

Insights into Quality Practice: An Interview with Coaching Legend Bill Walsh

Bill Walsh & Kevin Sverdukk, USA

Bill Walsh: Bill Walsh is among the greatest coaches in the history of the National Football League (NFL). During his 35-year coaching career he won 3 Super-Bowls as head coach of the San Francisco 49ers. He was given the nickname “Genius” for his innovative football strategies and mastery in preparing his teams to perform. He was elected into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and was selected by ESPN as the top American Football coach of the past 25 years.

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Abstract

Perhaps no other factor influences performance more than the quantity and quality of the athlete or performer’s practice regimen. Possibly no other coach understood and integrated this as completely and consistently as Bill Walsh. Bill Walsh’s reputation for meticulous planning and preparation of his teams has been well chronicled. This interview was conducted as part of a research project examining expert coaches’ attitudes and beliefs about quality practice.

Interview with Bill Walsh

Kevin: What do you see as the role of practice?

Bill: There’s four or five criteria for practice. The most basic is physical conditioning, and that is often over-emphasized. The next would be to go through the repetition of developing the skills. Those skills can be very extensive or rather limited. So, conditioning and then skills, then in team play the coordination between the athletes in team drills. The next would be related to planning for the opposition and rehearsing, in a sense, what you’ll be doing for the game itself. The fourth would be to develop the skills of those players who may not be ready or prepared for playing games themselves. So you have that obligation. The next would be pre-

paring for contingencies that can develop, situational circumstances that can develop in the game that are common to every game. Those are part of our practice regimen. That would probably be the limit of it.

Kevin: What would be some behaviors in practice that would catch your eye in a positive way?

Bill: Well, I think concentration and focus is absolutely critical and that’s what we demand, require, and expect - focus and concentration on the activity being carried out, and in the explanation and the basis for the activity. The second would be communication between players themselves, and players and coaches. That has to be ongoing. We expect and require that. And then energy and

enthusiasm for what they are doing is the next critical factor, and from there it's being supportive of teammates, working together to mutually improve in skills and techniques.

Kevin: In talking about concentration and focus, how do athletes know what to focus on, the ones that are having a great practice, how do they know what to focus on?

Bill: Well, I think that's strictly a coach's role. The coach has to engender a feeling of importance of the activity. So, the coach's role is to establish an environment in which the player will feel naturally inclined to focus and give attention to what they're doing related to the upcoming game or upcoming season. The energy and support of other players should mutually develop an atmosphere on the field that is conducive to learning and preparing and concentrating.

Kevin: Were there athletes you worked with that got more out of practice than other athletes?

Bill: You'd like to think not, but I suppose there were. A lot depends on the position they play. Some thrive more so than others on the practice regimen. It was the coach's job to motivate and pull along those who were not as enthusiastic, but once you establish an attitude among the players, very rarely does someone let down because the other players just will not accept that. A good example was the 49ers. If the offensive unit is running its scout team play for our defense, if they don't come out of the huddle quickly and get into position quickly and execute, well Ken Norton, the middle linebacker, will just chastise them and raise hell with them, tell them to go back in the huddle and come out right; he'll start coaching the other team to get the look that he wants. So,

when that atmosphere develops, that's when practices are most valuable and important.

Kevin: Is there an element of expectations?

Bill: Yes, I think those teams or schools or organizations that have developed an attitude and a state of mind expect a lot of each other. High expectations. They require of each other that they practice honestly and with complete focus, so, once that is established, the coach's role is just to monitor it, because you don't need very much prodding.

Kevin: Are there any mental cues needed? When you have an athlete that you want to pick it up in practice, you want to get a little more out of him at practice, is just enthusiasm and concentration enough, or are there some other things?

Bill: Just do what is expected, whatever the activity is. But, they've got to be reasonable. If they're not reasonable, then the athlete will question, whether they do it overtly or not, who knows, but they'll question it if it is not reasonable, if it doesn't make sense. That's the shortcoming of some coaches. If it's reasonable, and especially if the athletes can see the practice being directly related and connected to the upcoming game of contact, then the athlete is far more interested in preparing themselves. If it is just activity for the sake of activity, then I think athletes do lose their focus. Often a coach can't quite understand why the athletes are losing their focus, that's why it is so important that practice be relevant to the game.

