

The Mark Murphy Plan: Packers president will use past hiring experience to find the right head coach

By Michael Cohen

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Not three minutes had passed before the digital snickers began to flow.

It was Dec. 3, 2018, one day after coach Mike McCarthy was relieved of his duties following a humiliating loss to the Cardinals, and the Packers were holding a joint news conference for president Mark Murphy and general manager Brian Gutekunst, the two men responsible for the upheaval.

The 26-minute volley of questions and answers neared its conclusion when Murphy faced his most pointed inquiry of the afternoon: What was it that made him more qualified for choosing the next head coach than Gutekunst, a man who spent the last 20 years of his life in the Packers' personnel department?

“I don't want to brag about myself, but all of my adult life I've been involved in football,” Murphy said with a touch of defiance. “I've seen it from the perspective of a player. I've been an athletic director for 17 years. I've hired many, many coaches, several football coaches. So I think I have a lot to offer. I feel that I'm a football person even though I'm in a position of president. Brian and I have a great relationship, and I think this gives the Packers the best chance to have success, and that's why I'm doing it.”

Almost immediately, Murphy's words ignited a hailstorm of criticism on social media, where he was mocked for the description of his qualifications and lampooned for coming across like someone yearning for the power of an NFL owner. Fans, who believed power over the head coach should be ceded to Gutekunst, were incensed.

 **Wiscosota Kid**
@hansenwithane

Replying to @Michael_Cohen13

If there's more trouble in Green Bay in coming years you can bet it's because this clown felt the need to be involved in every decision.

♥ 32 3:08 PM - Dec 3, 2018

[See Wiscosota Kid's other Tweets](#)

 **Steve Jaha**
@S_Johannes

Replying to @Michael_Cohen13

@BarstoolBigCat anyone who calls themselves a “football person” is the furthest thing from an actual football guy

♥ 20 3:07 PM - Dec 3, 2018

[See Steve Jaha's other Tweets](#)

 **Amur**
@spruoko

Replying to @Michael_Cohen13

He's hardly a football person. Bob Harlan was a football person. Murphy is a shareholder stooge.

♥ 2 3:28 PM - Dec 3, 2018

[See Amur's other Tweets](#)

 **David Walden**
@DavidWalden2

Replying to @Michael_Cohen13

this look is kind of embarrassing for the organization IMO.

♥ 3 3:05 PM - Dec 3, 2018

[See David Walden's other Tweets](#)

In refusing to budge, it became clear that Murphy — and, by extension, the Packers — would navigate their coaching search by leaning heavily on Murphy’s experience as an athletic director at Colgate (1992-2003) and Northwestern (2003-’07), where hiring coaches was integral to the job description.

A closer look at Murphy’s tenure with both schools revealed approximately 50 head coaching hires in 15 combined years of employment. The majority of those hires took place at Colgate, his alma mater, and a place where Murphy oversaw the selection of more than 30 head coaches for Division I men’s and women’s programs during his tenure, according to athletic department records.

“We used to say sometimes we feel like a search firm,” Murphy, 63, said in an interview earlier this week.

Those years at Colgate represented Murphy’s first foray into athletic administration after his playing career with the Redskins gave way to stints as the assistant executive director of the NFL Players Association (1985-’88) and a trial attorney for the U.S. Department of Justice (1989-’92). Murphy had neither hired anyone nor worked for a university, which meant everything about the position was new. Colgate is where the bedrock of his managerial style was formed.

To better understand that style — the one that will determine the Packers’ next coach — *The Athletic* Wisconsin spoke with 10 former coaches and one former administrator who worked for Murphy at Colgate. They shed light on man remembered for his competitive spirit, his collaborative approach to hiring and his willingness to make crucial decisions in the face of consequences.

Those are the tenets Murphy has relied on since joining the Packers in 2007, with the majority of his contributions coming on the business side until he reorganized the football power structure last year.

