

# Why Michigan football's Jim Harbaugh almost left for NFL, and what really brought him back

By Michael Cohen  
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On Feb. 2, the man who fancied himself the next head coach of the Minnesota Vikings arrived at the facility early for what he thought was little more than a formality. He'd flown in from Ypsilanti the night before to beat a snowstorm sweeping across Michigan, fully prepared for a return to the NFL after seven years.

It was a busy day at the TCO Performance Center in Eagan, Minnesota, where the Vikings were nearing the conclusion of a search to replace the recently fired Mike Zimmer. The owners had secured a new general manager a few days prior and narrowed their list of coaching candidates to four: offensive coordinator Kevin O'Connell and defensive coordinator Raheem Morris of the Los Angeles Rams, defensive coordinator Patrick Graham of the New York Giants and, somewhat surprisingly, Michigan football coach Jim Harbaugh.

Minnesota's interest in Harbaugh metastasized quickly, advancing from an exploratory conversation over the weekend to granting him the final interview a few days later. Harbaugh, 58, arrived with the most impressive NFL résumé of the four after leading the San Francisco 49ers to three consecutive NFC championship game appearances and one Super Bowl berth from 2011-14. He still owns the fifth-best winning percentage in league history (.695), behind only Guy Chamberlain (.784), John Madden (.759), Vince Lombardi (.738) and George Allen (.712).

Emboldened, perhaps, by his own hubris or a misinterpreted signal, Harbaugh believed the job was his. He traveled to Minnesota ready to accept an offer he assumed was coming and then felt genuinely surprised when the Vikings embarked on a formal interview. Something had been lost in translation.

But how did Harbaugh get there in the first place, and how did he reach a point where leaving his alma mater seemed desirable after orchestrating one of the most successful seasons in school history? The Free Press spoke to numerous sources who helped explain what pushed Harbaugh to the NFL brink.

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At his core, Harbaugh wants nothing more than to forge connections with players and coach the sport he adores. He cherishes the mundane regularity of weekly preparation and daily practices; adores the time spent in meetings and watching film; thrives on the adrenaline rush of competing against other men every Saturday. There's a reason Harbaugh gushes about players he believes truly love football.

His adoration of the sport itself clashes, at times, with certain elements of this modern era in college football. Things such as the transfer portal and name, image and likeness deals have introduced new aspects of the job that didn't exist when he arrived in Ann Arbor after four seasons with the 49ers. To some extent, those added spheres of competition dilute the purity of what Harbaugh enjoys most about the job. They also create an uneven playing field across the country.

In public settings, Harbaugh has defended and lauded Michigan's elevated academic standards as coach, even when those thresholds preclude his staff from recruiting certain high school athletes or transfers. In more private moments, a source said Harbaugh has expressed frustration with the university's refusal to provide the kinds of waivers that allow underqualified athletes to enroll.

The waivers were a luxury Harbaugh enjoyed at San Diego and Stanford, the source said, though how many each institution provided is unclear. Without that tool in Ann Arbor, Harbaugh has told people it's harder to bring players to Michigan than it was to Stanford, one of the nation's premier academic institutions. Just last week, 2022 three-star pass rusher Kevonte Henry decommitted from U-M due to academic issues and promptly signed with Oklahoma.

There are similar complications for Harbaugh in the transfer portal, where athletes still pursuing undergraduate degrees struggle to move their academic credits to Michigan. The pool of players U-M can pursue is often limited to graduate transfers and rare undergraduate exceptions. Center Victor Oluwatimi from Virginia, who already graduated with a degree in economics, is the only transfer the Wolverines have added for 2022.

Meanwhile, schools such as USC, Ole Miss, LSU, Oklahoma and Florida State have secured at least 10 commitments each through the portal. And in the Big Ten, where U-M is tied with Penn State for second-fewest transfers added, the average number of commitments is 4.9 per school. Nebraska leads the league with 12.

The commercialization of college football through things like the transfer portal and NIL money runs perpendicular to Harbaugh's desire for uniformity, a landscape where raw coaching ability would once again play a significant role. Instead, athletic departments hire teams of people dedicated to the NIL

arms race and websites such as 247 Sports rank prospects in the transfer portal for this new tentacle of recruiting.

