

Cowher, Holmgren have same goal: perfection

By Dave Goldberg
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT

It's an 8-year-old snapshot of Bill Cowher that endures: the Pittsburgh coach brandishing a fist at Jacksonville's Chris Hudson as he races past the Steelers bench en route to a game-clinching touchdown.

"Intense" is the word it conjures, a word most often used to describe Cowher. It might have been more: As he clenched that fist, Cowher looked like he might jump on the field and tackle Hudson.

It's easy to depict Seattle coach Mike Holmgren as just the opposite: a laid-back Californian who



COWHER



HOLMGREN

has been fashioning precision offenses for more than two decades.

Not really. Holmgren just shows his intensity a little farther from the cameras.

"He says to me, 'I don't want you to turn over the ball,'" Seahawks quarterback Matt Hassel-

beck said. "Then I'll throw an interception — it happens, doesn't it? — and come off the field, and he'll say, 'I don't want you to turn over the ball.'"

Going into Sunday's Super Bowl, Cowher and Holmgren share a lot beyond their all-female households: Cowher has three daughters, and Holmgren has four, plus four granddaughters.

"That's what we talk about, our girls," Cowher said.

They are the longest-tenured coaches in the NFL, 14 seasons without a break. The 48-year-old Cowher was hired in by the Steelers in 1992, the same year Holmgren signed on in Green Bay.

After winning a Super Bowl with

the Packers after the 1996 season and losing one the next year, Holmgren moved on to Seattle as coach and general manager.

Both are considered among the NFL's best coaches, perhaps a bit below the superstar/celebrity level that includes Bill Belichick, Bill Parcells and Joe Gibbs. Some of it is personality (neither craves the spotlight), and some of it is they've experienced failure.

Until this year, for example, Cowher had lost the only Super Bowl he'd been in (to Dallas after the 1995 season) and also was 1-4 in AFC title games, all at home.

The 57-year-old Holmgren was asked to step down as Seattle's GM after the 2002 season after the

team went 9-7, 6-10, 9-7 and 7-9 in his first four seasons, not what was expected from someone who arrived as the savior of a franchise that had been consistently mediocre.

But their styles and systems are markedly different.

Holmgren is a former third-string quarterback at Southern California who aspired to coach and teach in high school and played in a rock 'n' band.

His success as a high-school coach in the Bay Area led to a job at San Francisco State and then as quarterbacks coach at Brigham Young in 1982, where one of his pupils was a young QB named Steve Young.

Holmgren did enough there that he was hired by Bill Walsh to coach the 49ers quarterbacks, moved up to offensive coordinator, then moved on to Green Bay as head coach.

Cowher comes from another tradition: Passing is second to running. That's one reason Ben Roethlisberger has been able to flourish at quarterback in his first two seasons; he doesn't have to carry the offense.

His players seem to like Cowher despite his public persona.

"Everyone thinks he's tough. He is, but he's a players' coach," wide receiver Hines Ward said. "His door is always open if you have a problem or just want to talk."

• Hopes

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gets better, I'm not going to be able to throw everybody and have to wait for moves that will be there all the time, (like) shots and real simple things.

"I feel like I don't have to force as much now."

Johnson attributes his career-long improvement to the instruction of Franklin coach Bob Hasse-

man, whose program has been a state power for the past 15 years. Under Hasseman, Johnson has developed an array of moves and become an effective offensive competitor. When he first joined the varsity team, he wasn't skilled in multiple areas and wasn't a particularly aggressive wrestler.

Four years later, he's a complete wrestler who excels at scoring from the bottom position. In recent years, that was not a strength.

Johnson struggled often getting up from the bottom. He'd freeze and not move rather than trying to score.

Now, after countless drills and constant ripping by coaches, he's able to get up, recover and earn points.

"When the whistle blows, you're supposed to explode off the bottom and not think about it," Johnson said. "When I was a freshman, I would just freeze and panic and forget what I was supposed to do."

Hasseman is as impressed with Johnson's conditioning as he is with his technique and development.