Murphy has been present for the highest points of the McCarthy era, including Super Bowl XLV, and the ultimate removal of both McCarthy and former general manager Ted Thompson. All the while he’s positioned himself as the primary reasons why the Packers will — or will not — return to form in the near future. He’s the one guiding the ship as the Packers travel to New England (Josh McDaniels, Brian Flores), New Orleans (Dan Campbell, Pete Carmichael Jr.) and possibly Tennessee (Matt LaFleur) for the next wave of their coaching search.

“One of the most important things you can do as a manager is hiring the right people,” Murphy said. “I didn’t bat 1.000. There was some good and some bad. The process is the important thing.”

Establishing a family atmosphere

Laura Nardelli remembers her interview for the position of women’s indoor and outdoor track and field coach because Murphy arrived late.

Nardelli, who was 38 at the time, had been away from coaching for several years while raising her children and believed Colgate presented the right opportunity in 1998 to return. Rather than judging Murphy for his tardiness — he was only a few minutes behind schedule — Nardelli viewed his explanation as a reason to accept the job: One of Murphy's children was under the weather, and he had been handling the situation himself.

“It was just such a relief that I have small children, he had kids, family comes first,” Nardelli said. “And that was sort of the message that he communicated non-verbally all the time. It was the way he lived his life. It was nice that a lot of us coaches had families and the whole place had a family feel to it back then.”

Isolated in Hamilton, N.Y., a rural town of 4,400 people an hour southeast of Syracuse, Colgate was the epicenter of the region. It was a “one stop light, one fast-food restaurant, one pizza place kind of town,” according to Ron Rohn, the former women's basketball coach, who joked that he and his family lived two blocks from campus because one more block meant leaving Hamilton entirely.

The geography made it difficult to attract coaches, Murphy said, which is why he and his wife, Laurie, who have three daughters and a son, fostered a family atmosphere for the athletic department.

The Murphys bought a modest Victorian home in the center of Hamilton that became a focal point for social activity. They hosted a party at the start of each school year for coaches and their respective families. The adults grilled food while kids swam in the pool. Murphy's daughters served as lifeguards. There was even a zip line for additional fun.

It was not unusual for Murphy and his family to make dinners plans with various members of the athletic department, and they shared a pew with the Nardellis every weekend at church. Coaches were encouraged to bring their children into the office, and two of Murphy's former employees remembered dogs being welcomed, too.

“The (athletic director) we got after Mark was nothing like that, and a lot of things kind of fell apart in that way,” Nardelli said. “They started inspecting baby bags when kids were going to soccer games. The wife of the soccer coach tried to bring her young child in with a juice box and wasn't allowed. I mean, it wasn't like that when Mark was there.”

He won their respect professionally as well. Murphy lobbied against the prioritization of sports at Colgate, a Patriot League school that didn't offer athletic scholarships. He ensured the smaller sports still received an adequate number of merit-based financial packages to offer potential student-athletes, which Nardelli credited as a major reason for the success of her track program.

Scott Thielke, a former men's and women's tennis coach, said Murphy afforded him a veritable blank check during his first year with the program to determine how large of a budget the programs needed to succeed. Thielke, who has worked for a half-dozen athletic directors, labeled Murphy the best of the bunch. They've kept in touch long after Thielke left Colgate, and that has become a hallmark of Murphy's approach.

Jim Nagle, a former men's lacrosse coach, said Murphy sent him a note when Nagle accepted a job at Stony Brook many years later.

"He took the time to write me a note as a president of the Green Bay Packers," Nagle said. "He hadn't been my boss for four years, five years maybe. And that always just struck me as wow, what an amazing guy. Me in that position, I can't say I would take the time to write a note for somebody like who has been so far removed from his current position. But that really just kind of spells out the type of guy he is."

Murphy also was a proponent of pickup basketball played at noon several days per week. The games were held in the intramural gym on campus and open to all university employees, from coaches to professors to faculty members, with plenty of cross-department interaction yielding unexpected friendships.

It was in that setting, according to multiple staffers, that Murphy transformed from gregarious boss into ruthless competitor, a reflection of his roots as a three-sport athlete at Colgate: football (four years), basketball (one year) and baseball (three years). Winners remained on the court for the next game, and Murphy was known for sharpening his mentality the moment someone neared victory.