It's understandable for Harbaugh to wonder how Michigan can keep pace when he sees college quarterbacks earning seven-figure deals.

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Those developments were among a confluence of factors that nudged Harbaugh closer to the NFL, where a salary cap, draft picks and defined transaction windows offered some of the built-in equality he coveted. Sources close to Harbaugh said he remained deeply wounded by the loss to his brother, Baltimore Ravens coach John Harbaugh, in Super Bowl 47 and craved the chance to hoist the Vince Lombardi Trophy himself. Harbaugh also recognized the narrowness of his window to jump from Michigan to the NFL, as the average age of head coaches is decreasing.

Harbaugh's tipping point involved lingering frustrations over his contract at Michigan, where athletic director Warde Manuel slashed his base salary by 50% through an extension signed after the 2020 season. Having earned plenty of money during his lucrative career, Harbaugh cared less about the numerical reduction than he did the symbolism of Manuel's offer, sources said. To Harbaugh, who still backed himself to turn the program around, it felt like a public cleaving.

But Harbaugh swallowed his pride, agreed to the extension and made widespread changes that pumped life into a downtrodden Schembechler Hall. In what amounted to a make-or-break season for Harbaugh, whose revised contract included a significantly smaller buyout, he guided the Wolverines to heights unseen since 2004. Michigan defeated Ohio State, captured the Big Ten championship and reached the College Football Playoff for the first time in school history.

Harbaugh believed his successful turnaround should be rewarded with another contract extension that restored his salary to the \$8 million per year from his original deal, if not more. When the subsequent offer from Manuel came up short — that version of the contract is still unsigned — Harbaugh began evaluating his NFL options more seriously, a source said.

Still, Harbaugh planned to approach any potential return to the NFL with caution given the tumultuous ending in San Francisco, where his clashes with CEO Jed York and general manager Trent Baalke spilled into the media. The bombastic nature of their falling out dinged Harbaugh's reputation in league circles.

A source familiar with Harbaugh's tenure in San Francisco said one of the primary issues was a schism between the scouting department and the coaching staff over player evaluation, especially in the buildup to the draft. As the 49ers built their draft board each year, Harbaugh and his assistants quickly realized their rankings of draft prospects were drastically different

than those compiled by Baalke and the scouts. Certain coaches felt pressure to alter their lists to hew closer to what the personnel men supplied.

An example of their disagreements involved former Oregon running back LaMichael James, a prospect in the 2012 draft. The assistant coaches who evaluated running backs slotted James low on their list due to his injury history and questionable durability. They felt strongly that James would bust at the next level, the source said.

But the scouting department was enamored with James and placed him near the top of their running back rankings. Baalke drafted him late in the second round with the 61st overall pick. James, who rushed for 184 yards in two seasons with the 49ers, was out of the league by 2015.

Because of that evaluation imbalance — and the resulting frustration it caused for the 49ers' coaching staff — sources said Harbaugh planned to be extremely selective when considering a return to the NFL. Those close to him believed Harbaugh would only entertain or pursue opportunities with franchises willing to grant him significant influence over personnel decisions.

It's a desire that could be met two ways: A team could mirror the arrangements of Bill Belichick in New England, Pete Carroll in Seattle and, until recently, Sean Payton in New Orleans, all of whom were given final say over their rosters; or Harbaugh could align himself with a general manager who shared his philosophical beliefs and would collaborate with, or possibly defer to, Harbaugh throughout the roster-building process.

Speculation surrounding the first option swirled when the Las Vegas Raiders fired general manager Mike Mayock three months after head coach Jon Gruden resigned in early October. Those dual vacancies meant owner Mark Davis was capable of offering Harbaugh the type of control he desired, though a source said it was unlikely the Raiders or any other team would have acquiesced to that request.

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As conjecture about his future raged, Harbaugh continued working for Michigan through January and into February. He indicated to his assistant coaches that he planned to stay, a source said, and that he was actively negotiating a new contract with Manuel which would include provisions to benefit the entire staff, not just himself. The assistant coaches largely believed him but also understood that A.) Harbaugh was saying what he needed to in that situation and B.) things could change at any time.

