

Selling the ‘Seahawk way’

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- a scenic, sun-splashed day at the Seattle Seahawks’ headquarters in Renton, the weight room remains eerily quiet, much to the chagrin of Chris Carlisle, the team’s strength and conditioning coach.

He helps stretch out secondary coach Kris Richard in one corner of the room. “Now you’re ready to run a 4.2 forty,” Carlisle jokes as the two finish. Coach Pete Carroll makes a quick appearance in his continuing rehab from offseason knee surgery. Carlisle’s job is not to work out the Seahawks coaches, but there are no players to work with because of the continuing labor friction between owners and players. He remains optimistic that the league’s lockout, which began in mid-March, will soon come to a close and he can get back to work, “I hate not being around the athletes and not being able to work with them,” Carlisle said. “But instead, I’ve spent time reading, researching and figuring out how to do it better at this level than it’s been done before. And that kind of carries on what Pete talks about.”

Carlisle is a loyal Carroll disciple. He worked with the former USC coach from 2001-2009 with the Trojans and was one of seven coaches to follow Carroll last year when he took the job with Seattle.

Carlisle is Carroll’s eyes and ears in the weight room. He’s often out at practice watching the interaction between players and coaches or working with injured players on the side, helping them return to the field.

“I think a value that I bring with Pete is, I speak fluent Carroll,” Carlisle joked. “And so, being around it as much as I have, I’m his voice to the athletes when he is not on the floor here.

“We’re talking about the same things. We constantly talk about the same goals and the same way of preparing. There’s not two ways here, there’s one way. And it’s a Seahawk way. It’s the way we prepare our athletes to win.”

MOVEMENT IS KEY

Carlisle, 48, isn’t your typical strength and conditioning coach. An avid reader with a master’s degree in history, Carlisle dips into books such as “The Book of Five Rings” by samurai warrior Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645), the writings of World War II German tactician Erwin Rommel and Michael Lewis’ sabermetric bible “Moneyball” for inspiration to better prepare his athletes for success.

Carlisle would like to write his own book someday. Notebooks fill his office drawers. They include detailed notes on workout regimens and a self-reflective daily journal.

“I think our profession – and I’ll be shot at by other coaches – but I think it is 10 percent science and 90 percent art,” he said. “I really do. And the art is figuring out how to make all these different personalities – how to get them to work at the highest level. And that’s a new thing.”

Gone are the traditional trappings of players’ bench press, squat and power-clean marks being posted on the wall. Carlisle says he never tests, because it takes time away from training, and a good strength coach should know within 5 pounds where his athlete stands in the traditional lifts.

At the core of Carlisle’s philosophy is figuring how to make players more efficient through movement. The start of that belief began during his high school days in Mason City, Iowa, playing as a smallish offensive lineman for Barry Alvarez, who would go on to a successful coaching career at the University of Wisconsin.

“He brought all of this movement stuff in (from when Alvarez coached at Nebraska), and at the time, I was an undersized offensive lineman,” Carlisle said. “And I needed to have movement, and that’s how I was able to play. At that time, 240 pounds was huge. And I was a 200-pound offensive lineman, and so I had to move better than everyone else.”

Carlisle’s philosophy solidified in 1997 when he was part of a junior college national championship as offensive line and strength coach at Trinity Valley Community College in Texas.

A year later, he took a job as associate strength coach at Tennessee with mentor John Stucky, the same year the Volunteers won the national title. Carlisle also worked closely with renowned sprint coach Vince Anderson while at Tennessee, where he learned most of his speed drills.

“If you think about the game of football, you shut your eyes and the ball is snapped, what do you see 22 guys doing? They’re all moving,” he said. “And so if you want to train guys to play football, it’s not about sitting in machines. It’s about moving. And so the weight room then becomes a facilitator to movement.”

BEATING CANCER

Carlisle was at Tennessee with Stucky when Carroll came calling in February 2001. A few weeks after USC hired Carroll as head coach, Carroll hired Carlisle as the Trojans’ strength and conditioning coach.

