold open tryouts in the summer of 1976? Was it an appeal to Philadelphia's football fans to quiet their infamous booing or to honor their blue-collar temperament?

Actually, George Allen, the head coach of the Los Angeles Rams, introduced me to the idea when I was his special teams coach in 1969. George did that to find practice players and once in a while he'd even find an underdog who'd make the roster. That's how I discovered Vince Papale, who became one of my best special teams players in Philadelphia.

Vince was a unique player—a non-drafted, 30-year-old free agent. At 5 feet 6 inches, 150 pounds, Vince was too small to attract college football recruiters, so he went to St. Joseph's College to compete in track. During those four years, he grew to 6 feet 2 inches, 190 pounds. After graduation, he played for a local semipro team and then for the World Football League.

When the WFL folded, Vince tried out for the Eagles. He made the team because he had great passion and fine athletic ability. But he also had character, and I was looking for players with character, ones who were tough enough and hungry enough to change the complacent atmosphere of the team.

Vince was an underdog, and I like underdogs. Philadelphia fans can identify with him, too, because of that. Vince was very impressive in that open tryout. He stayed on the roster for three seasons as one of the most aggressive, hard-hitting special teams players we had.

Did you watch the 2006 Walt Disney film *Invincible* based on Vince Papale's Eagles career? How accurate was actor Greg Kinnear's portrayal of you in the film?

I only saw the movie once. I have to admit that I was really nervous about being portrayed, especially when I was getting different accounts before I saw the film. My son, Rick, was a stand-in in many of the scenes and he told me, "Dad, Kinnear portrayed you pretty well." On the other hand, many of my former players who saw the film, said, "Coach, he wasn't as intense as you were at that time."

When I finally saw the movie I was amazed to hear Kinnear use some of the same expressions I used back in those days, things I don't say anymore. Overall, I'd say that Greg did a great job, though he wasn't as intense or as emotional as I was at that age.

I also thought that the movie was well done. The way they told Vince's story was true. We knew how inspirational that story was because we lived part of it. But the movie was also presented in a way that the family could enjoy it.

How did the press treat you during your years in Philadelphia?

When I was the head football coach at UCLA in 1974, John Wooden, the head basketball coach and a legendary figure, suggested that I not read the sports pages during the season. He told me, "What they write about you most of the time, whether it's good or bad, just isn't true, so why allow it to be a distraction?" So I followed his lead. To this day, I haven't read a single article about the two Super Bowls my teams reached. I don't want to get upset at anybody. Nor do I want to get an inflated ego over the flattering things someone wrote. I know what I am—a football coach, nothing more, nothing less.

As a head football coach in the NFL, I had to interact with the media every day. Then, after spending 14 years in the broadcasting business, I had a better understanding of the media and an appreciation for what they do. I felt that as a head coach I had an obligation to help the media do their job by speaking truthfully and accurately.



Dick Vermeil led the Philadelphia Eagles to their first-ever Super Bowl appearance.

How about Philadelphia's football fans? What are they like?

Philadelphia fans are unique in their intensity and loyalty. Deep down, they are also very sincere. They may boo you, but if they respect you, trust you and care about you, they will be extremely protective of you, too. To this day, I have people stop me on the street and express their appreciation for those Eagles teams I coached. That has given me a better perspective on the important role a head coach plays in representing the organization to the community. The fans tend to view you as a model for the team. You're always being evaluated by them. It's a tremendous responsibility, and one I've taken very seriously throughout my career.

Would you call the Eagles teams you coached between 1976 and 1982 "over achievers?"

We had better players on those teams than we were given credit for. Remember, the Eagles had been losing for so long that people tend to forget the strides we made in those first three years. We started winning in 1978. Only 12 of the players on my original roster, in 1976, eventually made it to the Super Bowl in 1981. We called them the "Dirty Dozen." So there were some good football players during those first three years, but there weren't enough of them to win consistently until 1978. One of the reasons for the lack of talent was that the Eagles didn't have any first-, second- or third-round picks in the college draft until 1979.

Who were some of the most memorable Eagles players during your seven years as head coach in Philadelphia?