The athletic department announced the addition of defensive line coach Mike Elston on Jan. 17, in what many perceived as a sign Harbaugh would remain in Ann Arbor. But a source close to the situation said the hire was largely driven by then-defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald, who had Elston on his short list and vetted the candidate by making calls to some of Elston's former colleagues. Macdonald would eventually leave for the Baltimore Ravens after

John Harbaugh made the surprising decision to fire coordinator Don “Wink” Martindale.

Harbaugh did spearhead the search for a new defensive coordinator, however, and began reaching out to prospective candidates before Macdonald’s deal with Baltimore was finalized. The primary criterion was continuity for the players, so Harbaugh sought a coach whose philosophy and scheme were close enough to what Macdonald taught that his team wouldn’t feel like it was learning a third defense in as many years. Harbaugh was in the process of scheduling interviews for the last weekend in January when a new opportunity emerged with Minnesota.

By hiring Kwesi Adofo-Mensah as general manager, the Vikings suddenly fit Harbaugh’s second option for a desirable NFL scenario: a GM with whom he had a preexisting, non-confrontational relationship. Adofo-Mensah broke into the league with the 49ers in 2013 while Harbaugh was head coach. He served as manager of football research and development during the final two years of Harbaugh’s tenure before eventually getting promoted to director of that department in 2017, by which point Harbaugh was in Ann Arbor. His most recent role before joining the Vikings was vice president of football operations for the Cleveland Browns.

Among other things, the research and development department in San Francisco was responsible for studying the analytics associated with various in-game scenarios, like the odds of winning if an offense goes for it on fourth down from its own 38-yard line. Harbaugh spent a few hours each week analyzing the latest reports with people from the department so he could make informed decisions on the field, a source said. How much or how often Adofo-Mensah was involved in those meetings is unclear, but his interactions with members of the coaching staff were infrequent.

Nonetheless, the opportunity to interview in Minnesota represented more NFL interest than Harbaugh had received in quite a while following several uneven seasons at Michigan. There were times when John Harbaugh made calls to gauge his brother’s standing around the league and came away frustrated by what he heard, a source said. He couldn’t believe no one wanted to hire a coach with one of the best winning percentages in NFL history.

But the fact remained: Some of the league’s powerbrokers were still uneasy about how things ended in San Francisco, the brusque nature of Harbaugh’s personality and his propensity to jump from job to job.

The uphill battle for Harbaugh to earn another crack at the NFL was real.

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Maybe the idea of beating those odds contributed to Harbaugh’s excitement when he entered the TCO Performance Center on Wednesday, ready to become the next head coach of the Vikings. He’d run the 49ers the way he wanted, refused to be strong-armed by York or Baalke — even though it cost

Harbaugh his job — and was on the precipice of making it back to the NFL anyway.

After all, there are few things Harbaugh enjoys more than proving naysayers wrong.

But what Harbaugh presumed to be his coronation in Minnesota quickly devolved into consternation as the meeting veered in a different direction partway through the afternoon. How or why the interview soured remains unclear, but Harbaugh decided his best recourse was to call Manuel and recommit himself to Michigan. He assured his boss that flirtations with the NFL were done.

Regardless of how much Harbaugh loves U-M, his about-face conjured images of a dog with a tail between its legs. Harbaugh's dalliance with the Vikings — and the NFL at large — had left the program in a holding pattern, as one assistant coach described it, and there were reports saying he'd already said a few goodbyes on his way out of Schembechler Hall. He told recruits he wanted to be a Super Bowl-winning coach because that was football's ultimate prize. His son, Jay Harbaugh, who is the special teams coordinator and tight ends coach at Michigan, was said to be giving off the impression that a move to Minnesota was likely when speaking to people in the business.

The task of smoothing over unrest with coaches, players, recruits and fans began in a hotel room Wednesday night, with Harbaugh stuck in Minneapolis due to inclement weather. He spent the evening calling and texting those close to him in what will be an ongoing conciliatory process. Sooner than later, Harbaugh is expected to sign a contract extension that would signal a major step toward long-term reassurance.

Until then, Harbaugh's actions have cast an awkward pall over the program that even a man impervious to embarrassment can't deny. Harbaugh fancied himself the next coach of the Vikings. Now he needs Michigan to fancy him.

— *Free Press* sports writer Rainer Sabin contributed to this report.

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