"He'd pass the ball, move it around, wanted to play a team game," Rohn said. "But if it came down to sitting out the next game or not, Mark would want the ball and take it to the hoop himself a lot.

"If the game was to 11, when it got down to 8 or 9, he got a little more physical, a little more aggressive and didn't smile as much. ... And a body or two more might go flying than when it was, 2-0, when he was more friendly. I think that's a really good insight into Mark as a person."

Added Liz Feeley, another former women's basketball coach who participated in pickup hoops, "You talk about instant game face. It was like, 'OK, give me the ball. Give me the ball.' "

Feeley said she remained on the perimeter rather than challenging Murphy in the lane. Murphy, she explained, was unafraid to block shots regardless of the shooter's gender. There were times when someone returned from the gym with a bloody lip, according to former golf and women's hockey coach Braden Houston,

"It got a little rough," Houston said.

The aggression faded as Murphy left the court. He resumed his day as the athletic director coaches adored.

Building relationships

His relationships with coaches mattered because Murphy utilized his staff for search committees to evaluate potential hires. Murphy needed to trust their insights as much as the coaches needed him to guide the program.

Search committees were chaired by Murphy and typically included at least one current coach in addition to faculty members or professors from outside the athletic department. Each group consisted of four to six people and often evaluated candidates in person as a panel.

The committees were used frequently because in 11 years as the athletic director, from 1992-2003, Murphy hired a minimum of three women's basketball coaches, three women's cross-country coaches, three women's ice hockey coaches, five women's volleyball coaches, one women's lacrosse coach, three softball coaches, five tennis coaches, one swimming and diving coach, one men's cross-country coach, two men's basketball coaches, two football coaches, two men's ice hockey coaches and three men's lacrosse coaches.

Those committees afforded coaches a unique window into Murphy's hiring process, which is pertinent now as the Packers search for McCarthy's replacement. Murphy was known for being extremely well-prepared during interviews because he dedicated large amounts of time to studying résumés and backgrounds.

He had a unique ability to remain exceedingly polite while asking probative questions that "really got down to the depths of the individual," according to Houston. It was not uncommon for Murphy to begin with broad, philosophical questions before digging into specifics about how a potential coach would run various aspects of a program.

"He was just so smart, just a smart guy," Feeley said. "You could always see his wheels turning in his head. He was looking to be innovative; he was looking to advance the programs."

A trademark of Murphy's search committees was soliciting feedback from everyone involved. He afforded each person an opportunity to speak their mind about the candidates and was described by several former employees as being a terrific listener.

The goal of the committees was to solicit a broad range of opinions, according to Murphy, and the reason he included current coaches was so they could analyze potential hires from a coaching perspective.

"I felt sort of — and I think rightfully so — that he kept his own thoughts and cards pretty close to his vest, you know?" Rohn said. "In other words, he wasn't in there saying, 'Hey, this is what I'm looking for, this is what I want, this is the kind of guy I think we should hire.' He would ask a lot of questions and get a lot of input, but you always had the (feeling) that he had an idea of what he wanted, and he wanted other people's opinion of that person to see if that is the best person for the job, so to speak.

"My gut feeling is that Mark is someone who wanted to build a consensus to really get everybody's input, but then it's my job to make the decision. It's not my job to defer responsibility and just say, 'The committee decides this.'

Murphy seemed unfazed by difficult decisions from the start. Shortly after being named athletic director, Murphy needed to hire a men's ice hockey coach to replace the beloved Terry Slater, who had passed away unexpectedly. Colgate had relied on an interim coach for the remainder of the 1991-'92 season, after Slater's death, and Murphy went a different direction when the final decision was made. Murphy's selection, Don Vaughan, is still coaching at Colgate today.

And there were other examples. Nardelli had been away from the profession for seven years when Murphy named her the women's track and field coach in 1998. Feeley, who was 28 at the time, had never coached at the Division I level when Murphy hired her to run the women's basketball program in 1992. And when Feeley left for another job in 1995, Murphy encouraged the alumni to back Rohn for the permanent gig after he stepped in as the interim for a full season.