Quarterback Ron Jaworski. We selected him in the second round of the 1973 draft when I was an assistant with the Los Angeles Rams. Ron was raised in a steel mill town in Upstate New York and went on to play his college ball at Youngstown State. He had a great passion for football and gave it his all every week. I liked that kind of intensity, that kind of competitive attitude. When I came to Philadelphia, I traded tight end Charles Young to the

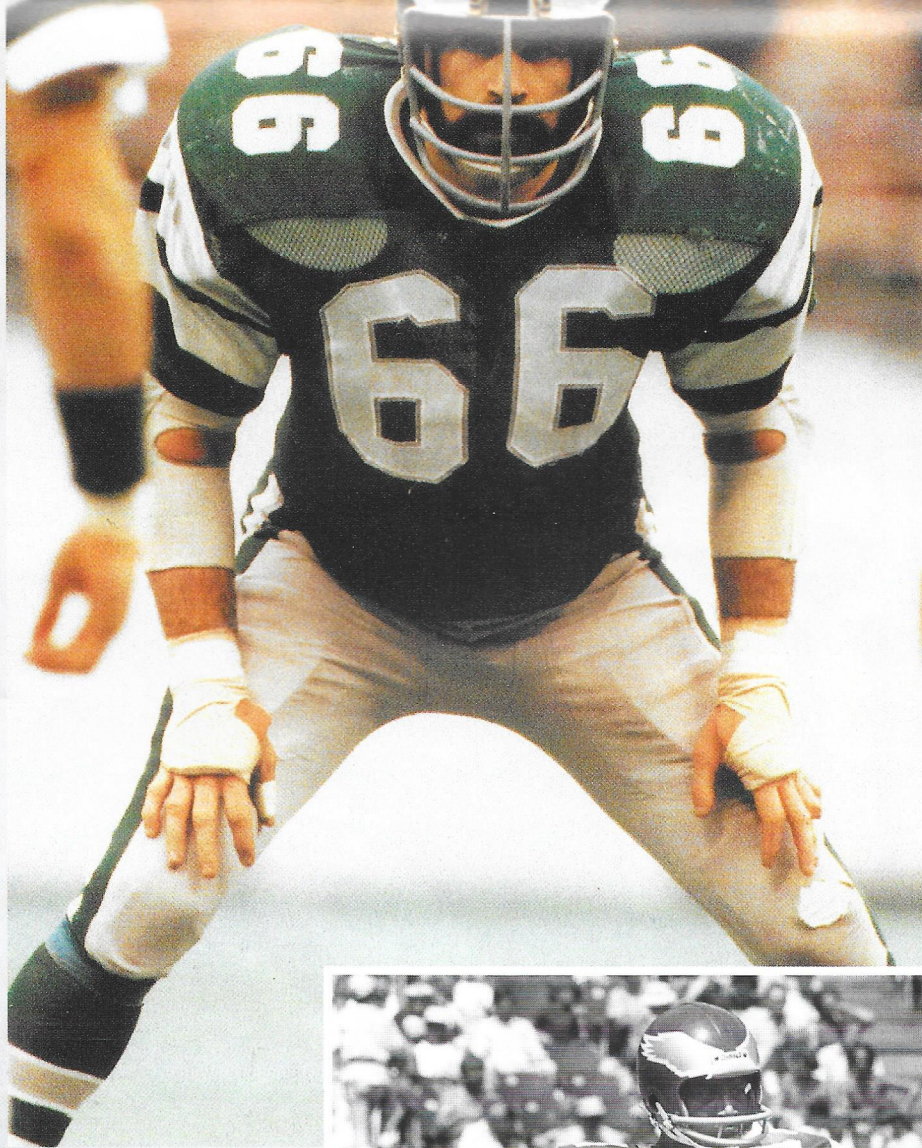


Rams to get him. Ron not only had the talent to take the Eagles to the next level, but he was a blue-collar guy, the kind Philadelphia fans can relate to. It was a perfect fit, and probably the very best trade I ever made.

Ron had been with the Rams for four years. During that time he had been taking turns at quarterback with John Hadl, James Harris and Pat Haden. In the nine games he started, Ron won them all, including a 1975 NFC Divisional playoff against the

Eagles' running back Wilbert Montgomery played a total of eight seasons with Philadelphia and finished as the team's all-time rushing leader.