Also Franklin's strength and conditioning coach, Hasseman admires how Johnson pushes himself in the weight room and in weightlifting class.

"(Johnson's) always been an avid weightlifter," Hasseman said. "He's the standard for how our kids should work out in the weight room."

"He works really hard and goes till failure on every lift. He's a really competitive person."

Johnson's determination is what pushes him in the weight room. When lifting, he thinks about his past failures, which makes him lift harder.

"When you're in (the weight room), you're supposed to lift hard and not mess around. When I get in there, I just get the job done."

When I lift weights, I just think of all the things I wish I could've done better," Johnson said. "If I work harder, then maybe they won't happen again. I try to do as much I can."

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Cody Johnson
Undefeated Franklin Community High School wrestler

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As he's gotten older, Johnson's also become better on the mat.

He finished 30-8 his sophomore year at 215 pounds and won his first sectional championship. He bested that mark last year after moving up to 275. He finished 33-6, was second at the semistate and advanced to the state finals, where he was pinned by New Haven's Andy Lambert in the first round.

Johnson hates losing. The bitter memory of last year's finals match lingered in his mind long after it ended.

But now he realizes that it's not the end of the world if he loses a match. Yet he has no intention of doing so as he pursues a state championship.

"Before matches, I used to be like, if I didn't win a match, I was going to die or something bad was going to happen," Johnson said. "I put so much stock in one match. Everyone wants to win, but you have to put it in perspective."

That doesn't mean that Johnson has come to accept losing.

"I take losses real hard," he said. "I haven't gotten beat this year. But I know if I get beat, I'd be absolutely crushed. You put so much time into it."

• Ben

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

Turns out Roethlisberger handled his Super Bowl unveiling as easily as he did the Bengals, Colts and Broncos during the AFC playoffs.

And certainly he handled it better than some much older quarterbacks at Super Bowls past. Hall of Famer Johnny Unitas was grumpy and glum-faced at media day before the Jets' mega-upset of Baltimore in January 1969, possibly because Earl Morrall was starting ahead of him.

Roethlisberger couldn't have looked more at ease. Relaxing at an elevated podium as reporters crowded five deep around him on the Ford Field turf, he tugged at the scraggly but lucky-charm beard he can't wait to shave — "win or lose," he said — and answered everything thrown his way.

His personal life? "I have no personal life," he said.

Roethlisberger briefly dated LPGA rising star Natalie Gulbis last summer. He recently said it was so difficult for him to go out in public that he now finds it's easier to meet women on the Internet than in person.

The helmet-less motorcycle riding that so bothered coach Bill Cowher last spring?

"That's why I grew my hair long, so it could blow on my wind. But we can't talk about my motorcycle," he said, laughing.

And what does he dislike about

going on the road for a fourth consecutive game, even if the Super Bowl is officially a neutral-site game?

"My dog," he said, speaking fondly of the Rottweiler named Zeus that stayed back in Pittsburgh. "If I could have my dog here, it would be perfect, but coach Cowher wouldn't let me bring him."

Really sounds like guy is bamboozled by all the attention, huh?

Because he's taken the Steelers to an AFC title game and a Super Bowl in his first two seasons (no other NFL QB has done that), Roethlisberger will be the better known of the two quarterbacks Sunday.

Matt Hasselbeck seems to be the perfect quarterback for a Seattle team that, until now, rarely gets much national attention: steady but not spectacular, a solid playmaker but not a big star.

"This week hasn't been bad at all," Hasselbeck said. "I'm actually enjoying it."

Roethlisberger wants to be that big star, talking openly of wanting to be remembered as one of the best in the game's history.

But he realizes that the Steelers' team concept will never allow him to accumulate the numbers of a Dan Marino.

The Steelers, who haven't been so confident about a postseason quarterback since Terry Bradshaw went 4 for 4 in Super Bowls, are convinced Roethlisberger will hold up just fine Sunday.

"Ben is different with his confidence this year," wide receiver Hines Ward said. "He has trust in everyone around him."

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