"A lot of coaches pass through these places onto better things, hopefully," said Marty Scarano, who served as Murphy's assistant director of athletics at Colgate and is now the athletic director at New Hampshire. "If you're hiring the right people, they're passing through, right? This isn't necessarily their terminal job. Mark did a great job of that."

Scarano was one of three people interviewed for this story who pointed to the hiring of football coach Dick Biddle as one of Murphy's finest moments at Colgate. The same football program for which Murphy had starred in the mid-1970s went 0-11 in 1995 under Edward Sweeney, then in his third year as coach. It was the first winless season in school history, and Murphy decided to make a change.

This time, though, Murphy forsook a search committee and made the decision himself. He and Scarano were in a hotel room when both men agreed Biddle, who was in his second stint as a Colgate assistant, was the right man for the job. They considered Biddle a "hidden gem" overshadowed by coaching politics.

"It raised a lot of eyebrows because Dick was one of the assistant coaches that never said a word to anybody and just went about his business," Rohn said. "Most people on campus didn't know he existed, you know? But obviously, Mark knew something in him or saw something in him."

"There's an old adage at colleges that says a donkey is a horse designed by a committee, you know what I'm saying? Sometimes you have too many voices. You try to please everybody and you wind up making a bad decision and pleasing nobody. I think any good administrator and leader is someone who takes a lot of information from other people but has a vision of where they want things to go, you know? And then if they're not right, hey, you know, that person gets the hatchet."

Added Thielke: "When (Biddle) was hired, at that point in time I had been there for two years, and he had probably said less than five words to me in the entire time that he was there. And I was not the exception. Probably 70 percent of the coaches were in that same situation. He wasn't unfriendly but he was very much an introvert and he kept to himself. He had his own workout routine and did his own thing. That was a hire that I personally would have never made, and

(Mark) did a great job with that one. When he was hired, I was like, ‘Woah!’ Because I would not have seen that coming.”

Biddle would transform the Colgate program. The Raiders won six games in his first season, seven games in his second, eight in his third and 10 in his fourth. By 2003, after eight years at the helm, Biddle had guided Colgate to the Division I-AA national championship game and a 15-1 record. He finished with 137 wins in 19 seasons.

Last November, the Patriot League named its coach of the year award after Biddle.

“I think, frankly, the staff and the head coach at the time were threatened by Dick Biddle,” Scarano said. “Mark will tell you, Dick was not an outgoing, articulate guy. He’s not the guy that’s going to win the podium, so it took a lot of courage for Mark to hire him. It really did.

“But I told him, ‘We don’t need a spokesperson for Colgate football. You’re the spokesperson for Colgate football. You embody it, you’re the athletic director, you’re everything that’s great about Colgate. We need a hell of a football coach and you got one. He doesn’t have to do shit other than coach the hell out of the game.’

“And hey, the history speaks for itself. Dick went on to become the winningest coach at Colgate.”

Reflecting on past

Four weeks have passed since Murphy enraged Packers fans with an explanation of why he’s controlling the coaching search himself. They cared not that Murphy promised to collaborate with Gutekunst to avoid hiring someone the general manager doesn’t like. Instead, they viewed Murphy as a team president wishing he was the owner.

Perhaps that’s why Murphy paused earlier this week when asked what he learned during those years at Colgate, from the time he hired his first coach in 1992 to the time he hired his 30th a decade later. Murphy knew his answer would speak volumes about both his past and the Packers’ future, so he chose his words carefully.

“The most important thing in my mind is the fit and making sure it’s somebody that is a good fit for your organization, that’s excited about the opportunity,” Murphy said. “A red flag for me is when early in the interview process people start talking about salary. That’s an indicator for me that they’re more concerned about the benefits of the position than the actual position and the opportunity that’s available. The other lesson I learned is once somebody says no, just move on from them.

“If the process works the way it should, it really helps identify the best candidate.”

Things to keep in mind these next few weeks.