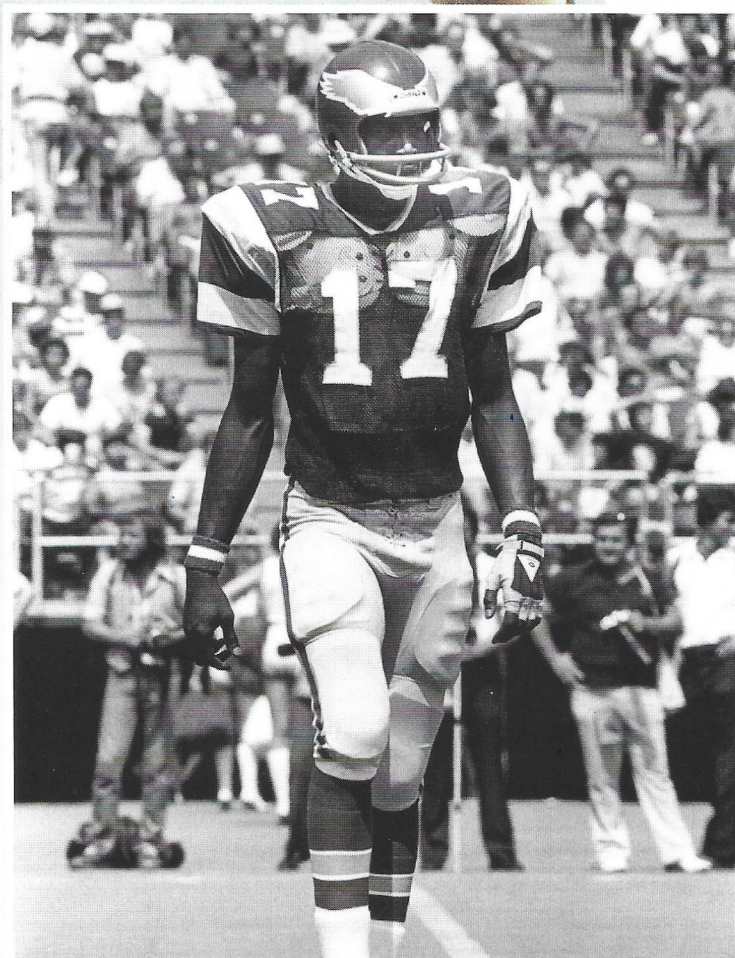
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES



St. Louis Cardinals. He wanted a fresh start somewhere else, a chance to be a consistent starter. When I brought him to the Eagles, I told him that he was my quarterback and that he was going to play no matter what. Of course, Ron went on to win 42 regular season games with the Eagles between 1978 and 1981, second only to Pittsburgh's Terry Bradshaw among NFL quarterbacks. He also led our team to the playoffs for four straight years and to Super Bowl XV in 1980-81.

Running back Wilbert Montgomery was the finest player I ever coached in the NFL. He was a sixth-round draft pick out of Abilene Christian in 1977. Wilbert played a total of eight seasons with Philadelphia and finished as the team's all-time rushing leader. He had great vision, ran hard, blocked, caught the ball well—everything you'd ever want in a tail back. Wilbert was one of the top running backs in the NFL at the time, right along Tony Dorsett of the Dallas Cowboys. If he were playing today, he'd be earning \$7 million a year. When I went to the St. Louis Rams, I hired Wilbert as my backfield coach.

Harold Carmichael was another great football player, though he had a totally different stature for a wide receiver. At 6 feet 8 inches in height and 225 pounds, he had a long, lean frame and no one thought he'd be able to survive in the NFL. But Harold was an exceptional receiver. He ran great patterns, had great hands and was able to catch a lot of balls around his ankles. He could also beat double coverage by simply reaching above it to catch a pass. If he had played for me in St. Louis or Kansas City, Harold would've been a shoe-in for the Hall of Fame because I utilized the receivers much better than I did in Philadelphia. Back then I believed in running the ball and only throwing when it was necessary. As a result, Harold didn't get as much recognition as the other receivers in the NFL.



Above, Middle linebacker Bill Bergey had size plus extraordinary quickness and agility to anchor the Eagles' defense between 1974 and 1980.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Right, Wide receiver Harold Carmichael was another key to the Eagles' success. He was an exceptional receiver and was able to beat double coverage by reaching above the defenders to catch a pass.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

On the other hand, there was Bill Bergey, our middle linebacker. He was such a dominant player that he received a lot of press. Bill came to the Eagles as an All-Pro from Cincinnati before I arrived in Philadelphia. He was 6 feet 2 inches and 250 pounds, so he had size, plus extraordinary quickness and agility. He delivered tackles with his full body, which is something that just can't be taught. In 1979 he suffered a serious knee injury, but Bill had a lot of passion for the game as well as a lot of pride. He pushed himself through a long, painful rehabilitation process so he could return in 1980. Bill was an outstanding example of perseverance, physical and mental toughness.