Kevin: What would clue you in to the state of an athlete in practice? How would you know if they are not focusing or concentrating?

Bill: Well, if he makes mistakes and repeats the mistakes; the directions are given to the players and they don't respond as directed or as coached. When that happens you know they are not thinking about what they're doing, when they tend to lose their poise and their efficiency in football by jumping off sides and not asking questions. If an athlete is not asking questions and participating in the practice, then you wonder if they're really with you and concentrating.

Kevin: So, there's a mutual responsibility?

Bill: Sooner or later there should be. It may not be in the initial stages of developing a team, but at some point, when the team is mature, or when the program is mature, you expect questions to be asked. Now, not silly questions to slow practice down to get a rest which you see at college level, but it's honest questions, a player might differ with a coach on something. So there's an interaction between a player and a coach, and players and players. There are some people who will let down - maybe 10%-20% of your athletes will let down - at practice; they get fatigued and they lose concentration and they take a short cut to what they're doing and that's the coach's job to identify who those people typically are and to be right there and just expect and demand that they participate and give the same energy level as everyone else.

Kevin: Why do some go harder, like Ken Norton?

Bill: I just think it's in their genes, in a sense, or their history or background or experience, or conceivably the importance of a game to that particular person and the role they play on the team. If a player like Ken Norton has to make different calls to adjust the defense and the offense doesn't align itself properly or quickly, well then he's up-

set because he can't get his job done. So it depends on the role that each player is involved in. But there are players who will inherently let down and you wish they wouldn't and you just drive them harder, but not so much through criticism and ridicule - a lot of it is supportive. Keep pushing and driving and reminding them. There will be 10% of the athletes that will be in that category. If you had a high school coach, I'm sure it would be much more evident because of the immaturity of the athletes than at college or professional levels. Now, some coaches don't define what is expected in practice or they emphasize just one phase of practice too much, so on occasion there are coaches who will take more out of the athlete in the conditioning process so that you simply can't think clearly in the execution process. That is very common, especially with inexperienced coaches.

Kevin: So are you saying that a quality practiced is balanced?

Bill: Certainly, and as I mentioned, I think the conditioning aspect is far too much a factor, especially for the inexperienced coach because they're not sure what they should do next or don't know what they should do next. So they have the athletes go through some rudimentary running and think he is preparing the athlete, when really most often that is counter productive. So a knowledgeable and well informed coach is going to have something very specific every minute of the practice that they are attempting to define or accomplish, so they never have enough time to get all these things done. That's where training and experience comes into it.

Kevin: Are there some self-directed attitudes and behaviors of the athletes that are important?

Bill: Oh sure, Well, there are some who will work harder - there are some key players who will want to do more - following practice or before practice. Different roles may require that or they just have that intense determination to improve and prepare themselves. And it's up to the coach to monitor that because that can become excessive and counter productive. But I think it's important to the coach that he just continue to spur everybody on to improve their own individual skills all the time and ensure that people are actually improving and accomplishing things in practice, rather than just going through the drudgery of a practice that so often occurs, especially at the high school level, but even at the college level, and sometimes the professional level.

Kevin: To go on with that....Is it something more than the athletes just doing what the coaches ask him to do?

Bill: Oh, certainly. You'd hope that the athletes, by the way they are communicating with each other during practice, are taking it beyond what the coaches would find acceptable. The more communication, the more interaction between the athletes motivating each other - but more so communicating as to how they are going to do certain techniques and execution - the more of that the better. And some people are nonverbal and you have to sort of find a way to help them learn to communicate better. You'll find there will be key people on a team that will be communicating the teachings of the coach and those are the people who basically set the standard for everyone else.

Kevin: What would be some of the "hows" you would tell the athlete?

Bill: I think, in a general sense, athletes should take the field feeling that they are going to improve some very distinct, spe-

cific techniques or skills that day, and will continue to on an ongoing basis. The other "how" is to ask questions of their teammates. When necessary, ask the coach to explain possibly further, but then to enthusiastically focus and concentrate on what they are doing and to demonstrate in energy that circulates through the entire team.

Kevin: When you talk about enthusiasm, concentration, focus, and energy, how would you compare that level in a quality practice situation with a game situation?