What made Carroll’s decision special for Carlisle was that the head coach hired him knowing that he had been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease three months earlier. “He hired me knowing I had cancer,” said Carlisle, who still gets a lump in his throat talking about it. “He believed in me, that I was going to be able to push through. And when you have that, and your faith and great doctors and all that kind of stuff, there’s no way to lose. It wasn’t even part of the plan.”

Carlisle continued his treatment in Knoxville, Tenn., flying back East for chemotherapy treatment every two weeks. He also received radiation treatment at USC medical center in East Los Angeles while continuing his daily work with the Trojans.

Doctors told him in the summer of 2001 that the cancer was in remission, and Carlisle plans to celebrate his 10th year of being cancer-free in November, with his wife, Louon, and son, 11-year-old Alex, at his side.

“I make a lot of people mad because they talk about being a survivor, but I don’t think I ever became a victim,” he said. “And that makes people mad, because they all want to group people that came through cancer as survivors. I don’t know. Survivors are the guys in Japan right now fighting their asses off to survive that with tsunamis and earthquakes and the nuclear stuff – those people are survivors. They were victims, and they are surviving, and they are going to come out strong.

“To me, I never became a victim. I went to work as soon as I was diagnosed. I have a strong wife. I had a strong upbringing with my parents. I wasn’t going to let somebody else raise my son. That’s the key to it.”

A SIMPLE PLAN

Carlisle points to an offseason workout book that’s as thick as a phone book – evidence of his team’s plan to get players ready to go as quickly as possible after the lockout ends.

“If they come in tomorrow, we have a plan,” he said. “If they come in next week, we have a plan. If it’s in June, we have a plan. Everything is all organized.”

Each player received a workout book in January after the season ended. But Carlisle understands that not every player will follow it well, and some will return in better shape than others.

He also knows that guys are working out at private facilities with high-quality trainers, but there’s also concern about whether players are getting all the work they need.

“You’ve got to remember that those are businesses,” he said. “And the people that are working at those businesses want you to come back. So they’re not going to get all up in your stuff there, because I might go somewhere else where I feel like they like me better. You know, like, ‘Hey what do you want to do?’ and the player’s like, ‘Oh, I don’t feel like doing much.’ So they’re like, ‘OK, then we won’t do much. Let’s try this today.’

“Here, we have our program, and if even if you don’t feel like working, you’re going to work. We’ll find a way for you to get the best workout possible.”

One thing that Carlisle sensed was developing last year was a sense of trust that the Seahawks’ workout regimen works for the players. He points to players such as veteran quarterback Matt Hasselbeck as evidence. Although Hasselbeck suffered a broken wrist and bruised hip, forcing him to miss two games last season, he also played one of his best games of the season in the playoffs against New Orleans, and he appeared to have better velocity in his throws late in the season.

“He had the hip thing, and that was because he couldn’t fall with his wrist after he broke his wrist, so he started falling on his hip, and that caused problems,” Carlisle said. “But he (Hasselbeck) said throwing the ball, he felt better than he had in a long time at the end of the season.”

Carlisle said that players started to trust him more after they began to feel that the workouts they had started early in the year were helping them remain in shape for the duration of the season.

“We’re starting to turn the corner on this trust thing,” he said. “You know, I’m a college guy. I was a college strength coach. These guys all went to college, but I’ve never been in the NFL, so what do I know? Nobody ever stepped on me like that, but you could tell. Then all of a sudden, by the time we started getting to (optional

team activities), guys went to OTAs and it was hard, but guys felt good. Same thing in two-a-days, and then all of sudden, guys start buying in.”

He thinks that Seattle will experience the same type of rebirth that Carroll led at USC, where the Trojans won seven consecutive Pacific-10 Conference titles and two national championships.

“Just watch, it’s going to be such a great ride with Pete,” Carlisle said. “And we’re going to look back 10 years from now, and people are going to have a lot of rings around here, and we’re going to look at each other say, ‘I told you so. I told you this is going to be a great ride.’ “You’ve got to remember, I’ve seen this all before. I’ve seen this movie. It’s a great ending. And we’re right at the beginning.”

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