What was your most memorable game as the Eagles head coach?

There were many memorable ones. But I'd have to say that the loss to the [Dallas] Cowboys in the last game of the regular season in 1980 was among the most memorable, because of the intense rivalry between our two teams. Going into that game we had a chance to clinch a share of the NFC East title if we beat Dallas or if we lost to them by less than 25 points. The game was played at Dallas, and at the beginning of the fourth quarter we were down 35-10. Bergey and Carmichael were injured and Montgomery was playing hurt. But our defense held the Cowboys scoreless after that and Jaworski rallied the offense to score two touchdowns and a field goal for 17 points. My nephew, Louie Giamona, did a great job catching the ball coming out of the backfield, too.

Although we lost the game, 35-27, we covered the point spread to earn a playoff spot. Of course we went on to defeat Dallas, 20-7, in the NFC Championship game three weeks later. But that was the character of our football team. Our guys were relentless and they had tremendous stamina. They'd just wear down the opponent. For example, the 1980 team scored over 100 points in the fourth quarter of games that



Between 1983 and 1996, Vermeil served as a television analyst for NFL and college football broadcasts by CBS and ABC. He is pictured here with Brent Musburger at the 1993 Army-Navy Game.

COURTESY DICK VERMEIL

season, while giving up a total of 42 points in the same quarter. It was unbelievable. I truly believe that we were in better condition than every single one of our opponents that season.

In January 1981 the Eagles were heavily favored to win Super Bowl XV against the Oakland Raiders but lost, 27-10. What happened?

You probably won't believe this, but after winning one Super Bowl and losing another I can say that it takes the very same type of discipline, stamina, character, training and work ethic just to make it that far, regardless if the team wins or loses. When you have those qualities, a special bond develops among the players and between the players and the coaches. I was privileged to be part of that special bond with the Eagles in 1980 and with the St. Louis Rams in 2000

Having said that, there were some obstacles we faced going into Super Bowl XV. First, there were some key injuries on the offensive side. Charles Smith had a broken jaw and Scott Fitzkee had a stress fracture, so we had just one wide receiver, Harold Carmichael. Second, Oakland had a bigger, stronger team and they played press man coverage, which meant that we couldn't get the ball to Carmichael. Third, the Raiders stacked their linebackers on the line of scrimmage. While our offensive linemen were very physical and well coached they weren't as big physically, so

we had difficulty with our zone blocking schemes. But the major reason we lost is because we turned the ball over three times, and you just don't win Super Bowls if you do that.

Despite all that, I think if we could have made a couple of big plays early on in the game, we would've been fine. Remember, we beat the Raiders during the regular season, 10-7, at Veterans Stadium [in Philadelphia]. But we fell behind in the Super Bowl and seemed to sag emotionally. I think you also have to give the Raiders a lot of credit. They were a much

better team that day. They prevented us from playing at the level we performed for most of the season. That happens in football.

Why did you retire after the 1982 season?

It came to the point where I had to leave. I had pushed myself so hard over those seven years in Philadelphia that I wasn't as good a coach as I should have been. I had driven myself so hard for so long that I was no longer effective. I knew I needed a break. So I went into broadcasting NFL and college football games. Interestingly, I worked less hours and made a lot more money in broadcasting.

Why did you take 14 years to return to the NFL as a head coach?

I didn't go back earlier than that because I didn't want find myself in the same hole. I didn't want to be totally consumed by the job again. I owed my wife and my family more than that. The opportunities were there, though. Every year someone from the NFL called and asked if I was interested in a head coaching job. But the only two organizations I met with over that 14-year period were the Eagles and the St. Louis Rams.

In 1995 I met with Jeff Lurie, the new owner of the Eagles, and the conversation got me excited about coaching again. But at that point I'd been out of coaching for 12

years and Jeff was just establishing himself, so it didn't seem like the right fit. Two years later, I met with the Rams, a more established organization, and felt confident that I could do the job. Since my children were grown by that time, I was free to return to the NFL. I also knew that time was running out from the standpoint of age.

How did you change as a head coach when you joined the St. Louis Rams?