Bill: In football, you take out the final element of that hard physical contact, but you want the same explosion of movement and execution, identical to that of a game. You don't expect it to change for the game - you can't. The players won't suddenly execute better in a game. It just doesn't happen; they don't execute as well because of all of the variables, so you want everything you do to be game-like, and as designed or required by the coaches. On occasion, at certain periods prior to the season you will have, in football, all-out game-like conditions. But during the season you can't do that and you don't want to do that. You do demand and require that the players move at the same explosive tempo and that they think and they execute all their skills - you're using game-like conditions for each day you practice, so that you're addressing a different phase of the game or different strategies, and that should be done just as intensely as you would during a game itself.

Kevin: When you think about your best performers, and not talking too much about just talent-wise, what is different about them in practice? Was there something in practice that they did that significantly contributed to their level of performance?

Bill: Well, there are some players who practice at their own pace if they can - it may not be the same pace as the rest of the team - and still perform admirably. But by and large the folks that turn out to be outstanding players have a great practice effort and concentrate on improvement. But on occasion you'll find someone who doesn't practice well, but when the game starts, he plays much better. You have to find a way to account for that. Often that happens in football, with the men who handle the ball - the running backs. Whatever the coach feels is the requirement of the practice, he should follow up on that continually and not compromise it. When he compromises it, or lets his hands off the control, practice can be ineffective, even chaotic.

Kevin: What motivates athletes to practice hard?

Bill: The seriousness of the game itself. Athletes learn to understand that through practice they can perform, and if they don't practice well they don't develop the fundamental techniques and skills they need. And when they're playing a comparable opponent, they'll falter, they'll make mistakes or lose their momentum or concentration. So those that practice better are more confident during the contest itself. They feel that they have prepared themselves. If there's a doubt in your mind as to your condition or your techniques or your game - in a sense if you know you haven't really prepared yourself like you could - well then typically you'll come unraveled if the competition is comparable. Now, what tends to happen if you're playing against an inferior opponent, then you can get away with a lot. If your opponent is very competitive, that's when you are truly tested. So last night, LaSalle won 56-0; well, I don't even want to read about it. It's ridiculous that they're playing that team. I

don't care how good they are, they have to find people that are competitive.

Kevin: So, with motivation, is there any intrinsic motivation to practice hard? Is it just that...okay if I practice hard and I have a chance of winning then that's the reason I'm going to practice hard?

Bill: Oh, no, I think people develop, hopefully thrive on the activity itself; thrive on running a pass pattern, doing it better than anyone else or as well as they possibly can do it. Oh, yea, I think there is an intrinsic value to practice. Those that thrive on the sport that really, in a sense, care for the sport, are really involved with it and even find joy in practicing and being on the field. Oh, yes, that's what you'd like to think - that every athlete has a form of that or by degree they have in their system. By degree they do, some more than others.

Kevin: How would you say that is learned? How would an athlete get to that point?

Bill: Its different experiences and a level of confidence. If an athlete does not have a lot of confidence, is fearful, and isn't sure of himself, well, then they're not going to thrive on much of anything. They're going to be out there trying to overcome that fear as much as learning to improve their game. So, there are those who have the fear of failure and just won't let go and give it everything they have. You just hope they grow out of that. Some people never really do.

Kevin: How would you define competition?

Bill: Competition is related to the nature of the sport and the rules of the sport - a basic drive. We have refined it to the point that we can utilize it and play in sport instead of work for something else. There's an energy and a drive that is inherent in people. Fortu-

nately there is sport that can relieve that and give people fulfillment. Hopefully, it's not so much that it dominates, hurts or ridicules the opposition.

Kevin: Is it important to success?

Bill: Hopefully you respect the opposition, what they're doing, and you respect them as competitors.

Kevin: Does it exist in quality practice?

Bill: Well, you hope so. There's always the isolated person who is not capable really of respecting very much. They're self-oriented and you always have to work to temper that. Hopefully you don't have too many people like that.

Kevin: Would you say there is a range or perceptions of competitiveness? What people perceive as being competitive?

Bill: Well, each person is a little different. There are those who compete almost at a rage. There are those who compete nonverbally and quietly and go about their business - mechanical. All forms, by degree, the persona of the athlete. There are some positions in football where you'd like a little rage. That can be, in a sense, motivating to the team. But, if the entire team was full of rage, then typically emotions sort of block out execution.

