



Carroll goes by the book to teach football at USC

Carroll draws coaching inspiration from writings of a tennis guru

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Was this football practice? Or Zen?

At USC the other day, Coach Pete Carroll played catch with his receivers.

He threw a spiral.

Right there, did it feel heavier in your hands there? Where was your awareness?

Carroll caught the ball.

What is this about? he said. *It's about trusting yourself.*

He caught the ball again, talking the entire time.

Relax the shoulders . . . don't force it. . . soften . . . flow. . .

He and the receivers worked on technique, certainly. But all the while, he was infusing them with ideas he had formed thanks in no small part to a paperback book he had picked up 33 years ago.

You know about Carroll's successes. About how, since coming to town in 2001, his Trojans have plowed through college football like a runaway train. About the energetic, charismatic way he coaches -- and what it has brought: No. 1 rankings and national titles, conference victories and Rose Bowls, high picks and Heismans.

If he keeps this up much longer, we might be stacking his name next to John Wooden's.

But what you might not know, and what Carroll downplays publicly, even with his

players, is this: **Part of his approach comes from a Zen-laced primer on a sport far removed from the violent chaos of a Trojans football game.**

Tennis.

Right, tennis.

The book is "The Inner Game of Tennis." It is full of teaching, Carroll told me, that inspires his life. It is full of teaching that he uses to help his players perform -- even if they don't know it.

First published in 1974, the book was written by a philosophical tennis coach by the name of W. Timothy Gallwey. **It focuses on the game played between the ears -- against anxiety and doubt.** Beat back those two demons, Gallwey says, and you are going to let your natural talent shine. In tennis, at school, at work, even on a football field.

Carroll's Trojans teams are chock full of talent -- usually more than you find on any other team. Watch the Trojans practice, and you're instantly struck by their jack-rabbit speed and barrel-chested strength. They plow into each other with nonstop intensity. You catch yourself wondering: "These are college kids?" Then you scan the field, and you are struck by how many there are. They're all over the paddock. Another SC team, loaded.

But talent gets you only so far. Just ask the Lakers of 2003-04, the team with O'Neal, Bryant, Malone and Payton. Talented flame-outs.

Carroll's methods and the energetic, supercharged culture he has worked to create have helped his teams maximize their gifts. How many times over the last handful of years has a Trojans team choked? Not many. How often have they bounced back after tough, unexpected losses? Often.

They seem to **learn from mistakes** instead of brooding about them.

Maybe it's all about the inner game.

Sitting on a concrete bench near the practice field, Carroll, **intense, centered**, said that much of what he does -- the way he runs practice, coaches games, talks to his players, even how he handles reporters -- is a mix of old-school savvy and progressive psychology and philosophy.

He picked up the psychology and philosophy in earnest in the mid-1970s when he was a graduate student at the University of the Pacific. That was when he discovered "The Inner Game of Tennis." **Those concepts**, Carroll said, pointing at the practice field, **"are a part of this whole program."**

So explain the philosophy.

"It's all about **clearing the clutter**
in the interactions between your
conscious
and subconscious mind."

Not the words of a stereotypical, militaristic football lifer.

Uh, how do you do that?

"Through superior practice and **a clear approach.**
Focus,
clarity
and
belief in yourself

are what allows you to express your ability without discursive thoughts and concerns."

Never, I said, did I think that I would hear a football coach talk about discursive thoughts and concerns.

Carroll laughed. But **there was fire in his eyes**; he was speaking of exciting stuff.

He talked about

the importance of
**establishing a culture of
trust.**

He said that

**in the heat of the battle,
it is important to suspend judgment,
good or bad.**

He spoke of **being in the moment and feeling the flow**, the importance of not trying to start fast but to finish strong -- and about what he considers the linchpin of USC's recent run of success: **precise, highly focused, highly disciplined practice.**

Then he threw in something that would make Vince Lombardi snort. **"We are trying to create a self-actualized program," he said. "It's really about divine nonchalance."**

Whoa. Cool. West Coast.

A bit different. But, in my book, different is often good, and Pete Carroll and his band of Trojan footballers are proving it.