I had matured. I wasn't as insecure. I knew myself better as a person. I also realized that I had to delegate greater responsibility to my assistants. In addition to being head coach, I was also president of football operations in St. Louis. As a result, I couldn't continue to coordinate the offense and coach quarterbacks. It would've been too much. So I had to become a true leader of an organization, and that meant delegating responsibility.

What did you learn from losing Super Bowl XV with the Eagles that helped you win Super Bowl XXXIV with the Rams?

I was more confident in myself as a head coach by 1999, so I was more relaxed. I was also more understanding of the responsibilities I had to control as well as those I didn't have to control in order to win. But the Rams team I coached in Super Bowl XXXIV had very different circumstances than the Eagles team that went to Super Bowl XV.

In St. Louis we were able to go to the Super Bowl healthy. We also had an unbelievable receiver corps and a quarterback in Kurt Warner, who was the Most Valuable Player in the NFL that year. We were not only the number one-ranked offense in the league, but also the number six defense. It was hard for the Tennessee Titans—or any team—to beat us that year, especially on Astroturf, because we were so fast.

Why did you join the Kansas City Chiefs in 2001 after retiring from the Rams in 1999?

When I retired from the Rams I thought it was the right thing to do because I'd be

going out on top. You can't do that without winning the Super Bowl, which we did that year. Plus, I had invested the equivalent of six years' worth of work in St. Louis in just three years' time, so I was exhausted.

But the following spring when I gave out the Super Bowl rings at the team party, I realized that I had made a big mistake. I had just spent three years building an organization and had great relationships with all the players and the owners. And I still had the desire to coach. I didn't want my career to end that way.

In 2001, when the Kansas City Chiefs asked me to take the head coaching job, I initially turned them down. Then I had second thoughts. I missed the people. I missed the competition. I missed the game. I'm a coach, always have been, always will be. Football is in my blood. Plus, I was very close friends with Carl Peterson, the team president, and had great respect for Lamar Hunt, the founder of the organization. So I called back and took the job.

Did your instincts prove to be correct?

Yes. I felt totally prepared to take that head coaching job, and we did have success. By my third year in Kansas City, I thought the Chiefs could win the Super Bowl. Unfortunately, we lost in the AFC Divisional game to the Indianapolis Colts, 38-31.

How does a native of California's Napa Valley decide to plant roots in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania?

My children, friends and many of my former players from the Eagles still live in the Philadelphia area. I'm deeply involved in the community and in organizations like Blue Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania and the Boy Scouts of Chester County. All of that happened because of my years as head coach of the Eagles. That team was and remains special to me. They did all the things the 1999 St. Louis Rams did to win a Super Bowl, but we just weren't able to do it.

As for Chester County, it's my home. I bought property in East Fallowfield in 1984. We built a house on it three years later, and it's been our home ever since. Chester County is every bit as beautiful as

Napa Valley, only there aren't vineyards or an extensive wine industry. But I'm working on changing that.

I established a business in Napa called Vermeil Wines & Group. We produce about 2,500 cases of wine each year.

You and your wife, Carol, were very active in the community wherever you've coached. What are some of your involvements in southeastern Pennsylvania?

I have a real compassion for special needs children and adults. They are people who struggle with problems through no fault of their own, so I try to help them however I can. People for People, run by a former Eagle, Herb Lusk, is one of the most outstanding organizations I've ever been around. I've never seen a pro football player do more for a community than Herb has done. So why not help him? I love to hang my hat with those kinds of organizations, because they help other people.

In the early days, when I was with the Eagles, I could give my name, but I didn't have much money to contribute. Now I'm in a position where I can do more to help financially.

I think you get involved with the community because you appreciate what the community has done for you. It's almost an obligation. If the people in a community hold you in esteem, then you better do something to deserve it.

Many sportswriters believe that your achievements warrant induction into the National Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. What are your feelings on that subject?

You know, I've heard people say that. But it's a lot easier to say than to earn the right to be there. I have no control over that. If it happens it'd be an unbelievable honor, something way beyond any goal I've ever set for myself. But what's most important to me is how I'm remembered by my players. I'd like to be remembered as a person who cared, as a good teacher, as a friend.

William C. Kashatus of Paoli, Chester County, is a regular contributor to Pennsylvania Heritage.



Vermeil's finest hour came with St. Louis after his 1999 Rams team captured a thrilling 23-16 victory in Super Bowl XXXIV against the Tennessee Titans. Once again, he was named NFL Coach of the Year.

COURTESY DICK VERMEIL