

# Coach Pep Hamilton wields Stanford playbook

Tom FitzGerald, Chronicle Staff Writer

Early in Stanford's training camp, the younger assistant coaches were stunned when head coach David Shaw and offensive coordinator Pep Hamilton got into an argument during a staff meeting.

The room got very quiet.

A day later, Shaw told the mortified aides, "What you guys don't know is that's what we need out here. He's got great experience; I've got great experience. We're going to disagree on some stuff. We're going to hash it out, decide what we're going to do and move on."

The others didn't realize that the arguing "was never personal," Shaw said. "It was two guys pleading their case in a court, to a certain degree. Granted, I get to be the judge. But there are a lot of times I lean on his experience."

Hamilton, 37, spent seven years as an NFL assistant, working closely with such offensive coaches as Norv and Ron Turner, Jimmy Raye, Paul Hackett and the late Mike Heimerdinger.

Former Jets and Chiefs head coach Herm Edwards, now an NFL analyst for ESPN, was with New York when Hamilton was the quarterbacks coach. "He's very energetic, always trying to learn," Edwards said. "He would go to meetings with the defensive coaches, and I'd say, 'You're just trying to beat us (the defense) when we're going 7-on-7. You're finding out what the defense is keying on.' "

In 2006, Alex Smith's promising second season, Norv Turner was the 49ers' offensive coordinator and Hamilton the quarterbacks coach. Hamilton isn't surprised that Smith's play has improved markedly under Jim Harbaugh.

"Coach Harbaugh is a proven winner," Hamilton said. "You knew he would will that team to win."

The team Harbaugh left behind has an even better record than the 49ers'. The No. 4 Cardinal (11-1) will play No. 3 Oklahoma State (11-1) in the Fiesta Bowl, and most people expect an offensive show. The Stanford playbook, over which the meticulous Hamilton presides, has nearly 300 plays, more than many NFL teams have.

Having Andrew Luck as the trigger man and practically a coach on the field can make Hamilton look good. There's a misconception, though, about what Luck does at the line of scrimmage. He calls the plays only in the sense that he selects which of a few options the coaches have given him on that snap. He reads the defensive formation and adjusts accordingly. He does not pick out which of the 300 plays he feels like running.

"We wouldn't dare put all that pressure on Andrew," Hamilton said.

Shaw and Hamilton have been friends since 2002, when Shaw was quarterbacks coach for the Ravens and Hamilton was an intern.

"He and I were raised very similarly," Shaw said. "He was raised by a cop; I was raised by a football coach. There wasn't a lot of wiggle room. You learn how to prepare. You learn how to be systematic. You learn how to, when you open your mouth, know what you're talking about."

Hamilton says his childhood "wasn't a lot of fun and games. It was a lot of work. I didn't like it too much at the time, but it gave me maturity at an early age. It has helped me a lot in my coaching."

Growing up in Charlotte, N.C., Hamilton idolized Michael Jordan and the rest of North Carolina's 1982 national champions. Hamilton was the point guard on an AAU team, the Charlotte Sonics, that won several state titles. His teammates included Jeff McInnis, who played in the NBA, and Jeff Capel, a former head coach at Oklahoma who is now an assistant at Duke.

Hamilton's best sport, though, was football. He attended Howard University, a historically black school in Washington, D.C., because the larger schools recruiting him, including Wake Forest and East Carolina, wanted to switch him from quarterback to wide receiver or defensive back.

"I had played one position my entire life," he said. "I stuck to it." Hamilton started for a year at Howard but played mainly behind two Division I-AA All-Americans, Jay Walker and Ted White. "What a lot of people didn't know," said then-head coach Steve Wilson, a former Denver Broncos safety, "was that Pep was the key to their success. He coached them in the offseason and during games. I talked to him all the time about game-planning. It was unbelievable, his understanding of the game at an early age."

Just before graduation, Hamilton had taken a job with the Bank of America when a Howard assistant decided to retire, and Wilson asked him to join the staff. "Fifteen years later, I'm still coaching," Hamilton said.

Before joining Harbaugh's staff at Stanford in 2010, he spent three years with the Chicago Bears. His wife, Nicole - they have three children - gave him an ultimatum: Wherever they wound up next had to be warmer than Chicago. Delighted to be back in a BCS game for the second straight year, Hamilton noted the unexpected twists life can take. If that assistant coach at Howard hadn't retired, he said, "I'd be a banker today."