



Photo: Baltimore Ravens



# Special Delivery

**John Harbaugh's success stems from adhering to the values and principles he learned while working his way through the assistant coach ranks.**

*By Paul Markgraff*

Around “the league,” Baltimore Ravens head coach John Harbaugh is known by his peers as the special teams head coach. Harbaugh’s assistant head coach and special teams coordinator Jerry Rosburg is particularly proud of that fact.

“John and I have gone through a lot on special teams over the years,” he says. “All of us coaches appreciate it, and all of the other special teams coaches in the league, too, recognize what John has done and they appreciate it as well.”

Fittingly, special teams played a decisive role in the Ravens’ NFL championship win in February over a San Francisco 49ers squad led by Harbaugh’s brother, Jim. The Ravens built a 21-6 lead going into the half, but John felt as though they were playing a “really hard field position game, kind of playing to see who would make the first mistake.”

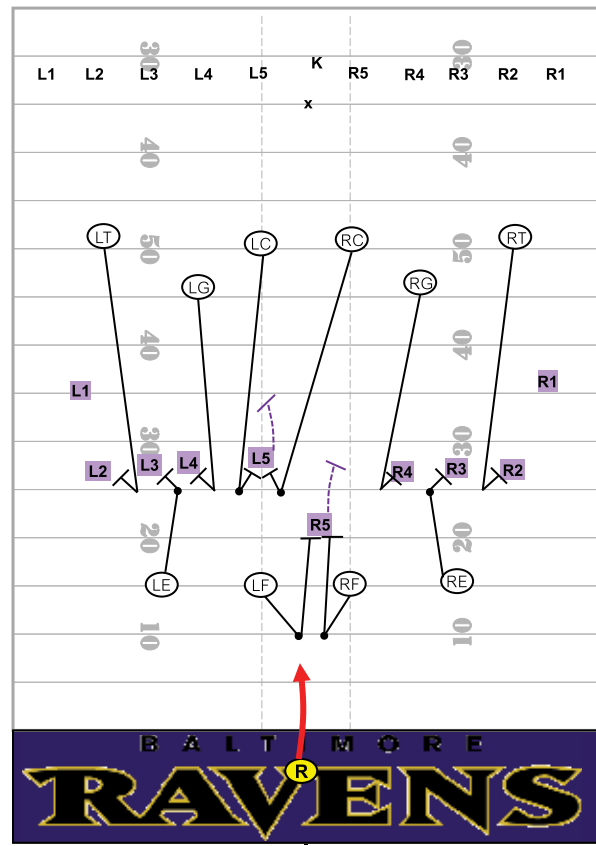
Though his team was up by at least two scores going into the locker room, John Harbaugh realized his team wasn’t going to win the game that way.

“We were going to have to open it up,” he says. “I talked with Jim Caldwell about that a little bit with two minutes left in the half. We confirmed it on the phone before we even left the field at halftime.”

While normal NFL Championship halftime revelry ensued on the field, Harbaugh and his coaches planned their attack.

“We needed to open it up on both sides of the ball, defense and offense, cut it loose and go after them on offense. I think we did that, and that was huge. It really lifted our team. We’re trying to go all out to win the game. It was kind of like, ‘Damn the torpedoes.’”

Rosburg called Middle Wedge R5 – Double L5 on the kickoff return to start the second half. (See Below)



“It’s a middle return,” says Rosburg. “We just overloaded the middle and we doubled both 5s two different ways. We doubled the 5 to the left with our front, and we wedged the 5 to our right with both of our fullbacks.”

Jacoby Jones caught the ball in a position where he was not falling backward, and was able to get the ball moving forward immediately. He was 8 yards deep in the endzone.

In that case, “he has the green light,” says Rosburg.

Up front, special teams kept it clean: no leakage, no penetration. Twelve strides later, Jones cracked it wide open, and seconds after that, he notched six points for special teams on the opening play of the second half.

For Harbaugh, who came up through the special teams ranks, that phase of the game is, well, special.

“Special teams might be the ultimate team aspect of the ultimate team game,” says Harbaugh. “Covering kicks is not a very glamorous thing to do, and you really do rely on one another more than any other single play. You’re part of a group, part of a unit, kind of an unsung hero more than anything in the sport.”