Kevin: Is there a competitive nature to practice?

Bill: Well, often practices become very competitive, especially early in the year where there is some time between the practices and the game. In football, it could be four weeks. Then it becomes competitive because the nature of the game on the field. But that's a factor in every sport. People

want to compete, so at some point they compete against their own teammates in practice, and that has to be tempered and controlled, and that's the job of the coach. Temper that, yet get the intensity that they need. That is an ongoing problem every year with every team sport, just before they play the first game. People are compelled, in a sense, to compete. That's what they've been practicing for and waiting for, so that can turn on their teammates, and if it's good positive sportsmanlike conduct and demeanor, then it's great. But that always has to be controlled by the coach.

Kevin: Do some athletes perform better in practice than in games?

Bill: Well, there are those that just aren't able to perform as they practice. There are always kids like that. It can just be a void in their make-up that can't ever really be eliminated. They operate very mechanically during the game or just fail to respond quickly enough. There are others who really lack self-confidence. So, when you get up against the unknown, which is the opposition, they lose their focus and concentration, and it turns to fear. So, those are always factors; people will let you down. Mistakes in performing in the game may not show as very important at practice because in practice everything is controlled. So a Joe Montana scrambling out of the pocket and hitting a receiver doesn't happen that much in practice, but in games he does it, and has to. A person like that is at his best naturally in a competition. And there are those who will practice well within the confines of a scheduled practice and drill that don't have that other dimension to their performance. They rarely make the key play and don't perform up to their potential. They just don't have that connection and it often doesn't show up in practice.

Kevin: Do quality practices bring out the intuitiveness in athletes?

Bill: Well, there could be drills and things of that nature where the coach is studying the athlete very carefully and seeing if they have that. I don't ever understand that because the player practices at one standard and the coach assumes that's how they'll play. If they have that level of performance and you don't see it in practice, well, you just have to see them in the game situation as to how they actually will perform.

Kevin: What would be your assessment of a player who doesn't perform as well in practice as games?

Bill: Well, it has to be pointed out to him. You have to give him maybe a little more latitude about how they do things so they can feel a little freer to perform.

Kevin: If you were to construct the make-up and physical behavior of an ideal athlete, in regards to quality practice, what would it be?

Bill: Well, as I say, a real thirst to learn more about the game and the pride they take in developing their own skills and measuring their skills and techniques. It takes a positive attitude to be committed to do the best they possibly can in every drill and repetition. They have a willingness to listen and clearly understand the coaches directives, and as I say, to learn to communicate with teammates continually and effectively.

Kevin: To summarize some of the components of quality practice in regards to the individual; motivated extrinsically and intrinsically to get better, positive attitude towards practice, full physical intensity in every drill, game-like situations, effective listening skills, communicate effectively

with teammates and coaches, overall pride in what they do, a high degree of concentration and focus on the details and purpose of what needs to be done. Would you add anything to that?

Bill: Well, I think that there's a plan for the opposition, to establish that plan, to take it as far as you can, as part of the response system that you have when you play so that you know your plan frontwards and backwards.

Kevin: How do you know if your plan is correct?

Bill: You do everything you can. You want to prepare for the next game. You look to understand what your opponent's strengths and weaknesses are and their tendencies and how they individually play specific circumstances. Learning what you must do against your opponent.

Kevin: Let's take a position on your team, like a place kicker, who is not actually involved with a lot of contact, is his preparation and quality practice any different?

Bill: Well, it could be he has his own practice regimen that is designed and developed by him and his coach and that can cover all the possibilities, but the continued repetition of a simulated game situation in kicking the ball. There are fewer requirements as to what the kicker is expected to do, but whatever he has to do has to be right and consistent, so he has to practice to develop a consistency. The only way you do that is continued repetition.

Kevin: Would you say you could generalize a little bit with other sports in regards to what quality practice is?

Bill: I think football can identify a lot of this with all sports, even individual sports. You have to practice, you have to have your game plan related to all situations, practice and repeat it thousands of times until it becomes instinctive. You just don't want to

have to think during the game itself. If you have to stop and do a lot of thinking, you're always going to be a step behind.

Kevin: Thank You