### Special Teams Crucible

Coming up through special teams has given Harbaugh a unique perspective on player evaluation, because more than any other phase of the game, special teams is about effort.

“I know one thing,” says Harbaugh. “I am a far better evaluator than I would’ve been in terms of building a team and finding players, than if I didn’t have that experience.”

He says special teams shows him the players who are willing to put forth the most effort, when there is the least to gain.

“It’s where you find your players, your football players,” he says. “Any football coach knows what that means. Special teams includes the essential pieces of football. It includes blocking and tackling, catching the ball, carrying the ball as your return guy. Running, hitting, walking, all of the athleticism traits. It’s hard to play special teams because there’s an awareness aspect to it, the vision and ability to see the field, the ability to see things unfold and anticipate as a football player.”

Players that don’t excel on special teams right away make Harbaugh nervous.

“It’s not 100 percent of the time, but most of the time, guys that excel at special teams, no matter where they are drafted, they excel at their regular position later on,” he says.

Harbaugh’s perfect player is also a hard-hitting, physical beast. But that aggressive nature is confined to the field.

“I think we can sum it up this way: between the lines, between the whistles and between the ears.”

Between the lines, his players are going to hit hard and run the ball; they are going to be physical. But they are going to do it within the rules.

“Dropping your head on a block has never been taught,” he says. “Using the top of your helmet is not safe and it’s not right. You would never do that in life. You need to see what you hit and keep your eyes up. It’s really important.”

The game is played between the whistles, not after the whistles, Harbaugh says.

“When the play is over, the play is over,” he says. “You’re not a man because you can take a cheap shot. That makes you

a cheap shot artist. It doesn’t make you a good player.”

Between the ears means athletes must play smart.

“It’s about good judgment,” he says. “We’re trying to win the game, but it’s about honor as well. Good players do things the right way.”

### Great Advice

Hiring the right assistant coaches also helped Harbaugh create his elite organization. Climbing the ladder as an assistant helped him sharpen his edge when it came to finding the right guy for the job.

“I think great coaching means great teaching,” he says. “The ability to teach and put together a lesson plan and be clear and let a player know exactly what’s expected of him with his technique or within a play, that’s really important. The right coach doesn’t live in the gray area, but makes it as black-and-white and as clear as he can.”

He says a great coach wants to lift up somebody else. At every turn, a great coach asks how he can help someone.

“A great teacher is a great advisor,” he says. “Everyone has free will and everyone has to make choices in life. You’re trying to help somebody learn and grow and help them become whatever their God-given potential is. What advice can I give you? Whether it’s how to play Cover-2, how to block the off-tackle power-play, or how to read a progression as a quarterback. This is an idea I can put in your head, a concept that I can help you understand to become a better player.”

Harbaugh’s journey to his current position also helped him learn to become a great assistant coach, himself. Above all, he learned that his No. 1 goal related to the head coach of the football team was to become “the head coach’s guy.”

“It’s his program; I want to be great for him,” says Harbaugh. “Some guys have a sense of entitlement or a victim type of mentality. To me, that is a path to failure. I want my head coach to know I am in his corner no matter what. I’ll do whatever I can to help his program become as successful as it can be. I will work as hard as I can, learn as much as I can, be as loyal as I can possibly be, help him in any way I can.”

Assistants don’t have to agree with everything the head coach does, either. Everyone is far too involved in whether they agree with a decision, says Harbaugh. But the assistant must support the head coach.

“If you’ve chosen to be in that program and be on that staff, then it is your responsibility to be his guy,” he says. “You do things honorably and you help him be better. You want your head coach to get every accolade. You want people to look at him and say what a great coach he is.

“When Andy Reid got Coach Of The Year, I know personally, the coaches on our staff, we felt like we got the Coach Of The Year. We did that together.”

In the end, Harbaugh says great assistant coaches are good guys that want to become great coaches, not guys that want to be pro coaches.

“I don’t care about a guy that wants to be a pro coach or a college coach,” says Harbaugh. “I care about a guy that wants to be a great coach, wants to be a good friend to the players and wants to be a good fellow coach. That’s the right kind of guy.” 